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Psychosocial web page Editor's introduction

Forgotten Children – the outcome of children born of the Lord's Resistance Army, Northern Uganda by Eunice Apio, 2008.

In this our eleventh edition, we present a qualitative study by Eunice Apio which reviews the social, emotional and psychological outcome of 69 Ugandan children born to mothers captured by the Lord's Resistance Army. The project, which was undertaken in the Gulu Municipality in Northern Uganda, combines interview and observational data gathered from the children's mothers or 'guardians', the mothers' families and reception centre staff.

The picture which emerges is shocking. When the children return from the bush, they are malnourished, have received little if any medical care and are uneducated. They have witnessed extreme violence and murder, and lived precariously moving from one encampment to another as the armed group they were living with evaded government forces. In the reception centres which received the returning mothers, the children evidenced difficulties in adjusting to their new lives, with some appearing emotionally cut-off and regressed, whilst others were preoccupied with violence in their recreational activities and play. The children's dual status both as children of LRA fathers (who have wreaked such damage on local communities) and as illegitimate children, resulted in their stigmatization and rejection by their mothers' communities. The returning mothers report distress at their children's treatment by their communities, and Eunice suggests that the lack of programmatic provision addressing the wellbeing of the children hinders the reintegration of the mothers themselves.

In her conclusions, Eunice makes a number of suggestions for increasing the social acceptability of these children and highlights the need for future DDR programs to make provision for their psycho-social needs. She emphasizes, too, the role the Ugandan government should play in fostering their community acceptance through affording them protection and ensuring the active implementation of their existing legal rights to equality with all Ugandan children.

Dr Linda Dowdney
Editor.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers unites national, regional and international organisations and Coalitions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Its Steering Committee member organizations are Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva.



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BEARING THE BURDEN OF BLAME – THE CHILDREN BORN OF THE LORD’S RESISTANCE ARMY, NORTHERN UGANDA

by Eunice Apio, 2008^{1 2}

ABSTRACT

The outcome of 69 children born to mothers captured by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda is presented. The children, their mothers, community leaders and agency staff were interviewed, revealing that these children encounter major difficulties upon returning to their mothers’ communities and face rejection and stigma as a result of their birth status. Recommendations to improve their chances of successful reintegration are made.

INTRODUCTION

Children born in situations of ongoing armed conflict have been studied infrequently, yet they may be regarded as a particularly vulnerable group of children. While various reports refer to the fact that some 300,000 children in Uganda have been affected by the armed conflict there, and have never known peace (see, e.g., Witter, 2002; Knox-Musisi, 1998), at the time this research was undertaken (2003) none had paid serious attention to those children born directly as a consequence of war, and even today they remain a neglected group of children (see, Carpenter, 2007).

There are suggestions in the literature that the lives of children born into situations of armed conflict are particularly hard, and that exposure to the chaos of war, can inhibit normal development and necessitate compensatory intervention. Further, it has been suggested that children who have

¹ This paper is based on the author’s MA dissertation *Challenges of Integrating Children Born in Armed Conflict: A Study of Children Born of the Lord’s Resistance Army, Gulu Municipality 1990-2003*, and a conference paper presented in Belfast, 2006.

² At the time of submission, the author was Executive Director of Facilitation for Peace and Development, Uganda.

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experienced violence and war may react either by becoming very aggressive, or alternatively by withdrawing into themselves. Whilst these may be considered normal reactions to extraordinary circumstances, such behaviour can be difficult for adults to understand (Ladegaard & Otto, 2003). Children born into the LRA commence their lives in particularly brutal situations, encountering war, famine, cruelty, extreme poverty and death from their earliest years

