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# The gendered postconflict city: Possibilities for more livable urban transformations in Gulu, northern Uganda

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**ABSTRACT**
Scholars acknowledge that postconflict urbanism is undertheorized and underdeveloped for practical governance or sustainable urban management, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, which has unfortunately experienced significant conflict in the post-independence period. We argue that postconflict redevelopment theory and practice under appreciates liminal spaces and the precarious existence of postconflict people, especially postconflict women. We examine the extant literature on Gulu, Uganda, to develop theory and urban management concepts around the notion of *the gendered postconflict city* as a unique urban identity and re-center the analysis on the everyday experiences, agency, and city building practices of women. We posit three realities for understanding the gendered postconflict city: (1) the postconflict gendered city is a liminal space beyond the notions of contingency and fluidity often assigned to African cities, (2) it is a place of deep and abiding trauma, and (3) it is a place of invisibility and precarity for women who self-organize to reduce precarity. We make a series of recommendations for postconflict urban management based on these realities that include recognizing liminality in postconflict planning and setting aside the impulse to prioritize the global competitiveness of postconflict cities above all else. These have important implications for NGO and national development practices.

**KEYWORDS**
Africa; gender; urbanization; postconflict

## Introduction

This *JUA* special issue seeks unarticulated African urban identity and the related possibilities for sustainable urban management. The urban identit(ies) of the continent's cities are variable and diverse, but we hold that the gendered postconflict city is an important and underexamined urban expression. That is, the postconflict city as experienced by women is a distinct form of urbanization that requires analysis and policy responses for more sustainable and livable outcomes for African societies. As a result of colonization and continued exploitation, the post-independence period in Africa has been characterized by a significant level of violent conflict, including civil unrest, political uprisings and suppressions, coups, and protracted civil wars. This makes postconflict[1] urbanization a common context in Africa. Further, the literature suggests that analysis of postconflict urbanism is missing a focus on gender (Acan et al., 2019; Habib & Soomro, 2021; Kaldor & Sassen, 2020). This is not surprising given that within postconflict contexts, women's claims on social, political, and economic structures are often excluded in favor of male interests deemed more vital to local social stability and economic development (Byrne & McCulloch, 2012; Deiana, 2016; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016). Thus, theorizing about postconflict cities, including those in Africa, too often sideline the experiences and contributions of women. We argue, along with others (Acan et al., 2019; Kaldor & Sassen, 2020), that the postconflict African city is highly gendered and the connections between cities and conflict

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with gender, beyond simple victimhood, has been missing from larger discourses on urbanization. The postconflict context is a major setting for African urbanization with unique forms of urban development, governance, and similarly unique opportunities for transformative urban management. The goal of this article is to examine the extant literature on Gulu, Uganda, as set within the context of other postconflict urban areas of Africa to develop theory and urban management concepts around the notion of *the gendered postconflict city* as a unique urban identity and re-center the analysis on the everyday experiences, agency and city building practices of women.

## Background

While the theoretical connections between conflict and cities are longstanding,[2] there is a growing acknowledgment that postconflict urbanism is both undertheorized and underdeveloped for practical governance or sustainable urban management intervention. In Africa, observers have noted that places like Juba, South Sudan; Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo; Jos, Nigeria; and Gulu, Uganda, represent a complicated urbanism that requires nuanced analysis to understand potential avenues for transformation (Badiey, 2014; Buscher, 2018; Nnabuihe & Onwuzuruigbo, 2020). In fact, while cities have always been a prime location for the formation of new social identities and politics, the interaction of a city with armed conflict gives rise to new physical and social sites of contestation that require us to rethink our notions of urban capabilities, who drives postconflict urban development, and the possible outcomes for social action (Badiey, 2014; Bjorkdahl & Selimovic, 2016; Bollens, 2006; Buscher, 2018; Kaldor & Sassen, 2020; Pech et al., 2018). Postconflict cities like Kigali, Rwanda; Maputo, Mozambique; and Luanda, Angola, have performed well relative to mainstream economic markers, but postconflict urban development perpetually concentrates the spoils of development in the hands of a few elites in these cities (Baffoe et al., 2020; Gastrow, 2017; Goodfellow & Smith, 2013; Hudani, 2020; Roque et al., 2020; Waldorff, 2016). Together, observers tie these realities to postconflict state building and elite capture of reconstruction often leading to evictions, political marginalization, local dissent, and exacerbation of longstanding dynamics of exclusion and inequality that are often part of the original narrative of conflict.

There is no singular experience of conflict by individuals or urban regions and postconflict economic human and spatial development can take many different paths (Pech et al., 2018). Many scholars examine postconflict cities to highlight one or more specific themes, the interaction of these themes, and their impacts on postconflict life and sustainable urban management. These include the impacts of mainstream economic imperatives and/or economic exclusions (Murtagh, 2017), the role of international experts (Hudani, 2020), urban politics, state institutions, and governance (Boyd et al., 2014; Buscher, 2018), explosive urban growth and land rights (McMichael, 2014; Pritchard, 2016; Udelsmann Rodrigues et al., 2021), the complex implications of humanitarian intervention (Acan et al., 2019; Mackie et al., 2017); and everyday dissent among urban residents (Gastrow, 2017).

Missing from the literature is an examination of the postconflict city through the experience of women. This is not to say that women do not feature prominently in much of the literature, but here we are arguing that the gendered postconflict city is a specific expression of urban life, particularly in Africa. With Kaldor and Sassen (2020), we suggest that effective postconflict urban analysis must recenter analysis on the capability of women not just as victims but as transformative urban actors. We argue for the need to re-center the analysis of this unique urban identity on the everyday experiences, agency, and city-building practices of women.

