Making 'The Process': Sexual Vulnerability and Burundian Refugee Boys and Young Men' Strategies for Onward Migration from Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda

YVETTE RUZIBIZA (iD)

Department of Anthropology, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
ruzivette@gmail.com

LIDEWYDE H. BERCKMOES

African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

Based on ethnographic research among Burundian refugee boys and young men in Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda, we explore how boys and young men in the camp, guided by the longing for a better life, aspire for onward migration and develop strategies based on their knowledge of relevant legal frameworks. Given that onward migration under the UNHCR framework is possible for only the most 'vulnerable', we highlight the negotiation strategies adopted by some boys and young men to support their 'process', based on sexual vulnerability related to being in same-sex relationships. Notwithstanding the deprivation and bleak prospects, we thus propose to look at the refugee settlement also as a space opening chance for vital transformation. At the same time, we point out that the restricting frameworks seeking to foster protection of refugees, may, in an environment hostile to same-sex relations, unintentionally render refugee boys and young men more vulnerable to gendered exploitation.

Keywords: Burundian refugees, boys and young men, onward migration, sexuality

Introduction: Whatever is Necessary

Life is what it is in the settlement [...] We have to survive. What is scarier than surviving, is the failure to try surviving. You have got to do whatever is necessary to survive [...] And here all adolescents dream to go to Europe, USA, Canada or Australia, so they are ready to do anything to achieve that.

                                                    Steve, 16 years, Nakivale refugee settlement

As of April 2015, political instability in Burundi has forced approximately 350,000 people to flee to refugee camps and settlements in neighbouring countries, half of whom are young people (UNHCR 2019). In the camps and settlements in Rwanda, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Uganda, many young Burundians encounter hardship and uncertainty (Krause 2021). In Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda, for instance, young people face harsh socioeconomic circumstances marked by a lack of access to basic needs and services like food, water, sanitation and health care, few employment possibilities, and a lack of educational opportunities (Ruzibiza *et al.* 2021). In this article, we explore how in such a contexts of hardship and uncertainty, refugee boys and young men aspire and navigate towards better futures (Utas 2005b; Krause 2021; Van Stapele 2021).

Based on long-term ethnographic research with young people aged 13–19, we show that Burundian refugee boys and young men in Nakivale focus their aspirational practices on onward migration (Nekby 2006; Lindley and Van Hear 2007; Rezaei and Goli 2011; Kelly 2013). See, for instance, Steve's comment at the beginning of this introduction, which illustrates how young people experienced Nakivale as a place of despair, and which for many made onward migration to a Western country an aspirational goal that justifies all means. We show that boys and young men developed their aspirational strategies in relation to legal and policy-related constraints and opportunities presented by the refugee context in Uganda. In particular, they described a primary strategy for a better future as making 'the process', a term they commonly referred to, to indicate that a person initiated or holds a file with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the purpose of resettlement to a third-country destination. Yet, as only the most vulnerable refugees qualify for resettlement through UNHCR, young people making the process needed to find a way to make it to the 'list' for resettlement. For this, they drew on the persecution of gay individuals following the Ugandan anti-homosexuality bill introduced in 2009, passed as the Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2014, and later annulled (Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015). This act, although only briefly in place, paved the way for a prioritization of the protection of asylum seekers by UNHCR based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) (UNHCR 2012).

We showcase Burundian refugee boys' and young men's aspirations and practices by drawing on the detailed story of one of the young men we encountered in Nakivale, Armel. His story represents the dismay caused by uncertainty about the future shared by many young people we encountered in Nakivale, as well as the way in which young people pursue onward migration using the policy framework concerned with sexual vulnerability. In the literature, gendered vulnerability is often looked at from a female perspective (Musariri 2021: 168). While some dynamics described in the article pertain to girls and young women too, here we seek to contribute to the slowly growing literature about gendered vulnerability of boys and young men (Edström *et al.* 2016; Carpenter 2017; Schulz 2018).

The article is structured as follows. First, we discuss the conceptual approach that informed the analysis, followed by the methodology employed. We then

describe the context in which aspirations and pursuits for onward migration take shape. Subsequently, we share the detailed story of Armel, which reveals how sexuality has moved centre stage in the boys' and young men's navigational strategies for onward migration, leading to our central argument that the unique context in which young refugees find themselves, may unwittingly risk exacerbating their sexual vulnerability in gendered ways.

Central Concepts: Vital Conjunctures and Social Navigation

Our research builds on the work that shows that even young people in trying circumstances attempt to transcend their situation by reconstructing hope and imagining possible futures, while devising strategies to realize these imagined futures (Kleist and Jansen 2016; Grayson 2017; Krause 2021; Van Stapele 2021). To conceptualize such processes, we find the concepts of 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2005) and 'social navigation' (Vigh 2006, 2008) particularly useful.

A vital conjuncture is defined as:

> a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives. It is a temporary configuration of possible change, a duration of uncertainty and potential (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871).

Johnson-Hanks coined the concept to understand the relationship between structural and individual factors and how they influence people's decision-making during important life events—in her study, decisions about pregnancy and relations considering their hoped-for futures as honourable mothers. The concept combines Bourdieu's notion of conjuncture—'the context of action, the site in which habitus is made and its consequences are enacted' (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872)—and the demographic term vital event. The conjunctures are vital in that they are considered a potential turning point in an individual's life course trajectory.

We use the notion of vital conjunctures to refer to the unique characteristics of the refugee context. As Suzanne Buckley-Zistel and Ulrike Krause (2019 [2017]: 1) argue:

> norms and rules sedimented over time [. . .] are challenged and put into doubt by the new demands and limitations encountered in displacement, where much of the social, economic and political world is externally formed and restrictively imposed.

