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Channeling Literacy Learning into Everydayness: Northern Ugandan Women Language Peace

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Channeling Literacy Learning into Everydayness: Northern Ugandan Women Language Peace

Cover Page Footnote

We are grateful to the Northern Ugandan women who participated in this study for their willingness to share their stories and what literacy education means to them. We are also grateful to doctoral students who have served as research assistants at various stages of this project.

Channeling Literacy Learning into Everydayness: Northern Ugandan Women Language Peace

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Abstract. *This study contributes to the literacy scholarship by exploring the motivations for literacy learning of adult women in Northern Uganda, connecting to current trends in language and literacy studies and education in post-conflict contexts that center the peacebuilding potential of language, literacy, and women. To understand women's motivations and the ways peace is languaged through their narrative, we adopt a chronotropic lens to the analysis of the embodied discourse. We showcase the analysis of the findings that reflect the larger research corpora of 24 focus group participants that were interviewed on the campuses of their vocational school in Northern Uganda. We argue that by understanding what motivates the women to pursue literacy education, we can also account for the ways these motivations are discursively constructed through peace in their positionalities as mothers, businesswomen, or*

community leaders. We conclude with the discussion of implications of this work for research and practice.

This study addresses a scholarly call to consider adult learners' motivations for literacy learning by focusing on their desires and not just their needs (Rosenberg, 2015). Specifically, we draw from language and literacy scholars who have discussed the peacebuilding potential of language and literacy for young and adult students (Kelenyi et al., 2020; Pentón-Herrera et al., 2023) and post-conflict education scholars who have proposed to conceptualize women as peacebuilders (Rivas & Safi, 2022). In this study, we shift the lens from formal – top-down geopolitical peace, to bottom-up embodied peacebuilding – lived, internal, and relational peace cultivated by women in their daily lives through literacy and language. This reconceptualization is critical for understanding literacy not merely as a tool for communication, but as a process of peacebuilding grounded in everyday life. By foregrounding women's voices and self-articulated narratives, the study illustrates how they translate learning into ways of being that reimagine their lived realities.

We examine the motivations for literacy of women by foregrounding their emic perspectives in pursuing literacy education as adults, mothers, community members, and businesswomen in the changing sociopolitical timespace of Northern Uganda. In considering their motivations, we explore how and why they language peace through and as embodied discourse of peace. We use language or languaging as a verb (Becker, 1991; Bloome & Beauchemin, 2016) to emphasize the performative dialectical process that reveals women's understanding of and their reactions to the happenings of daily life in relation to their identities as literacy learners. Thus, languaging peace is a discursive act that is not simply a communicative tool but also a way to channel, and therefore embody, individual thoughts, feelings, expression of personhood, reactions and actions in post-conflict contexts (Agbara, 2024).

To examine women's embodied discourses of peace, we utilize a chronotopic lens – a spatiotemporal configuration of language populated by particular social types and (moral) behavioral scripts (Karimzad, 2020; Agha, 2007; Catedral & Djuraeva, 2018). For example, Miremba discursively constructs—or languages—peace as positive

change in her and her community's everyday life: "If I go for a meeting, I...act as a role model by telling...what I learnt and how to practice whatever was learnt...to bring about positive change in our lives...how to take care of our children...how to keep proper hygiene at my home." Situated in the spatiotemporal context of a post-conflict community meeting, her account invokes social types of women—those knowledgeable about childrearing and hygiene—and moral scripts of care and service, illustrating how her motivations for literacy translate into action and enacting peace as an embodied, situated practice. In what follows, we will present a review of literature that has shaped our lens toward the research project, followed by the methods and analysis of the research findings. We conclude the paper with a discussion of these findings and their implications for research and practice.

The Desire for Literacy

Much understanding of literacy's role and its value across the world comes from research exploring literacy practices and experiences in communities characterized by diversity and marginalization, showing that literacy can "oppress and liberate, reconfigure or reify existing social realities" (Vieira, 2020, p. 79). Adult women learners living in male-dominated post-colonial societies as Northern Uganda are one such community, as they experience additional challenges that come with adulthood, such as being a single mom, in their pursuit of education. Hence, scholars have questioned not just the need for literacy, but most importantly why adult women learners desire literacy, demonstrating the importance of considering the issues of power and status, in addition to access and cost (Robinson-Pant, 2004; Rosenberg, 2015). Through an intersectional approach, researchers have examined adult women's embodied literacy learning in relation to their individual and sociopolitical histories (Kaiper, 2018a), imagined communities (Kendrick & Hissani, 2007), places and people impacting their daily lives (González Ybarra & Saavedra, 2021), and subjective perceptions of quality of life (Mtika & Abbott, 2023). In the context of Northern Uganda, scholars have reported the positive impact of the functional literacy, which focuses on transferring classroom literacy skills to navigating daily life, on women's socioeconomic development (Akello & Bohlinger,

2021) and individual and collective agency in their roles as mothers (Akello & Lutwama-Rukundo, 2022) and household heads (Akello et al., 2017).

