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'Boys don't rule us': exploring Rwandan girls with disabilities' resistance to masculine dominance in school

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities resist masculine domination at Rwanda's largest inclusive school, Busengare Secondary. Based on 16 in-depth interviews and 3 focus group interviews with Rwandan girls with disabilities, this study draws on critical feminist perspectives to examine the subjectivities of girls with disabilities marginalised by virtue of their gender, class and disability. The findings reveal that girls with disabilities challenge the enduring power of masculine domination that seeks to limit their leadership and learning in classrooms through two distinct strategies: assertive resistance and subversive resistance. At its core, this paper exposes gendered structures of dominance among young people with disabilities not yet addressed in gender studies and disability studies scholarship in Rwanda.

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Introduction

In the last 20 years, Rwanda has made tremendous progress in promoting equitable access to education for all at both the primary and secondary levels (MINEDUC 2016). The Rwandan government's considerable investment in the education of girls and economically disadvantaged youth is well documented and internationally recognised. International bodies, such as UNESCO, the World Bank, USAID, among others, celebrate Rwanda's steady commitment to inclusive education as a central expression of human rights and as a necessary formula for the improvement of post-genocide Rwanda (World Bank 2003; UNESCO 2013; USAID 2014; World Economic Forum 2015). Despite the noteworthy commendation Rwanda has received for enhancing the education of historically disadvantaged groups, more support is needed for Rwandan children with disabilities beyond policy prescriptions – especially for economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities.

To date, not a single policy brief or international report has underscored in detail the cultivated agency and surplus vulnerability of economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities. The educational experiences of girls with disabilities are not explicitly mentioned or

detailed in Rwanda's legal and policy frameworks, though it can be presumed that policy interventions aimed at all Rwandan girls are inclusive of girls with disabilities (MINEDUC 2008, 2012). More significantly, the general absence of girls with disabilities from educational policy discourses inadvertently suggests that some girls are perhaps more valuable in school to the advancement of the nation-state than others (Nkurunziza, Broekhuis, and Hooimeijer 2012; UNESCO 2009). Findings from Rwanda's *Education Statistics Yearbook* revealed that in 2016, pupils with disabilities represented 0.75% of 2,399,439 enrolled in primary education and 1% of 553,739 students enrolled in Secondary education (MINEDUC 2016). At both levels, the number of males was greater than that of females, as indicated in Table 1. The 2013–2018 *Education Sector Strategic Plan* reported that 7–8-year-old girls with disabilities are three times less likely to start school at the right age, have 18% greater chances of repeating a primary school class, and have four times greater chances of dropping out of school than boys with disabilities (Republic of Rwanda 2015). The limited enrolment of girls with disabilities is further complicated by the fact that Rwandan girls with disabilities are far more likely to face multiple forms of discrimination than girls with no disabilities in schools and other civil society institutions (Republic of USAID 2014; Republic of Rwanda 2015). Despite such emerging evidence, the influence of these forms of discrimination on the educational experiences of girls with disabilities has yet to be explored in educational research or public policy.

To better understand how disability, gender and social class inform the education of girls with disabilities, this article explores the experiences of girls with disabilities in the nation's largest inclusive school. This exploratory study reveals that Rwandan girls with disabilities encounter and resist masculine domination in classrooms, forging pathways towards gender equality on their own terms. Masculine domination is understood here in a Bourdieusian sense as a set of conscious and unconscious social and institutional practices that support male superiority and female inferiority (Bourdieu 1990). The gender politics of classroom participation detailed by participants signal the need for further transformation of Rwanda's relational and educational structures to accelerate the empowerment of all girls in Rwandan schools (Russell 2015; Schweisfurth 2006; Unterhalter 2012, 2014).

This paper first provides background information on disability studies in Rwanda, highlighting the paucity of scholarship attentive to girls with disabilities. Second, we explore African and African diasporic feminist perspectives on negotiating with and around patriarchy to develop a layered theoretical framework for understanding the complex experiences and resistance strategies of girls with disabilities. Third, drawing on empirical data, we showcase Rwandan girls with disabilities' critiques of boys' dominance in classrooms – noting the assertive and subversive resistance strategies they deploy in school. The article closes with a set of recommendations for improving the educational experiences of girls with disabilities in Rwanda.

