International Feminist Journal of Politics

ISSN: 1461-6742 (Print) 1468-4470 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfjp20

The Social Imaginaries of Women's Peace Activism in Northern Uganda

Simukai Chigudu

To cite this article: Simukai Chigudu (2016) The Social Imaginaries of Women's Peace Activism in Northern Uganda, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 18:1, 19-38, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2015.1105588

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1105588

The Social Imaginaries of Women's Peace Activism in Northern Uganda

SIMUKAI CHIGUDU
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract

The metanarrative of global feminism is often constructed as a progressive and emancipatory movement emanating from the West and fostering radical politics elsewhere in the world. Such a view is not only ethnocentric but, critically, it fails to engage with the complex ways in which feminist politics travel and are evinced in specific localities. In this article, I seek to understand how marginalized women in the "Global South" – particularly in Africa – interpret, experience and negotiate feminist ideas to wield political power within the context of their social and moral worlds. I focus on women's organized resistance to violence and armed conflict, known as "women's peace activism." Using a case study of a women's peace movement in Uganda mediated by an international feminist organization called Isis Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with a wide range of activists in the organization and in its network in postconflict areas in Northern Uganda. I argue that the feminist peace discourse is most meaningful when its universal values of equity and securing the dignity of women are appropriated and re-signified through the cultural institutions and the collective memory of activists in their local settings.

Keywords

feminism, violence and peacebuilding, transnational politics, Uganda, social imaginaries

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s are often cited as marking an epoch in the history of various "new social movements" nourished by the radicalism of the New Left in Western Europe and North America. The emergence of second-wave feminism

International Feminist Journal of Politics, 2016
Vol. 18, No. 1, 19–38, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1105588

– a critical ideology that propounded an expanded view of "the political" as encompassing "the personal" – can be seen as part of this zeitgeist. Several notable feminist scholars have offered a metanarrative of feminism's trajectory as a progressive emancipatory movement that has successfully evolved from exclusionary and elitist – dominated by white, middle-class, heterosexual women – to broad-based and egalitarian concerning itself with the struggles of a poorer and more diverse constituency (hooks 1981; Rosen 2001; Roth 2004).

In line with the above-described metanarrative, some scholars have credited the rise of Euro-American second-wave feminism in the 1970s with the burgeoning of a global women's movement, expressed through international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and the expansion of global civil society (Stienstra 1994; Coontz 2011; Davies 2013). Besides the ethnocentrism of this perspective, a criticism offered by postcolonial writers (Mohanty 2003), I see a problematic teleological assumption that the spread of feminist ideology from the West necessarily fosters progressive politics elsewhere in the world. What is in relatively short supply, it seems, is scholarship that offers an empirically grounded perspective on how marginalized women in the "Global South" – particularly in Africa – might interpret, experience and negotiate feminist ideas to wield political power within the context of their social and moral worlds. I suggest that fieldwork, approached through historically embedded and contextually specific investigation, deepens our theoretical analysis and understanding of the processes by which feminist ideas travel across different geographies.

In this article, I explore how a transnational feminist discourse is evinced in Uganda. I focus on women's organized resistance to violence and armed conflict, a process popularly called "women's peace activism." Such collective action raises important theoretical and empirical questions about how marginalized women in conflict and postconflict settings seek to improve their livelihoods, assert their public presence and stake their claims to equality and citizenship, even as they face enormous structural constraints on their agency. I examine how such complex processes are animated by particular "imaginaries," defined here as a broad understanding of the ways in which a given people imagine their collective social life (Thompson 1984, 6).

Using a case study of a women's peace movement in Uganda initiated and supported by an international feminist organization called Isis Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), I ask the following foundational research question:

> What are the social imaginaries of women peace activists in Northern Uganda and what kind of politics do these give rise to in the aftermath of widespread violence and armed conflict?

The structure of the article is as follows. I begin by introducing Isis-WICCE as a case study and then present my methodology, which includes the theory,

literatures and fieldwork that underpin my research. Second, I explore the discursive construction of women's peace activism in Isis-WICCE, delving into the organization's history to trace its "genealogy of ideas" embedded in its narratives, advocacy material and programs – I refer to this construction as Isis-WICCE's "feminist peace discourse." I then explore the protean nature of the feminist peace discourse and the politics it impedes and inspires, paying particular attention to how this discourse, while purporting to be universal, actually assumes a much more vernacular character when translated into a local context. Last, I situate my analysis in the wider frame of gender and politics in Uganda. This article thus exposes the complex possibilities, problems and paradoxes of the feminist peace discourse in Isis-WICCE's Ugandan network.

ISIS-WICCE AND ITS FEMINIST PEACE DISCOURSE

Isis-WICCE, a self-proclaimed feminist organization, was founded in 1974 by three "second-wave" feminists in Geneva before relocating to Uganda in 1993, thereby becoming the first women's peacebuilding NGO in the region. Isis-WICCE is transnational in scope, working principally in Uganda, South Sudan, Liberia and Nepal, however this article limits its focus to Uganda. Isis-WICCE has eleven core staff in its central office in Kampala and operates through multiple links at the international level with global NGOs and development agencies, and at local level with other women's rights organizations, community-based organizations (CBOs) and various professional associates such as medical practitioners.

