

Experiences of forced mothers in northern Uganda: the legacy of war

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From 1986–2007, the Lord’s Resistance Army inflicted severe suffering on civilians in northern Uganda through indiscriminate killing and child abductions. While both abducted boys and girls were trained to use arms, girls were commonly distributed among commanders as forced ‘wives’. These traumatised girls and young women (both pregnant and forced mothers’) were retained in rehabilitation centres longer than any other ex-combatants. While they may have been accorded special privileges in the centres, after reintegration, their home communities stigmatised and discriminated against both mothers and children. This paper discusses the experiences of forced mothers and their children, while at rehabilitation centres, and through the reintegration process. Additionally, it examines how communities should be stimulated to view forced mothers and their children as survivors of multiple human rights violations.

Keywords: children, forced motherhood, psychosocial needs, reintegration, Uganda

The legacies of war

The armed conflict in northern Uganda, between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the state, started in 1986 and officially ended in January 2007 when the region was declared a post conflict zone by the government. Figures suggest that up to two million people in the Eastern, Northern and North Eastern Uganda districts were displaced (UN News Centre, 2004). It is, however, the Acholi sub-region, comprised of Amuru, Gulu, Kitgum and Pader

districts, which bore the greatest brunt of this armed conflict. The World Food Programme (2003) estimates that 800,000 people, approximately 90% of the Acholi population, were internally displaced, lived in camps or safer areas of the Gulu Municipality, and were separated from their livelihoods. The majority of those living in camps were women and children. The children were particularly vulnerable as they were the LRA’s ‘soft target’ for abduction, sexual slavery and recruitment for armed combat, even when they lived in so-called protected villages. The United Nations suggested that during the prolonged civil war, in total, 25,000 children were forced to enrol as soldiers, with the girls forced into sexual slavery (UN News Centre, 2004). An estimated 10,000 girls became forced child mothers as a result of LRA abduction between 1988 and 2004. Another 88,000 girls, who were not abducted, became child mothers due to conditions in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps contributing to the risk of rape. Therefore, the term ‘forced mothers’ is used in this paper to refer to girls who were repeatedly raped, sexually abused, suffered sexual violence and/or their human rights violated by the LRA and sometimes the state army. Some of the girls were below the legal age of consent, hence becoming child mothers. During the armed conflict, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and various charities provided shelter (including night commuters’ shelters where wartime children sought

protection from abduction and/or sexual assault) food, transport, water and sanitation, cooking utensils and counselling services, within the IDP camps.

After the government of Uganda's declaration of the end of the conflict in 2007, the focus shifted to capacity building and development. Another change, following the declaration, was the phasing out of local and international projects that were tailored to activities within a conflict zone. As a consequence, the (more than) 500 local and international charities that had been operating in northern Uganda, providing emergency relief to 1.7 million people, were quickly reduced to less than 50 organisations. As a result of this reduction, the Acholi people were forced to depend on Ugandan state services for provision of their needs.

However, due to economic and logistical challenges, the resettlement of people from the camps became not only a complex task, but also one that often failed to meet the needs of the target population. One example was the story of a 53-year-old widow and her children, who had been resettled in her home village, and was reported in the local press (*The Sunday Vision*, 18 September 2011:8). According to the report, after one week back in her home village, she returned to the dismantled camp. During this short period away, she and her children had lived under a tree, with no basic services or food. Also during this time, one of her children had died of malaria, as the nearest health centre was 31 kilometres away.

While many people have now resettled back into their original homesteads, some legacies of the war remain unaddressed. One of those unaddressed issues is the focus of this paper, children born as a result of rape, during or after captivity, and their forced mothers. Forced mothers or wives were typically young girls of 15–21 years of age,

who had one or more children less than five years of age at the time of interview. All had survived a brutal rebellion and multiple, human rights and sexual violations. McKay et al. (2011) suggest that when formerly recruited young women and girls returned to their communities, they were socially isolated and experienced significant psychosocial distress, which poses major barriers to reintegration. Therefore, approaches implemented for them were unsuccessful due to this stigmatisation and discrimination (Akello, Richter & Reis, 2006).

