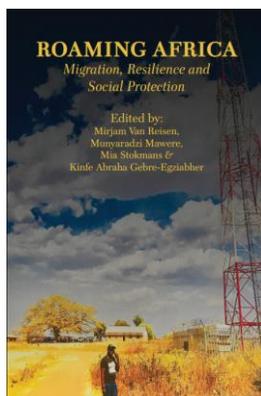


Life after the Lord's Resistance Army: Support for Formerly Abducted Girls in Northern Uganda

Primrose Nakazibwe & Mirjam Van Reisen

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Table of Contents

Preface by Zaminah Malole	ii
Acknowledgement	vii
A Word on the Review Process	viii
Acronyms	ix
Part I. Theoretical Perspectives	1
Chapter 1: Roaming Africa: A Social Analysis of Migration and Resilience	3
<i>By Mirjam Van Reizen, Mia Stokmans, Munyaradzi Mawere & Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabber</i>	
Chapter 2: All or Nothing: The Costs of Migration from the Horn of Africa – Evidence from Ethiopia	37
<i>By Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabber</i>	
Chapter 3: Why do Foreign Solutions not Work in Africa? Recognising Alternate Epistemologies	55
<i>By Gertjan Van Stam</i>	
Part II. Living Borders	83
Chapter 4: Continuation of Care across Borders: Providing Health Care for People on the Move in East Africa	85
<i>By Dorothy Muroki, Boniface Kitungulu & Leanne Kamau</i>	
Chapter 5: Mobility as a Social Process: Conflict Management in the Border Areas of Afar Region	109
<i>By Abdelab Alifnur & Mirjam Van Reizen</i>	
Part III. New Perspectives in Migration	141
Chapter 6: Out of the Frying Pan into the Fire: Are Climate Disasters Fuelling Human Trafficking in Kenya?	143
<i>By Radoslaw Malinowski & Mario Schulze</i>	
Chapter 7: Standing in Two Worlds: Mobility and the Connectivity of Diaspora Communities	171
<i>By Antony Otieno Ong'ayo</i>	

Chapter 8: ‘Europe is not Worth Dying For’: The Dilemma facing Somalis in Europe	203
<i>By Melissa Phillips & Mingo Heiduk</i>	
Chapter 9: Countering Radicalisation in Communities: The Case of Pumwani, Nairobi	225
<i>By Reginald Nalugala</i>	
Part IV. Livelihoods	253
Chapter 10: Moving on to Make a Living: The Secondary Migration of Eritrean Refugees in Tigray, Ethiopia	255
<i>By Bereket Godifay Kabsay</i>	
Chapter 11: Inhospitable Realities: Refugees’ Livelihoods in Hitsats, Ethiopia	283
<i>By Kristina Melicherová</i>	
Chapter 12: Young and On their Own: The Protection of Eritrean Refugee Children in Tigray, Ethiopia	315
<i>By Tekie Gebreyesus & Rick Schoenmaeckers</i>	
Part V. The Challenges of Return Migration.....	345
Chapter 13: Home, but not Home: Reintegration of Ethiopian Women Returning from the Arabian Gulf	347
<i>By Beza L. Nisrane</i>	
Chapter 14: Shattered Dreams: Life after Deportation for Ethiopian Returnees from Saudi Arabia	377
<i>By Shishay Tadesse Abay</i>	
Chapter 15: Life after the Lord’s Resistance Army: Support for Formerly Abducted Girls in Northern Uganda	407
<i>By Primrose Nakaajjwe & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	

Part VI. Social Protection	433
Chapter 16: Is Trauma Counselling the Missing Link? Enhancing Socio-Economic Resilience among Post-war IDPs in Northern Uganda	435
<i>By Mirjam Van Reisen, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Zaminah Malole & Bertha Vallejo</i>	
Chapter 17: Roaming Lifestyles: Designing Social Protection for the Pastoralist Afar in Ethiopia.....	459
<i>By Zeremariam Fre & Naomi Dixon</i>	
Chapter 18: Where is your Brother? Religious Leaders in Eritrea Offer a Counter Narrative to Totalitarianism.....	483
<i>By Makeda Saba</i>	
 Part VII. Defining Responsibilities at the National Level.....	 519
Chapter 19: Peace, but no Progress: Eritrea, an Unconstitutional State.....	521
<i>By Bereket Selassie & Mirjam Van Reisen</i>	
Chapter 20: Moving Through the Policy Window: Women in Constitution Making in Kenya.....	557
<i>By Stella Maranga</i>	
Chapter 21: Where are the Youth? The Missing Agenda in Somalia's Constitution.....	577
<i>By Istar Ahmed</i>	
About the Authors	601

Chapter 15

Life after the Lord's Resistance Army: Support for Formerly Abducted Girls in Northern Uganda

Primrose Nakazibwe & Mirjam Van Reisen

Introduction

When the guns were finally silenced in Northern Uganda, many people had to live with the after-effects of war in their daily life.¹ The armed conflict in Northern Uganda had lasted 20 years. It was declared officially over in January 2007 by the government. The conflict between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the National Resistance Movement, the ruling political party in Uganda had been extremely violent and left deep scars.