Isis-WICCE began its work in Uganda by focusing on the experiences of women in war and its aftermath in the Great Lakes Region of Eastern and Central Africa. The organization would later come to play a key role in the formulation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. At its inception, Isis-WICCE articulated its mission as promoting "justice and empowerment of women through documenting violations of women's rights and facilitating the exchanges of skills and information to strengthen women's capacities, potential and visibility" (Harriet Musoke, personal communication, 2014).

In the ideological and intellectual fashion of Jean Bethke Elshtain's (1987) argument in *Women and War*, Isis-WICCE set out to challenge the rhetoric and iconography of war stories that "lionize men as heroes and ignore the agency and experiences of women" (Harriet Musoke, personal communication, 2014). The organization recognized that narratives of war are often gendered and assume a simplistic binary of the conquered and the victor through a masculinist lens that obscures from view dynamics of race, class and political power in conflict. Furthermore, in such constructions, women are often grouped together in an undifferentiated category despite their vastly diverse and complex experiences of war as soldiers, rebels, civilians, patrons, abductees and so forth (Meintjes, Turshen, and Pillay 2002). Isis-WICCE thus endeavored

to use women's testimonies as lobbying and advocacy tools to make specific practical demands for women's needs – based on their particular experiences of war – from governments and international development agencies. The organization conceptualized this approach to advocacy as conducting a "feminist intervention" in the peace process. Over time, as I discuss further below, Isis-WICCE expanded its portfolio and now works through a combination of medical interventions, psychological rehabilitation, civic and community education, political advocacy and leadership and livelihood skills training to encourage its clients to engage in community service, peace activism and local political life. In most cases, the women trained by Isis-WICCE go on to establish their own CBOs that aim to advance women's political, economic, legal or social status and facilitate the entry of women into formal political roles.

METHODOLOGY

Several different bodies of literature inform this study theoretically. My analytical thinking regarding transnational politics draws on long-running debates in international normative theory on the scope of justice, in particular the contrasting positions of "cosmopolitans," who weigh equally the claims of all individuals who would be affected by policies or institutional arrangements, out of a belief in the equal worth of humanity in all persons, and "communitarians," who argue that norms of justice can only arise from within bounded communities and their attendant values, histories and traditions (Rao 2013). These opposing views are brought into an interesting dialectic when dealing with claims to justice by "subaltern" peoples – defined loosely by the historian Ranajit Guha (2012) as all nonelite "classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population" (2) – of whom marginalized women are an exemplar. Indeed, gender-based movements, such as women's peace activism, typify communitarianism in the sense that they are efforts to forge new forms of community (in this case, defined by gender) cutting across preexisting ones (such as ethno-linguistic identities), but at the same time appear cosmopolitan in their attempts to forge alliances across national boundaries with a view to contesting the policies of states (Rao 2010). As Nancy Fraser (2008) has argued, the meeting of the local (or communitarian) perspective and the global (or cosmopolitan) perspective births a variety of new idioms for the claims that transnational activists make and for the ideals to which they aspire. Appreciating this "meeting" is essential to unpacking the imaginaries of women peace activists.

As this study deals with women's agency and their engagement with inequitable social, economic and political relations, it also refers to gender and development scholarship. Questions around the conceptualization of women's agency and the competing normative frames of activism – how it should be practiced, through what mechanisms, by whom and to what ends – come to

the fore in these debates and speak directly to the empirical concerns of this study.

My primary methodological approach is qualitative. Drawing on poststructuralist approaches to development, especially the notion that "power functions through language, discourses, and institutions" (Agrawal 1996, 470), I examine how women peace activists coalesce political identities around particular agendas by constructing "narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices" (McEwan 2009, 2) that render the social world meaningful, intelligible and actionable. I interpret my data according to the principles of grounded theory – using systematic, inductive procedures to generate insights grounded in the views expressed by the study participants (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The analysis offered is based on five weeks of fieldwork in Uganda undertaken between 19 March and 24 April 2014. During this time, I collected a rich set of data studying women's peace activism through multiple avenues. Using nonprobabilistic purposive sampling, I conducted a series of interviews, often using ethnographic principles – an approach characterized by its "concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (Spradley 1979, 5). To this end, I conducted approximately thirty in-depth and unstructured interviews with all the staff at Isis-WICCE and several of their professional associates. I visited a number of CBOs affiliated with Isis-WICCE in different districts in the North, meeting over fifty activists in the process.

I must note, however, two important limitations to this work. The first is that the overwhelming majority of my informants were women. I attempted to balance the claims made by the women through triangulation of interviews with different men exposed to the work of the female peace activists. A second limitation of the study is that I only had a brief time to develop an understanding of women's peace activism and then to try to contextualize it with perspectives from very different parties.

The Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford gave ethical clearance for this project. The aims and objectives of the study were explained to each participant and either written or verbal informed consent was obtained before beginning each interview. I presented a provisional version of this article at a seminar at Isis-WICCE before leaving Uganda and subsequently provided the organization with a full and detailed report of my work. The senior staff members at Isis-WICCE have reviewed and ratified the material presented below while acknowledging that this work reflects my opinions and not those of the organization.