However, despite individual accounts of literacy learning examined in these studies, there is more emphasis on top-down approaches, such as what the literacy program models look like and what adult women learners have learned through such models. Our study on the contrary emphasizes the bottom-up approaches to the role and value of literacy for adult women learners, by foregrounding women's voices in relation to their motivations for language and literacy and the ways they channel their literacy into everydayness. We follow Rosenberg (2015) to show that adult women literacy learners are equal epistemic agents who challenge us to re-think what counts as literacy by critically viewing and assessing the world around them and their place in it. In the context of this study, we can see that women are themselves an embodiment of peace and peace building. Their desire and pursuit of literacy is an act of languaging peace as self and languaging peace *in* the world.

Peacebuilding Potential of Literacy and Women

While existing research frames women as peacebuilders and peacekeepers, they are often positioned as external to peacebuilding—excluded from decision-making, cast as beneficiaries, and their local efforts overlooked (Justino, Mitchell & Müller, 2018; Dhar & Poddar, 2020). For example, in Northern Uganda, educators linked women's literacy to community building and reducing violence but noted the need for cultural endorsement, as educated women are often perceived as conceited and leaving elders after marriage, unlike educated men (Beach et al., 2020). Similarly, Rivas and Safi (2022) show that formal peace mechanisms in Afghanistan obscure women's own meanings and motivations, while Asaf (2017) illustrates how displaced Syrian women actively cultivate peace through everyday language, education, and social ties. Building on this work, the present study shifts from top-down frameworks to lived, embodied peacebuilding, examining how women enact peace through literacy and language.

If women's everyday practices can be understood as acts of peacebuilding, then literacy becomes a particularly powerful site for this work. Yet literacy itself is not

neutral. Stuckey's violence of literacy (Friedenberg, 1991) underscores how literacy can function as a mechanism of control—its “cost” measured not in monetary terms but in histories of colonization, displacement, and war that disproportionately affect women, whose voices are often unheard and whose identities are shaped through patriarchal structures (Eldred, 2014). These dynamics stand in stark contrast to the peacebuilding potential of literacy, where writing (Vieira, 2019) and storytelling (Haidar & Farrukh, 2023) become acts of agency, connection, and restoration for marginalized individuals and communities (Kelenyi et al., 2020; Salmon & Clavijo-Olarte, 2023; Pentón-Herrera et al., 2023). Alongside literacy, language itself enables women to enact peace: when used to affirm dignity and mutual recognition, it can de-escalate conflict, whereas negative or demeaning language reinforces violence (Curtis, 2022; Agbara, 2024). Therefore, the present study extends the language (noun) of peace to languaging (verb) peace—foregrounding how women actively enact peace through literacy and language in relational and embodied ways in their everyday lives.

Examining Embodied Discourse through a Chronotopic Lens

Our view of embodiment and embodied discourse has been primarily shaped by (socio-)linguistics scholarship that has extensively theorized the interconnectedness of language, body, emotion, and experience. *Embodiment* refers to an informed body that is inclusive and illustrative of the world in which it lives (Busch, 2020): our bodies internalize and embody historical and material conditions, power relations, social and linguistic practices and more that shape the contexts of our lives. This perspective allows us, language and literacy scholars, to consider non-linguistic as well as linguistic forms of knowledge and practice across dimensions of time and space (Mehta & Bondi, 1999). As we attend to women's voices, we acknowledge that voice is deeply ideological and embodied in its performativity of specific social categories, such as gender when particular kinds of people are constructed by speakers and interpreted by listeners (Buscholtz & Hall, 2016). Speakers often self-position or construct their perceptions of being positioned in the world unconsciously; this, however, changes when these positionings are constructed in relation to the times and spaces that are

experienced emotionally, hence bodily (Djuraeva & Catedral, 2020). In this regard, emotions, like language, are not inherent to the body, rather they are sociocultural products of embodied experience, which is well captured by Vygotsky's (1994) notion of *perezhivanie*, the way one lives through an event and re-lives it similarly or differently at different stages of life. Busch (2020) suggests that embodiment can be conceived as enactment in interaction, as incarnation of discursively established positions, and/or incorporation of lived experience.