The exploratory research project presented here was undertaken in order to learn more of the experiences of children born in the conflict situation in Northern Uganda during the period 1990 to 2003. Of special interest were the children born in captivity to members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). These children face particular challenges. Often born of rape to abducted female sex slaves or 'wives' of the LRA, they start their childhoods within the precincts of war, and live their early lives in conditions of extreme privation and violence. When freed from captivity, they return with or without their mothers, to local communities where they may encounter particular difficulties stemming from their anomalous birth status (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Whilst it has now been recognised that girls as well as boys who are associated with armed forces or groups³, are in need of demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, until recently they were not catered for, and many still do not go through formal demobilization programs (Mazurana and McKay, 2003; see also the Paris Commitments, 2007³). Consequently, their children have not been the focus of such programs, and it would seem, therefore, that their needs have been largely neglected by researchers and INGO reintegration programs alike. This relative neglect is highlighted by the UN commissioned study on Women, Peace and Security (UN 2000) which acknowledges both that children born of forced pregnancy in armed conflict represent one of the major impacts of armed conflict on women and girls, and that little is known about these children and their integration with their mothers into their communities (see also Carpenter, 2007).

It is of interest to note, however, that the legal context within which these children live in Uganda protects their human rights. Uganda is a signatory to the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (2002), and has ratified the African Charter on Humans and Peoples (1986), as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC – 1994) and many of the main provisions of these conventions are enshrined in the 1996 Ugandan constitution.⁴ Thus, along with other Ugandan children, those born of the LRA are protected by a legislative framework which guarantees the protection and proper care of children affected by an armed conflict, their equality under the law – and thus protection from discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect, and the right to a name, nationality and birth registration.

³ For the definition of the term 'a child associated with an armed force or group' see the Paris principles, 2007: <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf/> For the associated Paris Commitments, see: <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ParisCommitments120207english.pdf>

⁴ Note that Uganda acceded to the Optional Protocol on 6th May, 2002.



Yet, in spite of this protective legislative framework, all reports so far indicate that of all the children born during the conflict in Uganda; those born to abducted girls are perhaps the most vulnerable and the most forgotten. It is for these reasons, that this study was undertaken. In particular, it was hoped to assess the impact of captivity on children born within the enclaves of the LRA; to examine the experiences of the mothers and children upon return, and to suggest appropriate mechanisms for facilitating their integration.

BACKGROUND

This project was undertaken in the Gulu Municipality, which is the administrative headquarters of the Gulu district where the majority of inhabitants are from the local Acholi tribe. At the time of this research, this municipality was at the centre of a war that had raged relentlessly since 1986 between the Uganda Government army (Uganda People's Defence Forces [UPDF]) and a rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This prolonged war spilled over into all the districts of Northern and parts of Eastern Uganda, and devastated entire communities with far reaching consequences (New Vision, 2004)⁵. There were mass displacements of communities into neighbouring districts or Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps. It is estimated that some 1.8 million of the population of Northern Uganda people were displaced to IDP camps or urban settings, of whom 80% were estimated to be women and children (UNICEF, 2006). Conditions in IDP camps at the time of this research raised serious human rights and protection concerns relating to the lack of food, housing and medical care in addition to congestion and sexual abuse (USAID, 2003).

The conflict between the Ugandan government and the LRA continued until peace talks commenced in July 2006. These peace negotiations resulted in an agreed Cessation of Hostilities (Juba, 2006), since when no violent incidents attributed to the LRA have been reported in Uganda. Resettlement of the population has begun, with about 3000,000 displaced people leaving IDP camps and moving closer to their original homesteads and farmlands.