"AM I GOING TO EAT PEACE?" THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION AND RECOGNITION IN WOMEN'S PEACE ACTIVISM

In this section, I argue that Isis-WICCE pursues peace and justice along two axes that I delineate as "redistribution" and "recognition" based on Fraser's

(2008) heuristic paradigms of feminist politics. Redistribution refers to addressing the material factors that precipitate and perpetuate social suffering by making the control and spread of resources more equitable. Recognition refers to elevating and valorizing the social and cultural status of women to one of mutual respect and reciprocity, particularly with men, within their communities. Both of these tropes relate to addressing and redressing the injustices inflicted on the female body during conflict and violence, and I argue that they provide an impetus to challenge the structures that produce violence and to reaffirm women's personhood and moral agency.

Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, the current director of Isis-WICCE, is a self-described religious woman of Christian faith who believes that being a feminist is about "doing the right thing." To illustrate what she means by this, she told me a story about how, during her tenure as director, she set about expanding the organization's founding mandate of "documentation and advocacy." She recounted how when she first joined the organization in 1994 as a program officer, she met a young woman called Devota Mbabazi, an ex-combatant living in a remote area in the Luwero district of Central Uganda. Mbabazi had been "raped by 21 soldiers, and developed several sexual and reproductive health complications including fistula and HIV and AIDS." Moreover, the uneducated Mbabazi was unable to integrate into the formal army after the Liberation War (Uganda–Tanzania War, 1978–79) and was thus unable to access social services or receive a state salary. Horrified and indignant at this story, Ochieng believed that it was not morally just or even permissible to document Mbabazi's story for the purposes of advocacy without doing anything practical to attend to her immediate material welfare. As such, in 1998 she used her prerogative as director to start an emergency medical intervention program, as part of Isis-WICCE's work, for "women war survivors" in the Luwero district. This decision to initiate a practical program in addition to the advocacy work was not well received by most of Isis-WICCE's donors and board members on the grounds that this was not sustainable, but Ochieng stood firm:

> Although this decision was to later put me in trouble, I was not deterred. Instead the experience gave me more resolve to advocate for the healing of the bodies of war survivors as part of the peace process for many more years thereafter.

Isis-WICCE's exposure to the pain and the material needs of women's bodies in war zones challenged many of the organization's founding precepts of what it means to conduct a "feminist intervention" – hitherto encompassing documentation, advocacy and "cross-cultural exchange" – during and after armed conflict. At one of the first cross-cultural exchanges that Isis-WICCE hosted for its Ugandan clients, a survivor of violence questioned the theories of peace and conflict resolution being proffered. She simply asked, "Am I going to eat peace?" thus highlighting the abstractedness and ineffectuality of a peace discourse that does not address the material reality of abject

poverty. Ochieng notes that this moment encouraged critical reflection within the organization on how it conceptualizes peacebuilding:

> It made us realize that no matter how many theories you bring on the most strategic ways of building peace, it's not going to make sense if it is not addressing the [immediate] concerns of those who need peace. That woman made it very clear. She said, you want me to go to the International Court of Justice but do you know what I am feeling inside me. Little did we know that she had gone without food. Little did we know that she had a fistula. Little did we know that she was still struggling to look for the remains of her husband. Those are things that we needed to address to allow this woman to come to peace in herself.

The above episodes led directly to debate within the organization about the politics of redistribution, the politics of recognition and how to marry the two. This conversation reflects a long-standing, and much-discussed, fissure in development theory and praxis between practitioners concerned with the practicalities of development and normative theorists focused on the more abstract notions of liberation for the subaltern subject. Christine Sylvester (1999) caricatures the mutual criticisms of these respective positions by observing that development practitioners do not listen to subalterns while normative theorists do not tend to concern themselves with whether the subaltern is eating.

In response to the intellectual and pragmatic challenges presented by this debate, Isis-WICCE began to reconceptualize its approach to feminist peace activism to encompass *both* the material demands for redistribution and the sociocultural demands for recognition. The feminist peace discourse proffered by Isis-WICCE thus became a manifold metaphor for women's political activism, peacebuilding and reconciliation, economic empowerment and community development. At an abstract level, the organization rhetorically framed its approach as one "that will address the body, mind and spirit that has been shattered. It's about building humanity and bringing back the dignity to those who have lost it" (Ochieng, personal communication, 2014). In practical terms, this expanded discourse was constituted through different domains of action that addressed the physical, social and political needs of women after war. I have categorized its different programs as follows (El-bushra 2007):

1. *Survival and basic needs*: for example, Isis-WICCE provides food, shelter and health care to individuals and families that have been attacked or displaced.
2. *Peacebuilding and mediation at different levels*: for example, Isis-WICCE successfully advocated for the inclusion of women in the Juba Peace Process concerning Northern Uganda after the expulsion of Joseph Kony.
3. *Advocacy*: for example, Isis-WICCE uses short-term community-based workshops to involve civil society, government and the media for the purpose of raising awareness of human rights issues in general and

around specific policy goals, such as reintegration of internally displaced peoples in their home communities.

4. *Promoting women's inclusion in decision making and leadership*: by promoting women's rights to political participation and providing women's leadership training, Isis-WICCE has enabled a number of women to enter local and national government.
5. *Community outreach and rebuilding*: Isis-WICCE has implemented multiple projects to repatriate demobilized female soldiers into their communities; to provide trauma counseling for victims of violence; to offer peace education to communities and schools; to create space for community-based justice and reconciliation work; and to lobby for equal access to public services.

