

Title: Logics of Affordability and Worth: Gendered Consumption in Rural Uganda

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Logics of Affordability and Worth: Gendered Consumption in Rural Uganda

In recent years menstruation has become a growing concern in development circles, with poor sanitary care linked to a range of adverse outcomes, from early pregnancy and gender disparities in education, to shame and social exclusion (Kuhlmann et al. 2017; Sommer and Sahlin 2013). In countries like Uganda, where many households skirt precariously along indices of deprivation, the lack of adequate sanitary care is often attributed to “period poverty”: the inability of poor households to afford safe and hygienic menstrual protection for women and girls (Birkwood 2018; Cooney 2013; Eguny 2014). Yet though conditions of economic hardship prevail, household consumption practices do not always reflect the constraints of poverty. Though resource constraints may appear to delimit consumption to “necessities” at a household level, the picture becomes less clear when seen from within the household, where the capacity to exercise choice and in what way, is differentially available. When asked whether sanitary pads were a regular household expense, for example, many men in our study expressed an inability to afford them for their wives or daughters. “We would have loved to buy for them but we can’t afford,” bemoaned one group of men; women, it was repeated, would “have to find alternatives.” Sanitary pads were, however, relatively inexpensive. Priced at around a dollar per pack (B-Space 2014), they were equivalent in cost to a bottle of beer. What, then, did these participants mean when they said they could not afford to buy sanitary pads? As a key phrase, affordability appeared to extend beyond the monetary value of goods and a household’s financial capacity to purchase them: it served to index a range of economic, social and moral valuations, grounded in distinct understandings of worth.

In this paper, we explore logics of affordability within rural Ugandan households, examining how worth is differentially ascribed to certain goods and the conditions under which worth is given, contested and reworked. Drawing from Boltanski and Thevenot’s (2006) notion of

“orders of worth”¹ and Folbre’s (1994) concept of “structures of constraint,” we examine how acts of prioritization that constitute household economies reflect and reproduce structures of unequal gender relations. We demonstrate how gender norms and anxieties surrounding female propriety and respectability on the one hand, and male status and privilege on the other are marked and sustained in the material practices of the household, constituting what is deemed necessary, affordable, and responsible. Here choice is not only shaped by the varying income streams of household members but also by the available agency of the person doing the choosing.

We begin by exploring the moral worlds through which goods are constructed as necessary in the abstract, and then identify the continuities and contradictions as this idealized spending of the *responsible* household is translated into actual expenditure. Addressing a range of products individually, we analyse in turn their ethical resonances; from the morally ambiguous personal consumption of alcohol and beauty products and their “reputational” logics, to the “responsible” category of educational spending and the liminal position of sanitary pads (cf. Wilk 2014). Moral obligation, we find, is differentially distributed between genders, with women less able to evade the ethical orderings of consumption that are more easily skirted by men. Hence, in the competing spheres of the personal and the communal, women are deemed responsible for household expenditure, expected and willing to defer personal gratification for expenses made for the benefit of their families. Their personal consumption preferences, arbitrated within this wider sphere of expenditure, are readily discounted. Men, meanwhile, are able to delimit a sphere of personal consumption separate from the household, with limited accountability to its moral requirements. The gendered nature of power relations is thus revealed both in the apportioning of moral duty and in the construction of affordability, through which consumption is constrained and enabled.

Consumption, values and worth

Goods, it has long been recognized, have something to tell us about culture (Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Kopytoff 1986). Regardless of form or function, they are carriers of meanings and operate within a broader rationale of social belonging. As Douglas and Isherwood (1996, 38) famously argued, goods make “visible and stable categories of culture,” evoking a central anthropological insight that departs from the utilitarian lens of classical economists: utility is far from value-neutral; it is constructed, wrangled over and readjusted (Kroenberger et al. 2015). The “worth” of an entity, as Reinecke (2015, 215-16) describes, “is not just based on a single value dimension, such as price, but embedded in a number of different and, sometimes incompatible complex philosophical and political value systems.” Rather than a rational calculation along twin axes of utility and price, worth is tied to multiple forms of (e)valuation, what Boltanski & Thevenot (2006) describe as “orders of worth:” a wristwatch may be a family heirloom or a device for calculating passing increments of time. How such regimes of valuation are constructed has long been of interest to anthropologists who, since Malinowski’s (1984) account of the *kula* trade, have shown how material objects embody different orders of value across diverse social, temporal and geographic dimensions (Appadurai 1986; Eiss and Pedersen 2002; Graeber 2001; Mauss 1990; Otto and Willerslev 2013; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1976).

Recently, economic sociologists have expanded conceptions of value by engaging with the processes through which goods and objects are qualified as such. The notion of “qualification,” drawn from Callon et. al (2002), entails socio-economic processes through which certain qualities are ascribed to goods, stabilized, objectified, and arranged, and has been used to account for how different attributes are bundled within products. A good, for example, embodies multiple characteristics, such as quality, provenance, and availability, which are variously foregrounded and shaped by economic actors in the process of qualification and requalification (Reinecke 2015).

