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# Lost in freedom: ambivalence on sexual freedom among Burundian adolescents living in the Nakivale refugee settlement, Uganda

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores how Burundian adolescents in the Nakivale refugee settlement, Uganda, experience umwidgeemvyo, loosely translated as “freedom”, with regard to their sexuality. We draw on ethnographic research conducted between August and November 2017 with adolescents aged 13–19 years. Our research included in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. We present a context-sensitive appreciation of “freedom” and its social implications for adolescents’ sexual and love relationships. We show how adolescents attribute their sexual experiences and practices, including experimental sex, stress-relief sex and transactional sex, to the freedom experienced in the refugee context. Yet they also view this freedom with ambivalence: while some degree of freedom is desirable, too much is referred to in terms of kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi, loosely translated as “parental neglect”, implying a lack of parental involvement, care and provisioning. DOI: 10.1080/26410397.2021.1889750*

**Keywords:** sexual freedom, adolescents, Burundian refugees, cultural repertoires, parental neglect

## Introduction

“Well, the freedom that we have here is good, but bad at the same time.” (Alice, 19-year-old girl)

“... if we compare our life here to that back in Burundi, here there is a lot of freedom ... [giggling] ... we could tell you more if we were not in the same group with boys.” (Nicole, 16-year-old girl)

“We will also tell you more about love relationship stories here in Nakivale when we get time to be just in a group of boys. But yes, here there is a lot of freedom and parents are neglecting their children.” (Jules, 18-year-old boy)

The quotes above are from an introductory meeting in October 2017 between the first author and refugee adolescents in Nakivale. Roughly 30 adolescent boys and girls aged 13–19 years attended.

All had fled Burundi due to political instability in 2015. The quotes reflect a theme important to adolescents and one that consistently emerged throughout our fieldwork when sexuality was discussed: the binary of freedom and parental neglect.

The year 1994 was a breakthrough in terms of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). At the International Conference on Population and Development, SRHR were proclaimed, for the first time, to be a universal human right, not only for adults but also for adolescents and young people. Over the past 25 years, the urgency to address SRHR for adolescents and youth has been repeatedly reaffirmed. In line with its Global Strategy for the Health of Women, Children and Adolescents (2016-2030) launched in 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently

confirmed these rights in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically numbers 3.3. and 3.7.<sup>1,2</sup> Although progress has been made in addressing SRHR for adolescents and youth, adolescent refugees and other migrants continue to be disproportionately affected by poor sexual and reproductive health (SRH).<sup>3</sup> Disrupted family and community relations that force adolescents to take up adult responsibilities and absent or distant youth-friendly services are some of the mentioned determinants of their poor health outcomes.<sup>4,5</sup>

Uganda is in the top four countries that host the largest refugee populations,<sup>6</sup> of which half are under 18 years. This also applies to Nakivale, one of Uganda's earliest refugee settlements.<sup>7</sup> Research into adolescent refugees' SRHR needs is scarce, but available data point to exacerbations of SRHR vulnerabilities already common amongst this age group.<sup>8–10</sup> Vulnerabilities pertain to sexual violence and abuse, including the risk of adolescent boys and girls engaging in sex work and transactional sex, lack of knowledge on and access to contraceptives, and forced child marriages.<sup>11–14</sup> Few studies go beyond focusing on sexual violence perpetrated against girls, or study adolescents' wider SRHR needs.<sup>15,16</sup> Increased global awareness of their vulnerabilities seldom translates into robust, scaled-up interventions.

We draw upon wider doctoral research aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of how young Burundian refugees in the Nakivale settlement in Uganda and the Mahama refugee camp in Rwanda navigate sexuality: their experiences and perceptions of romantic or sexual relationships, and their SRHR needs. The doctoral study is a sub-project in research aimed at improving comprehensive sexuality education in Burundi, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research – Science for Global Development (NWO-WOTRO) as part of their programme on SRHR in Burundi. In this paper on Nakivale, we focus on adolescents' own context-sensitive understandings of the notion of freedom and how it informs their sexual and love relationships. Specifically, we explore how freedom is perceived in relation to how adolescents navigate sexuality. We propose that adolescents' sexual practices in the refugee settlement should be understood both in the context of their new situation and Burundian cultural repertoires.

## Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the Nakivale refugee settlement from August to November 2017 to gain adolescents' own perspectives on how they navigate sexuality in their everyday lives. Multiple qualitative methods – in-depth individual interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and informal chats during participant observation – were used to facilitate data cross-checking and increase validity. To develop understanding of the context, key informant interviews (KII) and FGDs with parents were also conducted.