Mapping the margins in different fields: exploring gender in disability studies in Rwanda

Over the past two decades, the Rwandan government has committed its resources to the promotion of inclusive education policies in favour of vulnerable members of its society (Miles 2004; Meekosha 2008). Table 2 illustrates the significant, albeit slow, progress

Table 1. Enrolment of students with disabilities since 2011, by gender.

Learners with disabilities in Rwandan education	2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Nursery schools	675	491	671	491	588	496	758	629	867	638	925	620
Primary schools	14,944	12,409	13,070	10,793	11,880	9828	10,964	8812	10,319	8378	10,639	8479
Secondary School	3714	3448	3141	3012	3069	2873	2936	2604	2451	2172	2910	2655
Tertiary training												
Vocational	–	–	626	340	434	237	758	629	269	325	141	149
University	–	–	169	77	168	125	122	66	96	46	237	195

Source: Ministry of Education Statistical Yearbook (2011–2016).

Table 2. Historical developments of inclusive education in Rwanda.

Post-colonial period (1960–1990)	Genocide and reconciliation period (1990–2000)	Post-genocide reconstruction period (2000–present)
Special education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General ignorance about disability • Beginning of charitable organisations' support to rehabilitation and basic education • Hardly any government support 	Special and integrated education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pockets of awareness on the education of children and youth with disabilities • Persistent charitable organisations support and reinforced by international agencies' involvement • Beginning of government support 	Inclusive education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved awareness about the rights of people with disabilities • Sharp increase in support, development of NGOs and assessment of international bodies • Steady support from the Rwandan government

Note: Karangwa (2013, p.49).

towards inclusive education since 1960 in Rwanda. Table 2 also highlights three distinct periods of inclusive education history in Rwanda: (1) the post-colonial period, (2) the genocide and reconciliation period and (3) the post-genocide reconstruction period (Karangwa 2013). In all three phases, gender has seldom registered as a significant factor worth analysing among Rwandan youth with disabilities.

During the post-colonial period, from 1960 to 1990, religious and non-profit organisations offered small-scale special education and rehabilitation services to a very small percentage of young people with disabilities, with hardly any government support. The enrolment and experiences of girls with disabilities were not prioritised in this period. This did not change in the second phase, the genocide and reconciliation period (1990–2000), in which there was a modest increase in the range of health, educational and moral support provided to young people with disabilities led largely by international and religious charities. Since 2000, the Rwandan government has formulated policies to enhance the rights of people with disabilities, trained teachers and community leaders on effective, age-appropriate, culturally responsive pedagogies and streamlined collaboration among grassroots NGOs and international bodies, all with the aim of improving the educational experiences of pupils with disabilities. Research suggests that inclusion in its fullest sense is important for Rwanda's advancement, from a political and human rights perspective (Karangwa, Miles, and Lewis 2010; Karangwa, Ghesquiere, and Devlieger 2007). In light of this, private-sector institutions and non-governmental organisations have increased their support for inclusive education. International organisations (e.g. Handicap International, VSO, UNICEF), religious charities (Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist) and indigenous advocacy organisations (e.g. the Federation of Associations and Centres of Handicapped people of Rwanda (FACHR), Rwanda National Union of the Deaf, amongst others) now constitute a robust and expanding community of support for institutionalising inclusive education – though their efforts are often fragmented and sectarian (Karangwa, Miles, and Lewis 2010; NUDOR 2014). The current post-genocide reconstruction period (2000–present) presents an opportunity to strengthen work done in the previous phases, by prioritising the most marginalised groups in Rwandan society, including girls with disabilities.

A critical assessment of the small – but significant – field of disability studies in Rwanda reveals a few trends: (1) examinations of the relationship between disability and vulnerability (Miles 2013); (2) critiques of prejudice towards people with disabilities coded in language and social attitudes (Karangwa, Miles, and Lewis 2010); and (3) explorations

of the widespread institutional limitations in the education sector to support all children and adolescents with disabilities (Thomas 2005; NUDOR 2014). What has yet to be recognised in scholarship in Rwanda is that people with disabilities negotiate profoundly gendered experiences – including in schools.

