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AND HUMANITARIANISM

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When Rights Come Home: The Intimate Politics of Women's Rights in Urban Uganda

Introduction

The relationship between human rights and African states is a complex one. For many states, the dictates of neoliberal economic reforms have provided a rationale for a retreat from any commitment to a broad conception of human rights encompassing economic and social justice. As James Ferguson has argued, neoliberal policies have typically “hollowed out” African states and legitimized an outsourcing of government responsibilities to nongovernmental organizations and the private sector.¹ Many African states have therefore combined a limited commitment to individual civil and political rights with a narrow economic development agenda focused on capital investment. In this sense, such states embody what David Harvey has described as a neoliberal nexus of individual freedoms and market-focused economic policies.²

For many African states, there is yet another layer of complication in their engagement with human rights issues. As Aili Mari Tripp has argued, many African states today are best described as semi-authoritarian, combining “elements of democratization with illiberal rule.”³ Such hybrid regimes engage with global rights discourse in multifaceted, and at times paradoxical, ways. For Tripp, Uganda is a prime example of the semi-authoritarian African state. Under the leadership of President Yoweri Museveni, the Ugandan state has moved from a pro-rights regime (especially with regard to women's rights in the late 1980s and 1990s) to one that is increasingly inconsistent on individual civil rights and freedoms (especially rights to political expression, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and most recently freedom of sexual expression). As Tripp argues, Museveni has astutely used a commitment to neoliberal economic reforms as a way to assuage Western donors' concerns about rights abuses.⁴ Relatively robust economic growth in Uganda in the last decade has provided convenient cover for a regime that has become bolder in asserting its continuing claim to power—a claim often made at the expense of rights.

Thus, the current landscape of human rights in Uganda is complex and typical of how many semi-authoritarian African states negotiate rights in a global neoliberal economic and political context. In spite of, or perhaps due to, these developments, human rights discourse is now ubiquitous in Uganda. In this essay, I focus on how such rights discourse, especially women's rights discourse, filters from the public sphere into the private sphere and animates the lives of ordinary men and women in Uganda.

Discussions of the everyday practice of human rights in the developing world often turn on a clash between Western assumptions about the sovereign, autonomous individual and non-Western kin and group-based identities sustained through ties of

reciprocity and mutual obligation. More recently, however, there has been a move past such problematic dichotomies of rights versus culture and an emphasis instead on how global human rights discourse takes on meaning in local contexts.⁵ Sally Engle Merry has provided crucial insights in this regard and argued for the need to examine how local actors are “remaking human rights in vernacular.”⁶ Vernacularization combines both appropriation and customization of rights discourse and involves translating “globally produced ideas into myriad specific social settings in ways that are often indirect, fragmented, and diffuse.”⁷ For Merry, there is no wholesale transfer of a single, cohesive human rights framework but instead a selective and strategic re-articulation of specific elements most salient to local campaigns and concerns.

This emphasis on the vernacularization of rights provides the necessary link between abstract notions of rights and context-specific ways rights are practiced in everyday social interactions. Research in this vein, however, has largely focused on the roles that certain groups, especially well-educated NGO activists, play in the process of translating rights into local contexts. In *Human Rights and Gender Violence*, for example, Merry focuses primarily on how activists addressing violence against women act as crucial intermediaries between the global and local.⁸ Less attention, however, has been paid to how rights are remade by more ordinary individuals through everyday social interactions.

Intimate relationships, I argue, are an especially important and overlooked arena for the production of local meanings of rights, especially women’s rights. They are a crucial forum of social interaction where ideas of women’s rights are rebuffed, reinterpreted, and strategically redeployed. In this sense, intimate relationships are not only central for “doing gender” but also for doing women’s rights.⁹ Our understanding of how human rights discourse takes on meaning within intimate relationships is, however, extremely limited.

In addition, there is a need to examine the reciprocal dynamic, namely, how intimacy is reshaped through framings of rights, especially women’s rights. While this affective realm of women’s rights has been a focus of feminist analysis in the West, its manifestation in African contexts has received little attention, even though women’s rights are playing an important role in the changing nature of intimate relationships.¹⁰ This is especially true with regard to the growing salience of relationship ideals premised on notions of “modern” romantic love and companionate marriage that are increasingly evident not only in sub-Saharan Africa but in many other non-Western contexts as well.¹¹

Together, these reciprocal dynamics—intimate relationships shaping rights and rights shaping intimate relationships—constitute what I refer to as *the intimate politics of rights*. Such intimate politics are especially important to consider in relation to women’s rights. This is because women’s rights in their full articulation are focused not just on empowering individual women but on transforming social relations between women and men. As a century of feminist scholarship makes evident, a central component of transforming the gender status quo is revealing how the ostensibly private and personal domain of sexual intimacy and family relations is in fact deeply politicized in ways that sustain gender inequality. It follows that attention to the more micro-scale of everyday social interactions within intimate relationships is

necessary to understand how women's rights become meaningful in specific social contexts.

This essay takes up this challenge and draws on in-depth research with "couples" in urban Uganda to examine how intimate relationships remake women's rights in the vernacular and how rights, in turn, reshape intimate relationships.¹² In 2009, I conducted three months of research with nineteen cohabiting couples living in Bwaise, a fairly typical low-income urban community in Kampala, the capital of Uganda. This research was informed by twelve months of prior ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in this same community in 2004 and that was also focused on changing gender dynamics.¹³

The couples were systematically recruited with the goal of creating a diverse sample based on age, relationship type (monogamous and polygamous), religion, education, income, woman's work status, partner age difference, and HIV serostatus.¹⁴ A total of forty individuals (nineteen couples) participated in the study, including two polygamous families, and the final sample reflected the key ethnic, religious, and class demographics of Bwaise overall.

The fieldwork combined in-depth interviews with all couples and ethnographic observation in the homes and workplaces of half the couples. The interview protocol had two components and was carefully designed to minimize the influence one participant might have on the other (especially how a husband might affect his wife's responses). First, the husband and wife were interviewed together; these interviews were deliberately kept short (thirty minutes) and focused on basic background information. At a later time (typically two days), in-depth interviews with individuals alone were conducted, lasting 1.5 hours on average.¹⁵ My research with these couples reveals the complex and often unexpected ways that ideas of women's rights are deployed and reconfigured in such everyday interactions and how women's rights discourse shaped the meaning of intimacy in these relationships.

Gaining a better understanding of the intimate politics of women's rights in Africa is especially timely. Since the turn of the millennium, rights-based approaches to improving African women's social status have proliferated. Women's rights are now central to a wide range of campaigns, programs, policies, and interventions including those focused on securing women's access to land and business capital, preventing domestic violence, and addressing gender disparities in health, especially in relation to HIV/AIDS. Such efforts often turn on using a rights framework to alter the gender power dynamics within intimate relationships, yet relatively little is known about how women's rights are grappled with in such relationships. There is, in fact, evidence that rights-based activism can at times be counterproductive and too blunt a tool for women's empowerment in certain African communities.¹⁶ By providing a detailed case study of the intimate politics of rights, this essay furthers our understanding of these dynamics and helps clarify the promise, and limits, of rights-based advocacy for African women.