Originally, the notion of vital conjunctures places emphasis on the multiple temporalities of life transitions, yet we propose that in the context of flight, there is also a strong spatial dimension to the 'zone of possibility' (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 871). A refugee settlement presents a spatial zone imagined and governed as providing temporary relief before more durable solutions can be found. In other words, refugee camps and settlements are spatially and politically organized as temporary spaces before transition (cf. Turner 2016). When young Burundians

were forced to flee their home country and seek refuge in Nakivale refugee settlement in Uganda, they entered a period and space that is supposed to be transitory; a vital conjuncture with unique structures, challenges, and opportunities that shape how young people perceive and actively pursue possibilities for better futures elsewhere.

The second concept is social navigation and seeks to help shed light on how people make decisions in relation to possibilities and risks (Vigh 2008, 2009). Henrik Vigh proposes that social navigation requires an assessment of both

> immediate dangers and possibilities as well as an ability to envision the unfolding of the social terrain and to plot and actualise one's movement from the present into the imagined future (Vigh 2006: 52).

The concept was developed in a highly volatile war-torn environment and can be associated with the fulfilment of social, material, and existential needs in the present as well as in the longer-term future. Social navigation suggests the importance of improvization, but also recognizes the reactive and flexible processes of plotting and planning that we wish to highlight in this article. In this article, where the vital conjuncture helps to conceptualize the context, social navigation is used to foreground young people's perspectives and understand the ways in which they pursue their strategies towards better futures.

Methodology: Fieldwork in Nakivale

> During the early days of fieldwork, Ruzibiza, the first author, was still familiarising herself with the setting when she noticed a small crowd had started to gather at one of the [UNHCR] offices. People of different ages were pushing each other to get closer to a long list that was posted on the wall. Drawn by curiosity and eager not to miss out on something that could be interesting for this study, Ruzibiza approached the crowd and asked one of the adolescents there about the list. He explained that it was a list of people and families who will be resettled to another country by the UNHCR. That day and the next, Ruzibiza saw refugees of different nationalities, including adolescents, coming to check the list. Some went away with a smile, others appeared disappointed. As the days went by, she learned about 'the process' and 'the file' leading to the list. She recall well, that this famous list came out only once during the time she was in Nakivale.
>
> Based on fieldwork diary, August 2017

The empirical material analysed in this article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the first author in Nakivale refugee settlement, Uganda. After two 2-week visits in June and July 2017 to familiarize and establish contacts, the main data collection period started in August of that year and lasted 4 months. The study is part of a larger PhD project that seeks to understand how young Burundians navigate sexuality in Ugandan and Rwandan refugee contexts, foregrounding young peoples' perspectives and experiences regarding sexuality (Ruzibiza, forthcoming).

Research methods employed included 'deep hanging out' (Rosaldo cited in Ferguson (1997: 188)), participant observation and informal conversations, as well as more formal in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), which were conducted in Kirundi. Over the course of the fieldwork in Nakivale, 60 Burundian young people, of whom 24 male and 36 female, took part in the research as key participants in interviews and FGDs on themes that were iteratively developed over time. They were aged between 13 and 19 years—an age-range decided upon considering the larger project in which this research is embedded.[1] We refer to our participants as boys and young men, or young people, to engage with the literature about social navigation, vital conjunctures, and aspirations, which generally appeals to the broader category of young people often defined as 10–24 years (WHO 2011).

To ensure that we included different categories of young people, we approached participants at different sites, including the youth centre, schools, on the streets, and in trading centres. We also visited the health clinic, the church, and other places where adolescents hang out, such as the communal water taps and other spaces created and appropriated by adolescents, such as hangouts, locally called 'ligalas'. Moreover, some participants were accessed through the personal networks of research assistants and through snow-ball sampling. Other research participants interviewed include Burundian teachers, leaders of cultural groups, churches, or other community leaders, as well as (non-Burundian) representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the settlement. Many of the Burundians were also parents to adolescents in the settlement, though not necessarily our participants. In this article, we draw only on the findings from interviews with boys and young men and those with parents and community leaders, in so far as they spoke to the specific themes of this article, same-sex relationships, aspirations and onward migration. Two research assistants, one male and one female young Burundian refugee living in Nakivale, were involved in the research, offering support, and facilitating access.

As a Rwandese born and raised in Burundi and having lived for some years in Europe, Ruzibiza, the first author, was generally positioned as an insider and an outsider simultaneously; the latter in the sense of someone who has lived for some years in Europe. The insider position facilitated rapport and was reflected in interviews where, for instance, some participants addressed her as 'my sister'. At the same time, due to her outsider position, research participants appeared to feel more at ease when discussing issues pertaining to sexuality, as these are usually not openly discussed in Burundian society. Berckmoes, the second author, supported the research remotely and contributed to the analysis and writing of this article. Her extensive research experience with young Burundians, including

---

young Burundian refugees in the Great Lakes region, greatly facilitated interpreting and situating the research findings.

We adopted a grounded theory approach to analyse the findings (Corbin and Strauss 2014). To ensure the quality of the data and the analysis during fieldwork, Ruzibiza had regularly met with the research assistants to reflect on the data, identify aspects for improvement, and conduct first-level interpretation and analysis of the findings. Later, voice recordings of interviews and FGDs were transcribed and were coded for core themes (Corbin and Strauss 2014). Young people's aspirations and strategies for onward migration emerged as a central theme in the first-level analysis. During subsequent levels of analysis and in the writing, the authors collaborated intensively.

