Workshop participants:

Thanks for taking the time to read what is a first draft of one of my dissertation chapters.

My dissertation focuses on conceptions of masculinity in urban Uganda and how they are changing within the context of the AIDS epidemic. In 2003-04, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a small, poor community called Bwaise in the Ugandan capital Kampala. In addition to the usual interviews, I spent time working at a small carpentry shop, volunteering for an NGO fighting domestic violence, and hanging out at a health center and two high schools.

This paper is a draft of what will be my chapter 4, which looks at gender and masculinity. This draft presents more data than analysis, so I am interested in comments on how to theorize the information presented here. In particular, your thoughts on the relationship between gender, sexuality and masculinity would be appreciated.

My chapter list in brief is:
Chapter 1: Intro and Lit Review
Chapter 2: Gender and Sexuality in Kampala in Historical Perspective (1700-present)
Chapter 3: Life in Bwaise (with special attention paid to work)
Chapter 4: Gender and Masculinity
Chapter 5: Sexuality and Masculinity
Chapter 6: Conclusions

Looking forward to your comments on Tuesday.
Introduction

By late morning, the metal roof was already burning in the equatorial sun, and the small carpentry workshop was stifling. But Rafik was oblivious, just finding his rhythm in the long day’s work. At 22, he already had two years of carpentry experience, and was confident in his skills as a maker of beds, chairs, tables, and cabinets.

Rafik’s workplace was more a shack than anything else. The walls were half-rotted wood panels, and raw ceiling beams supported the simple tin roof. The dirt floor was covered with lumber, wood scraps, and half-completed projects. The main work area was a blackened table in the rear of the shop, surrounded by a sea of wood shavings that were occasionally gathered up by scavenger boys. Within these ten square meters of space, Rafik and two other men made their living.

The carpentry shop was just one of countless small workshops in Kampala, the Ugandan capital. Like so many others, it was located in Bwaise - a dirty, congested area that is unfortunately best described as a slum.

While Kampala’s most attractive feature is its many hills, Bwaise and other flood-prone valleys are home to many of the city’s poorest residents. Like all developing-world capitals, Kampala has its exclusive neighborhoods, populated by the Ugandan elite and a large community of expatriates. With a population of over a million, and a national population of 25 million, there is also a tiny Ugandan middle class who have staked out land on the fringes of the city, building more modest versions of the gated compounds of the wealthy.

Yet most city residents subsist on one or two dollars a day, and in densely-packed areas like Bwaise life can be especially bleak. Behind the storefronts that line the main streets, there is

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1 Much of what is included in this opening section appears in earlier chapters of this dissertation. This information is included here to situate keys themes explored in this chapter, as well as to introduce my field site, including the carpentry shop where I worked as an apprentice.
a diverse array of housing, from brick and mortar one-story houses to mud-and-wattle one-room shacks housing entire families. Frequent floods, poor drainage, and makeshift sewers make this housing almost unlivable, making life in Bwaise a perpetual health-hazard.

Yet there are good reasons to live in Bwaise. Its proximity to the city center generates bustling business. And while Bwaise has a reputation for seedy nightlife, day-to-day business is its main draw, with dozens of retail outlets, auto-repair shops, markets, butchers, tailors, music stores, furniture showrooms - and carpentry workshops. So while life is harsh in Bwaise, there is also opportunity, and a chance for young men to make a living that might lead to a more financially secure adulthood.

This introduction provides a glimpse into the life of Rafik, who hopes his skills as a carpenter might be sufficient to navigate the road to manhood. Although far from lucrative, carpentry is a respectable profession for men in Kampala. It certainly ranks far below the white collar jobs that well-connected men are able to obtain in government or private companies. But such jobs are miniscule in number, and few men in places like Bwaise even aspire to such work. So across the city, many young men like Rafik hope the craft of carpentry can become their profession.

In the workshop, it was clear that Rafik took satisfaction in his work. He moved smoothly and steadily, all his motions efficient. His concentration was so intense that he often waited until late in the day to break for lunch. In a week, he could transform huge slabs of hardwood into a simple, but pleasing, king-size bed. Yet, like most workers in Kampala, Rafik never received regular payment for his labor. The owner paid him only after pieces were sold, and fair compensation was left very much to the owner’s discretion.
Even a dedicated and hard-working young man like Rafik found this routine exploitation difficult to tolerate. When his girlfriend became ill, he wanted to help pay her medical bills, but the owner wasn't forthcoming. So Rafik quit - which seemed rash, given the precarious labor market and the abundance of carpenters in the area. Yet within a week, he was working in a nearby shop that produced chairs. Most importantly, he arranged payment for each chair upon completion. So while this kind of manual labor was no guarantee of a steady income, the resourceful and motivated could sometimes make it work to their advantage.

But the difficulties Rafik faced in helping his girlfriend with medical bills were only part of deeper problems in the relationship, and money was central to all of them. Rafik was eager to move on to a more adult phase of his life. In Uganda, that means finding a place of your own and having children. Rafik often spoke about how much he wanted to settle down with his girlfriend. When asked if he was faithful, he gave a resounding yes. Part of his trepidation about multiple partners arose from a fear of AIDS, which he mentioned explicitly. Pragmatic concerns about jealousy were also a factor, but for Rafik there was more at stake. As he put it, “I don’t want that kind of life. It’s better to be in the kind of relationship where both partners are faithful.”

Manhood, parenthood, and fidelity were all interwoven for Rafik, at least in theory.

Part of what Rafik found alluring about his girlfriend was that she was educated. She had been trained as a nurse, an education significantly beyond Rafik’s unfinished secondary school. Employed at the main national hospital, she received a modest but steady income. Rafik didn’t find this discrepancy threatening, but rather attractive. She was the kind of woman he could build a future with, as partners. “It’s important to have an educated partner, so that you can be a team,” Rafik explained. While other men might demand that their wives stay at home, Rafik was interested in a woman with earning potential.
But it was exactly those qualities that proved to be liabilities in the relationship. After being together for over a year, but not yet cohabiting, Rafik’s girlfriend stopped taking his calls, and refused to meet with him. He was surprised, but he knew exactly why she had left him. As a carpenter working short-term, unsteady jobs, Rafik’s financial prospects were limited. A young woman with nursing credentials could do better, and Rafik’s girlfriend most likely left him for someone with greater potential. Rafik's vision of a steady partner with whom he could build a home and family had vanished.

The fact that AIDS played some part in Rafik’s ideas about relationships is not surprising in the Ugandan context. Current estimates are that nearly seven percent of the adult population is HIV-positive: a disturbing statistic, but a dramatic decline from the early 1990s, when infection rates were closer to 20 percent. While Southern African countries have seen HIV infection rates rise alarmingly over the last decade, Uganda's trajectory has been the opposite.

The government has been credited with addressing the epidemic early on, but there is no consensus as to why infection rates dropped so dramatically. Some point to the success of prevention campaigns focused on condom use, partner reduction, and more recently, abstinence - the now-famous Ugandan ABC model (Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms). Others have highlighted the grim fact that as large numbers of people with AIDS died throughout the 1990s, the number of HIV-positive people declined.