When Rights Come Home in Urban Uganda

Given the current government's promotion of women's rights, the vibrant women's movement in the country, and the significant influence of American and British

donors, Uganda is a particularly significant setting in which to examine how women's rights are remade in the vernacular. In Luganda, the language of the Baganda (the main ethnic group in Kampala), "human rights" is translated as *eddembe ly'obwebange* (personal rights) or *eddembe ly'obuntu* (rights of humanity). *Eddembe* itself can mean rights, but also freedom (such as *eddembe ly'okwogera* or freedom of speech), liberty, or peace.¹⁷ Notions of *eddembe* have a history among the Baganda that reaches back several centuries, and in the late twentieth century such ideas became intertwined with modern notions of human rights.¹⁸

Contemporary human rights discourse became salient in Uganda in 1986 when current president Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army seized power after a protracted guerilla war. Museveni, inspired by socialist notions of economic and social equality, encouraged women to participate as soldiers in his rebel army. Once Museveni was in power, his government emphasized women's rights in particular, which considerably increased women's political participation in government.¹⁹ In this sense, the Museveni regime placed issues of gender *equity* on the national agenda and gave legitimacy to claims that women should share the same political rights as men.

Yet the Museveni government never promoted a broader agenda for women's rights and empowerment that challenged patriarchal aspects of the gender order. From the 1990s to the present, the government has largely focused on providing greater equity in opportunities for individual women's advancement, especially in the realm of politics and to a lesser extent education. This emphasis on individual women's rights, as opposed to collective social change, was buttressed by the large influx of Western development aid since 1986. Most development initiatives targeting women, especially those funded by the U.S. government, have also been focused on promoting gender equity in government programs and policies and rarely directly addressed more systemic social-structural issues undergirding gender inequality. Thus, the government's promotion of women's rights has largely been in relation to individual civil and politics rights as opposed to broader economic and social rights.

The Ugandan women's movement, in contrast, has promoted a more far-reaching agenda emphasizing gender *equality*. Unlike the Museveni government's emphasis on gender equity in the political realm, which retains prevailing notions of gender difference, the gender equality advocated by the women's movement poses a more direct challenge to ideas of male superiority and male authority. The women's movement has pursued a wide range of issues, including women's land ownership and changes in marriage laws, thereby advocating for expansive conceptions of women's rights rooted in gender equality and a more substantial notion of economic and social rights.²⁰

In my own research in urban Uganda, I have investigated how ordinary Ugandans understand this complex and dynamic terrain of women's rights. Through this research, I have found that a new configuration of gender relations is evident in urban Uganda—one that accommodates some aspects of women's rights while retaining previous notions of assumed male authority.²¹ The majority of men I interacted with in my research were receptive to greater women's rights, so long as such changes did not undermine their ultimate authority over women, especially within the home. For such men, women's rights should be limited in scope and not synonymous with

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Couples

| | <i>Age</i> | <i>Education</i> | <i>Religion</i> | <i>Occupation</i> | <i>Monthly Income</i> |
|----------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Couple 1 | | | | | |
| Samuel | 52 | secondary 2 | Catholic | rental income | U.S. \$30 |
| Sophie | 38 | secondary 1 | Muslim | unemployed | 0 |
| Couple 2 | | | | | |
| Michael | 26 | university degree | Catholic | accountant | 200 |
| Mary | 25 | university student | Catholic | school teacher | 150 |
| Couple 3 | | | | | |
| Musa | 45 | secondary 3 | Muslim | herbalist | 30 |
| Madina (first wife) | 28 | secondary 1 | Muslim | sells from town | 100 |
| Rashmi (second wife) | 24 | primary 7 | Muslim | owns hair salon | 15 |

equality between men and women. However, some women and a small number of men I encountered did link women’s rights to gender equality and, in the process, they challenged entrenched notions of a masculinity rooted in male superiority.

Significantly, therefore, I found that the government’s framing of women’s rights in relation to gender equity was the primary reference point for how ordinary people understood women’s rights. Both men and women saw the government as the main advocate of women’s rights, which had important implications for how women’s rights were debated and wrestled with in everyday life. Tension over women’s rights focused largely on a limited agenda promoting gender equity and less on the more systemic challenges posed by the notion of gender equality—a notion that was rebuffed by most men and many women. Therefore, the concept of vernacularization, while useful, should not distract from how the story of women’s rights in Uganda is as much about the specific history of rights discourse as it developed in Uganda itself as it is about translating purportedly universal notions of human rights into a local vernacular.

This essay builds on these findings by examining women’s rights and gender dynamics within intimate relationships. In order to present the findings of my research in some detail, I discuss here three of the nineteen couples in my study. A summary of key background characteristics for individuals in these three relationships is presented in table 1. I have focused on these three relationships because the first two are important outliers in terms of how intimate relationships shape the meanings of rights. The third, in contrast, represents a more typical example of how women’s rights are engaged with, and reframed, in intimate relationships.

Each of these cases also illustrates how the vernacularization of human rights is entangled with a range of social processes, including shifting conceptions of masculinity and femininity, changing class dynamics, and the precarious nature of work. In this sense, this essay illuminates how the remaking of rights within intimate relationships is intertwined with a wide variety of concerns couples grapple with as they make lives for themselves in contemporary urban Uganda. These dynamics make intimate relationships key sites for interpreting and enacting women’s rights and also reveal how the affective realm of rights is implicated in the shifting contours of intimacy in urban Uganda.



Figure 1. A young couple in Bwaise, June 5, 2009. Photo by Robert Wyröd.

Samuel and Sophie: The Case of Rights Rebuffed

Examining local engagements with rights discourse, especially women's rights discourse, requires remaining attentive to how rights are entangled with more general tensions in gender relations. My own research on masculinity in urban Uganda reveals that diverse notions of masculinity coexist, from reactionary forms defending men's assumed authority over women to progressive forms advocating more equitable gender relations.²² As this first case illustrates, intimate relationships are, in fact, a key arena in which both sets of ideas—gender relations and women's rights—are worked through simultaneously.

Samuel was fifty-two and had lived in Bwaise his entire life, having inherited his home from his father. Sophie, thirty-eight, was also born in Kampala, and when she was sixteen her grandfather, who was Samuel's good friend, arranged her marriage to Samuel. Thus, Sophie too had lived her adult life in this home and, as I would come to learn, their small compound composed most of Sophie's world.

Both Samuel and Sophie had a year or two of secondary school education and they had raised five children together, making them fairly typical of families in Bwaise. In addition, they were struggling financially, which was common, with their only money coming from modest rental income for rooms in their compound.

When interviewed together, Sophie remained very quiet and let her husband answer my questions. Samuel described their marriage as a happy one, and both agreed

that the man was the leader in the home. Samuel did acknowledge that their financial problems produced stress in their relationship and, in a rare interjection, Sophie made clear she was eager to work but did not have capital to start a business.

