



ADYEBO

THE WILD PLANT

Justice and Reconciliation
Project

Adyebo

Justice and Reconciliation Project

Published by the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP)
Plot 50 Lower Churchill Drive
P.O. Box 1216
Gulu, Uganda, East Africa
Tel: +256 (0) 471 433 008
Web: www.justiceandreconciliation.com
Email: info@justiceandreconciliation.com

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Written by Nancy Apiyo.

Edited by Oryem Nyeko and Kasiva Mulli.

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Foreword

The saying ‘when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers’ is strongly synonymous with the suffering portrayed in this collection. The abduction, rape, torture and forcible impregnation of young girls are the reason for some of the considerable challenges facing those who return from captivity. Often ostracised and rejected by their own communities, these women continue to struggle to seek justice in the face of sexual exploitation and difficult economic hardships.

I wish to congratulate Dr. Erin Baines and the Gender Justice team for the insurmountable task speaking to the women and successfully allowing their voices to be heard through this publication. I am proud of the resilience shown by the young women who for the very first time broke the silence and spoke to a wider audience. You shall always be a beacon of hope to the thousands of other young mothers out there who have not had the opportunity to speak to a large audience. Your suffering is indicative of the sufferings thousands of girls spread across northern Uganda go through in the aftermath of abduction. In spite of the pain and psychological scars left by the ruins of war, you portray resilience in your words and your deeds as you go about your daily lives. For those of you in the Women Advocacy Network (WAN), your resilience demonstrates service above self as you have demonstrated to us that you speak not only of your suffering, but for the suffering of those around you. Despite being labelled perpetrators, you still promote reconciliation and call

upon forgiveness and support for your groups and communities.

The author succinctly narrates key themes and issues based on the memories of the girls. She meticulously does so by recounting their life from abduction, life during captivity, escape from captivity, life at home to when the girls begin to break the silence. In spite of the physical and psychological squeal of their experiences of extreme violence, the girls call for support so that they can better care for their children and earn their own living. Their story is a testimony of the suffering they undergo on a day by day basis as they seek medical attention for the bullet fragments still in their bodies, education and skills training.

The author finally draws attention to the plight of the children of girl mothers whose needs remain unaddressed; and their identity in the face of the patrilineal Acholi society they return to upon escape. This publication is a must-read for those passionately advancing the cause of young mothers and their experiences during and after captivity.

Boniface Ojok, Programme Coordinator, Justice and Reconciliation Project.

Acknowledgments

In a special way we would like to thank the women who have been brave enough to share their stories in order for people to acknowledge what they went through

Much appreciation goes to Dr. Erin Baines for beginning this project and for walking with these women through their struggles. To Ketty Anyeko, the former team leader of the Gender Justice department, for being one of the initiators of the project and for helping the women to be where they are today. To Evelyn Amony and Grace Acan, for the time and encouragement you continuously give to the women and to the entire team of the Gender Justice Unit as well as JRP for your support and input.

This publication is authored by Nancy Apiyo and was edited by Oryem Nyeko and Kasiva Mulli.

Preface

War is brutal, especially so for women and yet many do not get a chance to tell the world what they went through. Their experiences are always shrouded in silence due to fear and stigmatisation. This is true, in particular, for women who were abducted as girls by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and who lived in captivity for various periods of time. Even though these women went through extreme suffering, some of them survived and were able to return home safely.

In 2011, the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) began to work with them on a story telling project aimed at providing a familiar setting for them to feel free to share their stories and help them to heal. With their consent, JRP documented and compiled different testimonies from women groups that comprise the Women Advocacy Network (WAN, see the final chapter, "Breaking the Silence"). The experiences begin with their abduction, through to their journey to Sudan where the LRA camped, to their lives in captivity, their escapes, their lives at home and finally the formation of the Women's Advocacy Network.

The book is set in a normal story telling session. It is supposed to introduce the reader to a *wang-oo* session, the culturally familiar method, akin to families sitting around the fireplace telling stories, used during story telling sessions. The women, whose names have been changed to protect their

identity, are in this setting having one such session.

