

## **Decent exposure: young women mixing schooling and sharpness in Lira city**

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## Decent exposure: young women mixing schooling and sharpness in Lira city

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### ABSTRACT

We examine 'exposure' as a new subjectivity among young women in Lira City in northern Uganda. Socialising with men in bars, 'managing' boyfriends, being a good Christian wife, are all ways of mixing experiences of formal education with the challenges of navigating a way forward in the complex and evolving context of Lira City. Young women strive to acquire skills of hustling, networking and navigating social situations, which they begin to develop during their time in school and university. They continue to cultivate these skills as they move into early adulthood. Lira City is a landscape where new government legislation, the advocacy work of NGOs, the mass expansion of Uganda's education system, and unstable marriages, create new opportunities as well as challenges for young women. Young women think through these opportunities and challenges by thinking about what it means to be 'exposed' and acting in relation to these thoughts.

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## Introduction

Grace, in her early thirties, works in a grinding mill in downtown Lira in northern Uganda.<sup>1</sup> The mill is a noisy workplace where men and women undertake the difficult and competitive work of sorting and grinding maize for wholesale. The work can be dusty, and Grace is one of the few women who changes clothes when heading home (most of the others put a wrapper – a long piece of fabric – around their dust-covered work clothes). Grace goes by the name of 'pastor' in the mill, as she is a mission coordinator for her church. She is comfortable speaking English, as well as Leblango – the most widely spoken language in the city – and serves as the secretary of a savings group in the mill and appears as more educated than her work colleagues. Grace has married into what is termed a 'working class' home (her husband has salaried employment), which might lead to the expectation that working in the grinding mill was beneath her. But the mill work, and the income it provided, was central to her identity. It showed Grace's ability to navigate for herself in the city and has given her the funds to build

a house on her husband's land. A better position from which to bargain within her marriage and with her in-laws.

In Lira, 'exposure' is an elastic term used to describe women like Grace, who mix their experience of going through formal education with the sorts of skills needed to navigate the changing and competitive environment of the city.<sup>2</sup> Formal education was meant to generate certain competences – an ability to do the sums in a savings group, spoken English, 'organized' thinking – but it also produced experiences of struggle – the task of raising money for school fees, the search for sponsors – that were valuable in later life. Exposure also had a strong idea of travel or movement in it – whether in the form of going away to boarding school, moving to the city in search of work, or setting up businesses in different locations (cf. Prince 2013). It is a phrase more often applied to women than men, reflecting changes in the city – around land, marriage, work – that have had a more radical effect on young women's lives. This gendered quality also related to the novelty of schooling for young women in Uganda, many of whom were the first in their families to experience secondary or tertiary level education (cf. Tripp 2004). Schools are places where equal rights and reproductive health are taught alongside the formal curriculum, and where role models – in the form of female teachers and successful graduates – sit alongside opportunities for female students to take on leadership roles of their own – prefect, dorm captain. Exposure is a sort of educated identity that young women were expected to work on during their time in formal education and also after (Jones 2023; Levinson et al. 1996).

We make three claims in this article. First, that exposure is a new sort of subjectivity, used by young women to articulate their thoughts and feelings and how they understood what they were doing with their lives (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Luhrmann 2006).<sup>3</sup> Exposure shaped what sorts of actions these young women expected of themselves, and also what actions others expected of them. Second, as a subjectivity, exposure was partly made during school, which was described as a time of sociality and struggle. The secondary schooling experience, in particular, helped young women such as Grace, feel that they were preparing for the complex, and sometimes confusing experience of life in the city. Here a mix of formal education and being 'sharp' helped navigate relationships, manage businesses, and encouraged young women to take on new roles. Third, exposure had a gendered quality to it, and was mostly used to describe young women. This also explains why acquiring land – which had been off-limits in Grace's parents' generation – had become a preoccupation for young women.

In **conceptualising** exposure as a new subjectivity, our first point is that young women were not only describing how they came 'to inhabit particular culturally recognizable places' – a marriage, a position in the community, a business – but also how they desired these places in new ways – a 'modern marriage' with your name on a land title, a leadership role in the family with rights of inheritance, a business where your 'customer care' allowed others to see that you were educated. We point to the ways exposure helped put a language around how young women might interpret what they were doing and how they navigated their way to such places. This is what Cooper means, when she writes about young women's subjectivities in western Kenya 'as a problem as well as a project' (Cooper 2018, 665). As we shall later see Grace puzzled over how to make a place for herself within her marriage as an educated young woman; she had difficult relations with

her in-laws. It was her sense that she was an ‘exposed’ young woman that helped her move forward.

Young women felt that their time in school was critical to their claims to an exposed subjectivity, and their ability to move forward into adulthood (Dungey and Ansell 2020; Dungey and Meinert 2017).<sup>4</sup> This is our second claim. While researchers (often focusing on young men) see schools as sites of abstracted aspirations set apart from the hardships that might follow – unemployment, boredom, an inability to occupy a status of full adulthood – this was not how things were understood by our interlocutors in Lira (Mains Q4 2007, 2010; Masquelier 2013). Instead, young women theorised their relationship to education and life thereafter as one of continuous exposure. Schooling was a time where tactical skills – of making the right sorts of friends, of becoming confident in different environments, of self-management – were developed that would help in later life.