From a gendered perspective, scholars have demonstrated how the value accorded to goods can serve to (re)produce or challenge gendered identities and stereotypes. For example, Peiss (1996, 313) notes how cosmetics have been a way to express “social status, commonality and difference” across history and cultures, their meaning linked to the context and consumer of cosmetic goods. In the US, associations of cosmetics with “artifice, deception, and masking” and “corporal hypocrisy” prevailed amongst the middle class during the nineteenth century, as young women sought to challenge class limitations to become a part of the nouveau rich (ibid., 314-315). Similarly though cosmetic use was largely disparaged by African American women as an act of white emulation and racial transgression, by the twentieth century the “makeover” of black womanhood was seen as a form of racial uplift, which would liberate black women from the domestic labour, servitude and mammy stereotype “that aprons and head rags signified” (Baldwin 2009, 63).

While these and other studies (Modern Girl Research Group 2009) demonstrate how goods form a means of gendered (and racial) expressions, they tend to focus specifically on women. Few studies have examined how goods mediate gender relations, particularly in African households. In this paper we address this gap by exploring how the qualification and value of goods is embedded in the everyday micro-politics of the household economy, as expressed through idioms of worth and affordability. We argue “qualification” not only relates to provenance, but is also constructed relationally to other goods and expenditures. Crucially, the worth of goods (understood as both economic and social value) is also mediated in relation to the intended recipient of the item, that is, the worth or value assigned to the person. Here we are concerned with how this value is rooted in gender assignments, forming part of what Folbre (1994) describes as a structure of constraint, which delineates the boundaries within which social interaction occurs and the possibilities to exert

agency. For Folbre, the structure of constraint is comprised of assets, rules, norms, and preferences, which interact and sometimes contradict each other at different moments and in different people because of the multiple positions that individuals simultaneously occupy, but they can also delimit collective identities and shape, encourage and reinforce group behaviors. In rural Uganda, for example, consumption choices are not only the product of economic rationality, as neoclassical models suggest, but are shaped by “the social construction of individual preferences and cultural norms” (Folbre 1994, 39) that privilege and reinforce gender differentials. Thus, we illustrate how “feminized” products are often de-prioritized, as gendered orders of worth translate into women’s limited means of justification for items considered for personal use— beauty products central among these. Men, meanwhile, face fewer constraints in delimiting a personal sphere of consumption or in forsaking their responsibilities as providers, in contrast to women, for whom transgressions from gender attributions can lead to divorce or abandonment. While logics of worth are multiple, and not necessarily mutually exclusive, the household economy often reflects a zero sum gain, where the valuation of one criterion can likewise entail the de-valuation of another (Reinecke 2015).

Methods

The research on which this paper is based is part of a larger study conducted from 2012-2014, which sought to understand the impact of sanitary pads on girls’ educational attainment in ... (*Omitted for blind review*). The district is located in a rural region in east-central Uganda comprised predominantly of the Basoga ethnic group. It is one of the poorest districts in the country. A majority (96%) of the population resides in rural areas and face chronic development challenges, including high levels of morbidity and mortality, early marriages, high fertility rates, intermittent food shortages and malnutrition (Uganda 2008). Approximately a third of students in the district never complete primary school (Uganda Development Services 2013).

The observations and analysis presented here are primarily derived from a specific research stream that examined the influence of gender norms on the way households valued and prioritized goods. Research was conducted in eight rural villages; each located approximately 30 kilometres from the (*Omitted*) town, although poor roads and limited transport meant that it was an infrequent journey for most. The main occupation for both men and women is rain fed subsistence farming, with household income derived from selling surplus produce or “digging” on other people’s farms, coupled with irregular earnings from informal activities such as selling fish, charcoal, and brewing alcohol. The cash economy remains small-scale, with material fulfillment largely limited to a narrow spectrum of items readily accessible within the locality.

The research consisted of 33 qualitative interviews with parents (n=11) and school girls (n=22), 6 single and mixed-gender focus groups, 130 household questionnaires administered to parents of schoolgirls, and participant observation over the course of three years.² The household questionnaire aimed to educe the gendered dynamics of earning and spending household income, making household purchase decisions, and utilizing personal income. Questionnaires were administered separately to the male and female head of 65 households. The median age of respondents was 39 for women and 46 for men, with 13.8 percent of men and 43 percent of women having no formal education. High rates of polygamy were also recorded, with 41 percent of men reporting more than one wife. The majority of households are Protestant (36%) and Catholic (34%), with the remainder practicing forms of Pentecostalism (20%) or Islam (9%).

