Original Article

Gender Dimensions of Aguu (Socially Excluded Youth) in Gulu City, Northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

The African social philosophical sense of 'Ubuntu' ('I am because we are') and the notion 'it takes a whole village to raise a child' is at crossroads in the post-conflict Acholi sub-region in Northern Uganda. Society has relegated its social responsibility and moral values to bringing up children. This study fostered a gender-responsive approach to addressing the Aguu phenomenon in Gulu City. The term 'Aguu' does not have an accepted single definition. However, it is used to refer to a group of children and persons between the ages of 6 to 35 years who consider the street as their home and family. This makes the concept of 'family and home' fluid and temporal. Whereas society considers them a source of insecurity, this study views them as a 'floating population' who have been pulled or pushed into the streets by social, economic, and political factors. The study employed a qualitative and ethnohistorical approach, involving individual interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations, archival work, and literature review. The study perceived the Aguu as a distinct social network with a unique agency, identity and culture. The street affects the genders differently. Gender-specific vulnerabilities were evident, perpetuating their social marginalisation and exclusion. Understanding the gender dynamic and dimensions of the Aguu phenomenon is essential for crafting sustainable solutions and interventions. These interventions must be gender-responsive, addressing the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of male and female Aguu members.

INTRODUCTION

This article raises the need to holistically re-think the problems of the *Aguu*; a socially excluded youth; in the post-Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) conflict in Northern Uganda. It sheds light on the gender dimensions of the *Aguu* phenomenon as a social network of socially excluded youth in Gulu City. The term *Aguu* is dynamic and fluid and has changed over time in meaning and substance. It currently denotes a group of socially isolated young people struggling to subsist within the pre-established norms, conventions, and rules of society as they are defined in the context of Northern Uganda, Gulu City, and the Acholi ethnic group (Divon & Owor, 2021). The *Aguu* use this term to identify themselves as a group with a distinct social identity, culture, and code of conduct. According to Divon & Owor (2021), *Aguu* are viewed as individuals who resorted to illicit activities as a livelihood strategy; as criminal gangs who prey on by-passers and snatch their valuables; or as organized gangs that engage in coordinated criminal activities, and as criminals-for-hire, used as pawns in a variety of small and large conflicts for purposes of coercion, punishment, self-interest, or revenge.

African social philosophy is the philosophical discourse produced in Africa or by indigenous Africans that reflects the values, norms, and practices that shape the social and political organization of African societies (Azenabor, 2009). African social philosophy is relevant for this study because it underpins the *Aguu* identity, agency and culture, which are influenced by various factors and dynamics linked to war, culture, aid, and politics. The African social philosophy helps to understand how the *Aguu* members perceive themselves and others, how they relate to their family and community of origin, how they cope with their challenges and opportunities, and how they express their resistance or contestation against their claimed oppression or exclusion.

African social philosophy can be approached from different perspectives, including the ethnophilosophical approach and the critical approach. The ethnophilosophical approach attempts to identify and describe the common worldview or ethos of African cultures that underlie their social and political philosophy (Onebunne, 2020). The critical approach challenges and critiques the ethnophilosophical approach for being essentialist, ahistorical, homogenizing, or ideological (Onebunne, 2020). It also proposes alternative or complementary perspectives that take into account the diversity, complexity, and fluidity of African cultures and philosophies (Azenabor, 2009). In this article, a critical approach to African social philosophy was adopted, as it allows for a more nuanced and contextualized analysis of the *Aguu* phenomenon. The critical approach enabled a dialogue and exchange with other philosophical traditions that enriched and informed the research.

Social exclusion is a multidimensional concept that refers to the process and state of being excluded from the economic, social, political, or cultural systems that determine the integration and participation of a person in society (NASEM, 2018). Social exclusion can affect various aspects of a person's life, such as income, education, health, housing, employment, citizenship, etc. Social exclusion affects various groups of people, such as women, children, youth, elderly, ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees differently. Criminal involvement is a broad term that refers to the participation or engagement in activities that violate the law or norms of society (Camilletti, 2020). Criminal involvement can include various types of crimes, such as violent crimes, property crimes, drug crimes, sex crimes, etc. Criminal involvement can also include various levels of involvement, such as victimization, offending, witnessing or being an accomplice in crime (Uganda Penal Code (Amendment) Act. 2007).

The study adopts a critical perspective that challenges the dominant narratives and representations of the *Aguu* as a homogeneous group of criminals and deviants who pose a threat to society. Instead, it recognizes the diversity, complexity, and fluidity of the *Aguu* identity as a group whose inception and evolution are influenced by multiple factors and dynamics linked to war, culture, aid, and politics. The study also acknowledges the agency, creativity, and resilience of the *Aguu* as actors who shape and are shaped by the urban space.

The main research questions that guided this study were: (1) who are the *Aguu*? (2) How does gender influence the agency, vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement of *Aguu* members in Gulu City? The sub-questions are: (a) What are the gender-specific dynamics within the *Aguu* community that contribute to the formation of this social network? (b) How do traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures influence the roles and experiences of male and female *Aguu* members? (c) What are the gendered consequences of interactions between *Aguu* and the wider community, and how do these experiences shape their vulnerability to social exclusion and agency and engagement in criminal behaviour? This paper reviewed the existing literature on the *Aguu* phenomenon, the African social philosophy, and the gender dimensions of social exclusion, agency and criminal involvement. It identified the existing critical knowledge gaps and proposed possible interventions.