All research participants were informed of the purpose of the research, its academic character and that they could refuse or withdraw at any moment without negative consequences. 'Informed consent' was seen as 'a process' (Van Reeuwijk 2010: 20). First, consent was sought and secured from various gatekeepers, including the settlement commander, community leaders, and various parents and guardians. They then informed other community members about the research taking place. In addition, to ensure the respect of young people's right and wishes to participate in the research (Morrow 2008), at the start of each interview or group discussion a consent form was read out loud and its meaning briefly discussed. Participatory methods were used to ensure that participants had the space to withdraw or engage only with themes they felt comfortable with or in ways they felt comfortable with (see Morrow 2008). Finally, throughout the interviews or conversations, we monitored whether young people were still open to discuss themes and we did not push when they seemed unwilling to share more.

During recruitment and at the beginning of the interviews, expectations were clarified to avoid participants developing false expectations. Nonetheless, given the level of poverty, despair and hardship in the settlement, we repeatedly had to explain the impossibility of the research team to help participants achieve their aspirations for onward migration, such as through higher education. Still, Ruzibiza explained, motivated, and where applicable provided links to scholarships opportunities, as well as offered to help with application processes, as one of the few things within her capacity.

Before fieldwork, the study was granted ethical approval by the Amsterdam University Ethics Advisory Committee, the Makerere University Ethics Advisory Committee, and the Uganda National Science and Technology Ethics Advisory Committee. In addition, the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda—vested with the responsibility for implementing Uganda's disaster preparedness and refugee policy—granted Ruzibiza an official research permit to enter and conduct research in the settlement. In addition, we took measures to protect the anonymity of the participants, such as by altering names and some personal details in the stories presented later in this article.

Contextualizing Uncertainties and Aspirations

In general, the life of most Burundians prior to arriving at Nakivale had been hard, mostly due to the civil war that had ravaged their country from 1993 to 2005 (Verwimp and Bundervoet 2008; Verwimp and Muñoz-Mora 2013). Forced migration to Nakivale a decade after the civil war did not offer a better quality of life. Instead, young people stated that their situation had worsened significantly. Young people expressed difficulties meeting their basic needs and lamented that everything in Nakivale required money. Basic life necessities such as food, water, health, and education had a price. Food rations from the UNHCR were insufficient and were repeatedly delayed, leaving refugees to suffer from hunger. Health services were not entirely free, meaning that for those with no money or without family to fall back on, getting sick entailed the possibility of dying. Schools were also subsidized, but the remaining costs were too high for many. In addition, some young people had to travel long distances to school, often on an empty stomach. Most of the young people we met were therefore not going to school or had dropped out. As such, Nakivale had come to represent a place where dreams of studying were crushed, foreclosing the possibility of a professional job in the future, and unemployment in Nakivale was rampant. This was particularly tough for young people, especially those from Burundi's former capital Bujumbura, who had concluded some level of secondary education and had entertained ideas of higher education until their flight.

In brief, our research participants defined every single day they had spent and were spending in Nakivale as days of greatest despair (cf. Krause 2021; Ruzibiza *et al.* 2021). It was common to hear them say that they were doing whatever was needed to survive. They repeatedly referred to their experiences as refugees in terms of living in limbo (Malkki 1995). They found themselves 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967), although without any certainty of what lay ahead. Indeed, life conditions in the settlement projected a bleak future, or no future beyond the camp. Young Burundians explained that upon arrival in the settlement, they had hoped their stay would be short; that the political situation in Burundi would quickly improve so that they could move on with their lives. Over time, however, they had come to accept that their stay was an extended one.

The migration policy framework has since long proposed that the three possible durable solutions for long-term refugees are voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement (Harrell-Bond 1989; Aleinikoff 1992). The first, voluntary repatriation is often promoted by UNHCR (UNHCR 1996; Zieck 2011). Fieldwork for this study took place a few months after a visit of the Burundian authorities to Nakivale settlement, in February 2017. This visit was part of an attempt to convince Burundian refugees to return home but was not well received by the refugees. They felt that the life-threatening political insecurities that had led them to flee their country were still prevalent (Ssengendo 2017). Their critique resonates with more general comments on the UNHCR repatriation system. Namely, although lauded by the international donor community for being a cost-effective solution for managing refugees, Harrell-Bond (1989) and Hansen

(2018) warn that repatriation is often pursued regardless of whether the issue that had forced the refugees to flee in the first place had been resolved, and that repatriation takes place even in the world's most dangerous conflict areas. In Nakivale, the looming eventuality of being pressured to return to Burundi felt real for many, as forced repatriation had already taken place in Burundian refugee camps in Tanzania some years before. Some Burundians from those camps were, at the time of the fieldwork, living in Nakivale.

The push for repatriation as the most promising durable solution comes with increasingly fewer opportunities for the integration of refugees in the host country. The Ugandan government has been applauded for its favourable policy towards asylum seekers and refugees. Uganda's policy of allocating sizeable plots of land where refugees can construct small mud-brick huts and engage in subsistence farming for self-reliance are among the reasons for applause (Katungi 2019; Idris 2020; Pincock *et al.* 2021). At the same time, rules against building with permanent materials and continuous messages of the authorities that Nakivale is a *temporary* settlement, remind refugees of their need to, at some point, leave. Most of the young Burundians we spoke to, felt that the possibility of settling in Uganda was not welcomed. At the same time, the reminders of the temporariness of their stay, impacts their abilities to become self-sufficient while not enough aid is provided to escape everyday economic hardship. What is more, according to most of our participants, the fact of having been allocated plots weakened their claim of needing to receive sufficient food rations and at regular times. Namely, they were expected to invest their time in agricultural work, businesses, or other jobs to sustain themselves, despite the obstacles to do so.

