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# Love with Conditions: Marital Exit Threats as Bargaining Power in Uganda

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# Abstract

Marriage remains a critical site for the production, negotiation, and contestation of gendered power relations. While previous studies have investigated marital conflict broadly, they leave marital exit threats under-theorised as strategic mechanisms of power. This thesis argues that marital exit threats function primarily as weapons of control and bargaining strategies rather than simple indicators of marital dissolution. By engaging with longstanding feminist debates over agency and victimhood, the study demonstrates that Ugandan women deploy exit threats to negotiate behavioural change, demand recognition, and reconfigure marital power. Drawing on African feminist theory, household bargaining theory, emotional labour scholarship, and relational approaches to power, the study examines how women weaponise these threats within everyday marital life. Using a transformative qualitative design grounded in African feminist epistemology, the study combines feminist life-history interviews with fifteen women, institutional ethnography conducted in religious counselling centres, and participatory interpretive methods. The data demonstrate that women use threats of departure to contest unequal treatment and renegotiate the terms of cooperation within marriage. The study introduces the concept of affective capital to explain how accumulated emotional labour, caregiving, domestic work, sexual intimacy, and relational support become forms of bargaining leverage during periods of conflict. The effectiveness of exit threats is unevenly distributed according to women's access to material resources, educational attainment, legal status, social support, and institutional protection. The findings further demonstrate that religious and community institutions operate as contested sites that simultaneously constrain and facilitate women's agency. Policy assuming that women's marital threats are merely emotional outbursts would need revising, because these findings demonstrate that exit threats are calculated tactics deeply embedded in material and institutional power dynamics. By integrating African feminist scholarship with bargaining and relational power theories, the study advances a new conceptual framework for understanding how women contest power in intimate relationships.


# 1. Introduction

Marriage has long been recognised as one of the most important institutions through which gendered power relations are organised, negotiated, and reproduced. Rather than functioning as a unified social arrangement characterised by shared interests and harmonious cooperation, marriage frequently involves ongoing negotiations over authority, responsibility, resources, recognition, and decision-making (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990). Within these negotiations, spouses occupy unequal positions shaped by broader social, economic, cultural, legal, and institutional structures. Consequently, marital relationships represent important sites through which gendered forms of power are enacted and contested. This study picks up from this foundational insight by investigating a specific, under-examined negotiation tactic: the marital exit threat.

In many African societies, marriage extends beyond the relationship between spouses and is embedded within wider kinship systems, religious institutions, community expectations, and economic arrangements that shape opportunities and constraints for women and men (Tamale, 2020; Tripp, 2000).

This context directly engages with feminist debates concerning power and agency. Western feminist frameworks have historically oscillated between portraying women in the Global South as passive victims of patriarchal structures and celebrating them as liberated agents. However, African feminist scholarship challenges these binary portrayals. Instead, it argues that women frequently navigate unequal conditions through complex acts of negotiation, accommodation, resistance, and strategic compromise (Mohanty, 2003; Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020). Agency in this perspective is relational, context dependent, and exercised within existing social structures rather than outside them. This matters because it rules out universalising Western feminist models that fail to account for the specificities of African marital bargaining ((Kabeer (1999, 2005; Lundberg & Pollak, 1993). From this scholarship, the study picks up the analytical mandate to examine women's strategic agency within constraints, refusing to reduce women's actions to simple victimhood or unbridled liberation. It positions women not as passive recipients of patriarchal power but as active contestants who negotiate the terms of their subordination. This study thus intervenes in the enduring feminist debate over whether true agency requires the dismantling of patriarchal institutions or whether it can be exercised subversively from within them.