As part of the focus groups, we employed visual methods to ascertain how gender norms and values were encoded in consumption preferences. This included presenting participants with a shopping bag that included 39 “typically” purchased goods such as food items and soap, as well as strongly gendered items such as hair extensions, sanitary pads and alcohol. These “typical” goods were

based on what we observed during pilot-test studies, as well as confirmed by local researchers working on the project. Participants were asked to create three categories: 1) items that either they or their spouse paid for; 2) items the household either often or never bought; and 3) items that men or women think are necessary versus unnecessary. They were also asked to describe what they would buy if they won the lottery and to note any gender and generational differences in regard to their suggestions. Additionally, we sought to elicit participants' projected judgments surrounding gendered consumption practices by asking them to describe the type of woman who regularly purchased "feminized" goods — sanitary pads, hair extensions, lipstick, and skin-whitening cream — for herself, or the type of man who purchased local brew, batteries and airtime. These vignettes were repeated with additional requests, for instance, to describe men or women who purchased these goods but who did not pay for children's school fees.

During the administration of household questionnaires, we also asked respondents to categorize the shopping bag of goods, as well as to produce judgments based on two photomontages of goods (see Figures 1 and 2). These photomontages reflected typical gendered items associated with "irresponsible" spending, as reported in exploratory interviews, focus groups, observations, and discussions with locally-based researchers. One montage depicted hair extensions, skin whitening cream, sanitary pads, red lipstick, and airtime, and the other included a dress shirt and shoes, a belt, a cellphone, airtime and batteries.³ These goods were not meant to be interpreted as individually equivalent to one another across the gendered bags, but rather represent a typical basket of gendered goods.

INSERT FIGURES 1 & 2

The Household Economy

While much has been written concerning gendered consumption in Uganda and Africa more broadly, particularly with regards to transactional sex and the ambiguous figure of the urban woman (e.g. Davis 2002; Hodgson 2001; Samara 2010), there has been little qualitative attention to how gender shapes consumption and allocational priorities within rural households, which constitute 83.6% of Uganda's population (World Bank n.d.). Such priorities are closely entwined with the dynamics of production in which gender hierarchies are expressed. In the study villages, sharp asymmetries in earnings were evident between men and women, a difference informed by two principal dynamics: the gendered value of labor, and norms restricting women's access to paid employment. According to Bantebya-Kyomuhendo (2006, 2), expectations of female behavior in Uganda accord with a "domestic virtue model," a paradigm of respectability that idealizes a submissive, deferential woman, whose central role is to provide food and domestic labor for the household. The virtuous woman is constructed in opposition to her urban counterpart, typically depicted in the public imagination as a recent migrant to the town or city and strongly associated with prostitution (Davis 2002). As our research finds, the risks of being branded a "*malaya*" (prostitute) continue to reinforce compliance with an ideal of deference: a woman accused of prostitution can find herself open to physical punishment, divorce, either stripped of her children or left to provide for them herself, or forced to return to her family who would have to repay her bride price.

Such ramifications form a "structure of constraint" around what women are legitimately allowed to do, suppressing the potential of an individuated self. Although some men and women thought there was a generational shift, noting that "in the past it was only men who could work to sustain their families, but [today] even women are working to earn a living," this "work" was still mostly limited to "farming." Many of the women in the study villages recounted limited

opportunities to earn cash incomes outside of the domestic sphere and the agricultural activities in its vicinity. They were limited to selling surplus produce from their gardens and occasionally supplementing these small takings by performing locally-available casual labor such as digging. As women responded in a focus group, they got their money to buy things by “harvesting and selling maize [but] when it gets finished you again depend on the man.”

While both men and women nearly always identified “peasant farmer” as their main occupation, men faced fewer obstacles to mobility and would often travel to find seasonal employment, supplementing their incomes through, as one informant put it, doing “all kinds of work” from farming, burning charcoal, selling goods and fishing, to hunting, livestock production, and *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxis). Gender differentials in earning opportunities were reinforced by the lower value placed on women’s labor, which was often deemed unworthy of payment, or as sufficiently compensated by a subsistence wage or benefits (Obbo 1990; Wyrod 2008).

Such restrictions on earnings are transposed into the household economy through the common practice of maintaining separate incomes within a marriage: a “non-pooling” arrangement, distinct from households which operate as a corporate unit, sharing property and labor (Guyer 1984; Wilk 1994). Many of our interlocutors agreed that incomes constituted a personal domain under the over-arching authority of the earner. Indeed, despite the significant discrepancies in earnings, several women defended an ethic of individuation, a practice that would allow them to retain, in principle, some control over their personal incomes. Though both men and women earmarked money, a process whereby “people will segregate, differentiate, label, decorate, and particularize [money] to meet their complex social needs” (Zelizer 1994, 216), this process of qualification was highly gendered. As the principle shoppers, women were often given an allowance from their husbands. When asked who bought particular items for the home they

frequently attributed the purchase to their partners: the act of buying secondary to the supply of funds. Money was therefore tethered to its earner as it travelled in and out of the household. Women spending *men's* money (as was most often the case) were expected to purchase goods for the well-being of the household unit – such as food, fuel, shelter and school supplies. Although scarce, leftover funds were sometimes deemed suitable for use on personal products. To spend such funds, however, left women in a position of accountability. As Reinecke (2015, 215) explains, the practice of earmarking “invites ethical and political judgments through an alternative valuation procedure.” Men often upheld a personal right to exercise such judgments themselves, demanding a right of oversight over *their* money, oftentimes declaring themselves the final arbiter on all spending decisions.