Because of the growing number of refugees in need of long-term solutions, funding deficits, and resettlement countries' increasingly restrictive immigration policies and diminishing commitment to receive immigrants, resettlement to a third country is often the least and last pursued solution by UNHCR (Hansen 2018; Hovil 2018). As a result, resettlement, or onward migration to a third country has become possible only for individuals considered exceptionally vulnerable, including refugees in Uganda. In spite or perhaps because of the hardships and uncertainty, young people we met still aspired for better futures *elsewhere* and actively worked towards achieving that (Brun 2015). Indeed, many said that they believed that if they were to realize *any future* for themselves, this could only be elsewhere. There they believed that better socioeconomic conditions would become available to them.

> My sister, one has to do what he has to do to move from this place. You see, in addition to all the suffering, we don't go to school. So, to be honest, one doesn't see any future here. It is very key to keep searching for a life. In Europe I will have a good life, continue my studies, and also be myself.
>
> Armel, 15 years, 2017

Although not all young Burundians in Nakivale dreamed about making a life in a Western country or were busy working towards such end, our findings reveal

that many young people did nurture this—albeit small—possibility associated with their life in refuge, and they navigated the complex social, legal and policy frameworks to achieve their dream.

Making 'The Process'

In this section, we showcase our findings through the story of Armel. Armel's story illustrates how some Burundian refugee boys and young men navigate the legal and policy framework of the refugee context in Uganda to achieve aspired futures elsewhere. With his example, we explore the tactical use of the hostility and lack of protection related to the Ugandan laws criminalizing same-sex relationships to make, what our participants call, 'the process'. Given the extremely limited possibilities for reaching the UNHCR's resettlement list, our participants were conscious that they needed to showcase their heightened vulnerability.[2] We selected Armel's story because of all the detailed information he and others shared with us, the different perspectives we can include, as well as the way in which his story represents the various stakes at play. Similar stories collected among Burundian boys and young men, we used to interpret and analyse the findings.

Armel's Story: Same-Sex Relationships

While conducting an FGD with 15 boys and young men at the Nakivale Youth Centre, we noted that the topic of 'gays and homosexuals', as boys and young men referred to male, same-sex relationships, was sensitive as well as provoked lively debate. In a way, we were surprised that same-sex relationships were openly debated, given that in most African countries, they are considered taboo, not least because they are supposedly contrary to African culture and, in some states, criminalized. Also in Uganda, where national activists and donor's countries have successfully pressured the government into nullifying the criminalization of same-sex relationships in 2014, individuals in non-heterosexual relationships still face many challenges because they lack explicit state protection (Nyanzi 2013). Our research assistants then explained the relative visibility of homosexuality in the camp:

> Well, it is not difficult to know gay young people [male]. Some we know them because of their effeminate mannerisms and heterosocial behaviour: they hang

2 Despite the opportunity presented within the aegis of protection of asylum seekers by the UNHCR on the basis of SOGIE, in practice this does not translate to a quick passage to the West. In 2009, at a time of heightened tensions due to the passing of the bill, UNHCR prioritised Ugandan refugee cases. But even then, to advance a claim for asylum based on SOGIE, one needed to prove their vulnerability. After 2014—with the bill legally nullified, but a hostile social environment continuing, the UNHCR checks for proof of vulnerability has become more demanding. Furthermore, as Ramon Mendos (2019) remarks, the criminalisation of same-sex relations is commonplace in 72 countries—including 11 countries that impose the death penalty—leading to a great number of people in need of protection.

out with girls, most of their best friends are girls, they often mimic girls' ways of talking and walking or they adopt girls' clothing styles [. . .] Others we know them because they have started a process [. . .] on the ground of their gay identity.

Fieldwork research assistant, September 2017

Over the course of the following weeks, we came across several boys and young men who identified as homosexual and who were willing to share their stories. One of them was 15-year-old Armel.

The first thing Armel said was that he was gay 'for real'. He looked at us with a smile and said: 'I am not lying like all the other ones you probably heard who use gay identity for the process. For me, it is real. I have been through a lot, my sister'. He went on to explain that it was tough to be gay in Burundi:

> My family avoided me, especially my mum. They simply ignored me. [. . .] Even here, they still do, but also because life here really tests you to the limit; secrets or hiding lose their meaning. But also because of the law in the country, one never knows what can happen, so I am very discrete. I only hang out at one club where we meet with others who are like me.

Upon arrival in Nakivale and through friends in Europe, Armel learned that persecution for same-sex relationships can be grounds for resettlement in Europe, and that the hostile social climate for homosexuals and an absence of government protection in Uganda is widely recognized. 'Information is key here; you understand that I took the opportunity', he laughed.

He went on to explain other sources of information he had accessed, underlining the importance of 'the office', a common reference to staff of the UNHCR and (I)NGOs operating in the settlement. To give weight to his argument about the central role of the office, he narrated that on a particular day when he and other boys and young men were hanging out in a small group in the settlement, the representative of the new Bujumbura neighbourhood, where mostly Burundian refugees lived, approached them, and took one of them, Alexis, aside. Alexis, also a participant in this research, was respected among his peers as the founder of Talented Orphan Refugee Association (TORA), a local organization engaged in small-scale initiatives aimed at supporting the most vulnerable youth to integrate in Nakivale. According to Armel, Alexis came back from the short talk with an indignation impossible to conceal. As he recounted, 'Alexis said: "Oh life, life [. . .] really, we have to pretend to be gay or all become one to get a chance of leaving this hole that's Nakivale"'. We later corroborated the story with Alexis. Apparently, the representative had asked him if he knew boys and young men who were gay or who could perform a gay identity, as someone from the office had asked him to find young people who wanted to start the process on that basis.