In addition, there was a delicate issue that emerged regarding contraception and family planning. Samuel emphasized repeatedly that he had been faithful to Sophie since their marriage, and he bristled at the notion of using condoms, saying, “I’m not a womanizer, so we don’t need to use condoms. We are both mature. And family planning? No, we don’t go into such things.” Surprisingly, Sophie interjected again, saying, “I do use family planning [injections]. I decided to. It was me. Me alone.” Samuel appeared unfazed and replied, “I don’t know about those things.” Fearing how Samuel might respond to Sophie’s revelation after I had left, I quickly changed the topic.

In my interview with Samuel alone, at first he tried again to portray his marriage as harmonious. He described himself as the authority but stressed that he listened to, consulted with, and trusted his wife. When asked specifically about his attitudes toward women’s rights, Samuel replied,

It is good, giving them rights. Because it isn’t good to harass your wife. So women’s rights, it stops men from beating and abusing them. This gives a woman freedom. She’s free. So, yeah, it is good. [Equal rights], they should be there. Rights for both women and men? Yeah, let it be the same. It isn’t bad. It’s OK. Let us also be like whites. Like do you think you can beat a white wife? How can you beat her? The police will come for you.

Samuel continued, saying that a woman could now even be the leader in a home, “free to make any decision she likes,” and that “we are now following the whites. They have changed our minds. They’ve helped women.”

Pressed further, Samuel conceded that he was not fully comfortable with the changes he perceived. In the process, he shifted from talking about violence against women to women earning their own money, saying,

Yes, we men are somewhat beleaguered now. We used to be with a lot of power, which isn’t the case these days. Now the wife might have much more money as compared to you. Are you aware of these changes? You are her husband but she has much more money than you. So don’t you think that such a wife can do whatever she feels like?

Samuel continued, stressing that women’s rights “are good.” He did qualify his endorsements of women’s rights, however, by emphasizing that men should still be seen as superior to women. “Even for the whites, it’s the man who is on top . . . There is always someone who is better than others, so the man remains above the woman. However small the power he has over her now, the man still remains above the woman.”

Some of Samuel’s vocal endorsements of women’s rights, including suggesting that women could lead a home and that men and women were equals, did initially surprise me, given that few men I met in Bwaise were strong proponents of gender equality. However, his insistence that men ultimately remain superior to women was typical.

He acknowledged the new salience of women's rights discourse and suggested that certain aspects of gender equity were acceptable. However, as we continued to talk, a more startling issue did emerge, namely, a profound disconnect between his endorsement of certain ideas of women's rights and the reality of his relationship with his wife.

For Samuel, having a much younger wife presented potential problems, problems he had worked hard to contain throughout their relationship. "Young women are faced with so many challenges because they are not settled," he told me. "It is so hard to control them!" When asked if he trusted his wife, he replied confidently and proudly,

Ah, ah, ah, that is not a problem! That's because she is always at home all the time. People in the area don't even know she exists! (Laughs). She doesn't even know where markets and shops are. Ah, ah, ah, no she doesn't. And whenever I give her money, she just gives it to our children to go and buy food. She doesn't go there to the market. She doesn't even know that area or even any of the shops . . . So can you say that she is a bad woman? No! She's a good woman and that's why she is not walking about! (Laughs)

Thus, as we talked, it emerged that Samuel was in fact very controlling and took pride in having kept his wife under such close surveillance during their long relationship.

When Sophie was interviewed alone (by only a female Ugandan research assistant), she used the opportunity to vent. She did not hide her contempt for her husband, saying,

Ha, my husband! The only thing I like about him is that he has supported me all the time we've been together. Only that and nothing else . . . My husband is a very difficult person to deal with. He is always arguing . . .

Interviewer: Are you saying that you don't love him?

There are times I find myself just having to stay and live with him. You simply have to stay around but there is no such thing as love.

When asked who made the decisions in the home, Sophie replied somewhat impatiently, "Well, obviously it's my husband. He has more power than me. I'm introverted by nature and I am not very good at talking or arguing with him." Although she again noted that she herself had made the decision to use contraception, she stressed that her husband made all the decisions because "he [is] the man."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sophie supported the idea of promoting women's rights: "It is good. That means they are helping the woman, so that women are not being violated. It also helps the woman to make her own decisions." However, she did not feel that women had the same rights as men: "The man is always different. He possesses more power and the women have less power. The men are always above the women." While it was difficult to determine for certain whether Sophie thought this gender status quo was acceptable, she made clear that she felt both unhappy and fairly powerless in her own relationship.

In many respects, Sophie saw working as a solution to her problems, and it was obvious that she was frustrated with her options, complaining, "I spend most all of

my time around this house. I rarely go out.” Her work ambitions were modest—selling produce or other food items in the nearby market or shops—but she stressed that Samuel was not supportive.

In addition to earning money, Sophie was also preoccupied with family-planning issues and her sexual health more generally. Her decision to use contraceptive injections secretly was motivated by Samuel’s refusal to use condoms. “I talked about them and he got angry so I gave up on that,” she said. “He rejected the condoms, even recently when asked about them, saying he didn’t want to know anything about them. He refused to use them again saying he was only interested in going live [sex without a condom].” The bleeding associated with the injections was troubling Sophie and she feared she could not keep using them.

Condoms were also attractive to Sophie because of the looming threat of AIDS. She claimed to have remained monogamous in her marriage and said that she had no evidence that Samuel had ever been unfaithful in twenty years of marriage. Nonetheless, suspicions seemed to linger for her. “He can’t let you know,” she said. “You may get angry but if he has already made the decision often you are left with no option because he has simply decided it is so.” Sophie said that neither she nor Samuel had ever taken an HIV test, something Samuel confirmed when I spoke to him alone. While Samuel expressed no interest in testing, Sophie felt differently:

I have never tested. Testing is not a simple task. It is easy to give out the blood sample but waiting for the results, um. But when they tell you that you are positive, you die instantly. I will test but it is a sacrifice. The health workers have come here repeatedly to test us but I told them to give me some time. Yes I am planning to test but I am scared. I am very scared.

According to Sophie, dealing with HIV was a burden she would have to carry alone because Samuel would never consider testing with her, and if he tested alone he would not disclose his results. “He is not a kind of person who makes time to talk with me about these or other issues,” Sophie said. “He simply keeps quiet. He has never talked about it. He can’t accept dealing with it.”

Sadly, four months after completing my fieldwork, I learned from a close friend that Sophie had died. My friend, a community health worker who had known Sophie well, reported that Sophie had tuberculosis and although no HIV test was done, she suspected that Sophie had in fact been HIV positive. Before she died, Sophie told my friend repeatedly that she believed Samuel had infected her. My friend also reported that during the last few months of her illness Samuel had moved Sophie from the main house to a room deep in their compound where she could not be seen.

Thus, Samuel and Sophie’s relationship was in many ways a tragic one. The context of a strongly male-dominated, low-income intimate relationship shaped how women’s rights were framed and enacted. Women’s rights penetrated this intimate relationship in only the most limited way and primarily served as a way for Samuel to project an image of himself as a man versed in new discourses of gender equity. This indicates how easy it can be to appear to conform to certain Western notions of individual women’s rights, something Samuel likely felt compelled to do when speaking with me, a white American man. In a relationship defined by a large age

difference and a semi-arranged marriage where Samuel was firmly in control, it was simple for him to espouse such ideas, knowing he was not compelled to practice them. He knew that women's rights presented little challenge to the gender status quo in his home—a status quo that Samuel suggested he was quite content with and that served his needs well.