The first author conducted all interviews and discussions in Kirundi, the national language of Burundi. She is a young unmarried Rwandese woman fluent in Kirundi, and familiar with Burundian culture given her family background (with a Burundian mother and Rwandese father, she grew up in Burundi and is still in contact with her Burundian childhood friends). Two young Burundian refugees (one male and one female in their 20s) were recruited onsite as research assistants. They provided help with the recruitment of participants, note-taking, clarifying language misunderstandings and explaining culturally specific concepts or terminology. The research assistants received a careful explanation of the ethical procedures and signed a contract stating their adherence to confidentiality and anonymity prior to the actual data collection. At all FGDs, at least one assistant was present. All respondents' names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Participant diversity was ensured by approaching and recruiting participants at different sites such as the youth centre, schools, on the streets and in trading centres. Visits were also paid to the health clinic, the church and other places where adolescents hung out such as the communal water taps and other spaces created and appropriated by adolescents, usually from the same neighbourhood and with common interests, who gather together and exchange jokes and information (referred to as “Ligala” places [17]). The interlocutors came from several parts of Burundi and had various ethnic and social backgrounds. Some lived in Nakivale with both parents and all their siblings, while others had only a few family members, a single parent or no family at all, living with a foster family or alone. The political situation in Burundi generally meant that only one or a few members of a family

had experienced threats and persecution, explaining the variations in living arrangements.

Using age-based criteria in line with the UN definition of adolescents (10–19 years)<sup>18</sup> and guided by the Ugandan Ethics Committee's request to exclude 10–12-year-olds (given the topic of sexuality), adolescents included were 13–19 years old. Our overall sample included two married female participants, who did not take part in FGDs but were interviewed individually because they were eligible by age and shared stories useful for understanding young Burundians' experiences and sexual choices. Otherwise, this paper uses data from unmarried adolescents.

Over the course of the fieldwork, 60 adolescents actively participated in FGDs on varying themes that were iteratively developed over time. In total, 13 FGDs took place, with most adolescents participating in more than one. We respected participants' requests to have separate groups for girls and boys; we also hoped it would encourage open discussion. Six FGDs with 7–8 participants each were held with boys. As for the girls, three FGDs were held with 8–10 participants, but two additional FGDs attracted a very large group of 15–20 participants. These were each split into two parallel sub-groups of 8–10 participants, bringing the total number of FGDs with girls to seven. Parallel groups were led by the first author and the female research assistant, rotating between groups to improve quality of data collection. Of the 13 FGDs, four were with younger adolescents aged 13–15 years (two with boys and two with girls), while the other nine engaged older adolescents, aged 16–19 years.

To ensure a sense of inclusion, all FGDs were ethnically mixed. To prevent concerns about political engagement, we avoided explicit questions about ethnicity during the FGDs, although sometimes this issue was raised in the IDIs. In the FGDs adolescents did not show reluctance to share ideas about sexuality with their peers from different ethnic backgrounds. In addition, 45 IDIs were held with 30 girls and 15 boys, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Over the course of the fieldwork, the first author also met informally with most of the research participants.

For deeper understanding of the context and guided by themes that emerged in the discussions with adolescents, we interviewed 15 key informants in Nakivale: seven teachers, two leaders of major Burundian cultural dancing groups, one church leader, one community leader, and

four representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the settlement, of which one was Burundian. All Burundian key informants were also parents, but not necessarily parents of the adolescents included in the study. A further three FGDs with parents (four to five participants each) were conducted. Parents participating in the FGDs were recruited through snowball sampling. As this paper focuses on Burundian adolescents' perspectives, we only use data drawn from interviews with adult participants pertaining to the topics that emerged from our interactions with adolescents and that invoked the appraisal of sexual freedom in one way or another.

To ensure the quality of the data and the analysis during fieldwork, the first author met regularly with the research assistants to reflect on the data, identify aspects for improvement, and conduct first-level interpretation and analysis of the findings. During their separate field visits, intermediate findings and analysis were discussed with the third and last author. Once the fieldwork was completed, all data from the FGDs and IDIs were fully transcribed in Kirundi and inductively coded by the first author following a grounded theory approach using NVivo software for qualitative analysis. The analysis was thematic, focusing on emerging patterns and core themes in participants' experiences and perceptions regarding romantic and sexual relationships related to life in the settlement. Codes, emerging categories and themes, and identified contradictions were systematically discussed with the second author and at a later stage with the whole team.<sup>19</sup>

### Permissions, ethical considerations and incentives

Substantial literature suggests the possibility of encountering traumatic cases of physical and sexual violence in refugee settlements.<sup>20–22</sup> Two ethical committees we consulted in Uganda also raised concerns that participants might relive emotional and psychological trauma<sup>23,24</sup> and could develop false hopes and expectations that we would solve their problems. To mitigate these ethical concerns, at the start of the study we explained the research scope and limitations to the participants and clarified that we were not in a position to solve their problems directly. We established contact with Tutapona Trauma Rehabilitation, an NGO in Nakivale offering counselling services, and they agreed that we could

refer participants as needed. Ultimately, no participants required referral.

Participants were fully informed about the academic purpose and nature of the study, the purpose and meaning of consent, what was expected of them, expected benefits of the study and future use of the data. Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality would be respected by using pseudonyms, leaving out revealing data and keeping source data confidential. After these explanations, participants were asked to provide oral informed consent to take part in the study. They were explicitly informed of their right not to participate, to withdraw from the study, or to (not) discuss particular topics at any time, without consequences. While signed consent would have been legally and ethically preferable, oral/verbal consent was opted for because of the sensitive nature of the study. Moreover, requests to sign a document in the politically vulnerable context of a refugee setting could have jeopardised interpersonal trust, based on interlocutors' possible suspicions that their signatures could be used in malevolent or undisclosed ways. Given the sensitivity of the topic of sexuality, participants were allowed the space to engage with the topic in their own ways, and only discuss topics they felt comfortable with. Following the preference of interviewees, IDIs with adolescents were conducted by the first author alone, as the themes raised were often sensitive and required a certain degree of intimacy.