The involvement of UNHCR staff and other staff from partner (I)NGOs working in the settlement, is something that other respondents also indicated as problematic, especially given how it was influencing resettlement processes. Luc [one of our respondents] remarked that during the resettlement process, forms of exploitation other than bribes occurred. Aware of the refugee's desperation to leave

Nakivale, some staff extorted sexual favours: 'You see that guy, he is another gay who has a file. Allegations are that his process is at an advanced stage because he is now involved [they sleep together] with the staff [by staff he was referring to a member of UNHCR staff whom he pointed towards]'.

When we asked Armel for more clarification on how the process works, he explained:

> The settlement has its particularity [. . .] nobody cares about whether I am gay or not [. . .] I mean, frankly speaking, here in the settlement, no one can harm you. It is not like in [a] big town like Kampala [. . .] but of course, for it to be a case, one has to build it and document it. . . about the stigmatisation and harassment from the wider community we supposedly face, to prove to be [a] victim and vulnerable to all sorts of abuse. We do all this for the sake of the process.

Armel then listed at least five other boys and young men from his neighbourhood in Nakivale who started the process using the claim of a gay identity. But he added that the difference between them and him was that he is being truthful. The others allegedly performed a gay identity to forge a case. For instance, they met with other homosexuals in 'our club', a bar where homosexual people secretly met, which Armel called 'a safe place for us'.

Returning to the encounter between Alexis and the Bujumbura representative, the boys and young men present, upon hearing what Alexis had to say, started debating this opportunity for onward migration. Some of them, including Alexis, argued against employing this strategy, saying that being gay (or passing for one) is vilified in Burundian society—a society to which they belong and with which they share ideals. Others asked more informative questions, such as what one had to do exactly to comply with the requirements.

Upon asking whether Armel expected to migrate soon, he replied:

> That is the problem. Despite that I am genuinely using who I am, I still have to work it out well. Paying bribes for police files to document that I am constantly harassed on the grounds of being gay. There is no guarantee on these things. You know, there have been some cases whereby because someone paid an even higher bribe, the person can take the place of a genuine gay like me, even if I filed the process. The key is to have money here so that you can keep using it to follow up on your process. So, with God's will, I hope it will work out soon for me without spending more money than what I have spent so far.

When we asked where he got the money, he smiled and mentioned relatives in Sweden, adding: '[. . .] But of course, this was not enough. I told you that we have to do everything possible to move from here [. . .] you understand yourself'. We believe that he was alluding to transactional sex or 'sugar daddy'[3] relationships.

---

3 This concerns a type of dating involving a wealthier and older person using the financial assistance as a way to convince a younger person in need of financial support to enter into a dating relationship.

Alexis later told us that since the incident with the Bujumbura representative, the representative has kept motivating and encouraging him to consider playing the 'homosexual card' himself. Alexis told us that he understands that young people, instead of staying inactive and lacking prospects in Nakivale, opt for such a path towards a future elsewhere. However, he also said that he is not prepared to perform a homosexual identity to enter the resettlement programme, because he assumes that it may also entail performing that identity in the country of resettlement—thus, in the long term. Alexis added that he heard stories of young people who used this strategy and that when they reached Europe, they were matched with other gay men as lovers. 'So, I am not doing that shit', he said to affirm his conviction. 'Plus, I can never get the money needed for bribes', which he confirmed, is necessary to prove and document one's heightened vulnerability.

Discussion: Aspirations, Vulnerability, and Moral Decline

Armel's story shows how in Nakivale refugee settlement, young people experience deprivation and face bleak futures. Many young people we encountered expressed a fear that, with time passing, their temporary refugee stay could turn into an indefinite period, leading—in the words of Henrik Vigh (2006: 45)—to 'social death'.

Yet Armel's story is also illustrative of young people's determination to not give up on their future, even in the most difficult of circumstances (Archambault 2015; Di Nunzio 2015; Turner 2015; Vigh 2015; Turner 2016; Van Stapele 2021). In Nakivale, young people navigate the restricted legal frameworks pertaining to refugee life in search of a potentially vital turn, specifically onward migration, which is seen as a gateway for security, freedom in sexuality, and life chances in general. Indeed, for Armel, security and freedom in sexuality were not legally protected in Burundi, nor are they secured in Uganda, rather the opposite. In this sense, for some, the refugee settlement also gives way to a small possibility for a radically different and better future, namely through organized resettlement to a Western country (see also Grayson 2017, about young Somalis in refugee camps).

Considering the rarity of such potentially vital turns, the story also illustrates that forging these opportunities may come at high costs, such as losing acceptance by family and community, visiting potentially unsafe spaces, putting oneself in vulnerable and possibly exploitative situations to find money or bribe officials, and for some, faking their sexual identity. The hostile social environment resulting from the anti-homosexual bill of 2009 and the act of 2014 in the host country Uganda, and as part of the international refugee regime (Harrell-Bond 1989), thus severely shape how boys and young men can navigate their imagined or hoped for futures elsewhere. From Armel, we learn that in Nakivale settlement, the social norms are perhaps more tolerating than in Burundi because people are preoccupied with more urgent survival problems, and because they understand that some identities—in this case being gay—are performed for the sake of resettlement. Yet beyond Nakivale settlement, in contexts where refugee and Ugandan communities

co-habit, there is no tolerance for same-sex relations. Armel thus had to be careful as he could still endure stigma and homophobia from the Ugandan community, which could potentially lead to physical violence. In this regard, the Refugee Law Project, an organization working in Kampala with a group called the Men of Hope Association on the experiences of survivors of male sexual violence, confirms that stigma and violence to homosexuals is still commonplace everywhere in Uganda (Edström *et al.* 2016; see also Mabiiho 2016, on the temporality and instability of tolerance of homosexuals by family members).