One important yet underexamined dimension of these negotiations is the marital exit threat. A close examination of the existing literature reveals a consistent pattern of omission. Previous studies investigated marriage, divorce, domestic conflict, and women's resistance to patriarchal structures extensively. However, they leave the threat of marital exit itself relatively unexamined as a distinct practice of power negotiation. Most research privileges actual separation or divorce as outcomes of conflict rather than examining how the possibility of separation is strategically mobilised within ongoing relationships (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990). This constitutes a significant gap in the scholarship, because it overlooks the calculated, everyday negotiations that occur before separation ever becomes a reality. This study fills that gap by testing whether marital exit threats function as calculated mechanisms that women deploy to alter the balance of power within their marriages. The central argument of this thesis is that marital exit threats are not mere expressions of frustration or precursors to divorce. Instead, they are calculated weapons of marital control and bargaining mechanisms through which women seek to influence behaviour, secure concessions, demand recognition, and renegotiate conditions of cooperation within marriage. Marital exit threats become significant because they raise the possibility of withdrawing not only emotional support, caregiving labour, domestic work, childcare, companionship, and economic contributions, but also sexual intimacy and social legitimacy. The threat of withdrawal, not necessarily the act of leaving, becomes the leverage point. This argument rules out interpretations that reduce women's exit threats to emotional instability or irrationality. Instead, it positions women as strategic actors who calculate the costs and benefits of deploying such threats within constrained circumstances, actively contesting the distribution of marital power.

To construct this argument and address the identified gap, the study integrates four distinct bodies of literature, picking specific analytical tools from each to build a comprehensive framework that speaks directly to gender, feminist debates, and power contestations. Household bargaining theory (Agarwal, 1997; Sen, 1990) provides the concept of cooperative conflict. Sen's (1990) cooperative-conflict model

argues that households are sites where cooperation and conflict coexist because family members simultaneously depend on one another while pursuing partially competing interests. Bargaining outcomes depend upon access to resources, perceived contributions, social norms, and alternatives outside the household. This framework revolutionised the study of intra-household dynamics by demonstrating that even seemingly harmonious families are sites of continuous power negotiation. Agarwal (1997) extends this framework by arguing that bargaining power is shaped by property ownership, income, social support networks, legal protections, and community relationships operating both within and beyond the household. Her work on women's land rights demonstrates that material assets significantly enhance women's bargaining positions by providing credible fallback options. However, this literature leaves a gap concerning non-material resources. It prioritises economic assets and property rights but fails to theorise how emotional, relational, and bodily resources function as bargaining chips. Building on these foundations, this study picks up the concept of fallback positions and argues that marital exit threats are the explicit articulation of fallback options. It extends bargaining theory by showing that the threat of exit, not just the act of exit, functions as a power resource, filling the gap left by previous studies that have not adequately theorised this distinction.

Emotional labour scholarship (Hochschild, 1983, 1989) provides the concept of invisible relational work to explain why marital exit threats carry weight beyond material resources. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour refers to the work involved in managing feelings, sustaining relationships, and maintaining emotional stability within families. Feminist scholars have extended this by demonstrating that women disproportionately bear the burden of managing family emotions, mediating conflicts, and sustaining relational harmony. This invisible work, while essential to household functioning, is rarely acknowledged or compensated. However, a critical examination of this literature reveals a major gap. Previous studies describe emotional labour as an ongoing burden but fail to examine how it converts into leverage during moments of conflict. They theorise emotional labour as a site of exploitation but not as a potential weapon of resistance. This study fills that gap by developing the concept of affective capital. Affective capital refers to the accumulated relational value generated through caregiving, emotional support, conflict mediation, childcare, domestic labour, relationship maintenance, and the strategic management of sexual intimacy. Unlike emotional labour, which describes ongoing activity, affective capital refers to the value accumulated through such activity over time. It is a reservoir of relational investment that can be drawn upon or threatened with withdrawal. The study argues that women mobilise affective capital during marital negotiations by highlighting the potential withdrawal of emotional, domestic, and sexual contributions that sustain cooperation. This argument extends Hochschild's framework by showing that emotional labour, including the withholding of sex, is not only a burden but also a potential weapon of power. Women convert their accumulated emotional and intimate investments into bargaining leverage when they threaten to withdraw them, contesting the gendered division of emotional and sexual labour.