To be clear, girls with disabilities in Rwanda have been included in empirical research on disabilities, but their experiences have not been the focus of analyses. A marked exception is a recent USAID report on Rwanda, which indicates that: “Those with disabilities are four times more likely to be found not attending school than those with no disabilities, and disabilities tend to hinder girls’ access to school more than boys: 33.4% of males with disabilities have no education, while 50.2% of females with disabilities have no education” (USAID 2014, 2). Furthermore, the literature can benefit from centering the experiences of multiply minoritised girls. To date, no sociological studies have been done to understand the distinct educational experiences of economically disadvantaged Rwandan girls with disabilities. To the extent that economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities are considered in disability studies and girls’ education scholarship in Rwanda, it is often through a fragmented, single-axis frame – noting either their gender *or* class *or* disability (Crenshaw 1991). Portions of Rwanda’s *2013–2018 Education Sector Strategic Plan*, for example, focus on ‘... equity for disadvantaged students, including girls, the rural and urban poor, and children with disabilities’ (MINEDUC 2013, 36). Such extracts are arguably illustrative of the ways in which the inter-relationship between gender, class and disability are framed in ways that depreciate the complex, lived experiences of economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities (Nnaemeka 2004). The crux of the challenges these young women face lies at the heart of their intersectionalities and multi-vulnerabilities (Collins 2000). Groce (1999, vi), for example, argues that ‘young women with disabilities and young people with disabilities from ethnic and minority communities continuously face double discrimination based on their disability and their gender or heritage’. More research is needed that looks beyond the dictates of market logics (Davies 2008) and celebratory discourses of Rwanda’s progress towards gender equality (Russell 2016; Wallace, Haerpfer, and Abbott 2008), and instead measures the strength of democracy and education in Rwanda (and other parts of the global South) by their relationship to the most marginalised members of its citizenry (UNESCO 2013) – especially economically disadvantaged young women with disabilities. This paper attends to these imperatives.

Interrogating power: masculine domination and African women’s resistance

The effective examination of the educational experiences and resistance strategies of Rwandan girls with disabilities arguably requires the close, careful attention to indigenous African feminisms that prioritise local women’s concerns. We therefore draw here on African feminist Obioma Nnaemeka’s formulation of nego-feminism to theorise two interrelated resistance strategies girls with disabilities in Rwanda deploy to interrupt masculine domination. Acknowledging feminisms in Africa ‘as diverse as the continent itself,’ Nnaemeka (2004, 361) proposes nego-feminism as a distinctive iteration of feminism developing in sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora marked as the feminism of negotiation and engagement with power. Nego-feminism holds a two-part meaning: (1) a feminism of negotiation – ‘give and take, compromise, and balance’ and (2) no-ego feminism – ‘cope with successfully/go around’ (378). Nnaemeka (2004) argues:

African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where and how to detonate patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where and how to negotiate with and negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework ... (378).

Nnaemeka (2004) theorises African feminisms as sustainable political projects anchored by indigenous expressions, not Western ones. As a moving meditation on African feminisms, nego-feminism calls attention to the longstanding, proactive resistance of African women as they navigate everyday social life in local grassroots contexts. Nego-feminism suggests that resistance is not a singular or limited expression, but plural and wide-ranging, always dependent on the social or cultural contexts. African women's resistance practices arguably exist on a continuum – from the rounded refusal of hegemonic masculinities to the incremental invocation of equality in a wider patriarchal society. The merit, utility and effectiveness of such practices, Nnaemeka (2004) maintains, should not be measured by Western feminist metrics, but according to women in diverse African environments *themselves*. In other words, contexts (should) shape resistance and prioritise what resistance expressions are relevant for the livelihood of African women (Vilakazi and Swails 2016).