In addition, more generally, sexual violence against boys and men seems under-prioritized (Hilhorst *et al.* 2018) in humanitarian contexts. Sylvia Tamale (2005) shows that many aspects of people's everyday lives are always intricately linked to sexuality and that for many young people, also in non-refugee contexts, sexuality plays a complex and instrumental role in how they navigate everyday life (Tamale 2005; Utas 2005a; Groes-Green 2013). Yet something specific seems to be at stake in the way young people navigate sexuality during displacement. Namely, with dominant images of 'refugee societies as being morally in decline, with unbridled young men sexually assaulting women, and a degree of violence that is pathological' (Turner 2019 [2017]: 9), sexual violence that boys and men face remains largely unnoticed. Thus, boys and men who are vulnerable are forced to engage with tactics to prove their heightened vulnerability and to compete with the prioritized sexual violence of girls and women. This asks of them to engage in dangerous tactics to become visible and recognizable, even though these tactics also imply risks for further stigma, incarceration, and violence.

Armel's story furthermore emphasized the importance of being recognized as exceptionally vulnerable in the eyes of refugee protection policies, which fuel a 'politics of vulnerability' (Welfens and Bekyol 2021; see also Turner 2021). Recognition of being a homosexual in danger adds to other vulnerability markers that UNHCR officials use to justify adding someone to the restricted list for third-country resettlement. Because of this, boys and young men are propelled to pursue dangerous tactics in which they need to balance their in/visibility as homosexual. The dangerous balance young people needed to find between visibility and invisibility resonates with the work of Shio (2021), who found that gay men in Dar es Salaam employed various techniques to hide their sexual identity, alternating visibility, and invisibility. But where in Dar es Salaam invisibility was needed to navigate the state, and visibility to navigate social relations with other gay men, in Nakivale, visibility is needed vis-a-vis the state and institutions like UNHCR and INGOs, to document prosecution for a chance at resettlement.

In the camp, people used a Kirundi adage to say that in situations of radical deprivation, such as in the refugee settlement, the end comes to justify the means: '*batereye amagara hejuru umwe wese asama rwiwe*', which can be translated as 'when life is thrown up into the air, each one picks up theirs'. To some extent, then, our findings parallel Jorgen Carling's (2007) argument that in the face of stricter regulations to enter Europe, migrants do not give up but rather resort to more complicated and potentially deadlier pathways. But sometimes with negative consequences for the community's social fabric. In the story of Armel, Alexis

expressed understanding for such ways of '*kurondera ubuzima*' ('searching life', cf. Berckmoes 2014: 133), but we also regularly heard critiques of such strategies. For instance, Alexis considered doing this as selling his soul and assumed that once he uses this strategy, the gay identity will follow him, and he was not prepared to maintain that identity for the long run. These dynamics add to the devastating effects of corruption in the Ugandan settlement on everyday life and on the longer-term future perspectives of many in the refugee settlement. We repeatedly heard coded expressions such as 'with money, aid agencies here can do anything for you'; the other side of the coin being that many felt exploited by having to pay bribes for services, from medical referrals, police referrals, and food ration cards, all the way to arranged additions to resettlement lists.

Conclusions

To summarize, this article confirms the well-established knowledge that life in refugee settlements, like Nakivale, is often experienced as distinctly different from life before flight. For boys and young men, Nakivale, with its limited education, health, and economic opportunities, as well as its specific rules and regulations geared at a temporary stay, generate experiences of deep deprivation, uncertainty, and despair. Yet we propose to look beyond seeing the refugee settlement only as a space of 'stuckness' (Jefferson *et al.* 2019), to explore how it also bears the potential of a temporally and spatially informed vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002), promising of a radical turn in—some—refugee's life course (cf. Turner 2016).

We described how in Nakivale, such vital conjuncture is imagined in relation to regulations enabling and restricting onward migration. However, as onward migration is only available to those who 'most deserve to be saved' (Fassin 2005; Welfens and Bekyol 2021), young people feel forced to perform internationally recognizable forms of vulnerability, which perhaps most convincingly revolve around sexuality. They navigate visibility as homosexuals, thereby putting themselves in dangerous positions.

Thus, despite the aim to regulate security for refugees through policies for resettlement, the context of the hostile social environment for homosexuals in Nakivale and beyond, coupled with the need for documenting proof in light of 'the politics of vulnerability' (Welfens and Bekyol 2021), could mean that well-intended policies augment the risk for the health and well-being of refugees. Especially boys and young men who are accused of sexual deviance are at risk, while the local legal framework fails to protect exactly them from the more generalized problem of vulnerability to abuse and exploitation of refugees (cf. Buckley-Zistel and Krause 2017: 1), and while the social fabric of refugee communities is strongly being undermined.

This aspect of our argument speaks to the work of, among others, Severine Autesserre (2012), when she highlights that the simple narratives of international actors in humanitarian settings may have unintended yet detrimental consequences for local populations. She shows, for instance, that in war-torn DRC, 'the

disproportionate attention to sexual violence has raised the status of sexual abuse to an effective bargaining tool for combatants' (Autesserre 2012: 205). Related to this (Olivius2019 [2017]) shows how interventions that seek to address violence against refugee women in Bangladesh and Thailand instead rather frustrate the empowerment of these women.

In short, we argue that our findings point to the need to critically re-examine the policies and laws informing protection of and 'long-term solutions' for refugees, as these may unintentionally exacerbate and fuel the vulnerability and exploitation of, in our research, refugee boys and young men in gendered ways.