So whether through the tragic loss of life or effective prevention campaigns, AIDS has become part of the cultural fabric of Uganda. Yet, as Rafik’s story illuminates, AIDS is just one of many issues that young men contemplate when attempting to become a man in a place like Bwaise. Thus, when thinking about what it means to be a man in a place like Bwaise, it is important to recognize that AIDS has shaped Ugandans’ lives, but also that AIDS is just one of
many issues affecting conceptions of masculinity in Bwaise. Uganda is also home to perhaps the
most vibrant women’s movement in Africa, which has successfully advocated for women’s
rights, impacting aspects of masculinity in the process. And as Rafik’s story illustrates, the
nature of work is central to gender relations in Bwaise as well.

There is no straightforward, guaranteed path to manhood in a place like Bwaise. All
routes are beset by complications, compromises, and risks. Consciously or unconsciously, young
men in Bwaise weigh risks and responsibilities as they forge their own paths to adulthood. With
few successful male role models, many men make poor decisions, unable or unwilling to
acknowledge the long-term impact of their actions on themselves and their families. But even
more thoughtful and well-intentioned men can feel despair when assessing their options for
attaining adulthood. AIDS casts their decisions in stark relief, making them truly matters of life
and death.

This chapter is the first half of an attempt to parse conceptions of masculinity more
systematically, and move beyond the frequent conflation of the sexual and non-sexual
dimensions of masculinity. This chapter examines how gender matters to current conceptions of
masculinity, and the following chapter focuses on sexuality and masculinity.

If masculinity has two key dimensions, sexuality and gender, the sexuality dimension, I
would argue, is changing in urban Uganda because of the AIDS epidemic, while the gender
dimension is changing in part because of the success of the women’s movement in Uganda. The

While most writing on masculinities in Africa deals with both sexual and non-sexual aspects of masculinity, few
authors provide an adequate analysis of how they are connected and interrelated (Silberschmidt 2001, Setel 1999,
Cornwall in Lindsay 2003, Morrell 2001, Hunter 2005). In particular, issues of how changes in male sexuality are,
or are not, tied to changes in the legitimacy of male power, and female subordination, are alluded to but often
insufficiently developed.
impact of economic conditions and the shifting nature of work for both men and women is more complex, and impacts both dimensions, but in many different, often contradictory, ways.

Interestingly, the changes in the two dimensions are not mutually influential for the most part. That is, the changes in the sexuality dimension are not clearly affecting the gender dimension, and vice versa. While I would be leery of arguing that gender and sexuality are not at all mutually influential, Uganda, it would seem, provides a case for examining the extent to which the gender and sexuality dimensions of masculinity could be thought to operate independently.

**Gender Relations in Historical Context**

Current gender relations in Uganda are the result of a complex interweaving of indigenous pre-colonial ideas with notions introduced by colonialism, Christianity, Islam and capitalism. What it means to be a man in Bwaise today can only be understood against this historical backdrop. In addition, Uganda is culturally diverse, with people from over 30 different ethnic groups contained within its borders. The primary distinction is between Bantu-language speaking groups in the southern part of the country and groups in the north speaking Nilotic or Central Sudanic-languages. Kampala is located in the southern part of the country, in Buganda, the home of the Baganda. Representing 17% of Uganda’s 25 million people, the Baganda are the largest ethnic group in Uganda, both in terms of numbers and influence. So while the capital Kampala is ethnically diverse, the Baganda predominate and their language, Luganda, is the lingua franca.

The Bantu groups in southern Uganda all have agricultural roots and primarily practiced subsistence hoe agriculture, although several incorporated pastoralists and began herding cattle. The northern groups all have pastoralist roots, yet several began farming and fishing when they...

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3 The issues discussed in this section are addressed in greater detail in Chapter 2.
migrated to areas not suitable for cattle grazing. With the exception of the Kakwa people of far northwestern Uganda, both Bantu and non-Bantu groups have been patrilineal, with ancestry traced through the male family line. Most were virilocally (patrilocal), whereby the wife went to live with the husband and his relatives after marriage⁴, and polygyny (multiple wives) was also a common practice in nearly all of these groups.

An important distinction between Bantu and non-Bantu groups involves the nature and extent of male control over female reproductive powers. High bride price, paid in cattle and money by the husband to the bride’s family, was characteristic of the non-Bantu groups, and this was linked to strong prohibitions against divorce, and an emphasis on a husband’s right to his wife’s children, even children the husband did not father. In contrast, marriage among the Baganda and other Bantu groups was characterized by a low bride wealth, more limited male control over female reproduction, and few prohibitions on divorce, making such separations a common practice (Obbo 1980).

The vast majority of my informants were Baganda (and among the non-Baganda nearly all were from other Bantu groups) so a few important points about the Baganda are worth mentioning here. By the 1700’s, the Baganda had established the most powerful kingdom in the region with a centralized state having a certain degree of authoritarian control. There was a class system, however, social divisions were fluid enough to allow a person with talent and ambition to gain social status (Nzita 1997). So through hard work and skillful political maneuvering, a man could gain power and prestige.

The conventional division of labor among rural Baganda involved women being responsible for domestic work and cultivation of the fields, while men focused on hunting,

⁴ Although matrilocal (husband lives with wife’s family) and neolocal (couple establishes a home away from relatives) patterns have existed as well.
fishing, commerce and politics. Polygyny was common, but because of the emphasis on clan ties, women never became part of their husband’s clan. Ties between brother and sister were strong, and brothers often provided protection and a home if marriages ended in divorce, which was frequent (Obbo 1980).  

By the turn of the Twentieth Century, the British had established their control in Uganda, creating a protectorate which they ruled indirectly through the Baganda. The impacts of colonialism, Christianity and Islam can not be neatly summarized here, but several changes should be noted. Taxes and cash crop farming were introduced, placing a new emphasis on earning money and exhibiting status with cash. Colonial administrators and Christian leaders also attempted to standardize bride wealth payments and stressed the value of an indissoluble, monogamous marriage over customary marriages, which allowed both polygyny and divorce. Some women saw this new emphasis on lifetime, monogamous marriages as threatening the independence and flexibility they found in polygynous unions (Obbo 1980).

Women’s activism, broadly defined, is seen as starting in Uganda as early as 1946 with the formation of the Uganda Council of Women (Mills and Ssewakiryanga 2002). However, the post-independence period was not favorable to women’s organizing. In the 1970’s, Idi Amin banned women’s groups, and his successor Milton Obote used the Ugandan National Council for Women as a political tool (Tripp 2002). After the current president Yoweri Museveni overthrew Obote in 1986, his government made changes that drastically increased women’s political participation in government, at local and national levels. Museveni’s government also oversaw a

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5 While women had limited property rights, by 1900 changes brought by colonialism allowed women to purchase land, something many aspired to do in an attempt to secure more economic independence and security (Obbo 1980).
re-writing of the constitution of Uganda in 1995, which included broad and explicit rights for women and gender equality. Today, 28% of the seats in parliament are occupied by women.\(^6\)

With the relative stability of the Museveni regime, development agencies began taking an active role in supporting Uganda’s local women’s organizations. NGOs addressing women’s rights have expanded rapidly in the last decade and are influencing policy on national, regional and continent-wide levels. The Ugandan women’s movement is best described as liberal-reformist, with an emphasis on women’s equal participation in politics and public life. However, there are a handful of more radical voices, most notably Makerere University law Professor Sylvia Tamale who has been outspoken on the need to challenge the roots of male-domination. She has also stressed the importance of linking issues regarding sexuality, including homosexuality, to debates over gender bias and equity, a stance which has resulted in much conservative vitriol. For Tamale, the reform-oriented agenda of women’s movement has been depoliticized by the donor community, co-opted by political elites, limited by careerism, blinded by homophobia, and beholden to patriarchal, male-dominated political parties. While refreshing as Tamale’s perspective may be, she is far from the mainstream of the Ugandan women’s movement, and her criticisms should not overshadow the real accomplishments of many women’s rights activists. With these changes in mind, we can now turn to an examination of the current state of gender relations, and focus on how men and women understand masculinity and femininity in a place like Bwaise.