In keeping with Nnaemeka's (2004) assessment, we add the view that there are at least two types of resistance practiced by participants: assertive resistance and subversive resistance. Assertive resistance is arguably what Nnaemeka (2004) refers to as 'negotiating with patriarchy', and subversive resistance, 'negotiating around patriarchy'. Both assertive and subversive resistance models emphasise power as relational. Through both models, power can be achieved through confrontation or compromise, assertiveness or adaptation. The introduction of this two-part typology here is not to suggest that all participants consistently resist masculine dominance or do so in the same way, but to note that not all forms of resistance for girls with disabilities are synonymous. In fact, though it is beyond the scope of this article, it is plausible that girls with disabilities in Rwanda and across Central and Eastern Africa may not practice just one of these resistance frames, but may also oscillate between the two depending on the social context.

As Nnaemeka (2004) argues, 'African women's willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around men even in difficult circumstances is quite pervasive' (Nnaemeka 2004, 380). It would be woefully inaccurate to suggest that if African women's resistance to masculine domination does not match (white) Western women's refusals then they are not practicing feminism (Oyewumi 2003; Taiwo 2003). For the girls with disabilities in this study – whose identities and positions in social institutions like schools are complex based on their age, class, gender and disability – such negotiations are arguably vital for their success and perhaps for their healthy survival. The capacity of girls with disabilities to forge purposeful pathways towards equality when learning among boys with disabilities demonstrates their agentic powers to 'modulat[e] feminist struggle in deference to cultural and local imperatives', should they desire to do so (380).

While nego-feminism provides moving insights into the divergent resistance practices of African women, intersectionality attends to the diverse identities, institutions and inequalities that shape subjectivities. Developed as a Black feminist framework for exploring intertwining identity categories (of gender, class, disability, age, etc.) and the co-

determination of social inequalities, intersectionality elicits ‘thick’ multi-layered narratives embedded within and across social contexts (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). Intersectionality is here recognised as a theoretically rich approach for understanding the complexities of Rwandan girls with disabilities’ experiences that often go unaccounted for in educational research and policy. Intersectionality considers how power shapes identities, and how power is negotiated across multiple institutions. Before discussing the factors that limit the leadership and learning potential of participants, the section that follows outlines the research design and data analysis processes.

Methods and data sources

This paper is drawn from a larger, multi-method qualitative study focused on the educational experiences of girls and boys with disabilities at Busengare Secondary School – the nation’s largest Nine-year Basic Education School devoted to the personal and professional advancement of people with disabilities. Through participant observation of 10 classes (with a total of 120 sessions), 28 semi-structured one-on-one interviews with Rwandan girls and boys with disabilities, 5 focus group interviews, and 18 in-depth interviews with teachers and community stakeholders, information about the educational journeys, trajectories and outcomes of girls with disabilities in Rwanda were gleaned. Although this paper centres the 16 one-on-one interviews and 3 focus group interviews with 5–6 female pupils in each, the additional information serve as sensitising data useful for understanding the wider relational and institutional contexts that shape the life experiences of girls with disabilities.

Busengare Secondary School is a unique case study for this research project. It stands as one of Rwanda’s first inclusive schools and is nation’s largest one to date. Founded as part of the charity arm of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, Busengare Secondary was established in 1962 after Belgian missionary Father Joseph Fraipont committed his life to the development and success of Rwandan children with physical and visual disabilities. In the subsequent decades, the school evolved from a fledgling learning centre to a 15-block school with dormitories and recreational facilities, serving students at the primary and secondary levels. The school has garnered a national reputation as a school that provides a rigorous science curriculum, comparatively good science laboratory facilities and socially relevant pedagogical approaches for students from all backgrounds, with or without disabilities. Students with disabilities deemed talented, gifted or promising in any respect are often recommended to this school to enhance their skills and prepare them for a life of leadership and learning in the wider Rwandan society.