In making sense of what Grace and other young women were doing, we borrow from scholars who point to the pragmatic subjectivities that develop around the schooling experience (Alber 2004; Bledsoe 1990; Bolten 2015). Bledsoe in work from Sierra Leone, for example, points to the political subjectivities that young people cultivate while in school. She shows how seeking out sponsors, and managing relations with parents, produces an understanding that adulthood will also be a time of struggle where actions will need to be carefully timed. A phrase repeatedly used among the young women we spent time with was that ‘you should use your head’ *myero atii kede wia* in the years after school, which reflected back on the ways schooling, when approached in the right way, gave you useful ways of thinking and knowing. Young women told us how they took advice from radio programmes where they were encouraged to think like a ‘muyaye’, a term, that Frankland writes, has been used to refer to the ‘mythologised social threat’ of unemployed young men in Uganda’s cities (Frankland 2007, 34). In our case the term, which has a long history, was being repurposed by young women who told us they valued *muyaye* characteristics of pragmatism, attention to the situation and an extractive attitude to social relations (Obbo 1980, 222–223).<sup>5</sup>

Our third claim concerns the gendered nature of exposure and helps explain why land ownership had particular value for young women. A phrase that was popular among our interlocutors was that you should ‘come to marriage with more than your private parts’ *myero pe ibin kede ngunyi keken inyomere*. The meaning of the phrase was that women who were looking to make a long-term relationship particularly those with secondary or tertiary level education, should reflect on the fact that their value to themselves and their marriage went beyond the begetting and raising of children. The growing number of ‘come-we-stay’ relationships, and the fact that marriage was increasingly achieved in a piecemeal way, with brideprice paid over a number of years, made it less of a guarantee of stability or security. We were told that parents were ‘busy looking for money for themselves’ and were less interested in orienting their children towards the demands of ‘cultural marriage’. Young women also spoke of not wanting to be ‘owned’ by their husbands in the way their mothers had been.

One way of responding to this instability was to be ‘strategic’ and to build up assets prior to marriage. These assets were described to us as a ‘fallback’, or a ‘Plan B’ should a relationship fail, they could also, as in Grace’s case, increase the autonomy of a woman within her marriage. The asset that mattered above all other assets was land. As we shall

see, getting a plot for herself had a particular meaning for women. While scholarship from northern Uganda documents the ways in which land ownership remains off-limits to women, ‘exposed’ young women in Lira City nonetheless imagined that land was something they should orient themselves **towards** and were, to varying degrees, successful (Amone and Lakwo 2014; Whyte and Acio 2017). Land’s intractability – the registering, titling, and indivisibility of a plot – made it a powerful ambition for women, and its acquisition a sure sign of an exposed, educated subjectivity.

### Methods: hairdressing as data collection

Our research is the product of a collaborative ethnography, led by five educated youths – Sharon Enon Acio, Vicky Alum, Ann Gumkit Parlaker and Dorah Adoch, and James Opolo. Four were young women. We adopted a range of methods, with our primary approach consisting of participant observation. After mapping different parts of the city – including Ireda where Grace lived – and identifying a number of interlocutors, we focused on seven women, three of whom are discussed in detail in this article, that captured different relationships to education and land. Observations could take the form of going along to a young woman’s shop and helping out with sales and arranging items, spending time in a hairdressing salon, working in a grinding mill, or hanging out at home. In building a rapport and in getting closer to the respondent it was possible for issues such as family relations, business life and personal relationships to be discussed. After each interaction, which we sometimes recorded, we generated a diary entry. We also attended public occasions – church services, marriages, funerals, savings groups – with our interlocutors, accompanying them as a friend.

As the majority of the study team were themselves educated young women from Lira they had a lot in common with their interlocutors.<sup>6</sup> They had also struggled to find salaried employment, and had tried their hand at different businesses, and understood from a young age that acquiring land for themselves should be a guiding ambition. Enon Acio, Alum, Gumkit Parlaker and Adoch were aged



**Q5** **Figure 1.** Researcher Sharon Enon Acio doing participant observation in a hairdressing salon.



**Figure 2.** A young woman working as a mobile money agent, a form of work popular in Lira City. Mobile money agents facilitate the transfer of money, for a fee, from one person to another via mobile phones.

Q6



**Figure 3.** A marketplace in central Lira. This is the sort of space that educated young women come to do business both during their studies and after. Learning how to navigate the market can be a challenging experience.

Q7

between 25 and 38 at the time of the fieldwork. They had all gone to university. They saw themselves as ‘exposed’. Their ability to form friendships and to work in an intimate way alongside women, such as Grace, meant we could move our analysis away from the more dramatic open conflicts that dominate accounts of gender and land in northern Uganda.<sup>7</sup> We could look instead at more everyday, roundabout ways in which young women navigated their relationship to land (cf. Joireman 2018; Whyte and Acio 2017).