Relational theories of power (Foucault, 1986) and African feminist epistemologies (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020) provide the understanding that agency is negotiated rather than absolute and that power is continuously produced through everyday interactions. Rather than viewing power as a fixed resource

possessed by one partner, relational theories conceptualise power as emerging through interactions, negotiations, and contested meanings. This perspective illuminates how women exercise agency not by overthrowing patriarchal structures entirely but by manipulating the terms of cooperation within those structures. Nnaemeka's (2004) concept of nego-feminism emphasises negotiation rather than confrontation as a central feature of African women's engagements with unequal power structures. Similarly, Tamale (2020) argues that analyses of gender and power in Africa must attend to local histories, cultural contexts, and institutional realities. However, a gap persists in how these theories are applied to intimate, everyday marital negotiations. Much of this scholarship examines women's agency in public spheres, political movements, or economic activities, leaving the intimate space of marriage underexplored as a site of negotiated power. This study fills that gap because participants rarely used marital exit threats to reject marriage altogether. Instead, they generally sought to transform relationships from within by altering patterns of cooperation, recognition, and authority. The study picks up these insights to show how negotiated agency operates specifically within the intimate space of marriage, demonstrating that women are active negotiators who use the tools available to them, including the threat of exit and the withdrawal of sex, to contest patriarchal authority. This directly engages with the feminist debate on whether true agency requires the dismantling of patriarchal institutions or whether it can be exercised subversively from within them. It aligns with what Mama (1995) terms quiet ingenuity, a form of covert, strategic, and relational resistance that challenges Western feminist assumptions about what constitutes authentic agency.

Intersectionality and institutional scholarship (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Kwesiga, 2002; Musisi, 2002; Van Klinken, 2019) provide the analytical tools to examine how structural inequalities and institutional contexts shape the efficacy of marital exit threats. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality framework and Collins's (2000) matrix of domination reveal how race, class, citizenship status, and geopolitical location compound gendered vulnerabilities. In African contexts, Kwesiga's (2002) work on Ugandan women's differential access to resources demonstrates that the efficacy of marital exit threats is heavily contingent on economic autonomy, land rights, and social networks. Professional women with educational credentials and salaried employment can deploy credible exit threats by leveraging their financial autonomy (Ahikire, 2014; Tripp, 2000). Refugee women, by contrast, face what Amony (2015) terms gendered precarity, where immigration laws render them legally dependent on abusive spouses (Menjívar, 2006). Widows are stripped of land rights through clan-based dispossession, rendering their marital exit threats hollow (Tripp, 2000). Furthermore, feminist scholarship has often debated the role of religious and legal institutions, frequently casting them as uniformly patriarchal. However, this study argues that institutions are not monoliths but internally contested spaces where resistance emerges in unexpected forms. Pastors' wives quietly supply mattresses to women fleeing violence. Sheikhs mediate disputes while allowing women's market work. Mobile lawyers weaponise men's fear of institutional scrutiny (Foucault, 1986; Hanson, 2010). These contradictions suggest that institutional authority over marital exit threats is itself contested. The study picks up these intersectional and institutional insights to argue that contestation over marital exit threats is intersectionally uneven. The same exit threat that empowers a salaried professional may endanger a refugee. This highlights how power is distributed

unevenly across different axes of identity and structural location, filling a gap in the literature which has not adequately theorised how intersectional fault lines shape not just the efficacy but the very meaning of marital exit threats.

Finally, the study identifies a gap in the literature concerning failed threats. Much feminist scholarship on resistance and bargaining focuses on successful outcomes, overlooking the cases where women's threats fail to produce compliance. This study argues that understanding failure is essential for theorising power. When husbands successfully neutralise threats by calling bluffs, withholding resources, or invoking institutional authority, women's bargaining positions are weakened, sometimes permanently. The literature has not adequately examined these failed negotiations. This study fills that gap by comparing successful and failed threats to identify the conditions under which affective capital, sexual withdrawal, and credible alternatives produce influence. This argument rules out romanticised accounts of women's agency that ignore the structural constraints that limit women's power. Instead, it provides a more nuanced account of the conditions under which agency translates into influence, advancing the feminist debate by demonstrating that agency is not an inherent trait but a contingent outcome of structural positioning. This intervention challenges Western feminist celebrations of individual resistance, insisting instead that agency must be theorised in relation to the material and institutional conditions that enable or constrain it.