As a result of the protracted conflict and subsequent population displacements, prevailing social cultural norms and values have been so eroded that violent acts leading to mutilations and serious psychological/traumatic consequences are the order of the day. Schools have closed or are not functioning normally, while health centres, roads and other social amenities are not operational. It has been estimated recently that between 24,000 and 38,000 children have been abducted by the LRA in Uganda (Berkeley-Tulane Initiative, 2007). Girls have been abducted in large numbers by the LRA, although fewer girls than boys have been taken overall (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Abductees served in various capacities, including as porters, combatants and sex slaves (see footnote 3). But perhaps one of the most outstanding consequences of this war is the

⁵ Peace negotiations between the government of Uganda and the LRA have resulted in an agreed Cessation of Hostilities (Juba, 2006), since when no violent incidents attributed to the LRA have been reported in Uganda.



emergence of completely new categories of children among the thousands who have been born during the conflict. These include: internally displaced children growing up in camps (some of whom are the result of rapes within the camps); children born in UPDF army detachments, or children born of girls abducted by the LRA (Knox-Musisi, 1998). It is difficult to estimate just how many children fall into the latter category, but by the mid 2001 girls held by the LRA had given birth to thousands of children, excluding those who returned from captivity with children or pregnant⁶ It is known that by 2004, some 1,000 children of the LRA had returned with their mothers or were born shortly after their mothers' return. Many children, of course, remain with the LRA.

INFORMATION GATHERING

The Gulu Municipality of northern Uganda contains two reception centres for former child soldiers (GUSCO and World Vision). These centres were able to identify the 69 LRA children whose outcome we report. The children were born in captivity to girls who had been abducted by LRA. The children had returned to Gulu with or without their mothers. Those who returned alone were attached to other returning mothers ('guardians') by centre staff so that, for their time in the centre, they had someone to care for them.

The children's ages ranged from infancy to 12 years, with 32 being boys and 37 being girls. 29 of the mothers were first time parents, whilst the remainder had either borne other children from normal liaisons within the Acholi community prior to their capture, or to LRA members following their abduction. At the time of the study, all the children were living without their fathers, either because their fathers had been casualties of war, or were still living in the bush, although some were rumoured to have returned to civilian life.

In order to build up a picture of the children's social, psychological and economic well being, information about the children was gathered from a number of sources. Children who were old enough to answer questions about their experiences were spoken to directly. In addition, information was gathered from a combination of mothers; 'guardians'; the mothers' families; reception centre staff and local community members. Although questionnaires were developed to cover the main areas of interest, these were mostly completed by means of semi-structured interviews, as the majority of participants were illiterate. Interviews were conducted in either English (international staff) or in Luo/Acholi for local participants. Additional information on the children's play and social interactions came from direct observation of their play and activities, either by the researchers or by reception centre staff.

Background information and information about reintegration programs was also gathered from organizations working to rehabilitate and reintegrate former child soldiers in Gulu. These included, among others, the Concerned Parents' Association (CPA), the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative



(ARLPI), and the international charity SOS Children's Village. A detailed consultation with local Acholi traditional leaders was also undertaken.

OUTCOMES

Parenting during captivity

The mothers' accounts of pregnancy, birth and child care whilst with the LRA revealed much suffering. The lack of antenatal and postnatal care in harsh living conditions resulted in many young mothers perishing along with their children during childbirth. For those who survived, becoming a mother changed their status within the armed group. Life prior to motherhood was extremely hard for all – the girls suffered inhumane conditions, including disease, starvation, thirst, rape, arbitrary punishment and fear of imminent death.

Motherhood brought changes for all the women. For 25 of them (36%), these changes were positive, as having a child sometimes allowed them exemption from fighting and arbitrary punishment. Those attached to high ranking LRA commanders, were provided with maids or helpers. The remaining 44 mothers (64%) saw the impact of motherhood as negative due to the lack of ante and post natal provision and the extra responsibilities of feeding, clothing and caring for the child under conditions of extreme privation. Without access to health care, there was also the burden of tending for sick children and the fear of infant death.

On their return, the children were found to be seriously malnourished. With parents constantly on the run, it was difficult for mothers to find sufficient food for their children or for themselves, which made breastfeeding difficult. Both mothers and their children thus lacked basic necessities such as food, medicines, water, clothing and shelter. The children endured long marches through the bush to avoid enemies of the LRA. They witnessed violence and murder. They lacked education and suffered untreated diseases such as cholera, malaria, worms and diarrhoea. With only one or two exceptions, the children born in captivity were never immunized. Those who were immunized in the bush, tended to be children of high ranking commanders with privileged access to health facilities in Khartoum.

