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Children and young mothers' agency in the context of conflict: A review of the experiences of formerly abducted young people in Northern Uganda☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the experiences of formerly abducted young women during their captivity with the Lord Resistance Army rebels and in the resettlement and reintegration period. Special attention is given to their exercise of agency and choices. Using a qualitative design, narrative interviews were conducted with child mothers ($N = 21$), local and civic actors ($N = 17$), and the general community through focus groups ($N = 10$). Data transcripts were analyzed using template analysis methods to derive meanings and increase understanding of the situation. Abducted children faced significant difficulties during their captivity and also during their resettlement and reintegration process, yet they continued to exhibit strong agency to cope with the new realities. Despite these difficulties, opportunities existed which were utilized by the young people, albeit to different degrees depending on each young person's ability and initiative (agency). Situational factors limiting the child mothers' agency were identified as embedded within the latter's environment. This study raises the importance of appreciation of the young women's agency in both the bush-captivity experience and resettlement and reintegration processes within the community, post-conflict.

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Introduction

Despite the existence of international watchdogs such as the United Nations and increased global advocacy for respect for human rights and promotion of good governance, armed conflict continues to be a defining characteristic of the geo-political situation found in many countries (Kaldor, 2006; Keen, 2008; Nilsson, 2013). Moreover, new research also notes the changing dimensions of armed conflict and how children have been entrapped in them (Nilsson, 2013; UNICEF, 2009). Wars and armed conflicts have had significant and deleterious effects on children in different parts of the world. Children's lives have been disrupted in many ways including being displaced from familiar surroundings, having their education disrupted, and being forced to participate directly in hostilities (Nilsson, 2013; Ozerdem & Podder, 2011; UNESCO, 2011; Wessells, 2006). Also, the livelihoods of children and their communities have not been spared the ravages of war. Many children return from rebel captivity to an unfamiliar context devoid of the earlier protective and supportive environment that would have nurtured them into adulthood (Allen & Vlassenroot, 2010).

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Recent contemporary conflicts in Africa have included the protracted civil war in Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, Chad, Ivory Coast, and the Ethiopia-Eritrean war. Other conflicts have occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, and Burundi (Achvarina, Nordas, Ostby, & Rustard, 2008; Ozerdem & Podder, 2011).

Uganda has experienced several conflicts since independence from Britain in 1962 (Bainomugisha, 2011). Most of these conflicts have had far reaching consequences for children. The most prominent of all these conflicts has involved the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. Led by rebel commander Joseph Kony, the LRA has drawn most of its forces from abducting young children (Allen & Schomerus, 2006). The conscription of child soldiers is not a new phenomenon in Uganda's history. The involvement of children in armed conflict can be traced as far back as 1972 and also to the 1978–79 wars of liberations against the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin (Bainomugisha, 2011). Studies suggest, however, that the scale of abduction and conscription of children into armed conflict in northern Uganda has been unprecedented in the country. Since the beginning of the conflict, between 25,000 and 30,000 children (both boys and girls) are estimated to have been abducted (Human Rights Watch, 2006). McKay and Mazurana (2004) put the proportion of girls abducted at 30% of the total number of abducted children, but Annan, Blattman, and Horton (2006) indicated a figure of 15%. The abducted children (both boys and girls) were subjected to extreme brutality, including walking long distances on foot and being trained to fight and forced to kill fellow children and other community members.

The abducted young girls found themselves playing a multiplicity of roles within the rebel establishment. They were subjected to sexual abuse and were forcefully made to be "wives" to the rebel commanders. As a result, many have taken on the role of motherhood at a very early age (below 18 years). They have thus been described as *child mothers* (Mazurana & Carlson, 2006; McKay, 2004). The young girls and child mothers within the bush had to fight to defend their positions, procure food, and fend off their enemies.

Child Mothers as Agents and Actors

The experiences of formerly abducted child mothers in rebel captivity and in the aftermath of resettlement within the community as they attempt to negotiate the reintegration process can be understood in the context of the literature on agency. From this perspective, the child mothers are viewed as *agents* and not simply passive objects within their environment (Bjorkhaug, 2010; Honwana, 2006). This agency refers to the dexterity, physical strength, knowledge, and emotional intelligence (commitment) which facilitates the exercise of action (Sewell, 1992). Dessler (1989) argued that while human agents have power or influence on their situations and initiate some actions, these powers are exercised within an historical space which regulates such actions (structural influence). In a study spanning 10 years (1995–2005) and involving over 400 former child soldiers, Wessells (2006) found that despite the fact that children are often subjected to great cruelty and extreme difficulties while in rebel captivity, they demonstrate strong agency and attempts to influence their situations. This issue is often underestimated by other actors and stakeholders. Wessells' observations are similar to Boyden and De Berry (2004) regarding children's agency both within and in the aftermath of war. Boyden and De Berry (2004: p. xvii) state that "even when confronted by appalling adversities, it is revealed that many [children-and child mothers] are able to influence positively their own fate and that of others. . .." A similar study exploring the issues pertaining to the reintegration of formerly abducted persons in northern Uganda also highlighted the agency of the formerly abducted persons (including the child mothers) as a critical issue in the reintegration process (Okeny, 2009).

Recent scholarship on children and young people recognizes the importance of agency in understanding the experience of young people [child mothers inclusive] (see Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, 2011; Ezeah, 2012; ILO, 2010; Ochen, 2012). This spans the area of education, post-conflict reconstruction, and youth quest for livelihoods in both urban and rural areas. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2011) noted that the challenges of programming for vulnerable children and young people come from the limited definition of the concept of vulnerability which focuses on the individuated classification of vulnerability. This they argue is based on "a range of risks and shocks that affect one or more of a variety of livelihoods assets" (p. 12). Yet they suggests that "rather than focusing on risks as an exogenously given factor to be managed, vulnerability is conceptualized as emerging from and embedded in the socio-political context. . .".

Moreover where the focus is mainly in economic issues, inclusion and exclusion are never effectively addressed, and there is tendency of sustained discrimination against particular groups (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Experiences from Northern Uganda suggest that child mothers are faced with brittle discrimination and exclusions (both subtle and overt) from the communities in which they have resettled. While the action research done by McKay, Veale, Worthen, and Wessels (2010) recognizes the importance of agency of the child mothers and their efforts at transforming their situation and that of their children, it also points at the important roles that can be played by intervening development agencies and external change agents. The latter study like ILO (2010) recognizes the challenges of reintegration faced by the FAYM returning to a significantly changed community, with many experiencing double orphan hood and thus little recourse to extended family support. Both ILO (2010) and McKay et al. (2010) recognize the significance of support by external agencies but suggests that these should be responsive to the socio-economic and legal factors within the intervention context. The vulnerability of the young mothers within this context is also considered and with it their need for special support from actors and agencies. Yet while such views are expressed, little efforts are made to effectively address them. Nyambedha (2011) argues for a framework which recognizes and support traditional elements of social protection.

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