Aleinikoff, T. A. (1992) 'State-Centered Refugee Law: From Resettlement to Containment'. *Immigration & Nationality Law Review* 14(1): 186.

Archambault, J. S. (2015) 'Rhythms of Uncertainty and the Pleasures of Anticipation'. In Elizabeth, C. and Pratten, D. (eds.) *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa. Anthropology, Change and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 129–148.

Autesserre, S. (2012) 'Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and Their Unintended Consequences'. *African Affairs* 111(443): 202–222.

Berckmoes, L. H. (2014) 'Elusive Tactics: Urban Youth Navigating the Aftermath of War in Burundi'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Amsterdam: VU University.

Brun, C. (2015) 'Active Waiting and Changing Hopes: Toward a Time Perspective on Protracted Displacement'. *Social Analysis* 59(1): 19–37.

Buckley-Zistel, S. and Krause, U. (eds.) (2019 [2017]) *Gender, Violence, Refugees.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Carling, J. (2007) 'Migration Control and Migrant Fatalities at the Spanish-African Borders'. *International Migration Review* 41(2): 316–343.

Carpenter, R. C. (2017) 'Recognizing Gender-Based Violence against Civilian Men and Boys in Conflict Situations'. In Jamieson, R. (ed.) *The Criminology of War*. Belfast, Northern Ireland: Routledge, pp. 377–397.

Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2014) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

Di Nunzio, M. (2015) 'Embracing Uncertainty: Young People on the Move in Addis Ababa's Inner City'. In Elizabeth, C. and Pratten, D. (eds.) *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa. Anthropology, Change and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 149–172.

Edström, J., Dolan, C., Shahrokh, T. and David, O. (2016) 'Therapeutic Activism: Men of Hope Refugee Association Uganda Breaking the Silence over Male Rape in Conflict-Related Sexual Violence'. No. IDS Evidence Report; 182. IDS.

Fassin, D. (2005) 'Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France'. *Cultural Anthropology* 20(3): 362–387.

Ferguson, J. (1997) *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.

Grayson, C. (2017) *Children of the Camp: The Lives of Somali Youth Raised in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Groes-Green, C. (2013) '"To Put Men in a Bottle": Eroticism, Kinship, Female Power, and Transactional Sex in Maputo, Mozambique'. *American Ethnologist* 40(1): 102–117.

Hansen, R. (2018) 'The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework: A Commentary'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31(2): 131–151.

Harrell-Bond, B. E. (1989) 'Repatriation: Under What Conditions is It the Most Desirable Solution for Refugees? An Agenda for Research'. *African Studies Review* 32(1): 41–69.

Hilhorst, D., Porter, H. E. and Gordon, R. (2018) 'Challenging Humanitarianism beyond Gender as Women and Women as Victims'. #PressforProgress. Africa at LSE.

Hovil, L. (2018) ''Uganda's Refugee Policies: The History, the Politics, the Way Forward'. Rights in Exile Policy Paper'. International Refugee Rights Initiative. Available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/IRRI-Uganda-policy-paper-October-2018-Paper.pdf (accessed 09 August 2021).

Idris, I. (2020) ''Integrated Approaches to Refugee Management in Uganda'. K4D Helpdesk Report. Available at: https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/14991/716_Integrated_Approaches_to_Refugee_Management_in_Uganda.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 09 August 2021).

Jefferson, A., Turner, S. and Jensen, S. (2019) 'Introduction: On Stuckness and Sites of Confinement'. *Ethnos* 84(1): 1–13.

Johnson-Hanks, J. (2002) 'On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctures'. *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 865–880.

Johnson-Hanks, J. (2005) 'When the Future Decides'. *Current Anthropology* 46(3): 363–385.

Katungi, M. (2019) 'A Critical Analysis of Uganda's Refugee Regime: Lessons for East African Community Partner States'. Master's Research Paper, University of Nairobi. Available at: http://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/108147/Katungi_A%20Critical%20Analysis%20Of%20Uganda%E2%80%99S%20Refugee%20Regime.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 09 August 2021).

Kelly, M. (2013) 'Onward Migration: The Transnational Trajectories of Iranians Leaving Sweden'. PhD Dissertation, Uppsala University. Available at: https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:615215/FULLTEXT01.pdf (accessed 09 August 2021).

Kleist, N. and Jansen, S. (2016) 'Introduction: Hope over Time—Crisis, Immobility and Future-Making'. *History and Anthropology* 27(4): 373–392.

Krause, U. (2021) *Difficult Life in a Refugee Camp: Gender, Violence, and Coping in Uganda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lindley, A. and Van Hear, N. (2007) 'New Europeans on the Move: A Preliminary Review of the Onward Migration of Refugees within the European Union'. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, Working Paper No. 57. Oxford: University of Oxford.

Malkki, L. H. (1995) 'Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things'. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 495–523.

Mabiiho, A. K. (2016) 'Freedom from Fear! Opportunities and Encounters of Ugandan LGBTS in the Integration Process in the Netherlands'. A Master's Thesis, The International Institutes of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, The Netherlands

Mendos, L. R. (2019) *State-Sponsored Homophobia*. Geneva, Switzerland.

Musariri, L. (2021) 'Becoming Cornered: Migration, Masculinities and Marginalisation in Inner-City Johannesburg'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Amsterdam.

Morrow, V. (2008) 'Ethical Dilemmas in Research with Children and Young People about Their Social Environments'. *Children's Geographies* 6(1): 49–61.

Nekby, L. (2006) 'The Emigration of Immigrants, Return vs Onward Migration: Evidence from Sweden'. *Journal of Population Economics* 19(2): 197–226.