Parenting following return

The mothers reported that they found it easier to parent their children once they had arrived at the reception centres. Virtually all (96%) reported their time in the centres as a positive experience. Freed from captivity, it was easier for them to meet their own and their children's basic needs, and there was no longer a need to flee from the UPDF. Within the reception centres, the children's basic health care needs could be attended to. Those children who entered reception centres on their return were immunized. However, returning children who did not go through such centres are unlikely to be immunized against serious childhood illness such as poliomyelitis, diphtheria, tetanus, tuberculosis, whooping cough and measles.



The children's status and well-being

We found that the children's basic rights to a nationality and a name were respected. There is a kind of beauty naming a child the African way as African people attach meanings to names based on situations and circumstances. This tradition was carried on within the LRA camps with mothers choosing meaningful names for their offspring. But, the majority of abducted mothers gave their children names reflecting their plight and thus referring to their abduction, servitude, sexual slavery and of their mothers' endless desire to return home. Thus, the great majority of children (71%) had been given names such as '*Komakech*', meaning 'I am unfortunate', *Anenocan*, 'I have suffered', *Odokorac*, 'Things have gone bad', *Lubanga kene*, 'only God knows why this happened to me'. Other children bore names given by their fathers – for example some children had been named after Joseph Kony which was particularly unfortunate, as the name is associated with so much suffering in Acholi.

With such names, the baby becomes a living reminder of the mothers' sufferings. The name also acts as a reminder to others of the mother's captivity. For some children, the name may lead to self-chastisement when they take on a sense of responsibility for the overwhelming suffering of their young mothers. When the children returned from captivity, perhaps out of sheer sympathy for them, reception centre social workers attempted to give them fresh names with more ordinary meanings. For example, *Komakech* was converted to *Komagum* (I am fortunate) and *Odokorac* to *Odoko ber* (things have turned good). Interviews with mothers and staff, however, indicated that the mothers were reluctant to accept these changes. They preferred the old names. Those children born after their mother's return were given ordinary names by members of the reception centre.

The nationality of any child born within the confines of the LRA has been a political issue. They are unlikely to have been registered at birth, particularly as most have been born in the jungles of southern Sudan. Consequently, their nationality has been called into question. Sudan does not grant them nationality on the basis of their birth within its borders, as they are regarded as illegal immigrants. Further, their presence in Sudan is not officially acknowledged so that Sudan is neither obliged to register these children immediately after birth, nor to take account of them in government plans. Whilst under Ugandan law, children whose parents, or grandparents, are Ugandan citizens are also regarded as Ugandan citizens, though neither the government of Uganda nor the Sudanese government grant them legal passage. Although their names immediately identified the majority as children of the LRA, all the children in this study were regarded as Ugandan by their mothers, by international workers and by traditional leaders, by virtue of either their birthplace or their parental nationality (given that members of the LRA are Ugandans).



Interviews with mothers and reception centre staff indicated that children returning from the bush found it difficult to adjust to their new surroundings. The children who had lived the longest with the LRA appeared to be the most affected. Their continued identification with their absent fathers, and the emotional defences they had constructed in order to deal with daily privation, isolation, and the witnessing of extreme and arbitrary violence and punishment, resulted in some children presenting post-captivity as emotionally cut-off and regressed. These children appeared unable to experience any aspects of their lives emotionally – as if they had felt too much and were determined never to feel again. Some children appeared to take on a burden of ‘badness’ in order to cling to an image of their parents or adults as loving and nurturing.