By examining the existing literature and identifying these five critical gaps, this study addresses four research questions. How do Ugandan women deploy marital exit threats within everyday marital negotiations? How do women understand the meaning and purpose of these threats? How do institutions shape the legitimacy and effectiveness of marital exit threats? How do social inequalities influence women's ability to use marital exit threats as bargaining tools? By answering these questions, the study contributes to scholarship on gendered power, bargaining, African feminism, and intimate forms of negotiation, offering a nuanced account of how women contest power within the contested terrain of marriage. It advances feminist debates by demonstrating that agency, resistance, and bargaining are not abstract ideals but deeply embedded practices shaped by the material, institutional, and relational contexts in which women live.

# 2. Methods

This study employed a transformative qualitative research design grounded in African feminist epistemology. The design was selected because the objective was to understand how women interpret and deploy marital exit threats within their everyday lives rather than to measure the prevalence of such behaviour. African feminist epistemology prioritises participant voice, contextual understanding, reflexivity, and the production of knowledge rooted in lived experience (Tamale, 2020). This methodological choice aligns with feminist debates that challenge positivist paradigms, arguing that knowledge is situated and that centring marginalised voices is essential for producing rigorous and politically committed research. Interviews suit a research question about meaning, not frequency.

The study was conducted in urban and peri-urban communities in Uganda. Participants were recruited through community organisations, women's associations, religious institutions, market networks, and snowball sampling. Eligibility required participants to have experienced marital conflict involving actual separation, contemplation of separation, or explicit threats of marital exit.

The final sample comprised fifteen women aged between twenty-two and sixty years. Data were generated through feminist life-history interviews, institutional ethnography, focus groups, visual timelines, care calendars, and exit-threat mapping exercises. The multi-method design provided insight into individual experiences while also examining the institutional contexts within which marital disputes were negotiated. This approach was chosen because it captures both the intimate and institutional dimensions of marital bargaining power.

Institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) involved six months of fieldwork in three religious counselling centres, with analysis of twenty-eight case notes and observation of twenty-three mediation sessions. Six months captured the cyclical nature of religious counselling, which a shorter window misses. These sites were selected because they are the institutional spaces where marital exit threats are most frequently adjudicated, negotiated, and contested.

Participatory data analysis (Fine et al., 2003; Lykes & Hershberg, 2012) comprised four interpretive focus groups and visual timelines, with participants mapping their own exit-threat tactics. This method was chosen because it positions participants as co-analysts rather than passive subjects, aligning with African feminist commitments to reflexive and collaborative knowledge production.

To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms and participant identification codes. Quotations throughout the manuscript are presented using a consistent format that includes pseudonym, age, occupation, and participant code. Ethical considerations included culturally resonant pseudonyms (Ellis, 2007), participant-led interpretation (Torre et al., 2012), and trauma-informed protocols within Lather's (2017) research as care framework.

Data analysis involved iterative coding and interpretation. Three analytical approaches guided analysis. Intersectional power mapping (Crenshaw, 1991; Kwesiga, 2002) was used to examine how class, education, legal status, religion, and economic resources shaped women's bargaining positions. Infrapolitical resistance coding (Scott, 1990; Musisi, 2002) identified subtle forms of negotiation. Affective labour analysis (Hochschild, 1983; Tamale, 2020) examined how emotional labour and caregiving responsibilities shaped bargaining dynamics.

The concept of affective capital emerged inductively during analysis as participants repeatedly described situations in which emotional labour and caregiving became resources during conflict. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and trauma-informed interviewing strategies were employed throughout the study.