The Problem Statement

In Gulu City, Northern Uganda there exists a socially excluded youth faced with multidimensional challenges that hinder their integration into mainstream society. Whereas their emergence was initially attributed to the LRA War, Gulu City continues to experience an increase in the number of such young people locally called "*Aguu*" who have transformed the street into their home. They face challenges which are influenced by their gender dynamics, which exacerbates inequalities and shapes their

experiences of exclusion differently for the young men and women. While both genders encounter barriers such as rejection, poverty, unemployment, limited access to education, and social stigma, young women often face additional vulnerabilities linked to cultural norms, early marriages, and gender-based violence. Similarly, young men experience limited access to and ownership of land, and societal pressures to fulfil traditional roles as providers, which often leads to frustration, marginalization and exclusion when opportunities are scarce. Despite efforts to address the socially excluded youth question in Gulu City, there is limited understanding of the gender dynamics and the related challenges contributing to the persistent presence of the *Aguu* on the streets. This therefore dismisses the claim that the *Aguu* are a product of the LRA conflict. This lack of nuanced analysis hampers the development of targeted interventions that address the unique needs of socially excluded youth. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the gender dimensions of youth exclusion in Gulu City, exploring the root causes, manifestations, and potential strategies for fostering inclusion and empowerment across gender lines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The origin of the *Aguu* is traced back to the conflict in Northern Uganda between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels, which lasted from 1986 to 2006 (Divon & Owor, 2021). During this period, many children and youth were abducted by the LRA, displaced from their villages, or orphaned by the war (Kelly et al., 2016). Some of them managed to escape or were rescued by the government forces, but they faced difficulties in reintegrating into their families and communities due to trauma, stigma, rejection, or poverty (Kiconco, 2022).

Some of them were displaced from their villages, living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, where they faced poverty, disease, hunger, and insecurity (Kelly et al., 2016). Some were orphaned by the war, losing their parents, relatives, or guardians (Amony, 2015). While

others were abducted by the LRA and forced to become child soldiers or sex slaves (Curtis et al., 2022). They were separated from their families and communities (Allen et al., 2020). Others escaped from captivity and were rescued by the government forces, but faced difficulties in reintegrating into society due to stigma, rejection, or lack of support (Kiconco, 2022).

As survival became difficult, some of them migrated to Gulu town, where they formed bonds with other street children and youth who had similar experiences or backgrounds (Divon & Owor, 2021). Together, they created their own identity, agency and culture as *Aguu*, a new generation of post-LRA conflict youth. Whereas Divon & Owor (2021) asserted that the term *Aguu* means "crazy" or "wild" in the Acholi language, this study establishes a contrary meaning of *Aguu*.

Divon and Owor (2021), observed that not all the street children/youth were a direct result of the LRA conflict displacement and abductions. Some street children/youths were on the streets because the conflict disrupted the livelihood of their parents, as they lost access to land and property triggering poverty and mental health. Therefore, the children/youth left home and their families, relocating to the town.

Similarly, the emergence of the Aguu is attributed to the exposure of Northern Uganda to external influence through the humanitarian economy (western humanitarian NGOs and development partners) that had persisted in Gulu town during the two decades of conflict and a decade after the conflict had ended. They chose to pursue and live an urban lifestyle inspired by foreign influence and imagined opportunities which was not consistent with the indigenous Acholi traditions and values (Divon & Owor, 2021). But they also recognise that some children/youth freely choose the street life for freedom and access to what they believe is 'easy money' and life through crime (Divon & Owor, 2021).

The sociological perspective argues that the *Aguu* phenomenon is a result of social, political, economic, and infrastructural changes that have occurred in Gulu City since the end of the conflict (Divon & Owor, 2021). Gulu City has undergone rapid urbanization and development in recent years, attracting many migrants from rural areas and other regions who seek better opportunities and services (Divon & Owor, 2021). This has created new challenges and opportunities for the *Aguu*, who have to compete with other groups for scarce resources and spaces in the city. The *Aguu* have also adapted to the changing urban environment by diversifying their activities and interactions with other actors in the city. Some of these activities are legal or legitimate, such as petty trading, casual labouring, performing arts, or community service (Divon & Owor, 2021). Some are illegal or illegitimate, such as theft, robbery, drug trafficking, prostitution, or violence (Divon & Owor, 2021). The *Aguu* have also developed different forms of resistance or contestation against the authorities and institutions that oppress or exclude them from the city (Divon & Owor, 2021). These include political mobilization, social activism, cultural expression, or direct confrontation.

The historical roots of African social philosophy can be traced back to ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Nubia, and Axum, which flourished along the Nile and East African regions (Chukwu & Edwinah, 2021). Early African philosophers, known as sages or griots, played a pivotal role in transmitting cultural knowledge and wisdom through oral traditions (Graness, 2022). As these philosophies evolved over time, they became deeply entrenched in African societies, shaping the values, norms, and communal practices that define the continent's diverse cultures (Azenabor, 2009).

African social philosophy is characterized by several core principles that underpin the fabric of African societies: Ubuntu/Unhu; Communalism; and Oral Tradition and Storytelling (Azenabor, 2009). The concept of Ubuntu, also known as Unhu in some African languages, lies at the heart of African social philosophy (Mokgoro, 2012). Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within a community (Assié-Lumumba, 2017). It embodies

the belief that 'I am what I am because of who we are,' highlighting the shared responsibility and collective well-being of the community (Assié-Lumumba, 2017). Ubuntu emphasizes compassion, empathy, and communal support, fostering a sense of solidarity and harmony within African societies (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Communalism is a fundamental aspect of African social philosophy, emphasizing the importance of collective ownership, shared resources, and mutual assistance (Ikuenobe, 2018). It challenges individualism and promotes the notion that one's well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being of the community (Azenabor, 2009). Communalism manifests in various aspects of African life, from communal land tenure systems to community-based decision-making processes (Kasanda, 2015). Oral tradition is a significant medium through which African social philosophy is passed down through generations (Abdoulaye & Yang, 2015). Storytelling, in particular, plays a crucial role in conveying cultural values, historical knowledge, and moral lessons (Graness, 2022). Griots, historians, and elders serve as custodians of this oral tradition, preserving the essence of African social philosophy through narrative (Anene & Njoku, 2018).