\(^6\) Goetz and Hassim (2003) have written on the problems and limits such a state-sponsored women’s movement poses for women’s liberation in Uganda. Others have been critical of the Museveni government for supporting women’s issues only to secure women’s votes.
Local Conceptions of Masculinity in Bwaise Today

An Ideal Man

The quickest route from Rafik’s carpentry shop to the main road was to weave through the labyrinth of buildings behind the shop. A dirt path snaked between a once-decent house and latrines set high off the muddy ground on concrete platforms. Just beyond the latrines the new Pentecostal church was taking shape, and although two walls were missing, a temporary alter and a few plastic chairs were already in place. From here the path became more treacherous as it crossed an overflowing canal of raw sewage blocked downstream by the church construction. The banks of this stream were littered with old wooden latrines now full of human waste.

Across the canal a cluster of one-story brick homes kept the sewage in check, although these residents were in a constant battle to keep the waste from entering their courtyard where all the cooking was done. The narrow path continued between increasingly informal structures, including a small living area built above an animal shed and a “clubhouse” built by teenage boys out of scrap wood. A grown man who recently left his wife lived in a rented corner of this clubhouse. Further along were a couple cramped workshops where men spent their days in a glue-induced haze as they filled furniture and car seats with plastic stuffing. Just beyond was a small courtyard created by the backs of the larger, two-story buildings lining the main road. Here carpenters, loosely affiliated with the nearby furniture showroom, sanded and varnished tables and chairs. At midday, a woman who lived in a crumbling, soot-colored house turned her the veranda into a makeshift restaurant. Entering a narrow alley between two of the main buildings completed the journey, dumping you out on the noisy main road.

The shops along this stretch of road were some of the most desirable in Bwaise, and it was here that Salim had operated his butcher shop for many years. Unlike the cluster of butchers
further up the road, who operated out of nothing more than wooden stands, Salim’s shop was substantial. The interior was clean, with white tile, a cement floor and a four-foot high counter that protected the interior from the dirt of the street. Especially nice was the large awning stretching nearly to the edge of the street where Salim and his wife would chat with visitors during the many idle moments. On the white counter, Salim displayed not only the grey intestines and entrails sold by most butchers, but usually a few deep-red cuts of prime meat as well. The counter was lined with brown paper but Salim’s incessant waving did little to deter the swarms of black flies.

With his white smock and cap, Salim projected the air of a competent working man, and he garnered a good deal of respect from people in the area. At 55, he was proud to have managed this business for nearly a decade, although he was not the owner, and earned only one or two dollars a day. He was not ashamed of having almost no formal education and took pride in running such a clean and professional shop. Like his father, he had been a butcher his entire life and raised five children who were all grown and on their own (although none finished secondary school). His first wife died many years ago and he has been with his current wife for nearly thirty years. His wife cultivates the land around their home outside the city, but does not earn money, an arrangement Salim seems to find agreeable. As a Muslim he feels he could marry a second wife if he could support her, but is not interested because he cannot afford it.

As an older Ganda man who has earned some respect in Bwaise, Salim’s views about masculinity are telling. When asked what it means to be an ideal man (omusajja yennyini) in Bwaise he replied, “One who obeys the law, fears God, is obedient to his boss, his leaders and responsive to his wife. He is respectable and is one of integrity.” Respect (ekitiibwa) and respectability are central to manhood and earned by knowing one’s place and fulfilling your
obligations. If you obey your superiors, are responsive to those dependent on you, and have integrity (omwesimbu) you will earn respect.

Being married was central to Salim’s idea of manhood, and he stressed how a man should treat his wife:

A man must be married and be able to give some money to your wife, so that you show appreciation. When a woman remains at home she does a lot of work. If you were employing someone you would be paying her a salary. This is why I have managed to live peacefully with my wife. A wife is a very important part of life.

By showing appreciation, a man recognizes that a husband and wife are complementary and, in turn, the wife and children show him respect. It is this reciprocity Salim likes most about his relationship:

We appreciate each other’s contribution to the home. When I come back home my wife tells me about her day, and I tell her about mine. She is thankful to me and teaches the [grand]children to be thankful to me and everyone.

Thus Salim is content in feeling like he has lived up to expectations of being a man in Bwaise and expects a certain amount of respect because of it. By some measures, his accomplishments are modest, considering he was unable to send any children through secondary school, continues to make little money and can contribute little to his grandchildren’s welfare. However, by other measures he has done well: raising several children, owning a modest home, managing a decent business and maintaining a good relationship with his wife. For men of his generation and modest background, Salim has accomplished enough to be a man in Bwaise.

Much of Salim’s understanding of being an ideal man is the mainstream in Bwaise. However, few men have Salim’s success in negotiating manhood and his modest accomplishments might not be adequate for generations younger than himself. For most men in Bwaise, there is great anxiety about living up to ideals of being a real man, and their
relationships with their children, wives, girlfriends and other men are marked by tension and conflict.

What nearly all men and women agree on in Bwaise is an ideal man is married, owns a home (and ideally some land) and has children. As David, a younger, single man without children or steady work put it, “A good man must God fearing. Educated enough. Healthy. A real man must have a wife. Not only a wife but a family. And a good man must be working. You must be presentable to the community.” Being a man means providing for the material needs of the family, and manhood is defined by both having and fulfilling responsibilities (buvunanyizibwa). 7 Thus there is an achieved, rather than ascribed, aspect to respectable manhood in Bwaise that does not follow automatically from perceived biological differences between men and women.

For people in Bwaise, what distinguishes men from women is self-evident. Musa, a 35-year-old man who survives as a porter, explained that even without a wife or children a man is still a man because God created him so. But, he added, a young man can never become a real man unless he takes on obligations (ebibanja) and land or a house. What defines a man a real man, then, is not how they different from women, but from other men. It is through his actions that a man becomes a true man.

A more contested issue is the legitimacy of male authority and its relationship to fulfilling the responsibilities of an ideal man. For many men and women, male authority over women and children is a natural aspect of masculinity. In general, authority (obuyinza) has been so closely tied to men and obedience (obuwulize) to women that it can be difficult to discuss authority

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7 These responsibilities include providing money for food, health care, clothing, school fees, but the actual shopping, cooking, cleaning, child care and child guidance are female responsibilities for the most part.
without implicitly evoking men. For example, few would contest men are the ultimate authority in the home, an issue discussed at greater length below.  

But while male authority remains naturalized to some extent, in Bwaise it still must be earned to be legitimate. The legitimacy of male authority is constantly questioned because so few men fulfill the responsibilities of being an ideal man. Henry, an energetic 45-year-old manager of a hardware shop near Salim’s butcher shop, explains the tensions around male authority this way:

Robert: What does it mean to be a man in Uganda?
Henry: I would start this definition from nature. The Bible says that the man is the head of the home, and the woman is the helper. God made it that way. That is how we get the authority (obuyinza), we are the owners of the home, and that is why the man gets a woman and they make a home.