There was space in the data collection for our interlocutors to ‘feel free’, in ways that are not typical of research projects which rely on the presence of an outside researcher, rather than a peer. Our case interactions often began with the researcher sharing her own experiences and encouraging others to then speak. ‘Girlfriend talk’ about relationships, desires and aspirations was an important part of observing and participating in the subjectivities we describe in this article.<sup>8</sup> Spending time also meant meeting the friends, family, husbands. This also allowed us to gain a more varied and unexpected picture of land, education and gender in Lira City.<sup>9</sup>

We also found that fieldwork could be its own form of ‘exposure’. Vicky Alum found the experience of working alongside Milly was one where she ‘learnt a lot’ as Milly, like Vicky, was a single mother and her way of doing business, managing family issues, and **socialising** with different sorts of people became a sort of ‘go ahead’ to Vicky in her own life. As with other members of the team, Vicky came to appreciate Milly’s focus on self-development through business. For Sharon, who worked alongside Betty in her hair-dressing salon there was a sort of mutual exchange, where Sharon gave Betty training in recordkeeping, while Betty mentored Sharon in hairdressing. Sharon also worked alongside a young woman Stella, a social science graduate, who made a living selling clothes in the market – Stella sold second-hand dresses bought for around 12,000 shillings (US \$3.29), which she repackaged as ‘first class’ officewear.<sup>10</sup> Sharon came to learn that Stella was earning more from her dress business than Sharon was from her work as a researcher on the project. As the only young man in the team, James learned how young women concealed business efforts from their husbands and partners, giving James more ‘exposure’ in how he approached his own relationship.<sup>11</sup>

### ‘Exposure’ in a changing city

New subjectivities also ask that we consider ‘how changes in thought, feeling, and position come about’ (Cooper 2018, 670). Why does land come to be desired? Why does it show you have an educated identity? How can you tell if you are ‘using your head’? In understanding the emergence of ‘exposed’ subjectivities it is possible to identify different elements acting on young women in Lira City, with education one of the most obvious areas where gender relations have shifted.

Starting in the mid-1990s Uganda dramatically expanded its education system, first by making primary education universal and free, and then by part-extending this policy to secondary education. Since the late 2000s there has also been a large growth in university provision, both public and private. Our interlocutors told us how their identities changed through spending time in single sex secondary schools, where young women learned to ‘speak out boldly’ in the absence of boys. It was also in boarding schools that ‘exposure’ came through the coming to terms with different, disciplinary learning environments. Students had to navigate the vigilance of teachers, prefects, and peers. Conflicts had to be managed ‘procedurally’. Young women also spoke of their own competitions around dormitory life – who packed her suitcase in the most **organised** way, who kept her shared area in the best order. For day students, exposure might come from managing relations with private landlords or host families. Day students also felt ‘exposed’ through their access to media, news, and knowing more about the wider world, which they could then bring to school. What links these observations together is the way school was reflected on as a time of exposure. Young

women related exposure to their role in paying for their own education. One of our study team brewed waragi – a local spirit – to pay for her secondary and university education, another sold second-hand shoes during their time at university in Kampala. Students also worked through their time in secondary and university education, with a growing number of ‘weekend’ and ‘evening’ degree courses allowing poorer Ugandans to work in, what were often, low-paying, nine-to-five jobs to finance their education.<sup>12</sup>

What Vokes and Mills term Uganda’s ‘new educational landscape’ transformed relationships between older and younger generations (Vokes and Mills 2015, 327). A sense that parents now ‘invested’ in their daughter’s education changed expectations around marriage (Burgers this volume). Whereas a generation earlier, marriages would have been supported by senior male relatives offering gifts of cattle and customary land to the bridegroom, the present situation was one where bride and groom were expected to pay for most of the costs (Sunder 2019). This goes some way to explaining delays in formalising marriage, and the growing number of what Cooper has described as ‘come-we-stay’ relationships in her account of young women in western Kenya.<sup>13</sup>

This also meant that adulthood was marked for many young women, not by marriage but rather by moving into a phase of life where they felt ‘responsible’, and were regarded as such by others. A key moment, for many of our interlocutors, came when they took on responsibility for paying the school fees of a younger family member.<sup>14</sup> Dorah knew that she was becoming an adult when she started sponsoring a younger sibling through school. This ‘made her feel what her parents must have felt’, she told us, and that ‘when you have to pull money for others, you feel the pain of your own education’. University, ‘where you sleep alone’, where ‘you manage your own life’, and where you might travel to a distant city for studies, also generated feelings of adulthood. Adulthood might also be shown by taking on positions which asked others to recognise your grown-up status. In Grace’s case this meant becoming a youth leader in church, and treasurer in the savings group at the grinding mill (O’Sullivan 2023). When young women refused responsibilities they were felt to be less fully adult.