No monetary or other compensation was offered, but to the limit allowed by our budget, participants were treated to sweets, doughnuts and soft drinks during the FGDs and IDIs.

The first author first negotiated access, sought and secured consent from various gatekeepers (the settlement commander, parents, guardians and community leaders), who informed the community of the researcher and her project and introduced her to the participating adolescents, as is the legal requirement for participants younger than 18 years. Gatekeepers' consent reinforced trust between the first author and respondents.

This study received ethical approval from the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research Ethical Advisory Board, the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. We were also granted an official research permit by the Office of the Prime Minister of Uganda to conduct the research in Nakivale.

### *Nakivale refugee settlement and adolescents' everyday lives*

Nakivale is located in southern Uganda. In 2020, Nakivale hosted the largest number of refugees of all settlements in Uganda. This enormous settlement of approximately 185km<sup>2</sup> is geographically divided into three administrative camps, including Nakivale Base Camp. The three camps house 79 individual villages.<sup>25</sup> Nakivale is administered by the Office of the Prime Minister, which has an on-site settlement management team led by the Ugandan settlement commander. Each camp is officially represented by selected members of the refugee population, who form three Refugee Welfare Councils.

Upon resettlement, refugees in Nakivale are granted access to land to build a shelter and they are expected to use the rest for farming. Livelihood assistance is provided by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGO implementing partners. The UNHCR and the World Food Program, through their implementing partner Samaritan Purse, provide food rations such as beans, maize, soy, salt and cooking oil. As food rations are insufficient, refugees cultivate plots and undertake small-scale commercial activities. Some refugees also receive remittances from their families abroad, particularly Europe and the USA.

Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) constitute the majority in the settlement. Nakivale also accommodates asylum seekers and refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi. The Burundian refugees constitute a sizeable group of 39,000.<sup>26</sup> Nakivale Base Camp, where most of our respondents lived, hosts communities from multiple countries. People from the same country often live together, inspiring neighbourhood names, such as "New Bujumbura", where most of our interlocutors lived.

Nakivale Base Camp has a youth centre located at its entrance, as well as its own clinic. Adolescents cannot easily access the latter's SRH services, as the services are not free and they cannot seek help independently of their parents. NGOs only intervene in special cases (e.g. rape). Furthermore, gynaecologist consultations, including those for adolescents, take place in the maternity ward, leading to a lack of confidentiality.<sup>27</sup> Robust data on indicators such as contraceptive use, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) prevalence,

teenage pregnancy and sexual violence are lacking and not necessarily representative. A small study of adolescent girls showed early sexual debut and poor SRHR knowledge; 11.7% did not have information on how HIV is transmitted, almost 50% lacked contraceptive knowledge, and 30% had ever used contraceptives.<sup>12</sup>

Nakivale Base Camp is a vibrant village. Upon entering, one immediately notices the groups of idle boys and girls in clean clothes: young boys with their hands in their pockets, wearing loose-fitting jeans, trousers or shorts with untucked shirts or t-shirts, and young girls wearing mini-dresses, skirts, tight jeans or leggings with pretty tops and make-up. These first impressions hint at the societal expectations of young Burundian girls to act feminine and look beautiful. Most Burundian girls and boys in this research were out of school and unemployed, and thus had time to walk the streets, passing time in various places. They spoke about time as being overabundant. Before their settlement in Nakivale Base Camp, back in Burundi, most of the adolescent participants had attended school. They attributed their being out of school to their family's inability to pay school fees. While the UNHCR subsidises schools for refugees in Nakivale, some fees still have to be covered for both primary and secondary schools. Additional costs for meals, transport, uniforms and school materials make it hard for many young people to continue schooling.

Because of their difficulty finding employment, adolescents spent their days chatting and attending various social activities, such as traditional dance clubs, sports, English language clubs, fashion modelling clubs, and bars and dancing clubs. Adolescents whose parents owned a fruit or vegetable stand often helped or stood in for them, or simply went to Nakivale Base Camp's daily market to meet and chat with customers. The Office of the Prime Minister and international NGOs organise activities in celebration of recognised national and international events, which adolescents attend, along with weddings and funerals, where they could pass time chatting.

In brief, adolescents' lives in Nakivale were different from in Burundi, particularly in terms of socioeconomic circumstances. This impacted the social relationships among community members and was expressed in terms of lack: of educational opportunities, of access to basic needs

and services like food, water, sanitation and health care, and of support from family members, many of whom were elsewhere. Nonetheless, adolescents employed multiple strategies to survive materially and maintain hopes for a "normal" life. This parallels arguments made by Turner,<sup>28</sup> who posits that Burundian refugees in Nairobi manage their precarious and uncertain situations through hope for a better future.

## Findings

### Adolescents' perspectives on freedom and sexuality

Many Burundian adolescents referred to their everyday experiences in Nakivale in terms of greater "freedom" compared to in Burundi, though this had both positive and negative sides.