# 3. Results and Discussion

The data demonstrate that marital exit threats function as bargaining practices through which women attempted to influence behaviour, secure recognition, and renegotiate power within marriage. Women consistently described marital exit threats as efforts to change relationships rather than end them. Ruth (28, Market Vendor, P07) explained: "When I finally said then go, he suddenly remembered my cooking." This moment captures the performative power of exit threats as strategic disruptions of patriarchal scripts that expect women's silent endurance. Similarly, Deborah (35, Secondary School Teacher, P12) reflected: "It shocked him that he didn't know I could speak." These accounts illustrate how threats of departure functioned as attempts to secure recognition and behavioural change rather than immediate separation. Three of eight focus group participants described similar theatrical deployments, which suggests that performative ambiguity is a deliberate tactic rather than incidental. Judith (41, Trader, P19) remarked: "My marital exit threat was theatre, but the audience changed." Her account suggests that the effectiveness of threats depended on altering how husbands perceived women's willingness and ability to withdraw cooperation. The contestation here is over meaning. Is the exit threat theatre or truth, manipulation or protest? Women strategically exploit this ambiguity, whereas men struggle to fix the weapon's meaning and therefore its coercive power. This argument rules out interpretations that reduce exit threats to either genuine intentions to leave or empty rhetorical gestures. Instead, it shows that women deliberately cultivate ambiguity to maximise their bargaining leverage, actively contesting the interpretive power of their actions.

Affective capital emerged as a second dimension. Sarah (39, Hairdresser, P16) described: "Two hundred and fourteen days of being the first to apologise, cook, and smooth things over." Similarly, Beatrice (52, Farmer, P24) stated: "I threatened to leave after burying three children alone." These narratives reveal how accumulated emotional labour and caregiving became resources that women mobilised during conflict. Participants repeatedly reported that husbands became attentive not only because of potential separation but because of the anticipated loss of emotional support, domestic labour, childcare, relationship maintenance, and sexual intimacy. The data indicate that affective capital is highly effective when recognised by the marital audience and largely ineffective when ignored. Polygamous women's solidarity in taking turns carrying his temper like a shared market basket exemplifies nego-feminist approaches (Nnaemeka, 2004) that pool affective resources for collective bargaining. This strategy challenges Western feminist notions of individualistic resistance, demonstrating that power can be contested collectively. The contestation is over valuation. Whose emotional labour counts as leverage when the threat is issued, and when? This study argues that affective capital is not automatically convertible into bargaining power. It must be recognised and valued by the marital audience for it to function as leverage. This argument extends Hochschild's framework by showing that emotional labour is not inherently powerful. Its power depends on the relational context in which it is deployed, highlighting the contingent nature of gendered power.

Institutional mediation emerged as a third dimension. Grace (31, Small Business Owner, P09) explained: "The pastor said my marital exit threat was demonic. His wife gave me a mattress." Here the church condemns her weapon even as another woman quietly re-arms her. Rebecca (50, Administrator, P31) reflected: "The priest blessed my tears but not my divorce." This illustrates how religious rhetoric

attempts to disarm women while sanctifying their suffering. Mariam (24, Market Vendor, P05) described a different experience: "The sheikh mediated. Now he allows my market work." These quotations reveal that institutions simultaneously constrain and facilitate women's bargaining efforts. Institutions are not monoliths but internally contested spaces where resistance to and through exit threats emerges in unexpected forms (Foucault, 1986). Sister Hope's ledger notes nineteen sewing machines to women who found God after beatings. This reveals how faith-based spaces can become sites of covert economic empowerment that arm women's exit threats. Mobile lawyer Sarah's observation that the bus fare to court scares him more than the judge highlights how men's fear of institutional scrutiny can be weaponised. The threat of legal involvement becomes another coercive tactic. This argument rules out the assumption that religious institutions uniformly reinforce patriarchal control. Instead, it shows that institutions are contested sites where women can find unexpected allies and resources, complicating feminist debates about the role of religion in women's empowerment. It refutes the secular feminist assumption that religious institutions are uniformly patriarchal, revealing instead that they are internally contested spaces where women can find unexpected allies.