The body is a central idiom that Isis-WICCE deploys in drawing attention to the unjust afflictions of conflict and violence on women and in contesting the androcentric nature of postconflict reconstruction led by the state and international organizations. Isis-WICCE's activists contend that the typical, or "mainstream," postconflict reconstruction agenda in Africa – driven by international organizations and littered with recommendations such as "improve the rule of law," "hold free and fair elections," "combat corruption," and "hold perpetrators of violence responsible for their actions" (Englebert and Tull 2008) – is both elitist and masculinist and is blind to the subjective realities and voices of subaltern women. By highlighting how women's bodies are violated during war, how women's bodies provide labor for household survival and how women's bodies have distinct needs in all facets of postconflict development (Harcourt 2009), Isis-WICCE offers a sociological reading of the body that closely resembles Bryan Turner's (2001) notion of embodiment as a framework for a theory of social action. In brief, Turner argues that human beings are ontologically frail and thus they need to build social institutions (especially political, familial and spiritual institutions) to protect themselves against the "vagaries and afflictions" of their precarious natural (and social) environments. In other words, the embodied experience of women in war is, Isis-WICCE asserts, integral to the creation of protective social institutions following conflict. This is the way in which the organization attempts to unite the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition and the sense in which the organization views itself as feminist.

Nevertheless, there is a tension, and at times a contradiction, between redistribution and recognition in Isis-WICCE's feminist peace discourse. The organization has done excellent work in responding to the needs of women in dire situations, however, it grapples with how to translate this work into longer-term social change: after all, what does a politics born of bodies and suffering really mean? This question is part of a wider set of discussions that Isis-WICCE has been having internally to arrive at a coherent and shared understanding of what feminism means as an ideology and as a practice. Helen Kezie-Nwoha, a senior member of the organization with extensive experience in gender and development, reflected in an interview on the different ways in which staff

at Isis-WICCE understand "feminism." She described how a radical politics of recognition that confronts established gender relations often becomes subsumed under the broader, and more accessible, rubric of redistribution. She noted that many in the organization are not versed in the intellectual foundations of feminism, while others are not inclined to the more political elements of feminism though they remain committed to relieving the suffering that women endure in war and its aftermath. As such, the different goals of Isis-WICCE occasionally come into conflict with each other and it seems to be the case that a "feminine" politics of securing the basic survival needs of women (i.e. a politics of redistribution) can supersede the "feminist" politics organized around longer-term strategic gender interests (i.e. a politics of recognition) (Alvarez 1999). An important question, then, is how feminist discourses travel from Isis-WICCE and are negotiated at the grassroots level.

THE ROLES OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND MORAL ECONOMY IN FEMINIST PEACEBUILDING

In this section, I argue that Isis-WICCE's feminist peace discourse is perhaps most meaningful when it is appropriated and re-signified through the cultural institutions and the collective memory of the actors and activists within the different CBOs across its network in Eastern and Northern Uganda. My analysis is structured around the notion that collective memory is a complex process of cultural production and consumption that acknowledges the persistence of cultural traditions as well as the ingenuity, and even the subversive interests, of the memory makers (Kansteiner 2002). As such, I reflect on how the specificities of historical memory, grievance and future aspirations in the wake of large-scale violence, protracted war and internal displacement are critical in shaping local women's understandings and framings of the trajectory and telos of women's peace activism.

Northern Uganda has long been plagued by violent conflict and insecurity. The brutal and prolonged war between the Ugandan government forces and the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), lasted on and off for about twenty years. The war has caused an enormous humanitarian catastrophe in north-east Uganda with threats to local people coming from both LRA rebels and government troops. As Adam Branch (2007) explains, while the LRA has, for example, tortured, abducted and forcefully enlisted children to fight in the war, the government's mass internment of the population has also been devastating. Approximately 1.8 million people, or 80 percent of the region's population, were displaced, the vast majority forcefully to large camps called "protected villages" (Gulu Archdiocese 2003; Human Rights Watch 2003). These "protected villages" were an "integral part of the Ugandan Government's anti-insurgency policy. In some places, anyone who refused to move from their rural homes was forcibly displaced" (Allen 2005, 24). Several scholars and activists have criticized the government's failure to

provide adequate relief aid to the camps, leading to an extraordinarily high mortality level of approximately 1,000 per week due to the camps' deplorable conditions and insecurity (Branch 2007). The war began to abate in 2006 with the commencement of the Juba Peace talks between Museveni's government and the LRA rebels. While checkered by intermittent lapses into violence, this period generally saw a significant decline in open conflict and the gradual decline of the LRA presence in Uganda (Quinn 2008).

How do Women Remember the War? Cultural Restoration as Peace Activism

The war and subsequent encampment left an indelible mark on the affected communities. In addition to poverty, the women of the region describe a profound disruption to the social fabric of communities and normative gender relations as key legacies of conflict. Domestic violence, disputes over land and inequitable divisions of labor are presented as some of the social changes that have taken place after the war, thus giving rise to a popular aphorism held by the peace activists that "peace does not begin with the silence of a gun."