To situate embodiment, we employ *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1981)—a spatiotemporal organization of discourse populated by certain social types (Agha, 2007) and (moral) behavioral scripts that specify norms for behavior (Catedral & Djuraeva, 2018). *Chronotopic contexts* are the starting analytical points from which embodied discourses emerge and which they categorize and characterize, (re)constructing the *images* of these contexts through lived experience (Karimzad & Catedral, 2022). Thus, chronotopes capture both “the contexts one is speaking from as well as one is speaking about” (Catedral & Djuraeva, 2022, p. 3), allowing the analyst to situate the agency of voice, the value assigned to one's voice (hooks, 1994) and how this value is negotiated by the speaker through the embodied discourse (Karimzad, 2020). The communicability of chronotopes is a matter of scaling (Blommaert, 2015), that is time, space, people, and behavioral scripts become more or less recognizable and powerful depending on the scales at which they are being communicated (Djuraeva & Catedral, 2020). Discursive scales or scaling are useful for attending to the ideological higher-scale chronotopes, e.g. who is regarded as highly literate, and material lower-scale chronotopes, e.g. what highly literate look likes in day-to-day practice. While chronotopes are embodied across the scales, it is the ones that are *lived* that present the embodied level of experience, that while incorporated into is beyond discourse. Figure 1 below uses the study data excerpts to illustrate the chronotopic and scalar languaging of peacebuilding:

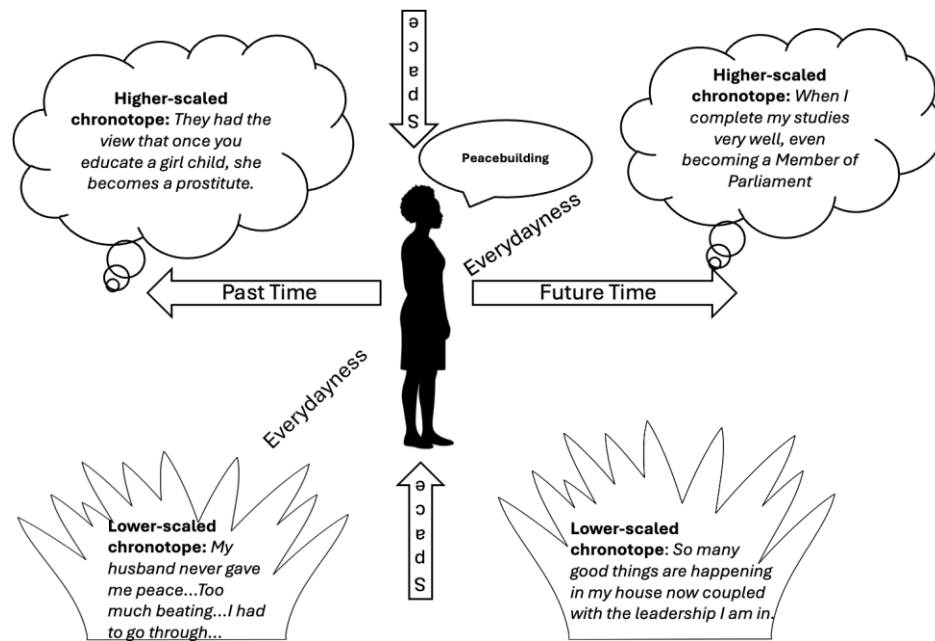


Figure 1. Chronotopic and scalar languaging of peacebuilding.

Method

Context and Participants

This study took place in Northern Uganda, one of the four regions in Uganda. While multiethnic and multilingual, English is used significantly in the region as a language for interethnic communication, business interactions and spaces such as hospitals and schools. Acoli is another commonly spoken language by Acoli people who reside in Northern Uganda. The region endured conflict for over twenty years due to the Lord's Resistance Army that forcibly conscripted young women into their army and for use as sex slaves. In the post-conflict timespace, these women are considered “unmarriageable” by society—the term bush women is given to them—because of the impact of the trauma that they have faced. In an already patriarchal society where men are reasserting their power over women, they experience additional marginalization due to their childhood past as abductees or internally displaced persons. However, we rush to note that this is not how women construct their positionalities themselves in re-storying the events *then* as missed education opportunities due to war and family abuse as opposed to *now* as making time and space for pursuing basic education as an adult

learner, who manage their households, work, raise children, and engage in community work.

The study participants, aged 25–55, attended one of two adult women’s schools located on the campus of a girls’ vocational school in the city and its satellite compound in a nearby village. Situated on land traditionally belonging to the Acoli people, all participants identified as Acoli and spoke Acoli as their first language. Having experienced ageism and linguistic, socioeconomic, and gender marginalization in formal schooling, the women described the program as welcoming for its openness to anyone willing to learn regardless of prior educational experience. Most participants ran small market businesses and paid reduced school fees to sustain their studies. Using purposive sampling, 26 women with varied schooling backgrounds, enrollment durations at the vocational schools (one to four terms), literacy levels, and family roles participated in this study, providing diverse perspectives on women’s engagement in peacebuilding through everyday literacy practices. Recruitment took place during regular class sessions and was conducted by Rosemary Nyirumbe, a local Acoli-speaking co-author, trained by a U.S.-based co-author, Sally Beach, who had worked closely with her in creating the school and co-developing its literacy curriculum. Verbal consent was obtained prior to participation in group discussions.