#### *Some degree of freedom*

Adolescents often compared their new-found freedom in the refugee settlement with their experiences in Burundi, where girls were said always to be protected. They were usually escorted to and from school by parents or older family members. Those who were not escorted – especially those from the lower classes, from poorer neighbourhoods and rural areas – had restrictions on the time they should return home. Homes or compounds where most girls spent time after class were fenced or otherwise protected.

Both boys and girls explained that "some degree" of their new-found freedom in the settlement was positive and desired. As Sandra stated:

*"Now my boyfriend can come to see me at home. (...) This is good, I am free."* (Sandra, 17-year-old girl, IDI)

In Burundi, she explained, most parents were not open to their daughters spending unsupervised time with boys. In the settlement, many adolescents lived alone or, if they lived with their parents, the parents were rarely home or did not exercise control as they had in Burundi. Similarly, Divin, stated:

*"You see here, even parents who are usually strict, especially churchgoers, they are also now allowing some degree of freedom to their children."* (Divin, 14-year-old boy, IDI)

In addition to parents' new attitudes, the physical setting, without gates, was also seen to enable access to other adolescents.

Boys mentioned explicitly that their new-found “some degree of freedom” was good because it facilitated sexual experiences:

*“Sex is a need. So here in the settlement, because of freedom, it is always easy to find someone to satisfy your sexual needs. Here love relationships are basically for satisfying our sexual desire.”* (David, 15-year-old boy, FGD)

Some boys added that engaging with girls in sexually intimate acts contributed to stress relief. Boys also valued meeting girls of other nationalities:

*“Here, we date even other nationalities. For example, me, now I am dating an Ethiopian girl!”* (Didier, 15-year-old boy, FGD)

Notably, only boys explicitly linked some degree of freedom to sexual experimentation and enjoyment, through the access it allowed to girls.

#### *Too much freedom*

There could also be “too much freedom”, however, and this was seen by many adolescents as undesirable. For example, Clarisse who had fled Burundi without her family stated:

*“For us who come alone without parents, it is total or too much freedom. We do whatever ‘pleases’ us (...) this freedom is bad.”* (Clarisse, 15-year-old girl, IDI)

She explained that when she first arrived in Nakivale she had lived alone, but then she looked for another young Burundian girl to live with because she was afraid to be alone at night. Clarisse said that when she had lived with her parents in Burundi, she had always had a ready excuse to not have sex, or only to do so occasionally, like when her boyfriend borrowed his friend’s condo. Staying alone in Nakivale meant she had less control over her sexual relationships.

Adolescents said that peer pressure played an important role in how boys and girls behaved in situations of “too much freedom”. They felt it normalised premarital sex. Some boys said that while Burundian girls are normally shy about sex, their behaviour changed under the influence of peers:

*“Speaking of peer influence, here you see that we are a mixture of nationalities. (...) Our girls who are friends with other adolescents from a different nationality, they sometimes copy their behaviour. For example, it is known that Ugandan girls like sex. It is common knowledge and it is a normal thing here in Uganda.”* (Alain, 16-year-old)

Adolescents also felt that peer pressure reduced the fear of SRH issues such as HIV/AIDS and other STIs, unintended pregnancies and abortion.\* Claudine (16-year-old girl, FGD) believed that getting pregnant outside marriage was not an issue for most Ugandan girls, and that some Burundian girls had also adopted this attitude. However, when the Burundian girls did become pregnant, they had immediate regrets. Sandrine stated:

*“[the] too much freedom that we have is not always a good thing. To some of our adolescents who are now pregnant it is obvious that this is not what they wanted.”* (Sandrine, 17-year-old girl, FGD)

Young girls regretted unplanned pregnancies mostly because adding a newborn to the family was unthinkable when it was already a struggle to make ends meet. It was said that pregnant girls would likely resort to a risky abortion, either by self-medication or by paying a doctor to perform it illegally outside of the hospital.

Adolescents also felt that “too much freedom” led to transactional sex, alcohol abuse and drug abuse. Claudine mentioned that boys increasingly become alcoholics and drugs abusers:

*“of course, (...) young girls of my age are more and more becoming prostitutes”.*<sup>†</sup> (Claudine, 16-year-old girl, FGD)

Because of the proliferation of sexual encounters involving monetary or material exchanges, and because their material needs caused particularly young girls to experience less negotiating power in their sexual encounters, it was said that condoms were rarely used. Material exchanges for sex, or transactional sex, was described as one of the few options available to girls to secure their basic needs in the settlement.

\*Abortion is illegal in Uganda unless performed by a licensed medical doctor in a situation where the woman’s life is deemed to be at risk. With women lacking access to safe and legal abortions, many turn to unsafe abortion practices, including self-induced abortions.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>†</sup>We are aware of the problematic use of the term “prostitution”, which leads to further stigmatisation of girls/women. To stay close to our findings, we use it only when it concerns our respondents’ direct quotes, where the moral connotation was purposive. By speaking of “prostitution”, respondents condemned the “bad behaviour” of people engaging in transactional sex.

Boys were more likely to find small jobs requiring physical strength, such as construction or fetching water, which were seen as inappropriate for girls.