Robert: How does a man in Bwaise show his manhood?
Henry: Because of the urban setting, the man shows his manhood through his actions. He does this by the way he dresses, supporting himself, having money. For example, as a business man, it is important to have a well-stocked shop. The women don't require much because they depend on men. We have a saying that “a real man has money, if he does not have money he is not a man” (omusajja ye alina sente, atalina ssente si musajja).

Like most men, Henry stresses that men are responsible for all the material needs of the family and in the process of fulfilling those responsibilities their authority is reaffirmed. Yet, as will be discussed below, all men in Bwaise emphasize poverty as a prime problem that makes it extremely difficult to fulfill the responsibilities of being a real man. Men are reluctant to give up the authority that comes with fulfilling their responsibilities, even if they can’t fulfill their responsibilities.

Many women in Bwaise would agree with Henry and say men should be responsible for all a family’s material needs. Some say an ideal man should “be responsible for everything all the time,” “be responsible for every concern in the home,” “be in charge of the home” and “if

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8 Similarly, to give orders (okuwa amateeka) has been understood as something men do while women do what they are told (okukola kye bamugamba). The active/passive distinction between men and women is most clearly evident in the verb to marry, where men marry women (okuwasa) but women are married to men (okuwasa).
you have a man, everything depends on him.” Such women do not find the idea of male authority necessarily problematic, however most are quick to qualify that such ideal men do not exist in Bwaise.

For example, Fina, 33, lives with a large extended family and is raising her four children alone after her husband moved to Europe. She spends most of her days in a small, dirty courtyard preparing meals for her family and relatives. For Fina, men are superior to women, but good men are hard to find:

God made men much higher, we cannot be equal to them. Men are far beyond women.
Robert: What is a real man?
Fina: Being a real man is important. He would know what a woman is, would be able to look after his wife and children. Some don’t care for their families. Some get an extra wife instead of looking after the family he has. When the current wife gets children he leaves her and gets a younger woman.

So what distinguishes the female critique is a more open contestation of the legitimacy of male authority. While men are supposed to be the authority in the home, few, they would say, conduct themselves in a way that deserves respect or authority. An ideal man in Bwaise is very hard to find and most men do not earn the authority they lord over women.

Many women are also critical of the way men abuse their authority, with several saying an ideal man discusses matters with his wife, respects her opinions, and is sensitive to the feelings of his wife and children. This is in contrast to some men who see an ideal man as one who “commands” his family and has “people under [his] control (okufuga).”

Finally, there are those aspects of an ideal man that revolve around sexuality. Among men, there is little consensus about whether an ideal man should have more than one wife or girlfriend at the same time. Opinions vary from those strongly opposed to the idea to those that see multiple partners as an ideal. Some men say that an ideal man “should be having at least three wives” or point to elite men because “the business men, they have many wives.” Others are
more ambivalent saying a real man does not have to have many sexual partners but “it depends on someone’s priorities and preferences.” Religion, not surprisingly, shapes attitudes as well, with one Christian man saying, “You see the Muslims have five wives, that way they are considered to be real men.”

Then there are others strongly opposed to the idea such as David, the young man quoted above:

Robert: How do you feel about a man having more than girlfriend?
David: It's not good. I don't want it. It's not ok.
Robert: Only one girlfriend at a time?
David: Yeah... is it good for someone to have more than one girlfriend? It's not good.
Robert: Sometimes I hear people say a real man can get many women?
David: At first in their cultures, and religion the Muslims think like that, that a real man has four wives. But the situation these days, in Uganda, we have many problems so it's not easy to satisfy many wives. Like lack of job, lack of job, and there are many people, you know, I think everyone is infected [with AIDS].

Women also recognize that having multiple sexual partners is a way that some men prove their manhood. However, nearly all women are critical of this, with one saying simply, it “shows he is a man and strong, but it’s not good.” It is significant that David mentions AIDS when he discusses the sexual dimensions of masculinity. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

An Ideal Woman

Conceptions of masculinity revolve around notions of not only what it means to be a man, but also what it means to be a woman. Both men and women emphasize bearing children and motherhood, ideally within marriage, as central to a woman’s identity. For both men and women,

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9 Religion is an important factor because Muslims are something of an embattled minority in Uganda. Many Christian Ugandans assume most Muslim men are, or would like to be, polygynous regardless of whether or not this is actually the case. Many Muslims, in turn, emphasize their right to polygynous unions as a way of asserting their difference.
parenthood and adulthood are linked, and having children brings responsibilities, but women’s primary responsibilities are in the home. An ideal woman is married, bears children, cares for them and respects her husband. Few women would disagree with this definition and many would also stress a woman should know that her role is looking after her husband and their children. However, women (both old and young) are also likely to emphasize an ideal woman acts with some independence, not waiting for her husband to tell her how to fulfill her duties. Such a woman does not need to be managed by her husband and should even feel comfortable pointing out problems in the home, even if they are the husband’s fault. If done with proper respect, her husband will take her advice and listen to her suggestions. This echoes what Salim the butcher noted, that while women’s responsibilities are primary domestic this does not necessary imply a relationship exclusively defined by subordination and submission.  

Another quality that distinguishes discourses on being an ideal woman is the emphasis on maintaining dignified behavior. While men who drink too much, steal, or have many indiscriminate sexual partners are likely to be seen as irresponsible and not worthy or respect, an ideal woman is one who exhibits decorum and is monogamous. As Fina told me:

An ideal woman respects herself, should be well to do, able to look after her family and children, be able to communicate with other people, behaves well toward her husband, does not quarrel in public or with her neighbors.

Other women would add “sticks to one man only.” Many young women are particularly sensitive to accusations of sexual impropriety and as one 19 year old explained, a woman who is not married “should try to respect herself and keep her dignity and not be taken by just any

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10 Yet it would be a mistake to overemphasize the extent to which male-female relationships are conceived as complementary. This was made clear to me during a “gender sensitization” seminar held at the main police station in Bwaise. The moderator was a female judge from the family court who also held a master’s degree from Uganda’s top university and the participants were a dozen police officers, roughly equally divided between men and women. The participants were asked to write five characteristics of an ideal woman and man. They all the listed motherhood and caring as traits of an ideal woman, whereas an ideal man is the head of family and protects it. Yet one female and one male officer emphasized an ideal woman as submissive, listing “weak”, “not courageous” and “fearful” as ideal qualities.
man.” This was a particularly touchy subject for this woman because she was in a relationship of convenience and admitted that when it comes to this man, “I don’t like him although he supports me. My love is limited. But I really loved the father of my baby.”

The connection between monogamy and propriety in an ideal women is even more important to many men, with one man saying an ideal woman is “in the home, has children, and never unfaithful to her husband.” But many men express frustration with the women in Bwaise, and as one man said, an ideal woman is:

That woman who is settled, she has a home, she is committed to one partner (tafuddeyo kwagala muntu mulala – literally “she is not searching for another person to love”), has children and empathizes with her husband if he has problems. But the majority cannot cope.

For some men, it is difficult to reconcile women working with their notions of an ideal woman. As a 40-year-old man with a tiny “dry cleaners” off the main road in Bwaise said, “An ideal woman should be married, well behaved. In Buganda, a woman should be looked after, but in the north the women work.” Many men in Bwaise would disagree. Another man exactly the same age and with similar education stressed that “even if a woman is working at home, she should be able to earn an income.” Many, but not all, younger men are willing to go even further.

