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Restoration and Renewal through Sport: Gendered Experiences of Resilience for War-Affected Youth in Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Building on the proposal for a ‘culturally sensitive’ framework of resilience, this article explores the construction of resilience at an individual and community level. Through the lens of sport, we explore the relational nature of resilience and its relationship to ideas of morality and community well-being. Using interviews and focus groups conducted across northern Uganda 2018–2020, we engage youth perspectives on resilience or restoration (*roco*). We emphasise the gendered dimensions that shape different stakeholder’s understandings of the concept and that, in this context, the pursuit of a community-affirmed vision of resilience or good surroundings (*piny maber*) reinforces pre-existing inequalities.

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted between 2018 and 2020, this article directly engages Acholi youth in evaluating resilience. It focuses on the use of sports in northern Uganda, a location that offers several distinct yet highly relevant settings to the study of post-conflict resilience. Sports for development and peace (SDP) programming, which aimed at building social capital and civic responsibility, provides an avenue for exploring how the relational nature of resilience shapes individual experiences of morality and community wellbeing. This allows us to consider how young people negotiate, experience and understand their own coping strategies and the role for external interventions.

We centre the voices of young people as key sources of knowledge in understanding how they and their communities understand, experience and value resilience, recognising the child and young person as agents in their own right (Finnström 2008). Francis is an Acholi man, active in local sports within Gulu.¹ He set out to conduct this research among his own peers to bring the perspectives of local people into an academic sphere and to engage directly with questions of development practice and conceptualisations of resilience. This emic perspective allows us to deal more adequately with local

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realities, cultures, values and norms in defining and charting pathways for resilience (Harris *et al.* 2017). It provides an avenue to deepen our understanding of what constitutes a resilient response, which resources are considered useful within this culture and how access to these resources can be supported. This co-production of knowledge offers a unique insight into the views and perspectives of those who 'benefit' from SDP programming, recognising that few grassroots SDP programmers and participants have the opportunity to publish in academic journals (Nicholls *et al.* 2010).

Despite calls for greater evidence in the field of SDP, scant attention has been paid to the views of the people who participate in such programmes (Lindsey *et al.* 2016). Calls for more systematic 'evidence' of the impacts of sporting programmes have been challenged by those who highlight the barrier to knowledge production that effectively polices knowledge frontiers (Nicholls *et al.* 2010). This paper directly challenges the coloniality of the knowledge frontier of both resilience and SDP literatures by centring the perspectives of Francis and his peers. In the absence of these unheard stories, we risk privileging external accounts over local constructions. These local constructions which explore the lived experiences of SDP programming provide essential insight into the relational construction of resilience between genders and social groups.

Similarly, though resilience has been widely adopted by practitioners as a major framing theme within development and humanitarian agendas (Béné *et al.* 2014) it is limited by an ongoing lack of attention to the voices of 'beneficiaries'. The concept has great intuitive appeal as a framing theme for how individuals and communities to recover and maintain themselves in face of crises (Ager *et al.* 2013), yet questions of how those individuals and communities understand, experience and value resilience and its interventions remain unanswered. This is true also for existing literature on the resilience of youth in northern Uganda (Klasen *et al.* 2010, Haroz *et al.* 2013). Only by engaging with these perspectives will development programming be able to effectively contribute to locally desired outcomes.

Vindevogel *et al.* argue that 'a culturally sensitive conceptualisation' of resilience is 'a prerequisite for being able to assess resilience in northern Ugandan youth' (2015, p. 399). Their broadly psychosocial framework which emphasises six themes (progress; self-reliance; social connection; morality; health; and comfort) offers an important starting point for beginning to assess whether a given external intervention contributes meaningfully to local resilience in northern Uganda. By paying close attention to 'the context in which individuals are embedded', they go 'beyond the individual' and highlight the role of the community in setting expectations for and perceptions of resilience (*ibid.*, p. 410). We build on their approach by arguing that there is a need to pay much greater attention to power, agency and inequality *within* this framework. Interrogating their culturally sensitive framework of

resilience with questions of for whom, what, when, where, and why this conception of resilience emerges can further nuance the framework to draw out the relational and gendered dimensions of resilience (Meerow and Newell 2016). This approach is integral to the understanding of resilience as a relational concept (Ager *et al.* 2013, Biermann *et al.* 2016).

A key question is therefore the extent to which resilience is locally desired and how it can be understood in local terms. A historical Acholi conceptualisation of resilience can be seen in the concept of good surroundings or *piny maber*. Acholi author Okot p'Bitek, describes *piny maber* as: 'when things are normal, the society thriving, facing and overcoming crises' (1986, p. 27). Within this conceptualisation, crisis is, to some extent, normalised whereby resilience is the 'acceptance of disequilibrium as a principle of organisation' (Walker and Cooper 2011, p. 154). Rather than viewing resilience as transformational, this conceptualisation focuses on 'changing certain things in order to retain "core" elements of life' (Humbert and Joseph 2019, p. 216). This indigenous conceptualisation of resilience describes a society 'thriving', united together in their approach to crisis. Importantly, this conceptualisation of *piny maber* marks the society as key to what might be termed resilience.