In contemporary African societies, the interpretations of African social philosophy have evolved to accommodate the complexities of modern life. Scholars such as Mokgoro (2012), Assié-Lumumba (2017), and Ewuoso and Hall (2019) have examined how traditional values like Ubuntu can be applied to address contemporary challenges, including urbanization, globalization, and social inequality. These contemporary interpretations strive to strike a balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing the changing dynamics of African societies. However, the application of African social philosophy is not without challenges. Both Himonga et al. (2013) and Ikuenobe (2018) argue that the emphasis on communalism and ubuntu may clash with the individualistic values propagated by modernity. Additionally, the impact of colonialism and globalization has led to cultural diffusion and a dilution of indigenous social philosophies in certain regions (Chukwu & Edwinah, 2021).

In summary, African social philosophy remains of paramount importance in shaping the values, norms, and institutions that govern African societies. It serves as a guiding force for communal living, conflict resolution, and collective identity. Moreover, African social philosophy contributes to a unique worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity and the environment, underpinning African approaches to sustainable development and ecological conservation. African social philosophy is an intricate tapestry woven from the historical experiences, wisdom, and cultural heritage of the continent's diverse communities. Rooted in principles such as ubuntu, communalism, and storytelling, this philosophy emphasizes the importance of collective well-being, solidarity, and cultural preservation. While contemporary interpretations adapt to the challenges of modernity, the essence of African social philosophy remains a profound influence in shaping the identity, values, and resilience of African societies. As African societies navigate the complexities of the 21st century, the enduring relevance of their social philosophy continues to inspire a shared sense of ubuntu and interconnectedness, paving the way for a future that upholds the cultural heritage and collective wisdom of the continent.

Gender is a social construct that refers to the roles, behaviours, expectations, and identities that are assigned to men and women by society (Nagels, 2021). Gender is influenced by various factors, such as biological sex, culture, religion, history, etc. Gender is also dynamic and fluid, as it can change over time and across contexts (Bergenfeld et al., 2021). Structural, cultural and individual factors are factors and mechanisms of social exclusion and criminal involvement and explain how gender influences the vulnerability or resilience of different groups of people to social exclusion and criminal involvement.

Structural factors refer to the macro-level factors that shape the distribution of power, resources,

opportunities, and constraints in society (Redhead & Power, 2022). Structural factors include economic systems, political systems, legal systems, social systems, etc. Structural factors can create or reinforce gender inequalities or disparities that affect the access or control of different groups of people over various aspects of their lives (Jackson et al., 2022). For example, structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, corruption, etc., can increase the risk or likelihood of social exclusion or criminal involvement for *Aguu* members who face economic hardship or social marginalization.

Cultural factors refer to the micro-level factors that shape the values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of individuals or groups in society (Li & Rose, 2017). Cultural factors include traditions, religions, ideologies, subcultures, etc. Cultural factors can create or reinforce gender stereotypes or expectations that affect the roles or behaviours of different groups of people in various situations (Willan et al., 2020). For example, cultural factors such as patriarchy, machismo, honour codes, etc., can increase the pressure or incentive for social exclusion or criminal involvement for *Aguu* members who face gender norms or roles that limit their choices or opportunities.

Individual factors refer to the personal-level factors that shape the characteristics, motivations, decisions, actions, and reactions of individuals in society (Grove, 2021). Individual factors include personality traits, cognitive abilities, emotional states, moral values, etc. Individual factors can create or reinforce gender differences or similarities that affect the responses or outcomes of different groups of people in various circumstances (Trani et al., 2020). For example, individual factors such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, risk-taking propensity, moral disengagement etc., can increase the resilience or vulnerability to social exclusion or criminal involvement for *Aguu* members who face personal challenges or opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative and ethnohistorical approach, involving individual interviews, Key Informant Interviews, focus group discussions, participant and non-participant observations, and literature reviews. The team of researchers observed the *Aguu* activities both day and night to explore the nature of their clandestine and public activities. A total of 371 (67 Females and 304 males) *Aguu* who were purposively sampled through snowball and networking methods were interviewed. They were drawn from Olailong, Pece, Kasubi, Cuk Acenjere, Layibi and Lacor areas in the suburbs of Gulu City. The participants identified using snowball and network methods were persons who had lived most of their lives in the streets and had relevant knowledge of and experience with the *Aguu* phenomenon. They included: former and currently active *Aguu*, community members and leaders, Learners, Teachers, social workers, police officers and prison wardens, journalists, and academicians. The study employed thematic analysis to identify, group and analyse the key issues emerging from the data. Triangulation was used to cross-check and validate the data from different sources and methods. The study follows ethical principles and guidelines to ensure the respect, protection, and benefit of the research participants and the research community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Conceptualising the term Aguu

There are divergent and diverse meanings to the term "*Aguu*". In a focus group discussion with the *Aguu*, they observed that there is a prevailing negative perception of the term "*Aguu*" in Gulu City. It is commonly associated with criminal groups and activities, including drug use, theft, and burglary. The Aguu are perceived as troublemakers who engage in illicit activities aligned with the stereotype that portrays them as a socially excluded and deviant group. During the interviews, the Aguu agreed to the common and prevailing views of the meaning of the word "Aguu".