In contrast, an ideal of female compliance governed how women should manage the money. Some women had their wages for digging paid directly to their husbands, or, as one woman noted, “she cooperatively spends [her money] with her husband. This is done out of love. It helps her to strengthen their love. She knows if she doesn't do so their marriage would be in problems.” But, she continued, while men may be “friendly” with wives who earned money, they would “never cooperate” when they did and could “force their women to give them money.” As another woman described, her husband who drank quite regularly used to “over power her” and take the money. Since she was an orphan and had no family to go back to, she had little recourse but to “let it all go”. The threat of being physically beaten combined with social expectations compelled women to acquiesce.

While women were closely identified with household expenditure, men enjoyed greater autonomy over their spending and were identified more frequently with personal purchases, expenses made primarily for their own benefit, alcohol in the main. These patterns echo a notion

that has gained widespread currency in development orthodoxy: “men spend money on themselves, women spend it on their family” (Birabwa-Nsubuga 2007, 36). Women, it is argued, possess an inherently family-centered ethic, and will prioritize the nutrition and education of their children over their own needs (Dwyer and Bruce 1988). Men, by implication, are bound to patterns of “binge consumption” (Wilk 2014), liable to spend funds “irresponsibly”, namely on personal luxuries. This dichotomy was affirmed by individuals in the household survey, where 97% of women and 88% of men indicated that when a woman receives cash she would spend it *first* on her family. When asked the same question about a man, only 45% of women and 72% of men indicated that they thought a man would spend the money *first* on his family. Moreover, 66% of women and 52% of men believed that when men received money they would spend it irresponsibly.

Folbre (1994) designates these respectively gendered spheres as the “competitive” and the “cooperative.” Men’s interests, she argues, are “separative” and “competitive,” whereas women occupy realms that are “cooperative” and “communal” (Folbre 1994, 310). The latter is founded on the notion of an altruistic household in which women’s interests match those of the household. The gendering of these realms consequently structures the separation between the household economy and other economies, differentiating between male and female access to resources, opportunities, and consumption spheres.

While many of the households in our study appeared to uphold these gendered ethics of consumption and production, it should be noted that they were not static, nor homogeneous, but given to adjustments, competing values and subversions. Gender roles were often more ambiguous than at first implied. Both men and women regularly concealed or failed to communicate earnings and expenses to their respective partner, even when they said it was jointly managed. When

questioned as to whether men tell their wives about spending money on alcohol, a man in a focus group responded, “When my friends buy for me, I tell my wife, and when I buy for them, I don’t tell her.” Even enquiring into their partner’s earnings was considered improper by some. But, while many husbands demanded wives hand over their earnings, one man reported consulting his wife on all decisions related to expenditure. In some cases women controlled household expenditure to a greater extent, while others earned much of the income themselves. Women also told us that they when their husbands refused to pay school fees (culturally deemed a male responsibility), and were interested in “alcohol and not education” they found ways to force his hand. One woman, who knew how important social standing was to her husband, told him she “needed money for utensils for visitors and then diverted the money to [school] fees”.

However, many women we interviewed did not have a partner to subsidize their income, share responsibilities, or impose their will; de facto single parenting due to polygamy was common and many women were by default the primary breadwinners, as their husbands’ other wives and children took priority. Hence, despite a normative script that upheld boundaries between the realms of the competitive and the communal, individual self-interest and social obligation, such realms, as Folbre (1994) suggests, may be less binary in practice, reflecting the variability of circumstance.

Orderings of Necessity in the Abstract

Ascertaining the necessity of products is a normative proposition. The designation of needs implies what *ought* to be bought, what is proper to have (Wilk 2001, 112). As noted, the focus groups and interviews we conducted sought to evince the constructions of utility through which certain products were deemed essential, while others were rejected as superfluous to requirements. Participants deemed “[laundry] soap, cooking oil, onions, matches, paraffin, sugar” as essential items while “rice, biscuits, airtime” were less frequent purchases, often deemed “luxuries.” These ascriptions of necessity, however, implied a more complex schema than bi-partite classifications of

needs versus wants set forth in some critiques of consumption, in which *authentic* needs satisfying physiological well-being are set against the inauthentic desires of consumer culture (Baudrillard 1998; Veblen 1994). Rather, goods were rendered requirements contextually, in relation to whom, where and when they were deployed, reflecting the ways in which worth is contested through moments of situated judgment (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). Rice, for example, was understood as an indulgence for everyday consumption but a necessity during social occasions, when it performs a vital social role in designating proper hospitality. In these instances rice was rendered so indispensable a good that women reported borrowing money from neighbors in order to fund its purchase. Soda, similarly, was considered a circumstantial necessity, as both a treatment for the sick and an accessory to special occasions. The categorizations alternated pending the demands of the circumstances. Necessity was also designated circumstantially in relation to the product's intended beneficiary. For example, bars of soft soap shifted from an indulgence for older children and adults (who could be adequately served by laundry soap), to a required product for newborn children. It was deemed that children needed special, gentler treatment. The significance of categories of necessity therefore lay to an extent in their porosity, as requirements shifted in relation to social positionality, time, place and perception.