However, through our research it became clear that young Acholi people more often describe resilience as '*roco*'. They explain resilience as a process of starting afresh, like a snake shedding its skin in hibernation (*roc twol*). *Roco*, in this way, captures the cyclical notion of crisis but it also speaks to moving away from the past, that young people often describe as 'limiting' and holding them back. This framing is pivotal for understanding the way youth reframe and establish society in a post-conflict context. A comparison of these conceptualisations reflects the perception stated by a number of interviewees that Acholi people are moving away from a communal or societal approach. Greater emphasis is placed on one's individual role in creating good circumstances and persevering through challenges, though it is also still recognised that individual resilience or perseverance is the concern of the collective. In this way Acholi youth pushed back against community-orientation of *piny maber* in favour of individual responsibility.

Drawing on Wandji's call for greater emphasis on the 'situated meaning of threat/disruption in relation to resilient subjects' (2019, p. 289), we recognise that young Acholi people face multi-scalar, temporal and relational challenges. They and their communities, in many ways continue to carry the consequences of conflict (Allen *et al.* 2020). Yet as articulated in this research they also face immediate threats such as the loss of key family members and ongoing adversity such as poverty and social and political marginalisation (Atim *et al.* 2019). Any manifestation of resilience in this context cannot therefore be defined by a specific threat but rather, as participants described, it is a generalised ability to 'persevere'. This

'perseverance' is described as something that equips each young person with the resources to withstand these challenges whilst holding their course.

These young people argue that the intense embodied encounters and emotions experienced in individual and team sports help them to facilitate experiences of mutual respect, trust, social inclusion and belonging which help them to thrive and overcome crises. However, although the programmes have provided meaningful contributions to resilience at the community and individual level, they have also become an avenue for reproducing and reinforcing existing inequalities, particularly along gendered lines. Attention to gender dynamics within this patrilineal and patrilocal context assumes particular importance within a politics of resilience framework. Although one participant noted that they felt the 'limiting culture [for women] is fading off' (12), the relational construction of gender in Acholi culture is central to contextualise young people's lived experiences. Yet gender dynamics are often an afterthought within SDP and youth literatures (Abbink 2005, Schulenkorf *et al.* 2016). Instead, we argue that a gendered perspective is essential to understanding the construction of resilience.

This paper situates the experiences of these young people and the programme organisers within a critical analysis of the power dynamics and systems in this context. Attention to power relations is essential in order to 'deconstruct whose voices become privileged and whose voices are silenced, and why' (Fabinyi *et al.* 2014, p. 34). We draw attention to the way that potential pathways to community-accepted ideas of resilience may be operationalised in ways that maintain unequal power structures. These findings highlight the need for greater attention to be paid to the ways different community stakeholders may understand resilience or have different expectations of resilience for different people – in particular, drawing attention to the possibility of alternate gendered markers of resilience. Differing and potentially competing ideas of resilience will have uneven effects on these different stakeholders (Béné *et al.* 2014), which must in turn be accounted for when developing locally relevant resilience frameworks. This approach stresses the diversity of experiences, interests and norms that shape resilience and that might be critically important when deciding which policies or infrastructures to promote (Harris *et al.* 2017).

Using sport as an entry point, this article critically engages with some of the theoretical, methodological, and empirical debates surrounding resilience and young people in war-affected spaces. It also contributes to a growing body of literature on the relationship between youth engagement, inclusion and belonging and the development of 'pro-social' behaviour through SDP.

Context

Programming for young people in northern Uganda assumed central importance in the context of the widespread violent abduction and recruitment of minors by the Lord's Resistance Army from 1986 to 2006 (Finnström 2008). Within the realm of youth programming, sport was positioned by external actors as a key tool for creating 'post-conflict' stability. Sports programmes and clubs continued to proliferate throughout the immediate post-conflict period that, for many, was marked by life in internal displacement camps. The prominence of sports programming for youth in this context makes it a particular useful starting point for a consideration of resilience.

At this time sport was taking on new prominence in international developmental and humanitarian agendas. In 2003, the UN passed Resolution 58/5, which recognised 'the role of sport and physical education as a means to promote education, health, development, and peace' (UN 2003). This built on previous international resolutions that highlighted the social contributions of sport and, recognised recreational play as a human right and actively encouraged the promotion of sports by UN member states. Within this setting sports programmes for young people proliferated and became a key tool for development practitioners. Advocates of SDP argue that the benefits of sport extend far beyond the remit of physical activity and health (UNICEF 2021). At an international level, sport is seen to contribute to the 'realization of development and peace [through] its promotion of tolerance and respect' (UNGA 2015, p. 18). It is argued to provide the opportunity for young people to develop important and stable relationships with adults that may be especially valuable for young people experiencing instability in their lives (Kay and Spaaij 2011). However, it is not clear that these benefits can be easily replicated in post-conflict settings (Hamilton *et al.* 2016). There is therefore a need to consider how sports programmes impact the lives of young people in post-conflict settings such as northern Uganda.

Although the sports programmes under consideration did not specifically purport to enhance 'resilience' as is common in today's NGO language in post-conflict settings (de Milliano and Jurriens 2016), they sought to address many of the key tenets of what Vindevogel *et al.* (2015) set out as resilience in the context of northern Uganda (A4A and the Steve Nash Foundation 2008). Involving young people in active sports was seen by humanitarian actors such as Athletes for Africa (A4A) and local leaders as a way of helping communities by building social capital and civic responsibility through inculcating ideas of playing by the rules, teamwork, leadership, cooperation, fairness, and non-violent competition. Sport appeals, as outlined the A4A strategic plan document, as a 'normalisation strategy[y], offering social cohesion, commonality of interest and a channelling of energies into non-violent interactions' (*ibid*). The sporting activities offered included football, dance,

netball and martial arts. In many cases these were offered alongside skill development programmes (for example, agricultural skills). Though the format and focus of the programmes varied, these programmes were often conceived of as a way of making civilian life more interesting and attractive for young people.

