

# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF MASCULINITIES, CONFLICT, AND PEACEBUILDING

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## PATRIARCHAL BACKLASH IN UGANDA?

Contested masculinities in conflict and  
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### Introduction

A backlash against gender equality and minority rights is sweeping across many countries across the globe, including Uganda. Despite decades of experiencing conflicts and post-conflict nation-building, Uganda continues to boast of many apparently progressive policies on gender, such as affirmative action for women's political representation from 1989, a gender-inclusive Constitution in 1995, a Domestic Violence Act in 2010, or the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) more recently. Yet pushback has been increasing, and inclusive gender-egalitarian policies are often postponed or diluted amidst a shift in discourse toward 'protection of the family' (Mwiine et al., 2023). Sexual minorities and groups challenging hegemonic gender norms have become increasingly demonised and criminalised with little visible wider public opposition – such as in the context of the recently passed Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023. This raises thorny questions over how masculinities and gender justice are being contested in Uganda in the wake of recent histories of conflict and peacebuilding and how this may relate to broader politics of gender backlash across the world.

The question of 'men and masculinities' in feminist conversations is gradually gaining some currency within conflict, post-conflict and peacebuilding initiatives in Uganda and beyond (Large, 1997; Dolan, 2002; Abirafeh, 2007; Anderson, 2009; Onyango, 2012; Watson, 2015; Bamidele, 2016). But it is harder to find analyses of this which link across regional contexts, from the local to the global. Our central question in this chapter is: 'How can we better understand the backlash against gender equality and inclusive justice in Uganda today and its connections to masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding?' We argue that we can better understand such backlash in Uganda by tracing historical constructions of masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding within a holistic analysis. This is important because backlash is not an isolated or exogenous event but is itself part of conflicted historical processes and recurring dynamics which shape how we understand and engage with ideas of masculinity, gender, conflict and peacebuilding, both locally in Uganda and as part and parcel of a more global evolving dis/order. Such an analysis must attend to at least three dimensions: a spatial contextualisation linking the local to the global, a decolonial rereading of history and a related deconstruction of meanings given to terms such as 'gender', 'masculinity', 'the family', 'the nation', 'conflict' and 'peace'.

In spatial terms, we put the recent backlash against gender equality in Uganda in the context of the concurrent global swell of ‘patriarchal backlash’ because these local dynamics are also connected to global ones. Whilst taking multiple forms and involving diverse actors across settings, such backlash emerges in response to apparent crises and challenges to inequitable orders, and it travels transnationally, operating in typically resonant ways. It focuses on deeply symbolic spatial sites of body, family and nation to ‘righteously’ restore these to some supposed divinely pre-ordained or natural state. We then take a decolonial turn and re-reading of history to recall how the region’s colonial histories of subjugation under European imperialism earlier reshaped gender orders and power relations from the global north. Since then, struggles for independence, local and regional conflicts and efforts at peacebuilding have continued to be co-shaped with neo-colonial influences and interests. We focus on Uganda while also looking at Africa and beyond, because ‘the nation’ is itself a central – and rather recent – construct in this dynamic, emerging from post-colonial and regional conflicts, and can thus only be understood within that deeper history.

We then deconstruct the symbolic sites of the body, family and nation in Uganda to highlight related binary, hierarchical and categorical traps embedded in divisive conflictual narratives about these. We explore contested masculinities around recent conflicts and peacebuilding by drawing attention to how vulnerabilities and diversity amongst men have been occluded by patriarchal and reductive constructs and to how conflicts, backlash politics and statecraft take on highly masculine modes of performance. The site of the body gets heteronormatively constructed in blunt sex-binary terms, which occludes other possibilities and gendered intersectional nuances. This does the ideological work of naturalising a binary principle onto other appositions as a simplistic, reductive either/or logic, such as in conflict/peace or perpetration/victimisation. The family gets constructed as traditionally hierarchical and male headed, naturalising a hierarchical principle for broader social organisation and providing a model for the nation and the state as patriarchal and authoritarian. The nation as a whole, then, gets constructed as a bordered and coherent unit of population or citizenry, identified in contradistinction with ‘the foreign’ and naturalising a homogenising, circumscribed and exclusionary logic, a categorical principle.