David, the single 20 year old quoted above is quite clear on this point:

Robert: So if you have a wife some day what type of wife would you like?
David: A working lady. Education is enough. At least a degree. A working lady. That’s the first one.
Robert: For you it's OK if she works?
David: It's OK. And I like it so much!

Women can also be vocal about having a right to work outside the home, with some saying women should work and contribute to the welfare of the family. This sentiment is especially common from women with more education.
But what is most striking about the tensions over women working is the disconnect between discourses about women working and the fact that so many women in Bwaise do in fact earn money. Stroll through the area on any given day and you’ll find women managing shops, in market stalls, in restaurants, selling charcoal, running lunch places from their homes, washing clothes, frying bread and selling used clothes, to name but a few. In addition, many women in Bwaise have been forced to earn money, and in nearly every cluster of houses you can find a “single mother” who is raising her children without help from any man. Many of these fathers simply left when times got tough, others are in jail, and some have died from AIDS. For these women, debates about women earning money are moot, and survival takes precedence. Many want a man who can take care of all the responsibilities, but know a new man may do more harm than good. As one single mother said:

They disrespect women, they do not look after them, they don't like looking after the homes, even the married women say their husbands do not help them. They are all complaining and suffering, that is why I choose to remain single.

For this woman, men simply cause too many problems, which is a common sentiment among women in Bwaise. As will be discussed in the next section, many women see men as the cause of their troubles, whereas men emphasize poverty as the root of their problems.

Problems for Men in Bwaise

The nearly universal refrain from men when talking about their problems is obutaba na ssente, “being broke.” Even working men in Bwaise know that obutaba na mulimu, “unemployment,” looms persistently. A steady income is elusive and without it men cannot pay for food, rent, school fees, or clothing, making all the responsibilities associated with masculinity difficult to fulfill.
All men in Bwaise are preoccupied with money matters, for they know their identity as responsible men is predicated on having and dispensing money. Without money there is no proper marriage or proper family, something made clear by how few people in Bwaise have been officially married, whether in a church, mosque or in a civil union. Henry, the hardware store manager, sees poverty as his central concern:

The income is a big problem. We find it difficult to educate children. We cannot even afford the cheapest means of transport which is a bicycle. We have work to do but it requires capital. The biggest problem is poverty…All worries stem from poverty because we cannot be gainfully employed.

For most men, money is not only the source of the problems but also the solution - both their curse and salvation. Men who only have some primary school education, of whom there are many in Bwaise, recognize that lack of education is also a major impediment for them, but even these men see a decent job solving their problems. As discussed in the previous chapter, Bwaise is filled with working men, and most men describe themselves as very hard working. However, work in Bwaise is nearly exclusively informal, insecure, manual labor where pay is not only poor but also inconsistent. Surviving, little lone raising a family, in such conditions is difficult. And as many men note, the AIDS epidemic has killed relatives who might have helped, leaving orphans that are an added burden to already over-taxed families.

Men are vocal about the burden of their responsibilities, and although socialized to see themselves as the provider and breadwinner in the family, men discuss the pressure they feel not only earning money but also being the primary decision maker. Men complain of the stress they are under to “make correct decisions in the home” or the fact that “everyone looks at your as a solution to every problem in a family.” While some men say they have too many responsibilities, most are reluctant to question the rigid division of labor of the status quo. As one man put it, “I have to look after my family by myself. I do not expect help from anyone else.” Many men seem
to recognize that their authority is tied to being the breadwinner and questioning this division of labor would lead to questioning the basis of male authority. This recognition of poverty preventing men from being providers, coupled to a reluctance to rethink notions of an ideal man, leaves most men embittered, with a strong sense of victimization.

While men primarily see poverty as the cause of their problems, many men also frame their burdens in relation to women. Ali, an unemployed 32-year-old single man, expresses the connection this way:

Many men regret being men because of the huge responsibility. One thinks of the responsibility of looking after the wife and children, especially without a job. Women have an advantage because they were created differently. If she finds out that one man is broke, she can get another one. Men in Bwaise feel a real man is one who is rich, with plans and has been working for a long time.

Other men echo this sentiment saying “women are never satisfied” or “they stress a lot and see one good thing and go for it forgetting the good you have done together.” The theme of wayward, unfaithful women is a recurring one, and as one man said, “The problem with women, they don’t like to be married. Today even the one you marry you will find her on the street.” For such men, women are ungrateful, greedy and disrespectful of men, and their behavior is one of the many insults men endure attempting to be a respectable man in Bwaise.

Women do recognize poverty makes it difficult for men to live up to ideal notions of manhood. However, their sympathy is limited, and most are critical of how men deal with their predicament. One 50-year-old woman said:

A good number of men are jobless so the income is very low to some people especially those who are not politicians. Some stupid men think that some type of work are not worthy their age, standard etc so they decide to pick pockets and break into houses and steal money instead of working for it. Instead of looking for what to do now every small or big it would be, a good number have decided to over drink from very early morning up to noon, marijuana included.
In Bwaise, a job and hard work are key markers of a responsible man, and men who find alternative routes to money must tread carefully. Most men fear that if they are unemployed they will be seen as a *muyaye*, a powerfully derogatory epithet when used to describe an adult man. A *muyaye* can be man or a women, teenager or adult, and can be glossed as a thug, or petty thief, who is probably into drugs as well.¹¹ For adult men, it is an especially profound insult and all grown men who are struggling financially fear such accusations. A man’s fear of being labeled *muyaye* for being unemployed is justified and many women in Bwaise are quick to associated the two. Women see men are caught in a bind, but they also see men running away from their duties, turning to alcohol, drugs, crime and violence. One women noted that such pressure may even lead men to suicide, however this too was viewed by her as just a particularly morbid form of escapism.

Occasionally a woman will note that some men receive inadequate help, with one saying what’s hardest about being a man is, “Even though a woman is working, she would like a man to look after her, our [women’s] money is never enough.” However, in general, women feel men cannot cope with their responsibilities, and, out of pride or stubbornness, men refuse to do what is necessary to be providers for the family. The implicit critique is that manhood in Bwaise is best defined by ineptitude and irresponsibility, not respectability and resourcefulness. The man as provider may remain an ideal for many women, but it is an ideal so rarely embodied by men that it is nearly irrelevant.

*Problems for Women in Bwaise*

In contrast to men, women frame their problems not in relation to poverty, but in relation to men.

It is men who ignore responsibilities in the home, don’t pay school fees, refuse to attend

¹¹ *Muyaye* is most often used to describe certain types of men, as opposed to women, and there are teenage boys in Bwaise that wear the label as a badge of honor.
seminars, don’t accept family planning, bring sexually transmitted diseases, and take their wife’s money. For one woman, “Being a woman is the source of all problems in the world. One must be strict in order to bring up children. The man does not care.”

Other women complain their husbands meddle in their affairs and steal their money. Winnie, a 59 year old facing such problems, is ambivalent about her marriage. Like most women, being married is a source of pride and central to her identity as a woman, something she expresses clearly:

He supports and assists me with domestic work, like cleaning that big compound, when I need something from the shops he brings everything for me. He cuts down trees in the compound and does other hard things I can not do as a woman. Sometimes, he makes me feel happy as a woman with a husband and I feel proud of him because people see me as a woman with a husband, and that I do not disturb anyone’s home looking for men to love me, because I have mine.