"Aguu, are just a bunch of troublemakers. They smoke weed, they rob people on the streets at night, and they break into houses. They are considered useless" (Interview in Gulu City, Respondent GC 001).

"I see Aguu as those boys and girls who are always in the wrong. They do not care about anything. They steal or rob people on the way in order survive and make ends meet" (Interview in Gulu City, Respondent GC 002).

"Aguu are like the thieves in the dark. You cannot trust them. They are always up to something bad" (Interview in Gulu City, Respondent GC 003).

It is evident that the community's negative perspective of "*Aguu*" could contribute to their social exclusion, which may manifest in various ways, such as limited access to education, employment opportunities, and healthcare services. Gender-specific vulnerabilities within the *Aguu* community may exacerbate the social exclusion experienced by both male and female members. Furthermore, the perception of *Aguu* as criminals may also influence interactions with law enforcement agencies, potentially resulting in differential treatment based on gender. For example, the findings from interview discussions revealed that male *Aguu* members face distinct challenges and risks related to criminal justice involvement compared to their female counterparts.

However, this study establishes that the term *Aguu* means different things, to different people, at different times, and that the "*Aguu*" are not a uniform group and therefore it is important to disaggregate them.

In Acoli, Aguu is derived from the Acoli word "gure" which literally means a collection of people /persons or to gather in a place. Therefore, Aguu is a collection of young people who have gathered in the town and are characterised as a gang of criminals" (Interview with the market vendor in Gulu City, Respondent GC 004).

Another perspective of *Aguu* traces the origin of the term to Juba City in South Sudan. A market vendor who once operated in Juba, South Sudan noted that she first heard of the term "*Aguu*" from Juba City. She stated that: "*In Juba, the word "Aguu" also connotes a person who is idle and disorderly, and most likely is a criminal*" (Interview with the market vendor in Gulu City, Respondent GC 005).

The conflict-related definition of *Aguu* refers to children born in war and who were rejected by both maternal and paternal families or could not trace their paternity and therefore were thrown out of their maternal families. The Local Council 1 Chairperson of Vanguard Village, Vanguard Parish, Pece-Laroo Division in Gulu City noted that initially the term *Aguu* was used to refer to night commuters who would commute in the evening to sleep in the Bus Park during the LRA insurgency. However, as the LRA abductees and children born in captivity began to return home they faced a reintegration challenge as their families saw them as an abomination (in Acoli '*cen*') and rejected them. Similarly, when those who had lost their parents during the war returned from Internally Displace Persons (IDP) camps, the relatives who had remained in the village grabbed their land and chased them away from their families. These categories migrated to the town to look for survival and ended up on the street.

Historicizing the Formation and Evolution of the *Aguu* in Gulu City

Based on the interviews with the community members and leaders, Cultural Institutions, Religious leaders, Gulu City and political leaders, and the *Aguu*, the emergence of the group is attributed to both push and pull factors. The findings indicate that *Aguu's* identity has evolved over time and is currently characterized by a distinct social identity, culture, agency, and code of conduct. However, the name has not changed but the actors keep on changing, pointing toward the intricacies and complexities of the Aguu Phenomenon. This transformation can be seen as a coping mechanism developed by socially

excluded youth in response to the traumatic and stigmatizing experiences of conflict, displacement, rejection and the breakdown of traditional family structures.

The study established that there were two categories of *Aguu* in Gulu City; namely the "*Aguu* of the street" and "*Aguu* on the street". These are the local lexical relating to the *Aguu* phenomenon. According to the interviews with the *Aguu*, they observe that "*Aguu* of the street" was a term used to refer to those who came to the street while young and were seen grow up and survive in the street. Most of these categories were children born in war, rejected by the family, orphans, children without paternal identity, children neglected by their mothers and children who got lost during the LRA war. On the contrary, "*Aguu* on the street" are those who operate from home to the street on a daily basis. Most of them are Sex workers, children from well-to-do families, and school dropouts.

The findings indicate that *Aguu's* identity represents a way for these youth to create a sense of belonging and purpose in the face of adversity. Many Aguu members shared a common experience of either losing one or both parents. This parental loss often served as a significant push driver for their entry into the *Aguu* network. Without parental support and guidance, they found themselves in vulnerable circumstances, seeking alternative means of survival and belonging.

> "Both my parents died during the war. I had nowhere to go, no one to take care of me. So, I ended up with the Aguu" (Interview with a male Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 005).

Family breakdown and poor parenting were other factors in the emergence of the Aguu in Gulu City. From the interviews, 82% attributed their joining the Aguu to family breakdown and domestic violence. A female *Aguu* reported that:

> "My father had many women and my mother had six children with him, but he couldn't take care of all of us. When my mother left, life became really hard as the eldest child I had to

take care of my siblings, progressively I found myself joining the Aguu as a child sex worker" (Interview with a female Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 006).

Most of the *Aguu* acknowledged the complexities of their family situations, such as fathers having multiple partners and being unable to provide proper care. This reflects the structural factor of family dynamics and the impact of parenting on the well-being of children. One particular story involved a boy whose mother was imprisoned for a serious crime. This left him with no immediate family support, as he did not know his father. The absence of a stable family environment played a pivotal role in his decision to join the *Aguu* network. Several *Aguu* members revealed that after the demise of their fathers, the departure of their mothers or the imprisonment of their parents, they faced excessive demands from step-mothers, uncle's wives or other family members. They were transformed into a source of household and farm labour form of domestic slavery. This household work burden often came at the expense of their education and feeding. The disruption of their schooling further exacerbated their vulnerability pushing them to the street.