Methods

This research uses semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and Francis' personal experiences, to present an emic view of the experiences of resilience and sports programming in this post-conflict setting. Thirty-one key informant interviews were conducted with key stakeholders such as youth leaders, District Sports Officers, Local Councillors and programme managers. Independently of this, eight focus groups were held with sporting clubs, two of which were in existence prior to the A4A programme – Gulu Boxing Club and Lalogi FC. A total of 111 people participated in the research (93 male-identifying participants, 18 female-identifying participants). All of the participants were formerly engaged in externally funded sports programmes and the majority (70 per cent) were actively participating in local sports groups at the time of the research. However, there was a notable difference in rates of ongoing participation between men and women – of the 18 women only 5 were still engaged in sporting activities. The field work took place in Uganda's Lamwo, Gulu and Omoro Districts (2018–2020). The research sites are a range of rural, urban and peri-urban communities which were the focus of substantial sports programmes, particularly those led by A4A (2006–2011). We also built on a previous evaluation of Gulu Boxing Club (Büscher *et al.* 2016).

Though this research focuses on the experiences of those who participated in externally funded sporting programmes, it is important to note that there are a multitude of local sports groups (largely football) across northern Uganda that function with little or no external support. The majority of the participants have continued to engage with these local initiatives long after the termination of the externally funded programmes. As part of this study, we draw out the comparisons and connections made by the research participants between local initiatives and externally funded programmes.

Consent was obtained from each interviewee and focus group discussion participant. The majority of interviews were conducted in Acholi, then translated and transcribed into English. Both the interviews and focus groups were guided by structured questions that were closely informed by Vindevogel *et al.*'s (2015) framework and by Francis' own experiences. The questions that we developed around the experience of sport were shaped further by the views of the interviewees. Feedback loops both at the point of interview and

at the point of analysis have been central to understanding these experiences and a key tool to ensure that the research is driven by local views. The data from this study was analysed using thematic analysis.

That Francis conducted this research among his own peers is important given the barriers to knowledge production noted in both SDP and resilience literature. Francis' positioning within the community and his understanding of the experiences of those interviewed brings a unique perspective to this research; however, it has been important to practice reflexivity in regard to his positionality particularly with respect to gender. Francis noted that when he was conducting interviews it became apparent that a number of women were not always comfortable sharing their full opinions with him. This is unsurprising in the context both of patriarchal models of society and given the mockery many of them have experienced in sport. Some interviews were terminated as a result. Though some young women did engage with the research, further consideration is needed for the question of how understandings and perceptions of resilience may differ according to gender within the community.

This research takes a young person-centred approach that recognises that these young people, within the context of the structural challenges they face, are key actors within the broader social, economic and political processes that shape their everyday lives. Recognising that the category of youth is to a great extent socially constituted and that social status also has importance for determining one's classification and that under 35 is the definition of youth most frequently adopted in northern Uganda, we have taken a broad approach, including those aged 14–35 as youth (Abbink 2005, Finnström 2008).

Discussion

In order to close the gaps around different stakeholder priorities, young peoples' views must be central to programme evaluation (Meerow and Newell 2016). When asked if sport has an impact on their lives, these young people listed benefits such as individualised health benefits (both mental and physical), '[sport] makes you become healthy whenever you run and sweat' (1), as well as community benefits such as a 'reduce[d] theft cases' and a generalised 'increase in discipline' (2). Participants and programme organisers alike described football, boxing and other activities as 'healing games' (3). Both social connectedness and self-reliance were found to be particularly important as the participants found they could rely on their team or club members. Many also described positive relationships with their coaches and programme organisers. These new communities and social networks are reported to present opportunities for shared ideas (particularly advice), material and emotional support and the 'inner' strength to make constructive

choices in present situations (3). In this way sport can be understood to be supporting groups or communities to maintain themselves when they encounter obstacles.

It is important to highlight that those who 'benefit' from the programmes see them as valuable as activities in and of themselves. Often criticisms of SDP programmes at an international level suggest that sport should in some way be transformative if it is to be considered successful. To some extent this is a reflection of the sweeping statements and promises of 'transformation' found in SDP and resilience literatures. However, by measuring success in terms of those who participate in the programmes it is possible to assess sports programmes on different terms.

Analysis of these discussions highlighted two main themes. The first, is the function of sport as a pathway for resilience for young people, particularly young men. The second is that sport offers an opportunity for social restoration, in that by engaging young people in the construction of relationships and community and, the moral policing that this allows, the community is renewed. This has exclusionary and marginalising consequences particularly with regard to gender.

Konye Keni (Help Yourself): Charting Pathways for Resilience through Sport

The first theme focuses on the ways that sport provides opportunities for young people to chart their own pathways to resilience. As well as the incremental health benefits of sport, sport is perceived to have a transformational impact on individual outcomes. In psychological terms, sport is seen to provide an important avenue to escape. According to young people in Lamwo, their participation in football programmes provided a new 'community' and a way to forget about 'the bad things that were happening to people' during the war (4). Another player commented, 'when there is an activity . . . people don't dwell so much on the past and can even forget' (8). Sport has therefore played an important role in minimising their memories of wartime and displacement. Another young man who participates in martial arts activities explained, 'when you train and come back, you are tired. There is no time to think about the negative aspects [of life]' (5). Physical activity of training and the communities engendered by sporting participation form a resource for forgetting about the past and for protecting against present adversities. By facilitating the minimisation and eventual absence of negative memories, sport functions as a resource for building wellbeing and resilience at an individual level.