## Method and research questions

This article is an inductive essay that analyzes existing academic, international aid, and government literature pertaining to Gulu and the reconstruction of northern Uganda to posit theory about the gendered postconflict city. We nest the experience of Gulu within the larger literature of postconflict

urbanism to contextualize and corroborate our arguments. Our approach is reliant on secondary scholarship and we believe this is justified by the current gap in theorizing on this important issue. Our goal is not to provide an empirical generalization to the specific case of Gulu, but instead to create concepts for scholars and practitioners to examine, test, and extend for positive impact on knowledge and quality of life in postconflict regions, especially for women.

Because we are suggesting that the gendered postconflict city is a specific urban expression that requires specific and deliberate analysis, our first task is to ask if concepts regularly applied to Africa's cities do justice to the gendered postconflict context. This is the purpose of the section below that immediately follows an introduction to Gulu. In it, we argue that postconflict redevelopment theory and practice under appreciates liminal spaces and the precarious existence of postconflict people, especially postconflict women. Further, the concepts most often applied to African cities, like fluidity, improvisation, and even informality require rethinking or modification in the postconflict. We rely on Murphy & McDowell, 2018) to conceptualize the liminality of the gendered postconflict city and connect the concept to longstanding ideas of African urbanism like those of AbdouMaliq Simone (2001, 2006, 2014), Jennifer Robinson (2006, 2013), and others.

Second, we draw on the experiences of women in Gulu and other postconflict regions to point out several salient aspects of the gendered postconflict city. Specifically, we argue first that the gendered postconflict city is a place of deep and abiding trauma. Then we discuss that it is a place of invisibility and precarity for women who self-organize to reduce precarity.

Third, we discuss recommendations for scholars and practitioners to improve sustainability and livability in the gendered postconflict city. We rely on Judith Butler's (2004, 2009) ideas of precarity and livability where local power structures shape whose lives are livable. Livability includes the necessities of life (food, shelter, etc.) but also conditions of social intelligibility and agency. We argue that the policy focus in gendered postconflict cities should focus on livability rather than notions of sustainable urban development because it has a broader and implicitly political lens that connects to all the conditions that sustain life. The focus on livability leads us recommendations for political processes as well as for development and reconstruction plans.

## Gulu

Gulu, Uganda, is selected as the focus of this paper. See Figure 1 for a map of Uganda. The city is chosen because it was a key location in the protracted war (1986–2006) between the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government of Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Joseph Kony. As will be discussed below, Gulu is also chosen because it is central to the postconflict redevelopment strategy put forward by the Government of Uganda and international interests. Gulu is an important population center; it has growth considerably due to wartime and postwar migration and is the main urban center of northern Uganda with a population of 146,858. Gulu is the second largest Ugandan city after the capital, Kampala.

Gulu was also chosen due to its experience during the war. Gulu was a major center of logistics, supplies, and the administration of the government's military counterattack on the LRA incursions. Strategic defenses around Gulu were aimed at slowing the LRA speed of assault and quick deployment of government responses (Virilio, 1977). This led to the intensification of the built environment including communications, transport, roads, and better funding of the military and military installations. All these also protected, supplied, and supported individuals and groups gathered within its spaces, fueling urban development of Gulu. Gulu was also the main center for the international humanitarian response during and after the conflict. This intensified when the Ugandan government forced the rural population of the north into internally displaced people's (IDP) camps and expected international NGOs to administer the camps. In return for managing the displacement, NGO programs became the infrastructure and urban service delivery funding priorities of international donors with significant impact on the built form and administration of Gulu (Branch, 2013; Buscher

**Figure 1.** Map of Uganda showing location of Gulu in the country's north. Source: The World Factbook 2021. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2021.

et al., 2018). While the central government had long neglected Gulu and the north, during the war, NGOs became the main providers of urban and social services and these investments in the physical and social infrastructure guide current urban planning decisions.

Gulu of course existed prior to the war. Its path is bound up in the legacy of colonialism and the postcolonial context that add to the layered urbanization. In fact, the war has roots in the colonial administration of Uganda (Branch, 2013; Finnsrom, 2008) and the conflict defies easy classification as Western media has downplayed the atrocities of the Ugandan government, preferring to focus on the brutality of the LRA. Further, the conflict itself is connected to the legacy of Uganda's political economy that led to decades of disinvestment in the north by regimes focused on the south. In fact, these dynamics continue to this day with Gulu one of the centers of opposition to President Museveni.

Lastly, Gulu is chosen because the city has been the focus of important scholarly work. For example, Buscher et al. (2018) examine Gulu to show how the influence of international aid organizations give rise to "humanitarian urbanism" in postconflict cities. Adam Branch (2013) has also examined Gulu

previously to understand the city's transformation to an IDP camp and how urban destabilization is perhaps greater after the cessation of open hostilities. We draw from and seek to build on these, adding to it our extensive review of the wider postconflict literature.

## The postconflict gendered city is a liminal space beyond the notions of contingency, fluidity, and informality often assigned to African cities

This section addresses the first task articulated above: How can concepts commonly employed by African urban theorists be extended or modified in the gendered postconflict context? We argue that gendered postconflict cities are liminal spaces and that important concepts of African urbanization do not adequately convey the context or suggest adequate policy responses.