When girls abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda realised their dream of returning home, the reality was not what they expected. Often with children fathered by the rebels, they found themselves outcast and ill prepared for life. These girls are deeply traumatised as a result of the abuse and sexual violence experienced in captivity, which is compounded by the discrimination experienced on return. The government's rehabilitation programme needs to address these issues by reaching out to these girls with psycho-social support and mental health services, as well as improving their livelihoods by securing access to land and helping them develop the skills they need to survive.

¹ This chapter presents some of the findings of a study titled *Cost Benefit Analysis of Cash Transfer Programs and Post Trauma Services for Empowerment of Women in North Uganda (EWP-U)*, which was carried out from 2015 to 2019 (Van Reisen, Nakazibwe, Stokmans, Vallejo & Kidane, 2018). The study was conducted by a consortium of institutions: Tilburg University, Mbarara University of Science and Technology, Makerere University and Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE). We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Netherlands Science Organisation (NWO).

The civil war in Northern Uganda started in 1986 when the National Resistance Army, later renamed the National Resistance Movement, took power in Uganda and the LRA decided to fight the new government. The LRA began as an evolution of the Holy Spirit Movement led by Alice Lakwena. When Lakwena was exiled, Joseph Kony took over. However, with the change of leadership, the rebel group lost regional support, which forced Kony to engage in self-preservation, including stealing supplies and abducting children to fill his ranks. The rebels, thus, embarked on a campaign of terror, which included child abduction, mutilation, murder and general destruction. The conflict was concentrated in the Lango and Acholi ethnic sub-regions of Northern Uganda, including Kitgum District.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of the former abductees ten years after the end of the war in the context of the rehabilitation effort by the Government of Uganda in the north. In 2015, when this study was undertaken, the support provided by the Government in Northern Uganda was focused on social protection programmes which offered cash or in-kind livelihood support to the members of impoverished communities. The objective of the social protection programmes was to help the region regain its resilience. But has this objective been attained in the context of the severe trauma experienced by the population in Northern Uganda?

This study investigates the trauma suffered by the girls abducted by the LRA in Northern Uganda and how they are coping now as young women with the traumatic events that happened and how they have been able to reintegrate back into their communities and participate in social protection programmes initiated by the government. The main research question is: *How has the trauma experienced by the girls formerly abducted by the LRA affected their reintegration as young women returning to their original communities, including their ability to access government social protection programmes?* This research question is approached through the lens of the feelings as information theory (Schwarz, 2010). This theory holds that feelings present themselves as information. Therefore, in populations with high trauma, it can be expected that the resulting negative feelings affect the impact of social

protection programmes. The hypothesis of the study was that the trauma, left unaddressed, would dampen the results of the efforts of rehabilitation through the social protection programmes. This chapter provides a qualitative assessment of the study that was carried out in Kitgum, located in the far north of Uganda, bordering South Sudan.

War trauma in Northern Uganda

Many people in Northern Uganda, including women and children, were left to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the atrocities committed by the LRA and the National Resistance Movement. The abduction of children by the rebels left many severely traumatised, and their return home did not erase the horrific experiences. When they returned, they found themselves in a wider community that had also experienced a lot of trauma due to the atrocities committed by the rebels. They had to deal with their personal trauma as well as the collective trauma suffered by their community. The civil war in Northern Uganda left the whole region devastated by traumatic experiences, leaving citizens to handle their feelings on their own after the war ended (Logan, 2016). Previous studies conducted in Uganda have indicated that many survivors of the war still suffer the effects of the war (Ovuga, 2005; Ovuga, Oyok & Moro, 2008; Roberts Ocaka, Browne, Oyok & Sondorp, 2009). Many of those diagnosed with mental health problems suffer from depression, alcohol abuse, anxiety and suicidal tendencies, which are all signs of untreated trauma (Ovuga, 2005).

War and political conflict are gendered phenomena that affect men and women differently. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (Ward, 2005), there is a growing body of data that brings to light the sexual violence and torture of civilian women and girls during periods of armed conflict over the last decade. Women and girls in Northern Uganda experienced all the forms of atrocity suffered by women and girls in conflict situations. This chapter, therefore, focuses on the trauma experienced by women and girls, notwithstanding the reality that men

and boys were also severely traumatised by the experiences described in this chapter.

Social protection programmes

Social protection is at the heart of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals of the Global Agenda 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063 (Guloba, Ssewanyana & Birabwa, 2017). African countries have taken on this agenda by incorporating social protection policies and programmes into their plans of action. Uganda has embraced this call of action at different times, as needed and as financial resources have allowed. After the end of the war, the Government of Uganda rolled out many social protection programmes that specifically targeted war affected districts, alongside the implementation of national programmes aimed at poverty eradication and the modernisation of agriculture.

Some of the social protection programmes that have been put in place and implemented by the Government of Uganda are the National Social Security Fund, National Pensions Scheme, Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, Orphans and Vulnerable Children grant, Universal Primary Education, Universal Secondary Education, Universal Health Services, cash for work schemes, Community Driven Development Programme, Agricultural Livelihood Recovery Programme, Karamoja Livelihood Improvement Programme, and Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE), under which there is the Senior Citizen Grant and Vulnerable Family Grant. Much of the interventions on trauma were carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) with limited capacity and small coverage. This chapter looks at the experiences of formerly abducted girls in accessing these programmes after they returned home.