With the support of school leaders, an open call was made to all Year 9, 10 and 11 pupils with physical disabilities who wished to participate in the research study. Scores of students expressed interest in the study. However, to better address the gaps in the literature, the lead author narrowed the pool of potential participants by focusing on students whose parents/guardians have been unemployed for 5 years or more, pupils who spoke English or French in addition to Kinyarwanda and who received principal and parental/guardian consent to engage in the project. Following the participation of the first three pupils who met these criteria, a snowball strategy aided in the recruitment of additional participants for the study. All the female pupils who participated in the study came from rural regions of Rwanda outside the nation’s capital city, Kigali. They all identified as Christian

(Catholic, Anglican and Evangelical) who started schooling later in life due to limited economic means and inaccessible schools in their neighbourhoods. The duration of the interviews ranged from 70 to 90 minutes. Following the individual interviews, respondents participated in five focus group interviews to explore common themes raised in individual interviews. The eight girls in the study were interviewed twice and also participated in three focus group interviews exploring male power and control in the classroom.

Individual and focus group interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and analysed using the qualitative software program, NVivo. Elements of field notes and interviews were translated in detail from Kinyarwanda to English with the aid of the trained research assistants, fluent in English, French, Kinyarwanda and Sign Language. Both research assistants were trained in qualitative interviewing techniques and had a long history of working with people with disabilities in Rwanda. In all instances, interviews were conducted by two individuals, with one serving as a lead interviewer, while the other served as a note-taker to ensure accuracy and precision in interpretations. Though some nuance and subtlety faded inevitably, the remains are still vital given the paucity of relevant scholarship on economically disadvantaged rural youth with disabilities. Data analysis employed a modified grounded theory approach in two related phases (Strauss and Corbin 1998): (1) open coding to identify broad categories such as 'girls' resistance strategies', 'female-led peer advocacy', amongst others; and (2) focused coding with categories such as 'girls resistance to male dominance', with associated sub-codes like 'confronting sexist assumptions about girls with disabilities in classrooms' to add richness and depth to the analysis. Having open and focused coding as central features of the analytical process provided layered perspectives on Rwandan girls with disabilities' resistance to male dominance in classrooms. To ensure anonymity and security, pseudonyms are used for participants and the research site throughout the subsequent sections.

Negotiating girls empowerment in schools: models of assertive and subversive resistance

Participants point out that for girls with disabilities like them, empowerment remains an on-going, nuanced negotiation with patriarchy and privilege, even in a secondary school that considers itself inclusive. In this regard, nego-feminism (noted through assertive and subversive resistance) is not just about African women's negotiations of power in public political life; it is also about girls with disabilities' daily mediations of power in school among their male peers with or without disabilities. The next section provides examples of assertive and subversive resistance to underscore the agentic powers of girls with disabilities.

Assertive resistance

Assertive resistance can be understood as an expressed critique of gender inequality in schools and advocacy for the rearrangement of gender relations between boys and girls with disabilities in local contexts. Furthermore, assertive resistance challenges the silencing, subjugating and stereotyping of girls with disabilities and affirms girls with disabilities' capacity for intellectual and civic leadership in male-dominated schools. Practical expressions of assertive resistance included challenging boys with disabilities' sexist speech and behaviour during classes; pursuing and holding prominent school leadership

roles; advocating for the recruitment of more female teachers and support staff; and confronting teachers who ignore sexism in classrooms. The purpose of these practices is not simply to name prejudicial behaviours, but to enhance the relational culture in classrooms and the school community to better enable girls with disabilities to pursue their goals without penalties. Below, girls with disabilities testify to practicing assertive resistance at Busengare School as a means of honouring their complex identities at the intersections of gender, class and disability that are often ignored. These participants do not view girls' empowerment as a resource conceded through social and educational policies, but as an element of equality actively negotiated through daily life. For instance, 20-year-old Year 11 mathematician Ruth argues:

I know that boys with disabilities and girls with disabilities have real struggles, but we are not in the same position in school. I want that to change ... I'm not afraid to challenge the boys in class. I know I am just as smart as them—and may be more. I advocate for girls with disabilities because I want us to have a better life, a better time in school ... it's hard enough being a girl in Rwanda, and even harder to be a girl with disabilities who is poor ...

