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# Learning Marriage Ideals and Gendered Citizenship in “God-Fearing” Uganda

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Hinged on her motto, “for God and my country”, Uganda has identified herself as a “God-fearing” country. Indeed, religion in its different forms finds its way into the social, economic and political facets of Ugandan lives, very particularly those of women and girls. In this chapter, we explore the crafting of religious gendered citizenship in Uganda through a focus on learning and marriage. Specifically, we ask how ideals concerning Christian marriage are crafted and taught in Ugandan churches, and how ideals concerning relationships (which may or may not be defined as marriage) are adopted, contested and actually learned by Catholic and Pentecostal women.

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Our analysis is grounded in the claim that churches' teaching about marriage is not *just* about marriage as such. Rather, encapsulated in formal teaching about marriage are more general notions of gender relations—about what makes a good Christian man and a good Christian woman, and of how they should relate to one another (see, e.g., Kisembo et al., 1998). Moreover, marriage is expected to do more than just organize relations within a family. In both Pentecostal and Catholic teaching, the family is seen to form the cornerstone of the state. The polity rests upon formally bound marriages, which in the Catholic faith are considered sacraments, and as insoluble by almost all Pentecostal churches, and it is ideally within the godly family that God-fearing new citizens can be raised (Alava, 2019). By seeking to inculcate ideals of marriage and gender, religious leaders are thus simultaneously seeking to mould ideal citizens for the service of God and for their country. That said, there is, a notable contrast between the Christian vision of ideal marriages, and the actuality of marriages in Uganda: few people marry in church, and many of those at a mature age (Alava, 2017a). As our data shows, this is true even for many women who grant the church a central place in their lives.

Following feminist citizenship scholars (Lister, 1997; Preece, 2002) we hold teaching about gender norms to be intimately connected to teaching about citizenship. When girls are taught—as many girls in Uganda are—that women must always accept their husband's sexual advances, or that land is passed from the hands of fathers to sons and not to daughters, or that fathers have more say in the use of household income than mothers, they simultaneously intuit that all members of society are not equal, and that some have the right to wield their power over others, while others are expected to bend under it. Such “incidental transmission of attitudes” (Ostrouch-Kaminska & Vieira, 2015: 6) contributes to patterns of gender roles and relationships, with impact on the way people exercise their citizenship and “evaluate themselves as members of society” (ibid.).

Yet such processes are far from straightforward. Not every lesson is learned, and not every attempt to form a person's mindset produces the teacher's desired results. It is particularly important to bear this in mind when analyzing religious education. We align ourselves with feminist religious studies scholars who “acknowledge that religion may be used to legitimate gender inequality and the discrimination of women [but] reject the idea that religion is by necessity patriarchal” (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016: 55). In this vein, and paralleling the distinction made in citizenship studies between formal and experienced citizenship (Kabeer, 2005),

scholars interested in the interconnections of citizenship, gender and religion have utilized the notion of *lived religion*, which directs attention not only to religious institutions and their formal teachings, but to “what people *do* with religious idioms, how they use them ... and how, in turn, men, women and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making” (Orsi, 2003: 172). By contrasting how churches teach about gender and relationship ideals and how women actually learn about them, we attempt to contribute to the call made by Nyhagen and Halsaa:

Rather than assuming religious women’s subordination or agency, we need to investigate whether and how religious women experience their lived citizenship within particular contexts as empowering or restricting in relation to their gender. (2016: 67)

The particular lens we bring to this attempt is one of learning. While scholars of sexuality and religion in Africa have shown how sexual and gender moralities are moulded through marriage counselling (van Dijk, 2013) and churches’ gender-specific peer support and training groups (van Klinken, 2013) and public “love therapy” sessions (van de Kamp, 2013), what these and other studies *also* show is that teaching and learning about gender, relationships and citizenship—and the character moulding concomitant within these processes—occurs far beyond the places formally set out for that purpose: in peoples’ everyday lives, and in their interactions with the world around them (Ostrouch-Kaminska & Vieira, 2015: 2). Therefore, we suggest that experienced citizenship, lived religion and informal everyday learning intertwine in the crafting of gendered citizenship.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, we discuss three ways in which the religiously imbued gendered nature of citizenship is apparent in Uganda; second, we introduce two particular sets of empirical material on which our analysis is based: interviews with Christian clergy and with religious women; third, we discuss pastors’ views of marriage ideals and ways of teaching them, and the ideals of relationships and their learning as described by women. In conclusion, we draw parallels between the views of clerics and women and suggest directions for further research—by scholars in gender, religion and citizenship more broadly—into the part played by learning.