Theoretical framework: Feelings as information

The discussion of trauma in this chapter draws on the theory of 'feelings as information' to explain the impact of trauma on an individual's decisions and life. Schwarz (2010) understands human

thinking as informed by a variety of subjective experiences, including moods and emotions, metacognitive feelings and bodily sensations. This theory explains that mood affects the judgement of individuals and they respond and make decisions differently depending on their mood. Individuals in a happy mood are more likely to report higher life satisfaction than those who are sad (Bower, 1981). The theory assumes that people attend to their feelings as a source of information, with different types of feelings providing different types of information and, hence, different reactions (Schwarz, 2010).

People suffering PTSD tend to have sad moods resulting from painful experiences in their life. The definition of PTSD, as given by Ovuga and Larroque (2012, p. 183) – “a psychiatric condition, which develops after a person experiences, witnesses, is confronted with or hears about emotionally stressful and painful experiences beyond what a human being can bear” – offers insights into the impact of PTSD on the emotions and feelings of the victims.

An individual’s feelings may result in different emotional expressions. Emotions exist as signals to underlying appraisal patterns (Schwarz, 2010). People traumatised by war tend to develop self-blame, guilt, and loss of self-confidence and self-esteem (Ovuga & Larroque, 2012). This leads to emotional numbness, which often accompanies the traumatic experience of people with PTSD, which causes severe loss of control over personal routines and dignity, with a pervasive loss of sense of the future with the victim living day-by-day (Herman, 1997; Ovuga & Larroque, 2012). This leads to sad moods resulting in low life satisfaction, which impacts negatively on their self-drive to change the circumstances of their lives after the war. Thus, for people suffering from PTSD, managing their traumatic experiences may be important to restoring their emotional wellbeing and enabling them to reintegrate into their community.

The experiences that lead people to suffer from PTSD cause a sense of helplessness in the affected individuals, as a result of fear and horror, which impact negatively on their mood. Hence, people suffering from PTSD experience negative feelings, which negatively

affects the information they hold about themselves. Ovuga and Larroque, (2012: p. 184) noted that “victims develop selfblame, guilt feelings, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem. Emotional numbness that accompanies the traumatic experience causes severe loss of control over personal routines and dignity with a pervasive loss of sense of the future”. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) can help explain how negative emotions leading to negative information may lead to negative behaviour towards one-self and towards the community (through perceived negative attitudes). Perceived negative social norms towards the highly traumatised group may further impact on behaviour (Chapter 1, *Roaming Africa: A Social Analysis of Migration and Resilience*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Mia Stokmans, Munyaradzi Mawere & Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabher). The expectation is that people suffering from a high level of PTSD may, therefore, not fully benefit from opportunities, as the negative feelings dominate, not allowing them to see or grasp the opportunities.

In this study, the phrase ‘room to manoeuvre’ is used to imply the interplay between actions and competences, which is agency (Simonton & Montenach, 2013; Samman & Santos, 2009). The World Bank defines agency as the “the ability to make decisions about one’s own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution, or fear” (World Bank, 2014, p. 3). This definition sees agency as: “women’s access to and control over resources; freedom of movement; freedom from the risk of violence; decision-making over family formation; and having a voice in society and influencing policy” (World Bank, 2014, p. 2). The World Bank’s definition is based on the assumption that agency is something someone can receive from somewhere else or can be ‘given’ by those in authority (Nakazibwe, 2017). However, agency is more than observable actions. Although it tends to be operationalised as decision making, it can also take a number of other forms (Kabeer, 1999). Thus, this study adopts the definition of Kabeer (1999, p. 438), who defines agency as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them”. Kabeer explains that agency takes many forms, including: “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion

and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis and it can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectives” (1999, p. 438). Meyers (2002) adds that agency is an innate skill that helps an individual to exercise her own will and that women can discover themselves through their ‘agentic skills’. Therefore, the understanding and application of agency in this study identifies formerly abducted women as actors who pursue conscious and unconscious goals to determine their life through interpretative and narrative frameworks that help them make sense of their world and how they relate to it after returning home.

This study further uses the concept of ‘intersectionality’. In this chapter, this is defined as “the interaction between gender, race and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008, p. 68). Intersectionality enables differentiation between women and sheds light on how age, marital status, ethnicity, physical and mental health and other variables impact on the participation of people and to help understand how people in different circumstances may use their room to manoeuvre.

Methodology

This study is part of a mixed method research measuring the effect of support programmes on social-economic resilience. The research is conducted in a real-life natural setting. The purpose of the qualitative research was to help interpret a quantitative survey carried out among 470 women (Chapter 16, *Is Trauma Counselling the Missing Link? Enhancing Socio-Economic Resilience among Post-war IDPs in Northern Uganda*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Zaminah Malole & Bertha Vallejo). In the survey it was found that the women receiving psycho-social support scored significantly higher than women receiving support in the form of social protection on social-economic resilience. The women receiving both psycho-social support and social protection scored significantly higher than all groups, while the score of control group did not change. These

results point to the importance of addressing post-traumatic stress as part of building social-economic resilience. In this chapter we investigate why unaddressed trauma negatively affects social-economic resilience, even in the context of attempts aiming to regain resilience through social protection. It aims to describe in-depth a wide range of varied experiences, allowing the different lived experiences of participants to be acknowledged. In this way it follows the notion that quantitative findings are the result of different real individual experiences.