Both players and coaches perceive sport to hold the potential for transformative change. One individual attributed his transformation, from 'aguu' (street kid) to security personnel, to sports' ability to 'freshen your mindset

to think right and focus on the good side of life and not the bad side anymore' (7). The young people interviewed repeatedly spoke of being 'too tired' to dwell on the challenges they faced (8), '... hence no time to even think of loitering and or going down to the streets to pick a fight' (6). The corporeal experiences of intense physical activity and its associated exhaustion are a key deterrent from entering into undesirable activities. Sport therefore continues to provide a valuable tool for young people to avoid adversity through sheer physical exhaustion. Physical activity in this way represents an embodied practice of escape. There is a sense that sport helps protect individuals from the threats posed by the after-effects of social breakdown and idleness.

Participation in sport generally is understood as an opportunity for agency within a constrained environment – this sentiment is captured by the name of a local youth group, *konye keni* (help yourself). One young person commented: 'When times are difficult you start to think again about the past, but when there are opportunities and you are empowered, you can start to think about the future' (9). However, the imagined futures made possible by funded opportunities hinge crucially on the continuation of those programmes.

Imagined Futures: Pathways for Escape

As well as the embodied practice of escape, the transformative potential of sport is often grounded in presentation of sport as a potential career. The connection made between 'opportunities' and 'think[ing] about the future' highlights the role that sports programming plays in allowing this thinking to take place (9). The possibilities opened up by sporting activities are positioned as a central building block of restoration. Resilience is inextricably linked to hope at an individual level through these potentialities (Wrangel 2014). The transformative potential of these imagined futures provides a goal for the young people to work towards. This is something coaches are keenly aware of. In both football and boxing, narratives of individual success are prized, and coaches raise the profile of sport in the minds of young people by presenting it as a potential career path: 'We are advocating to them to look at the sport in a professional way and encouraging them that it is possible for them to make it' (10).

These stories of success play an important role in individual motivation and psychological well-being. Francis himself has experienced the drive and commitment that these imagined futures can spur and many of the players and participants similarly spoke of harbouring such dreams. For many, the initial motivation for participation and commitment to training is driven by this desire to capitalise on the career potential – 'people started joining in order to make money' (1). The continual return to stories of success reflect in large part the desire to escape and the lack of alternative opportunities, as well as the role played by adoration for international leagues and competitions in popular imagination.

Sporting programmes often claim that they will have some impact on poverty. A4A claimed that, 'talented individuals – and their families – will be able to escape poverty by developing their skills, while others will be able to support their livelihoods through linked activities' (Athletes for Africa and the Steve Nash Foundation 2008). Yet despite the professional aspirations of many of the participants very few achieve levels of material success that would allow them to escape poverty. By recognising the specific successes and limits of sports, we can come a long way in clarifying the scope and tangible benefits of SDP projects.

These imagined futures play a pivotal role in how these young people position themselves in relation to past and present adversities by providing a potential path away from those setbacks. Through this process, individually, they practice '*roco*' and shed their old experiences. These young people do not anticipate a time when they will be free of a need to rely on their own abilities to persevere through various challenges, rather they recognise the structural constraints they face and pursue the opportunities at hand. Efforts to manifest resilience are positioned as part of a process. It is not a thing that 'exists', rather resilience is negotiated and requires ongoing engagement between diverse actors and interests (Harris *et al.* 2017).

In exploring the role of opportunities in constructing resilience through hope for the future, it becomes possible to engage with the temporal dimensions of resilience. Humbert and Joseph argue that resilience thinking and programming are 'dependent upon a state of uncertainty ... [with] no clear deadline and no time frame of resolution of the threat' (2019, p. 219). That the goals for resilience programming are adjustable speaks to a core challenge with the concept but this also makes the concept particularly useful where the 'threats' are diverse and seemingly perpetual. Moreover, as much as resilience is innately tied to 'threat', in this case resilience is also tied to an idea that one can imagine possible alternate futures, which pose the opportunity for escape, the prospect of 'thriving, rather than mere survival' (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Miskanen 2019, p. 250). The voices explored here expose the way they practice resilience by escaping their pasts and engaging proactively with present opportunities to construct potential imagined futures. But it also draws on a key weakness of external programming for resilience – the contributions of SDP to resilience, insofar as they are connected to these imagined futures, are experienced largely for the duration of the externally funded programmes.

That the resilience and transformational effects are seen to be so tied to imagined futures emphasises the importance of the continued functioning of the programmes problematises the nature of external funding and engagement. One focus group emphasised that 'the type of football here was just community sport by organizing friendly matches and stop there year in year out but we need something more than that to a greater level' (11), another

highlighted ‘we are all dreaming of playing football at a professional level . . . [but] there is no organisation to take up football seriously here’ (12). Even though the imagined future of participating in professional sport may not come to pass, this alternative and longed for future provides a clear goal and highlights the importance of continued funding for the programmes – ‘when you believe you are working towards something you won’t risk messing it up hence you are avoiding the bad things’ (1).