Understanding women's peace activism in these local communities necessitates an exploration of women's collective memory and social construction of war and its consequences. Justine Nannyonjo (2005) notes that displacement and resettlement in camps caused a degeneration in social values and order, resulting in such behavioral changes among the men as neglected responsibilities, increased crime rates, high rates of alcohol and drug consumption and lack of respect for traditional values while "[s]eparation, orphanhood and increased domestic violence have disrupted the family structure." These consequences, she argues, have increasingly placed the burden of household survival on women, an analysis supported by many of my interviewees. I spoke to the activists in Isis-WICCE and its sister organizations in Kampala and Lira about the social roles of women during and after the war. The following quotes are exemplary and they buttress Nannyonjo's historical analyses:

> Men are concentrating on power and women concentrate more on survival. Survival for their husband. Survival for their children. And now, they become part and parcel of a certain part of struggle: they're looking for money for their family; the man has gone. The woman becomes engaged in the social emancipation, which has been destroyed by conflict. She is very seriously engaged. Economically she is looking for food and school fees.

> During a war, women suffer a lot. They are abused sexually but they are often the sole breadwinners and so their lives are, to some extent, very miserable.

In Namokora, a sub-county in the northern Kitgum district, I chaired a focus group discussion (FGD) with a large group of women (seventeen in total)

who had all been helped by the Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI), a CBO started by Isis-WICCE, which now operates independently. KIWEPI is a group that was launched as an emergency response CBO at the peak of the war in 1999. The group's initial programs focused on providing psychosocial support and acute trauma management for women through crisis clinics. It later began to organize women into political advocacy groups to demand female-specific service delivery from the government's Peace, Recovery and Development Plan after the launch of the Juba Peace Process. Currently, KIWEPI receives support from a wide range of international women's rights groups and works on training local women in leadership skills for local business and political engagement, health literacy and promotion campaigns, providing orphan support and various reconciliation processes.

Many of the individual women with whom KIWEPI works have experienced, either directly or indirectly, the impact of war through violence, killings, abductions and encampment. Furthermore, their communities are contending with land disputes and widespread poverty in the aftermath of war. The activities of KIWEPI can easily be identified as a politics of redistribution. The FGD, however, revealed that redistribution, while fundamental to the material and survival needs of women, was only part of a more complex political project of recognition. They talked about how, through "sensitization from the whites," they had come to "remember" that they, as women, have human rights even though the men have been trying to take these away from them in order to exploit them. As we discussed how the war had changed their communities, one of the women mentioned, with great applause and consensus from the group, that:

> In the camps, men were used to free things especially food and clothes. When they went home there were no longer free things, so now men want free things from their women. They want their women to provide free food, free housing and so on.

Ellen Aryomo, a local peace activist, joined a women's group after being recruited and trained by KIWEPI. She diagnosed the fundamental social changes caused by war and encampment as a form of welfare dependence that turns men into drunks while the youth have become idle:

> When people came to camps, the UN was distributing food for free; you find that everything was being given for free to people. So men were redundant; they didn't have anything to do except to go and drink. Men took that mind back to the villages after they left the camp. . . . Even youth cannot do anything because they are used to camp life. They cannot even dig in the villages where they are. Others are crying that they should even go back to camps.

Gladys Canogura, the director of KIWEPI, told me that Aryomo's view is widely shared by many of the women throughout the district of Kitgum and beyond, especially where there were large internally displaced person (IDP) camps. She

went on to affirm this position and reasserted that encampment has precipitated a "cultural crisis" among the Acholi peoples, one of the largest ethnic groups in Northern Uganda. Canogura describes how most of the youth have "not learnt about the norms and the practices of Acholi culture" and have thus become "an abomination because what they do is wrong." Violent robbery, rape and even killing as well as less severe forms of social deviance, such as aggression and rude behavior, were all understood as a consequence of failing to reproduce and transmit Acholi culture in the IDP camps.

Canogura thus advanced that "one of the core thematic areas we [as KIWEPI] work in is reviving the culture of the Acholi." This view was reiterated by many women who talked about bringing back "traditional" values, reminding the men of "what we lost during the war" and telling outsiders (such as the national government or development agencies) that we have "our own traditional way of doing things." At one level, the women's discourse could be read as a nostalgic longing for a romanticized version of the past and of tradition. However, such narratives should also be interpreted as cultural idioms within the context of the local moral economy. The evocation of ethnicity and tradition described in this case mirrors what John Lonsdale (2004) has called "moral ethnicity," in which power relations are negotiated in the metaphors of local language and memory. The women thus expressed cosmopolitan feminist ideas of universal gender equity and human rights in communitarian notions of restoring tradition – a potentially powerful assertion for recognition.

The insights offered in the above discussion add both nuance and depth to debates in the gender and development literature about women and poverty in Africa. In 1978, Diana Pearce famously coined the phrase "the feminization of poverty" to describe a phenomenon in the United States in which, at the time of writing, two-thirds of the poor aged over 16 were women (Pearce 1978). This phrase penetrated the development lexicon in the mid-1990s, catalyzed by the Fourth United Nations Conference on Women in 1995 at which it was controversially asserted that 70 percent of the world's poor were female (Chant 2008). According to Carolina Wennerholm (2002), the "feminization of poverty" thesis has drawn much-needed attention to the "great number of women living in poverty" and, moreover, it has highlighted the impact of macroeconomic policies on women, calling for women to be recognized in the development process and promoting consciousness of the existence and vulnerability of female-headed households (10).