As peacebuilding can itself become a mode of settling a new and differently oppressive social contract – a ‘relative peace’ naturalising new orders of hegemonic masculinity, incorporating and neutralising challenges – we then draw on this analysis to conclude with some reflections on what might mitigate backlash and toxic patriarchal evolution with relevance for peacebuilding in conflict-affected places like Uganda. We call for transcending the anxiety appealed to in backlash by exposing its contradictions and simplistic binaries, hierarchies and categorical logics to aim for more inclusive and negotiated transformations.

### **Patriarchal backlash in Africa and the world**

How should we understand national patriarchal politics in Uganda in the context of the recent global swell of patriarchal backlash? Whilst Museveni’s Uganda has seen an upswing in pushback against sexual minorities or protections for women over the last decade (Mwiine et al., 2023), this has coincided with resonant trends in the USA, Brazil, India, Russia, Turkey or Hungary and the ‘tough-man politics’ of Presidents Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Putin, Erdogan and Obran belittling women and ‘lesser men’. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that ‘hegemonic masculinities’ evolve through complex processes of cajolement, incentives and co-option but also through conflict and domination. They add that multiple ‘blocs’ of hegemonic masculinities take different – and overlapping – manifestations from local or national through regional and global levels (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 845–9). Amidst a plethora of armed and other conflicts over

recent decades, we have seen the rise of resonant forms of backlash against supposed ‘gender ideologies’ and human rights, indeed veritable ‘culture wars’.

Whilst first developed to analyse American anti-feminism of the 1980s, we grapple with Faludi’s (1991) concept of ‘patriarchal backlash’ but in the context of conflict-affected societies such as Uganda today. Much of the recent literature on this subject has focused on the global north, Latin America and Eastern Europe (Corrêa et al., 2018; Flood et al., 2018), but other literatures about ‘male backlash’ and resistance to women’s empowerment in the fields of gender and development in the South (Silberschmidt, 2005; Eastin & Prakash, 2013; Izugbara & Egesa, 2019) or in conflict and peacebuilding (Abirafeh, 2007; Myrntinen et al., 2014; Watson, 2015; MacKenzie & Foster, 2017) also need to be revisited to bridge these debates.

Anti-gender backlash has commonly been framed as a ‘reactive’ response against progress on gender equality (e.g., Mansbridge & Shames, 2008; Piscopo & Walsh, 2020). Yet it is increasingly recognised as being about more than gender and as broader efforts by powerful groups to resist challenges to inequitable systems. Townsend-Bell (2020) sees misogynistic violence as individually reactive forms of systemic maintenance coexisting with far more subtle and organised ‘pre-emptive’ manoeuvres to prevent systemic reforms, all underpinned by hierarchically ordered and intersectionally interwoven oppressive systems. Such pre-emptive pushback to prevent egalitarian changes (both deliberate and embedded) has also been noted by others in the context of Africa and elsewhere (e.g., Ranchod-Nilsson, 2008; Rowley, 2020; Mwiine et al., 2023).

Backlash is also increasingly recognised as connected with other types of divisive politics, neither merely *post-hoc* reactive nor pre-emptively resistant but rather as ‘proactive’ and/or revolutionary efforts to access power and shape the future in particular patriarchal modes, often based on ideas of ethnic or religious/cultural identity and belonging (e.g., Beinart, 2018; Datta, 2018; Graff et al., 2019; Moghadam & Kaftan, 2019). Whilst many do not use the term ‘backlash’ itself, a growing body of research conceives of this as a broader and divisive politics of alignment between a range of protagonists (including conservative religious, ethnonationalist far-right, authoritarian political and certain hyper-capitalist actors and networks), who variously engage in these different modes of gender politics and opportunistically converge into counter-movements (e.g. Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Datta, 2018). Kuhar and Paternotte (2017: 15) even argue that ‘gender’ is deployed as an ‘empty signifier’ enabling diverse protagonists with different aims to align because of what they describe as the concept’s ‘populist emptiness.’