Unequal access to bargaining power emerged as a fourth dimension. Patricia (44, Lawyer, P34) stated: "My degree on the wall silences him." Naomi (37, NGO Programme Officer, P28) similarly explained: "My salary bought me negotiation power." In contrast, Hawa (29, Refugee Participant, P40) stated: "He knew I could not leave because all the documents depended on him. The threat ended before it started." Amina (22, Informal Trader, P42) summed up her experience: "No papers, no threats, just survival." These accounts demonstrate that bargaining power depended heavily upon fallback positions and alternatives available beyond marriage. Material realities further constrained bargaining power. Atim's hand-drawn survival maps detailed one kilometre to the cleanest well and five kilometres to the clinic for my son. This illustrates how geographic and economic precarity shaped the exit threats she could credibly issue. Nambi recounted her brother-in-law's exit threat: The land eats your labour. So, I planted cassava, it grows unseen. This demonstrates subversion of dispossession through quiet resistance (Scott, 1990). Harriet, a 45-year-old widow, explained: "His family said I'd lose my garden. I now pay rent to my dead husband's brother." This exposes gendered property inheritance that rendered her exit threats hollow. In contrast, Susan, a 38-year-old tailor, leveraged economic independence: "I hid my sewing machine at church. When he said go, I stitched my way out." This is an exit threat made coercively credible by hidden economic assets. Agnes (55, Village Elder, P15) observed generational shifts: "Young women mock my old ways until they need clan allies." The contestation here is over who can afford to wield the weapon and how traditional networks remain vital resources for women lacking institutional support (Musisi, 2002). This argument rules out universalising accounts of women's bargaining power that ignore intersectional differences. Instead, it shows that the capacity to deploy exit threats is stratified by material, legal, and social resources, demonstrating that gendered power is deeply interwoven with other axes of inequality. It refutes the Western feminist tendency to treat women as a homogeneous category, showing instead that the capacity to deploy exit threats is stratified by material, legal, and social resources.

The limits of marital bargaining emerged as a final dimension. Rose (33, Food Vendor, P22) recalled: "He told me, Go where? After a while, even I stopped believing my own threats." Joyce (36, Casual Labourer, P29) reflected: "I packed my clothes and sat outside waiting for him to stop me. He locked the door and went to sleep." Christine (40, Shop Attendant, P14) explained: "After I said I would leave, he stopped paying school fees." These cases demonstrate that threats frequently failed when women lacked credible alternatives or when husbands successfully neutralised attempts at bargaining. The data show that credible alternatives held in successful cases and failed in unsuccessful cases. The difference was the presence of economic independence, legal status, or social support that made non-cooperation believable. This argument rules out the assumption that women's agency automatically translates into influence. Instead, it shows that agency is contingent on the structural conditions that enable or constrain women's bargaining power, providing a critical intervention into feminist debates that sometimes overstate the efficacy of individual resistance. It challenges romanticised accounts of women's agency that ignore the structural constraints that limit women's power, insisting instead that agency must be theorised in relation to the material and institutional conditions that enable or constrain it.

The data strongly support Sen's (1990) cooperative-conflict framework by demonstrating that marital relationships involve simultaneous cooperation and conflict. Participants sought not to destroy cooperation but to renegotiate it. Marital exit threats emerged as bargaining mechanisms through which women attempted to alter the terms of cooperation, secure recognition, and challenge unequal treatment. This study agrees with Sen and extends it by showing that the threat of withdrawal, not just actual withdrawal, functions as a powerful bargaining lever in ongoing relationships. This argument rules out interpretations that reduce exit threats to precursors of divorce. Instead, it shows that exit threats are strategic tools deployed within ongoing relationships to renegotiate the terms of cooperation, actively contesting marital power.

A central contribution concerns affective capital. The data indicate that women accumulated relational value through emotional labour, caregiving, domestic work, and conflict mediation. During moments of conflict, these investments became bargaining resources. Affective capital therefore extends Hochschild's (1983, 1989) emotional labour theory by explaining how care becomes leverage within intimate relationships. This matters because it rules out purely materialist models that ignore the emotional dimensions of marital power. It shows that women's bargaining power is not only economic but also affective. The study argues that affective capital is a distinct form of bargaining resource that operates alongside material resources, institutional support, and social networks. This argument extends feminist theory by incorporating emotional and relational dimensions that previous studies overlooked, demonstrating that power is exercised not only through material resources but also through the manipulation of affective ties. It refutes the materialist bias in bargaining theory, which has historically prioritised economic resources while ignoring the emotional and relational dimensions of power.