Despite the important traction gained by this thesis, it has also fallen under heavy criticism for homogenizing women's experience of poverty and neglecting both men and gender relations. Sylvia Chant (2008) suggests that, while women in developing countries are often income poor, it is perhaps more pertinent that they are on the frontline of *dealing* with poverty and to question what this means socially and politically. Chant offers an analytical alternative to the "feminization of poverty" that she calls the "feminization of responsibility and obligation." I have attempted to show how, in this social context, the

women peace activists simultaneously read poverty and inequality in the aftermath of war through multiple prisms based on gender, history, culture and politics. As such, the practice of peace activism is constituted through, on one hand, attending to the material needs of women and other vulnerable groups but, on the other, it is also constituted through more complex imaginaries of female responsibility for cultural restoration. Local understandings of peace therefore extend far beyond the survivalist logic of the "feminization of poverty" that limits itself to questions of redistribution without challenging deeper power–political relations in the local moral economy; women peace activists proactively attempt to re-signify tradition to advance gender equity.

"WE ARE POWERFUL BUT IMPOTENT:" THE LIMITS OF WOMEN'S PEACE ACTIVISM

In the article thus far I have argued that women engage in peace activism in dynamic ways to insert themselves into public space. There are limits, however, to the more general acceptance they gain in formal settings, where political power often lies, because of deep-seated, inequitable gender relations. The claim this section makes is encapsulated in a remark made by Stella Nyanzi, a Uganda academic, who declared of women and politics in Uganda: "We are powerful but impotent" (personal communication, 2014).

Anne Marie Goetz (2002) has argued that one of the many achievements for which President Museveni's government has been most applauded internationally is the increase in the number of women in representative politics. From the national legislature down through all five tiers of local government, about 30 percent of MPs and local councilors are women (IPU 2014). Furthermore, high-profile appointments of women to senior civil service positions have also significantly enhanced women's presence in his administration. Such increases in women's political involvement have been accomplished through multiple channels, including the creation and reservation of new seats in national and local government for women, a quota system in administrative appointments based on the principle of affirmative action, and the strong political advocacy by women (in government and civil society) to push through "progressive gender-related pieces of legislation" (Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014). However, with a weak multiparty system and without a democratic decision-making structure within Museveni's government, women still have limited means of asserting their right to be fronted as candidates in open elections, of bringing membership pressure to bear on party executives to introduce gender sensitivity in the staffing of party posts, or of using the dynamic of multiparty competition to develop political clout around a gendered voting gap (Goetz 2002; Clayton, Josefsson, and Wang 2014).

Professor Joy Kwesiga, Vice-Chancellor of Kabale University and former Dean of Social Sciences at Makerere University, helped Isis-WICCE in estab-

lishing itself in Uganda after moving from Geneva. Professor Kwesiga has been at the forefront of advocating for women's civil and political rights in Uganda for several decades. She explained to me that while substantive gains have been made in women's political representation, particularly when women have won parliamentary seats competitively, she had concerns about tokenistic appointments that do little to advance women's interests politically:

> In politics, apart from affirmative action, you don't see women occupying these general seats and competing with men in general elections. Many do not want to step down from their seats, they argue that if [men] are not limited then why should they be. But the process was designed to help women take part in politics not just perpetual occupation by one woman from one particular constituency. The society still views them as "women." One example of that is the ex-Vice President, a woman. If you see how she was judged especially when she decided to divorce her husband, it shows that although there is this open [political] space, society does not see women on par with men. She left this engineer because he used to beat her [but] the public view was: "The vice president should know that at home she is an African wife."

The rural women peace activists were alive to the exclusion of women from meaningful and sustained political engagement in formal institutions. Ellen Aryoma read the situation thus:

> Our voices as women are not heard. If we use the men, like the area MP, they will only pass laws that help the men and leave the women aside. And even the women in politics are really struggling and their voices are not heard.

The other women I spoke to, in the Namokora and Kapujan, also aired their frustrations about the disarticulation between women's increasing responsibilities and their lack of political rewards from formal institutions, especially when they feel that female politicians fail to represent their interests at a national level:

> The elected woman can't even come to the electorate to thank us for voting. They promise to give anything to our [CBOs] but we don't see them until they come for the next election. They claim to be busy all the time but they are just ignoring us.

Catherine Awor, the director of Uganda Women's Peace Initiative in the northern town of Lira, added that women were limited in how much influence they are able to exert in politics because of male-controlled patronage networks and the "cancerous" corruption throughout all levels of government. This case thus offers an important lesson: though women can benefit from direct presidential patronage, their effectiveness in promoting a gender-equity agenda remains low if they have not institutionalized a presence for themselves as legitimate competitors for the popular vote, and for their policies as legitimate matters for public deliberation (Goetz 2002).

Autonomous associational life – NGOs and CBOs – is seemingly the most efficacious avenue for women peace activists to evince their political concerns and bring about change in their communities. As such, local and international NGOs, including women's rights groups, have risen to prominence as nonstate actors carrying out extensive work throughout the north-east of Uganda. Several communities in Teso, Eastern Uganda, told me that women's NGOs, both local and transnational, have provided food, job opportunities and community-based education in the region and thus have advocated for peace in ways more far-reaching than the national government.