Turning this argument around, Edström et al. (2024) propose that this is instead symptomatic of a deeply gendered and patriarchal politics of crisis management, where recurrent symbolic tropes of backlash the world over exploit deep anxieties provoked by a seeming convergence of crises. Financial, climate, political, health and security crises are seen as interacting whilst being selectively manipulated to stoke fear and division. For instance, humanitarian crises and displacement arising from conflicts or disasters get presented as ‘migrant crises’ and combined with economic downturns to raise host populations’ fears of unemployment and hardship or even ‘demographic displacement’ (Gökarıksel et al., 2019).

As elites and other powerful interest groups exploit and manage existential anxieties stirred by the spectre of crises, they do so through distinctly patriarchal ‘fixes’ of symbolic spatial sites (Edström et al., 2024). Three key sites are proposed (Edström et al., 2024) as the most hard-fought battlefields for conflictual narratives to re/shape them: the body (individualised and heteronormatively sexed in gender-binary terms), the family (traditionally hierarchical, patriarchal, sanctified and privatised) and the nation (bordered, ethnically ordered, culturally homogenised and othering of aliens and misfits – i.e., those not conforming to gendered majoritarian ideals of identity).

The rhetoric of backlash is framed in resonant ways across diverse contexts; as a defence of local/national traditional values against some foreign foe, but they also have broader transnational connections and alliances to mobilise tactics, language, ideology and financial support (Datta, 2021; Global Philanthropy Project, 2020). For instance, whilst the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) in Uganda have passed several bills and initiatives for greater gender equality consolidating international support, it has also become sufficiently influenced and supported by religious institutions – including faith-groups in the USA – to repeatedly push for harsher legislation against homosexuality since before 2014 until today. Ironically, these moves are animated by appeals to protect ‘traditional African values’ from corrupting Western imports, whilst this transnational support comes with advocating for particular Christian ‘family values’, which itself represents a (neo-)colonial effort.

Masculinities and gender orders in Uganda co-evolve in relation to both older histories of coloniality and more recent patriarchal politics of conflict. We therefore now turn to how gendered dynamics were shaped through histories of colonialism and to framings of gender and masculinity as local, ‘traditional African’ or Ugandan versus Western values.

### **Gendered histories of coloniality and conflict in eastern Africa**

How can our analysis be helped by contemplating the country’s colonial histories of conflict and peacebuilding? Tamale (2020: 41) notes that the preoccupations and priorities of African feminists cannot be like those of orthodox Western feminists, because the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism ‘continue to slip through, intersect with patriarchal domination and come out on the other end as subjugation with different strands from those found in Western paradigms’. Tracing those legacies calls for going back in time.

Not all persons born female in precolonial Africa were destined to girlhood and womanhood in ways that a patriarchal system (as we know it today) arranges society, and the reverse too held true for those born male. Patriarchy as a system of society’s male domination in much of Africa appears to be a rather recent socio-historical development. As Ekholm (1972: 29) explains, most pre-colonial Bantu societies across much of East, Central and Southern Africa were characterised by features such as often living in matrilineal domestic arrangements and tracing ‘descent in the matrilineal . . . line’, and a broad territory across these subregions was ‘sometimes referred to as the “matrilineal belt”.’

With the advent of the colonial state, both African men and women were excluded from higher echelons of state structures, although men continued to be involved at lower levels of government. Oyěwùmí (1997: 124) argues that the colonial state spearheaded the categorisation of women and their reduction in status and exclusion from leadership roles and that the basis for ‘this exclusion was their biology’. Colonial rule thus perfected a two-fold process of racial and gender subordination. African men were eventually designated as chiefs by the colonisers and would ultimately find themselves with ‘much more power over the people than was vested in them traditionally’ (Oyěwùmí, 1997: 125).

European colonialism ushered in a great metamorphosis in Africa regarding ideas about gender based on body, class and racial differences, which represented complex and deep political, social and economic changes, in large part co-shaped through interactions between Islamic traders, Protestant and Catholic missionaries and representatives of the Imperial British East Africa Company. Yet the colonised did not simply resign their agency to the dawning new order. For instance, Baganda women in Kampala-Kibuga created ‘new ways of being that seriously threatened patriarchal control’ (Musisi, 2001: 181).