For instance, a male *Aguu* noted that:

> "After my mother left, my aunt made me do all the housework. I could not go to school anymore" (Interview with a male Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 007)

Similarly, a female Aguu reported that:

> "I had to work all day. There was no time for school. It was like they did not care about my future" (Interview with a female Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 008).

The loss of access to education reflects a structural factor within the family context. It underscores how family dynamics, including parental absence and the burden placed on children, can impact their educational opportunities.

Peer influence as a pull factor

Some of the *Aguu* members interviewed attributed their joining of the *Aguu* network to peer influence rather than LRA conflicts, hardship or loss of parents. These individuals had access to resources and stable family backgrounds but were drawn to the *Aguu* lifestyle due to what they saw and heard from their peers, especially the freedom and space. One of the respondents confided that:

> *"Those who have joined Aguu recently like my friend Anyadwee (Not real name) have everything at home, but as their friends within the Aguu network shared their adventures it attracted them into the Aguu Network."* (Interview with a male Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 009).

This was further confirmed by a female Aguu who reported that:

> *"The Aguu looked like they were having fun. Many who joined recently just do not want to stay at school and study even when their parent can afford to educate them. When they see that their friends are making money in what they think is a cheap way, they end up joining Aguu just for swag [slang for lifestyle]"* - (Interview with a female Aguu in Gulu City, Respondent GC 010).

Peer influence highlights the social factor within the *Aguu* community. The *Aguu* lifestyle, possibly associated with a sense of belonging and adventure, can be enticing for the young generation (Generation Z), irrespective of their family circumstances.

The perspectives of Gulu City leaders further validate the influence of peer dynamics. The leaders observed that those already in the *Aguu* network often had the capacity to attract their peers to join them. This suggests that *Aguu's* existing members can serve as role models or influencers, drawing others into the network.

> *"We have noticed that those already in the Aguu network can influence their friends to join. It is like a cycle. They see their peers living that lifestyle and want to be part of it"*

> - *(Interview with a Gulu City leader, Respondent GC 011).*

Gulu City leaders' insights emphasized the social and communal dimensions of *Aguu's* growth, where peer interactions play a pivotal role in the recruitment of new members. These narratives underscore the interplay of structural, cultural, and individual factors in influencing *Aguu's* membership. The loss of parents and family dynamics represent structural and cultural factors that contribute to vulnerability, while peer influence reflects an individual-level factor. Gender dynamics within these experiences warrant further exploration. Gulu City leaders also narrated that the closure of displacement camps without considering the long-term consequences has created challenges for young people, including Aguu members. This reflects a structural factor that contributes to the vulnerability of youth who lack access to essential resources and opportunities for reintegration into society. Mr. Peter Banya, the Deputy Resident City Commissioner of Pece-Laroo Division noted that:

> *"The closure of camps without considering the long-term impact was a mistake. Many youths, including Aguu members, were left without proper support or opportunities. The office of the Prime Minister did not plan for the next 20 years after the conflict ended. It has had consequences, and Aguu is one of them"* (Interview with a Gulu City leader, Respondent GC 012)

In summary, the formation and evolution of the *Aguu* network in Gulu City are influenced by an intricate interplay of push and pull factors, including parental loss, family dynamics, educational disruption, and peer influence. The qualitative narratives provided by Aguu and confirmed by Gulu City leaders offer valuable insights into the diverse pathways that lead individuals to become part of this socially excluded and marginalized community. Understanding the gender dimensions within these pathways is critical for developing targeted interventions that address the specific needs and

challenges faced by male and female *Aguu* members.

A Journalist perspective

> *"It is like a cycle. They see their peers living that lifestyle and want to be part of it" –"* (Interview with a Journalist in Gulu City, Respondent GC 013)

The Journalists' observations suggest that male *Aguu* members who are already part of the network may influence their peers to join. This peer-driven recruitment may expose more young males to the vulnerabilities and risks associated with *Aguu* membership. The influence of *Aguu* members on their peers can perpetuate social exclusion for both genders, drawing individuals away from mainstream opportunities and reinforcing their marginalized status. As peer influence leads to more individuals joining the *Aguu* network, the potential for increased criminal involvement becomes a shared identity and experience among members, further entrenching them in this lifestyle.

In a nutshell, gender exerts a significant influence on the vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement of *Aguu* members in Gulu City. Female and male Aguu members face distinct challenges and experiences that are shaped by their gender, family dynamics, and peer interactions. Understanding these gender-specific dynamics is vital for developing gender-responsive interventions that address the unique needs of both male and female *Aguu* members and mitigate the factors driving social exclusion and criminality within this marginalized community.

Gender dimensions and dynamics of the Aguu in Gulu City

There are gender roles among the *Aguu* based on their sex which are a set of socially accepted behaviours considered appropriate for the members. From the interviews with the *Aguu*, the gender roles identified included the following:

The female Aguu roles

The female *Aguu* plays the caring role of providing and caring for the *Aguu* group she belongs. She engages in activities such as street begging, working in restaurants, or engaging in sex work. With her earnings, she provides food, treatment, clothing and rent. In the situation she fails to provide for the group, the male *Aguu* would rape her as a payback for the free food and accommodation she is enjoying. The female *Aguu* in the group provides sex to male members. This is an in-house survival mechanism which is accepted and respectfully done.