Sophie also expressed support of certain aspects of women's rights, yet she was a realist and knew that they had little effect on her daily existence. The relationship context was in fact too male-dominated for Sophie to gain much leverage from the prevailing limited notion of women's rights as gender equity. While she found areas where she could demonstrate her agency and independence, notably in the area of family planning, her life was profoundly constrained by her husband. Thus, the context of this relationship shaped Sophie's ambivalent views of women's rights as something theoretically beneficial but largely irrelevant to her daily existence.

It was clear that women's rights not only failed to catalyze more equitable power dynamics in the relationship but instead largely heightened tensions between Samuel and Sophie. Samuel clearly recognized that ideas of women's rights were circulating in this urban context, and his determination to control Sophie can be read as a reactionary response to changing gender relations. His reactionary stance was no doubt intensified by this couple's precarious financial position and Samuel's tenuous embodiment of the male provider ideal. Sophie, in turn, also recognized that while women's rights were salient in Bwaise, she could not benefit from them in her marriage. This made her embittered toward her husband and frustrated with the constraints of her relationship. Unfortunately, women's rights did little to help Sophie ensure her own sexual health and safety. They instead exacerbated tensions in this relationship, with tragic consequences for Sophie.

Michael and Mary: The Case of Rights Assumed

This second case builds on insights from the first regarding the intertwined nature of gender relations and human rights but also foregrounds an additional issue—class dynamics. While the vast majority of my informants were struggling to meet their everyday needs, Kampala is in fact a rapidly growing city in a country that has experienced robust economic growth in the last decade. As my informants frequently underscored, such growth has not been experienced equally among Ugandans and there is a perception of intensifying economic inequality. Central to these processes is the emergence of a growing middle class defined not only by economic capital but social capital as well. While tertiary education is a key marker of such social capital, gender relations are also implicated as individuals strive to define themselves as modern urbanites. As this case will reveal, gender relations, women's rights, and class ambitions are all deeply intertwined.

Michael and Mary, age twenty-six and twenty-five, had a relationship very different from Samuel and Sophie's marriage. Michael and Mary were a relatively unusual example of a couple in Bwaise with significant social capital on a trajectory to possibly join the small but growing Ugandan middle class. Both had university-level education and were already earning more money than most couples, young and old, in the area. They had been together for two years, cohabiting on and off, and

were about to take the step of living together full time. They had no children and no immediate plans for children.

As I came to know Michael and Mary, I learned that they were different in other ways as well. What most distinguished this couple was the strong emphasis they placed on collective decision making in the home. More than any other couple in this study, both the man and woman stressed the importance of making decisions, both large and small, together as a team.

I spoke at length with Mary alone about her notions of an ideal husband and her relationship with Michael. She said she was interested only in men with a certain attitude toward relationships and stressed repeatedly how important it was that the man listened to her and respected her views and opinions. For Mary, Michael embodied these qualities, and she described herself as lucky to be with such a man:

If I don't like something [he's done], I normally tell him what he has done that made me annoyed and he changes there and then . . . He is open [to talking]. He listens and when I don't like something [he's done], he will say fine and he will never do it again. And if I do something wrong and he doesn't like it, he tells me.

Mary repeatedly emphasized listening and being responsive to each other's needs as a point of pride. "Decisions are supposed to be made by two people because you may make decisions for me that I will not accept," she told me. "You cannot force a person like me! Actually I do not believe in imposing something on me that I do not want."

Given how Mary described her ideal relationship and the qualities she admired most in Michael, it was surprising to learn that her attitudes toward the promotion of women's rights in Uganda were quite negative:

In my view, I do not think it was proper that women are supposed to be given full rights . . . That is why you see women nowadays, they don't give a damn about a man. Once she tells the man to do this and the man refuses then you see her going out and breaking up relationships and marriages. And these are the women who are talking about rights; that the women should be given rights . . . I think she should respect the man. The man paid the bride price and then you tell him that?! I don't think so . . . So yes, these rights cause problems in relationships. There actually is nothing positive about them.

Mary's views on equality between men and women were also in line with her opinions about women's rights:

Men and women might be equal in education level but it remains the fact that the man is the head. Whether the lady has a bachelor's degree and the man is just a diploma holder, the fact remains the man is the head. The woman has to respect the husband as a man.

For Mary, then, a relationship as an equal partnership was separate from women's rights. Rights as gender equality were incompatible with her ideas of proper behavior for women within their relationships and posed a threat to her notions of a harmonious marriage.

I was eager to speak with Michael alone about these issues and wondered if he too

was critical of the promotion of women's rights. Like Mary, Michael also stressed the importance of mutual decision making in their relationship:

A relationship is a mutual understanding between the two people that have agreed to live together. So then, why should one dominate? If there should be an understanding, I think there should be a balance.

Michael was also very supportive of Mary working and finishing her university degree. However, in contrast to Mary, Michael was an outspoken supporter of women's rights:

I think women need their rights. They must have rights as women because they are people like any other person. But the fact is there are men that are not men, there are men that are really like beasts! How can you control them? The only way of controlling these people is by giving women their rights.

When asked more directly about whether men and women are equal, Michael replied,

Men and women are equal. Why not? They are equal. They all have two eyes. Does a man sleep on two beds and a woman sleeps on one bed? No, we all sleep on one bed . . . I think to an extent if you are to look at the culture in Uganda now, we have more women economically progressing than men. What does that mean? It means that if they are given an opportunity they can even be equal . . . So yeah, we are equal, we need each other.

Michael's apparent comfort with the notion of gender equality, while not unique, was certainly a minority view among the many men I had interviewed in Bwaise.

Overall, both Michael and Mary described their relationship as involving very little conflict and both said they were strongly committed to each other and their future together. There was, however, a major issue in their relationship that they were still very much in the midst of addressing. Mary was HIV positive but Michael was HIV negative, and they had known about their HIV discordance for eight months when I met them.

Unusually, it was Michael's idea that the couple test together after they had been in their relationship for a year. After testing positive, Mary concluded her one and only previous sexual partner infected her. When Michael tested with her, he was negative and claimed Mary was his first sexual relationship, which Mary was inclined to believe was the case.

Overall, Michael and Mary appeared to be coping with this issue surprisingly well; compared to other serodiscordant couples I interviewed, they appeared to have an uncomplicated relationship. Yet when I spoke with Michael alone, it was clear that he was more conflicted about the relationship. He was in fact not completely committed to staying in it but was instead carefully weighing all his options. When asked if he planned to marry Mary, he said, "I hope. That is a question that is actually puzzling." Michael clearly articulated how much he cared for Mary and her well-being but he was also avidly seeking information about his options, including by participating in this study.