One of the most salient cultural categorizations concerned the distinction between spending on “reputation” and “respectability” (Wilk 2014). Distinct in their temporal horizons, spending on respectability aimed for the accrual of capital, financial and otherwise, signaling efforts to invest in the long-term prosperity of the household – education chief among these in our study. Reputational spending focused on the here and now of social belonging with items such as biscuits, bread, cigarettes and beauty products, categorized as personal rather than household products and bought for purposes of ready gratification. The purchase of such items was generally contingent on the

fulfillment of other household expenditure, although gender norms resulted in this contingency falling differentially upon women (held morally responsible) and men (held symbolically responsible). An ethics of necessity was thereby configured relationally, and ordered hierarchically: personal spending at the expense of communal items was to be condemned, though it was still considered a vital accessory to a desirable life. Yet, as we explore, these morally-saturated designations of utility often lost force when abstract orderings of the shopping bag were translated into actual everyday consumption choices. As such, real patterns of expenditure were at times distant from the morally intelligible spending of the *responsible* household.

Orders of Justification: Logics of Worth and Affordability in Practice

Consumption, Wilk (2001) asserts, is inseparable from morality, insofar as it has assumed a huge “burden of meaning” within societies today: considered at once *the* site of aspiration, a barometer for progress, and the central building block of identity (Cross 2000). Dynamics of condemnation and reification resonate with the social and economic position of consumers; what might be considered an instance of feckless spending for some is treated as morally-neutral for others. Discourses of morality operate too at the level of local communities and individual households, seeding an ethics of consumption which is constructed relationally, with reference to other goods, income and expenses, and inflected too with the social valuation of people. In the following sections we examine how four goods that were identified as strongly gendered in the focus groups— alcohol, beauty products, sanitary pads and education— are accorded moral value, or become economically permissible, in relation to the gendered subject position of their intended users and demonstrate how disparities in subject positions are materialized in the designation of affordability.

Alcohol

Uganda holds the distinction of being the continental leader in rates of alcohol intake, with over 26 liters of alcohol consumed per capita annually (WHO 2018). The vast majority of alcohol consists of illegally brewed beers (often served in large plastic drums) and the highly potent local moonshine known as “*waragi*.” For men in our study who did drink (some, such as Muslims, avoided alcohol for religious reasons), it constituted a regular and oftentimes daily expense. Considered a male past-time, alcohol was deemed a necessity for one gender only. While 26% of women surveyed claimed to drink, a third said that it was confined to rare (ceremonial) occasions and only three professed to drinking daily. This disavowal contrasts with national data on alcohol consumption, which indicates that 32.6% of females drink significant amounts of alcohol (WHO 2018). While the discrepancy may stem partly from urban versus rural differences, it likely also reflects the distinct moral intonations of drinking between genders. In particular, it points to the absence of social scripts that position drinking as part of women’s sociality and social investment, rather than as an act of personal consumption. Indeed, when asked to specify goods that only men would think are necessary, both men and women commonly chose alcohol as “just for men.”

In contrast, men’s drinking was defended by men, as well as some women, as an associational imperative— a central element of Ugandan social and economic life. When asked how people afforded alcohol, one man who was a regular consumer explained: “we find a way of getting money and we have it.” Alcohol, like the everyday basics of inexpensive sustenance, would be prioritized regardless of competing expenses. Though levels of spending on alcohol, typically sold in sachets or communal buckets and brewed locally, varied, its cost was not insignificant. When asked how much a man who was not an alcoholic would spend on a day of drinking, one man in a focus group shared:

He spends between 2500-5000 shillings (93-1.84 US dollars⁴). One can begin with *malwa* [locally brewed beer] of 2000 shillings. Then he adds on gin of 500 shillings or “Eagle” [bottled beer] of 1800 shillings... Those who take for leisure, they may spend 1000 shilling [on] *waragi* [locally brewed gin].