The female *Aguu* are used in espionage to spy on their unsuspecting male clients and lure them to move to the dark corners of the city. The female *Aguu* would then give a phone call to their male counterpart to attack the client and rob him of valuables mostly mobile phones and cash. In another scenario, the female *Aguu* who act as sex workers in the night clubs would call the male *Aguu* to beat up their clients who refuse to pay them or want to underpay them for their pleasure services.

The female *Aguu* are used by individuals to eliminate especially their male rivals or competitors and those who are a potential threat to their interest. From the interviews, a female *Aguu* confided that her friend was an expert in being hired by businessmen, civil servants, NGO workers and politicians to lure their unsuspecting rivals and kill them using poison, stabbing or strangling using nylon thread.

The female Aguu from the various groups rival each other. When they suspect a male Aguu in their group who is relating with them crosses over to befriend a girl in another group, they would gang up as females to assault such a girl to teach her a lesson. In the event she does not desist from the relationship, the girls would bring in notorious male *Aguu* to eliminate her ruthlessly.

The female *Aguu* is often used by security agencies to track notorious criminals in the city. According to a senior police officer, he acknowledges that whereas the *Aguu* are a security problem they are often used to get

security information. For instance, with the help of Atuku (not real name- Acoli word for little girl), we tracked and arrested the *Aguu* gang leaders. This helped us to pick up the notorious gang leaders and restore security in the city. As we drove in the city in a tinted window car, Atuku would guide us to streets and hideouts and show me the notorious *Aguu* who might have participated in the crime being investigated. Similarly, we would move to the sports ground where the gang were practising taekwondo, I would remain in the car, as the flying squad arrived to pick them up. Thus in 2018, the streets were quiet and security was restored.

The Male Aguu roles

The male *Aguu* plays the role of providing defence and security to the *Aguu* group he belongs. He engages in activities such as street begging, collecting scraps, washing vehicles and motorcycles, and theft. With his earnings, he contributes towards rent, food, treatment, and clothing. These were the males' social and group responsibilities.

According to Deputy Resident City Commissioner (Gulu East), Mr. Peter Banya, "the *Aguu* are treated like criminals but we do not victimize them, when we arrest them, you check their pockets you will find knives, and weed (slang word for opium), what we do is that we arrest them and when we find them with weed, we deal with them and get the supplier".

The male *Aguu* play the role of inventing and maintaining the culture and lifestyle of the group for instance the dressing code, the verbal and non-verbal communication, drug dealing and trafficking, and stealing people's bags, clothes, shoes and household properties. For instance, they introduced a dressing style where they would wear long hanging belts to the levels of their knees and a folded shirt sleeve. This was reportedly, copied from their friends who had visited from Masaka City.

The male *Aguu* are used by some politicians, business persons, and individuals to eliminate especially their political and business rivals and those who are a potential threat to their interest. In some cases, husbands suspecting their wives to be having extramarital relationships with other men would hire the *Aguu* to trail and eliminate such men. From the interviews, a male *Aguu* disclosed that they would be hired to disrupt political rallies of rivalling politicians and break into the shops of the rivalling businessmen and women. He further disclosed that one of the female *Aguu* in the group was often hired by businessmen and politicians to lure and kill their unsuspecting rivals using poison, or by stabbing them to death.

Both male and female *Aguu* members face significant health risks, including malnutrition, substance abuse, and exposure to diseases. However, their coping mechanisms differ, for instance, the males tend to self-medicate using alcohol or drugs, exacerbating mental health issues. Females are more likely to seek support from health facilities or engage in informal caregiving roles to access basic healthcare. A female *Aguu* may accompany a sick peer to a private clinic for treatment, while a male *Aguu* might avoid seeking medical help due to stigma or fear of being identified and apprehended by the authorities.

Vulnerable members who fall sick or sustain injuries are often cared for by senior male *Aguu*, who use their earnings to purchase basic medical supplies. For instance, when an *Aguu* is injured while collecting scrap metal, or due to mob justice, the other members help to provide first aid, clean and bandage the wound using purchased or improvised materials. In cases of severe illness, the group collectively approach charitable organizations or individuals of goodwill to support them provide medical treatment.

Conflict Mediation within the Group: The *Aguu* members often get into disputes over shared resources or responsibilities. Senior *Aguu* often mediates these conflicts to maintain group cohesion and reduce tension. For instance, when two or more members disagree over food or earnings, a senior Aguu or the gang leader would resolve the issue by redistributing resources fairly or counselling and encouraging them to coexist.

Within an Aguu group exists established informal group "rules" to prevent future disputes and rift.

Emotional and Social Support: Life on the streets can be emotionally tasking, especially for younger or recently orphaned members. The male *Aguu* often provide emotional support by fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie within the group. For instance, when a member feels isolated or afraid, the senior *Aguu* give them reassurance by sharing stories of their own struggles and resilience. Group bonding activities, such as singing, storytelling, or sharing meals, create a supportive atmosphere that alleviates the stress of street life.

Mentorship and Guidance: Older Aguu provide guidance to younger members, teaching them survival skills such as navigating urban environments, avoiding law enforcement, and finding opportunities for income generation. They often hold mock court sessions in their places of abode. For example**,** a senior *Aguu* mentors the newcomers by showing them where to collect recyclable materials, negotiate with scrap buyers, or beg for money effectively in high-traffic areas. They may also provide advice on avoiding dangerous activities or people, such as drug dealers or exploitative employers.

Sharing Basic Resources: The Aguu often pool their limited earnings to ensure that all group members have access to essentials like food, clothing, and shelter. When a new or younger member fails to earn money through begging or scrap collection, the older members share their food or earnings to ensure such a member does not go hungry. In colder months, senior *Aguu* provide clothing or blankets to younger, sick or disabled members to protect them from the cold.