Scholars including, but not limited to, AbdouMaliq Simone (2001, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2014) and Jennifer Robinson (2006, 2013) have understood that African cities are places and spaces of invention, resilience, navigation, possibilities, and constant adoptability that must be understood on their own terms. This conclusion is both based on observation of African urban life and is also a deliberate attempt to reframe debates away from stereotypes of violence and poverty. Additionally, it is widely accepted that the binary representation of the urban-rural belies the fluid urbanity and rurality landscape in Africa. African cities are sites of constant and simultaneous improvisation and hustling that provide a sense of long-term temporariness to each contingent moment. In this context, people make, remake and perform urbanity, bringing cities into being in ways that are meaningful to them (Castryck & Sieveking, 2014). This takes place locally, but within historic legacies of colonialism and global networks of accumulation that regularly marginalize and disrupt African urban dwellers and their strategies for social and economic well-being. For Simone (2001, p. 18) this "worlding" of the African city means that "residents are in a continuous state of changing gears" where the need for constant preparedness to adapt or to move physically or socially creates a backdrop for everyday life. Other scholars have shown that the fluidity and movement of African cities is highly shaped by gender, age, and other social locations whereby movement in urban Africa serves as a form of searching for personal belonging and to shore up one's own social, economic, and physical security (Gough, 2008; Harris, 2018; Harris & Little, 2019; Langevang, 2008).

These concepts have important implications for theory building and policy analysis. Duminy et al. (2014) synthesize the literature to argue that urban planning research in African cities must contend with at least three conceptual notions. First, that African cities are impacted by their existence on the periphery of academic and policy discourse, and that African urban residents are excluded from conventional discussion of the urban experience of city building. Second, that African urbanization consists of high levels of urban informality, where state–society relations including the growth of informal settlements, housing, livelihoods, etc., exist in a zone of flexibility and exception. Third, urban residents experience the politics of anticipation where one never knows what will happen next and must be looking to make the most of every moment to make a life.

These concepts are certainly present in postconflict contexts but are not adequate to understand life in postconflict African cities. Beall et al., 2013) have argued that the end of civil wars globally do not end civic conflict in cities nor the postconflict social crisis among women and urban youth. Adam Branch (2013) confirms this arguing that for Gulu, the time after the war is the time it was most unstable. The continuation of conflict dynamics in the postconflict period is described, for example, by Henrik Vigh (2008) who observes how conflict is not a passing period of chaos, but rather settles as a social state, shifting from a state of emergency to a situation of emergency; a settled life of uncertainty. This reconstructive vision of conflict prompts Myriam Denov and Andi Buccitelli's (2013) observation of conflict and crisis being chronic and endemic in postconflict Sierra Leon.

Thus, many of the same words or concepts that focus on uncertainty, improvisation and informality are used to explain postconflict African cities and those that have not experienced destabilizing armed conflict. We need theoretical clarity to understand the specific urban experiences of postconflict contexts. These realities lead theorists (like Murphy & McDowell, 2018) to suggest postconflict zones

in Northern Ireland and the Basque region of Spain are not merely locations no longer experiencing violence or seeing such spaces as communities on the other side of violence. Rather, Murphy and McDowell acknowledge a third or liminal space where postconflict societies remain in a state of flux or constant movement. They draw on observations in the literature of highly uneven postconflict regeneration across neighborhoods of the same cities (O'Dowd & Komarova, 2011) and of seemingly ever-present conflict in areas where conflict had ostensibly ended (Bollens, 2012) to extend the longstanding notion of liminal space within geography and urban studies to spaces of conflict transitions. One way to conceptualize the liminal space of the postconflict is vis-a-via the metaphor of journey or continuum. Murphy and McDowell describes the liminal as, "processual process characterized by an initial stage of separation and detachment; a middle stage of liminality in which the subject or 'liminar' moves through a space that is different from both the 'before' and 'after' states; and a final stage of 'aggregation,' or consummation of the liminal journey." In addition to the state of being neither here or there, postconflict liminal societies are also marked by a "collective longitudinal experiences of ambiguity"; an "in-between-ness within a changeful context," and in some cases the liminal state "may become a permanent state—with consequences for peace itself."

Of particular relevance to the everyday experience of African cities to Duminy et al. (2014), discussed above, is urban informality. Informality defines African cites, including those in postconflict contexts. However, many scholars (Mackie et al., 2017; Wind & Ibrahim, 2020; Young, 2020) argues that informality in the postconflict must be understood differently. While urban informality is a lifeline to local populations when commodity and social service networks breakdown, in the long run, postconflict informality must be recognized as resistance to top down postconflict governance systems so commonly experienced after war and as a reproduction of the conditions that led to conflict in the first place.

In Gulu, the city's continuous state of change may on the surface resemble that of other African cities that have not experienced destabilizing, but we argue, it is postconflict liminal space (Murphy & McDowell, 2018) that requires us to interpret the improvisation, informality, and anticipation observed there and in other postconflict cities differently. The 2-decade experience of the civil war in northern Uganda resulted the physical displacements of 1.5 million people into internally displaced peoples' camps (Dagne, 2011). The camps were created by the Ugandan government through violent forced relocation and sustained by government-backed political repression and by international NGOs that managed, fed, and lent legitimacy to the camps (Branch, 2007). Branch (2013) argues that these camps effectively created an archipelago of slums without cities and that Gulu, the largest city in the region, was transformed into the largest of the IDP camps hosting 100,000 displaced people.