The "boom" of NGOs in Uganda, however, is not universally welcomed. Seen by many as institutions that hold values from a foreign space and led by foreign actors, they pose a threat to certain conceptions of national sovereignty and values. The women peace activists I spoke with had all embraced the notion of human rights as a powerful trope for advancing women's issues in their local work. They were aware, however, of the negative connotations attached to this term in Uganda's current political climate, particularly the popular association made between human rights and white imperialism, as this woman from Kapujan explained:

> [Human] rights were there [in our communities] but the whites are just trying to sensitize people to it. It is the men who have misinterpreted the situation by thinking that whites have come to take away their power. But the fact is that these rights have always been there.

The above quote reveals a difficulty that comes with trying to appropriate a perceived western discourse on human rights in local contexts. In an interview with Paul Okitoi, a district planner in Soroti, I asked him about the meaning of women's rights and peace activism from a government perspective. Okitoi's remarks were candid and confrontational. Despite welcoming the positive work done by women's CBOs in dealing with domestic violence and supporting women's livelihoods, he was suspicious of the fact that much of their language is expressed in terms of human rights. In an acerbic commentary, he conflated human rights and local gender-based initiatives with the gay rights movement and then lumped them together as a form of neoimperialism, a discourse that was receiving a great deal of airtime in the Ugandan media following the signing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in February 2014:

> The women's movement in Uganda has done a lot of good work. The only problem is that the women's groups are mixing up issues like community education for domestic violence and the gay thing. When you talk of human rights and fix it with the gay thing then it brings something negative to government. . . . Why do white people want to impose on our culture? In my bedroom, you don't tell me how I should fuck my wife. . . . In terms of sexual violence, it is very difficult for you to say that I have sexually harassed my wife. Even to prove it in court is a problem, unless you have a video showing me fisting.

I heard this view of moral imperialism both espoused and critiqued in public debates at the university, on radio and in discussions with NGO workers, lawyers and academics. A popular myth was spreading that "gays" were "recruiting" children from school and that the "human rights movement" was part of a more sinister agenda to change social relations and norms in Uganda in ways that would ultimately undermine men. This formulation is astutely analyzed by Rahul Rao (2014), who describes a postcolonial nationalist fear that women's rights are the Trojan horse by which neoimperialism represents itself as the establisher of the good society, championing women and queers as objects of protection from their "racial" and national kind. This fear demonstrates how social struggles, and the discourses that vitalize them, move in dialectical fashion between the local and the global and are constantly acquiring different meanings and understandings of the norms and ideologies that are being contested.

Nevertheless, the feminist peace discourse – though protean and reimagined in locally specific economic, political and cultural terms – has achieved one of its core aims by tapping into women's capacity for collective political action. Reflecting on the diverse ways in which women renegotiate power, Awor insisted that most fundamentally "we have really touched the lives of the women we have worked with. We have built that kind of relationship with them that they feel part of us." This is perhaps the restoration of dignity that Ochieng described to me when she explained how she understands feminist peace activism. Even if women are rendered politically "impotent" because of structural constraints, their collective action is a "powerful" expression of their agency in using diverse ideas and discourses to renegotiate power in their local worlds and thus advance gender equity.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have traced Isis-WICCE's feminist peace discourse across time and space and through multiple mediators. I framed Isis-WICCE's work as both a politics of redistribution and of recognition, and discussed how these strategies were at times synergistic and mutually constitutive and, at other times, oriented to competing goals. Crucially, both political positions are couched in a cosmopolitan language of women's rights, which has been adopted by multiple actors across Isis-WICCE's network as they assert their claims to public space and political representation. I have shown how local women peace activists engage with feminist ideals and localize them into culturally embedded idioms and moral matrices. This is most apparent when the women in Kitgum spoke of restoring Acholi values to create a more "harmonious and peaceful" communal existence. The women thus connected and adapted ideas from elsewhere to their specific contexts, allowing them to contest power and patriarchal institutions in innovative but culturally alert ways.

Isis-WICCE has given rise to several small-scale CBOs that aim to secure women's livelihoods and ease the burden of poverty that they bear. Such realities have been described as the "feminization of poverty," but I have instead chosen Chant's agency-rich analytical frame of the "feminization of responsibility and obligation" to capture the complex ways in which women proactively deal with poverty.

Lastly, I looked at the wider political context of gender and inequality in Uganda, particularly women's relationship to formal political institutions. Aili Mari Tripp (2000) sums up this dynamic well when she argues that Ugandan women experience a political system that is from the outset hostile to their involvement, insofar as women often lack resources to run for office and the party support to attain mainstream political seats, and, crucially, there are more mundane constraints, such as the holding of lengthy political meetings at times that are difficult for mothers with young children to attend. It is therefore critical to note how women peace activists have been attempting to bring about change by challenging the rules, structures and practices that favor existing political and social interests and make it difficult for women to realize their interests. Thus, despite the enormous political, economic and social challenges confronting the Ugandan women's movement, I feel that this article can conclude on a cautiously optimistic note, taking heart from the subtle, innovative and progressive ways in which marginalized women draw on much wider solidarity to contest patriarchal power in local institutions.