In the less certain environment of Lira City, land has become a focus for the aspirations of educated young women. The Land Act of 1998 has, since its introduction, created a new normative environment, with court cases that underlining the rights of women. Popular stories circulated – on the radio, in church, in bars – of wives challenging husbands, most commonly in situations where the husband was trying to sell land ‘away from the children’, denying them their inheritance (Anying and Gausset 2017).<sup>15</sup> There were also accounts of women being given sole ownership should a male relative turn out to be ‘irresponsible’. Land ownership, which was mostly limited to elite women living abroad in the past, was now a realistic if challenging prospect for many educated younger women. The legal status of land in Uganda’s cities, where plots are bought and sold with relative ease when compared to rural areas – where systems of customary tenure still held sway – had increased the options for women (cf. Joireman 2018; Kandel 2022; Whyte and Acio 2017).<sup>16</sup>

### Three exposed young women

In the next section we extend our account of Grace and also discuss two other ‘exposed’ young women, Milly and Prossy. These women were purposely selected from our larger

cohort of more than fifty women interviewed. They represent considerable suggesting the subjective space that ‘exposure’ opened up to young women. Each of the women could be said to embody popular ideas of ‘exposure’; combining past experiences of school-based education with present-day efforts at social navigation. Grace made a claim on land her husband bought prior to marriage. Milly used business networks to create more autonomy for herself within her natal family. Prossy mixed business and intimate relationships to acquire the capital to buy land for herself. In all of these cases our interlocutors emphasised their relationship to education, and the importance of land as a ‘Plan B’ in a world where relationships, of marriage and kin, had become increasingly unreliable.<sup>17</sup>

### Grace: a patient Christian wife

Grace Adong, introduced at the start of this article, is a resident of Ireda in Lira City East Division. She was in her early thirties at the time of fieldwork, and has a Uganda Certificate of Education, meaning that she had completed her O Levels. Grace speaks English in a confident and measured way as well as Leblango, the language most commonly spoken in the city. When away from the grinding mill, Grace dressed well, in clothes described as ‘gentle’, meaning in the style of an office worker – A-line skirts, a blouse, perhaps a jacket – and in a way that emphasised Christian-inflected notions of female modesty. A one-time tailor, Grace’s work at the grinding mill involved drying and sorting the maize she bought from a wholesaler (she then sold this on for a profit to traders after it had been ground into maize flour). Grace affected a calm presence and got on with the other women in the mill, carefully managing her relationship to the gossip and occasional arguments that were a feature of life there. As a treasurer for the savings group within the grinding mill, her co-workers and neighbours valued her abilities as an ‘educated’ woman.

Grace was married with one child. At the time we got to know Grace, her husband had found work with an NGO operating in another part of northern Uganda. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he had, like many people in the formal sector, been laid off. Grace told us how she had supported him through this time with her income from the grinding mill. By the time they got married, Grace’s husband had already bought a piece of ‘swampy land’ in Ireda near to her in-laws. As noted earlier, Grace experienced schooling as a time of hardship and struggle where she had to find sponsors, and where she missed terms due to lack of funds.

Grace’s main identity in the community was as a committed churchwoman. It was in church that she received help from a pastor, when her brother was no longer able to sponsor her education. She was assistant mission coordinator in St Mark’s, an Anglican church in Ireda, with particular responsibility for women. This meant Grace took the lead in planning the preaching in church, scheduling topics for discussion and greeting and introducing speakers. Grace was also the vice chairperson of the choir at the archdeaconry and was a leader in ‘praise and worship’ a very important part of Sunday services. This sort of institutional activism reflected both her experiences of clubs in school, and a wider culture where educated identities were invested in committee careers in youth and early adulthood (Kell 2005). Grace was also an ‘advisor’ for youth in her local church ‘cell’ and in the main parish church. When we first attended prayers, we found Grace leading the choir team, standing next to the altar between songs. Grace showed herself to

be a good ‘student’ of the Bible, with the preacher of the day nominating her to answer questions about the central text from the story Elisha. In late 2022 Grace had just finished leading a youth convention in the archdeaconry. 295

Church work shaped Grace’s married life in ways that helped her to understand that she was an ‘exposed’ young woman. She was not popular with her in-laws, having been the subject of harsh criticism. When her mother-in-law started making an accusation about Grace’s past life – that she had been a thief in the business she was previously employed in, that she had terminated a pregnancy before marriage – Grace responded, she told us, by praying that ‘one day God will vindicate me’. Her mother-in-law also accused Grace of having a child in the village that she had kept secret. 300

While this sort of inter-generational conflict is nothing new to the Lango region, it took on a particular character at a time when young women expected to develop a degree of independence for themselves. Grace told us that while her husband did not do much to defend Grace in these situations, Grace’s own response had been to outwardly follow the church doctrine of being a wife who was submissive to her husband and respectful of her in-laws. Grace told us that ‘marriage is not just white ants, there are also red ants’ (white ants are a delicacy popular with children, red ants protect the queen and have sharp mandibles) and concluded her thoughts by saying that ‘being patient overcomes this situation’ *bedo mot omio yib room mio*.<sup>18</sup> 305 310

