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RETURNING HOME: GENDER AND CHOICE AMONGINTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS IN GULU DISTRICT

**Kalyango Ronald Sebba**

# ABSTRACT

The study examines how gender influences the choice of women and men to either return or not return to pre-conflict homes. This study, carried out in Gulu District of Northern Uganda, specifically set out to explore how gender relations between women and men influence the decision to return home or not within given spaces; that is, the IDP camp, transit site and pre-conflict homes. The study also set out to assess how social institutions influence women’s and men’s decision to return home and to examine how women and men cope with and/or adapt to the challenges they experience in the return process. To examine these factors, a qualitative methodology was used to illuminate the subtle interconnections in the multilevel interactions between displaced persons and institutions to reveal how individual goals, motivations and preferences are, in turn, influenced by institutional commands and a complex set of gendered and non-gendered factors.

The study fills a gap in knowledge by explaining the factors that influence women’s and men’s decision to either return home or not after years of displacement. In particular, the study explains how a return to pre-conflict homes is never a linear movement from the place of asylum to the original home, but a cyclical one. The study also highlights how gender relations within households interface with community and institutional factors to influence when, where and how women and men go after years of displacement. Using a sustainable livelihoods framework, the study further examines the strategies of returning women and men and how women, in particular, cope with exclusionary policies and programmes which obscure their agency and consider them passive victims and recipients of aid.

A pluralistic theoretical framework is applied to show how women and men negotiate with and circumvent institutional structures to find creative ways of establishing a fulfilling life. The study also demonstrates how changing gender arrangements during conflict and displacement influence the decision to either return to pre-conflict homesor not. Thirdly, the study shows why return, which is situated in multiple discourses, is contested by all actors and may not mean the same thing for women and men. This conclusion is arrived at through a methodological triangulation, which highlights the interplay of various factors that influence women’s and men’s decision to return home. The study essentially illustrates how interface analysis compliments gender analysis to provide room for a more critical understanding of how divergent views of actors influence the decision to move back home. The study therefore makes a methodological contribution on the primacy of triangulation of methods in the study of return migration so as to side-step dominant discourses which tend to leave out women’s and men’s concerns in both institutional and ideological terms.

The findings of the study bring to the fore how gender influences when, where and who returns first to pre-conflict homes. The findings also show how differences at the interface between displaced persons and institutions result into divergent meanings of *return*. While institutions approach *return* as a linear movement, for displaced persons *return* is essentially a cyclical process permeated with changing gender and power relations. Lastly, the findings show how the choice to return is largely informed by social processes which are in turn conditioned by human agency, livelihood strategies, gender roles and entitlements in pre-conflict homes.