## 2 UNTANGLING GENDERED RELIGIOUS CITIZENSHIP IN UGANDA

The Ugandan Constitution grants equal rights to men and women (Articles 21 & 23, Republic of Uganda, 1995), yet the gendered nature of citizenship in Uganda is evident in multiple ways: in public debates about legislation concerning sexual morality; in persistent gender roles and inequalities; and in the arena of formal politics. Religion is closely entwined with each of these realms.

Public and political debates over legislation governing sexuality and family relations comprise the first arena wherein the gendered nature of citizenship in Uganda is made apparent. As Guma writes, the rhetoric of these debates is “symbolic of a deep concern about the apparent state of the nation in regards to the way we think about sex and gender in society” (2015: 24). This concern has crystallized in debates over three pieces of legislation: the long-stalled marriage and divorce bill, which would address oversights of women’s rights in the existing legislation (Larok, 2013); the so-called anti-gay bill, which penalizes not only many same-sex activities but also severely limits organizations’ support for sexual and gender minorities (Nyanzi, 2015; Ward, 2015); and a bill on pornography, which involved the entire Parliament of Uganda in a debate on the length of skirts women should be allowed to wear in public (Guma, 2015). This brief overview demonstrates that, despite what the country’s constitution says, Ugandan public debates construct citizenship as contingent on adherence to narrowly defined gender roles, which are upheld to a large degree through the moral policing of women.

Secondly, the gendered nature of lived citizenship is implicit in persisting inequalities. Despite improvements in some areas, gender inequality persists due to women’s differential access to and protection of land, resources and employment; wide-based sexual and gender-based violence; and “limited participation in household, community and national decision-making” (UNFPA, 2017: 1). In much of Uganda, the lives of both men and women are guided by starkly differing expectations of conduct. As Ndidde et al. observe in their analysis of gendered citizenship in rural Uganda, “the status of a female citizen [is] often constructed vis-à-vis her relationship with a male, either a father or a husband” (2020: 112). Although the constitution grants men and women equal rights as citizen, socially and culturally embedded views confer differing rights and responsibilities on men and women, resulting in women in Uganda being

held back in particular ways from accessing their full rights as citizens (*ibid.*).

Third, how citizenship is gendered is evident in formal political arenas. While Uganda has been given credit for its quota system for female representatives in governance structures, including parliament, and while notable advances were made by the women's movement particularly in the 1990s, opportunities for women's political power remain constrained (Tamale, 1999; Tripp, 2000). This is particularly true at the grassroots level, where forums for decision-making may be dictated by men, leaving little space for women's voices to be heard (Oosterom, 2011). Even prominent and locally respected female politicians may be perceived as the "daughters" of big men in power, and as ultimately bound to serving interests dictated by powerful men, rather than by their constituents (Alava, 2022). The male-centric nature of Ugandan politics is particularly clear in the religious arena where, despite the abundance of women carrying responsibility, prominent leaders are all men.

Religion plays a key role in all three realms, and there is considerable historic precedent for its contemporary influence on sexual conduct, family norms and gender roles. In the wake of Britain's colonization of Uganda, supported by Catholic and Anglican missionaries, Christianity profoundly ruptured pre-existing patterns of social relationships, and has, since then, often been drawn upon to curb challenges to patriarchy (Harris, 2017; Ochwada, 2007; Peterson, 2012). During the early 1990s, when Uganda was ravaged by a brutally wide-spread HIV/AIDS epidemic, churches featured centrally in moulding and promoting the "Abstain, Be faithful and [to a far less enthusiastic degree] wear a Condom" model for HIV/AIDS prevention (Boyd, 2015; Gusman, 2013; Parikh, 2007).

The growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity (PCC) has also shaken up religious sexual politics in other ways. Whereas the subject of sex was previously largely silenced in churches, one can now literally see pastors on stage flirting with their tightly-clad wives and talking smugly about the pleasures of sex, to the apparent glee of young audiences. On the other hand, the rise of PCC has led political discourse and public debate in Uganda to be "pentecostalised" (Bompani, 2016), whereby not only do religious leaders play prominent roles in public debates about morality, but politicians also increasingly employ religious reasoning and biblical mis/quotations to bolster their views, condemning those espousing different views as morally degenerate. Through these

developments, religious standards have become closely enmeshed with definitions of good citizens: that is, those who are hard-working (Alava, 2017b; Bompani, 2018); who remain peaceful during elections (Alava & Ssentongo, 2016); and who abide by particular gender and sexual norms (Bompani, 2017; Boyd, 2015; Christiansen, 2011; Gusman, 2009, 2017). Uganda thus follows broader regional trends in Africa wherein, increasingly, “[b]eing a good citizen requires being a good Christian” (Bompani & Valois, 2017: 7).

To add to these rich existing literatures, our study set out to explore the perspectives of teaching and learning in the dynamic space between religion, gender, politics and citizenship and, as we now explain, to experiment with methods of doing so. Due to the special place marriage holds in the Christian imaginary, but also in customary Ugandan societies, our starting point was to explore the importance accorded—and not accorded—to Christian marriage by our research participants.

### 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND MATERIAL

The analysis is informed by the authors’ ethnographic research on and personal experience of Christianity in Uganda, building specifically on two separate bodies of empirical data: interviews with Christian clergy (interchangeably referred to as pastors), and learning timeline interviews with Catholic and Pentecostal women. It should be noted that these data sets were originally collected with different methods, concentrating on slightly different questions due to the participants’ different positions vis-à-vis the research topic. However, for the purposes of this chapter’s analysis, they offer complementary perspectives on Christian marriage and on how gendered citizenship learning takes place in religious communities and within the weave of religious adherents’ everyday lives.

The interviews with pastors aimed to assess the different ways in which clergy formally convey their teachings about marriage to their parishioners. Issues discussed included the churches’ requirements for couples wishing to marry, training given by the church before and during marriage, and the pastors’ perceptions of their churches’ general influence on their members’ marriage practices. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Kitgum (a district capital in Northern Uganda), Entebbe (a town in Central Uganda with an international airport and a sizable expatriate population) and Bushenyi (a town with a university campus

in Western Uganda) with altogether 23 Catholic, Anglican and Pentecostal pastors, two of whom were women. Of the clerics, about one third were Acholis from northern Uganda, another third Baganda from Central Uganda's Buganda kingdom, and the remainder had ethnic roots in different parts of Western and Northern Uganda.<sup>1</sup> Among the interviewees were Catholic and Pentecostal pastors who headed the parishes in which the second body of data was produced.

While pastor interviews focused on the teaching of formal ideals, learning timeline interviews sought to understand what religious women themselves considered to be ideal relationships, and to trace how they described the events and relationships along their life trajectories that they considered significant in learning these ideals. These interviews were conducted in Entebbe with fifteen Catholic and ten born-again women, some of whom were married, some single (including single parents), some divorced and some cohabiting with their partners. The participants ranged from the fairly poor wives of soldiers living in army barracks to women of considerable affluence and high social standing, but all were identified due to their active participation in women's communities at their churches. Although residing in a town in Central Uganda, about half of the women were Luo-speakers (Acholi, Langi or Alur), and most of the others were a mixed group of women with roots all over Uganda.

At the beginning of the interview, respondents drew a picture or diagram conveying an ideal relationship between a man and a woman—a marriage or not, depending on their choice. They were then asked to reflect on the sources of learning that have led to the depicted ideal and to identify examples of learning from: (1) people; (2) experiences and events; (3) communities; and (4) media. These were then utilized to construct a "timeline of learning" from the time of the participants' birth up to the present. What emerges from our analysis of these two different sets of data is a difference in direction: whereas formal teaching seeks to inculcate pre-established ideals in religious adherents, religious women's actual pathways of learning lead to their own ideals being transformed.