Observations of the children’s behaviour by centre reception staff indicated that the majority (74%) remained preoccupied with the violence and uncertainty of their former daily lives, as evidenced by their play and social interactions. For instance, they played imaginary games in which they tied up fellow children and marched them away, or packed up luggage to flee from imaginary raids. They bothered their mothers about when their fathers would return from ‘stand-by’. Some woke in the night to order their mothers to pack and join the convoy before a shift of camp. The children’s own reported fears included a fear of strangers, a fear of losing their mother, and, for more than half, a continuing fear of the military.

Acceptance of the children upon return

Given their easy identification as children of the LRA, and the suffering imposed upon communities by the LRA, an important aspect of the children’s outcome is how they were received by their mothers’ families and the communities they encountered as they made their return. Although poorly documented, local reports suggest that prior to 2002 some LRA child escapees were killed by angry local populations as they were trying to find their way back to their homesteads. They were viewed as members of the LRA and treated as such.

Generally within the Acholi custom and kinship structure, children belong to the father and his family. However, the situation for LRA children is complicated by the fact that the father may be unknown (in cases of gang rape), and/or is an LRA rebel. It has been argued that because the children belong to their LRA fathers, the mother’s family may reject the child (see Human Rights Watch, 2003). However, within the same culture, it is also customary for a child born outside marriage to belong strictly to the girl’s family, and are given her family name. Such children are referred to as ‘atin luk’ or ‘child illegally conceived’. They are considered as part of the mother’s family unless the father pays a fine known as *luk*, in which case they become part of the father’s clan. Even when this occurs, the child still bears its original name deriving from its mother’s side. Therefore, even without ‘belonging’ to their father, these children can be subsumed within the Acholi kinship structure. In the case of the LRA born children, however, nobody wants or is



asking for any fine (*luk*) from the LRA. So, the traditional mechanism for appeasing the tribes involved is not practiced, even if the man returns during an amnesty.

While the Acholi culture allows for illegitimate children to be identified as part of the mother's family, illegitimacy is nevertheless regarded seriously within African society, with some tribes discriminating against illegitimate children – for example, within Alcholi society, unless they are taken into the paternal clan as a consequence of the father paying *luk*, they cannot inherit property. In this context, the children of the LRA bear the double burden of an illegitimate status (without opportunities for recourse to traditional mechanisms for paternal clan inclusion) as well as the stigma deriving from the rebel status of their fathers. Thus they fall into the lowest possible social grouping, existing outside of the normal social structure, and receiving even more discriminatory treatment than other illegitimate children.

The mothers reported a mixed reception by their families, peers and communities. In the immediate aftermath of their return, 78% said that their families were welcoming, with just four mothers reporting a negative reception. Of the latter, one returned to the reception centre and another expressed a preference for returning to the LRA where she and her child would feel socially acceptable, and could acquire food without the need for her to find employment. She, too, went back to the reception centre.

Over time, however, the general relief and happiness was short-lived due to the pressures of poverty, displacement, and the need to find extra resources to support the returning mothers and their children. Additionally, those families whose abducted children were still unaccounted for found these returnees a bitter reminder of their own children's absence. The returning mothers' communities were often less welcoming – indeed, it is known that until recently many children trying to escape from the LRA were killed by communities in retaliation for the actions of the LRA. Thus, only 19 (28%) of the mothers were able to report a positive reception by their communities. What is striking about these discussions with the mothers – which took place on a one-to-one basis without reception staff present – was the preference for many mothers not to talk about certain topics. Thus, 33% did not want to discuss their reception by their communities while 38% did not wish to talk about how their peers received them. One possible reason for their reluctance was a continuing fear of potential retaliation against their families and communities by the LRA. Alternatively, it could be that our questions seemed irrelevant to these mothers, given the horror of their previous experiences, and their difficulties in re-engaging emotionally with their lives upon return - their apparent indifference masking a numbed resignation to their situation.

Consequently, the mothers' own initial joy at their return was soon tempered by several factors including: their stigmatization by their communities as ex-LRA; the poverty at home; the squalid conditions of the IDP camps, and the knowledge that their luckier peers had continued with their education while



they themselves might never be able to do so. Some also had to deal with the fact their parents had died while they were away.