Mary clearly appreciated her partner and suggested that staying in this discordant

relationship was not something most of his male peers would do. "Someone has to have courage to do that, actually. Those who do it actually have to be courageous. Not everyone can be . . . [other men] have problems with dealing with such issues, but those who are courageous, yes, they can deal with them." Michael also discussed how in the eyes of some of his male peers he could legitimately leave this relationship. When he first learned that his partner was positive, he said, "I thought, should I just get rid of this person? I had friends I asked and everybody was like 'Run away. Run away for your life!' And I am like, I was hesitant . . . Up to now it is a question which is puzzling me."

Having children was also part of the puzzle for Michael. While he was aware that drugs could help them have a HIV-negative child, he did not rule out eventually taking a second wife, but only for having children. At the close of the interview, Michael made his ambivalence clear, turning to me and asking:

Would you abort the whole relationship or would you continue with it? The truth is I don't know. She is not a bad person and you cannot get someone who is 100 percent. So if someone can give you 80 percent of what you ever desired you take it, because when you look for the 20, you have the 80 percent at home and you are looking for the 20 outside the home. There will be implications.

Ultimately, the decision to continue the relationship was Michael's alone.

Women's rights shaped intimacy in this relationship because this relationship was premised on, and in a sense a symbol of, both Mary's and Michael's commitments to notions of gender equity. In this sense, women's rights were largely assumed in this relationship and undergirded Mary's and Michael's shared relationship ideals. While Mary distanced herself from a strong articulation of women's rights, she nonetheless stressed notions of gender equity, even equality, when describing her goals for an intimate partnership. She was fortunate to have found a man like Michael who appeared quite comfortable with and committed to such ideas, something unusual in the men I met in Bwaise.

In turn, this more companionate and financially stable relationship context shaped Michael's and Mary's understandings of women's rights in several important ways. The fact that Mary and Michael were more financially stable facilitated the couple's commitment to an egalitarian relationship. Compared to a couple like Samuel and Sophie, their everyday financial challenges were less intense, which reduced tensions in their relationship. In addition, Michael and Mary knew their class status depended on having two incomes, which made Michael supportive of Mary's work, not threatened by it.

Unexpectedly, however, Michael's strong endorsement of aspects of women's rights and gender equality provided a safe space for Mary's rather vocal condemnation of the government's promotion of women's rights. Mary expressed concern that women's rights had led women to disrespect their husbands and that this threatened the harmony and stability of relationships. Mary's views on women's rights, and her preoccupation with certain aspects of proper female comportment in an intimate relationship, were not uncommon among women I interviewed in the area and were quite common among men. In this regard, Mary shared much with women with less



Figure 2. A family outside their home in Bwaise, September 9, 2004. Photo by Robert Wyrod.

education and social capital, revealing the complex ways in which women's rights can be simultaneously embraced and rebuffed in urban African contexts.

The complication of HIV serodiscordance added yet another dimension to the relationship—one that challenged the notion that women's rights could be assumed in it. Mary's HIV status tilted the balance of power in Michael's favor, especially given that a man in this context could abandon an HIV-positive woman with limited social sanctions. While Michael was very much grappling with these issues, both he and Mary tacitly acknowledged that living with discordance undermined their commitment to a more egalitarian relationship. Had it not been for AIDS, I expect that Mary and Michael would have fostered the type of companionate relationship they both envisioned. However, with Mary HIV positive and Michael negative, the power dynamic in their relationship shifted in a way neither desired. Mary's critical stance on rights made her more wary of asserting herself about how they should cope with serodiscordance, and a reluctant Michael was left to decide the future of their intimate relationship on his own.

Musa, Madina, and Rashmi: The Case of Rights Reframed

This third case is also focused on gender relations, women's rights, and class but examines these issues in relation to a low-income family that was more typical of the couples I studied. A consistent theme in many of these relationships was the intertwining of gender, women's rights, and women's work. Negotiations over whether a woman could work outside the home were often complex, entailing women's assertions of a right to work and men's attempts to contain perceived threats such work had for their identities as the family provider. As this final case illustrates, such negotiations

could be tense and often turned on interpretations of rights centered on work, women's agency, and men's authority.

In his early forties, Musa worked as a purveyor of traditional medicine. Earning only about a dollar a day, he felt much pressure to provide for his family. He had been with his first wife, Madina, who was twenty-eight, for over a decade, and they had two children together. In 2006, he informally married his second wife, Rashmi, twenty-four, and they had one child. While Musa claimed to be happy splitting his time between his two households, he was clearly struggling to support both families.

I spoke with Musa alone about what he viewed as an ideal marriage and he emphasized harmony, peace, and mutual understanding. He claimed that his relationships largely met these expectations and there was little quarreling. However, he also saw his first wife as more ideal because they were formally married and he had paid her bride price. "She is better than the other one," Musa told me. "This one does everything I ask, knowing that her bride price was paid." Thus, Musa's notion of marital harmony combined an emphasis on communication and collaboration but was also predicated on respecting the husband as the authority in the home. For Musa, this authority required reinforcement in certain circumstances. "For example," he said, "you may tell [your wife] to do something and she instead quarrels with you and when you are upset you can beat her."

Musa's views on women's rights also reflected this tension between domestic harmony and threats to male authority:

It's good to observe the rights of a woman. It even brings happiness in the home . . . The problem is that when the women heard of the rights granted by the President some of them misunderstood it. They tend to go beyond their limits. So everything you do to her she will think of reporting to the police because she has her rights. So you keep questioning her moral character and whether rights mean misbehavior.

In this sense, Musa's views on women's rights were fairly typical for men in Bwaise in that he sought a balance between the promotion of rights and the defense of men's roles as leaders in the home. Like Samuel, Musa also implied that women's rights placed a limit on excessive violence in the home, which was ironic given his acknowledgment of his own potential use of violence. Musa was grappling with the meaning of gender equality in a similar manner:

Men and women would be equal but some women go beyond their limits. For example, you will tell her to do something and she won't do it the way it is supposed to be done. The reason they are not equal is that it is the man who got the women and married her and brings her to his home and he looks after her. But there are certain instances she will abuse you because she has her rights. It brings peace in the house but at the same time there are some who misuse it. Instead it leads to problems.

What separated Musa from Samuel, however, was that his grappling with the meaning of women's rights had real consequences in his relationship. His relationships were

sites in which the meanings of rights were still congealing, and for both of his wives the right to work and earn their own money was of central importance.

Like Sophie (Couple 1), Musa's first wife, Madina, was married to him at an early age in a quasi-arranged marriage. When interviewed alone, Madina strove to project an image of herself as a polite, well-mannered, and dutiful wife. "I totally agree to do what my husband wants me to do," she told me at first, "and that's what makes him happy . . . [if we disagree] I accept it if he has decided it so." Yet she clarified this statement by adding, "But let me tell you this, for whatever we have discussed, I try to lead him in what we can do . . . The man has more power in the home. But he listens to me."