The desire for autonomy could be seen in the way Grace made a claim on some land her husband had purchased prior to their marriage. While Grace was not keen on the site and told us that Amuca in the western part of Lira City would have been a better option, she also wanted some assurance that this was land to which she had a claim. (She lived with the uncertainty of whether or not her husband had added her name to the title after they had married.) Grace navigated this less-than-ideal situation by building a structure on the land with her own money. During the COVID-19 pandemic when her husband was out of work and travelling looking for a job, Grace used her own money to part-build a house on this land. She did this, as far as we could tell, without her husband’s knowledge. 315 320

Such stories of wives building secretly or even of buying land without the husband knowing are increasingly common in Lira City. In conversation with Grace what was also apparent was the extent to which she felt criticisms of her, including accusations of past misdeeds, was down to jealousy and a lack of education on the part of others. While Grace might not publicise what she had done, she could rely on gossip at the grinding mill, among her neighbours and in church to ensure that her efforts were recognised. She did this, as she told us through ‘using her head’, and through acting ‘quietly’. This Grace felt showed her tactical side within the marriage, and helped her understand that she was an ‘exposed’ young woman.<sup>19</sup> 325 330

### **Milly: “a lady of all seasons”**

Milly Atim was in her early thirties. She had more formal education than Grace. After O’Levels, Milly took a nursing course from Good Samaritans International School of Nursing and Midwifery in Lira. Milly was renting a house in Ireda at the time of fieldwork. She was the mother of two girls who were in primary school in Yomcwin Children’s Village. This was a free, very highly regarded educational institution, that was 335

meant to be for children from poorer backgrounds. Milly dressed well and, one of our respondents commented, ‘also looks as if she eats well too’. She had the skills of someone who could adapt to different environments. Milly was described to us as a ‘lady of all seasons’, meaning that she could adapt to different social contexts. At burials we found Milly in a long dress in a ‘decent style’ that reflected her connections to her natal village. When socialising with friends in town Milly might wear jeans with ‘damage’ (intentionally torn) and a close-fitting t-shirt.

Milly was a ‘family leader’ in the village, meaning that she was the decision-maker among her siblings, an unusual, though increasingly common, position for a young woman. She was the first-born child of her father’s second marriage, and during his illness was appointed as the ‘heir’ to his properties.<sup>20</sup> Since her father’s death, Milly maintained the structures that he had built in the village – one residential buildings was used as classrooms – and had bought property in her own name in town. Milly was entrepreneurial, having removed the management of the school from her wider family, renting the business to an outsider.<sup>21</sup> Two traits we observed in Milly was that she was a capable navigator in her role as family leader and that she worked on her skills as a career businesswoman through her friendships in town.

There was a founding story to Milly’s claims to being an ‘exposed’ young woman. This followed her around and was known in the city as well as the village. It drew on her formal education and also her tactical skills. As the ‘sharpest’ child from her father’s two marriages, the one with the most ‘natural intelligence’, Milly had gained her father’s favour, and was increasingly trusted in managing the family businesses.<sup>22</sup> When Milly’s father was sick in Lacor Hospital in Gulu, she was charged with the responsibility of taking care of the family – including male children from her father’s first marriage – as well as managing her father’s property in the village. Some other members of the family – brothers to her father – tried to seize property documents from Milly. They claimed they would need to sell her father’s land to pay for his hospital bills. Milly called her mother, who was looking after her husband in Lacor, to see if they would have to sell land to raise money. When her mother assured her that there was no need to sell, Milly refused to hand over the land documents. She pretended she could not find them, a ‘sharp’ move for a young woman handling older male relatives.

At the time of fieldwork, Milly was mostly a ‘woman of the town’. She had a group of male friends with whom she hung out in the evenings. Milly socialised with these men, but resisted accusations of being a ‘gold digger’; she made a point of paying her own bills and dressed to please herself. Milly frequented two places ‘Te-Bung’ – a bar – and ‘The Grill’ – a pork joint.<sup>23</sup> These had a mixed clientele of government workers, locals, NGO staff, and poorer city dwellers. Milly explained that bars were a place to relax and ‘to get some relief from the stresses of life’. The drinking joint offered a chance to meet other educated people, mostly men, with whom she could network and confer. A doctor friend from Lira who was a regular drinking partner, helped Milly establish a pharmacy in a neighbouring town. It was also through a meeting in a bar that Milly got advice on how to go about getting sponsorship for her children’s education in Yomcwin Children’s School. Though the school at the village was meant to be for children from disadvantaged homes, those with connections were able to secure places for their children. Male friends also came to Milly for counselling, particularly when they had relationship difficulties with wives and/or girlfriends.

Milly started buying land for herself and her daughters in Bar sub-county. As an unmarried woman, with two dependents, these land purchases gave Milly's children assets of their own. Milly was also in the process of planning to relocate her relations in order to free up the site currently occupied by the family. Akia sub-county, where her family currently resided had recently been integrated into Lira City, making the land more commercially valuable. The land was a good business prospect as the site could be divided into plots for future sale. Milly did not brag about her business acumen, or the money she was accumulating through these sales. We only found out about these new plans to buy land when Milly was giving advice to one of the team members on what they should do should they want to do the same.