Beyond the gender-binary categorisation of racialised bodies, colonial officials struggled with colonised Africans over gender and class relations at the household level, or the 'family'. Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) argue that the idea of 'the home' has been a crucial focus, particularly instilling a Western family ideology. For example, the Tswana society was already undergoing socio-political and economic change at the advent of British colonial rule. Each chiefdom had comprised a hierarchy of social and administrative units (households, family groups, wards, sections, etc.) modelled on a polygamous family and ranked according to agnatic rules of seniority. The Tswana had a marked preference for marrying close kin, which bred a field of ambiguous social ties; consequently, 'the less the degree of centralization, the more autonomous were households, the less marked was sexual division of labor, and the more attenuated was male authority' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 42).

Thus, gender constructions are embedded in a dialectic: While the ways men and women see and represent themselves are shaped by larger societal transformations, pre-existing notions of gender also have an impact on the course and receptions of these transformations – including the abolition of African forms of slavery, the replacement of older structures of authority, the introduction of Christianity and Western education, the spread of Islam, the expansion of wage labour and cash cropping, migration and urbanisation (Lindsay & Miescher, 2003). And because Western gender and other categories were fixed down with biological building blocks, their immutability was put beyond question (Oyèwùmí, 2005).

Tamale (2003: 3) has argued that the law is more preoccupied with male-on-male sex when it criminalises intercourse 'against the order of nature' and that the dominant phallogocentric culture maintains the stereotype of 'women as the passive recipients of penetrative male pleasure'. In her inaugural professorial lecture, Tamale (2016) maintained that the dominant (patriarchal) system that accepts naked bodies in 'private' but proscribes them in 'public' does have political motivation: This private/public divide gets fictitious especially 'when it comes to issues of sexuality where we see the same institutional power turning our 'private' sexual issues into 'public' matters to be regulated and controlled by law' (Tamale, 2016: 18). To the patrilineal principles in Uganda giving men dominance in marriage and property and ascribing women's biological role as child bearers (Obbo, 1989) is now added to the law by the patriarchal state to regulate the no-longer 'private' matter of who one chooses to have sex with as a consenting adult in the name of anti-homosexuality.<sup>1</sup>

So, even as Uganda formally embraced a largely progressive constitution in 1995, many overlapping and entrenched forms of patriarchy remain unchallenged today, whilst others are currently being reinforced. For instance, the granting of equal political status to women – even within state structures – can be viewed as a 'devil's bargain' of some sort (Moffett, 2006): women as holding equality only some of the time and in certain spaces.<sup>2</sup> Whilst understanding patriarchal oppression justifiably centres on the history of the status of women, we also need to trouble the relationship between men, masculinities and conflict to grasp patriarchal backlash better, a topic which we turn to next.

### **Masculinities, gender equality and visibility in conflicts and peacebuilding**

How can we best understand the diverse and often conflicted roles of men and masculinities in relation to patriarchal backlash and to struggles for gender justice in conflict and peacebuilding today? Several questions emerge from debates and scholarship on men and masculinities in relation to post-conflict peacebuilding. For example, do certain forms and norms of masculinity reinforce war, or does violent conflict reinforce hegemonic models of masculinity (Dolan, 2002), or both?

How do gender binaries inform the construction of men's and women's experiences in these settings (Esuruku, 2013)? What is the effect of silences around men as gendered subjects, such as the ignoring of different groups of men's vulnerabilities in gender analyses of conflicts or limited analyses of 'the cost of armed conflict to men and boys' (Large, 1997: 28)? These questions have and continue to be part of the post-conflict debates amongst communities in Uganda and beyond.