The chapter is based on the qualitative analysis of themes that emerged from the stories shared by the women who participated in the study. The findings presented in this chapter were from interviews conducted in July 2015 in Kitgum District. Kitgum was one of the districts worst affected by the conflict, due to its location on the border with South Sudan, which was a base for the LRA. The participants were purposively selected from the list of girls who had been supported by the Kitgum Women Peace Initiative (KIWEPI) after the end of the war. KIWEPI is a local NGO based in Kitgum, providing mental health services to the women who returned from the war and giving them practical support such as training or livelihood support.

The 10 participants selected for the interviews were all formerly abducted and were at the time residing in Kitgum District. A number of the women interviewed were young girls at the time of their abduction. The study also included two key informants: the director of KIWEPI and the Kitgum District Development Officer. These key informants shared their expertise, knowledge and views on the local context, changes over time, and their experiences with the women. The office of KIWEPI selected the participants for this study. The study used interviews as a data collection method with an interview guide to facilitate the interviews. The interviews took the shape of story-telling. In order to avoid re-traumatisation, it was left to the respondent to decide what experiences they wished to share with the interviewers.

The interviews were conducted at KIWEPI by a senior team of experienced researchers in the context of investigating events with severe violence. The researchers had been introduced to the organisation by Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), a Uganda-based NGO specialising in providing support to severely traumatised women and with a long track-record of working in Northern Uganda. The interviews were carried out by a team of trained researchers, including an expert on trauma from Isis-WICCE. Through KIWEPI the interviewers built the trust of the women and were able to hold in-depth interviews. These interviews caused deep distress, but it was necessary to conduct them to understand some of the current causes of impediments to social-economic rehabilitation in the region. Although some of the extracts of the interviews may sound distressing and unreal, the KIWEPI-team of professionals confirmed the veracity of the stories and confirmed that there are many stories of similar situations.

The research-team was headed by a team leader who asked the questions during the interviews, while the rest of the team took notes. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in local language and translated to English. All the women interviewed for this study were aged between 23 and 35 years at the time of the interview. They all had a child born to the rebels or had lost a child born to a rebel. The names used are not the real names of the women, for purposes of confidentiality, but are known to the researchers.

The situation in Kitgum is important for understanding the social dynamics in Northern Uganda. The stories contained in the interviews are testimony to the LRA's cruel treatment of very young children, snatched from their parents and communities. This cruel war had an impact on Northern Uganda at large with different dynamics occurring in different places as a result of it.

Choice of research site

Interviews held in other locations revealed different traumatising experiences affecting people and communities at large. To give some examples. In Barlonyo people narrated the severe traumatisation as a result of the mass-attack and massacre by the LRA in 2004. The attack claimed the lives of 124 people; although the real number is still disputed by community members, some suggesting that it was more than 300 people. It also left hundreds injured (Site visit, Barlonyo, 26 January 2017 and 21 February 2017) In Amuria, women told of the severe hardship of their communities, who during the war were held for protection in detention centres guarded by the government troops. Lack of food and water forced the women into prostitution resulting in widespread HIV & AIDS among the community (Focus group discussion, 9 July 2015). In other locations, such as in Kaberamaido and Bukedea, women also explained the hardship they faced due to HIV & AIDS, leading to further deprivation and poverty, which they had overcome by organising themselves to give psycho-social support and start a small credit system. In Lira, the researchers were able to speak to young men, who were engaged as child-soldiers during the war, and who equally had a hard time re-engaging with their communities, who regarded them with much mistrust and misgiving (Site visit, Lira, 26 January 2017). In regions such as Katakwi, respondents spoke of the fear of attacks by neighbouring communities and cattle-raids, due to the general lawlessness in the region during the war (Focus group discussion, 9 July 2015).

This chapter focuses on the in-depth qualitative interviews held in Kitgum as a background to understanding the intensity of the post-war trauma experienced for returnees from the LRA.

Abduction of children forced to live with the rebels

This section provides a brief narration of some of the stories of formerly abducted girls and women, explaining their ordeal during the time of their abduction and their stay with the rebels. These narrations

serve to provide understanding of the experiences in Northern Uganda, particularly in Kitgum.