Madina's views on women's rights were also complex and echoed both her husband's and Mary's (Couple 2) concerns about rights threatening harmonious marriages:

Women's rights. On one side it is a good thing but on the other side it is aimed at undermining men . . . The good thing about it is that they gave us a voice. That if he does something wrong I will go to the police and report him. That is the difference that is there, but the rest is bad. Most of the women are now stubborn. That's why you see that families are breaking up day and night. Because the women have a voice they feel they can speak all the time . . . [Such behavior] is impossible because that is what our culture dictates. That is the natural way of our culture and it must stay. That's how it is supposed to be. I personally want it that way, when the man is the one who has more power and authority [in the home]. That's always good.

Madina continued, stressing that in her mind a woman who so directly confronted her husband's authority was disrespectful.

Madina's relationship with Musa was complicated, however, by the fact that she was working (selling goods in downtown Kampala) and was making more money than Musa. Madina was proud of this and said that her work gave her a large say in the decisions she and Musa made as a couple. But she was also very concerned about exercising this power within the established bounds of female decorum. In her mind, women who suggested that men and women are equal were poorly raised, and such disrespect was a clear indication that the woman lacked *empisa* (character). She was therefore diligent about remaining tactful in how she exerted her power in her relationship and how she guided her husband's decision making. "I do not get upset [with him] but I always sit with my husband and I tell him that what you have done is wrong," she said. "I don't say a word or even comment on anything whether right or wrong in the presence of any visitor or any other person that comes into our home."

Madina's work outside the home was something she had fought for in her relationship—and fought for intensely. Three years before I met Musa and Madina, their relationship had gone through a crisis. Madina had purchased a large expensive television with her own money and Musa had taken it from their home without consulting her. As Madina rightly suspected, Musa had given the television as a gift to another woman—Rashmi, the woman who became his second wife. Furious,

Madina left Musa and returned to her parents' home. She seriously considered divorcing Musa and buying her own home for herself and their children. However, her parents intervened and advised her to be patient and wait for Musa to realize his mistake. The strategy was successful; Musa did come seeking her forgiveness.

The intriguing twist in this story is that Madina used this crisis to demand her husband's permission to allow her to work in downtown Kampala. In fact, Madina had been secretly running a business in town, selling clothes she made, for two years before the television incident. She never told Musa because she believed he would have forbidden it. The television crisis provided Madina's opportunity to force Musa's hand. Following what she saw as the proper protocol, she asked her father to intervene on her behalf. "So then my husband told my father that he had accepted all these conditions [about me working]," she said, "and since then I am working."

For Madina, the right to work and earn her own money was crucial for her own well-being:

I decided to stay in the marriage because he knows I am working and he can't beat me up. He fears to harm me. And also when I am working I am able to support myself . . . I have *eddembe* [rights; also freedom, peace] because of having my own money. So, so much.

While Madina remained leery of women's rights for breaking up families, she nonetheless drew on such language to describe how she and her marriage had changed over time.

Madina was striving to strike a balance among maintaining her *empisa* (character), gaining and exercising *eddembe* (rights; freedoms), and earning *ekitiibwa* (respect) from her peers and husband. It was a delicate balance to maintain, but in the context of her relationship she appeared to be succeeding. This was in stark contrast to Sophie (Couple 1), even though both women were married at a young age. For Madina, this balance had reestablished a degree of harmony in her relationship. When asked if she ever still considered leaving Musa, she replied, "The reason I don't think about it anymore is because every type of support I need, I can get it myself now. So I thought it would be waste of time and I decided to use my self-sufficiency to protect my reputation and the *ekitiibwa* [respect] I have as a married woman."

In this sense, Madina was fairly typical of many women I met in Bwaise who were striving to capitalize on the new possibilities presented by women's rights within the limits of established notions of proper femininity. In his individual interview, Musa talked about slowly coming to accept such changes in their relationship, especially those related to Madina working. "You get used to it," he told me. "Especially if she is not the kind of women susceptible to bad *empisa* [character]." This is not to suggest that Musa had become completely comfortable with Madina, or Rashmi, working outside the home. He valued their contribution to the household finances and recognized some degree of a right to work for women, but he felt such independence still needed to be monitored carefully.

While modern notions of women's rights created new suspicions for a man like Musa, he also suggested that he had come to have a new sense of respect for Madina. He saw her as rather difficult to control now, or "bigheaded," but emphasized that

she had maintained her good character and did not neglect what Musa saw as her wifely duties. Thus, in Musa's eyes as well, Madina appeared to have succeeded in her attempt to claim new forms of *eddembe*, and even *ekitiibwa*, while maintaining her *empisa*.

Madina's co-wife, Rashmi, was grappling with similar issues, and her status as the second, younger wife provided its own complications. When interviewed alone, Rashmi was more definitive that women's rights were a good thing, and she also strongly linked them with a women's right to work:

Women's rights, it's a good thing . . . Now we can work in all places of work. And even the world has developed because of this. But if we would have remained behind, we would be badly off. So yes, I need to work. Yes, yes, yes. Because when you work, you can get money and your *eddembe*. And when you have money, you can have *eddembe*. But no money, no *eddembe*.

Rashmi expressed some ambivalence about whether men and women should be viewed as equals, saying, "We are all equal . . . In general, I would say I have rights to do this and that, but still the man has more rights than me." What was clearer was that for Rashmi, women working and earning their own money had significant implications for relationship dynamics:

It is the man who leads you. You know, when you are at home, there should be a leader who leads you. Who takes on all the responsibilities at home. That is why he is better than you . . . But it should be changed! Because also we women, we also have responsibilities . . . It has changed. The one who has money is the boss. In order for a woman to be the leader at home, she should have money. But for a man, even if he doesn't have money, he can still lead the home.

For Rashmi, work was a central preoccupation and she saw her polygamous marriage as beneficial in this regard. In order to provide for two or more families, polygamous men were under financial pressure to allow their wives to work. Rashmi herself had benefited from this because Musa had provided the capital for her to start her own hair salon, located a half-mile from their home. This support from Musa was, in fact, one of the qualities Rashmi liked most about him:

You know what we like most about men is when you get a man who gives you *eddembe nga eryoobuntu* [human rights]. When he gives you your rights. Now, my husband gives me rights. And there are those men who refuse to let their wives to go and work. But mine gives me my rights and I go and work.

Unlike Madina, Rashmi did not refrain from using more stark terms to discuss the implications of women working:

There is a time when the man goes to work and he doesn't get any money. Then it is up to the wife now to look after a home because the husband didn't get any money. You can also pay the rent to the landlord. So you're doing what? You're now acting as a husband. You take on the responsibility because the husband cannot . . . When such a time comes, for us who are working, we can act as husbands.

Rashmi even suggested that if her business was successful she could buy a home for her and Musa, saying, “If I get money when he has not gotten any, I can build my house and I’ll take him from a rental house to my house.” This suggestion represented a dramatic deviation from conventional gender norms, which dictated that a man married a woman and brought his wife to his own home.