While it is difficult to estimate just how many children were born in captivity, or have LRA fathers, by mid 2001, girls held by the LRA had given birth to thousands of children, excluding those who returned from captivity with children, or pregnant. Many of their children were traumatised as a result of witnessing and experiencing various extreme events including sexualised violence, living in captivity, cruelty and misery. This situation is especially precarious for rescued children. Often born of rape to abducted female sex slaves or 'wives' of the LRA, they began their childhoods within the precincts of war, and lived their early lives in conditions of extreme deprivation and violence (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Methodology

Data collection. In 2004 and 2005 the author interviewed children (aged 9–16 years) in Gulu district as main respondents to her study. Some of those interviewed were forced mothers, most were below the legal age of consent (18 years old) when they had given birth. These children had fled to the Gulu municipality due to the stigma and prevailing discrimination in the communities where they had been reintegrated. Additionally, after 2007, the

author regularly visited events in Gulu attended by forced mothers, such as churches and other institutions, which recruit and offer vocational training to ex-combatant mothers, or provide social support.¹

Interviews were conducted about their experiences during captivity, reintegration, and their social lives in the Gulu municipality. In total, in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 forced mothers, 19 of whom were below 18 years, and one focus group discussion with child mothers (ages 15–19 years) at Noah's Ark tailoring school.² Key informant interviews were also conducted with two local NGO coordinators, one project site administrator and two trainers in the vocational institution.

Additionally, some (former) child mothers and their children attend church services³. In these services, members of the congregation are invited to share their experiences (good or bad), in the form of testimonies. The author has attended approximately 20 such testimonies by forced mothers. Also included in data presented here are various stories on forced mothers reported in local newspapers.⁴

The post war experience of forced mothers: rejection and discrimination

Community response to forced mothers: some examples

Acan was nine years old in 1994 when she was abducted by the LRA. From her home area in Patongo (in the present day Agago district), the LRA walked her across valleys, woodlands and forests, until she could no longer guess where they were. The LRA assigned her to a rebel fighter as a forced wife. Everyday Acan longed to return home, but feared the repercussions. She bore two children with the fighter, before she had

the opportunity to escape in 2004, during heavy fighting between the state army and the LRA. Upon rescue, she and her children were taken to the World Vision Centre for Formerly Abducted Children (WVCFAC) for counselling and rehabilitation. She lived at the centre for about eight months, during which time her parents were contacted and informed of the impending reintegration of their daughter and her children back into the community where they lived in an IDP camp. According to Acan, her mother always asked her who the fathers of the children were, and what she planned to do with *them*. When her father visited Acan at the WVCFAC, he shook hands with Acan, but declined to touch her children. He made it clear, from the first day he saw his daughter, that he was ready to accommodate Acan in their home, but asked the WVCFAC if it was possible to reintegrate her children elsewhere. The rehabilitation centre's policy, however, was to reintegrate all child mothers and their children with the parents or close kin of the forced mother. On the day of reintegration, Acan's parents had invited close kin and neighbours to witness the ceremony. Acan reported there were many people, including her former schoolmates, who had come to see her, her children and how her parents interacted with World Vision counsellors who had brought her to the camp.

However, after the reintegration ceremony, life was not easy. Her neighbours often referred to her as the mother of rebel's children, and a killer. She was frequently told that her presence in the camp put the others at risk, as the LRA could attack in an attempt to regain control of Acan and her children. As a result, Acan lived in fear of re-abduction and the discrimination of her children. Acan's parents tried to send her away at one point, because they did

not want to live with the rebel's children. When Acan reported this issue to a (local) Patongo youth counsellor, her parents were counselled, and their attitude changed slightly. However, Acan's parents frequently reverted to old attitudes whenever they were upset or angry. Her kin and parent's attitude forced Acan and her children to leave their home community, and eventually they settled in Gulu town. Acan said that prior to her leaving their home, her father would take any opportunity to punish her children. Her parents and neighbours continuously told her to take the children back to their father in the bush.