Data Collection and Analysis

Six focus group discussions were conducted in Acoli with groups of 3-5 women. The women were participants in the newly established literacy program, led by Rosemary Nyirumbe with significant support from Sally Beach who worked alongside her in its development. Selection was done on a voluntary basis. During regular class sessions, a local Acoli-speaking co-author invited women to participate, explaining in their home language the purpose of the study, that participation was optional, and that choosing not to participate would have no implications for their involvement in the program. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes and was held on one of the program’s two campuses. Participants attended only one session, as groups were organized by campus and scheduled to accommodate class times. The discussions followed an open-ended, conversational format guided by a short set of prompts inviting

participants to introduce themselves, reflect on their experiences in the program, and discuss their motivations and everyday uses of literacy. There are a few reasons why we decided to collect the data through focus group discussions: its spoken, open-ended, and qualitative nature was responsive to the oral traditions of learning with which the study participants had engaged, and its collective nature served as a safe space for women with shared lived experiences to talk, relate, and re-imagine themselves as adult literacy learners navigating the post-conflict context (Kook et al., 2019). In fact, research has shown that “collective responses enable participants to challenge the ideologies underpinning their marginalization, and recontextualize the language used by others to describe their bodies” (Jones, 2022, p. 549). The purpose of the discussions was to allow the women to share their funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019) through their experiences around education and to ascertain their needs and wants for their learning.

All discussions were led by Rosemary Nyirumbe or the research assistant who had helped to recruit the women. The discussions in the city took place on the porch area outside of the classrooms where the women attended school at the end of the school period. The discussions at the satellite campus took place under a tree near the primary school where the school for women was held. At both places, the women, and in some cases their young children, sat on chairs in a circle where they could see each other. The discussion was loosely structured with the facilitator asking the women to talk about themselves using the familiar storytelling approach, their education as a child or teenager, what they wanted to learn at the school for women and why, and about their motivations for joining. Discussions continued around what each woman did well, how they passed on culture to their children, and how school structures could be more helpful to their learning. All the discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated from Acoli into English by Rosemary Nyirumbe who led the literacy program. Following transcription, participants were re-engaged for member checking to confirm the accuracy of the recordings and representations of their perspectives.

All four authors collaboratively analyzed six focus group discussions to ensure both intra- and interrater reliability of emerging themes. Using an open coding approach, each author first reviewed all transcripts individually, adding comments and reflections, which subsequent readers engaged and expanded upon. Collective interpretation was

negotiated through virtual Zoom meetings, during which emerging ideas were mapped and refined. The team then revisited the data, coding within a shared Excel spreadsheet to consolidate thematic patterns. Writing the manuscript formed part of this recursive, reflexive process, through which stories resonating most strongly across researchers were identified as representative of broader experiences. Recognizing power dynamics, we note that the lead researcher, Rosemary Nyirumbe, also served as the school's director—a position that, while entailing authority, facilitated trust and participation given the program's participatory design and co-developed curriculum (see Beach et al., 2020).

We took a double hermeneutic approach (Smith & Osborn 2003), through which we tried to understand how the participants understood and experienced discursively their social world, as it related to language, literacy, and identity. Using the chronotopic lens, we attended to temporal and spatial deictics that anchor language in physical or imagined space in participants' accounts of an event *there* and *then* (e.g. the time of war) to its evaluation *here* and *now* (e.g. post-conflict time) (Catedral and Djuraeva, 2018). In examining the particular social types (e.g. head of household) and norms for behavior (e.g. practicing good hygiene), we focused on the discursive positionalities the women invoked and constructed in relations to certain times and spaces. Central to the notion of embodiment in and through discourse, our analysis was particularly attuned to the evaluative and affective language (e.g. discouraged) in participants' narratives (Busch, 2020; Jones, 2022). Having conducted multiple rounds of qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021), we have first identified the motivations for literacy learning as the cornerstone theme that emerged in the analysis. However, it was the chronotopic lens toward the embodied discourse for why women learn literacy that brought our attention to how and why women language peace.

Researchers

We position ourselves along a continuum of insider and outsider perspectives in Northern Uganda. Rosemary Nyirumbe is Luo (ethnicity), speaks Acoli, and was born and raised in the region. As director of the school where the study took place and a

religious sister in an African order dedicated to serving vulnerable populations, she has lived through the conflict, rescued abducted girls, provided skills training, and established the schools for women in collaboration with faculty at a U.S. college of education, which she later attended as a doctoral student. Another author from the U.S., Sally Beach, conducted literacy research and worked closely with her in creating the school, gaining insider understanding of its operations. Both authors were directly engaged with the community and contributed to co-developing the curriculum, designing the study, and supporting interpretation of findings in culturally grounded ways. A Canadian author, David Monk, has taught and researched lifelong learning and participatory approaches at a local university in Uganda and contributed contextual interpretation regarding sociocultural images ascribed to women who were abducted or internally displaced during the war. The lead author, Madina Djuraeva, is from Central Asia. She studies identity and education in multilingual communities, and she drew on her collectivist cultural background and experience supporting adult women's education to frame the study, analyze and interpret the data, synthesize the findings, and lead the whole writing process. Together, the team collaborated recursively and reflexively in coding, analysis, and writing, ensuring the research foregrounded both local knowledge and cross-contextual interpretation.