Winne’s husband works as a builder, but his work is very inconsistent. Although fairly old, Winnie herself works as a tailor, earning a meager income of two to three dollars a week, and this modest sum causes problems in her relationship:

Sometimes we fail to understand one another which makes me worried and it is due to his playing with my money and taking it for alcohol and cigarettes. When he drinks too much, he comes home and starts barking at me like a dog, which makes other people look at me like a person living under threats [of violence].

For Winnie, these and other problems make her wonder if the relationship is worth continuing:

Whenever he is poor he tries to play tricks with my business and takes money for alcohol and cigarettes. When I complain he becomes angry and starts abusing me in public. That gives me a headache and I feel out of place…I feel [these problems] are hard to solve and sometimes I want him to go away from me, because I am the one who married him and brought him to my father's compound where I am now staying after the death of my father.

Disturbingly, Winnie spoke of how insecurities over being a provider lead men like her husband to domestic violence as a way to prove their manhood:
When he comes home at night, he just kick the door so that they may open for him. Sometimes they don't remove their shoes, they call the wife to come and to remove them and wash their feet. Sometimes when after you quarrel with him, we keep quiet and immediately go to bed, and he starts forcing you to play sex with him and if you refuse, he forces you without your consent and hurts your private parts.

Such domestic violence is an unfortunate aspect of life in Bwaise (and Uganda more generally), but attempts are being made to address the problem and one promising approach will be discussed later in this chapter [not in this draft].

In Bwaise, domestic violence is often cited by single mothers as the reason they left their husbands. Other women have been abandoned by the fathers of their children, and survival for all these single women is difficult. Most want to start a new relationship, but from experience know the trouble a new man can bring. As one single mother said, the hardest part of being a woman is, ‘just what I’m going through. I look after this child and others. I need to get a man but not just any man. There is no way of knowing a good man, unless your friend recommends him.’

AIDS is one more complication for such women because as Fina, another single mother, noted, what’s hardest is “being deserted by the husband, and then going with other men and getting infected with disease.”

It’s not surprisingly then, that many women frame the solution to their problems not in terms of men, but in terms of being able to earn their own money. Given the chance, many women feel they could be self-reliant. Fina, for example, feels, “If I were working I would be fine. For example, if I had a business I would be fine.” Another younger woman said, “The major problem [for me] is lack of employment. If I had a job and earned money, I would be able to take care of myself.” Yet barriers to employment are many for women. Capital to start even a simple business is usually out of reach. In addition, married women often find their husbands hostile to the idea, either prohibiting them from working or reluctant to provide any financial
support. Many women, it seems, have given up on men as providers and have moved past simply blaming them and instead want to take matters into their own hands. Few men recognize this explicitly and when asked what is hardest about being a women most stress menstruation and giving birth.

**Gender Equality**

Clearly men and woman have different perspectives on the source of their problems, so it’s not surprising relations between them are so contentious. Such conflicts over the state of gender relations are most evident in discussions of gender equality.\(^{12}\) In Bwaise today, there is a range of attitudes about whether men and women are equals. For some, the thought of male superiority is natural, and it is impossible to think about men and women being equal. At the other end of the spectrum, some feel it’s obvious men and women are equals and both have the same rights. Not surprisingly, tensions over gender equality are frequently voiced in relation to whether women should work and earn money outside the home. However, attitudes do not line up neatly along gender lines because both men and women voice opinions from all positions on the spectrum.

Many men in Bwaise are hostile to the idea that men and women are equals. For some men, male physical and intellectual superiority is innate and obvious, and the conventional division of labor is a natural outgrowth of such differences. For Zaidi, a 39-year-old married man

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\(^{12}\) In Uganda, gender equality usually refers to women having equal representation in politics and equal access to employment opportunities. The constitution of Uganda has a broader definition, stressing equal rights, and that “woman shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men…Laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status, are prohibited by this Constitution” (1995, 30). However, many in the women’s movement say real legal reforms that would guarantee women’s rights have yet to be enacted. A set of such reforms, known as the Domestic Relations Bill, has languished in committee for several years.
looking after 6 children, women working outside the home does little to change his attitude about innate gender differences:

Robert: Are men and women equal?
Zaidi: No, because the women think differently from men and the way they behave.
Robert: Can men and women do the same things?
Zaidi: They can.
Robert: How are they different?
Zaidi: Women's thoughts are easy [simple minds] not complicated like men.
Robert: Does your wife have an income generating activity?
Yes, nearby [tailor].
Robert: Then what is the major difference between men and women?
Zaidi: Because women usually think about domestic responsibilities, while men go out to look for money away from home in town.
Robert: Who is the authority in the home?
Zaidi: The man.
Robert: Can man and woman make a decision together?
Zaidi: They can make it together but the man is the authority.

While Zaidi can rationalize women working with his ideas of natural male superiority, there are some issues promoted by the women’s movement that he finds troubling:

For example, one might want to get a second wife, and these [women’s] rights require that the husband should consult her, but I want to make my own decision. And sharing property with the wife yet she found you with this property.

Even men who are more open to gender equality find the notion of a wife’s right to inherit property going too far. Other men ground their notions of natural gender differences in culture.

Henry, the hardware shop manager, puts it this way:

This is natural, they are not equal, unless you want to change nature (obutonde). They are influenced by nature, a woman cannot roof a house, she would require help from the man. The culture naturally does not allow such a thing to happen, especially here in Buganda.

Some men have a slightly softer edge to their patronizing attitude toward women. As discussed above, Salim, the butcher, sees men and women as complementing each other:

They are not equal. A man is higher, because he is the one who goes out to bring the woman to his home. The man also is the major provider in the home. The relatives and in-laws have to look to the man for any requirements. But this does not mean that the man is too superior, however, because they complement each other.
Other men echo Salim’s emphasis on male superiority rooted in men’s roles as providers. For Steven, a 40-year-old former engineer who is still looking for a wife, it is also important that gender equality does not interfere with the man’s duty to provide moral guidance to his family:

Robert: Are men and women equal?
Steven: Not so to say. Because I think it's just a natural phenomenon that a man...I think we are superior. Because we are really the providers of the family needs by virtue of being the family service provider.
Robert: What makes men and women not equal?
Steven: The enabling capacity which a man has to provide for the family in the home.
Robert: OK, but you think women and men should be treated equally?
Steven: To some extent yes. As long as the equality again does not violate the men's capacity to direct the trend of the family. To direct the moral trend of the family.