In their interview together, Rashmi was equally assertive and Musa let her answer several questions that were posed to him. As with Samuel and Sophie, family planning emerged as a critical relationship issue. Like Sophie, Rashmi revealed she too was using injections, a decision she had made on her own. I was actually surprised by just how assertive Rashmi was in discussing this issue with her husband present:

I can tell him to wait until we get more money and then I can resume having children . . . So I need to first increase my earnings to the level of being able to properly dress two children. So that is why I tell him I won’t have more children. I can only manage one child. A second child! Ha! [laughs] Not until I notice a change in this household. Then I can be forced [to stop using contraception] but not until I realize there is a change. If there is no change, I am not going to have other children, until I notice the change.

While Rashmi spoke with much confidence about her right to utilize family planning, it emerged that the issue was more complex and difficult for the couple. She acknowledged that the injections were causing serious complications, including excessive bleeding and, most problematically, a decline in her libido. She stressed that this was a very difficult relationship issue, and Musa interjected, “If she doesn’t have the appetite and you do have it, you simply go ahead with the action. At times she regains the appetite along the way as you have sex. And you go on.” Rashmi laughed nervously and said she feared that this problem might drive Musa to get another wife.

In her interview alone, Rashmi discussed these issues in greater detail and conceded that her control over sex could be limited:

He can’t force me to have sex when I don’t want to. I might come back very tired when he can also see that. I am very tired and I say no I don’t want to and he accepts . . . [But] sometimes we get misunderstandings, when I refuse and he forces me to have sex. It happens . . . That is what I would like to change, just to listen to me whenever I tell him that I am not in the mood.

When I spoke with Musa alone, he stressed that there was a limit to his tolerance of Rashmi’s use of family planning:

It may become a big problem because the time will come that we need another child. It becomes a problem if I keep telling her [to stop using family planning] and she still refuses . . . In fact, you might think about it and at times you react with anger to show her that it is not a good thing to do. Especially if she takes a long time without getting pregnant. If she knows what is good for her she will stop using the injections so that we can have another child.

Musa linked these problems of family planning with Rashmi’s work and indicated that her focus on work was causing problems in their relationship:

You know Rashmi is so consumed by her work at times . . . The most important problem is that she is so preoccupied by her job. She will tell me that if she gets pregnant she won't be able to go to work.

Musa was, therefore, appearing to lose patience with Rashmi and suggested that he might take action in the near future to limit her control over family planning and to rein in her attention to her hair salon. Like Madina, Rashmi was proactively asserting her agency in her marriage, but unlike Madina, her approach placed her at greater risk of a backlash.

Overall, the context of a polygamous family provided interesting, and rather unexpected, opportunities for Madina and Rashmi to reframe notions of women's rights and freedoms. Both women were wary of more expansive notions of women's rights focused on gender equality and each strove in her own way to balance ideas of rights with "proper" wifely comportment and maintaining marital harmony. However, they were simultaneously emphasizing that a woman's right to work was a central concern for them and, in this sense, they reframed the discourse of rights to focus on women's economic security. This focus went beyond narrow, conventional Western notions of rights limited to individual civil and political rights and was more in articulation with ideas of economic and social rights. The financial and emotional demands of maintaining a polygamous marriage made Musa receptive to certain aspects of how his wives reframed women's rights. He enabled Rashmi's work and more begrudgingly came to accept Madina's work. Yet in both relationships, Musa remained conscientious about containing the implications of work for the relationship dynamics, striving to retain his position as the ultimate authority in the home.

Women's rights discourse shaped intimacy in this polygamous marriage in a more complex way than in the marriage of Samuel and Sophie. Both Madina and Rashmi drew on rights discourse to remodel their relationship more to their liking, especially with regard to gaining some economic power as money earners. Musa, in turn, appears to have grown more comfortable with a limited notion of women's rights, especially after his marriage to Rashmi. Yet his acceptance went only so far, and it was clear that Rashmi in particular was treading close to the limits of his tolerance. This sparked new relationship tensions that could prove difficult to resolve. This relationship, then, illustrates how such a reframing and strategic redeployment of women's rights in the home can subtly reconfigure relationship dynamics in ways that both reduce and stoke tensions in the home.

Conclusion: Toward an Intimate Politics of Rights in Africa

Taken together, these three couples illuminate the diverse ways in which notions of women's rights become meaningful through social interaction within intimate relationships. They illustrate the intimate politics of rights—the nature of the intimate relationship altered how rights were understood, enacted, and mobilized, with certain types of relationships fostering a reworking of women's rights and others foreclosing such possibilities. In addition, these couples shed light on the reciprocal dynamic of the intimate politics of rights, namely, how the affective realm of women's rights discourse shaped intimacy in these relationships.

With regard to how intimacy shaped rights, in Samuel and Sophie's male-dominated relationship women's rights were rebuffed, doing little to challenge Samuel's control or enhance Sophie's agency. Michael and Mary's more financially stable relationship, however, provided a context for this couple to develop their commitment to more egalitarian gender power dynamics. Yet the fact that this was a serodiscordant relationship (which was not uncommon in Kampala) tilted the power balance in Michael's favor, an outcome neither desired. The polygamous marriage provided unexpected opportunities for Madina and Rashmi to reframe women's rights, and they focused on their perceived right to earn their own money. Unlike Mary and Michael, however, this was not a relationship premised on egalitarian ideals, and Musa made clear the limits of his tolerance of women's greater independence, especially Rashmi's role in sexual decision making.

With regard to the affective realm of rights, for Samuel and Sophie the new salience of women's rights discourse in Bwaise only heightened tensions in their relationship. In sharp contrast, Mary and Michael viewed this new discourse on women's rights as something of an assumed status quo that provided a foundation for their companionate relationship ideals and goals (even if Mary distanced herself from aspects of women's rights). For the polygamous marriage, women's rights discourse had multiple effects in that it provided Madina and Rashmi greater leverage in articulating and enacting their relationship goals (especially with regard to work) but it also raised new tensions in their relationship with Musa—tensions both Madina and Rashmi negotiated with caution.

As noted earlier, both Samuel and Sophie and Mary and Michael were outliers among the couples in this study, with the former relationship unusually male-dominated and the latter unusually committed to egalitarian relationship ideals. In contrast, the dynamics I observed in the polygamous marriage were the most typical of the couples in this study and thus most representative of the intimate politics of women's rights in Bwaise. Musa, Madina, and Rashmi were all uncomfortable with a discourse of gender equality that stressed women being equal to men. They were all, however, open to aspects of gender equity and each was attempting to reconcile such relatively new notions of women's rights with prevailing ideas of being a "proper" husband or wife. In this sense, women's rights both helped reconcile certain conflicts in this marriage while simultaneously creating new tensions—a dynamic I observed in many other couples in Bwaise.

It is also important to consider how these intimate relationships reveal the specific contours of human rights in African contexts. What is evident from my research with these couples is that the rhetoric of women's rights is only normative in a limited sense. The government's stress on women's rights and gender equity dominates how rights are understood, marginalizing more substantial connections between women's rights and gender equality advocated by the Ugandan women's movement. In this sense, ideas of women's rights can be invoked and used as resources in everyday social interactions but their partial and limited manifestation in urban Uganda means they are not a normative notion with gravitas.