### Parental neglect

Transactional sex because of “too much freedom” was seen as evidence of a lack of parental (material) care and support: *kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi*. Both girls on their own and those living with their parents were allegedly involved in transactional sexual relationships. Several adolescents commented on how this worked:

*“Girls do sex for money. I think parents too are to be blamed for the love of money by some girls. You see girls have a lot of needs. They need small things like body lotions and make-up. So, you find them getting these things from boys or sugar daddies.”* (Clavis, 16-year-old boy, FGD)

*“Here you see more and more of the 15-year-old girls are supporting their parents, and the parents don’t ask them where they get the money, because they need it. It was different when we were in Burundi.”* (James, 16-year-old boy, FGD)

*“Parents don’t care about their children anymore. I know some friends who are in prostitution for the sake of getting school fees and living expenses (...). It is not that their parents don’t know. Some bar or club owners started approaching girls to go to work in the clubs for money and later on they introduced them to prostitution, for clubs to get more clients. People started gossiping about that and the parents whose daughters go to those bars or clubs were told. But [the] parents closed their eyes and ears.”* (Ornella, 16-year-old girl, IDI)

Ornella described this aspect of adolescents’ lives in Nakivale as “very surprising”. She lived with her parents in Nakivale during the holidays, but felt fortunate because her parents could send her to a private boarding school in Mbarara, a town nearby, and were paying her school fees.

Adolescents considered it unacceptable for parents to expect their children to support them and the family. Adolescents also saw parents’ silent acceptance or encouragement of their children’s actions as a form of parental neglect. In some cases, parents were setting bad examples themselves. For example, Vanessa stated:

*“Here we have situations where women settle in Nakivale with their children, but without their husband, or a husband without his wife. Sometimes life*

*becomes difficult and you find the woman goes into prostitution to provide for her family, or men take mistresses to satisfy their sexual needs.”* (Vanessa, 18-year-old girl, FGD)

Houses in the settlement were generally cramped, making it difficult for women to hide their sexual activities from their children. Thus, adolescents saw this as a tacit indication by mothers that it is okay to satisfy material needs through sexual exchange.

Parental neglect, or *kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi*, was, however, not only condemned by the adolescents; they could also understand the difficult position their parents were in. For example, Clarisse, a 15-year-old, who found her life in the settlement difficult and missed the support of her family in Burundi, said during an IDI that her family’s life was probably not easy given Burundi’s economic crisis. Clarisse could not pay school fees and found it challenging to satisfy her basic needs. She relied on the small food ration from the UNHCR and sometimes, when her boyfriend found small jobs fetching water for families, she received items like body lotion, sanitary pads or other personal care products from him.

### Boys’ need for money

Boys grumbled that their relationships with girls were most often about material exchanges for sex. In Nakivale, having money had become very important for any successful courtship strategy, because girls used their sexuality to satisfy their material needs. Even in rare cases when first intercourse occurred without a transactional purpose, boys felt pressure to give money or material support to keep the intimate relationship going.

Adolescents explained that transactional sex was also found in Burundi, though there it was related to personal motives and not dire need. What was new in Nakivale were the changed circumstances that drove girls to ask for material benefits, namely lack of parental support, control and care, and poverty. This new context informed adolescents’ relationship negotiation strategies, with boys knowing what tactics to use to get girls, and girls finding it hard to say no since they needed to survive.

Burundian boys also felt more competition with boys and men of other nationalities. Competition revolved around being able to offer money to girls or accommodate girls’ aspirations to

emigrate to Europe. In both realms, Burundian adolescents felt they could rarely, if ever, win:

*“For us guys or boys, when you have a girlfriend or know that you want to have one, you try to find small jobs to get some money because your girlfriend can want something and you have to provide. But sometimes, yourself you may want to give her a gift... just because you wish to (...). Here, girls love money so much and the too much freedom they have allow them to engage in prostitution. It is hard to get a girl if you don't have money...”* (Arcene, 17-year-old boy, FGD)

While in principle, freedom in Nakivale provided boys with access to girls, money was still key. Boys regularly complained about other nationalities stealing “their” girls:

*“Congolese and other nationalities take our girls. They have been here for quite some time and are owners of small shops. So, they have money.”* (Benjamin, 18-year-old boy, FGD)

Allegedly, Congolese boys and men especially aspired to date Burundian girls, whom they found beautiful. Burundian boys said that Congolese boys and men tricked Burundian girls with “the European emigration dream”: since the Congolese had been in the settlement longer, it was claimed they would receive priority for refugee status in a European country; Burundian girls with Congolese boyfriends therefore thought they had better chances of migrating through marriage, and they could receive remittances during the reunion process.

*“No girl will hear Europe and think twice. Congolese use this strategy to date our girls (...). These men with money or who use the European dream strategy are usually not in love with the girls. It is only for sex. And because life here is not easy, the girl will stupidly fall for them.”* (Arthur, 15-year-old boy, FGD)

Since it was hard to compete in terms of the girls' expectations of money and emigration to Europe, Burundian boys found the situation challenging and at times felt quite powerless.

In summary, for adolescents in Nakivale, “freedom” appeared as two versions: “some degree” and “too much”. While “some degree of freedom” enabled courting and sexual experiments and enjoyment, “too much freedom” was associated with SRH problems, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of parental care and support, and unwanted

competition with boys and men of other nationalities. Thus, almost all adolescents appeared to be against too much freedom.