DISCUSSIONS

The *Aguu* phenomenon in Gulu City, Northern Uganda, presents a complex tapestry of vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement among its members. Through the lens of gender, we explored the nuanced ways in which males and females within the Aguu network experience and respond to these challenges. This discussion synthesizes the findings and offers insights into the gender dimensions that shape the *Aguu* phenomenon.

Parental loss emerges as a common push factor among the *Aguu*, significantly impacting their journey into the network. The narratives of both male and female members reveal that the absence of parental guidance and support leaves them in vulnerable circumstances, pushing them toward alternative avenues of survival and belonging. For male *Aguu* members, the death of both parents due to the conflict leaves them with nowhere else to turn. In contrast, female Aguu members face a different kind of vulnerability, where family structures disintegrate due to polygamous relationships and a lack of paternal responsibility and the girls are seen as a source of income and wealth.

These findings underscore the structural factors at play, reflecting the broader post-conflict socio-economic landscape of Northern Uganda. The region's history of conflict and displacement has disrupted traditional clan and family moral fibre and systems, leaving many children orphaned or separated from their families. The clan and family have abdicated their collective role to raise a child. The gendered experience of parental loss highlights how male and female *Aguu* members navigate distinct vulnerabilities. Males often grapple with homelessness and insecurity, while females may face economic hardship and social marginalization.

The findings underscore the lack of basic survival material needs. Material consequences refer to the tangible effects that affect the economic well-being or living conditions of individuals or groups in society (Li & Rose, 2017). Material consequences include income loss or gain poverty reduction or increased asset accumulation or depletion. Material consequences can create or reinforce gender gaps or advantages that affect the economic status or security of different groups of people in society (Grove, 2021). For example, material consequences such as income loss or gain due to social exclusion or criminal involvement can increase or decrease the economic

dependency or autonomy of *Aguu* members who face different income sources or needs.

The disruption of education and the burden of overwork emerge as gendered challenges within the *Aguu* network. Both male and female members find their educational paths obstructed by family dynamics that push them into labour roles. Female *Aguu* members are forced into strenuous work, leaving no room for formal education. This often results in economic dependency and social isolation, trapping them in cycles of vulnerability and exclusion. For male *Aguu* members, the burden of household chores overshadows educational opportunities, compelling them to abandon schooling and seek alternatives.

These findings illustrate how cultural factors, deeply rooted in gender norms and roles, intersect with individual experiences within the *Aguu* network. Traditional expectations placed upon females to fulfil domestic responsibilities and males to engage in manual labour further reinforce gender disparities in education and opportunity. The disruption of education not only limits their prospects for a better future but also exposes them to the allure of the *Aguu* lifestyle, with its perceived excitement and sense of belonging, hence, social consequences.

Social consequences refer to the intangible effects that affect the social well-being or relationships of individuals or groups in society (Redhead & Power, 2022). Social consequences include social isolation or integration, social stigma or recognition of social capital or depletion etc. Social consequences can create or reinforce gender barriers or opportunities that affect the social status or inclusion of different groups of people in society (Camilletti, 2020). For example, social consequences such as social isolation or integration due to social exclusion or criminal involvement can increase or decrease the social marginalization or participation of *Aguu* members who face different social networks or roles.

Peer influence is a powerful determinant for both male and female Aguu members leading to psychological consequences. The narratives shed light on the magnetic pull of the *Aguu* lifestyle, fuelled by the experiences and narratives of existing members. Female *Aguu* members may feel compelled to conform to specific gender roles within the group, while male Aguu members may be swayed by the allure of risky adventures and camaraderie.

Peer influence contributes significantly to social exclusion, as both genders find themselves drawn into a subculture that exists on the fringes of mainstream society. The *Aguu* network becomes a surrogate family, replacing the void left by the breakdown of traditional family structures. In this context, gender-specific roles and expectations within the *Aguu* network may further perpetuate social exclusion.

Moreover, peer influence is a gateway to social delinquency and criminal involvement for both genders. As individuals adapt to the norms and values within the *Aguu* community, criminal activities become an integral part of their lives. This shared experience within the network reinforces their identity as Aguu members, making it increasingly difficult to break free from the cycle of criminal behaviour.

The insights provided by Gulu City leaders and journalists affirm the influence of existing *Aguu* members on their peers. This peer-driven recruitment process has gender-specific implications, potentially exposing more young males to the vulnerabilities and risks associated with *Aguu* membership. The cyclical nature of peer influence, as noted by Gulu City leaders and journalists, further solidifies the *Aguu* network's grip on marginalized youth.

Psychological consequences refer to the mental effects that affect the psychological well-being or functioning of individuals or groups in society (Grove, 2021). Psychological consequences include mental health problems or solutions to self-esteem loss, gaining identity crisis or affirmation etc. Psychological consequences can create or reinforce gender challenges or strengths that affect the psychological status or resilience of

different groups of people in society (Trani et al., 2020). For example, psychological consequences such as mental health problems or solutions due to social exclusion or criminal involvement can increase or decrease the psychological distress or coping of *Aguu* members who face different stressors or resources.

In summary, the gender dynamics within the *Aguu* phenomenon are complex and multifaceted. Parental loss, family dynamics, disrupted education, peer influence, and attraction to the *Aguu* lifestyle interact with gender roles and expectations to shape the vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement of male and female *Aguu* members. Understanding these gender-specific dimensions is essential for the development of effective interventions that address the unique challenges faced by both genders within the *Aguu* network. It is imperative to recognize that gender-responsive strategies are crucial for breaking the cycle of vulnerability, exclusion, and criminality among Aguu members, ultimately offering them a path to a more secure and fulfilling future.