Abwoli (32 years)

My name is Abwoli, and I come from Matiri Lagor Village, Kitgum District. I was 11 years old when I was abducted along with three other girls. We were going to town from home when all of a sudden, we realised strange movements in the nearby bush. The rebels were hiding in the trees watching us as we walked. As we proceeded one of the soldiers jumped down with a gun and forced us off the road and we entered the bush where we met hundreds of other soldiers. They slapped us and undressed us and touched us everywhere. Then we had to walk for one week without rest to Sudan. We were forced to carry things beyond our capacity. We were told if we failed to carry our load, they would cut off our breasts. There was no drinking water, we would drink urine; the soldiers would tell the girls to pee and they would drink the urine as there was no water. The girls would try to touch the soil and get water out of the soil. They gave me to an old man without teeth from Gulu; he told me he would look after me as a kid before he turned me into his fourth wife. He forced me to have sex with him in return for food and clothes. I stayed back in the barracks as a sex slave. After about 8–10 months, I realised that I was pregnant. I was left in the hands of my co-wives, who mistreated me almost to death. They did not love me, they would sometimes cook and not give me food. I would steal food [cries]. My husband returned when I was about to give birth and I was taken to Juba for an operation on a stretcher. Then the baby came. (Abwoli, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015)

This interview speaks to the deep distress and fear of very young girls, suddenly cut off from their families, sexually violated and raped, and living in fearful circumstances without any support. There was a deep sense of powerlessness and hopelessness, while the situation appeared completely out of their control.

Amoti (23 years)

My name is Amoti, I came from Lamo district. I was I was 13 years old studying P5 when I was abducted along with my two sisters and three other girls on our way back from school. [Breaks down and cries for about two minutes. She is carrying a

baby whom she keeps shaking as she cries]. Someone told us in class that the place was not safe, the teachers did not release us, thinking the fights would be far away until later in the evening when we were released to go home. On the way, as we ran home, we were stopped by a young boy who later appeared to be with the rebels. The young boy was used by the other seven rebels to distract us while the rest of seven rebels were hiding around the same place. The seven rebels came out and arrested us as we spoke to the young boy and took us to a cassava plantation. In the cassava plantation, we found many other rebels who were cooking as they had been looting. On arrival in the plantation, we were divided into the youngest and the older ones. The very young ones were sent back home. My youngest sister was sent back home with our books. However, my other sister and I were separated that day and until now I have never seen her again. We kept walking. In my group, there was a commander who had kids and I was allocated to carry the children. We kept on rotating around the villages of Gulu for about nine months. Most of the time there was nothing to eat, you just ate raw sweet potatoes. (Amoti, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015)

This was another very emotional interview. The loss of her sisters caused a lot of distress, especially not knowing where they were. From the interview it seemed that the respondent felt guilty in not protecting the other girls, despite her young age at the time of the abduction. Being among the eldest she felt responsible for the safety of the others and suffered a lot of pain from the sense that she had failed them. This also caused a lot of distress in returning, knowing that she had been able to escape, but unable to return her siblings and friends safely. The feeling was that she was still hoping to find them and that they were very present in her current life. Not knowing whether or not they were alive made the loss even more difficult to bear and she had not been able to close the loss.

Akiki (25 years)

In September 2003, I was abducted at night with my sister and brothers by the rebels. They tied me to the others and also my brother was tied with the boys. It was at 23:00 at night. We walked for a long time and the soldiers cooked, but we were not allowed to eat. We started walking at 6:00 am without stopping until 18:00 pm. We rested one hour, cooked food. This time they gave us something to eat, then

we started walking again. Every day was like that, resting only one hour in the evening, walking towards Soroti. We walked for four days until we were in Soroti. After several lootings and abductions, finally we moved to Sudan. They started raiding villages and adding more people to the group. We were heading to where Kony was. When they got someone from 10 to 18 they would not kill you because you could carry things. I was trained to become a child soldier and I was trained to kill. I was among the groups of rebels that attacked and looted many villages. I spent seven years in the bush. (Akiki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015)

This interview speaks to the inability of the abducted children to determine their actions. Trained as a child-soldier, this girl – along many other girls and boys – committed war crimes before escaping and returning to the community. The young woman appeared numb and emotionless. It was explained by the KIWEPI team that being both victim and perpetrator makes it much harder to be accepted back into the community on return. From the interview, it was clear that the trauma resulting from what had happened to her and what she had done was alive. Feelings of guilt, remorse and confusion were part of the painful and honest narration of her story.

Dehumanisation and narrow escape

In order to ensure the submission of the abductees to the fighters, the children were exposed to severe inhumane treatment. The following are some of the stories the women shared.

Amoti (23 years)

As time went by, they took away my child and made me carry 8–10 chickens and jerry cans. Then there was a boy who befriended me, because I was hurting a lot. He told me that we would escape together [crying]. One day we asked another rebel whether the barracks were far away. We were told, “You are far”. However, we smelt a cigarette, we knew soldiers were around. I was carrying the chickens and the jerry cans and I had to carry them so careful that they would not make noise. We decided to escape on that day. We took a different direction from the other rebels. On our way we heard a gunshot and realised that the soldiers had ambushed the rebels. We were lucky, as this meant that the rebels would not pursue us. The soldiers

kept shooting and shooting until the rebels started dispersing. The government soldiers threw a bomb, and the soldiers came to see who had died. I hid in the hole that the bomb had made. I was lying down when the soldiers came and I put my hand up. That is how I escaped from the rebels after a painful experience. I lost my sister, and all hope of finding her has vanished. (Amoti, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015)

This young woman suffered deeply from the abduction, the loss of her sister, the loss of the child she gave birth to, and the treatment she experienced in the bush. Her narration centred on the long walks at night, during which she was forced to carry the chickens and jerry cans without making any noise. On these walks, she must have had a deep fear for her life. Any noise could trigger a counter-attack. The soldiers were ruthless in instilling fear in the porters. Today, this sense of fear seemed to override all other feelings and she went into great detail in explaining how she made sure not to trigger any noise during the dangerous trek of the militia.