'Life become so unbearable when I lived with my people. My older son (five years old) always came back from school, often after only an hour, because other children would attack him, or say he is a son of Kony the rebel and killer of Acholi people.'

Another forced mother, *Aciro*, was abducted in 2000 on her way to collect firewood.

'I was forced to kill and remove the heart of a woman who had tried to escape. I was also forced to have sex with an LRA fighter. By the time I escaped, I had three children.'

Her parents had refused to host her to return to her home in Palenga, arguing that they might be attacked by the LRA if they discovered an escaped wife there. She went to Gulu town where she rented a hut for her family. She invested the reintegration package funds from WVCFAC in stock she could sell: salt, matchboxes and cigarettes. During an interview, she disclosed that she could not go to the LRA fighter's home as she mostly felt hatred for her captors, and did not know if she would be welcomed by her captors' kin. In addition, she feared that

the fighters would be checking regularly if she had gone to live with their kin, and would subsequently force her back to the bush. In a follow up interview she had, by then, become a sex worker based in Gulu town. *Aciro* believed her small-scale business failed as a direct result of community members' reluctance to purchase goods from forced mothers. In many testimonies by forced mothers, they spoke of how some LRA child escapees (mostly women and children) were killed by angry local populations as they were trying to find their way back to their homesteads. They were viewed as LRA fighters, or fighters' kin, and they were treated as such (*Matsiko, 2006; Matsiko & Harera, 2007*).

Ajok reported that part of her reason for wanting to return to the LRA was that her own kin had not accepted her child, and as a result, he faced severe discrimination in the camps. Other challenges included: the poverty at home; the squalid conditions of the IDP camps, and the continuous fear that they exposed the communities where they lived to impending attacks by the LRA. Children born in captivity often experienced hatred in these communities, as they were viewed as relatives, beneficiaries and close kin of the enemy.

Lamwaka escaped in 2004 after 15 years in captivity. By then, she had had four children fathered by an LRA commander. On reaching her parents' home in Padibe village, she found both parents had died long before. All of her surviving relatives, as well as other members of the community, chased her away. *Lamwaka* went to the nearby forest, strangled all four of her children, and then hung herself.

Children born in captivity

In one Pentecostal church, where many forced wives and their children attend, the

pastor frequently prays for the children born in captivity. While praying, he laid hands on them, in order to chase away the spirit of rejection and hopelessness. He told the author that these children have confronted discrimination within their communities to extremes that some adults have not.

One key informant at a rehabilitation centre said; *'it was easy to identify children who were born in captivity and have gone through enormous difficulties. For example, they like to play with toy guns, fighting each other and any time they hear the sound of an aircraft, they run to hide or are on high alert, fearing that the state soldiers have come to attack them. Their mothers do nothing to restrain their behaviour'*.

Within the communities, parents frequently warn their children about the dangers of engaging with forced mothers and their children. The idea that ex-combatants have, or can easily be, possessed by *cen* (evil spirits) was commonly evoked in school children's descriptions of women and children associated with armed conflict. As a result, in primary schools where children born during captivity attended, they were viewed as dangerous, as if contaminated by the atrocities of their parents and treated as if other children could contract *cen* from them. In one classroom, where the author conducted interviews, two children born in captivity were isolated and no other children would sit close to them. The two children sat alone on a desk, while some of their classmates sat on the floor for fear of contagion.

Resilience

In general, perhaps due to their resilience and innovative coping, the female ex-combatants who had relocated to the Gulu municipality strived to support their family. Five forced mothers who were interviewed brewed and sold alcohol, and six indicated

having tried selling items like salt, sugar and cigarettes with the money they were given at WVCFAC, with varying success. Maelend (2011) and McKay et al. (2011), however, noted that the brewing and selling alcohol, while appearing to be a good income generating activity, exposed children to multiple violations and abuse.