Like Ruth, 18-year-old Year 10 comedian Rene emphasises the importance of more equitable gender relations among people with disabilities at Busengare School as a micro-level development impacting the many layers of her identity. She posits:

There is a lot of talk about women's empowerment in Rwanda, but for us, girls with disabilities, we can do even better and contribute even more to our country if we are encouraged to excel in school and not feel pitied or put down because we are girls with disabilities ... Our job as girls with disabilities is not to clean up after boys, serve them and be their girlfriends. Our job is to be leaders ... I challenge the boys around me because I believe the change starts with how the boys treat us and respect our perspectives as poor girls with disabilities. Real change does not start from the government ... You can't lead boys and other girls with disabilities if they always think you are not as good or as strong, or as smart as them.

Commenting on why she actively and consistently questions male teachers who ignore what she perceives as biased behaviour, 22-year-old 10th grader and aspiring teacher, Joy, points out:

If the boys with disabilities put us down, why would non-disabled people, seeing people, hearing people, walking people, believe we can lead them? ... That is why I have to challenge these boys with disabilities ... they should not undermine us because we are girls.

Similarly, Alice, a 26-year-old 12th grader and future physiotherapist, argues that biased behaviour will not change if girls 'just act nice'. She asserts:

Nothing will change if we [girls with disabilities] just act nice. We have to push these boys to see that they can abuse us, mistreat us, just like non-disabled men mistreat them. They are not afraid to speak up. So why should I be? ... Acting nice will keep me where I am but it won't get me anywhere else.

Ruth, Rene and Joy pursue fair treatment for girls with disabilities in schools by citing their discontent with the patterns of masculine domination to their peers and male leaders throughout the school. Their critiques are arguably more relational than structural, and their commitment to change more short-term than long-term. They emphasise power as a relational resource useful for transforming elements of their daily lives and appear invested in the restructuring of gender relations between girls' and boys' with disabilities

as a necessarily generative feature of women's empowerment plans and policies. Participants like Ruth draw on their intersectional identities to improve interpersonal relationships and social institutions. In this regard, the expressions of assertive resistance highlight how the participants internalise national calls to improve Rwandan society but focus on their local settings, rather than the national political arena, as the sphere of power useful for ensuring their empowerment.

It must be noted here that assertive resistance seems to come easier for girls with elevated status in peer networks at Busengare School. By virtue of their academic prowess (in the case of Ruth and Rene) or superb athleticism (in Joy's and Alice's case), these participants can hold their peers and school leaders to account in a way that may prove all the more onerous for girls with disabilities whose credibility or confidence are just emerging in their school context. These participants suggest that disability designations, gender identification and economic standing do not inherently limit their leadership prospects. Rather, it is the prejudicial relational conditions and processes of discrimination that result in social disqualification. It is the daily constraining conditions in their school that participants seek to change through assertive resistance.

Subversive resistance

Assertive resistance is not the only strategy for relational and institutional change informed by the intersectional identities of participants. Subversive resistance is yet another means of displacing prejudicial logics that limit the long-term leadership and learning of economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities. What might appear to be political tiptoeing around patriarchal practices is, to some participants, a slow, strategic subversion of widespread masculine domination through relationships. Whereas those who practice assertive resistance publicly name and critique sexism in their schools with the hope of disrupting patriarchy in the short-term, participants who engage in subversive resistance condone episodes of prejudice to enhance their social capital for long-term leadership and the structural transformation of the wider society. In the practice of subversive resistance, women's empowerment is positioned not as an immediate mission, but as a delayed, future outcome.