Despite the temporary nature of these funded programmes, the participants still expressed positive sentiments about their participation. They emphasised the need for sustained engagement beyond the immediate wartime setting, particularly in the face of ongoing resource shocks and constraints. As a result of the ongoing structural challenges faced by young people, ‘waithood’ or waiting for progress and change in the future is positioned as a hallmark of young African people’s lives (Honwana 2012). Yet these young people, ‘in the process of waiting . . . build relationships that provide a foundation for transforming their lives’, as they ‘wait, they talk, play, plan, scheme, hustle and work’ (Stasik *et al.* 2020, p. 2). For these youths, the simple act of participating in a football game or a boxing match is perceived to be highly significant, whether it is a local initiative or part of a funded programme. Through each match and training session they express agency in the pursuit of their own desires, ‘simultaneous with the maintenance of a broader vision for the future’ (*ibid.*).

If resilience is a process grounded in everyday encounters, this raises questions about the very ‘resilience’ of development programming. Given that the benefits of these groups fade when these programmes come to an end or the teams cease to come together, programmes that seek to facilitate and enhance resilience require developing and nurturing, particularly in a context of continued adversity (Atim *et al.* 2019). This poses a challenge to the nature of funding cycles that are typically project based and time bound (de Milliano and Jurriens 2016). As one organiser observed, ‘it is widely known how many NGOs there are in Gulu . . . it is no surprise that Ugandans have little faith in the longevity of many of them’ (13). This is a key barrier when the manifestation of resilience is grounded in the everyday accessibility of sport.

It is important, though unsurprising, that these alternative imagined futures were much more commonly expressed by young men. As one coach remarked, ‘many of the girls see no future in football’ (14). There is a significant difference in the resilience experiences of young men and women and as a result the way they relate to the possibilities presented by sport differs markedly. This has important implications for how the resilience effects of sport play out for young women. Their participation is less about broader notions of escape from poverty as they do not relate to that possibility, instead they describe the immediate opportunity that sport provides to ‘share [their] lives and opinions’ with their peers and be seen on equal terms (15).

Embodied Encounters of Belonging

Sport also has important resilience effects through embodied encounters of belonging. These effects manifested across both the externally funded programmes and in the sporting clubs that have persisted where possible without additional funding. The first manifestation of this at both an individual and team level is the emphasis placed on the way sport could create new communities. In a context of social breakdown SDP programmes are believed to have contributed to rebuilding and redefining the social environment. Both through team sport and individual sport the membership of a team or club is reported to generate new communities. These encounters serve as a platform for sharing more than just the sporting activity and creates a sense of 'togetherness', or embodied belonging:

... there is a saying in Luo, 'cing acel pe kweko tun', literally meaning 'one hand cannot do anything' the reason team sport is better than one (16).

This quote reflects the way participating in sport allows oneself to position the self within the team. Those participating in individual sports such as boxing indicated similar community formation within their clubs. Membership of these communities reinforces resilience by developing nurturing relationships that can arise between teammates, between coaches and players and between the team and the community. Team membership provides a framework for young people to ground themselves in community with each other and they in turn define themselves in relation to that community (Cele and van der Burgt 2015).

The provision of a space to come and work together towards a shared goal engenders a sense of belonging among the young people. This membership dynamic is vital to understanding community resilience in this context. Although individual and psychologically focused definitions of wellbeing and resilience have assumed greater prominence in development programming and in the minds of young people as they describe their individual abilities to overcome setbacks, resilience is articulated and experienced relationally (Vindevogel 2017). A coach, who focuses on girl's football participation, said that teams cannot achieve their full success without the 'buy-in' of the community:

You Need the Team to Be Owned by the Community in Order for It to Unite (17).

This attention to the relational dynamic between sporting programmes and the community illuminates why conformity to community morals weigh so heavily in descriptions of individual wellbeing. The terms of resilience as it relates to sport are to a great extent determined by conformity to community morals, which define who is inside and outside these spaces of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011). As each member comes to embody the community and feel 'at home', so it is understood that resilience is a 'function of the richness of the

connections within and across communities' (Zebrowski and Sage 2017, p. 46). Failing to attend to the relational construction of individual and community standards for resilience in this setting would be a fundamental oversight.

Roco: Restoring the Social Environment through Gendered Practices of Moral Regulation

The second emergent theme considers the relational construction of resilience. In particular, it explores the way that restoration (*roco*) at an individual level is considered integral to the construction of good surroundings at a community level. Sport in this case functions as a tool for constructing and reproducing certain aspects of the social environment considered desirable at a local community level, by parents, grandparents, and neighbours. The emphasis on one's position in society assumes particular importance in the northern Uganda where there is a heavy emphasis on 'social harmony' (Porter 2017). The resilience effects of sport are therefore connected to the reproduction and reconstruction of a community driven social environment. Through sport, the community is able to regulate youth behaviour for particular, conforming, manifestations of resilience. Community and individual interpretations of resilience must be understood as closely connected and dependent on one another.

For the community, participation in sport offers an important avenue for moral regulation, to keep young people 'thinking right' (10). There is a sense that sport contributes specifically to community resilience by encouraging young people to conform to these normative community expectations of 'right' and appropriate behaviour. The maintenance of this path is understood to have benefits for the wider community, both through positive activities such as community engagement, but also through the absence of negative attributes. One football captain remarked, 'You will always get too busy to think about doing wrong things' (18). As one young man reflected, 'by the time you come out from a training, you will only think of bathing, eating, and probably resting, no time to think of going on the streets' (12). The references to 'wrong' or 'bad' things found 'on the streets' covered loitering, stealing, violence, alcohol and drug usage. The benefits of sport were explained by both participants and community figures more often in terms of the absence of negative outcomes rather than the presence of positive functioning, particularly in relation to young men. This is typical of classical psychological approaches to resilience and reflective of the widely felt need to control young people (Cele and van der Burgt 2015).