The data also support bargaining theory's emphasis on fallback positions. Successful threats generally occurred when women possessed credible alternatives outside marriage. Patricia's educational attainment, Naomi's income, and Susan's hidden sewing machine strengthened their bargaining positions because non-cooperation was believable. In contrast, Hawa's legal dependency and Amina's lack of documentation undermined the credibility of threatened departure. The comparison between successful and failed threats demonstrates that marital bargaining power is rooted in credible alternatives rather than dissatisfaction alone. Women in both groups performed emotional labour and experienced inequality. What differentiated them was the extent to which emotional and material resources could be converted into credible bargaining positions. This argument rules out accounts of women's agency that ignore the structural conditions that enable or constrain bargaining power. Instead, it shows that agency is contingent on the availability of credible alternatives, underscoring the intersectional nature of gendered power.

The data further support African feminist arguments that agency is negotiated rather than absolute (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020). Women rarely sought liberation through separation alone. Instead, they negotiated, adapted, confronted, and strategically engaged existing institutions. Their actions reflected efforts to improve relationships through renegotiated cooperation rather than abandon marriage entirely. This refutes Western feminist binaries that cast women as either passive victims or liberated agents. One explanation is that African women's agency operates through what Mama (1995) terms quiet ingenuity, which is covert, strategic, and relational. Testing this would need comparative data from other African contexts, but the present evidence strongly supports it. This argument rules out simplistic accounts of women's empowerment that equate agency with exit or separation. Instead, it shows that women exercise agency through a range of strategies, including negotiation, accommodation, and strategic compromise, deeply enriching feminist debates on the nature of resistance and power. It challenges the Western feminist tendency to equate agency with visible, confrontational resistance, showing instead that African women's agency often operates through covert, strategic, and relational practices.

Furthermore, the data refute the assumption that religious and legal institutions uniformly reinforce patriarchal control. Intra-institutional contestation over marital exit threats exists. Pastors' wives, sheikhs, and Sister Hope quietly arm women the church has disarmed. This complicates secular feminist assumptions and suggests that institutional interventions should target these internal contradictions rather than dismissing institutions entirely. This argument rules out the binary opposition between secular feminism and religious patriarchy. Instead, it shows that institutions are complex, contested spaces where women can find unexpected allies and resources, demonstrating that power operates in nuanced and often contradictory ways within institutional settings.

# 4. Contributions to Theory

This study makes five theoretical contributions to scholarship on gendered power and marital bargaining. It extends Sen's (1990) cooperative-conflict framework by demonstrating how marital exit

threats function as bargaining mechanisms within ongoing cooperative relationships, showing that the threat of withdrawal, not actual separation, is the leverage point. It introduces affective capital as a form of bargaining resource generated through emotional labour and caregiving, extending Hochschild's (1983, 1989) framework by showing how accumulated emotional investment becomes convertible leverage. It demonstrates that fallback positions are multidimensional and include emotional, social, institutional, and legal resources alongside economic assets, moving beyond materialist models of bargaining power. It extends African feminist theory by showing how negotiated agency operates within intimate relationships, refuting Western feminist binaries (Nnaemeka, 2004; Tamale, 2020). It highlights the importance of failure for understanding bargaining power, demonstrating that agency does not automatically translate into influence, a gap previous studies left unexamined. These contributions advance feminist scholarship by providing a more nuanced account of how women negotiate power in intimate relationships. They rule out simplistic accounts of women's agency that ignore the structural conditions that enable or constrain bargaining power. They challenge the Western feminist tendency to treat women as a homogeneous category, showing instead that the capacity to deploy exit threats is stratified by material, legal, and social resources. They refute the materialist bias in bargaining theory, which has historically prioritised economic resources while ignoring the emotional and relational dimensions of power. They challenge the secular feminist assumption that religious institutions are uniformly patriarchal, revealing instead that they are internally contested spaces where women can find unexpected allies. Together, these contributions advance a more nuanced, intersectional, and contextually grounded feminist theory of gendered power and marital bargaining (Kabeer (1999, 2005; Lundberg & Pollak, 1993).

# 5. Policy and Practice Implications

Policy assuming that women are passive victims of marital power would need revising, because these findings demonstrate that women actively weaponise exit threats. However, the capacity to do so is stratified. For practice, this means programmes aimed at strengthening women's bargaining power should focus on improving access to fallback resources. Economic empowerment initiatives, education, vocational training, property rights, and legal protections can strengthen women's bargaining positions by increasing the credibility of alternatives outside marriage. Support for refugee women is particularly important because legal dependency severely undermined bargaining power, as Hawa's and Amina's cases demonstrate.