These realities meant that there was a constant flow in and out of Gulu as the population sought shelter and sustenance during the protracted conflict. This included the so-called "night commuters" where children traveled to Gulu and other towns every night to avoid abduction by the LRA resulting in considerable strains on the city and significant human costs (Falk et al., 2004). After the cessation of hostilities in 2006, waves of displaced persons returned to their rural homelands, only to find their land usurped or the local social fabric disintegrated in ways that made staying in the rural areas untenable. The population of urban areas in the north, like Gulu, rose rapidly as formerly displaced people looked to the cities to find a place to make a life.

This type of displacement is significantly different than the kinds of migration and informal urbanization that is a part of African urbanization outside of conflict. Chris Dolen (2009) argues that while the conflict between the Ugandan government and the LRA is widely understood as an internal civil war, it in fact should be understood as a form of mass torture. The civil war gave cover for the tortuous displacement of the population whose intent was to subordinate the northern Ugandan population. During this time, Acholis, the IDP camps, and anything associated with northern Uganda was stigmatized and otherized in the Ugandan media (Finnsrom, 2008). In this context, Gulu grew in an unplanned manner where informal housing proliferated in yards and other open areas outside of any city plan. While on its face, this may appear similar to urban informal housing and other land use patterns observed across the continent, the pace of informal development, its links to personal (in)

security, and how this kind of settlement pattern fits into the liminal postconflict space makes it a different type of urbanization process. This reality is not fully explored in the literature from either an urban theory or policy perspective.

In addition to widespread displacement, the conflict was characterized by the abduction of over 20,000 women and children (Human Rights Watch, 2012). Those abducted were forced to be soldiers, servants, and sexual slaves. The dynamics of return and reintegration of formerly abducted people or ex-LRA soldiers and forced-wives have added to the complex challenges of postconflict cohesion, as has been described in detail by a number of researchers (Acan, 2018; Amony, 2015; Baines, 2010, 2004; Baines & Rosenoff Gauvin, 2014; Dolen, 2009). Many formerly abducted women, facing significant stigmatization in their rural home areas had no choice but to settle in Gulu, trying to make a new home for themselves and a new place in the moral universe (Acan et al., 2019). Those formerly abducted now live along with ex-combatants and those displaced by the conflict while often being landless and uneducated.

Thus, while the concepts applied to African cities are still relevant, the realities of conflict, insecurity, and the postconflict liminal space add additional layers that change the experience of contingency, fluidity and anticipation. We need new concepts to understand the urbanization processes in the gendered postconflict city. We continue this line of thought next by discussing the far-reaching impact of postconflict trauma on postconflict urbanization.

## The gendered postconflict city is a place of deep and abiding trauma

In this section and the next we address the second task of this paper, to put forward salient concepts for scholars and practitioners as we seek to understand the gendered postconflict city. Given the extraordinary violence of war, extraordinary trauma in postconflict spaces would seem inevitable. We argue that trauma is as much a part of the structure of the gendered postconflict city as its physical infrastructure. The postconflict liminal space offers the opportunity of healing and transformation, but also the high probability of re-traumatization and cementing in specific kinds of vulnerability. In this section we will use the growing literature on postconflict trauma in Gulu and other African contexts to show how trauma is preeminent in gendered postconflict urbanization. We will also however note that the liminal space of the postconflict city is also the location of possibilities for transformation (Kaldor & Sassen, 2020; Porter, 2016).

The special threat of violence against women, often referred to as gender-based violence (GBV), in conflict and postconflict contexts is well documented and has been a focus of deliberation by NGOs and international governing bodies since at least the mid-1980s resulting in significant research, normative frameworks, and legal mandates (Ward, 2013). Research in postconflict Africa bears this out. Cardoso et al. (2016), Medie (2017), and Ballet et al. (2022) show that in Cote d'Ivoire, postconflict cities, where political crisis, rapid urban development, and social change combine to not only increase violence against women and children but also the acceptance of violence in everyday life and discourage reporting of gender and sexual violence by women. Adejumo et al. (2021) note that gendered violence in postconflict southern Nigeria is high and is enhanced by preexisting vulnerabilities such as age, education, ethnicity, and marriage status of women as well as ineffective local governance institutions. A literature review of the state of mental health in postconflict Liberia show that communities suffer higher prevalence of mental disorders and psychosocial distress (Hook et al., 2020).

These forms of trauma and violence have important social and political impacts. Fiske and Shackel (2015) show that in postconflict Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, and northern Uganda, the cycles of physical and sexual violence experienced by women extend to political, legal and economic exclusion that keeps women from decision-making structures. Although writing about Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cynthia Cockburn (2013) notes that postconflict upheaval and violence can lead to a regression of the status of women in society. Taken together, physical and sexual violence are prevalent and connected to political violence and exclusion in the gendered postconflict city.

As noted above, the conflict in Uganda was characterized by significant rates of abduction of women and children by the LRA and a number of studies in northern Uganda have examined the particularities of the reintegration process for the large number of abductees, particularly child soldiers and women (which are not mutually exclusive categories). Kiconco and Nthakomwa (2018) and Kiconco (2021) explain how these experiences are compounded for women. War time experiences of sexual and gender-based violence for women are documented as much harsher for women than for men. Reintegration is also more difficult because of patriarchal social structures, which make women more vulnerable and susceptible to ongoing abuse. Women are often ostracized by the community and find themselves in precarious and abusive living situations as a result. Maina (2009) documents various efforts to help in the reintegration process, both using western-European methods of counseling and medicating, and traditional ceremonies of reconciliation. However, according to Maina's comparative study of returning abductees who have been through a reintegration process and those who have not, the reintegration process has had little impact on the formerly abducted.