This context, therefore, produces a wide range of different practices with regard to women's rights, and each of the three couples reveals a distinct facet of how

women's rights are engaged in this urban African setting. Samuel demonstrates how men in particular can use women's rights discourse to exhibit their fluency in liberal notions of progress and development while simultaneously rebuffing women's rights in their relationships. Mary illustrates the ambivalence many women exhibit toward women's rights, drawing on certain aspects of rights discourse to buttress their notions of a "modern" marriage, while simultaneously distancing themselves from those aspects that conflict with established feminine notions of a dutiful wife or girlfriend. In this sense, Mary's attitudes reflect the coexistence of two sets of gender ideals, one focused on companionate marriage and the other on family and kin obligations—a coexistence more easily accommodated by ideas of gender equity than gender equality. Madina and Rashmi exhibit a similar ambivalence but also demonstrate how women's rights discourse can be reframed in everyday interaction, and in this case reframed to incorporate ideas of economic empowerment for women.

While women's rights have played an especially prominent role in Uganda in the Museveni era, this ambivalent engagement with women's rights discourse has been noted in other African settings as well.²³ It can also be a theme in Western contexts as vividly illustrated in Merry's examination of women in Hawaii who had experienced gender violence. With the encouragement of local activists, these women did adopt a rights framework. However, they "layer the rights framework over that of kinship obligations." In this sense, these women engage with human rights discourse through a "double subjectivity" as individuals with rights and members of their communal groups such that "there is not a merging and blending, but two somewhat distinct sets of ideas and meanings that coexist."²⁴ These same dynamics of ambivalence and contingency, I would argue, are evident among both the women and men in this study as they grapple with the meaning of women's rights discourse in their intimate relationships.

A perhaps more profound implication of this examination of women's rights in an urban African context, however, may be the centrality of economic conditions to the everyday practice of women's rights. The dominance of the government's gender equity framing of women's rights not only marginalizes notions of gender equality but also aligns women's rights discourse with narrow individual civil and political rights, as opposed to broader rights premised on economic and social justice. This allows the government to appear to be a strong advocate of women's rights while neglecting to address the economic conditions that structure the dynamics of intimate relationships among the urban poor.²⁵

All three couples in this study underscore that financial insecurity creates relationship tensions and that narrow notions of women's rights can exacerbate such tensions. The way Madina and Rashmi reframe women's rights to include issues of women's financial security is a poignant grassroots articulation of the need to link individual and economic rights and a powerful critique of the limits of neoliberal rights in transforming the lives of the urban poor in Africa. For ideas of women's rights premised on equality to become truly normative requires not only moving beyond a framing of rights as gender equity but also addressing those material conditions in a place like Bwaise that make harmonious intimate relationships not only precarious but all too rare.

NOTES

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1. James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 39.
2. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181.
3. Aili Mari Tripp, *Museveni's Uganda: Paradoxes of Power in a Hybrid Regime* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010), 194.
4. Ibid., 194.
5. Dorothy Hodgson, "Introduction: Gender and Culture at the Limits of Rights," in *Gender and Culture at the Limits of Rights*, ed. Dorothy Hodgson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 7.
6. Sally Engle Merry, *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.
7. Peggy Levitt and Sally Engle Merry, "Making Women's Human Rights in the Vernacular: Navigating the Culture/Rights Divide," in *Gender and Culture at the Limits of Rights*, 88.
8. Merry, *Human Rights*.
9. Candace West and Don Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (June 1987): 125–51.
10. Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989).
11. Jennifer Hirsch and Holly Wardlow, eds., *Modern Loves: The Anthropology of Romantic Courtship and Companionate Marriage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
12. Because formal marriage was uncommon in Bwaise, couples were defined in this study as a man and woman who described themselves as married, or soon to be, and who had cohabited for at least six months.
13. Robert Wyrod, "Bwaise Town: Masculinity in Urban Uganda in the age of AIDS" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007).
14. The study was also designed to examine how HIV/AIDS shaped relationships, and seven of the nineteen couples were HIV serodiscordant (one person HIV positive).
15. The interviews were conducted with the assistance of two Ugandan research assistants, one man and one woman. The female research assistant often, but not always, conducted the individual interviews with women.
16. Catherine Campbell and Yugi Nair, "From Rhetoric to Reality? Putting HIV and AIDS Rights Talk into Practice in a South African Rural Community," *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* 16, no. 10 (November 2014): 1–15.
17. John D. Murphy, *Luganda-English Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1972).
18. Ideas of *eddembe* were an important part of the Kingdom of Buganda, which emerged in the fourteenth century and remained powerful until Uganda's independence in 1962. Rights were accorded based on communal membership, family ties, and individual achievement. Although not

human rights in the modern sense, these ideas continue to shape understandings of rights among the Baganda today. However, as Mikael Karlstrom discusses in his analysis of democracy in Buganda, notions of equality and shared power do not easily map on to more hierarchical notions of politics and power among the Baganda. Thus, long-standing notions of rights and power among the Baganda, which remain salient today, both facilitate and impede the institutionalization of women's rights in Buganda and Kampala. See Mikael Karlstrom, "Imagining Democracy: Political Culture and Democratisation in Buganda," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 66, no. 4 (October 1996): 485–505.

19. Tripp, *Museveni's Uganda*, 2.

20. Uganda's contemporary women's movement is seen as one of the most vibrant on the continent. The movement comprises academics, NGOs, and politicians and best described as liberal-reformist with an emphasis on women's equal participation in politics and public life. There are, however, a handful of more radical voices, such as Makerere University law professor Sylvia Tamale, who frame Ugandan politics as deeply patriarchal and in need of systemic change. In recent years there has been growing concern that the women's movement may be stagnating as key legal reforms for women's rights have languished in government committees. There is also the more long-standing issue of how Museveni's state-sponsored gender equity programs constrain and possibly co-opt the movement. For more on Uganda's women's movement, see Josephine Ahikire, "Gender Equity and Local Democracy in Contemporary Uganda: Addressing the Challenge of Women's Political Effectiveness in Local Government," and Anne Marie Goetz, "The Problem with Patronage: Constraints on Women's Political Effectiveness in Uganda," in *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*, ed. Anne Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim (New York: Zed Books, 2003); Sylvia Tamale, *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999); Aili Tripp, *Women and Politics in Uganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); Aili Tripp and Joy Kwesiga, *The Women's Movement in Uganda: History, Challenges, and Prospects* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 2002).

21. Robert Wyrod, "Between Women's Rights and Men's Authority: Masculinity and Shifting Discourses of Gender Difference in Urban Uganda," *Gender & Society* 22 (December 2008): 799–823.

22. Ibid.

23. Dorothy Hodgson, "'These Are Not Our Priorities': Maasai Women, Human Rights, and the Problem of Culture," in *Gender and Culture at the Limits of Rights*, 88.

24. Merry, *Human Rights*, 180–81.

25. For a similar critique focused on human rights more generally, see Harri Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

book in progress is entitled *The Tabrir Effect: Protest, Revolution, and Counterrevolution in Contemporary Egypt*. He has published articles in *Social Research* and *International Sociology*, and has written for *U.S. Amnesty Magazine*, the “Immanent Frame” blog of the Social Science Research Council, and Jadaliyya.

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