Young people in this context are seen as a source of potential trouble, their very existence and freedom poses a threat (Finnström 2008, Branch 2011). In the context of generational and broader social breakdown sport provides an important avenue for the exercise of community regulation. In this way, sport

functions as a 'means of productive power' which is focused here on young people's bodies and conduct (Darnell *et al.* 2018, p. 136). Sport therefore forms a terrain of bio-politics, whereby control of young people is seen as integral to the restoration of the community. The resilience these sporting programmes engender should therefore not necessarily be considered as a potentially transformational political and social force (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Miskanen 2019). Attempts to reclaim a 'traditional' or 'right' way seek to deny the internal pluralities and tensions that persist within that culture (Branch 2011). Instead, these programmes must reckon with the tension between aspiring to 'empower young people as agents of social change' (Athletes for Africa and the Steve Nash Foundation 2008) and the function of 'sport as a practice of governmentality' (Darnell *et al.* 2018, p. 136).

Young people who are not perceived to be 'living right in the community' are considered not only to be dangerous to their teammates but also to the perception of sporting activities on the whole (19). Programme organisers took particular care to emphasise that those who were not able to manifest individual resilience by behaving 'right' would be excluded for the benefit of the team and community as a whole. One coach remarked:

Others have improved, spiritually, emotionally and socially and we are happy about it. If we see that you look bad in the eyes of the community . . . we call you and give you some guidance and counselling and if you are ready to improve then we shall move together but if not then we shall also let you go (6).

Sport is perceived as an asset to the community insofar as it supports the moral regulation of the collective. Central to the notion of a thriving community is individual conformity to community ideals. Individual resilience is therefore supported via this channel insofar as it conforms to community expectations. In this way 'communal' expectations of conformity are projected on individuals and particularly young people and are positioned as integral to the resilience of the community. Those who do not demonstrate sufficient 'resilience' to avoid or overcome problems are pathologized by coaches and team members, in keeping with community expectations. Coaches and team members absorb or propagate the moral expectations of the surrounding community and reproducing them in the team cultures. Coaches in turn indicated that moral regulation was perpetuated by parents who would at times intervene and prevent the continued participation of a young person in sport, particularly young women. Though a number of the coaches spoke of attempting to mediate with the parents on behalf of the young people in these cases, they were unsuccessful.

There is an understanding that the outcomes of a given individual, particularly for older youth, were to some extent dependent on their inner resilience. Those who behave 'badly' and therefore do not manifest 'sufficient resilience', perseverance or willingness to conform are excluded.

This has significant implications for the normative values attached to resilience at the community level. As many have argued contemporary deployments of resilience serves to move responsibility away from the market or the state and so resilience is about adaptation rather than resistance to suffering. Yet here we see how the community also places responsibility on the individual for an inability to 'cope up' or 'persevere'. The perceived success of sport is to some extent grounded in avoiding the 'moral pollution' of people who do not conform and who do not conduct themselves in desirable ways:

It is seen in the way a person mixes in the community, the way they walk, their actions ... in the way that some people walk in a style that you will just see that is a bad person, when bouncing, he looks like wants to touch your pocket and looking almost everywhere like he wants to steal some thing, just know that one is a thug. The way he dresses matters a lot (6).

These embodied behaviours are seen as outwards symbols of one's resilience and of their well-being. Boxing is presented as a tool of behavioural training that can shape how one embodies one's position within the community. Those who are more 'thug' like are seen to require discipline – these autonomous expressions of agency are interpreted as deviance because they do not conform to community expectations of resilience, or to the stated aims of peacebuilding activities (Branch 2011). Yet young people, aware of their limited voice in society, 'negotiate [discourses] ... by presenting their physical bodies in ways they believe will change how others view them' (Cele and van der Burgt 2015, p. 202). Although this may not conform to collectively determined ideals of resilience, this non-conformity could be understood as a form of resilience within a heavily constrained environment.

However, as well as preventing negative outcomes, sport is also seen to play an important role in facilitating greater engagement of young people within the wider community. This is made particularly apparent by the kinds of activities that the team undertake to actively and directly contribute to problems in the community:

We participate in community work like cleaning the market and helping people in the villages ... this woman who has no child, we did lots of things to fix her hut and her garden ... it left her in tears of joy that she was pleased to know that ... there are children who care for her (20).

Among players and club members the interviewees cited their reliance on each other in times of adversity and shared resources as a key benefit of participation. For example, shared farming and support through crises:

... When one of us lost his parent, we contributed money and also went to their home to help organise things until the burial was over ... which made him see us as his almost his first family because of the helping hand we gave (20).

SDP programmes in this context therefore appear to have enhanced individual abilities to access resources in their immediate community. By allowing the development of further social capital, sport has an indirect impact on material comfort, by facilitating resource flexibility in the face of a setback.