Nyanzi, S. (2013) 'Dismantling Reified African Culture through Localised Homosexualities in Uganda'. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 15(8): 952–967.

Nyanzi, S. and Karamagi, A. (2015) 'The Social-Political Dynamics of the anti-Homosexuality Legislation in Uganda'. *Agenda* 29(1): 24–38.

Olivius, E. (2019 [2017]) 'Refugees, Global Governance and the Local Politics of Violence against Women'. In: Buckley-Zistel, S. and Krause, U. (eds.) *Gender, Violence, Refugees*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 58–77.

Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2021) 'The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation: Refugee-Led Organisations in Humanitarian Governance'. *The Journal of Development Studies* 57(5): 719–734.

Rezaei, S. and Goli, M. (2011) 'Should I Stay, or Should I Go? The Emigrating Immigrants'. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation* 6(3/4): 229–250.

Ruzibiza (forthcoming) 'Negotiating Sexuality Amidst Refugee Uncertainty: Burundian Adolescent Refugees in Mahama Camp in Rwanda and Nakivale Settlement in Uganda'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Amsterdam.

Ruzibiza, Y., Berckmoes, L., Neema, S. and Reis, R. (2021) 'Lost in Freedom: Ambivalence on Sexual Freedom among Burundian Adolescents Living in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement, Uganda'. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 29(1): 1889750.

Schulz, P. (2018) 'Displacement from gendered personhood: sexual violence and masculinities in northern Uganda'. *International Affairs*, 94(5): 1101–1119.

Shio, J. (2021) 'Navigating Fugitive Geographies: Care, Kinship, and Class among Homosexual Men in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of Amsterdam.

Ssengendo, A. (2017) 'Come Home, Burundi Tells Exiled Nationals'. NewVision, Uganda. Available at: https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1446488/home-burundi-tells-exiled-nationals (accessed 09 August 2021).

Tamale, S. (2005) 'Eroticism, Sensuality and "Women's Secrets" among the Baganda: A Critical Analysis'. *Feminist Africa* 5(1): 9–36.

Turner, L. (2021) 'The Politics of Labeling Refugee Men as "Vulnerable"'. Social Politics: International Studies in Gender'. *State & Society* 28(1): 1–23.

Turner, S. (2015) '"We Wait for Miracles": Ideas of Hope and Future among Clandestine Burundian Refugees in Nairobi'. In Elizabeth, C. and Pratten, D. (eds.) *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa. Anthropology, Change and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 173–191.

Turner, S. (2016) 'What is a Refugee Camp? Explorations of the Limits and Effects of the Camp'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29(2): 139–148.

Turner, S. (2019 [2017]) 'Victims of Chaos and Subaltern Sexualities? Some Reflections on Common Assumptions about Displacement and the Prevalence of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence'. In: Buckley-Zistel, S. and Krause, U. (eds.) *Gender, Violence, Refugees*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 44–57.

Turner, V. (1967) 'Betwixt and between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage'. In: *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: IMPRINT Cornell University Press, pp. 93–111.

UNHCR (1996) 'Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection'. Handbook.

UNHCR (2012) 'Guidelines on International Protection No. 9: Claims to Refugee Status based on Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees'. UNHCR.

UNHCR (2019) 'Burundi Situation. Operational Data Portal, Refugee Situations'. Available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/burundi (accessed 09 August 2021).

Utas, M. (2005a) 'Agency of Victims: Young Women's Survival Strategies in the Liberian Civil War'. In: Honwana, A. and de Boeck, F. (eds.) *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth as Emerging Categories in Postcolonial Africa*. Oxford: James Currey, pp. 53–80.

Utas, M. (2005b) 'West-African Warscapes: Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone'. *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(2): 403–430.

Van Reeuwijk, M. (2010) *Because of Temptations: Children, Sex and HIV/AIDS in Tanzania*. Diemen, the Netherlands: AMB.

Van Stapele, N. (2021) '"When the Numbers Stop Adding": Imagining Futures in Perilous Presents among Youth in Nairobi Ghettos'. *The European Journal of Development Research* 33(1): 130–146.

Verwimp, P. and Bundervoet, T. (2008) 'Consumption growth, Household Splits and Civil War'. MICROCON Research Working Paper No. 9. Brighton: MICROCON. Available at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/6993302.pdf (accessed 09 August 2021).

Verwimp, P. and Muñoz-Mora, J. C. (2013) 'Returning Home after Civil War: Food Security, Nutrition and Poverty among Burundian Households'. Households in Conflict Network Working Papers 123. Berlin: Households in Conflict Network.

Vigh, H. (2006) *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldiering in Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Vigh, H. (2008) 'Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline'. *Ethnos* 73(1): 5–24.

Vigh, H. (2009) 'Motion Squared. A Second Look at the Concept of Social Navigation'. *Anthropological Theory* 9(4): 419–438.

Vigh, H. (2015) 'Social Invisibility and Political Opacity: On Perceptiveness and Apprehension in Bissau'. In Elizabeth, C. and Pratten, D. (eds.) *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa. Anthropology, Change and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 111–128.

Welfens, N. and Bekyol, Y. (2021) 'The Politics of Vulnerability in Refugee Admissions under the EU-Turkey Statement'. *Frontiers in Political Science* 3: 16.

WHO (2011) 'Youth and Health Risks'. Sixty-Fourth World Health Assembly. Resolution WHA 64.28. Geneva: WHO. Available at: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA64/A64_R28-en.pdf (accessed 09 August 2021).

Zieck, M. (2011) '"Quota Refugees": The Dutch contribution to Global "Burden Sharing" by Means of Resettlement of Refugees'. *International Journal of Legal Information* 39(2): 130–163.