The participants we spoke with are acutely aware of their inclusive school as a site in which contestations around relational resources (friendships, networks, information) are ever more fraught among boys and girls with disabilities due to limited access to top universities and jobs. Participants presumed that those girls with disabilities who acquire stocks of social capital within disabled and non-disabled communities will be better positioned for local, regional and national leadership to influence and enforce girls' empowerment in schools and society. As such, participants like Peace, a 25-year-old student of the natural sciences, who recognise the influence of patriarchy in prescribing 'good girl' behaviours also hold high aspirations for the community and national leadership in order to redress the conditions that limit girls with disabilities' livelihood in schools. In this instance, participants like Peace endure patriarchy with the hope of ultimately unseating it from its position of daily authority. While on the surface this may appear to be mere compliance with the patriarchal order, for the participants, at the very least, their decisions are informed by much more nuanced thinking on resistance. Peace, for instance, argues that:

There are more boys' with disabilities here at [Busengare] than girls with disabilities ... we don't have a lot of female teachers to support us. That is why it is difficult for me to just be alone ... I know it is stupid the way we have to act to get accepted by these boys, but you know what? I can play by their rules until I am in charge and can change the rules ... I am going to be a scientist ... When I am in power, boys will not be able to treat me or any other girl with disabilities in a bad way. I will use my power ...

Josephine, a 24-year-old 11th grader, takes a similar position to Joy, in that she is invested in the long-term benefits of being a 'good girl'. She maintains:

You have to think about what matters most ... If I can get these boys to be my friends and help me out, why not be a good girl. Once I get into a powerful position, I will be prepared to change the boys more ... I know I will be a boss later.

It can be proffered that Josephine and Peace's short-term compliance with masculine domination for long-term leadership rewards is not an act of substantive resistance to patriarchy. However, to Peace, the regular compliance with the request for a 'good girl' (being polite, kind, calm and amenable to boys' requests) is understood as performance for survival and success in a male-dominated society. It is perhaps a perspective or set of practices best understood by those whose identities rest at the intersection of girlhood, economic disadvantage and disability.

Jeanette's justification for subversive resistance is different from Peace's. Jeanette (a 23-year-old Year 11 pupils and future technician) notes the level of competition between boys with disabilities and girls with disabilities for status in peer networks. These very dynamics inform how girls with or without disabilities get treated. Participants like Jeanette choose between being in direct competition with boys with disabilities who are in the majority or playing on their side to earn their trust and access to relational resources (friendships, networks, information) with the goal of empowering girls with disabilities in the long-run so that they do not have to be subjected to the weighty patriarchy participants like Jeanette endured. Jeanette maintains:

You have to know what your ultimate goal is – to win the battle or to win the war. I want to be successful, go to university, get a job, have a family. This is very hard to do for a poor girl in a wheelchair like me, but it is possible ... I avoid the battle among the boys and make peace with them. If I get their attention and make friends with them, they can help me in the future. That's the bigger battle ... some girls [with disabilities] are focused on what's happening here now. I am thinking about the future. I want power for the future, that's when I can really get these boys to change their ways.

In keeping with Jeanette's commentary, 23-year-old 10th grader and aspiring physical therapist, Esther, expresses interest in developing social capital and political power for the future based on what she learned from women in her family. She contends:

I have watched many women in my family like my aunty and cousins stand up to men. It is inspiring, but somehow they end up getting punished for it ... I think they started fighting before they had enough power. For me, I will wait. I will study, work hard and wait until I am in a big position to really challenge these boys with disabilities.

The comments by Esther, Jeanette and Peace underscore the significance of how these young women strategise for long-term change. They demonstrate the complex dynamics that influence decision-making among girls with disabilities in Rwanda. What Esther,

Jeanette and Peace spotlight are the ethical, relational and political dilemmas girls with disabilities encounter in school, largely for being girls with disabilities of limited means. With a national economy and market infrastructure still woefully ill-equipped to support the full participation of girls with physical disabilities like Jeanette, participants are arguably compelled to think about the precariousness of their futures and what they can forego in the short-term (e.g. equitable gender relations) for long-term social, economic and political gain (e.g. women's empowerment in the economy) (Debusscher and Ansoms 2013; Hogg 2013).