#### 4 IDEAL MARRIAGES AND HOW TO TEACH THEM: THE PASTORS' PERSPECTIVE

In interviews with pastors, four core issues were repeated as central concerns of marriage teaching in Ugandan churches: (1) sexual purity; (2) harmony through hierarchy; (3) harmony with the extended family; and



(4) the primacy of marrying in church over doing so glamorously. With regard to the first concern, most pastors emphasized the ideal of sexual purity, of abstinence prior to marriage and the necessity of HIV testing, whereas few pastors mentioned sexual pleasure as a theme to discuss in marriage training. This resonates with a more general trend in Uganda where, as Parikh has noted, sex education in schools is taught under the rubric of “marriage and morality”, and its “embedded moral message suggests that sexual pleasure leads to dangerous consequences such as unplanned pregnancy or hiv” (2005: 143). Practically all interviewees highlighted that a Christian family should be founded upon Christian marriage, even while many acknowledged that marrying before having children was rare among their parishioners.

A second major concern was the maintenance of harmonious family relationships. Many pastors asserted that harmony emerged through submission to their view of a Christian gender hierarchy: God first, and the husband as the caring head of his wife. In one Catholic priest’s words, “The wife must know that the husband is a prophet, shepherd and priest”. In terms of the third concern, interviewed clergy placed varying degrees of emphasis on harmony with the extended family, with a division traceable between the attitudes of pastors in urban and more rural parishes. While Van Dijk (2013) has noted that marriage counselling in churches can lead young couples into conflict with their elders, most of our interviewees emphasized the importance of the couple’s maintaining good relations with relatives, indicating how committed Ugandan churches remain to the customarily valued notion of marriage as deeply embedded in kinship ties. Almost all the pastors we interviewed also considered the fulfilment of bride wealth requirements—always negotiated through the extended family—a self-evident requirement for a church wedding.

This brings us to the fourth key theme: money. Most pastors agonized over how bridewealth payments, which have in some parts of the country become highly expensive, and extravagant weddings were keeping young couples from marrying. Some churches organize mass weddings as a more affordable alternative for couples, while others advocate small weddings held simply in the pastor’s office, or for customary and church weddings to be held over the same weekend to cut costs. Yet none of these initiatives are popular: one devout Pentecostal woman we interviewed said marrying in a mass wedding would be so humiliating that she would rather not marry her partner at all.

To sum up, despite differences in emphasis between individual pastors, certain key themes cut across the interviews: the ideal marriage is sanctified through a church wedding; it upholds the husband as the natural head of the family; it is embedded in harmonious relations with the extended family; and it is based on an economy of humility, whereby the young family's wellbeing is put ahead of lavish wedding celebrations or exorbitantly high bridewealth payments. With these key themes of the pastors' teaching on marriage outlined, we turn to consider how pastors saw themselves and their churches as teaching these ideals to their parishioners.

The most central form of teaching mentioned by pastors was premarital counselling. The themes discussed during this often rather short training, consisting of a few gatherings led by the pastor or experienced laity, were rather similar in all of the churches we surveyed, and included financial management, handling relatives, raising children, proper intimacy and God's role in a relationship (see van Dijk, 2013 for an analysis from Botswana; and Parikh, 2005 on Uganda). Besides premarital counselling, urban churches in particular arrange couples' retreats, where lay counselors provide guidance on themes similar to those covered in premarital counselling. Interviewed clergy also emphasized the centrality of role models as teacher-mentors: a married best man and matron should guide new couples, who were encouraged to participate in groups such as the Catholic Church's "Holy Family", and cell groups central to the life of Pentecostal churches.

Besides premarital counselling, interviewed pastors also mentioned counselling in times of trouble as an important avenue for teaching about marriage. The centrality of counselling in African Pentecostalism (van Dijk, 2013) was highlighted by one Pentecostal pastor—as was, inadvertently, a "banking" model of learning:

It's part of our DNA. We can't just wed people [when] we don't know what they know and what they don't know. So, we are going to have to do some sort of premarital counselling so that we know for at least the following twelve topics, "we told you". In that way, if after the wedding and then you come back to us with a marital problem that comes out of those topics, it's a good point of reference, "We chatted about this and this is how it goes".