Coaches too reported enhanced abilities to support young people facing hardships (Kay and Spaaij 2011). One coach remarked that through the normalisation of youth-elder relationships through sport the 'children would feel comfortable telling the leaders about their lives at home' (17). A number of the young people similarly described their coaches as sources of advice and as integral to the growth of the team unit. Sport offers an important opportunity within the everyday for resource enhancement and therefore supports the ability to sustain oneself in a crisis.

Gendered Markers of Resilience and the Reproduction of Social Inequalities

The dynamic of moral regulation, which is perceived to be critical to community experiences of resilience, is heavily gendered. Given that the acceptance and embrace of SDP programmes is seen as dependent on community behaviour expectations, it is unsurprising that the pre-existing and to some extent socially sanctioned inequalities are reified and reproduced in sporting arenas. This poses a major challenge to the participation of young women in SDP. Those who are most able to successfully participate in sporting programmes in a sustained and beneficial way are young men. Although, undoubtedly, there are heterogeneities within their experiences, most obviously in terms of ability and geographic location, by and large young men are understood to be doing something that conforms to community expectations when they participate in sport. Young women, by contrast, go against the grain of what is considered 'normal' and 'right' behaviour, particularly when it concerns participation in 'men's sports'. As a result, young women do not experience the same resilience effects as young men in part because they face greater barriers to participation and actively exclusionary behaviour as participants. One woman remarked that:

Sometimes we feel our reputation is lost in the community as they look at us as lazy and only know how to play ... they think we are spoilt and only love men so much (21).

Both women and men are called to embody the expected values of the community. Yet, whilst encouraging the desired resilience markers in men, sport is seen as an indulgence for young women. If they play sport young women are 'seen as notorious in the community' (14). This is particularly

amplified by the distinction between rates of participation in externally funded programmes and local sporting groups. Where the participation of girls is often a requirement of externally funded programmes and is somewhat accepted by family members and neighbours, programme organisers and the women who participated in the research noted the resistance they faced amplified when those programmes ended. Moreover, as women bear the main burden of housework and domestic duties, they 'have not got much time to play' (14). Without sufficient attention to issues of power, politics and inequality *within* frameworks of culturally specific conceptualisations of resilience, we may miss the possibility of alternate, gendered markers of resilience. Programme organisers and the players also outlined the relational pressures young women face which hinder their participation in sport. Parents seem to fear that this kind of physical activity will damage the young women's reputation and change their physical appearance in ways that make them undesirable. The prioritisation of women's marriage prospects or their 'desirability' is placed as central to the decision-making process.

As one young man remarked, 'girls who play football here are not so much respected as there is still this thing of men/boys ruling over women and girls' (22). The same kinds of behaviours and lessons that sport imparts beneficially on young men are understood as undesirable for young women. One young man remarked that there is 'this thing inflicted on them that girls are humbled and should not be jumping or playing anyhow. Yet they have legs. They are human beings' (23). Some of the young women who participated in the focus groups indicated that pressure from their husbands put an end to their participation in sport. Their husbands 'fear that [other] men could snatch us away from them', becoming 'housewives ... marked the end of our participation in sport' (24). Coaches and organisers also indicated that similar sentiments were expressed by parents who stopped their daughters from partaking in sport. These barriers severely constrain the participation, inclusion and belonging of female participants.

In this way sport reproduces and reinforces gendered social dynamics. These relational expectations, whereby young women and men are confined to their 'appropriate' public spaces, serve a key role as part of the framework of community. The boundaries placed on the body affirm the boundaries of the social structure and are compounded by the prioritisation of particular kinds of sport. It is not sufficient to view individual and 'community' resilience as independent of each other. They are, instead, constructed and experienced relationally. Community resilience is dependent on the manifestation of resilience at the individual level – the individual process of *roco* is central to the creation of *piny maber*.

The construction of and attention to the needs of young men assumes particular importance in the context of a perceived breakdown in men's ability to 'persevere'. This perceived collapse in notions of masculinity further highlights the way expectations are differentiated across gender (Dolan 2002). One woman described men as empty shells, '*coo dong odoko poke nono, pe gi romo ciro can*' – 'men have become useless, since the IDP camps they can no longer persevere from poverty' (25). In this way she described the differential resilience expectations across genders. Young women are not seen to pose an immediate, uncontrollable threat in the way that young men are and as a result, at the community level the experiences of female youth are in danger of being 'ignored because of their lower "nuisance value"' (Abbink 2005, p. 25).

Although these gendered dynamics are neither the direct product of war, nor of the programmes themselves it is important to locate our understanding of resilience effects within the 'particular structures of kinship and norms that often subjugate women and girls' (Porter 2017, p. 4). The appropriate roles and relationships between young men and women are constructed relationally through such everyday social practices (Ahmed 2000, Finnström 2008). Many commented that even where participation was allowed, they experienced mockery from fellow teammates. Even in programmes specifically designed to find talented girls, one coach remarked that 'the boys gathered round and jeered and shouted at them' (14). These experiences produced fear and shame for many of the female participants.

The marked difference between the experiences of young men and women is highlighted in the way that girls see no future in sport compared to men. One female organiser remarked:

Sport seems to have had little effect on the women in the long-term – boys aspire to a future in football and continue to play in universities and in their spare time . . . the girls however often became mothers very early on or dropped out of school (14).

This has important implications for how we observe pathways for resilience and is suggestive that different pathways might need to be considered for different groups within the community. Given that this resilience is predicated on some ability to imagine and engage with an alternative future, the resilience impact of sport for young women might be limited given the lack of future opportunities.