Milly, when compared to Grace, showed a more outgoing and independent personality. She was oriented **towards** liberal and secularised spaces, and inhabited parts of the city – bars and pork joints – that were off limits to Grace, a committed Christian. What both women shared though, was an understanding that what they were doing was a mixing of educated identities and tactical navigation, and that it was through the building up of assets, with a particular focus on land, that was the best way of showing to themselves, and to others, that they were exposed young women.<sup>24</sup>

### Prossy: 'scheming' for land?

Prossy Apio was a woman in her mid-twenties at the time of fieldwork, and described by others as a something of a 'schemer'.<sup>25</sup> Prossy had a number of things – nice clothes, smart shoes, expensive hairstyles, painted nails, and often went out for dinner with a male companion – that led others to wonder about where her money came from (cf. Moore 2020). Prossy had 'dropped out' in her third year of high school after becoming pregnant. She had two children from the same father, though she was not staying with him. She remained unmarried. When we first met Prossy she was living at her family's home, the family had wanted her to stay on after her mother died. Soon after our first meeting Prossy moved in with her boyfriend Pato, a 'rasta man' and a hairdresser skilled with plaiting dreadlocks.

Though Prossy had not gone as far with her formal education as Grace or Milly, she carried herself as a 'campus woman' who 'knew fashion'. Prossy wore jeans and t-shirts like Milly, though showed a difference by preferring jeans that were plain and high waisted of the type popular with university students, without any signs of 'damage'. She told us that she liked clothes that were not 'over-designed' and chose 'craft shoes' – with beads in what was termed an 'African style' – rather than the 'ordinary shoes' favoured by town girls. Prossy also used hair pieces that are termed 'Brazilian', which had a more natural look than the hair synthetic weaves worn by 'village girls' or poorer women in the city. Her hairstyle – professionally shaped – was, like other aspects of her dress and demeanour, that of a woman who had reached a higher level in education. Other women commented to us that Prossy's body was 'well kept' and 'does not look like she has had two children'.

Prossy was skilful in managing her business in an **organised** way'. She had good customer care when compared with colleagues in the neighbourhood. Her prices were seen to be fair, and though her shop was small, Prossy made sure she stocked a variety of each of the products being sold. It was in these smaller ways that it was possible to

understand that Prossy was more than a 'schemer' focused only on 'going with men', and Dorah, from the study team, who worked alongside Prossy found that she was supporting her siblings financially in their efforts to reach tertiary level education. Her brother had a diploma in water engineering and her sister was a primary school teacher. The sense that Prossy was more than a 'schemer' was also expressed by the way she was always busy, and had no time for 'idle talk' if she wanted to manage a 'modern' business. Even when conversing with her neighbours, or with members of the study team, Prossy would busy herself with work. Dorah would sometimes be asked to mind shop while Prossy went to complete a business deal. 430 435

Prossy first mentioned her land purchase during her second interaction with Dorah.<sup>26</sup> She told us that the land bought was acquired through a cousin sister who had advised her. At the time Prossy was working in a supermarket in Kampala. She said that the cousin had told her to start saving money so that Prossy could make a 'decent business' when she returned to Lira. Prossy told us about a plot she had her eye on in the Anai quarter for three million shillings (US\$823). The cousin offered a space in front of her shop so that Prossy could start doing business as soon as she returned from the capital. Prossy sold aluminium kitchenware (ladles, saucepans and cooking stoves) as her first business on her return. We were led to believe that it was during this time Prossy bought land for herself. 440 445

A few months later at a burial, Dorah, Sharon and Vicky met up with Prossy who was in a reflective mood. Prossy started to tell Dorah about the land she had purchased. She could not let her current boyfriend know the real story of the land sale, as her money had come from a soldier she had met while working in the Karamoja region in a place called Ludua. Prossy told us: 450

It was from that time I was working in a bar. I got a boyfriend who was a soldier. And that man loved me so much. But when I realized he had a family I said to myself 'at least with this one there is no future'. So I must get something from him for my own future. 455

Prossy told us how she 'played with his mind'. She felt that he agreed to support her because the money for him was 'very little'. Her own sense of exposure had equipped her to find a way through this situation. Though a very different character to Grace and Milly, Prossy was clear that her success was also down to her ability to study the situation at hand. 460

## Conclusion

In making sense of the lives of young women who experienced formal education in Lira, the word 'exposure' came up again and again in our fieldwork. It described a subjectivity that mixed experiences of formal education with engagements in the wider economy. Importantly, 'exposure' recognised the way schooling was itself a time when young women were expected to develop skills and competences to help them manage the uncertain and unstable landscape of Lira City.<sup>27</sup> Making friends with people from other backgrounds while at school, and working in bars, markets and restaurants during the holidays or in the evenings to raise money for school fees were all part of the experience of education for young women in Lira. Schooling, a time of new responsibilities and opportunities for travel, was theorised in ways that threaded ideologies of 465 470

struggle into the opportunities that formal education was meant to afford (Bledsoe 1990; Bolten 2015).<sup>28</sup>