The post-independence period in Uganda has involved repeated militarised conflicts and sometimes ethnically targeted mass killings, for example during Idi Amin's dictatorship in the 1970s or the so-called Bush War and brief Acholi takeover in the mid-1980s. These masculinised violent conflicts often involved the subordination and emasculation of certain ethnic groups and were also imbricated with dynamics in and ethnic connections to neighbouring states (as colonial protectorate borders often disregarded and cut across traditional ethnic territories). This includes the Tanzania War in the 1970s, in South Sudan since the 1980s and involvement in the First and Second Congo wars since the NRM takeover in 1986. Dolan (2002) and Anderson (2009) argue that insecurity and deprivation in northern Uganda's displacement camps during the country's twenty-four years of protracted conflict following 'independence' had a significant impact on the construction of masculinities and femininities. The wars eroded economic, sociocultural and political resources, making it 'very difficult . . . for the vast majority of men to fulfil the expectations of a husband and father, provider and protector' (Dolan, 2002: 64). Saferworld (2014: 11) subsequently referred to 'experiences of men who are unable to conform to standards of manhood imposed by their societies' as 'thwarted' masculinities. Militarisation of the region exacerbated men's loss of livelihood and undermined Acholi men's masculinity, leading to pressures that often manifested in alcohol abuse and violence against women (Dolan, 2002).

Tensions in men's identities were also shaped by shifts in women's roles and femininities. Strongly supported in NGO-led income-generating activities, women adopted new roles such as taking full control of food supply by the World Food Programme, thus assuming the main provider role in their families (Anderson, 2009), which may fuel men's frustration and even violence in response. Ratele (2016: 9) argues that 'when women's lives change, such as when they assume positions of decision making in society and constructions of femininities undergo transformation, men and masculinities are likely to come under pressure . . .' Whilst protracted conflict in Uganda triggered shifts both in masculinities and in femininities, dominant discourses on gender equality in conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding hardly engage with different men's experiences at all. The discourse is typically both one-sided, focusing on women's vulnerability, and presumptive of a blunt categorical essentialism about 'men' and 'masculinity' associated with physical aggression, domination and perpetration of violence as being masculine and natural for males (Saferworld, 2014). When such reductive essentialist notions are naturalised, they can play a role in driving conflict and insecurity and occlude peaceable means of conflict resolution.

Such notions internalised as natural at the level of men's bodies also result in an erasure of men in positions of vulnerability. Bamidele (2016: 24) highlights the lack of attention to the question of men as victims of sexual abuse in northern Uganda by noting that whilst 'underreporting of rape and sexual violence is generally common . . . it seems particularly problematic with respect to sexual violence against men, due to a combination of shame, confusion, guilt, fear, and stigma', a problem also noted by several others (e.g., Sivakumaran, 2007; Daigle & Myrntinen, 2018; Edström & Dolan, 2019; Schulz, 2020).

As discussed, colonial impositions of race and gender categories reconfigured precolonial social relations. Within the 'household' and the 'state', these were moderated through the invention of another implicitly gendered binary construct – a public/private dichotomy, with men imagined and empowered as public actors and women gradually domesticated through colonial education

and female subsistence labour. Tamale (2020: 287) sums up how this ‘distinction acts as an enabler for women’s subjugation and the smooth operation of the heteropatriarchal-capitalist system’. The decolonial feminist Lugones (2010: 742) further highlights such ‘categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic [as] central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality’.

Embedded in hierarchies and processes of power, colonial categories and entrenched polarities continue to pervade everyday life as well as inform ways of engaging with masculinities and feminisms in conflict and peacebuilding. In a study with refugee male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Uganda, Edström and Dolan (2019: 177) argue that ‘humanitarian agencies need to examine deeply their own policies . . . to determine how inclusive and empowering of male survivors they are, or how . . . discriminatory’ (Edström and Dolan, 2019: 192). Historical constructions and their resilience in the contemporary nation close off possibilities of difference, diversity and collaboration, or of seeing the interwoven forms of oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender and class (Tamale, 2020), constructions now repurposed within local backlash politics. In conflict and peacebuilding, the colonial heteropatriarchal construction of masculinities often closes possibilities of imagining men outside these dominant perspectives, and backlash efforts exploit this legacy to generate male resentment supporting backlash.

## **Discussion**

How does our analysis of backlash in Uganda, set in a more global perspective and over longer histories of transnational conflicts and domination, illuminate the connections between constructions of masculinities in conflict and peacebuilding in this context today?