In their ethnographic study of trauma and violence in postconflict northern Uganda, Meinert and Whyte (2017) suggest that the trauma is manifested and spread through the violence of alcoholism, domestic abuse, anxiety, mental illness, and difficulty integrating to social circumstances. Locally, trauma is often understood as the torment of *Cen*, spirits of the dead who have not been put to rest. Meinert and Whyte point to violence as a layered and spreading phenomenon through examples like those of a war survivor who is affected by *Cen* and unpredictably resorts to violence against those around him, including his wives and children. This violence then sets an example for his children who will grow up not knowing how to take care of their families, perpetuating multigenerational violence as a result. Thus, trauma and violence seem to embed itself in the very fabric of the region, and of Gulu city, where the war was waged.

It is estimated that roughly 10,000 abducted women and girls gave birth to two or more children while in captivity (Denov et al., 2018). Myriam Denov and Lakor (2017) draw particular attention to the plight of these children born of rape or forced marriage in captivity. They report stigmatization, denigration, abuse, marginalization, lack of identity and belonging and general disempowerment by extended family upon return. Because of the difficulty being accepted back in the community, Denov and Lakor found the children they worked with felt that war was better than peace. This demonstrates the deep societal level of rupture and ongoing trauma, both by the children attempting to reintegrate, but also on the part of families in accepting them back. This also helps to explain the high rates of suicidal tendencies in war-affected children in northern Uganda. Winkler et al. (2015) and Ertl et al. (2014) explain that war affected children and youth have high rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, depression and suicidal thoughts. Women faced higher levels of PTSD across the board, with highest being the formerly abducted who had perpetrated acts of aggression while in captivity.

However, the postconflict liminal space is also a space of possibility and the potential for transformation. It should be noted that the International Transitional Justice Movement has been advocating that special or separate justice systems outside of the norm is required to provide justice for victims of human rights abuses in conflict zones for years. Their work advocates for formal systems using courts and tribunals as well as more traditional ways centered on restoration and healing through culturally relevant approaches in the aftermath of conflict (Baines, 2010; Baines & Rosenoff Gauvin, 2014). The concept of transitional justice recognizes there is a time after conflict where the needs of victims must be met through social and legal systems outside of what existed prior to war or what will come in the long term after conflict (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2020).

It is also worth noting that organizations like the International Center for Transitional Justice recognizes that the needs of a postconflict populace extends beyond redress for human rights violations and recommends far-reaching changes to how postconflict governance and community development plans are created and implemented (Kasande Kihika & Kallweit, 2020). These include greater ability for women and other victims to participate in policy development; recognition and support for grassroots civil society organizations, and greater research on the demographic realities and experiences of the local population during conflict so local services can be more responsive.

Moreover, Porter (2016) argues that any of these initiatives must focus on how women define their priorities through the everyday reality of their lives and not through pre-ordained themes determined during peace negotiations and high-level policy deliberations.

In fact, these calls for women to be involved at a greater level in postconflict decision-making echo calls from general literature on postconflict urbanism that suggest only inclusive democratic governance processes and the ability for grassroots organizations to set the reconstruction agenda will lead to outcomes the benefit postconflict societies across social locations (Baffoe et al., 2020; Mackie et al., 2017; Waldorff, 2016; Wind & Ibrahim, 2020; Young, 2020). However, we argue the deliberate inclusion of women must be highlighted in these efforts. The Gulu experience suggests that redevelopment process must integrate women who face the compounded challenges of high instances of trauma during the war, including high levels of stigmatization, loss of identity, and disempowerment post war. Myriam Denov and Lakor (2017) argue, for instance, that women's involvement in restructuring communities could be an important step in recovery. Winkler et al. (2015) suggest that simply moving on from the conflict and sending war affected women and girls to school is not a solution, and Maina's (2009) study reinforces that current reintegration processes are not particularly effective.

All of this suggests that that reconstruction plans and governance must acknowledge the conclusion of Meinert and Whyte (2017), which is that layers of trauma are embodied in the very place itself. The local term, *Cen*, is useful here because it explains trauma as a living energy that impacts the city and its population. Trauma is layered, shifts and spreads. It lives in many forms and contributes to the precarity and unpredictability of liminal postconflict cities; never fully disappearing, only hidden at times. The manifestation of *Cen* through violence and depression compounded by the rupture of traditional rural and communal society to a fast-paced city-style individualistic atmosphere exaggerates the disorientation of adults and youth alike. The postconflict city needs to learn to live with and work through *Cen* in ways that are locally meaningful and which guide policy.

## The gendered postconflict city is a place of invisibility and precarity for women who self-organize to reduce precarity

In this section we extend the notion of the liminality of the gendered postconflict city to the notion of precarity and invisibility for women. Whereas the preceding section argued that trauma permeates the city in the postconflict because of the experiences of the war, here we discuss how postconflict policy dehumanizes and erases women leading to precarity. In fact, the term *post-conflict* (hyphenated) is often criticized by feminist peacebuilding scholars because, for women, there is often no "post" to the insecurity or violence in their lives after war ends, and in fact, postwar contexts can actually be a much more perilous time for women (Porter, 2016). For Judith Butler (2004, 2009, 2016) precarity is the sense that all human life is characterized by vulnerability where our lives can be ended or injured at any time. Key to this is that our lives and the substance of our lives are in many ways out of our own control and in the hands of others. For Butler, this reality is a consequence of political and social actions. In fact, she argues that human social and political organizations act to maximize precariousness for those who lives are illegible to power and minimize it for those whom social structure recognize as fellow humans whose lives are worth living. Of course, this means the everyday experience of vulnerability and precarity is highly uneven across and within societies. Writing about postconflict Hargeisa, Somaliland, Stuvøy et al. (2021), suggest that precarity is spatialized in postconflict urban space during and after reconstruction as power is exercised to exclude, thus imbuing the built form with kinds of violence that continue to harm the already marginalized.