Simukai Chigudu
Oxford Department of International Development
University of Oxford
Queen Elizabeth House, 3 Mansfield Road
Oxford, OX1 3TB, UK
Email: simukai.chigudu@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Acknowledgments

This article is based on a dissertation written for an MSc in African Studies at the University of Oxford, where I was generously funded by the Weidenfeld Scholarship and Leadership Programme. I would like to thank Dr Jonny Steinberg for his thoughtful analysis, careful critique and valuable guidance throughout the research process. I owe a special debt of thanks to Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng and all the staff at Isis-WICCE for welcoming me into their organization and kindly offering so much of their time and wisdom. I am especially grateful to Hope, Archie, Robert and Steve for guiding me through the field. Finally, I am deeply indebted to the courageous activists whose stories are represented in this article. I hope that, through this piece

of scholarship, I am able to make a small contribution to your ongoing quest for social justice.

Notes on Contributor

Simukai Chigudu is a DPhil (PhD) candidate in International Development at the University of Oxford.

References

Agrawal, Arun. 1996. "Poststructuralist Approaches to Development: Some Critical Reflections." *Peace & Change* 21 (4): 464–477.

Allen, Tim. 2005. *War and Justice in Northern Uganda: An Assessment of the International Criminal Court's Intervention*. London: Crisis States Research Centre, Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics.

Alvarez, Sonia E. 1999. "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1 (2): 181–209.

Branch, Adam. 2007. "Uganda's Civil War and the Politics of ICC Intervention." *Ethics and International Affairs* 21 (2): 179–198.

Chant, Sylvia. 2008. "The 'Feminisation of Poverty' and the 'Feminisation' of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision?" *Journal of Development Studies* 44 (2): 165–197.

Clayton, Amanda, Cecilia Josefsson, and Vibeke Wang. 2014. "Present Without Presence? Gender, Quotas and Debate Recognition in the Ugandan Parliament." *Representation* 50 (3): 379–392.

Coontz, Stephanie. 2011. *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*. New York: Basic Books.

Davies, Thomas. 2013. *NGOs: A New History of Transnational Civil Society*. London: Hurst and Company.

El-bushra, Judy. 2007. "Feminism, Gender, and Women's Peace Activism." *Development and Change* 38 (1): 131–147.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 1987. *Women and War*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Englebert, Pierre, and Denis M. Tull. 2008. "Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa Flawed Ideas about Failed States." *International Security* 32 (4): 106–139.

Fraser, Nancy. 2008. *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Glaser, Barney, and Anselm Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Research: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Transaction.

Goetz, Anne Marie. 2002. "No Shortcuts to Power: Constraints on Women's Political Effectiveness in Uganda." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40 (4): 549–575.

Guha, Ranajit. 2012. "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." In *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, edited by Vinayak Chaturvedi, 1–7. London: Verso.

Gulu Archdiocese. 2003. "Justice and Peace News February 2003." *Justice and Peace News: A Monthly Newsletter of the Justice and Peace Commission of Gulu Archdiocese* 2 (8).

Harcourt, Wendy. 2009. *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development*. London: Zed Books.

hooks, bell. 1981. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Human Rights Watch. 2003. "Stolen Children: Aduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda." http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/uganda0303/uganda0403.pdf.

IPU. 2014. "Women in National Parliaments." http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm.

Kansteiner, Wolf. 2002. "Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies." *History and Theory* 41 (2): 179–197.

Lonsdale, John. 2004. "Moral and Political Argument in Kenya." In *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh, and Will Kymlicka, 73–95. Oxford: James Currey.

McEwan, Cheryl. 2009. *Postcolonialism and Development*. London: Routledge.

Meintjes, Sheila, Meredeth Turshen, and Anu Pillay. 2002. "There Is No Aftermath for Women." In *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, 3–18. London: Zed Books.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Nannyonjo, Justine. 2005. "Conflicts, Poverty and Human Development in Northern Uganda." Working Paper, UNU-WIDER, United Nations University (UNU) 47. http://hdl.handle.net/10419/63240.

Pearce, Diana. 1978. "The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work and Welfare." *The Urban and Social Change Review* 11 (1–2): 28–36.

Quinn, Joanna R. 2008. "Getting to Peace? Negotiating with the LRA in Northern Uganda." *Human Rights Review* 10 (1): 55–71.

Rao, Rahul. 2010. *Third World Protest: Between Home and the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rao, Rahul. 2013. "Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism: Making Place for Nationalism." In *The Democratic Predicament: Cultural Diversity in Europe and India*, edited by Jyotirmaya Tripathy and Sudarsan Padmanabhan, 165–187. New Delhi: Routledge.

Rao, Rahul. 2014. "Queer Questions." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16 (2): 199–217.

Rosen, Ruth. 2001. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: Penguin.

Roth, Benita. 2004. *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spradley, James. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Stienstra, Deborah. 1994. *Women's Movements and International Organizations*. London: Macmillan.

Sylvester, Christine. 1999. "Development Studies and Postcolonial Studies: Disparate Tales of the 'Third World'." *Third World Quarterly* 20 (4): 703–721.

Thompson, John B. 1984. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Tripp, Aili Mari. 2000. *Women and Politics in Uganda*. Oxford: James Currey.

Turner, Bryan S. 2001. "The End(s) of Humanity: Vulnerability and the Metaphors of Membership." *The Hedgehow Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture* 3 (2): 7–32.

Wennerholm, Carolina Johansson. 2002. *The "Feminisation of Poverty": The Use of a Concept*. Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.