Major strides were made in recent decades to address the historical invisibility of women in peace and security work in what became known as the Women’s Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda, calling mainstream attention to gender at all levels. Yet despite men still dominating these processes, Watson (2015) argues that men are missing as subjects in most of the UN peacebuilding efforts except when it comes to naming them as the predominant perpetrators of violence against women. Ratele (2008: 18) notes the irony that ‘there is something of significance we lose when we adopt a lens that . . . places women at the centre of studying men’. The reductive and implicit focus on men (instrumentalised to another purpose) misses the opportunity of knowing how masculinities – different men’s practices, expectations, fears and aspirations – influence the shaping of conflicts or their resolution.

If the birth of political modernity in the West (taking the 1789 French Revolution and its *Declaration of the Rights of Man [sic.] and Citizen* as an arbitrary reference point) ironically corresponds with the beginning of the struggle for women’s rights as human rights, the advent of the European colonial state is its counterpart moment in Africa. This is particularly significant around the understanding of the ‘family’, as most of the precolonial African society had the family as a sphere of negotiation, in which gender was a truly political arena of social relations of choice rather than fate. With the coming of the European colonial state (and now the postcolonial ‘nation-state’ as its heir), Africans witnessed a brutal shift from gender as ‘custom’ (in motion, negotiated, etc.) to gender as ‘customary’ (ascribed, fixed in the name of ‘tradition’).

Family, since the colonial-modern times, thus became a domain of conformity, a site fixed down for orderly rule. While matrimonial unions in much of precolonial Africa did allow for all sorts of arrangements, colonial-modern times restricted marriage to heteronormative arrangements. Moreover, these were undergirded by a set of patriarchal capitalist relations of production, especially in terms of property ownership and inheritance, a system now given renewed ‘legitimacy’ through a revitalised expansion of globally networked monotheistic religious institutions.



These sites did – and still do – the ideological work of patriarchally naturalising the body as biologically binary and sexed, the family as traditionally hierarchical, and the nation as ethnically or racially ordered and excluding.

What, then, should the struggle for gender justice look like in Uganda today and in the wake of protracted national and regional conflicts? It would first and foremost be a struggle against coloniality, not just colonialism, as the former is about the norms/aims/mentality underpinning colonial structures. Solidarity across sexes, sexual orientations and expressions, ages, classes, races, ethnicities, religions, etc. would have to be reimagined and reshaped for a decolonised, emancipatory future for all (male, female and gender non-conforming) rather than pitching up siloes of different struggles. Ultimately, this would mean a move to re-politicise the struggle for gender justice (beyond legal enactments and decriminalisation) and a refusal to naturalise gender norms and conformities; an unmooring of reductive binary, hierarchical and categorical/exclusionary thinking or rationales, all deployed in highly politicised backlash tactics to fix down updated forms of oppression.

Drawing on critical feminist masculinities perspectives (Ratele, 2008; Clowes, 2013), we argue for unpacking and unravelling divisive categorical dilemmas and going beyond gender binaries (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020; Mwiine, 2022) to challenge adversarial discourses that nurture resistance to women's rights, equality and gender justice for all to rather open up wider possibilities for gender equal and peaceful societies. In her theory of nego-feminism in African contexts, Nnaemeka (2004) suggests the notion of 'border crossing' for transcending such binaries. Border crossing 'entails learning about the "other," but more importantly, it should also entail learning from the other' (Nnaemeka, 2004: 374).

This process entails developing feminist politics which 'critiques patriarchal social institutions but does so in ways that do not reproduce men and women as binary opposites, as perpetrators and victims in relation to patriarchal power' (Mwiine, 2018: 3) but rather, as bell hooks (2004: xvii) puts it, as about the 'need to live in a world where women and men can belong together'. But if backlash represents a complex mode of patriarchal crisis management, what are the potentials of destabilising the categories to unmoor its exploitative underpinnings? How can we move from conflict through uncertainty and flux with openness to new and different futures?