In this sense, women's precarity is heightened in postconflict cities because while they are highly impacted by conflict and postconflict settings, they are not seen in policy, their needs are not planned for in earnest, and their lives are too often defined and managed by those with other priorities. Often this means being ignored or excluded from key community decisions or the benefits of postconflict reconstruction. Preexisting local cultural gender norms and the legal context of women's political participation highly impacts the opportunities for and efficacy of women's roles in postconflict

peacebuilding and development (Berry, 2015; Gizelis, 2011; Pospieszna, 2015). Women's claims on social, political, and economic structures in postconflict situations are often excluded by powerful international and local actors, including NGOs and national governments, in favor of interests deemed more vital to local social stability and economic development such as ex-combatants or local political or economic elites (Byrne & McCulloch, 2012; Deiana, 2016; Goetz & Jenkins, 2016). Important patriarchal cultural constraints mean that women are often not seen as legitimate political actors (Adeogun & Muthuki, 2018; Tagoe & Abakah, 2015).

In Gulu, this plays out in many ways and here we will focus on two. First, connected to points above, one important way to understand the invisibility and precarity of women in postconflict contexts is through the experience of formerly abducted women who seek to make a life for themselves and their families in Gulu. As cataloged by multiple researchers, formerly abducted women and their families face significant challenges and often settle in Gulu or the other towns of the north because they cannot return to their rural homelands (Acan et al., 2019; Ertl et al., 2014; Kiconco & Nthakomwa, 2018; Maina, 2009). For those formerly abducted, they and their children are stigmatized as subhuman and associated with the atrocities of the war (Baines, 2011). They are cut off from traditional social safety nets in rural areas especially access to agricultural land for themselves and their children as well as social and economic support systems in Gulu. Educating their children, feeding and housing their families is a struggle. They face continued high rates of mental distress, sexual assault, and suicidal ideation. Further, due to the breakdown of traditional social structures in the region (Branch, 2013), most responsibilities for household livelihood earning and community maintenance falls to women including roles traditionally played by men (Center for Peace and Development, 2018, 2019). Local and national governments do not recognize these challenges, do not see them as priorities, or do not have the resources to intervene.

In the face of situations like this, women throughout postconflict contexts organize themselves to address serious problems or simply to survive. For instance, D'Errico et al. (2013), document how women's groups in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo organize to address their own vulnerabilities in the face of inadequate or nonexistent health-care systems. In Gulu, facing invisibliz-ing social and political forces, women who were formerly abducted have self-organized to support themselves socially and economically, provide trauma counseling, and make positive community change (Acan et al., 2019; Justice & Project, 2017). These are acts of individual and collective agency carried out by women's grassroot organization all over the north, including Gulu, aimed at not only at reducing the precarity facing women in postconflict communities, but also simply at seeing each other as fellow humans to increase their ability to exist and live in the city and in society. One of these groups, the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) wrote and successfully had their petition read in the Ugandan Parliament in 2014 on behalf of war-affected women.[3] The petition listed the ways local and national governments as well as the international community have failed to see and acknowledge the difficult circumstances that women in the north continue to endure in the postconflict context. The petition called for an acknowledgment of the plight of women, reparations, and budgetary commit-ments to support women. No action has been taken on the petition.

This connects to the second way that precarity and invisibility plays out in Gulu and other gendered postconflict cities, which are the numerous planning and development polices that have been devel-oped for Gulu with essentially no input from and no focus on women facing heightened precarity including those formally displaced or abducted. This follows unfortunate patterns in international practice. Whereas the WAN petition and other advocacy initiatives have sought to center the experience of women in postconflict reconstruction, Erin Baines (2004) argues that in the name of gender equality, worldwide most postconflict policies and specifically those created for communities with significant refugee/IDP populations, simply add a concern for women to long established policy agendas and priorities. Worse, these typical postconflict policies and operations reinforce traditional gender assumptions about women's and men's societal roles as vulnerable innocents and political warriors, respectively. These combine to depoliticize and erase women and their priorities with the goal of reintegrating pre-war social hierarchies.

In Gulu, the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP) was adopted in 2007 for the period covering 2007–2010. It contains multiple goals for development in northern Uganda including priorities for consolidating state authority, rebuilding communities and resettling the displaced, revitalizing the economy, and ex-combatant reintegration. Its few references to women are in line with Baines's critique above. Women are either listed as statistically more impacted by HIV/AIDS and thus a threat to rising infection rates in police and security forces, as fearful and vulnerable to continued violence, and as indirect project beneficiaries of identified NGO activities. Women are not understood as political actors with agency nor does the PRDA acknowledge any meaningful role for women other than as passive recipients of government and NGO actions.