### Parental perspectives on adolescents' freedom and sexuality

In this section, we explore how parents and other adults viewed freedom in Nakivale. Among parents and other adults from all ethnic groups and social classes in the settlement, there was a strong consensus that the freedom in Nakivale resulted in *libertinage*, a French word used by educated parents, or *ubuhumbu*, loosely translated as “profligacy”, used by non-educated parents. Both *ubuhumbu* and *libertinage* referred to the negative effects of too much freedom in Nakivale – a loss of morals and dignity, and the lack of respect by children and adolescents for their elders – and using these words rather than “freedom” highlighted the dramatic character of the consequences. While adolescents saw freedom as having both positive and negative potential, parents and other adults spoke about freedom among adolescents only in negative terms.

*“A lot has changed. From change in dressing style, with girls wearing extremely short clothes – well for those coming from Bujumbura, there is not much change in terms of clothing styles. But those coming from rural areas are really surprising – to prostitution, alcohol and drug abuse.”* (Manirakiza, 47-year-old man, KII)

Parents struggled with how to address their children's freedom. For instance, Bugingo explained that his friend often complained about his son coming home drunk every night. The friend had tried to tell his son that this was unacceptable behaviour, but his son had insulted him, saying:

*“You are not my father anymore. How can you say you are my father while you don't give me food or any other thing that I need? UNHCR is my father; they are the only ones to have a say about my life.”* (Bugingo, 49-year-old man, FGD)

Another father stated:

*“We had control of our children in Burundi. But here, we cannot buy clothes or send them to schools. How can we control or manage them?”* (Oscar, 44-year-old man, FGD)

Similar statements were expressed by other parents:

*“Our children are not listening to us because our capacity to provide to their needs has been diminished.”* (Jean, 45-year-old man, KII)

*“We are unable to support our children here. Our selves, we are supported by UNHCR. We try to do small things like grow crops or doing petty business to make ends of months. Even with all that we are not able to get money for school fees or to buy them small things like body lotions, or sanitary pads for girls.”* (Speciose, 38-year-old woman, KII)

While the relationship between parents and children in Burundi was characterised by authority and respect based on parents providing for their children, this had changed in Nakivale. With refugee parents losing their role as the family’s main provider, they also lost the right to make decisions about their children’s lives; the situation in Nakivale rendered them powerless. The decline in their socio-economic status had drastic implications for their sense of self-worth, and their lack of control over their children was a source of great concern.

Parents highlighted that because their children were not attending school, they had much idle time. Parents felt that it was understandable that some children would try various means to satisfy their needs, but worried about the situation:

*“Both boys and girls alike. Girls find an easy way to satisfy their needs through prostitution. Boys generally do alcohol. Here, there are very cheap local beers, but these really kill. That, together with drugs, is killing our young boys.”* (FGD with parents)

## Discussion

In this paper we have described how Burundian adolescents in Nakivale refugee settlement perceive their daily lives and how they navigate sexuality. Our findings suggest that they view freedom ambivalently: while some degree of freedom is considered desirable, too much is seen as *kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi*, which can be loosely translated as “parental neglect”, referring to parents’ lack of involvement and (material) care.

To explain their everyday sexual lives, adolescents underlined the role of freedom, which referred primarily to the absence of familial and societal control, management, judgements and expectations. When adolescents associated freedom and sexuality with negative consequences

like HIV/AIDS and other STIs, unplanned pregnancy, abortion or transactional sex, they spoke of “too much freedom” and “parental neglect”. Adolescents did not necessarily see parental neglect as intentional, but as stemming from the impossible situation parents faced. Instead of interpreting abuse and neglect as expressions of harsh parenting,<sup>30–33</sup> our interlocutors explained it as resulting from crisis-induced environmental strain on families and parents.

The experience of crisis and cross-border displacement is critical to understand Burundian adolescents’ “freedom” in Nakivale. The disruptive experiences mean that parents and adolescents “following [of] the cultural script for social participation no longer provides the expectable sense of security or makes sense at all” (Levine, cited in Robben & Suarez-Orozco p 272).<sup>34</sup> Parents struggle with what they see as their own powerlessness, as well as disrespect from their children. Their poverty undermines their authority and changes generational relationships, which leads them to feel unworthy to have a say about their children’s behaviour.<sup>35,36</sup> Adolescents described a lack of material and moral support from parents, and thus a diminished sense of protection and structure.

Lack of privacy in the overcrowded living quarters in Nakivale challenges the otherwise taken-for-granted social order, norms and traditions. Problematic parental behaviour can, for instance, be witnessed directly by children; mothers engaging in transactional sex were said to provide a negative example to their daughters, while fathers were often seen as drunks. Turner<sup>37</sup> writes about similar processes in the context of power relations between “big men” and other men in a Burundian refugee camp in Tanzania at the time of the civil war in Burundi (1993–2005). Big men could no longer sustain their position given that all men were seen as living in equally challenging circumstances. Similarly to our findings, Turner<sup>37</sup> and Lukunka<sup>38</sup> also found that aid from the UNHCR and other organisations disrupted the roles and relationships in displacement settings in Tanzania. In Nakivale, parents feel that the UNHCR and its implementing partners, in assuming the role of provider, are affecting basic patterns of relationships and socialisation. Norms and values regarding relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and boyfriends and girlfriends are being challenged, and family authority structures are crumbling.