Life in the rebel camps was full of life-threatening events, which happened almost every day, and many abductees reported that it was difficult to imagine that one would live to see the following day. They were forced to kill to survive, becoming used to death. Atwoki explained:

When we were still with the rebels, we were given drugs to smoke, especially on days when horrible incidents happened. I remember the day one of the leading commanders was killed, we were given drugs to smoke and while I was very high on drugs, I killed my own cousin. Up to today, I still feel responsible for the death of my cousin and every time I think about it, it brings me a lot of pain [cries]. (Atwoki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015)

Women and girls were raped and later divided among soldiers for wives, often experiencing their first pregnancy in very difficult circumstances at a very young age. Health complications from rape and deliveries not attended by skilled medical personnel left many girls and women with complications, such as fistula, affecting their lives thereafter. One of the women interviewed complained “I have

issues with my breast – it is bleeding. I have cysts on my back and on my breast – maybe from the heavy carrying” (Abwoli, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015).

Atwoki shared the following story:

I was 12 when I was abducted. One of the worst memories that I experienced when I had just been abducted was the slaughtering of a pregnant woman as a sign that if any one of us attempted to escape, we would go through the same treatment. They continued to kill women in the same way during the raids. When the rebels saw a pregnant woman they would open up the woman’s womb and if found that she was pregnant with a boy it was stoned and if a girl they put a stick in her private parts. (Atwoki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, July 2015)

Killing or dishonouring the new life that pregnant women carry is a way to dehumanise captives, forcing them into submission, instilling fear and removing their humanity, particularly hope for a future (Van Reisen, 2014). The level of fear instilled in the children was extreme and it would have prevented many from escaping. Yet, despite this, those we interviewed, and others, found the courage to make use of an unexpected moment escape to their community.

Abwori (32 years)

In 2001, when my child was eight months, I was able to escape [from the rebels]. Whenever we would go to fetch water we would talk about the escape, choosing the group members carefully so that they would not disappoint. Then one day at nine at night we all escaped. There were five girls with children, one who was pregnant and four without a child. They [the rebels] realised that we had escaped and started following us. There was shooting behind us. We ended up in Sudan barracks, and then the Arab soldiers brought a van that drove us to a house that looked like a store. They later shipped us to Khartoum and we were four months in Khartoum. We were locked up in a place; we would just move out to eat and go back inside. (Abwori, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015)

While the girls longed for an escape and used all their imagination and bravery to succeed in fleeing their daunting circumstance, the escapes were themselves also severely traumatising events. The stories of how

they escaped demonstrate that despite ill health and carrying the children fathered by the rebels, the women still urged and longed to be free in order to give their lives meaning and they engaged in courageous ways of escape. After several months or years, many girls found their way back home through their own action.

The escapes added further trauma to the already serious trauma of the abduction and captivity by the rebels. From the interviews, it was clear that the women had not recovered from these experiences. The stories were at times told in monotonous, disengaged, mechanistic voices. In other interviews the women's narrations evoked deep emotion and distress over what had occurred. These events were still triggering extremely deep emotions and negative feelings. Often these feelings were paired with a sense of having failed others and low self-esteem and self-worth. KIWEPI appeared as an important source of mental health support. The little pride they expressed was related to the steps they had taken to increase their resilience and to look after themselves. KIWEPI professionals told us that in order for them to make small steps forward, they first had to accept their situation.

The unreceptive return to the home community

Having longed to return to their lost home, escaping from the rebels was like winning the lottery for those who survived the abduction and life with the rebels. The fact that they would finally re-join their family brought these girls a lot of joy. Many girls who escaped or were rescued by the army were taken to military points designated for collection and rehabilitation, before being reunited with their families. Those who had families to go back to went straight home, while those with no place to go remained at these centres until the war ended, when they re-joined their community as homeless children.

However, when the girls returned home, they received a mixed reaction from their families and communities. The girls who were lucky enough to have parents alive received both a warm and cold reception. A warm reception came from their parents who were happy to have their children back and treated them as survivors.

However, the wider community did not receive them the same way. During their abduction, many girls were forced to kill their own relatives or friends and those who returned home after they escaped or were rescued by the government soldiers brought back ugly stories. The parents of these children were sometimes forced to send their children away to keep peace with others in the community, whose children had died at their own child's hands.

In addition, some of the girls returned with children fathered by the rebels. These children reminded parents who had lost their children of the rebels. While the abducted girls were (partially) welcome, their children were not. However, the girls did not have any alternative but to keep their children. So, the only option was to move with their children to a faraway place where they were not recognised as 'wives of the killers'. Jobless and without any support, most of these girls ended up in Kitgum Town. Many of them ended up marrying to survive in this new place. Many reported that their new husbands did not welcome their children or support them with education. One of the respondents narrated: "When I reached home, my stepmother started to abuse me and my child, calling him the 'rebels' child'. I could not stand it and had to leave home and come to Kitgum Town" (Akiki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015).