But, above all the mothers were concerned about the negative reception of their children, with just under a third (22 mothers) reporting that their children were treated differently to those not born in captivity, while only 42% reported that they were sure that their children were not treated differently. One mother reported that part of her reason for wanting to return to the LRA in the bush was that her child was accepted there and would not face discrimination on account of his parentage or birth status.

REINTEGRATION MECHANISMS

Reintegration programs offer assistance to former child soldiers and others affected by armed conflict in order to increase the potential for their economic and social assimilation back into society. These may include both short and long term activities ranging from health counselling and medical care to general education or job counselling. There are a number of agencies on the ground in Gulu carrying out such activities. Two organizations (World Vision and the Gulu Support the Children Organisation [GUSCO]) run reception centres for returning child soldiers. Others, such as the Concerned Parents Association run follow-up programs for children reunited with their families. Remaining facilities include the international charity SOS children's village in Gulu, where some children live, receiving full board and care.

Information available from GUSCO shows that up to the time this research was finalised (2004), they had received 46 unaccompanied LRA children aged 2 months to 8 years. Tracing enabled 26 of these children to be reunited with their mothers' families (primarily their maternal grandmothers). Tracing efforts concentrated on the mothers' relatives given that illegitimate children are seen to belong to the mother's family. The others remained in reception centres, where they are temporarily attached to other returning girl mothers as a way of ensuring some kind of maternal care for them. Where children return with their mothers, all efforts are made to trace their families and to foster their reunification. Where possible, the children's fathers are also traced, but any attempts to reunite the parents are left entirely up to the families on both sides. The reception centres were regarded positively by the girl mothers, with 74% reporting that they found the reception centres welcoming, although 15 mothers (22%) preferred not to give their opinion on this.

The programs' emphasis on the reunification of the girl mothers with their families does not always go smoothly. For example, the majority of girls (74%) did not wish to be treated as children given that they now had children of their own. Their preference was for economic empowerment, so that they would not be destitute and would not be dependent on their families, on agencies or on difficult to come by charity. Programs do not pay sufficient attention to the likelihood that the families of these mothers' will find it very



difficult to accept their children – though these difficulties are implicitly recognized by the centres' tendency to hold back pregnant returnees in reception centres until after the birth of their child. In this way, their families cannot force them to abort their unborn babies.

All 69 mothers made recommendations along similar lines concerning provision for their children. These included the need for available programs to better support their children's basic needs and rights including those of education, health, shelter, food and clothing. All the mothers called for peace building so that they would be able to lead lives without fear anymore.

CONCLUSIONS

Information provided by these mothers and their children reveals a harrowing story. Children of the LRA grow up in extremely harsh, dangerous and adverse conditions. They return to their mothers' communities distressed, malnourished, un-educated and in need of medical care. Observations of their recreation or play, and of their behaviour at reception centres suggest that those who had lived longest with the LRA were the most affected – with some presenting as emotionally cut-off and regressed, and/or preoccupied with violence.

While families were initially welcoming of the returning mothers, difficulties arose over time. These stemmed from their children's illegitimacy; the extra financial burden for the family generated by the needs of the girls and the physical and educational needs of their children; the living conditions in IDP camps, and the lack of community acceptance of the returnees. In the Ugandan context, people can find it difficult to relate to former child soldiers and may well be scared of them. They may be regarded as rebels despite the fact that they did not choose to join the rebel army. In this study, both the mothers and their children suffered stigma as 'rebels' and their communities found it very hard to accept them.