Within the context of this study, masculine domination cannot be reduced to aggressive or abusive forms of control of women with disabilities by men with disabilities. Instead, masculine domination includes efforts to subjugate female leadership in classrooms to the control of men when young women wish to exercise the authority and agency they have, as codified in social and educational policies (McLean Hilker 2011; Huggins and Randell 2007). As the data reveal, and previous research suggests, masculine domination's more subtle variants are perhaps just as pernicious as its prototypical expressions (Berry 2015; Russell 2016). But though its manifestations vary, masculine domination accords men (with and without disabilities) power, privilege and prestige that may remain unremarkable in a wider patriarchal society (Bilge 2013; Purkayastha, 2012). In contexts marked by economic disadvantage and the widespread stigmatisation of people with disabilities, masculine domination becomes the means through which boys with disabilities acquire some measure of power among the multiply marginalised female peers with disabilities. In this regard, masculine domination is best understood as a heterogeneous expression of hegemony (Wallace 2017; Abbott and Malunda 2015; Bauer and Burnet 2013; Carlson and Randell 2013).

Acts of assertive and subversive resistance are distinct yet complementary strategies for addressing masculine domination in an inclusive school. They are emblematic of nego-feminism, and the nuanced negotiations African women engage in daily based on their complex identities and contexts (Huggins and Randell 2007; Hogg 2013). These approaches afford us insights into the multiple logics for justifying resistance as informed by intersectional identities and the wide-ranging acts associated with such rationalisations. Assertive and subversive resistance arguably represent Choo and Ferree's (2010) process-centred approach to intersectionality, emphasising the centrality of 'power as relational' and the formation of oppression faced by economically disadvantaged girls with disabilities as altogether distinct relative to what boys with disabilities experience. Both assertive and subversive resistance practices are necessary for the transformation of Rwandan schools and society. The social processes in schools that reinforce masculine domination can be effectively challenged when the short-term and long-term vision of women's empowerment is pursued. Educational policies and practices that provide a more explicit, targeted focus on girls with disabilities, as opposed to broad provisions for 'vulnerable children', will better reflect national commitments to inclusive education and the empowerment of all girls (Republic of Rwanda 2002, 2003).

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper sheds light on the complex educational experiences of girls with disabilities in Rwanda's largest inclusive school. The piece draws on expansive African and diasporic

feminist frameworks nego-feminism and intersectionality, to call attention to the overlooked forms of oppression multiply minoritised girls encounter throughout society. Both theoretical frames expose the resistance schemes of marginalised women. Participants suggest that they resist masculine domination through a host of subtle and strategic acts in and outside the classroom – identified in this article as assertive resistance and subversive resistance. By detailing participants’ practices of assertive and subversive resistance, we disrupt sexist, abelist logics that assume the passivity and limited agency of girls with disabilities.

To aid in improving the educational experiences of girls with disabilities and to strengthen girls’ education and support political empowerment efforts in Rwanda, we offer three recommendations. Firstly, there needs to be further, more extensive sociological research on the educational experiences and outcomes of girls with disabilities. Additional research of a quantitative and qualitative nature is needed to explicate the diverse gendered experiences among pupils with disabilities in Rwanda. Secondly, there is an urgent need to strengthen public policies to ensure greater protection of people with disabilities, by offering targeted policy focus on girls with disabilities in schools and society. In many respects, Jeanette, Josephine, Peace, Ruth, Rene, Joy and so many of their peers can voice their commitments to assertive and subversive resistance due, if only in part, to current enabling policies geared towards supporting people with disabilities and vulnerable populations. Educational policies with a sharper focus on girls with disabilities – and the effective implementation of these policies – can perhaps encourage more girls with disabilities to successfully pursue their education without fear of discrimination or marginalisation.

Finally, a systems-wide approach to empowering girls with disabilities is needed in Rwanda and around the world (Moodley and Graham 2015; Thomas 2011). Though the Rwandan government’s strategic plans pledge to remove all obstacles against ‘vulnerable groups’ (Republic of Rwanda 2015), the experiences of girls with disabilities in schools and the promotion of training for competitive professions are still largely unrecognised and underrepresented in national initiatives. A unified policy approach across multiple sectors (education, labour economy, politics, etc.) accompanied by the creation of talent pipelines for placing girls with disabilities into key competitive professions can bring Rwanda’s vision of equality into a more substantive reality for years to come. If the aforementioned recommendations are heeded by practitioners and policy-makers in Rwanda, the educational experiences of girls with disabilities can be further enriched.

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