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Child Abuse & Neglect



When war is better than peace: The post-conflict realities of children born of wartime rape in northern Uganda



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the realities and perspectives of a sample of 60 children born of wartime rape within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and currently living in northern Uganda. These children were born to mothers who were abducted by the LRA, held captive for extended periods of time, repeatedly raped and impregnated. The paper explores the multiple challenges that these children face in the post-war period including, rejection, stigma, violence, socio-economic marginalization, and issues of identity and belonging. Participants underscored the profound violence and deprivation that they experienced while in LRA captivity. However, because of post-war marginalization, participants individually and collectively articulated that wartime was better than peacetime. Multiple systems of support are needed to ensure the rights and protection of these children and importantly, to address and reverse young people's perceptions that "war is better than peace".

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1. Introduction: sexual violence, armed conflict and intergenerational realities

Sexual violence¹ during armed conflict is one of the most recurring wartime human rights abuses. Although the issue of sexual violence during conflict was once overlooked and under-researched, it has gained increased recognition, and with good reason. Incidents of sexual violence have been documented with increasing regularity in contemporary wars, transcending countries and contexts, serving as a weapon of war to intimidate the enemy, terrorize local populations, as a form of gendered power relations, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (Alison, 2007; Weitsman, 2008). Literature on wartime sexual violence has explored key areas. One area has examined the factors contributing to wartime sexual violence, its patterns and its functions (Cohen, 2013; Cohen, Hoover Green, & Wood, 2013; Isikozlu & Millard, 2010). A second area has traced the consequences of wartime sexual violence on victims such as stigma, exclusion, decreased marriageability and economic insecurity (Denov, 2006; Mackenzie, 2010; Mukamana & Brysiewicz, 2008). Other scholarship has studied perpetrators of wartime sexual violence: their motives, psychology, and their prosecution (Bensel, 2014; Henry, 2009; Wells, 2005). Research has also examined the legal implications and recognition of sexual violence, forced marriage and forced impregnation as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (Henry, 2011; Markovic, 2007).

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¹ Sexual violence refers as any act of a sexual nature which is committed on a person under circumstances which are coercive. Sexual violence is not limited to physical invasion of the body (International Criminal Tribunal For Rwanda, 1998).

Although this varied scholarship has made significant contributions to the field and raised international awareness of the issue of sexual violence during armed conflict, key gaps in knowledge remain. Importantly, little attention has been paid to the *intergenerational effects* of wartime sexual violence – particularly the reality of children born of wartime sexual violence. In the last decade alone, it is estimated that tens of thousands of children have resulted from wartime mass rape campaigns, sexual violence, and forced pregnancy in conflicts around the globe (Carpenter, 2010). Despite the widespread nature of this phenomenon, it remains vastly understudied (Denov, 2015; Van Ee & Kleber, 2013). The scholarship that does exist has revealed that children born of war are deeply affected by their biological origins and subsequent treatment by society (Denov & Lakor, submitted). Carpenter (2010) maintains that children's status as “war babies” may foster direct and indirect forms of violence by individuals, families and communities including stigma, exclusion, abandonment, and infanticide. Other authors have noted inequities in relation to children's access to health, education, and employment (Akello, 2013; Van Ee & Kleber, 2013). Questions on the legal citizenship and ethnic identities of these children have also been raised, particularly if families and communities refuse to accept these children or acknowledge their heritage (Daniel-Wrabetz, 2005).

What is noteworthy about much of the research completed on the topic of children born of wartime sexual violence thus far is that it has been based largely on historical analyses (Mochmann, 2008; Mochmann & Lee, 2010), compilations of existing literature (Van Ee & Kleber, 2013), legal frameworks (Markovic, 2007; Qin, 2003), and accounts from mothers (Akello, 2013; Zrally, Rubin, & Mukamana, 2013). Noticeably absent from the literature are the *perspectives and voices of the children themselves*. In particular, children's views of community belonging, identity, and stigmatization in the post-conflict context, and their implications, remain largely unexplored. This paper examines the realities and perspectives of a sample of 60 children born of wartime rape within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and currently living in post-war northern Uganda.

2. War in northern Uganda: abduction, forced marriage, and children born in LRA captivity

Created under the leadership of Joseph Kony, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was established to overthrow the Ugandan government and became well-known for its atrocities against civilians. Kony formed the LRA to counter the consistent and palpable abuse, exclusion, and oppression that the Acholi experienced at the hands of the Ugandan government (Allen, 2006; Finnstrom, 2008; Schomerus, 2007). Kony was said to be a young spiritualist, believed by his followers to possess prophetic powers (Baines, 2007; Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999). Widespread media portrayed him as a crazed Christian fanatic attempting to root his movement in the Biblical Ten Commandments (Baines, 2007). However, the LRA's main goal was to avenge the massacre of the Acholi population by Ugandan President Museveni's forces (Finnstrom, 2008). Over the course of the conflict – which lasted from 1986 to 2007 – both the LRA and government troops not only targeted one another, but also the civilian population. Kony believed that any Acholi who did not actively become an LRA supporter was colluding with the government's Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) (Allen, 2006; Finnstrom, 2008). The war forced 1.7 million people into internally displaced persons' camps and left tens of thousands dead (Annan, Amuge, & Angwaro, 2003; Ledyard et al., 2009; Patel et al., 2013). As families were torn apart, villages and communities demolished, education disrupted, and life's daily activities significantly altered, the Acholi people experienced brutal violations of their individual and collective rights.

In their battle against the Government of Uganda, the LRA abducted between 60,000 and 80,000 children into armed conflict (Shanahan & Veale, 2016). Children were preferred for several reasons: it was thought that they would not know the area well enough to escape, they would be easier to indoctrinate than adults, and it was an efficient tactic to terrorize families and communities. While all children were potential targets, the abduction, forced marriage, and forced impregnation of women and girls featured prominently in the LRA's *modus operandi*. Women and girls taken by the LRA were involved in multiple roles and tasks as porters, combatants, and cooks (Apio, 2007; Veale, McKay, Worthen, & Wessells, 2013). Moreover, as a critical part of his military and ideological operations, Kony organized and implemented a forced wife system (Carlson & Mazurana, 2008). Girls – with a preference for those aged 12–13 – were captured and given to commander “husbands”. The wives became the exclusive property of the commanders: these girls were required to obey any and every command and to never refuse their “husbands” sexual services. The majority of these females became mothers and their pregnancies were the result of repeated sexual violence by their commander “husbands”. This forced wife system had a clear objective – to produce a new clan. Kony repeatedly spoke of the need for “multiplying” and saw this as the solution for northern Uganda: to create a new class of people who had, from his perspective, benefitted from LRA training and life in the bush (Watyé Ki Gen/CAP, 2014).

It has been estimated that by 2001, 2500 children were born to forced mothers in captivity, representing one quarter of all children held by the LRA (Human Rights Watch, 2003 as cited in Apio, 2007). Many children born in LRA captivity died because of starvation, violence, and disease. For those children who survived, an in-depth understanding of the long-term reintegration experiences of these children and their perspectives and views on life post-conflict has yet to be fully realized. These were key aims of the current study.

3. Methodology

Funded by the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, this research was a partnership between researchers at McGill University and Watye Ki Gen. Watye Ki Gen is made up of a collective of women who were abducted by the LRA and held in captivity. In the post-conflict period, the organization is working to strengthen the rights, needs, and collective voice of former abductee women and their children, particularly within mechanisms of transitional justice.

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