Gender equality can bring out the deep sense of disempowerment and victimization many men feel. In the following excerpt from a discussion with a group of men in Bwaise, it is clear they see women now receiving unfair favoritism, even though some of these men feel both women and men are entitled to certain rights:

Robert: Are men and women equal?
Man 1: Women and men are not equal.
Man 2: A man should have been higher than the woman but now women are higher.
Man 3: Now with equality, women will get to the same level as us because of the changing situation but men are still higher.
Man 4: On the government’s side, women and men are equal. When the women have money women and men are equal.
Robert: Do you think men and women should be treated equally?
Man 1: They should both have been treated equally but the government has sided so much with the women.
Man 2: We the men are so hurt.
Man 3: We should also advocate for our rights just as the women did.
Man 4: When a woman talks, police will only listen to her.
Robert: What would it mean for you if women are treated the same as men?
Man 1: An understanding could be sought, imprisonment could have been eliminated because both parties would have a chance to present their issues.
Man 2: But still the woman will stay stubborn because we remain equal.
Man 3: We are not equal, come what may we shall never be equal.
So for these men, government-sponsored women’s empowerment has gone too far and is infringing on men’s natural status above women. But what some men find more confusing is dealing with some women’s economic success. Mohamed, a salesman in a furniture showroom, expresses the confusion many men face reconciling their notions of male superiority with women earning money:

Women are not equal to men because the man was created different from a woman. The woman is not able to differentiate between right and wrong. They act mostly to please someone…The biggest problem comes when a man is unemployed, if he is employed, there is no problem. If the man has little money, he should discuss with his wife on what decisions to make. If the man does not have money, the woman will not listen to him and will not have to consult him. The one with the money is the one who makes the decisions.

Women no longer listening to men is one of the things many men fear about greater gender equality, because if men and women were considered equal, women would no longer respect men, and men would lose their dignity. Or as one man more bluntly put it, “Here in Buganda they are not equal. Women do not control men, men control women (abasajja bafuga abakazi). It does not change.”

Yet not all men are so defiant and some acknowledge, albeit grudgingly, some change is beneficial, with one man saying:

Men should have a special status according to culture. This status in inherited from out grandfathers and our fathers. But if it is to do with life, we should all be treated equally. For example, we are all entitled to medical treatment, whether a man or a woman…[But] I would be unhappy if women are given equal status to men.

So while some men see women and men as having different roles, and women fundamentally lower in status, they recognize certain shared human rights and the benefits of working collaboratively.

Other men see women gaining access to education as jobs as a necessary part of development, and therefore ultimately something positive, but still set limits to equality,
especially regarding property and men’s authority in the home. Peter, discussed above, volunteers for an international NGO and has likely been exposed to ideas of gender equality through various seminars and trainings. When asked if men and women are equal, Peter wanted to reconcile women working with his notions of male superiority:

Biologically they are not equal but socially they are equal because they even do the same type of work. There never used to be women doctors or women engineers but now there are many. Regarding the rate of world development, it is good because it brings development.

Robert: Is there anything you don't like about women’s development?
Peter: A man should have control over property. But now there is a new law which says that a woman also has control over property and this has caused problems.

Robert: But in the home men and women are equal?
Peter: They are not equal, the man is higher but the reality is that it is possible to find a woman who is higher if she has more money than the man. The woman might rule over the man (okulinnya ku musajja – literally “to climb on or ascend over the man”). There are instances when a woman works at night, then she remains outside while the man sleeps. These things never happened in the past. These days women have started to marry men (okuwasa abasajja). If a young man does not have money, he may be married by an older woman.

Coming to terms with a world in which women now marry men and women are doctors whose daughters may inherit their land is disorienting for many men. Even many of those who have been exposed to ideas such as “gender” in workshops and seminars find it difficult to reconcile their conceptions of masculinity with the world around them.

One such example is Ronald, a 34 year old who has a long history of working with NGOs active in Bwaise. A sharp man with a some post-secondary school education, he is adept at building connections with organizations, and his very modest fortunes have risen and fallen with the vagaries of development funding in the area. Recently, times had been tough and grants for his small community-based organization had run out. Although he still identified himself as a “community development worker,” he spent some of his time volunteering for a domestic violence prevention organization, and the rest managing a small shop. His first marriage
produced two children but ended in separation, for which he mostly blames himself and his abusive behavior toward his wife, something he now regrets. Fluent in the language of development, Ronald has participating in many seminars on gender and development, and sees himself much more educated on the issue compared to his fellow men in Bwaise. Yet Ronald remains ambivalent about gender equality, acknowledging fluency in gender issues is a mark of status, yet apprehensive of advocating something that could further undermine his tenuous sense of manhood:

Personally I see man and women as equal in some aspects. But in some, I still say one is supreme over the other. Like a family, as a unit, they are equal because they are both leaders. But then, a man is in most cases he is more equal because he is the head of the family. Any given society there has to be a head. And when a head happens to be a man, of course a man has to be a bit superior. And you find there are cases where ladies are family heads, and those cases a woman should be superior…

Robert: Do you think most men in Bwaise would see it the same way, or have different views than you?
Ronald: Ah they have different views. Like there is a saying among men that “however much a lady is educated, her final office is the kitchen” [laughs]. Another old saying, [a woman’s mental] capacity it's always low no matter how educated she is, no matter how rich she is, no matter old she is. But in fact there are cases, they are wrong is what I'm saying. There are cases where you find a lady, although they are rare they are there, where you find a woman has high reasoning capacity and really she has superior experience of a man, the cases are there. But most men say, oh ladies they are always like that. They are always inferior. In the community they don't view things the way I do.

A few other men seem less conflicted about gender equality. Ibrahim is a 48 year old who has been a community leader in the area neighboring Bwaise for over a decade. For him, gender equality is linked to basic rights all people have, and he feels it is his duty to promote such ideas in the community:

Robert: Do you feel men and women are equal?
Ibrahim: Yeah, they are, of course…Yeah, since I've been a leader in the community for so long, I had some, you know, lessons in human rights, you know things that concern human rights and other problems. That was so actually gave me the insight that men, women, children are all equal.
Ibrahim went on to say that he also feels men should not be seen as the ultimate authority in the home, but men and women should make decisions together.

This is not to say that it is only men directly involved in community development work that are more open to some aspects of gender equality. There are “ordinary” men in Bwaise who are also attempting to negotiate a position that supports some aspects of women’s empowerment. However, it can be hard to carve out such a stance in a context where there is clearly a strong backlash against the gains women have made.

It is not just men who find gender equality problematic. Some women are emphatic that men have more power and authority, and it should stay that way. Men take on a lot of responsibility in the family, so it is only right they have more power. There are other women in Bwaise who are also not comfortable with the idea gender equality and are also dismissive of the women’s movement. As Fina says:

God made men much higher, we cannot be equal to men…These days the President has supported us [women], we have a voice. However, it is not possible to take a man to police because he would not agree. Sometimes I don't even see [my husband] yet he is in Kampala. He might come back late at night or spend three months away from home.

Then there are those women who feel men were given greater strength and authority by God, but they misuse it, forcing women to do whatever they want or simply neglecting their duties. However, most women in Bwaise feel that although women are not treated the same as men today, they should be treated equally. Like some men, these women connect women’s empowerment with development, although several are pessimistic about what equality could bring. As one woman said:

If women were treated equally as men, for me I think there will be satisfaction in every sphere of life and men will recognize women as important people, unlike now when they say women are weaker people and can’t do this and that…[But] if women became equal to men there will be violence against women by men because men will not allow women to command them as they now do. For example, [sometimes] men need to come back
home very late. If a woman also did this she is beaten to death because she can’t behave like him, the boss.

For some women, equality is not what women need, instead women should be put first. An older, 59-year-old, was quite adamant about this, saying:

Men and women should not be treated equally. It’s the women’s time now to gain so women should be put first at every opportunity, like employment, sharing in the government pie, etc. Women should have their rights considered and implemented as provided in the constitution of Uganda. Women should be given freedom to look for money because they also have responsibilities of taking care of their children for men are no longer caring about their children sometimes. A good number have run away from their homes, go with other women, leaving everything under the woman’s responsibility at home. [If women were treated equally] it means that freedom has come to earth and people are smelling development in their communities.