While these figures were consistent across interviews and surveys, many women claimed their spouse spent over twice as much. Indeed, the proportion of men (43%) who acknowledged drinking alcohol was significantly lower than women perceived and fell well below the national average (where 69% of men reported drinking regularly) (WHO 2018). Married women often voiced concerns about their partner’s spending on alcohol, complaining about the frequency of consumption and the corresponding loss of resources that might otherwise be directed towards the household. However, many appeared, or portrayed themselves as unaware of the extent of their partner’s consumption. One woman explained that her husband never purchased alcohol, only drinking when friends bought him a round (the “social” nature legitimating its consumption), a perception based potentially on the “stories” men acknowledged telling their wives to appease them. Women who acknowledged their husbands’ drinking claimed they were unable to challenge them about it. As one woman explained, “you fear telling him because he may beat you if you just look at him;” men’s power to conceal the consumption of alcohol thus resided in women’s corresponding lack of power to ask about or discuss it. In accounting for their drinking, men sought to “qualify” (Callon et. al. 2002) their consumption by emphasizing the social dynamics of alcohol consumption, as men gathered outside village centers, sitting around a drum conversing and taking turns sipping the local brew. Drinks, the men explained in one focus group, were bought in a succession of rounds, a continuous cycle of reciprocity welding drinkers one to the other across time. As one middle-aged man avowed “if you say no, I’m not going to participate in that,

that's the same as saying no, I'm not going to be part of this community.” Collective life was thus dependent on ongoing alcohol intake and though social bonds were also formed through informal gatherings in community centers, business activities and particularly through saving groups, men who did not drink reported lacking the “status” afforded the men who gathered around the drum.

The qualifications of alcohol as an essential social activity rendered it less commensurable with household expenses, beholden to a logic of worth that elevated community, not family. Indeed, where collective spending characterized alcohol at the point of consumption, within the household economy, women constructed it as an individual expense outside the moral parameters of the home. It was men spending their *own* money; a positioning enabled by the individuation of spending pots and concomitant lack of accountability for non-pooled resources. By making the personal social, men thus “justified” their right to afford personal indulgences, while reaffirming their right to command recognition in society through economic means. Women, however, were not afforded the same prerogative. Annexed to the domestic realm and deriving their social identity largely from their status as mothers and wives, women faced a structure of constraint on their freedom to consume, to which we now turn.

Beauty products

Signaling time spent on the self rather than in the service of others, beauty products pose a challenge to the “domestic virtue model” and its family-oriented ethic, emblematic instead of the “Modern Girl” and her “pursuit of consumption, romance and fashion” (Modern Girl Research Group 2009: 9). Indeed, as Burke (1996) argues of Zimbabwe, the use of beauty products evokes a deep tension between allure and transgression, ambivalent moralities evoked in the accounts of the women interviewed for whom, beauty products occupied contested moral terrain, connoting disreputable behavior among some, and wealth and social respectability among others. For example, some younger women told us they feared being conceived of as “man-hunters” when

using common beauty products such as skin whiteners, hair extensions and lipstick while some women in the focus group spoke of such products pejoratively, asserting that a woman who consumed such things was “a prostitute...because she beautified herself with skin-whitening cream and lipstick...to attack men.” These concerns alternated with praise for those who did or desired to use them: “I admire her and I don’t have any ill feeling about her. She’s rich and can get whatever she desires,” asserted one woman. Despite the salience of negative normative prescriptions, those women who saw beauty products as empowering devices dismissed men’s opinions on the matter, defending it as a female domain: beauty products, they asserted, akin to alcohol, were a means of garnering social reputability and reinforcing a personal sense of worth. By expressing a right to make their own purchase decisions regardless of male complaint, women were, in a sense, challenging the structure of constraint by which they were traditionally bound, as well as the conception that women’s interests were commensurate with those of their husbands’.

Subversive beliefs were, however, not always enacted in practice. Not only did many women lack the funds to purchase beauty products, but their use was largely annexed to special events and functions when women were expected to “look their best,” and defended in relation to the social expectations of such occasions. Unlike the regular intake of alcohol, beauty products were conceived as a rare indulgence, purchased within the parameters of the out-of-the-ordinary, their exceptionalism freeing women from accusations of promiscuity. Importantly, beauty products were never to come at the cost of familial welfare. Beauty products were condoned as a signal of respectability only for those who could afford them after all household expenses were paid. They were condemned as an act of irresponsibility for those who could not. As Folbre (1994) forewarns, although purchasing behaviors may tamper with the status quo, they do not necessarily amount to reorganizing social institutions entirely. Women explained how beauty products could

be purchased only once other essential items had been procured, bought with the balance of any funds earmarked for the household. Categorized thus in relation to household spending, beauty products were closely implicated in the moral ordering of household needs and subject to its arbitration. Hence the social worth of beauty products competed along axes of value that included the moral requirements of caring for children, food and schooling. Men, meanwhile, explained they could not afford to pay for the “upkeep” of their wives, as there were other domestic expenditures that had to be prioritized. Among the men who asserted their capacity to delimit the affordable was Godfrey, a regular drinker, who claimed his wife needed to privilege spending on children; lipstick was out of the question, the domain of prostitutes, not wives or mothers. Here we find resonances of Miller’s (1998) analysis of shopping, which describes such practices of moral-licensing in which the ethics of consumption are negotiated through rhythms of sacrifice and indulgence within the household. As Godfrey’s account implies, within a household unit, such moral responsibility can be portioned out unevenly. Women bear the load of sacrifice for “responsible” spending, while men are permitted the lion’s share of “reputational” rewards (Wilk 2014). Importantly, in contrast to alcohol for men and sanitary pads for schoolgirls (described below), there is no accepted social narrative that places beauty products into the acceptable realm of consumption for household progress, whereby the personal and the collective may be elided.