But Christian ideals of gender, sexuality and family are not only taught in those sessions that target married couples or those preparing for marriage; Ugandan churches' sermons, as well as speeches at events for women, men or youth, very often cover issues such as sexual purity, forgiveness, commitment, monogamy and the centrality of marriage in a good Christian life (Alava, 2017a; Klinken & Zebracki, 2016; Ward, 2015). A breadth of scholarship has shown that active participation in Christian settings *can* and often *does* mould people's ideals and the way in which they seek to portray themselves, as well as their sexual and relationship behaviours (Boyd, 2015; Christiansen, 2011; Gusman, 2017; van Dijk, 2013; van Klinken, 2013). As our analysis of religious women's interviews highlights, however, formal teaching can be adopted but it can also be resisted, and often is.

We turn now to describe how women with whom we conducted learning timeline interviews described their own relationship ideals and how they considered they had learned them over the course of their lives.

## 5 RELATIONSHIP IDEALS AND HOW THEY ARE LEARNED: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

Our analysis of the ways in which actively practising Catholic and Pentecostal women described ideal relationships, and the methods and sources of learning they marked as having led to these ideals, underscores Nyhagen and Halsaa's claim that "women have ambivalent and contradictory relations to religious institutions and authorities. They may choose to accept and submit to some religious prescriptions and practices, while contesting or rejecting others" (2016: 30).

In our interviews with women, three core themes could be identified as central to ideal relationships/marriages: (1) cohesion and the things that promote it; (2) spirituality; and (3) survival. First, under what we refer to as "cohesion", women spoke of friendship, openness, communication, love, sexual bonding, respect, patience, conflict resolution, faithfulness, compatibility of the couple in terms of age, religion and ethnicity, as well as harmony with the extended family. Owing to the presumption that marriage is permanent, many women argued that an ideal relationship meant sticking together through difficult times and being supportive of each other. While many interviewees emphasized the necessity of partnership and friendship, some women pointed out the tensions between different aspects of cohesion and women's desires for equality with their

partners. Describing how a good marriage should be protected from external forces, one widowed Catholic woman reflected on the younger generations' increasing criticism of gerontocratic control (see van Dijk, 2013; Parikh, 2005) when she argued that the idealization of harmony with in-laws "is highly oppressive". Why, she asked us, should women "be trying so hard to make sure you gain an acceptability from... relatives? Can't you just be what you want to be?"

The second theme raised by almost all interviewed women was the view that a relationship with God and spiritual practice increased the likelihood of an ideal relationship. Spirituality was seen to strengthen positive moral attributes, such as kindness, faithfulness, patience and sacrifice, while God was described as a source of guidance and protection. For instance, a Pentecostal married woman depicted the perfect relationship with the image of a triangle:

I believe God is the author of all marriages and He intends for a man and a woman to join in marriage, but with Him as the in-charge, the author of the marriage. And then working closely with God strengthens marriages. Let's say the triangle ... If you leave God out and if it's just man, woman and hope; who holds these marriages together?

Through spiritual practice, argued a young Catholic mother cohabiting with her partner, one can "learn about good ideals that help in living a good life". Interestingly, this woman, like many others, was in a relationship in which the man did not live up to the woman's ideal of spirituality. Whereas pastors we interviewed demonstrated a preference for both partners to belong to the same denomination, women largely argued that one's relationship with God was more important than one's formal membership.

The third theme that came out in practically almost all of the timeline interviews paralleled the theme of money raised in interviews with pastors. However, while the pastors' main concern and complaint was that financial issues outflanked spiritual ideals, for our interlocutors, issues of money emerged as a concern related to the physical survival and wellbeing of the couple and their children. Many women spoke emphatically on the necessity of financial stability and, specifically, the husband's ability to provide for a family. Fundamentally, the argument was that without income, ideal relationships cannot be realized. In the summary of one married Catholic participant, "a good man provides, looks after a woman and takes care

of her”. Yet a number of women also disagreed, including a young born-again woman cohabiting with her boyfriend, who stated, “My idea of a perfect relationship is eating on the same plate. Like we both bring to the table, we both take off the table, we both decide what gets on the table or put on the table”. Meanwhile, a number of participants with steady jobs had responded to the failure of their husbands to provide for their needs by separating from them.