Channeling Literacy Learning into Everydayness

The research findings that we will present below remind us of the adage about peace starting from within. As we analyzed the data, we found that Northern Ugandan women's motivations for literacy learning are closely connected to their positionalities and related practices in their daily lives, which we refer to as everydayness. The chronotopic analysis of their embodied experiences will illustrate how they channel these motivations into their everydayness by discursively constructing peace with and for themselves, and those around them. While there is no single story, we will exemplify the analysis of data from a few participants to showcase each finding across the whole data set.

Narrating the Past to Justify the Present

All study participants invoked their past when introducing themselves and explaining their present motivations for literacy learning that were suppressed in their childhood and youth due to war, patriarchal family members, and abusive spouses. They did not use words such as abductee or internally displaced, as these notions are often ascribed to them by outsiders, such as us, who study (post-)conflict contexts. The embodied experiences of an abductee or internally displaced, however, came up through their stories of marriage at a very young age, living outside of their birth home, and interrupted schooling.

“So That Was How I Stopped with My Education.”

My name is Abbo. The reason why I never went to school was because of war. The rebels attacked our home and took away all the money my father had. We were about to be killed. By the grace of God my father escaped and took refuge in Masindi. We remained in the village living miserably. Survival became a real challenge for us in the family since the head of the family was away. So that was how I stopped with my education.

For Abbo¹, in her mid-40s and fourth semester of literacy learning, voicing the consequences of war for her family and herself serves to justify her earlier lack of schooling. In doing so, she scales down the chronotope of war to everyday spaces in which she lived (home, village) and particular people (the rebels, father, family) that become meaningful to interpreting this moment of her lived history for her, and therefore for us. Her discursive description and evaluation of the events that happened *then* illustrates the physical violence of war on families left without a father figure, juxtaposing the chronotope of living through the war and patriarchal structural conditions that normalized dependency. Ultimately, for Abbo, stopping education was a consequence of conditions and embodied experiences (about to be killed, living miserably, survival) that lacked peace.

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms.

“There was no one to pay my school fees.”

Dembe, in her late 30s and in the fourth semester of literacy learning, like Abbo, invokes particular social type “there was no one to pay my school fees,” referring to a male figure in her family and her husband, who she married to escape financial and emotional hardships during the war:

They (parents) had the view that once you educate a girl child, she becomes a prostitute. The rest of us girls should stay home or get married... We (girls) missed the opportunity to go to school and our counterparts the boys had to go to school to study. I got eloped and started my own family...when life conditions became difficult. There was no one to pay my school fees. My husband never gave me peace as I stayed with him. Too much beating, and mistreatments that I had to go through during the time I lived with him.

Dembe like many of the study participants while motivated to receive education as a child, could not afford it due to the higher scale images of educated girls being equated to prostitutes resulting in a lower-scale decision making by her parents. That is, girls’ homes rather than schools were regarded as spaces that developed particular social types of women—women valued in marriage. As Dembe continues her lived story, she constructs the chronotopes of despair or last resolution in “when life conditions became difficult” to explain how she started a family in the first place, as she had no one to pay her school fees. She explicitly invokes the discourse of lack of peace to her body through languaging “beating and mistreatments” and her positionality as a wife “I had to go through.”

While women during group discussions self-positioned as adult literacy learners, explaining their motivation for literacy, the chronotopes—times, spaces, particular social types and norms for behavior—invoked in their responses illustrated the shifting positionality to an embodied discourse of a “dependent child, young girl” *then* living in the spatiotemporal conditions of compounded violence, where opportunities for education were not even a potentiality. This spatiotemporal organization of voice is informative in noting the embodied agency women discursively constructed in re-storying their past to justify their present “Survival became a challenge; I stopped my

education” or “I got eloped. There was no one to pay for my school fees.” While this was the first event women talked about, it was not the only one, as they transitioned to their needs and wants in their current and future positionalities.

“They told me that I was too old to be with them in the class.”

These needs and wants exemplified their motivations as adult women learners within the higher-scaled chronotope of changing social context in Northern Uganda and their increasing level of agency in making their own life decisions. For example, Dembe notes the following, as she constructs the image of a woman and access to education *now*—post-conflict time and space, “But today there is no difference between boys and girls or men and women as far as education is concerned. Equal treatment is there for all sexes,” to which Namono, in her early 40s and third semester of literacy learning follows up with:

When I got some business of selling pancakes and got some money and went back to school, they (other students) told me that I was too old to be with them in the class. I got discouraged and decided to leave school and come back home.