After the PRDA, Gulu's development has been shaped by the 2012, and 2015 Uganda National Development Plans (UNDP I and II) which centralized urban development decisions at the national level. These plans name Gulu as one of four regional centers that are receiving significant urban infrastructure investment. Buscher et al. (2018) argue that these planning and development investments expand on the built form and social service assets created during the war, which facilitated military and humanitarian needs, toward making Gulu more competitive in global markets. Plans were created with international donors as key stakeholders and with important NGOs offering up their own master plans for inclusion. The UNDPs include women as subject of planning processes more extensively than the PRDA and includes legislative accomplishments aimed at gender equity and a minimal acknowledgment of the existence of women's grassroots organizations. However, there is no significant role for women to play in the creation, implementation or monitoring of these plans and priorities and no way for organized women to engage and evaluate their appropriateness or impact on the ground. Additionally, these plans and programs do not acknowledge how postconflict society has changed, how individual lives have been altered, and "are oblivious to the unique experiences and needs of victims of gross human rights violations" (Kasande Kihika & Kallweit, 2020, p. 2). This means that even as the post war development plan and investments are aimed at infrastructure of mainstream economic development and not the specific needs of the population, the local population, especially women, are in no position to take advantage of the potential benefits of these programs (Kasande Kihika & Kallweit, 2020). Throughout the postconflict reconstruction plans, lip service is given to the role of women in postconflict reconstruction and their specific needs in postconflict contexts, but the plans do not recognize women as agents or even as people, but as boxes to check. Decisions about their lives and communities are made without their involvement and for the benefit of others. This means that apart from doing active harm, the failure to plan for the liminal period also forgoes the transformative potential to make Gulu more livable.

Once again, we see that local women respond to being excluded from local governance through self-organizing. Networks of grassroots women's organizations are seizing liminal spaces to rebuild relationships and rebuild communities from the bottom up. An example of postconflict grassroots women's peacebuilding efforts can been seen in the community-based work at St. Monica's Girl's Tailoring School in Gulu. Led by the renowned peace activist and educator, Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe, St. Monica's currently operates three primary schools, a vocational and adult literacy program, a tailoring and culinary school, and a full-service medical clinic offering maternity, delivery, and post-delivery care. St. Monica's formed as a as a space of refuge for women and children during the war and it continues to be a place of learning, healing, and activism. In 2018, St. Monica's began hosting an annual grassroots women's peace conference that brought women from various districts in northern Uganda and South Sudanese refugees to network, strategically discuss their needs and the needs of their communities and share ideas on how to activate and message peacebuilding and activism in their own communities (Center for Peace and Development, 2018, 2019).

## Discussion and recommendations

To address the final task articulated above and make recommendations for urban management practices in postconflict cities, we return to the Butler's notions of precarity and livability to guide the discussion on how to increase the livability of postconflict cities.

Judith Butler has written and spoken quite thoughtfully about precarity and its relationship to performativity. For Butler,

> performativity has everything to do with "who" can become produced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning. Precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable, readable, or grievable. And in this way, precarity is rubric that brings together women, queers, transgender people, the poor, and the stateless. (2009)

Those defined by precarity are typified by several factors including low or inconsistent wages, work-by-contract, lack of financial stability and a weakened or non-existent social safety net. Precarity is where women or anyone potentially based on how their humanity is performed in a given context are differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death because their humanity is systemically diminished or not understood by local power structures. The gendered postconflict city heightens women's precarity because war itself and postconflict urban governance—world over—makes choices about who matters, under what conditions they matter, who deserves life, and whose life deserves to be grieved. In the postconflict city this relates to resource allocation and reconstruction priorities that have always disadvantaged or excluded women. To Butler, *livability* is a political act because local power structures shape whose lives are livable. Livability includes the necessities of life (food, shelter, etc.) but also conditions of social intelligibility, social recognition, and social mattering. From our perspective, livability incapsulates and moves the discussion beyond sustainability, because Butler's notions of livability not only connect to all the conditions that sustain life but creates the possibility for postconflict subjects to thrive and attain a livable life. In thinking about the emergence of a postconflict Gulu, it seems that a radical reimagining should interface with theoretically practical questions like: who is the precariat and how do we know? How does the precariat move from object to subject? What are the factors that make a city livable for the precariat or how does ethical urban design, management, and livability disrupt the state of precarity?

Along these lines, we will conclude the paper with a discussion of ways to increase the livability of postconflict cities within the points we raise above. We have argued that important concepts emerging from scholarship in African urbanization do not fully capture the reality of postconflict cities and that the liminal space of these cities needs to be recognized in theory building and policy discussions. Further, we also showed that gendered postconflict cities are places of deep trauma. The liminal space of the postconflict city can be a time of re-traumatization, new trauma, or a time of healing and transformation. We stated above that postconflict development plans fail to see the liminality of the urban existence and actually increase the precarity of women's lives. Throughout all this we highlighted how women organize themselves to meet their needs and advocate for their own priorities.

First, we must acknowledge and plan for liminal spaces in the postconflict. Past important observations of urbanization in Africa have focused on the worlding of contingency and movement, and a population constantly changing gears. While these are absolutely a part of the gendered postconflict city, we must think about them differently in that specific urban context. Life's contingent moments in the postconflict city take place in a liminal space of settled uncertainty which itself was preceded by great social upheaval. This is an added layer to the worlding of African cities; a complex problem where postconflict cities exist on multiple layers of colonization, militarization, and patriarchy where women search for a place to exist. Their full humanity is not recognized in the urban often because they have become illegible to the governing discourse of the postconflict. Theorists and policy makers must recognize liminal states of being and create appropriate policy space for urban and social development within. That is, as seen in Uganda, most postconflict planning seeks to create emergency plans for the crisis and then once the most basic measures of social stability are met, national governments and the international community transfer policy frameworks to the prevailing development priorities of the day. The language of moving from humanitarian intervention to development intervention is replete in postconflict policymaking without full recognition of and planning for liminal states.