With these key tenets of ideal relationships in mind, let us turn to how the women we interviewed described the learning path, and the people and events they had encountered along it, that had led them to hold their particular ideals. First, learning from people was strongly emphasized by the women we interviewed. Women mentioned having learned about care work, obedience and perseverance from mothers and—particularly in interviews with participants from Central Uganda—paternal aunts (*ssenga* in Luganda, see Parikh, 2005). As described by a married Catholic woman, “Aunties always will advise you to get a man and make sure you respect your husband. Be good to your husband”. Fathers were more often mentioned by those few women who themselves expressed fairly gender-egalitarian views on ideal marriages. Besides family members, interviewees emphasized the importance of learning through the peer support and mentoring provided by friends, with whom “you talk about the fiancées, you talk about the kind of a man you’re going to get. The kind of man you want to go to”. Similarly, some women reflected on how they learned about what they want for their own relationships by observing people around them—either those in abusive or otherwise unhappy relationships, or those who seemed to have “perfect” Christian families.

Second, the women we interviewed spoke of both joyful and painful experiences through which they had learned about relationships and formed their opinion of what made an ideal one. For instance, a middle-aged Pentecostal woman’s relationship ideals had been profoundly formed by her experiences as a teenager, when she was raped and impregnated, and forced by her family to marry:

So it’s like in fact even getting married, I didn’t have that love because I felt it’s just the family that wanted me to get married, they’re abusing you every morning and evening. “What are you doing at home? We want cows [=bridewealth]. Are you a tree that we shall make the table in you?”

Other women described things they had learned about ideal relationships through their own abusive relationships, through being betrayed by their partners, or by going through painful separations or divorce. Some experiences were more positive, however: for instance, when women reflected on how much their views on relationships had changed after their becoming mothers. Yet overwhelmingly, the experiences through which women described having learned about relationships were harsh—and far from the ideals that pastors typically convey in their formal teaching on marriage and relationships.

Third, besides people and experiences, women gave us many examples of what they had learned from media. Those most often mentioned were TV family programmes, radio call-in shows and different social media channels focusing on relationship issues, this genre having proliferated in the last few decades on the wings of commercialized “sexperts” (Parikh, 2005: 153). One Catholic single parent, for instance, commented on Facebook groups where “you read what people are going through and then you realize you are not going through it alone. You actually get advice from strangers to help you with your relationship”.

Fourth, women spoke to us about learning that took place through their participation in different types of communities and groups. In the interviews, we did not explicitly specify the church as a source of learning because we did not want to over-prompt this aspect in the timelines. We did, however, tell all interviewees that we were speaking specifically with Catholic and born-again women to hear about their ideals concerning relationships; furthermore, if they struggled to find something to write indicating the communities from which they had learned, or asked for more explanation, we mentioned “church groups” among a longer list of other examples. What is very notable is that despite the set-up of the interviews, and despite these prompts, many of the women did not mention the church or church groups at all. Among those who did, most mentions were for church-related women’s friendship and peer-support groups, which provided practical advice and support in times of trouble. A married Pentecostal woman mentioned that her church offered a cell group consisting solely of married couples, while another participant described the importance of the church group to which she was invited during her studies:

We used to pray in the university church [on campus] so not so many elders were there. It was just students and these two professors and their wives.

So there is this wife of a professor ... she would teach us how to take care of marriages, like preparing us for marriages. Every year she would have [college] finalists and she would meet [them] like for three days. And yeah, she would teach us those things. To me it was very relevant.

Even in this example of learning from a church setting the learning came not from the formal structures of the church, but from an active adult member of the laity, who took it upon herself to train young women to fulfil the future ideal of becoming a godly wife for a godly husband—perhaps what could be considered a religious variant of the customary *senga* (see Parikh, 2005).