Many of the girls opted to get married because it was the only sure way they could be supported. However, some of the girls found it difficult to find a husband because of the stigma attached to being formerly abducted. One of the girls shared: "When I came from the bush I found another man, but he did not know I was from the bush and when he found out he ran away, but I was pregnant" (Atoki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015).

However, some girls found husbands who married them even after knowing that they had once been abducted. Unfortunately, many of these new husbands never accepted the children that the girls bore from the rebels and they had to either force their husbands to live with their children or send them to a relative who would take care of them. According to the Kitgum District Development Officer, these

children were now terrorising the communities in the towns, because they knew that the community did not welcome them. Furthermore, the vast majority of these children did not attend school, hence, grew up uneducated and prone to all sorts of negative behaviour. The negative feelings between the community and the children of the returnees fathered in the bush, translated into negative information about each other, exacerbating mutual hostility and negative behaviour towards each other.

Living a traumatised past

An epidemiological survey carried out in 2004 by the Ministry of Health in Uganda found rates of up to 50% for depression in the most severely conflict-affected districts (such as those in Northern Uganda), compared to 8% in districts not severely affected by war (Kinyanda, Hjelmeland & Musisi, 2004). In a cross-sectional study of 2,875 individuals in 8 districts in Northern Uganda, Pham, Vinck and Stover (2009) found that over half (56%) of the respondents and over two-thirds of those who experienced abduction met the criteria for PTSD, and that female participants were more susceptible than males.

Through the Ministry of Health, the Government of Uganda has been involved in the treatment of people diagnosed with mental-related health risks through the Butabika National Referral Hospital in Kampala. In order to enhance the mental health service delivery in the northern districts, Ugandan government institutions (the Ministry of Health, Butabika National Referral Hospital, and Makerere University Department of Psychiatry) and the Peter C. Alderman Foundation initiated a public-private partnership in which they established trauma clinics in four districts: Arua, Kitgum, Gulu and Soroti (Nakimuli-Mpungu *et al.*, 2013). The clinics were based on group counselling for those experiencing depression and post-traumatic stress. Despite the efforts by the government to ensure support for women and girls who had been abducted, many did not receive much support when they returned due to the limited time they spent in the reception centres. They were not allowed to heal first before being returned to their families and, hence, ended up taking

the trauma with them into their new life and often mixed response of those receiving them.

When the women and girls returned from rebel captivity, they were very traumatised by their abduction and life in captivity with the rebels. They had been subjected to all sorts of brutal and life-threatening treatment. The abduction in some cases took place during gunfire exchange between the rebels and government soldiers, leaving many dead. They were separated from their families, sometimes as very young children, and taken into the hands of new, strange and ruthless fighters.

Unfortunately, when they returned home, many of these girls were unable to get professional assistance to manage their trauma. The few that returned home through government assistance were only given support for a short amount of time by the government and then encouraged to go home. Some were taken through the traditional ritual of reconciliation without dealing with the trauma. One of the respondents said, “they took us home to do the rituals; step on a raw egg for reconciliation and I was accepted back in the community” (Atenyi, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015).

Another woman shared her story, as follows:

I came back in 2004 when I surrendered, we were taken to Kichua. Here, they gave us a rapid therapy before returning us to our families; I was there for one month. We were counselled to live with one another and to forgive. They announced on the radio and my uncle heard my name and came to pick me up. I was still very bitter with everyone and it's my uncle's wife that sent me to KIWEPI to receive counselling. (Amoti, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum 11 July 2015)

Another woman narrated the following:

When I returned home, I did not get much counselling. When we were rescued, I was brought to Entebbe and after taking us through amnesty arrangements, we were connected with our families. I came home with all the anger and frustration. Sometimes when I feel angry, I just want to kill someone. (Akiki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015)

NGOs have provided some of the women with further trauma management services with semi-professionals, including KIWEPI, opened to support girls affected by the war to reintegrate into the community. KIWEPI provides former child soldiers with a place to meet and share their past with people who have been through similar experiences. This ‘talking’ therapy has helped women and girls to open up and speak about what happened; even though they will never be able to erase the stories from their minds, at least they have been able to share their stories, put them in perspective and compare their own stories with those of others.² This has allowed them to re-evaluate their situation and themselves. One of the respondents noted that: “Before I got counselling, my mind was not working well, but now I am positive. I have been able to start a small business to support my family” (Akiki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 1 July 2015).

Through the psycho-social counselling a more positive feeling and mindset has been obtained. The sharing of stories helped women to understand that they were not alone, and that other women were also experiencing similar situations. This has allowed them to assess their situation more positively. Those who had received training from organisations such as KIWEPI, took up the skills they learnt and started small businesses to enable them to survive and support their children. The decision to start their own life as small entrepreneurs in order to survive was a result of the motivation they received from their fellow women, who took the step to establish themselves as independent women, despite the challenges they faced. Some of these women decided to look for help from their relatives to start something, but many of them did not receive any support. They felt that there was no way they could obtain support from the government, because many of the government programmes supported people in groups and they were unable to enrol in these groups, because of social stigma. Having overcome the negative

² Religious institutions have also played a large role in supporting girls returning from abduction, but, unfortunately, the damage is often too much for some girls to recover from with the support of priests alone.

feelings, they now looked for alternative opportunities. In this way, the women found their own way of surviving.