In spite of these limitations a number of young women and programme organisers noted the desirability of female participation in SDP programmes. Though young women's participation in sport may not be as highly valued at a community level, particularly in rural areas, the young women interviewed perceived sport to have had a positive impact on their well-being. Sport offers them important opportunities for socialisation and to establish themselves. They can form friendships and 'discuss their experiences between themselves'

(17). One coach noted a shift in the attitudes of the boys towards the girls, 'many boys changed their opinions about girls playing football because they could now call them their teammates' (14). Accounting more effectively for the structural restrictions young women face may allow for their participation – particularly when engaging parents around permission for their participation. Yet empowerment for women may be difficult to achieve when constructed through sporting cultures that cultivate more dominant forms of masculinity such as football (Hayhurst *et al.* 2014). It may therefore be more constructive to promote alternative forms of play and physical activity and shifting away from institutionalised, hierarchical sports such as football (Sterchele 2015).

By placing these SDP programmes in context and recognising their limits these narratives emphasise caution. Development programmes often presuppose that where resilience is lacking, a range of strategies can be deployed to restore or build future resilience by identifying complex social and cultural systems that allow communities to recover. What these findings suggest is that SDP programmes build on existing structures and within existing frameworks. In this post-conflict setting they have not, for the majority, built new opportunities for those who remain on the margins.

Conclusion

Using local knowledge, this research has furthered our understanding of what constitutes a resilient response, which resources are considered useful within this culture, how access to these resources can be supported, and what the drawbacks of resilience may be *within* the community. Sport has provided a particularly useful lens for considering how these young Acholi people perceive their resilience(s) and how the community in turn positions young people. This example illustrates the relational nature of resilience and how it shapes individual experiences of morality and community.

This paper has demonstrated that many of these participants see the sports programmes, where they are available, to be effective tools in their 'resilience' infrastructure. The intense embodied encounters and values developed through team and individual sport provide a platform to pool physical, material and emotional resources and therefore become better able to collectively withstand setbacks. Sport *can* provide important reinforcements for resilience at an individual and community level. In this way sports programming is understood to be a useful tool for supporting and constructing resilience but only insofar as it is sustained. These findings suggest that the continuation of sports programming has an important role to play in maintaining and enhancing the ability of young people to withstand adversity. Through enhanced individual, team and community functioning, sport plays an important role in sustaining adaptive functioning in the long term.

However, 'being adaptive and flexible might have enhanced a people's chance of survival but never carried any guarantee of equality or rights' (Lindroth and Sinevaara-Miskanen 2019, p. 244). The embrace of sport as a tool of resilience is in many ways about sustaining a particular conception of community rather than about transformation (Wandji 2019). At a local level, what is described as 'resilient' behaviour may reflect a desire for conformity. By engaging critically with contextualised and locally informed understandings of resilience, these findings highlight the need to interrogate the power dynamics at play. Though the young people here, particularly young men, consider SDP programming to be a particularly valuable and meaningful activity within the context of the everyday, in this context sports programming has aligned with the histories and structures of inequality (Darnell *et al.* 2018). The resulting manifestations of resilience achieved through sport, also align with pre-existing structural inequalities. Those who are marginalised and 'on the outside' of these experiences do not benefit from resilience and are largely precluded from these opportunities. Programming for resilience, even culturally sensitive programming, will face this challenge if it fails to nuance the understanding of whose vision of resilience it is trying to promote and what elements of society it is trying to reinforce. Culturally sensitive frameworks of resilience must attend to the pluralities and power dynamics that may exist *within* the community.

This effect may have been heightened because of the particular sports developed through these programmes. Although sport (or more precisely physical activity) has some degree of universality, the particular power dynamics constituted through competitive sports such as football, which promote values such as dominance and patriarchy, are at odds with the stated intentions of SDP and have contributed to a particularly masculine form of resilience. Moral regulation of youth behaviour by the broader community and the behavioural and psychosocial aims of SDP programming converge at the potential expense of those who are already marginalised, in this case, young women and men who do not conform (Branch 2011). The interconnectivity between programme success and community acceptance has arguably hindered sports programming from contributing more effectively to individual wellbeing, particularly for young women.

Calls to attend to power and politics are not new in resilience literature (Fabinyi *et al.* 2014) but these findings highlight the need for these conversations to be carried out across both local and macro scales. *Within* the community, different expectations for resilience and different markers for what might constitute a resilient response emerge, particularly across gendered lines. That there may be alternative markers of resilience across genders demands a reconceptualisation of resilience thinking and programming. Without attention to these dynamics efforts to boost resilience in locally specific ways may enhance pre-existing inequalities. Sports programming must make similar strides.

In this setting, differential experiences by gender have emerged most cogently and are most pressed as differential axes by the interviewees (Mohanty 1988), yet there are other social categories that also demand further exploration, particularly to explore the views of those who have dropped out of or were unable to participate in sport. The questions raised here highlight the function of sport as a tool for community regulation and pose an important challenge to the desirability of sports programming on these terms.

Note

1. Gulu is the main city in northern Uganda. Acholi people are the focus of this study, they populate a large area of northern Uganda and have a population of around 1.5million.

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Appendix – Research participants gender identity

- (1) interview – man
- (2) interview – man
- (3) interview – man
- (4) focus group participant – man
- (5) focus group participant – man
- (6) interview – man
- (7) focus group participant – man
- (8) focus group participant – man
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- (24) focus group participant – woman
- (25) focus group participant – woman