Namono’s example does not reject Dembe’s constructed image of a woman being equal to that of a man in the educational space, as she indeed mentions re-enrolling into school after she started making money through her business, which embodies an image of an independent woman who is not relying on parents or husband to pay her school fees and who agentively attends school. However, through her response Namono illustrates that there are other kinds of inequalities and challenges *now*. For example, there are many more adult women than men who re-enroll into public education and study along with children in post-conflict Northern Uganda. Namono, while gaining access to education, was positioned as “the other” due to her age being called “too old.” She links this experience, that is a chronotope of dropping out of school at present, to evaluative remarks by her classmates about her body, which had further bodily dimensions for Namono of feeling “discouraged” and “leave school.” We see Namono’s narrative as that of peace, or search for peace through literacy learning because of the embodied discourse of self-sufficiency, self-determination, but also de-motivation that she constructs through her story. Juxtaposing the chronotopes

of present as it is lived by adult women in Northern Uganda is informative in learning about their path and motivations towards literacy education. Ultimately, despite the discouragement and dropping out of school, Namono's participation in this study suggests she has continued overcoming challenges, including societal judgements to pursue the learning she wanted, on her own terms.

Good Mothers, Model Women: Learning as Transformation

All study participants had their first child at a very young age and have had more as they became older, serving as a head of their households. Therefore, the theme of what it means to be a good mother was also salient in the analysis of women's motivations for literacy learning. Participants invoked the chronotope of mothering through specific moral behavioral scripts, qualities, skills, and actions they associated with being a good mother, such as being a role model for their children, paying their children's school fees, and earning the respect of their children. Abbo, for example, embodies the first two values ascribed to good mothering through her narrative.

"I will be a model to them."

Since the intention is to improve on my life and that of my children such that in future when they (children) grow, they will be able to follow my footsteps since I will be a model to them. After here, I realize my dream. I hope to have what to do...for starting up a business. From there I will be able to pay school fees for my children.

Abbo constructs her present and future very differently to her past, when she had to stop schooling because of the war, miserable life, exiled and absent father. Improving her life for her children and realizing her dream as a businesswoman serve as motivations for her literacy education. These embodied images are why she languages peace through self-determination and self-sufficiency that are constructed through improving life, role modeling, becoming a businesswoman, and being able to support her children's schooling. The school space is where she can kick start her imagined future of being a good mother, a desire shared by all study participants.

“Telling the gathering what I learnt...Even becoming a leader.”

Miremba, in her early 30s and in the third semester of literacy learning, links good motherhood “care of our children...proper hygiene at my home” to serving as role models not only to her family, but also to the community at large.

If I go for a meeting, I am able to act as a role model by telling the gathering what I learnt and how to practice whatever was learnt so as to bring about positive change in our lives. Issues on how to take care of our children and most of it all, how to keep proper hygiene at my home. When my home is clean and hygiene/sanitation is maintained, then my home becomes a model home where other people come to learn from. It also builds and helps to foster good relationships among the people. This can increase the level of adult literacy and people will not feel ashamed coming here also to learn.

As an adult literacy learner, Miremba self-positions as a role model at the neighborhood gatherings with people in her community as she scales the embodied knowledge of childcare and household management acquired at school to the space of her home and community. The embodiment extends from bodily to non-bodily yet physical dimensions of a clean house. In serving as a role model, she “builds and helps people to foster good relationships”, suggesting the image for behavior Miremba constructs in a space of her house. Lastly, she scales up the chronotopes of a role model adult woman literacy learner to increasing the level of adult literacy among people in general, as in her example, they (people) “will not feel ashamed coming here (vocational school) also to learn.” Miremba’s narrative demonstrates that literacy learning for her means increased self-esteem and agency as a community member that motivates her in bringing positive change, facilitating good relationships, and modeling feeling unashamed. This languaging of the embodied dimensions of her positionality as adult literacy learner exemplifies peace, a positive evaluation of her self-esteem, community building, and lifelong literacy education. Like Miremba, Namazzi, in her late 30s and in the fourth semester of literacy learning, shares a similar sentiment:

“So many good things are happening in my house now coupled with the leadership I am in. I am in the Women Council... when I complete my studies

very well, even becoming a Member of Parliament... I am very optimistic.”

The affirmative embodied evaluations of “good, even becoming, very optimistic” construct the present-future image of an educated woman leader who is excelling inside and outside her house. Namazzi links this chronotopic image of achieving a position at a higher scale “even becoming a member of parliament” in her *imagined future* to a successful completion of language and literacy education she is pursuing *now*. Both Miremba and Namazzi are peacebuilders in that they are transforming their lives by pursuing literacy education that they channel into their out-of-school identities as mothers, community members and leaders, and literacy agents. This demonstrates that women, and specifically the study participants, are not external, but at the center of peacebuilding efforts.