The social protection gap

The Government of Uganda has put in place many social protection programmes for the rehabilitation of the survivors of the war in Northern Uganda. Many of these programmes target specific categories of people, such as the elderly, youth, women and people with disabilities. One would imagine that formerly abducted women and girls would benefit from these programmes. However, generally, the severely traumatised returnee women who participated in this study were unable to access these programmes because of social stigma and discrimination by members of their community. One of the women noted that “getting amnesty is not getting peace, rather to get peace of mind is to get a piece of land and a house, where the children can be safe and go to school, and to get work” (Atenyi, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015).

The women need resources, such as land, to support themselves and have a sense of belonging, so that they are empowered to live a decent life. Unfortunately, in Uganda, the government did not look at formerly abducted women and girls as a special category requiring special attention. Many of the social protection programmes offered by the government target general categories of people such as women, youth, and people with disabilities. Women are seen as a homogenous group by such programmes. The state of their mental health is not taking into consideration. This explains why none of the 10 girls interviewed in this study had received any support from the government’s social protection programmes. One of the girls explained:

Apart from the mattress I received from Kichua, where we were taken to process our amnesty, and a false promise of corrugated iron sheets, I have never received any other support from the government. A formerly abducted girl is seen as a social outcast who cannot mix with other women, so we are always left out of government programmes. (Akiki, interview, face-to-face, Kitgum, 11 July 2015)

Many of the women interviewed in this study had decided to start their own life, without the support of social protection programmes, displaying personal resilience. Many had taken bold steps to stay away from abusive partners and relatives who did not welcome them (and their children) back and started a new life with minimal support from organisations such as KIWEPI – sometimes with nothing. With the little help provided, some of the women took personal initiatives to counsel themselves to find better alternatives to life, rather than mourning their past life experiences, and to face the challenges that emerged when they returned home.

Discussion and conclusion

This chapter presents the results of in-depth interviews conducted among ten girls abducted by the LRA who managed to escape and return to their communities, as well as two resource persons (professionals supporting the women). The interviews confirm the deep trauma that the women are still experiencing, despite the long time that has passed since these events happened. Some of the stories shared by the respondents were traumatising even for the researchers who listened to them. Some of the stories came across as very alive and present in their current situation. The mental processing of the traumatic events was not complete – and in some case had not even begun it. As a result, the participants felt that the triggers of the trauma were still present in their life. The mental trauma impacted negatively on their day-to-day life and the situation was worse for those who had physical pain from health complications like fistula.

Many formerly abducted girls who returned from their ordeals felt the loss, guilt and shame associated with their life with the rebels. The women continue to face many challenges in supporting themselves and the children fathered by the rebels. Despite their high expectations of being able to return home, they experienced a sense of abandonment by their families and communities. They were forced to live on their own, which made it difficult for them to reintegrate into the community. Many of the women interviewed were rejected by their communities when they returned, hence, they were unable to

associate with them. This discrimination does not allow women to be part of the groups formed in their communities to benefit from government programmes.

Hence, isolation partially explains why these women were unable to access government social protection programmes directed towards rehabilitation in the region. When targeting women or youth in groups, rather than as individuals, government social protection programmes often miss out on the most severely traumatised women. Thus, many of them continue to live lives on the margins of society with little hope of receiving support. This study has established that some of women may not be able to access government programmes, even though they are targeted. The women and girls suffering from severe trauma need affirmative action to reach out to them and empower them to benefit from government programmes.

In a research related to this study, it was found that women in Northern Uganda who received psycho-social support performed better in terms of social economic resilience than women who received only social protection programmes (Chapter 16, *Is Trauma Counselling the Missing Link? Enhancing Socio-Economic Resilience among Post-war IDPs in Northern Uganda*, by Mirjam Van Reisen, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Zaminah Malole & Bertha Vallejo). This chapter shows that severe traumatic events result in negative feelings about one's self and the community, resulting in a high degree of helplessness and disempowerment. Women who received psycho-social support, from organisations such as KIWEPI found that they could transform themselves with a more positive mindset, allowing them to generate opportunities, despite the considerable difficulties they faced. Those who found the support to move on with their life shared many interesting stories about how they were able to manoeuvre within the constraints of their households and with limited access to government support. Hence, the women no longer look at themselves as victims of the wars, but rather as actors in their society who desire to survive, like any other human being. The women can be recognised as agents of change, who can inspire other women who may be going through similar circumstances.

Any effort to support the women who were abducted as young girls and returned to their communities, stands to empower and strengthen them. But what this chapter shows is that the government needs to reach out to these vulnerable women through psycho-social support and mental health programmes, to prepare them for the rehabilitation process. The government can and should further help them to integrate in their communities with resources such as land and support them with specific social protection programmes. These women should also be given tailor-made courses in basic skills, as they many have missed out on basic education.

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