Researchers have tended to see schools and universities as sites of abstracted aspirations, set against the difficult adjustments that come with early adulthood (cf. Appadurai 2004; Del Franco 2010; Frye 2012; Hall 2016; Stambach 2016). A number of studies have documented the different ways young people get ‘stuck’ in the years after education, unable ‘to experience progress and take on the normative responsibilities of adults’ (Mains 2007, 659; see also Durham and Solway 2017; Jeffrey 2010; Hansen 2005). ‘Exposure’ by contrast was a subjectivity that produced more continuities between formal schooling and the hustle of life in the city afterwards. While there were moments of rupture in the lives of young women – the loss of a sponsor, the death of a parent, a pregnancy – ‘Exposure’ folded these moments into longer ideas of the continuous cultivation of the ‘sharp’, educated person. For young women in particular, they used the idea of exposure to reflect on the gendered and generational nature of the changes they saw around them, and of which they were a part.

We have shown how young women such as Grace, Milly and Prossy continued to develop their relationship to education as they moved into their twenties and thirties. A young woman, like Grace, might cultivate a relationship to education through her work in church, or by becoming a ‘pastor’ in her workplace, a grinding mill. Milly cultivated an educated identity through ‘hanging out’ with doctors and businessmen in bars, and also by her capable leadership within the family. Others might use their experiences of travel and past relationships to inform how they went about doing business. In the case of Prossy, who was sometimes spoken of as a ‘schemer’, we observed a young woman who also offered excellent ‘customer care’. Of particular value for these women were rights in, or ownership over, a piece of land, a strong indicator to themselves and to others that they were exposed. Young women also reflected on how their exposed identity needed them to be attentive to the situation at hand, to think like a ‘muyaye’, so that they could navigate the changing landscape of the Lira City. In this way young women were ‘quite self-conscious, and indeed sociality-conscious’ of the situations they inhabited (Cooper 2018, 679). In making these arguments we have focused on the term subjectivity for the way it theorises how people feel, think and experience.

Uganda, like many other contexts, has gone through the massification of education in the last few decades, the wider effects of which we are only now beginning to understand.<sup>29</sup> Our account encourages researchers to be attentive to the way formal education, when opened up to large numbers of young people, changes social relations, and how, in an economy marked by sharp economic inequalities, transitions to adulthood are not neatly divided into time in school and time after. ‘Exposure’ understands education as a time of struggle, hustle and work, while life after school can also be a time when educated identities are worked on in navigating life in the workplace, within families, and in friendship groups. Cooper writes that ‘perhaps we have tended to overlook the subjective . . . dimensions of life transitions because we assume these to be tacitly experienced and difficult to identify, understand and attribute’ (Cooper 2018, 679). Through a collaborative ethnography that included team members who were themselves young women from the area, we have shown the significance of ‘Exposure’ as a subjectivity. It had, for young women who saw themselves as educated, become a framework for understanding and practicing the expectations they had of themselves.

## Notes

1. Identifying material has been changed in the article.
2. As if to underline the exposed nature of exposure, 'exposure' was spoken of only in English 520  
by our interlocutors; the closest translation in Leblango is *dano ongeo piny*, meaning  
a person who has a 'wider knowledge' of society within and beyond. When speaking  
Leblango the English word 'sharp' could also be mixed in.
3. An excellent discussion of emerging subjectivities in urban East African can be found in  
Prince's (2013) account of young men and women navigating their way in Kisumu, Kenya. 525  
Prince finds young people continuing to cultivate educated identities while working in  
a precarious economy of volunteering for little pay, alongside other ways of earning a living.
4. For earlier accounts of the influence of schooling on the formation of young lives, see  
Masemann's study from Ghana (Masemann 1974) and Musgrove's account from Uganda 530  
(Musgrove 1952). Musgrove's paper, in particular, is interesting for the way it emphasises  
the self-conscious way students try to develop identities set apart from the formal  
curriculum.
5. Exposed' young women also took, what they told us, was a 'scientific' approach to witch-  
craft, which were often attributed to a 'village mindset', of 'suffering from jealousy'.
6. At the prompting of one of the reviewers of the article, the study team were also asked if they 535  
thought Jones (a middle-aged man from the UK) was 'exposed'. While Jones did not himself  
feel particularly 'sharp' in navigating Lira City, the rest of the team told him that he was  
'exposed' because he could teach them new things, who had travelled to many countries, and  
was also someone keen to 'to learn new things' from others. The other senior researcher,  
Ocen (a middle-aged man from Uganda) was regarded as exposed by younger members of 540  
the team for many reasons. Alongside his education, they spoke of his ability to mix with  
different sorts of people in the community (he is a clan leader), his skills in helping others  
settle disputes and conflicts, and the way 'he welcomes ideas from many people'.
7. Ann Gumkit Parlaker was the researcher who spent the most time with Grace. Vicky Alum  
was the researcher who focused on Milly. Dorah Adoch spent more time with Prossy than 545  
the rest of the study team.
8. A male member of the team – James – said it was difficult for him to spend too long with the  
informant – a married woman – by himself.
9. This was not always an easy method for the team. Information – about businesses, relation-  
ships and futures plans – is jealously guarded and 'being free' with someone is not an 550  
automatic follow on from spending time with them. Questions on these matters could only  
be introduced gradually. 'Helping out' by, for example, doing some book-keeping, or simply  
arrange a respondent's goods for sale, also took time to develop, and the transition from  
being a 'visitor' to becoming a friend demanded patience and skill.
10. To calculate dollar figures in the article we took a five-year average from June 2018 to 555  
June 2023. The conversion rate was US\$1: Ush3,646.
11. Concealment within marriage was nothing new in Uganda. Parikh work on HIV/AIDS  
shows how concealment within marriages has a long history (Parikh 2007).
12. For a discussion of the role of savings groups and microfinance in funding education – and 560  
generating debt – see the paper by Jones and Amongin (2023).
13. One of the study team, already a young father, had gone through the 'introduction' stage of  
a marriage, where they had been introduced to their partner's family. Another member of  
the study team had a child from a 'come-we-stay' relationship with the boy's father, that  
later ended.
14. Sons of NGO workers and government officials, in particular, could be criticised if they did 565  
not show themselves willing to struggle, and were described to us as 'rich men in waiting'  
and 'lazy boys'.
15. There was also, at the time of writing, an inheritance law that has been making its way  
through Uganda's Parliament giving daughters equal rights in land in the case of the death  
of a parent. 570