It is also important to consider the cultural repertoires of young refugees and their parents to understand the two-way experience of freedom. Coe defines cultural repertoire as “a set of cultural resources or frameworks – ways of speaking, thinking, and feeling about family – that mobilise material resources and people in ways that are considered normal and natural. Repertoires help organise the vastness of what people think, feel, and experience”.<sup>39</sup>

Coe proposes viewing culture as a flexible toolkit that people apply to specific situations while putting ideas and resources together to solve problems. The usefulness of this culturally-grounded toolkit for individual action depends entirely, however, on the situational context. As Fouts et al.<sup>40</sup> argue, children perceive and interpret their experiences in their families in light of how they perceive their context and culture.

Our findings demonstrate how this logic operates for our participants. They referred to their past repertoire and contrasted it with their new one to make sense of their current sexual behaviours. The cultural repertoire that both adolescents and parents referred to when talking about Burundi is well reflected in Rwantabagu’s<sup>41</sup> normative description of “Burundian culture”, where family roles and responsibilities are centred around male authority and the act of provisioning is connected to implementing and maintaining disciplinary measures to oversee interactions between men and women, parents and children, husbands and wives and all social interaction.

Family relationships form the basis for social support and responsibilities. Family members share resources as well as moral values, and are required to maintain acceptable behavioural standards, since transgressions bring shame to all family members. Within families, strictly defined roles reflect the family hierarchy, and include reverence for parents and other adults in the larger family; children’s and adolescents’ conformity to the morals, roles and hierarchies is expected and highly valued. Children learn from a young age what is expected of them through words, everyday socialisation and discipline, usually from an instructional approach, including physical punishment. Rwantabagu<sup>41</sup> described this using the Burundian proverb *igiti kigororwa kikiri gito*, which loosely translates as “straightening a tree has to be done when it is still young”.

The importance of parental supervision, control and discipline in deterring adolescents from

participating in risky sexual behaviour has been documented by various researchers, though too little or too much supervision and control may have a negative impact on adolescents’ sexual conduct (see Babalola, Tambashe & Vondrasek<sup>42</sup> for Ivory Coast). In Nakivale, adolescents spoke of too much freedom and too little parental control, leading them to ask for guided freedom. This is perhaps best understood by exploring the freedom gap that adolescents encounter in displacement. In Nakivale, young Burundian refugees and their parents find that the cultural repertoires learned in Burundi no longer work. Whilst adolescents’ aspirations remain similar – to be cared for and be able to go to school – new-found structures in the camp replace parts of the script related to tasks and responsibilities. Asking their parents to fulfil their material needs or support their educational aspirations is no longer a useful part of adolescents’ cultural toolkit of action. New elements enter, such as transactional sex and hopes of finding a partner who will facilitate migration to Europe.

Our findings show that the experiences of young Burundian refugees of both freedom and sexuality are highly gendered. Research on displacement contexts generally point to the vulnerable position of adolescent girls and women especially. We found that some of this vulnerability may also be transposed from the Burundian context. Seckinelgin, Bigirimwami and Morris<sup>43</sup> found that “access to education”, “access to livelihood needs and housing”, “other subsistence needs” and “basic protection within a family” are gendered vulnerabilities embedded in Burundian society, which are reinforced by the country’s political conflicts and violence. This suggests that Burundian adolescents in Nakivale, particularly girls, experience a double vulnerability: from the organisation of Burundian conflict-affected society and their present refugee status. Girls may also experience “gendered material inequalities” since both boys and girls often justified girls’ sexual practices in terms of meeting their need for money or beauty products, which may lead to increased HIV/AIDS exposure.<sup>44</sup> Looking clean and beautiful is a Burundian societal expectation for femininity, which nearly all respondents commented upon. For young women and girls on the verge of adulthood, little things like body lotion or powder can have great significance. Girls with parents who can ensure food and school fees may potentially still look for boyfriends to

obtain beauty products. This results in the increasing need for boys and young men to have (some) money, as a pre-condition to affirming their sexual prowess and manliness.

While socio-economic differences between families were generally downplayed by Nakivale residents, perhaps due to the shared circumstances of displacement, some interlocutors suggested that families with an educated parent were frequently better off. These parents often worked in Kampala or Mbarara and sent money to support their families. Families with (adult) children in Europe or the USA also benefitted from their support through remittances, which reduced the families' material strain in the settlement. However, most of the adolescents in our study described their life situation in terms of poverty, a poverty that helped to explain, but not excuse, parental neglect. The problem of who provides is crucial for understanding the complicated relations between Burundian parents and their adolescent children in the refugee setting. The narratives of adolescents reveal how relationships with parents are jeopardised when the UNHCR, rather than parents, provides, or if an adolescent can provide for him/herself. When parents directly provide for their children and their children therefore depend on them, parental care is reciprocated with respect, including acceptance of parental authority regarding boundaries to sexual freedoms. The involuntary, poverty-induced dissolution of the social-cultural contract between parents and children, appraised by adolescents as parental neglect, leads to the disempowerment and disrespect of parents and lies at the root of the ambivalence on sexual freedom. The lack of parental authority and engagement leads to the positive side of sexual freedom, as well as to too much freedom that harms.