Parikh has observed that young and adolescent Ugandan girls do not learn about sex through formal public health campaigns or religious teaching, but “from discussions with friends, by watching older people flirt at local social places such as discos and bars, and through representations of erotica in popular culture” (2005: 128). Thus our claim that churches are not very central to women’s learning about relationships is not surprising; however, our findings enable more general consideration about the nature of learning. Overall, they show that women’s learning about relationships is more solution-oriented than guided by externally determined ideals; learning is an inherent response to what is deemed an immediate or potential future problem. Through experiences incurred over a lifetime, the ideals women hold about relationships evolve. This suggests a very different understanding of learning than that underlying the formalized teaching on pre-given ideals offered by churches. Moreover, women are strategic learners. The lesson drawn from the church by interviewees who had separated from abusive, untrustworthy or negligent partners, was that they were worthy, which for them trumped the demand to sanctify or hang on to relationships that threatened their well-being. These contradictions reflect the view that religion is a “malleable resource” (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016) that women appropriate and reject according to their individual needs.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Over the past 150 years, the norms governing sexual conduct, gender roles and marriage in Uganda have undergone radical transformations, triggered importantly but not exclusively by religious upheaval and innovation. Simultaneously, the ways in which such norms are transmitted

have changed. Following the decline of kin-based education that prioritized social reproduction (see Parikh, 2005), women in Uganda today draw on multiple and often contradictory sources of learning concerning gender, sexuality and relationships.

Taking marriage as a meeting point of gender, religion, citizenship and learning, the principle aim of this chapter was to describe the discrepancy between the teaching of formal marriage ideals in Ugandan churches, and the ways in which relationship ideals are adopted, contested and actually learned by Christian women in Uganda. We have suggested that in learning about (religious) gender ideals, women simultaneously adopt and negotiate attitudes and beliefs concerning their status, roles and rights as citizens. From our analysis, we suggest two interrelated key features as potentially fruitful starting points for reflecting on the overlaps of learning, citizenship, gender and religion.

First, gender and relationship ideals, and the ideals of citizenship embedded in them, are very often learned outside of formal settings set-up for the purpose of teaching them. Drawing from our material, we show that even in Uganda, a setting commonly argued to be “highly religious”, this general argument about formal teaching and actual learning also holds true for the church and its committed members. Reflection on interviews with pastors and with religious women indicated an important “difference in direction”: whereas formal teaching begins from formal ideals, actual learning processes mould the ideals that people ultimately hold. There is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the teaching and learning of preconceived ideas (as presented by clerics) and, on the other, learning as a strategic response to life events and experiences (as indicated by interviewed women).

This underlines the important difference between how educators *think* they are teaching people, and how people are *actually* learning. Two examples in particular epitomize the distance between clerically-held ideals and many religious women’s lived experiences: the idea presented by one of our interviewed pastors that, after giving couples premarital lessons, one can simply refer to the lessons and say, “this is how it goes” if there is any future trouble; and the fact that church weddings remain rare in Uganda despite the country’s professed status as a highly religious nation and the churches’ insistence on the importance of marriage (see Alava, 2017b). Recognition of such mismatches highlights the importance of acknowledging context in analyses of gendered citizenship: individuals are citizens, partners in relationships, and practitioners of



religion, and learning about all of these realms and their interrelations continues throughout the entire life course.

Secondly, although our analysis shows that women do not simply take their church's teaching on gender relations as a given, the reality of continued gender inequality and deepening autocracy in Uganda raises serious questions as to where and how full rights—of women and of all citizens—can be achieved. Our analysis has shown how religious communities provide many women with support networks, and how women can strategically draw from Christian teaching to counter patriarchal violence. However, while it is important to be realistic about the means people have to expand their wellbeing and freedom in contexts of profoundly constrained citizenship (Ahimbisibwe forthcoming), such acknowledgment should not lead to a romanticization of agency (Jungar & Oinas, 2011). In Uganda, as elsewhere, it is vital to question the extent to which Christianity can be part of the struggle for expanding women's citizenship when for centuries it has bolstered patriarchal structures of power. In Nyhagen and Halsaa's words:

Religion is ... a malleable resource that may have empowering and disempowering effects in relation to citizenship as lived or practised. Whether religious identities, participation and belonging provide barriers or resources for women's citizenship practices must therefore be investigated in specific, historical and socio-political contexts. (Nyhagen & Halsaa, 2016: 68)

Our analysis contributes one such investigation to the field, and highlights the necessity of querying further the ways in which religion contributes to how women learn, contest and potentially unlearn their roles as citizens.

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