16. All of the women in our study team – educated, from a mix of urban and rural back-grounds – were thinking about land while in school. Sharon said that in high school she began observing how women who relied on their husbands for land in her extended family lost out when they were widowed. Vicky, who became a single mother in her twenties, knew that buying land for herself would be the best way of securing a future for her son. Dorah told us of a distant relation, an aunt, who was ‘getting a lot of respect’ for the property portfolio she had built up after her divorce. 575
17. It is worth noting that while none of these women were involved directly in land disputes. It was a mark of exposure that they were working their way towards rights in land in an under-the-radar way (cf. Hopwood 2015). 580
18. Whyte and Siu (2014, 28) observe the practise of ‘keeping quiet’ in Uganda, and how this allows a person keep a relationship going, even when they feel they have been wronged.
19. Anna Eisenstein in her account of young women’s lives from south-western Uganda, discusses the way they ‘pace’ their early adulthood (Eisenstein 2021). She finds that Christian-inflected ideas of ‘study’ and ‘discernment’ are part of the way they approach social situations. 585
20. In the system of inheritance in Lango society, the dominant society in Lira City, rights are not straightforward and are negotiated between the generations, typically as younger family members enter into adulthood. In the past this might mean a father favouring one son over his brothers, in terms of assets and land. In more recent year’s inheritance questions are increasingly open to daughters, particularly those who were unmarried, or separated. Milly’s position as ‘heir’ meant she should be the decisive voice in inheritance matters within the near family, in her father’s absence. Though this was a status that had to be remade and worked on, rather than simply something Milly could claim for herself. 590  
595
21. While the term ‘school’ might convey a sizeable establishment, the one Milly was managing was a modest structure that occupied a single building.
22. ‘Natural intelligence’ was used to refer to someone who was felt to have high levels of ‘inborn knowledge’. 600
23. Pork joints are eating areas that have an improvised quality. Typically composed out of some rough-hewn benches, and a bamboo screen to offer some shade from the sun. They are located by the place where the pig is slaughtered (pork cannot be sold in the market due to Islamic religious laws) Pork joints have become a popular business for young men.
24. In this paper, and in the related paper on Pentecostal youth in Uganda, also in this volume, we have borrowed from Henrik Vigh’s conception of social navigation where young people seek ‘to draw and actualize their life trajectories ... in [the] shifting social environment’ of urban Africa (Vigh 2006, 55, see also Vigh 2010). 605
25. This has a different meaning to the term ‘prostitute’ which is a general term used for women who get by through relationships. A ‘schemer’ is someone who is good at studying whether the man in question can help them move ahead. 610
26. For example, Dorah who first interviewed Prossy, a key informant, on July 13 2021. Dorah remembers that she did not particularly warm to Prossy and that her colleagues Sharon and Vicky did most of the talking, at the time. Over time, Dorah became interested in the way Prossy who was good at reflecting critically on how she was moving on in life. It was only at a burial, in November, Prossy explained that what had made the land purchase possible – something she had earlier explained through her business acumen – was a gift of money from a soldier. 615
27. For a thoughtful account of youth, gender and navigation under conditions of uncertainty see Archambault’s account on the disguise and display from Inhambane, Mozambique (Archambault 2013). 620
28. Our case also challenges the idea, widely held, that school is where educated identities are fixed, showing how educated identities can be worked on by young women no longer in formal education, in sites that are far from the school gate (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

29. It is a massification that also takes place at the time of rapid urbanisation. In the 1970s, Lira 625  
was recorded as 'a town council' with 5000 residents (Dahlberg 1974, 171). In 2022 it was  
a city whose population approaching 250,000.

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