CONCLUSION

The *Aguu* phenomenon in Gulu City, Northern Uganda, epitomizes the complex interplay of vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement among socially excluded youth. This study delved into the intricate gender dimensions of the *Aguu* network, shedding light on how these dynamics influence the experiences of male and female Aguu members. As the study explored the meaning of *Aguu*, the formation and evolution of the network, and the role of gender in vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminal involvement, several critical insights emerged.

The *Aguu* phenomenon is multifaceted, with various interpretations coexisting within society. While many view *Aguu* members as criminals and deviants, the *Aguu* themselves identify as a distinct social network with a unique identity, culture, and code of conduct. This divergence in perception is essential to consider when developing interventions that foster inclusivity and address the needs of *Aguu* members.

The historical roots of the *Aguu* phenomenon are traced back to the protracted conflict in Northern Uganda. The disruption of traditional family structures, coupled with the challenges of reintegration, played a pivotal role in the emergence of the *Aguu* network. The study revealed that parental loss, family instability and dynamics, disrupted education, and peer influence are significant factors driving youth into the *Aguu* network. The gender-specific experiences of these factors highlight the unique vulnerabilities faced by male and female *Aguu* members.

Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of *Aguu* members. The loss of parental guidance due to death or familial complexities pushes both genders into the *Aguu* network, albeit with differing vulnerabilities. For males, homelessness and insecurity are primary concerns, while females grapple with economic hardship and social marginalization. Gender roles further restrict educational opportunities, contributing to social exclusion.

Peer influence is a powerful force drawing both male and female *Aguu* members deeper into the network. This influence perpetuates criminal involvement and social exclusion, as *Aguu* members find themselves trapped in a cycle of criminal behaviour and disconnected from mainstream opportunities. Gulu City leaders and journalists corroborate these findings, highlighting the cascading effect of peer-driven recruitment among marginalized youth.

In summary, the *Aguu* phenomenon in Gulu City reflects a dynamic social network shaped by a complex interplay of historical, familial, and gender-specific factors. Understanding these gender dimensions is essential for crafting interventions that address the unique challenges faced by male and female Aguu members, ultimately providing them with a path toward a more secure and promising future. By fostering inclusivity, offering opportunities, and challenging stigmatizing narratives, it is possible

to break the cycle of vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminality that pervades the lives of Aguu members in Gulu City.

Recommendations

To address the *Aguu* phenomenon effectively, it is imperative to adopt a gender-responsive approach. Recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of male and female *Aguu* members is essential for designing targeted interventions. These interventions should prioritize the reintegration of *Aguu* members into mainstream society, offering educational and economic opportunities that break the cycle of vulnerability and criminal involvement. Additionally, interventions should focus on altering societal perceptions of the *Aguu* phenomenon. Acknowledging the diversity and complexity within the *Aguu* network is a critical step toward destigmatization and social reintegration.

Create Gender-Sensitive Safe Spaces: Establishing safe spaces where *Aguu* members, particularly females, can access resources such as counselling, reproductive health education, and skill-building workshops could be reconsidered. A "Youth Resource Center" that offers childcare services for young mothers while providing training in marketable skills could be piloted.

Address Criminal Exploitation and Legal Protection: It is important to work with law enforcement to reduce the exploitation of *Aguu* members by criminal networks or powerful individuals (e.g., politicians and business people). Provide legal aid to *Aguu* members who are unjustly criminalized, to help them navigate the justice system and reintegrate into society.

Develop Tailored Educational Pathways: Offer flexible, non-formal education programs designed for Aguu members, including evening or weekend classes for those engaged in daily labour. Focus on literacy, numeracy, and life skills, ensuring both genders can rebuild their educational foundations. This could be by establishing partnerships with local schools or vocational and skills training institutions to re-enrol Aguu members, supported by scholarships or stipends.

Engage Communities in Awareness Campaigns: Conduct community sensitization programs to reduce stigma and promote understanding of the Aguu phenomenon. Use local media (radio, drama, and storytelling) to humanize *Aguu* members and highlight their potential contributions to society. Radio talk shows featuring *Aguu* members sharing their stories of resilience and transformation could be piloted to pull the Aguu out of the street or transform them into productive and law-abiding citizens.

Develop micro-enterprise programs tailored to gender-specific needs: For males, provide skills in carpentry, mechanics, bricklaying and concrete practices and agricultural innovations. While the females provide training in entrepreneurship, tailoring, hairdressing and, or food processing. Provide start-up grants or micro-loans to support small business ventures.

Enhance Mental Health and Trauma Support: Establish mobile counselling units or partnerships with NGOs to provide trauma-informed mental health services. Train local health workers to recognize and address the psychological needs of *Aguu* members.

Support Family Reunification Efforts: Work with community leaders and NGOs to trace and reconnect Aguu members with their families where possible. Offer mediation and support for families willing to reintegrate *Aguu* members into their homes.

Empower Local Leadership to Address Structural Barriers: Equip local leaders with resources and training to develop community-driven solutions, such as early intervention programs for at-risk youth. Advocate for policy reforms that prioritize youth rehabilitation and inclusion in national development plans**.**

Promote Sustainable Livelihoods: Collaborate with local businesses to create internship and apprenticeship opportunities for *Aguu* members.

Develop community-driven cooperatives where Aguu members can participate in income-generating activities like farming or recycling.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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