Education as a Benchmark of Worth

While primary schooling in Uganda is state-funded, parents are required to pay for expenses associated with schooling, such as meals, pencils and books, without which children are unable to attend. Respondents were keen to emphasize that education-related expenses like school notebooks were a basic necessity deemed as important to fulfilling the daily needs of survival as millet or cooking oil. School provided an important logic of worth to defend purchases made even indirectly towards educational ends. As one woman explained, her cell phone was bought in order to keep in

touch with children who were away at boarding school, thus staking a claim to the moral character of her expenditure. As *the* aspirational category of expenditure, children in school were a source of pride, buttressing the moral standing of parents. Signaling efforts to invest in the long-term prosperity of the household, expenditure on education resided firmly in the realm of the “responsible” (Wilk 2014); an investment in a world-in-waiting which could be considered a *proper* and productive use of funds. Hence many participants claimed that in the event of gaining extra financial resources, they would be spent on revenue-generating assets, such as livestock. In turn, monies earned from these investments would be apportioned to education, sending children to better schools and allowing them to continue education beyond primary level.

In the contingent landscapes of morality, *responsible* consumption hinged on the fulfillment of this primary ethical duty: to cover the costs of schooling. Hence spending on school fees was construed as an ethical benchmark against which other spending was judged. “I don’t consider him a serious alcoholic who would drink and fail to pay school fees for the children,” a woman said of her husband, the payment of school fees separating reasonable consumption from the excessive and corrosive consumption practices of a stereotypical alcoholic. Beauty products were also subject to the ethical arbitration of school fees: “how can you think of buying weaves when the child is going to be sent home for school fees?” asked one mother.

Girls were conceived by many as the primary channel for the realization of educational aspirations, with certain parents indicating that, if means allowed, they would choose to support a daughter through secondary schooling and onto further education over a son. This apparent inversion of traditional gender priorities was, however, couched in the rationales of typically-conceived gender roles. Participants who vouched for this preference reasoned that girls were more likely to fulfill a duty of care towards their family, unlike their self-willed sons. Girls were

constructed as possessing a family-centered ethic, prepared to defer their own needs for those of the wider household. However, this privileging remained largely in the realm of the theoretical. In the majority of households secondary education was not considered affordable - unlike primary education it is neither state-funded nor available locally, requiring the enrolment of children in boarding school. Indeed many children did not finish primary education, or progressed through at an icy pace. When asked why their children no longer attended school, many parents cited their child's unwillingness, before their own lack of resources. This contradicted the version given by many of the schoolgirls in our study, who often cited a lack of money for fees, school supplies or uniforms as the main reason for their leaving formal education. Indeed, although affordability emerged as a main category in justifying purchasing decisions related to consumer goods, parents were reluctant to admit they could not afford education-related fees and expenses. In emphasizing the child's choice or abilities, parents could maintain their sense and performance of responsibility, even when the ultimate barometer of moral consumption, education, was not met, demonstrating the multiple contestations of logics of worth at play.

Sanitary Pads

Through inventories of school requirements, education also acts as a “qualifier” (Callon et al. 2002) for other goods such as school notebooks, pencils, underwear, uniforms, as well as sanitary pads. Our parallel study (*omitted for blind review*), for example, found that secondary schools increasingly require parents to provide sanitary pads for female pupils, hence the few parents who did report buying sanitary pads for their daughters did so in light of their inclusion on these lists. Sanctioned thus within the morally desirable realm of educational expenditure, they were annexed to a regime of worth in which the hopes of parents and communities were solidly invested. Indeed, such lists detached the product from its first order association – menstruation itself, a process culturally tainted by the specter of uncleanness and nascent sexuality (Buckley & Gottlieb 1988;

Dolan et al. 2013; Hoskins 2002). Yet within the socially-sanctioned domain of education, pads engendered new sets of ethically proper associations, of child-centered aspirations and responsible spending. Consequently, many men felt comfortable to include sanitary pads within their imagined spheres of necessity, despite being reluctant to execute the purchase themselves. Subsumed under a logic of worth devoid of the normative implications of menstruation, pads were conceived as contributing to the common good of the household (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). For girls who did not attend secondary school, this logic of worth was suspended, and sanitary pads moved into the category of unaffordable goods.