The rejection of these children appears to be based on the fact that their birth was forced upon unwilling girls abducted by the LRA - a group which had inflicted much suffering upon their mothers' families and communities. The children appear to symbolize to these communities a decade long suffering stemming from being subjected to rape, extreme violence, community displacement and the disruption of the previously existing social and economic infrastructure. Where this view predominates, the children are regarded with disdain by communities who stigmatize them as rebels, children of murderers, or products of rape and defilement. This rejection can occur even if a family decides to treat the child well. Such families carry the burden of prejudice from the community to the extent that they are accused of liaising with, and therefore sympathizing with, the LRA father.



DDR programs in general are aimed at child combatants. Some recent programs focus on child mothers, but at the time this study was concluded (2004) none had specific provisions for the children born in the enclaves of the LRA, nor were they designed to support their integration into the family or community. Their psycho-social needs were not catered for with the consequence that needs such as medication, education and other socio-economic necessities were left in the balance. By mid-2005, however, a follow-up visit by the author indicated that some progress was being made with the setting up of a pilot project aimed at these children. It is vital that such work continues and is extended to cover as many of these children as possible.

The psychosocial support offered by reintegration programs has primarily been directed at returning mothers. There is a heavy emphasis on reuniting girl mothers with their families – even where the girls would prefer to function as adult parents in their own right, and are seeking economic independence. Insufficient attention is paid to the families' difficulties in accepting the LRA children. Examples were reported to the author of families wanting their daughters to abort unborn children conceived whilst with the LRA. Those girls who did not wish to do so stayed, or sought refuge in, reception centres until after the birth of their children.

Yet, the rejection of the LRA children by their families and communities directly negates efforts to foster the mothers' reintegration as the mothers will stick by their children. Thus the psychosocial needs of the children need to be attended to alongside those of their mothers. While the integration of these children is not an easy task, it may be that international agencies could foster community acceptance through exploring ways in which existing cultural practices could be used to counteract the stigma that these children encounter. For example, there is a ceremony called *dwoko ayo* involving rituals which symbolize the entrance of the returnee back into the family and keeps evil at bay. It is possible that explicit application of this ceremony to the LRA children, as well as their returning mothers, might prove helpful. In addition, local non governmental organizations, with their local expertise and understanding of local culture, have an important role in fostering the acceptance and reintegration of these children. Where re-integration of the mothers and their children is not possible, however, mothers will require economic support in order to live independently and care for their children.

As outlined in the introduction, Uganda is a signatory to various conventions and charters which charge the state with a duty to ensure as far as possible the survival, protection and development of children, and to act in their best interests. For example, signatories to the ACRWC are required to take measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices which are prejudicial to the health or life of the child and those which discriminate against the child on the grounds of sex or other status.



The rights of the LRA children to a name and nationality have been accorded – although their names represented a burden for the majority of these children. Yet, their birth status results in legal and social discrimination. They are particularly unwelcome because of their fathers' LRA status, and without inclusion into the paternal clan they cannot inherit property given that property can only be inherited through the paternal line. . They are, therefore, effectively rejected outcasts who must rely on their mothers for the fulfilment of their basic rights – yet within the paternal inheritance structure of the Alcholi culture their mothers have no property rights. Additionally, as a result of abduction, their mothers will have had a limited education, and find it difficult to earn their own living and so give their children decent lives.

Yet, the legislative framework to protect these children is in existence in Uganda. They are as entitled as other Ugandan children to the education, health and social provision which were not available to their families whilst they were living in the bush. What is needed, therefore, is that the legal framework is used as the basis for a dialogue with the Alcholi people to correct their prejudices and to begin the process of constructing avenues for the psychosocial support needed to aid the children's successful assimilation.

The State, therefore, has an important role in protecting these children, who should not be confronted as enemies or have their mothers charged with treason. As a marginalized group, they require special measures – i.e the government should design and implement integration and rehabilitation measures appropriate for these children alongside their mothers and other returnees. Without such support, there is a risk that these children, as products of rape, may effectively be viewed solely as evidence of a 'crime against humanity' or 'war crime' rather than as children in need of protection and the implementation of their rights.

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