Youth Violence and Resilience in Africa

Guest Editors

Godfrey Maringira
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8071-641X
Social Anthropology, School of
Humanities, Sol Plaatje University,
Kimberley, South Africa
gmaringira@gmail.com

Diana Gibson
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6846-603X
Department of Anthropology, University
of the Western Cape, Bellville, South
Africa
dgibson@uwc.ac.za

Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue was compiled from research findings from various youth cohort projects that formed part of the Governance and Justice Program funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The programme ran from 2017 to 2020. Researchers had the opportunity to present their youth cohort project work at several events, for example, at conferences such as the African Studies Association conference in Atlanta, USA in 2018. We used the feedback on some of the presentations at this conference to give thought to compiling a special issue covering topics relating to youth violence and resilience. This special issue examines youths in different circumstances; not only youths who commit violence but also those who refrain from violence. Hence our exploration has revealed that the youth is not a homogenous category—the youth consists of young people who have different expectations and who respond in different ways to various forms of violence in their communities.

The articles in this issue focus on different kinds of youth violence that manifest in a variety of research contexts. The researchers interrogated the ways that the youth made sense of such violence, became involved in it or managed to avoid it. This special issue pays attention to the ways in which the youths relate to violence and are engaged in it either through the communities of which they are part or through their individual or collective actions. The articles reveal that, despite a prevalence of youth violence, many young people find ways to navigate their way through situations of violence, acting as potential agents of change. Although these articles indicate that the youth's ability to deal with violence can be understood as a form of resilience, they also scrutinise the assumptions made about the inherent features of communities and youth formations, and the practices and ideas that enable or capacitate young people to deal with violence.

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We understand that the youth are not a homogenous group; rather they are defined by social expectations and responsibilities (Honwana 2013; Singerman 2013). Youths often live in a kind of prolonged "suspension": journeying from being juveniles to being socially constructed adults, who are often impaired. According to Singerman (2013, 1), this situation can be understood as a limbo of "waithood," or what Hage (2009, 97) refers to as "stuckedness": an experience of entrapment or "existential immobility." Under such circumstances youths lack social recognition as adults, as well as the wherewithal to become independent adults (Singerman 2007). These youths experience a situation of "wait adulthood"; that is, they remain caught in a liminal stage between youth and adulthood (Singerman 2013). The in-betweenness of "waithood" can be experienced as a kind of entrapment where young people become frustrated by and disenchanted with the social, economic and political problems that befall them. According to Honwana (2013), such a "waithood generation" requires radical social, economic and political change. However, waithood does not affect every young person; some become successful and/or independent at a young age and are consequently socially accepted as adults. Others remain very poor and dependent until late in life and frequently remain socially defined as the youth. Honwana (2013) nonetheless stresses that "waithood" can be creative; youths are not only victims—they have agency. In some circumstances, youths are a resilient and often a productive constituency. In contexts of violence characterised by economic marginalisation (Courson 2011; Cubitt 2012; Utas 2005), such resilience, youth productivity and fortitude are socially and locally constructed (Mutisi 2012). In this regard, youth networks can also structure pathways of resilience in the face of adversity (see also Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). In describing youth resilience to violence, Vigh (2009) employs the concept of "social navigation" to reveal the ways in which youths get by within violent settings: in situations where opportunities arise, youths will grasp them.

At the same time, the pervasiveness of violent youth networks can also be unpacked through Honwana's (2013) assertion that for many young people in African countries, where the economy is underperforming and corruption is rife, violence offers possible ways to survive. The youth are increasingly moving from dispersed and unstructured social and political acts to more organised violence (Honwana 2013). The perceptions of these young people are that violence brings hope. For Havel (1991, 181) "hope … is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." For Kleist and Jansen (2016, 6) "hope is viewed as a phenomenon which is characterized by simultaneous potentiality (in its broadest sense) and uncertainty of the future." In a context of continued socio-economic and political corruption, youths are faced with a "shrinking configuration of hope" to eke out a meaningful living (Havel 1991, 181). This brings "a sense of entrapment," of "going nowhere" in terms of existential and social mobility (Hage 2009, 12). In a context were employment is difficult to come by, youths are in a situation of "wait

employment" (Singerman 2013). In such a situation, armed violence can become a possible option for the youth.

Youth engagement in violence takes on multiple forms and originates in diverse contexts, requiring different explanations. The articles in this special issue focus on youth violence in South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Uganda. The first four articles attend to gang violence in South Africa. Godfrey Maringira examines how guns are the embodiment of gangs and he argues how difficult it is for gangs to leave the knowledge and skills of using guns. Denver Davids elaborates the manifold ways in which young men navigate the streets in Manenberg in order to survive not only violence but also drugs, poverty and domestic abuse. Rosette Vuninga examines the intimacies of youth female partners, in particular how these women negotiate power with gangsters. In her article, Rosette argues that women in intimate relationships with gang members have the agency to maintain relations with gangs. Hameedah Parker examines women, social networks and resilience to violence in the streets of Manenberg. She asserts that some women reject gendered normativity as neither victims nor perpetrators of violence, and that they rather navigate their experiences, bodies and interactions in a violence-ridden community. Ashad Sentongo talks about the youth in Uganda, in particular those who refrain from becoming involved in violence. He examines the ways in which youths employ resilience, despite being in a context characterised by the ravages of war, injustice and discrimination. Lloyd Pswarayi reveals how youths in Zimbabwe build social and economic resilience in the face of adversity. William John Walwa talks about the youth in Tanzania who, despite being portrayed as being violent—in particular the *boda boda* drivers (motorcyclists)—have, through participatory security, helped to halt violent extremism. Richard Faustine Sambaiga illuminates how women, as agents in their own right, actively mobilise themselves and the community to promote or counter violent extremism in Tanzania and Kenya.

Our special issue engages with assertions which often depict the youth as a category of people who are in "waithood limbo" and "entrapped," yet they are socially and politically resourceful. We assert that youths have the capacities to refrain from becoming involved in violence, resisting it in many different ways, often informed by their social and political contexts.

Acknowledgement

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