Indeed, while the Uganda Ministry of Education introduced a Menstrual Hygiene Management charter in 2015 to halt the trend of girls dropping out of school at the onset of menstruation (Uganda 2015), and a proliferation of local and international organizations are working to end “period poverty” by facilitating girls’ access to sanitary pads (Birkwood 2018), the majority of girls in our survey were still reliant on cloth (54.8%) or other methods including toilet paper, underwear alone, mattress, or sponge (9%).⁵ These methods are neither comfortable nor reliable, and were often linked to school absenteeism. As both girls and mothers told us, girls lack soap to wash the cloth and consequentially, they “don’t go... She can/t go with bad odor to school.”

Women proved unable to stake a successful claim for the necessity of sanitary pads within the household economy and were themselves largely restricted from buying pads due to limited funds and the lack of sales points in the vicinity (purchases required a journey to a trading town, a journey against which local norms cautioned women). When unqualified through the category of education, sanitary pads, intended first and foremost for women and adolescent girls, were deemed expendable. Nor did sanitary pads fall into the discretionary category of treats, items such as soda

and biscuits often bought by fathers to “strengthen love” for their children. Instead, steeped in the sexuality of adolescent girls and the concomitant risk their potential for pregnancy posed to the household, pads threatened to disturb paternal relations of care.⁶ Sanitary pads defied the logic set out by Douglas & Isherwood (1996) in which consumption can be considered a means of stabilizing social relations.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that affordability, far from being reducible to the monetary value of goods, enfolds multiple logics of worth. When participants justified their decisions to purchase or not particular items, they invoked a discourse of affordability. Rather than explaining what can and cannot be acquired within the financial realm of possibility, their discourses delineated social value schemas that materialized in a particular good. These value schemas, which encompassed responsibility, reputation, and respectability, intersected with gendered hierarchies to delineate logics of worth that positioned goods as affordable or unaffordable depending on their relative prioritization within the household economy. As such, while participants justified men’s purchases of alcohol as affordable, invoking the logic social belonging (and hence, reputation and respectability), women’s purchases of beauty products, which did not carry similar logics of worth, were considered unaffordable unless all other household expenses had already been paid.

Delineating these gendered constructions of affordability and unaffordability through alcohol and beauty products allowed us to contextualize participants’ claims that sanitary pads were unaffordable. In our study, sanitary pads emerged as a liminal good, moving between the categories of high and low worth, affordable and unaffordable, depending on their association with another, aspirational good: education. Participants characterized parental prioritization of children’s education as the mark of a responsible household. Firmly located in this logic of worth, education was positioned beyond discourses of affordability or unaffordability, to the extent that

parents were reluctant to admit that financial hardship had prevented them from paying for their children's education. Thus, when the purchasing of sanitary pads was mandated by secondary schools, parents readily subsumed pads into the logic of worth that designated all school-related purchases as responsible, and thereby, as purchases to be prioritized. However, outside the context of education, sanitary pads were devalued by households, and were marked as "unaffordable." This shift in affordability status, then, reflected a shift in categories: at school, sanitary pads materialized the broader logic of worth associated with education, which reflected well on the household; outside of school, sanitary pads materialized the deprioritized status accorded to women's personal-use items, which were considered of little or no value to the household. Hence, the household politics of consumption — which goods were prioritized and purchased, how often and by whom — reflected less the exigencies of income poverty than the salience of culturally-inflected gender divisions.

From a public health and education perspective, the shifting logics of worth and affordability accorded to sanitary pads suggest that it would be fruitful to reflect on the extent to which development discourses and programs engage with and reinforce these value schemas. While sanitary pads are now promoted by myriad NGO and social enterprise initiatives in Uganda, the focus on pads as a means to girls' education and familial social mobility may inadvertently reinforce logics of unaffordability, which designate girls' and women's products as holding worth when they carry an advantage for the entire household in the form of social belonging and aspiration. Given that the use of household cloth in lieu of sanitary pads carries health risks and is detrimental to girls' and women's social participation, it would be important to examine how sanitary pads can be discursively positioned as affordable outside the realm of education.

Importantly, this discursive positioning needs to take aim at and disrupt the gender norms that so tightly entwine the worth of individuals and objects.

Notes

1. Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) identify six “orders of worth” or “worlds”, in which actions require justification: the civic, inspired, domestic, fame, market and industrial worlds. This paper is concerned with domestic orders of worth.
2. Ethics approval was granted by (*Omitted for blind review*).
3. In response to the pilot testing of the questionnaire, questions about alcohol were removed from the photomontages to avoid the assumption that the man was a drunkard.
4. At the time of the research one US dollar equaled 2704.99 Ugandan shillings.
5. Women, too, had little access to sanitary pads; a majority (52%) surveyed stated they had *never* purchased them.
6. In Mulatsi, Uganda fathers have begun making reusable sanitary pads for their daughters, thus challenging the gendered boundaries of menstrual care (Walsh and Mwinemwesigwa 2018).

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Figure 1. Female Indulgent Goods



Figure 2. Male Indulgent Goods