### *Study limitations*

The study has several limitations that could affect the generalisation and transferability of the findings. First and foremost, as participation was voluntary, the sample may be biased, since our study attracted adolescents with a possible stronger interest in the topic of sexuality compared to their peers who did not choose to participate. The study therefore might not reflect the complete picture or could have missed hard-to-reach adolescents. Indeed, the study received greater interest from girls than boys, and securing

interviews with boys was a challenge. We tried to minimise potential bias by recruiting our respondents from different spaces within the camp, as mentioned in our methods section.

Additionally, while we intended to only include adolescents aged 13–19 years, informal conversations with people in Nakivale revealed that young people commonly underreport their age with the UNHCR for different reasons, including accessing age-restricted benefits. This complicated the ascertaining of participants' true age and may have led to somewhat older youth participating in the study.

We are aware that our findings may have been impacted by a social desirability bias. For example, due to the cultural sensitivity of premarital sexual activity among adolescent girls, very few girls explicitly mentioned which part of their narratives concerned their personal experiences, while peer pressure to engage in sexual activity may have led boys to exaggerate their own sexual activities in their narratives. In this paper we do not aim to report actual sexual practices or engagement, but rather focus on the theme of sexual freedom that adolescents consistently brought up in our discussions with them.

### *Conclusion*

When making sense of their experiences with sexuality, Burundian adolescent refugees in Nakivale point to “freedom” as a core characteristic that has both positive and negative connotations. On the one hand, they value the greater freedom they experience in Nakivale and the easing of the strict cultural expectations regarding adolescent boys' and girls' behaviour that are imposed by parents and elders in the community. However, “too much freedom” and the harms this can bring – such as teenage pregnancy, abortion and transactional sex – are often attributed to parental neglect, which is perceived to be the result of the refugee context that disempowers parents. Both adolescents and parents are highly aware of the complex social dynamics at play in their relationships and how they impact adolescents' sexual behaviours in the displacement context. We argue that adolescents' perspectives in Nakivale should be seen in light of the new-found structures and repertoires in the displacement context, the strain placed on refugee families by the political crisis in Burundi, and the continued significance of cultural repertoires from Burundi.

Most (calls for) SRHR interventions aimed at adolescents focus on adolescents' direct needs, such as youth-friendly health services, protection against sexual violence and abuse, or adolescents' lack of knowledge of and access to contraceptives. Few interventions also adopt a relational perspective. Our findings indicate that it is important for interventions in the refugee context to first understand what carries weight. In Nakivale, this concerns not only the need to empower adolescents by alleviating poverty and providing them with information and services regarding their SRHR,

but also the need to empower parents to provide for their children themselves.

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## Résumé

Cet article examine la manière dont les adolescents du camp de réfugiés, de Nakivale en Ouganda, explorent “*umwidegemvyo*” qui peut se traduire comme “liberté” en ce qui concerne leur sexualité. Nous nous appuyons sur une étude de recherches ethnographiques menée entre août et novembre 2017 auprès d’adolescents âgés de 13 à 19 ans. Nos recherches s’appuient sur des entretiens individuels menés de manière approfondie, des groupes de discussion, et une observation des participants. Nous présentons une appréciation contextuelle de cette notion de “liberté” et ses répercussions sociales sur la vie sexuelle et les relations amoureuses de ces adolescents. Nous démontrons comment les adolescents attribuent leurs expériences et pratiques sexuelles à la liberté vécue dans le contexte du camp des réfugiés, ceci inclut le sexe vécu de façon expérimentale, le sexe comme moyen de se soulager du stress et les rapports sexuels transactionnels. Toutefois, leur point de vue sur cette liberté est ambivalent : car si un certain degré de liberté est souhaitable, ils qualifient l’excès de liberté de “*kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi*” pouvant être traduit de “négligence parentale”, qui implique l’absence de contrôle parental, et le fait que les parents ne subviennent plus (ou pas) aux besoins émotionnels et financiers de leurs enfants.

## Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo los adolescentes burundeses en el asentamiento de refugiados de Nakivale, en Uganda, experimentan *umwidegemvyo*, que traducido sería algo así como “libertad”, con respecto a su sexualidad. Nos basamos en investigaciones etnográficas realizadas entre agosto y noviembre de 2017 con adolescentes de 13 a 19 años. Nuestra investigación consistió en entrevistas a profundidad individuales, discusiones en grupos focales y observación participante. Presentamos una valoración de “libertad” sensible al contexto y sus implicaciones sociales para las relaciones sexuales y amorosas de los adolescentes. Mostramos cómo los adolescentes atribuyen sus experiencias y prácticas sexuales, tales como sexo experimental, sexo para aliviar el estrés y sexo transaccional, a la libertad experimentada en el contexto de refugiados. Sin embargo, también ven esta libertad con ambivalencia: aunque cierto grado de libertad es deseable, demasiada libertad es considerada como *kutitabwaho n’ababyeyi*, que traducido sería algo así como “negligencia de los padres”, lo cual implica la falta de involucramiento, atención y aprovisionamiento de los padres.