



Welcome home from the “bush”? A roadmap towards the collective healing of child soldiers and “rebel wives” in the Acholi sub-region, Northern Uganda

Summary

This brief advocates more effective rehabilitation interventions for former child soldiers experiencing war-related trauma for the benefit of the home, community, and the nation at large. It is based on an eight-month ethnographic research project conducted in 2018–2019 in the Acholi sub-region in Northern Uganda. In this area, more than 20,000 former child soldiers were abducted during the 20 years of war between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and government of Uganda’s armed forces. The returnees have largely been neglected by the government and humanitarian aid agencies.

A qualitative approach was adopted to further understand how children and youths involved in the war survived violent experiences, stigma and exclusion and have reintegrated and moved on after the war. The brief considers whether the reintegration process was adequate and sufficiently holistic and explores how children born in captivity and teenage mothers who gave birth during the conflict can be helped to overcome continuous psychological distress in their daily lives.

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Background

Since 1984, many children – both boys and young girls – and women have been abducted and conscripted into rebel forces by Joseph Kony’s LRA groups with the aim to overthrow President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. Since this time, around 100,000 civilians have been killed (New Vision, no date), whilst others have faced severe human right violations, in particular children ‘born from the bush’ (children born to young girls and women that were ‘gifted to commanders as wives’). The commanders distributed the young abducted girls among themselves with the idea that they would ‘produce as many children as possible’.

Some children and their mothers were rescued whilst others escaped or were released to come back home. Reintegration of these children back into regular society was challenging but worked in some cases with support of local actors and NGOs. There were significant difficulties with the process, for example: maternal families were chosen over paternal families (which is not common in the patrilineal society in Uganda) as families could not be traced; other children’s families could not be traced the District Community Development and Probation and Child Welfare Offices (DCDPCWO) and they were placed with distant family members or in rehabilitation homes so that these children would later be adopted. Cultural leaders, in the local language known as *rwodi moor* and *atekere*, also played an important role in reintegration: they provided a cleansing service for the returnees, enabling them to live again with the wider community and as such providing a vocal spiritual role in the process.

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Methodology

The research on which this brief was based was conducted through individual interviews (IDIs) with 30 returnees; narrative life story interviews with 10 returnees including 32 follow up interviews; five focus group discussions with community members (15 females, 25 male); formerly abducted persons (FAPs; 20 females, 30 male); religious leaders (two females, four males); politicians (five females, eight males); other public authorities (five females, nine males) at different levels and; traditional and grass root leaders (three females, nine male).

The team also undertook participant observation of about 25 former child soldiers of the LRA who are now adults (with five to six respondents in a group). The cases of three former LRA child mothers were followed closely for more than five months. After obtaining consent, and in a sensitive manner as to not prompt further trauma, the research team discussed experiences of war, stigmatization, poverty, daily torture, rape and sexual violence. The research was carried out in a period of eight months from June 2018 to February 2019 in three rural villages: Lukodi, Paicho and Obiya Laroo and one peri-urban area: Negri village in Northern Uganda.

Findings

Impacts of war on the children that grew up in captivity still has a wide range of physical, emotional and psychological effects. Some respondents, for example, told stories about killing(s), rape and stories about growing up without parents, being homeless and having no sense of belonging were common. Respondents reported that: *“a home should enable safety and social acceptance of the former abducted child soldier”*. The experiences from the respondents, however, showed that having a safe home base was far from guaranteed. One male respondent, now aged 26 years who after the conflict was placed with his maternal family, narrates the stigmatization he faced. At home, for example, he explained he is still called: *“Adonyi ma obedo litin luk”* literally meaning: *“A foreigner, who is a bastard”*. After few months in his new *“home”*, he recounts, he started feeling the physical, emotional and psychological effects of the stigma. He decided to leave the house and started living in the streets of Gulu Town:

“Life was unbearable because I had no place to live and not enough food to eat. I made friends with some of the children I returned with from the bush who were already living street life. Eventually, I started selling boiled eggs to meet my demands of life and the friends who go for pick pocket at night at the dancing places. Up to now, I feel I don’t have any means of living and it makes me to think of returning in bush or I could have died from the bush”.

Similar stories of ongoing suffering were expressed by female respondents, many of whom who gave birth to children of rebel leaders and as a result were now stigmatized in the wider community. A female respondent of 33 year living with her grandmother, for example, narrates her experience, which gives key insights in terms of gendered experiences: *“I’m am already a mother of three children of which two were born from the bush”*.

Key considerations and recommendations

1. Government and NGOs have systematically neglected and failed to reintegrate the marginalized group of the returnees into post-war recovery and rehabilitation efforts. To combat this neglect the Ugandan parliament should pass a constitutional law which protects



returnees through a blanket Amnesty rendered, and ensure that this policy is enforced appropriately.

2. Returnees and children born in captivity still suffer psychosocially and policymakers should invest in culturally appropriate mental health and psychosocial support services to enable the returnees to cope with everyday life. NGOs and government could, for example, set up counselling centres to provide trauma healing to support collective rehabilitation of victims of the Ugandan civil war. Counselling centres could provide (a selection of) the following services: individual and group drop-in-counselling services; psychosocial-education; mobile mental health services; and professional case management and referrals.
3. Because every former child soldier should be 'settled in mind' and 'avoid over-thinking' to have emotional flexibility, the government and international actors should also address poverty issues holistically. Following this logic, former child soldiers should be trained in basic business skills. This should include practical, technical skills like brick laying and concrete practicing; tailoring; or agribusiness through for example, the Farmer Field School (FSS) methodology.
4. Village Saving Loan Associations (VSLAs) can also play a role in poverty reduction and foster (re)integration of these vulnerable individuals within wider society. Having a steady income, the ability to save and to be part of such an important community project can also reduce psychosocial stress as it gives these returnees an important role in their community and wider society.
5. Actors who provide these services should craft a careful communication approach when interacting with child soldiers to avoid stigmatization and further trauma. To address aggression, spiritual ideas, forgiveness and avoidant coping should be taken into account to help in communication and wider trauma healing approaches.
6. Investing in these vulnerable members of Ugandan society, and treating them with dignity, is not just beneficial for the people themselves but also shrewd from an economic perspective – it allows them to contribute effectively to community and national development.

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