Religious and community institutions should also be recognised as important sites of intervention. Because participants frequently sought assistance from churches, mosques, and counselling centres, training institutional actors to respond constructively to marital conflict could expand support options for women while reducing harmful outcomes. Faith-based economic initiatives such as sewing collectives and mobile legal clinics would bridge accessibility gaps for women seeking to wield exit threats as weapons.

Social protection measures must formally acknowledge the economic contributions of care work that underwrite women's bargaining positions. Securing women's land and property rights remains vital, especially for widows whose exit threats are hollowed out by clan-based dispossession (Uganda Feminist Forum, 2018). This argument rules out policy approaches that treat women's marital conflict as a private matter. Instead, it shows that marital bargaining power is shaped by public policies and institutional arrangements, directly implicating the state and community structures in the contestation of gendered power.

However, the study's claims hold only for urban and peri-urban populations. Rural experiences may differ substantially because of variations in kinship systems, land ownership patterns, and institutional access (Tripp, 2000). The study also relied exclusively on women's accounts and therefore captures women's perspectives rather than men's interpretations of marital exit threats. The qualitative design prioritised analytical depth over statistical generalisation. The risk of romanticising affective capital without fully interrogating its dual role as bargaining leverage and gendered exploitation remains a tension. The next test is whether affective capital holds as bargaining leverage when economic autonomy is removed, a question for future research. These limitations do not undermine the study's contributions. Instead, they identify directions for future research that can build on the insights developed here, further interrogating the complex intersections of gender, power, and resistance.

# 7. Conclusion

This study examined how Ugandan women deploy marital exit threats and found that they function as bargaining mechanisms through which women seek to influence behaviour, secure recognition, and renegotiate the terms of cooperation within marriage. Consistent with Sen's (1990) cooperative-conflict framework, marital relationships emerged as sites where cooperation and conflict coexist. Women threatened departure not necessarily to leave but to alter the conditions under which cooperation occurred. The meaning of these threats is perpetually disputed, between condemnation and legitimacy, between theatre and truth, between individual survival and collective bargaining (Kabeer (1999, 2005; Lundberg & Pollak, 1993)

The data demonstrate that bargaining power is generated through the interaction of affective capital, material resources, institutional support, social networks, and fallback positions. Emotional labour and caregiving became politically significant when women threatened their withdrawal, but affective capital produced influence only when supported by credible alternatives outside marriage. Successful threats occurred where women possessed resources that made non-cooperation believable. Failed threats occurred where dependency remained intact. This argument rules out accounts of women's agency that ignore the structural conditions that enable or constrain bargaining power. Instead, it shows that agency is contingent on the availability of credible alternatives, deepening feminist understandings of how power is negotiated within intimate spaces.

The next test is whether these bargaining tactics shift as customary law reforms alter land tenure, a dynamic that longitudinal studies must capture. Investigating digital platforms as emerging spaces for weaponised exit threats may uncover novel expressions of agency. Incorporating masculinity studies could deepen insights into men's perceptions and counter-strategies against women's weapons, whereas exploring queer women's experiences would challenge heteronormative frameworks (Mwenda, 2019). Through framing marital exit threats as dynamic, context-dependent bargaining mechanisms, this research advances decolonial feminist theory (Tamale, 2020) and honours what Musisi (2002) termed the quiet ingenuity of African women's resistance. It challenges Western feminist tendencies to treat women as a homogeneous category, showing instead that the capacity to deploy exit threats is stratified by material, legal, and social resources. It refutes the materialist bias in bargaining theory, which has historically prioritised economic resources while ignoring the emotional and relational dimensions of power. It challenges the secular feminist assumption that religious institutions are uniformly patriarchal, revealing instead that they are internally contested spaces where women can find unexpected allies. Together, these interventions advance a more nuanced, intersectional, and contextually grounded feminist theory of gendered power and marital bargaining.

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