When asked what men think about gender equality, some women stress the negative.

Madiina, a happily married mother of four, is very active in the community, running a primary school and holding a position in local government. In addition, she volunteers with the NGO working to reduce domestic violence and has a good sense of how men feel about issues such as gender equality:

Men in the community, they usually don't want hear that thing that they are equal with the women. Because they could misinterpret it. For them, saying equality they could say that if he gets two wives the woman could also get two husbands. That's the equality they think of. Men usually want to make orders. If they are equal, he has to make an order and the woman orders [too]. So that's the way I think they usually interpret it, badly.

But Madiina is undeterred and feels justified and empowered to discuss women’s rights with men, especially the right to work:

A woman has a right of working. And don't say that the women will not work because when they get money they will get money and get big-headed. No, it is a right for a woman to work, that's the equality that men work and women work. It is the woman also has to contribute some of the things that we buy at home. That is also the equality. They have their rights actually.

Given the entrenched attitudes some men have regarding male superiority, some women remain surprisingly optimistic about gender equality. For Hasifa, a 50 year old woman, the obstacles
toward more equitable gender relations are there, but she is confident she significant progress
will be made in her lifetime:

Hasifa: Some men…as we go on sensitizing them they know things are changing. Because those things, for culture, for religious or whatever, but things are going on changing slowly by slowly. Within 5 years to come here in Uganda, or in Bwaise, there will be a great change because men have started to know that they are equal, men and women. Those were things of long ago, mostly those of culture. There are some cultures, cultural people that think that men are greater than women. But nowadays even those culture people have started to recognize that we people, we are equal. 13

In summary, it appears entrenched poverty has forced men to recognize the value of women earning money and working outside the home. This in itself has not challenged notions of male superiority and, as indicated above, many men can easily reconcile women working with continued male authority in all spheres. However, the current government’s support of women’s political participation, continued pressure from the women’s movement to promote women’s rights and equality, and emphasis on women’s development by the many international development organizations in Uganda, have combined to legitimize women’s rights. When coupled to economic conditions that challenge the male role of breadwinner, there is a combined effect on the legitimacy of male superiority and authority. Some men have tried to accommodate women’s rights within a framework of male superiority, but they have found this more difficult to reconcile than women earning their own money.

While a backlash against women’s rights is evident, there have also been changes that challenged certain aspects of masculinity tied to male superiority. Significantly, aspects of masculinity tied to men’s sexuality are not the explicit focus of attention in debates over gender equality. Sexuality is no doubt lurking, with references made to a man’s right to multiple sexual

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13 It is worth noting that there has been a cultural resurgence among the Baganda due to a recent official recognition of the Kingdom of Buganda by the central government. The kingdom has very limited political power, but it has renewed cultural significance. Some aspects of this revival involve promoting conservative “traditional” practices, such as virginity testing for women. So the Hasifa may have unwarranted faith in such cultural leaders, but for her, progress will continue to be made.
partners and wives, but such issues are not as central as male authority, especially authority in the home.

One possible way to frame these issues is in terms of gender transgression. What exactly constitutes gender transgression for men and women in Bwaise, and what exactly are the consequences? How are limits to “acceptable” transgressions enforced and who is doing the enforcing? How do we differentiate gender transgression from transgressions related to sexuality? Can they be productively separated? We will return to these questions in the final chapter.

Gender and AIDS

As the discussion so far should make clear, AIDS is not a significant part of discourses on male authority and gender equality. Conceptions of masculinity related to male superiority and authority may be shifting, but AIDS does not seem to be a major reason why. What appear more salient are the nature of work and discourses about women’s rights. AIDS has certainly made it more difficult for men to live up to their breadwinner role, because potentially helpful relatives are gone and many have left orphans who require assistance. However, in this way AIDS is just another factor exacerbating poverty, and this is how many people understand it. Although, of course, economic issues are just a small facet of the epidemic, for it is loaded with many others meanings as well. But given the devastation AIDS has wrought in Uganda, and the plethora of programs designed to mitigate it’s impact, it is striking how little AIDS figures into debates and conflicts over gender equality.

Then again, perhaps this is not so surprising. Few if any AIDS prevention efforts in Bwaise (and Uganda more generally) have seriously attempted to integrated gender. Instead
programs emphasize abstinence, remaining faithful to one partner, condom use, and HIV testing. While gender is central to all these prevention tactics, issues around gender inequality have not been integrated into such prevention tactics. Within the government, there is discussion of “mainstreaming” gender into AIDS prevention (and everything else), and international organizations employ similar rhetoric. But in Bwaise it is difficult to find any evidence that discussions of gender have shaped prevention efforts.14

Although AIDS prevention programs fail to connect gender relations and AIDS, many people in Bwaise see connections – especially between women and AIDS. Women who deviate from ideal notions of motherhood and decorum are often accused of being greedy and omwenzi (promiscuous; used to describe either both men and women). These women are blamed for spreading AIDS, with the disease signaling more than just illness, but also conflict over gender relations in a changing world.15

This partly explains why gender equality is such a problematic concept for some men. Women transgressing their “proper” roles arouses a deep sense of unease about a man’s value in a place like Bwaise. As one man said when asked if men and women are equal, “It is impossible, a married woman is under her husband. The rebellious woman is with one man today and another man tomorrow.” For men like this, gender equality signals new and problematic ways of thinking about female sexuality, and who should control it.

Working women, then, represent much more than a woman’s rights to earn money, but also trigger anxieties about what it means to be a man in a world that is so different from one’s

14 One exception is in domestic violence prevention where, during the time of my research, two local organizations were just beginning to integrate AIDS prevention into their work. But overall, other AIDS prevention and testing programs active in Bwaise made only superficial note of the role gender plays in the spread of AIDS.
15 Men too are vulnerable to such accusations, because men who neglect their duties and fail to live up to ideals of manhood are labeled muyaye, and often seen as philanderers who spread AIDS. Yet it is usually women who accuse men of spreading AIDS, while many men link the spread of AIDS to women.
grandfather’s. In the context of AIDS, female independence is easily equated with unregulated female sexuality and disease. For example, Michael, a 28 year old, is disturbed by his wife taking a job as a waitress:

I am not happy that she is working because she is seduced by everyone. She may be tempted to accept at least one of them. Women do not mind about condom use because it is the man who makes decisions about condom use. If the man does not suggest use of condom, then the woman will not suggest it. Women these days are unruly. They are responsible for spread of AIDS.

Concerns over wives and girlfriends being on display is common among men in Bwaise. Insecure about their masculinity and earning power, they are in constant fear competition from men with more money or power. For some men, this fear is transformed into a critique of women’s sexuality, implying that if not properly regulated by men it will bring disaster. Brad Weiss (1996) makes a similar point in his discussion of the Haya of Northwestern Tanzania. For Haya men, greedy women came to symbolize the trauma and turmoil of world being transformed by modernization. Unbridled female desire and female sexuality unregulated by men came to epitomize a world turned upside down, and the devastation wrought by AIDS the unfortunate, but inevitable result.

Some men in Bwaise make similar connections, raising questions about how AIDS is affecting those aspects of masculinity tied to sexuality. And it is to this we turn in the next chapter.
References