This exacerbates or makes permanent unresolved community problems. Temporary plans that create policy for an ending crisis, like Uganda's PRDA, simply list a series of temporary projects to deal with massive displacement and population movement. Postconflict plans, including the UNDPs, prioritize physical infrastructure without providing for the long-term social infrastructure that might make life more permanent and livable. Worse, these plans pay lip service to gender inequities, but provide no enforceable mechanisms to that give women or women's grassroot organizations a permanent place in local decision-making. They fail the immediate and long-term needs of the population and miss important opportunities for transformation toward greater livability.

Second, postconflict urban policy must focus on creating a sense and reality of belonging for women within liminal postconflict periods. This can be done, in part, by delaying the onset of profit driven development policies during the liminal states. Postconflict (re)development plans that emphasis the profit motive in urban land development and control erase women and make their lives less livable. National and local policy must limit postconflict elites', government officials, and NGO's ability to control land, sell land, and benefit from the increasing cost of real estate. This means that plans that simply attempt to reintegrate cities into pre-war social and economic arrangements, or which prioritize quickly adopting mainstream development strategies without adequately attending to the liminality of the postconflict must be abandoned. It has been established that the rush to cash in on postconflict land development has made life less livable for women by all meaningful measures (Capraro & Woodroffe, 2018). In addition to delaying the profit motive in liminal postconflict development, the postconflict city's livability can be improved through inclusive housing policies aimed at recognizing and prioritizing the humanity of urban migrants, especially women impacted by displacement or abduction or who are separated from traditional social structures for any reason. This can be contextualized to the specific postconflict contexts. If land redistribution, formalization, and titling is unattainable, then lease/rental policies that protect households must be adopted and enforced. As per below, these polices should be created and enforced with local inclusive women's groups. In fact, in her study of Rwanda and Cote d'Ivoire, Heidi Hudson (2009) warns that lip service to the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and development efforts in postconflict contexts that fail to recognize culturally appropriate agency of women lead to ineffective policy and implementation. The timing of the limits to profit driven planning can also be dependent on the local context. In places like Uganda, where all aspects of life were impacted by the war, this period must last longer than the 24–36 months set up by plans like the PRDA.

Third, the international community must commit to changing how it approaches postconflict urban development. A multilevel approach is required where NGOs, potentially through the International Red Cross, SPHERE Standards, UNHCR, UN HABITAT or others adopt an NGO code of conduct that requires NGO to adhere to a set of principles to shape the long-term implications of their actions in conflict and postconflict contexts on urbanization. The framework for this already exists because since 2016, the United Nations and the World Bank have been developing collaborative ways of working that focus on all parts of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus (International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), 2018). The emerging policy frameworks from this endeavor must now be spatialized to require reflection on the impacts of humanitarian assistance on urban and community development. International donors must commit to not funding postconflict reconstruction packages that do not recognize and create policy for liminal spaces of transition and the political agency of women's grassroots organizations.

Postconflict urban development plans simply do not account for the needs of the population in general and women specifically or the impact that postconflict trauma will have on human settlements for years to come. With Porter (2016) and Cahn et al. (2010), we argue that to do this, postconflict cities must be planned around notions of social services justice, which centers social services and redevelopment on the everyday needs and priorities of women and connects investment to the material, social and mental health needs of the postconflict population. There is also a call to extend the body of research on trauma-informed service provision in health-care services to social policy development. Elizabeth Bowen and Nadine Shaanta Murshid (Bowen & Murshid, 2016) argue that while trauma is connected to one's individual experiences of

violence, distress, pain, and fear, it takes place within a socioeconomic context that can foster healing or re-traumatization and further vulnerability. Additionally, those same socioeconomic contexts structure one's social positions and the unequal exposure to trauma throughout society. Bowen and Shaanta Murshid argue that any social policy aiming to promote healing in the context of trauma must include elements of safety, trustworthiness and transparency, collaboration, empowerment, choice, and the intersectionality of social positions. We add that these policy concepts will allow women to remake the city in ways that are meaningful to them and attribute meaning to traumatic events that, like *Cen*, embody the city.

Last, the policy response needed in gendered postconflict cities is to make the invisible and unrecognized visible and recognized. Meaningful roles for women's grassroots organizations must be spelled out throughout subnational administration. It requires changes throughout the process of national and urban development policy creation and implementation. Women must be allowed to politicize, organize, and impact urban development planning in postconflict cities. This must build on the logic of UN security Council Resolution 1325 which recognizes the unique impact of conflict and conflict zones on women and girls and in postconflict reconstruction and build long-term permanent and political mechanisms for women to decide what a livable city is in the postconflict.

## Notes

1. We use the term *postconflict*, without a hyphen, because new and emerging conflicts that are directly related to previous conflicts are common and continue to impact the lives of everyone in areas impacted by conflict. Like the term postmodern and postcolonial we use the term postconflict to suggest extended state of conflict characterized by multiple other forms of violence, injustice, disenfranchisement, and alienation from land and community.
2. See Virilio (1977) who suggests that the technology and logistics of war making are also the preeminent logics of city making.
3. The text of the petition can be found at www.justiceandreconciliation.org/uncategorized/2014/womens-advocacy-network-petition/ (last checked 8 January 2022).

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