Bilingual Literacy Empowerment

At the start of the discussions, participants’ chronotopes of selfhood were often framed by past experiences of limited agency, exposure to violence, and dependence on men to access schooling. As conversations progressed, these chronotopes shifted to narratives of self-determination, self-sufficiency, and empowerment, reflecting the affordances of literacy education in their present and future lives. Beyond spatiotemporal images of community building, leadership, and good mothering, women also connected literacy learning to their work and livelihood, taking pride in the ways it transformed their lives and living conditions. For example, Chiku, in her early 30s and in the third semester of literacy learning, describes feeling confident and competent in her work as a saleswoman, able to communicate with customers in both Acoli and English, write receipts, and navigate the capital city independently.

“I feel happy and comfortable when I communicate.”

What is very significant in our learning here is that once we get to know how to speak, write and read in Acoli and English, all those who used to laugh at us will be ashamed and will no longer laugh at us as people who do not know anything. They will respect us and get to know that we are equally the same with them now. Transformation would have taken place in us now. I feel happy and comfortable when I communicate with my customers and can write my name and write receipts in English. Ignorance is dangerous. When travel to the capital city of Kampala, I need to have open eyes and read to board the right bus.

Chiku invokes past depreciating evaluations “laugh at us, people who do not know anything” made by others *before* to ascribe shame to those others *now* as she, along with other women in her group, have transformed. This transformation is chronotopically constructed through the image of a woman who possesses the literacy skills necessary to do her job and who has an embodied experience of ignorance being dangerous as when one takes the wrong bus in the capital city. The bodily dimension of the transformative discourse is further languaged through feeling “happy, comfortable, worthy of respect, being equal, and having open eyes,” which is a powerful positive agentive positioning that Chiku constructs as an adult literacy learner. It is this embodied language of feeling, being, becoming, and doing that is defined with affirmations that we consider in understanding how and why women language peace through their everyday literacy practices.

The positive emotions expressed in Chiku’s languaging of peace illustrate the empowerment that emerges from developing bilingual literacy. Similarly, Aleela, in her late 20s and in her second semester of literacy learning, constructs self-empowerment through biliteracy, particularly in English, as she no longer fears being perceived as inferior by her daughter or neighbors.

“Mummy can now speak English... I now don’t have that fear.”

One day my own daughter told me openly that she can write, read and speak English well. It was a big problem for me as her mother since I did not know how

to write and read and speak English. That I was very unfortunate! I felt bad moreover I am the one who paid her school fees and how could she talk like that to me? I was annoyed with her. I felt she needed to respect me and not be arrogant. But things have changed now. Nowadays she tells me that I have read and have some knowledge. That mummy can now speak English. I have a similar knowledge with her now. I am happy by the way that I can write my names and able to read and even speak some English. That was always my desire because of the challenges I used to get with neighbors and other people. I now don't have that fear.

Being positioned as an unfortunate mother who did not have basic literacy and conversational skills in English despite Aleela's financial contribution to her daughter's schooling, resulted in Aleela's narrative loaded with emotions of feeling bad, annoyed, and disrespected and positioning her daughter as arrogant. However, for Aleela, this conversation with her daughter resulted in her motivation to pursue English language literacy, shifting the chronotope of being viewed as "illiterate" to "literate" mom. The image of literate mom is constructed with Aleela's evaluation of her knowledge as being like her daughter's and her daughter's acknowledgement of her English language skills. As she reflects on this transformation, Aleela mentions being happy with her literacy skills, juxtaposing this emotion to that of fear that she felt in the past when having language related challenges upon encountering her neighbors. Aleela's self-image of a good mother who paid for her daughter's education, was her peace, disturbed with her daughter's remarks that embodied disrespect for Aleela. This lower-scaled chronotope of mother-daughter conversation is situated within the higher-scaled chronotope of using respectful language toward parents in Acoli culture. As she constructs positive communication with her daughter and other people *now*, Aleela re-builds her peace by embodying self-empowerment through "I am happy, that was always my desire, I don't have that fear." This self-empowerment stands in striking contrast to the "unfortunate" and "annoyed" self that Aleela recounts from the past.

Not being afraid or having less fear was a shared embodied emotion by many of the study participants, whose experiences of fear for their physical wellbeing in the past translated into the fear of being perceived ignorant in the present. Miremba and Aleela's

narratives illustrate well the ways women languaged peace through bilingual literacy empowerment, as they gained confidence, social recognition, and practical skills that enhanced their livelihoods and their sense of self-worth.