Discussion: challenges in rehabilitation and reintegration of forced mothers and their children

The anecdotal evidence presented here suggests that two core factors hindering reintegration for forced mothers and their children were their kinship (real or imagined) with the LRA fighters, and perceived possession by *cen*. This would, therefore, suggest that community oriented programmes are needed to alleviate forced mothers' suffering, and bring about reconciliation. However, this target population presents a complex challenge to stakeholders focusing on their wellbeing and reintegration within their communities. As a result of these complexities, and given that evidence suggest forced mothers' resilience and innovative coping, sustainable reintegration processes should involve implementation of participatory approaches with forced mothers and communities in northern Uganda. These approaches would define their core problems and develop appropriate interventions and methods of integration. Skills acquisition, facilitating small-scale trade, provision of education for the children and increasing general acceptance in the community are some of the proven ways to promote successful reintegration.

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¹ Within these institutions, researchers would seek permission from the centre coordinators prior to approaching any clients for interviews. I sought informed verbal consent from forced mothers attending vocational institutions prior to discussing with them their experiences of reintegration and resettlement. Forced mothers were free to leave out any aspects of their lives they did not want to share with the public. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the respondents. Studies elsewhere, for example, about women exposed to sexualised violence in Rwanda, report personal humiliation and loss of identity, as well as loss of hope about the future, due loss of virginity and therefore lacking suitability for marriage (Mukamana & Brysiewicz, 2008). Mollica & Son (1989) reported that women experience not only a loss of control over their body, but also a loss of control in all areas of their lives as the violation results in a shattering of beliefs regarding invulnerability, personal safety, and a fair social world. Physical effects, if women survive, may include rectal and vaginal tearing, bruising, and bleeding, throat agitation, and broken bones (Tompkins, 1995). Secondary injuries can include unwanted pregnancy, gynaecological illnesses, psychosomatic disorders, contraction of sexually transmitted diseases (e.g., HIV), and disturbances in hormonal systems, and reproductive health (Joachim, 2004). Any of these changes

are traumatic, cause long lasting health problems, and many women die from injuries, unsafe self-induced abortions, maternal mortality, and suicide (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2003). Studies elsewhere have also documented differential treatment of forced mothers during rehabilitation. For example, in Sierra Leone, many girls who had been combatants could not pass the official “Weapons test” where a child turns in a weapon after demonstrating her knowledge of how to disassemble and reassemble it, in order to enter the DDR process. Only an estimated 4% DDR participation rate was registered for girls compared to an estimated 18% for boy soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

² Noah’s Ark was an emergency institution that had been founded with the objective of providing shelter for night commuters during the peak of the insurgency in 2004. However, post conflict, their objectives changed to offering vocational training to forced mothers.

³ These are primarily Pentecostal churches, including Watoto church, Deliverance and Life Line Ministries churches.

⁴ *The Sunday Vision*, 18 September 2011:8

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International Conference: Children and Youth Affected by Armed Conflict: Where to go from here?

Kampala, 25 – 27th September 2013

Following a successful conference in Brussels in 2009, the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations and War Child Holland will now organise a new conference on rehabilitation and reintegration processes for children and youth affected by war and armed conflict. Reflecting on “the way forward”, this conference will address gaps in knowledge and information sharing from diverse disciplinary approaches, such as clinical psychology, social work, transitional justice, human rights, pedagogical sciences, education, global public health, and international advocacy. This multidisciplinary approach will maximise learning and help participants to identify ways forward in their own discipline. Moreover, interaction between researchers, practitioners, organisations and policy makers might broaden perspectives and collaboration possibilities.

During the conference, a set of recommendations for policy makers, practitioners and researchers will be formulated to impact policies related to rehabilitation and reintegration processes of children affected by armed conflict. This process will begin in the months prior to the event, and culminate in a finalised text of recommendations at the conclusion of the conference, following input from participants.

Conference website: www.kampala2013.ugent.be