As argued, deep-seated changes over recent centuries have shaped Uganda today – through colonial oppression, indigenous resistance (and some collusion), decolonisation and subsequent struggles for control, neo-colonial interventions (in business and diplomatic relations, revived transnational faith-based collaborations, as well as security, development and humanitarian assistance) and changing deployments of faith in society and national political life (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2013). These shifts have also shaped today's repressive and locally hegemonic ideals of masculinity, denying male vulnerability and diversity in a self-consciously pious, nationalist, militarist and homophobic mode (Cheney, 2012; Dolan, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

So to better understand patriarchal backlash against gender equality and justice in Uganda – and its connections to masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding – we have outlined three steps or analytical turns. First, we nest this within a broader spatial understanding of current divisive, oppressive patriarchal politics sweeping the globe – a politics which is variegated and contradictory but also internationally connected – and how this plays out as resonant forms of patriarchal crisis management. We have pointed to backlash protagonists typically mobilising anxieties for identification with simplistic constructs of identity for popular support – shaped and fixed down

in familiar spatial sites of gender-binary bodies, hierarchical patriarchal families and ethnically ordered nations.

Second, as this is an historical contestation in a new era of crises in global systems and transnational orders, we take a decolonial turn toward a fresh perspective on/from Ugandan and African history. This reveals not only how African identities and notions of gender have been shaped by older and more variegated regional cultures' subordination under European colonialism but also how colonists imported and imposed these specific constructs of gendered bodies, families and nations to shore up and fix down their rule and dominance, a process continuing in new forms under the current global (dis)order.

Third, we therefore take a deconstructivist turn to unpick these potent simplistic constructs. We highlight how this patriarchal legacy lives on in the way that gender continues to be conceived in humanitarian work as much as in peacebuilding and transitional justice. Ironically, the embedded patriarchal inertia of these legacies – and the unifocal attention to women in these fields – all serve to pre-empt any serious analysis of the roles of diverse masculinities, let alone the experiences of different men and other people of non-conforming gender. At best, the way that gender is typically framed makes it very difficult to factor in such broader backlash and, at worst, it potentially plays into the hands of backlash actors through feeding resentment and incomprehension.

As Large (1997: 23) suggests, '[p]eace is about transformation, and the quest for peace entails a social reconstruction of masculinity . . . no longer built on subjugation'. Critical feminist masculinity scholarship has reiterated that the project of studying men in gender equality ought to be seen as related to and supportive of radical gender transformation. Thus, rather than placing Ugandan women, men or any other gendered category at the centre stage of a push for gender justice, the more appropriate task is to 'engender' justice itself and follow Zeleza's (2005: 228) push for a fairer gender agenda away from the dual misrepresented mainstream – whether 'malestream' or 'femalestream' – toward studying the human experience 'in all its complexities'. Since we understand anti-gender backlash as a new historical moment of patriarchal r/evolution – in intersecting and transnational supremacist and extractive orders – such blunt and reductive approaches to gender within humanitarian or peacebuilding fields can potentially themselves facilitate such backlash.

Instead, we must aim to transcend its resultant divisions and anxiety. We can do so by exposing its contradictions and unmooring these fixed binaries, hierarchical and excluding categorical logics and ideologies – for understanding our bodies, kinships and home-worlds – towards more equitably inclusive, open-ended and negotiated transformations.

## Notes

- 1 Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni signed on Sunday 28 May 2023 the Anti-Homosexuality Bill into law. See <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/us-revokes-visas-museveni-signs-tough-anti-gay-bill-into-law-4250768>
- 2 In a different type of example, Tshimba (2021) described how, on 03 July 2020, Justice Godfrey Namundi delivered a landmark ruling at the Family Division of the High Court of Uganda at Kampala. A young adult male, Herbert Kolya, had brought a civil suit against an elderly widowed female, Ekiriya Mawemuko Kolya, for an order directing her to distribute the property in the estate of the late Israel Kikomoko Kolya in accordance with the late Israel's will. The plaintiff was a paternal grandson of the late Israel Kikomoko Kolya (who died testate in 1997), and the defendant was the latter's wife. Justice Namundi underscored that the land and home was a matrimonial property and so dismissed the plaintiff's claim, arguing that it is unlawful for husbands to dispossess their wives of matrimonial property in their wills without their spouses' permission. Yet the justice relied on a local court having ruled in favour of the defendant on the basis of traditional custom. That an older woman is rendered justice in a lawsuit comprising a young man

as plaintiff also speaks volumes about the intersectionality deeply enmeshed historically in the struggle for gender justice in contemporary Uganda.

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