So What? Implications for Research and Practice

Across participants, literacy transformed past experiences of conflict, marginalization, and interrupted schooling into self-determination, agency, and empowerment. Women leveraged literacy, including bilingual skills, to improve livelihoods, enact leadership, and navigate daily life with confidence and autonomy. These findings show how literacy functions as an embodied, relational form of peacebuilding rooted in everyday experiences rather than formal structures. Adult women in Northern Uganda desire literacy learning because they have wanted to experience going to school since childhood and receive equal education as their male counterparts. They desire literacy learning, because they can make time, space, and money in their complex lives to pursue education as adults. They desire literacy learning because they channel their knowledge and the affordances that come along with it into their homes, communities, and places of employment and activism, to reify their positionalities as a mother, neighbor, leader, and businesswoman. Paving their own way in a post-conflict society is what motivates these women to pursue literacy education. Women are not passive receivers, rather active agents who create and generate knowledge by investing in literacy learning (Norton, 2000) because of its sociocultural and material returns for themselves and those around them. Despite the scholarly call on centering the wants and not just the needs of adult literacy learners (Rosenberg, 2015), studies continue to demonstrate the value of literacy in adult learners' lives based on the mainstream ideologies that highlight the utilitarian lens. Attending to women's voices and their own account of how they channel their learning into everydayness provides authentic examples that help us re-imagine literacy learning as a peacebuilding process and women as peacebuilders through the embodied discourses of self-empowerment, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. The attention to how literacy manifests itself and unfolds in women's accounts requires a close

examination of how they language: the chronotopic conditions that they *speak from* and *speak about* (Catedral & Djuraeva, 2022). We have demonstrated that the analysis of the embodied language used to construct the chronotopes reveals what scholars in the literature refer to as positive peace (Agbara, 2024) – a way of languaging that has a positive impact on one’s negotiated identities. What our study findings add to current scholarship is how women language peace through their discursive constructions of serving as a role model, feeling respected, being a good mother, becoming the member of the parliament. Being attuned to their wants, as well as needs, as situated within the larger context of post-conflict Uganda then suggests why they language peace, explained through their motivations for literacy learning. As Patiño and Vieira (2019, p. 7) beautifully put it, “corazonar la paz, es decir, formas de paz que nacen en el tejido de palabras, cuerpos, emociones, ideas, necesidades y posibilidades” [Embodying/Hearting the peace results from forms of peace, which are born in the ways that words, bodies, emotions, ideas, necessities, and possibilities are weaved together].

This study has limitations. We do not claim the findings to be generalizable to other adult women’s experiences in Northern Uganda or beyond, because each narrative has its own voice. We also recognize the limitations of analysis of data that were translated from the original Acoli language into English, as this very act takes away a certain level of authenticity from women’s voices. Lastly, while the data collection was designed as a focus group discussion, the ways women answered questions, unlike in rare situations as in the example above by Namono, were more like an individual interview. We speculate that this could be due to the focus group interviews taking place on campus, where a certain norm for behavior is normalized among students.

The research findings have scholarly implications for theorizations of language, literacy and peace. Specifically, in addition to having violent or peacebuilding potential (Friedenberg, 1991; Kelenyi et al., 2020), researchers can examine how language and literacy can be used to create and sustain peace through everyday practices. They can do so by expanding the current focus on language in a conflict prevention or escalation (Curtis, 2022) to the analysis of languaging the attributes of positive peace (Standish et al., 2021), including but not limited to those that celebrate *the self*. Furthermore, this

study bridges the scholarship from the fields of literacy research and post-conflict literacy education, arguing for the peacebuilding potential of literacy and women. Future research can examine the positionalities of women as peacebuilders as not external to the peacebuilding process, that is contributing to for example the discussions of national security, but internal to the everyday creation of peace (e.g. Ismailbekova & Megoran, 2020). Finally, we recommend scholars to utilize the chronotropic scalar/scaling lens in their analysis of embodied and other forms of discourse to account for the multiplicity and complexity of ever-shifting social phenomena and contexts in the lived experiences invoked by participants themselves, providing a better reading of their world through their own interpretation of the world and their place in it.

Compton-Lilly (2014, p. 1) notes that human literacy learning must be addressed through “the spaces and times in which people act and interact, alongside the social relationships that transpire within those contexts.” We understand this statement as a call for more work, such as ours, which follow learners’ emic perspectives on how they make sense out of their literacy learning. For those of us who work with adult women learners, incorporating embodied language in relation to students’ motivations for learning may provide one such venue. Following the traditions of humanizing and other forms of human-centered pedagogies, applied implications of this research are in following learners’ lived trajectories through meaningful and intentional design of assignments, e.g. photovoice (Djuraeva and Fike, 2025), classroom interactions that closely replicate or that transpire the traditional classroom talk into that of the everydayness. In the context of Northern Uganda, the notion of functional literacy (see work by Akello and colleagues) can be expanded to different areas of daily life. The ways the literacy instruction is delivered to adult women learners can be transformed into locally and culturally responsive practices by education policies that support mobile digital education (see Sujarwo et al., 2022). While we have not found studies that implement the master-apprentice model to literacy education of adult learners, this may be a promising model to consider in the case of adult women learners in post-conflict contexts who make time and space to go to school, as it would allow direct learning on the go (see Dorn & Jones, 2023; Levy et al., 2021). By conceiving of language and literacy differently, through the lens of adult women learners and their languaging of

peace, we can conceive of them as dynamic spatiotemporal processes for learning and living and flourishing communities with the potential to learn literacy differently and consequently expand our capacity to read the world beyond the word.

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