The title of the book, '*Adyebo*' is based on a wild plant that the women survived on in the bush. It was eaten during times of famine or when there was no food. It represents suffering that they went through and the strength they continue to have advocating for change in their present lives.

Chapter 1: Abduction

'Kony said we the young ones turn into good soldiers when we are trained.'

It is July, a wet season in Acholi land. Even as the rain threatens to drop twenty women are seated under a tree sharing their stories. They say this helps them to heal and move on with their lives. Some of the women have postponed going to the garden this morning to first tell their stories. We listen like children listening to old grandmother's scary tale at a *wang-oo* in the night. Unlike our childhood stories, these ones are astounding. They are stories you would not wish to be true or to have happened to people.

Many children were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army during the war on their on the way from school, while fetching water or firewood or while they were in their own homes. Sometimes their whereabouts were disclosed by the villagers for fear of their own lives. An estimated 20,000 children were abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army as of 2004¹. We listen as the wind blows the leaves on the mango tree we are seated under. I am trying to picture what the women are saying in my mind and it is like watching a sad movie. One by one they begin to narrate their stories.

As dawn comes one day in 1995, Aling feels hungry and

¹ Madeline Beard, 'The Children Of Northern Uganda, The Effects Of Civil War'. *Global Majority E-Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (June 2011), pp. 4-18.

decides to go home. Squatting together with her brother, they get tired of not hearing any sound from the rebels. Her family had gone to hide in the bush from the rebels after hearing a rumour that the rebels were around. Not even the cold breeze or the fear could take away the hunger. Aling and her family decide to go their home to prepare a meal. They have to cook very fast to avoid being caught by the rebels.

Aling's father is seated at the fire place. His mind is far. It is hard for him to take care of his family amidst war. Oblivious to the fate that was to befall his family, he is thinking of taking his children to hide at his brother's place that night. Today, we are seated around like Aling's family at the fireplace, listening to her memories of the war.

As soon as I bent down to fry the groundnuts, my younger brother came in the house and told me the rebels had arrived. There was no where I could hide. The rest of the family was out at the wang-oo. The rebels came inside and told me to get up.

They asked me what I was doing and told me to go outside. My father tried to ask them not to take me but as they were about to beat him, he told them "Go with her. Let God be the one to protect her in the bush."

I moved with them and we went to the centre in Cwero. They raided homes and set them on fire. We began to move that night and walked till morning. In the morning I was given shoes to put on. We had only moved for one day but my feet had been pierced with thorns. I was still young and life was hard.

Aling pauses to recompose herself as the memories flood back and pauses a bit while she looks down. The other women encourage her and give her advice. This is a norm during the story telling session. The women give each other peer support. Daisy picks up from where Aling stopped and begins to narrate her story.

I was born in 1986. When I was with my parents, life was good. My father was a banker and my mother a doctor. I

was born in Jinja town. That was where we stayed and I grew up. I was abducted in 1996 when I was ten years. We had come to the village to visit my grandmother together with my parents. It was the first time I was visiting the village. In total 150 children were abducted that day.

Otti called Kony in Sudan and said we were young children and could not walk. I was the youngest. Otti said we should be released but Kony said we the young ones turn into good soldiers when we are trained. We were tied around the waist and began to walk. Foot soldiers and fighting planes followed us and a battle began. Some of the children who were abducted died. Those of us who remained continued with the journey.

I had not yet walked that far in my life. Seventy of us were finally taken by the rebels. My friends' feet were sore. With God's grace I didn't die and managed to reach Sudan. Later on I met a girl who was also abducted. She cried and told me she was the one taking care of her mother and was the breadwinner of the home because her mother was sick and her father had passed away. She had left behind younger siblings she would have been taking take care of. I was heartbroken.

I hold hands with the woman seated next to me while they continue to talk. The women are making dolls and beads while they narrate their stories. Most of them earn a living this way. Our host is seated peeling potatoes for her evening meal while her kids chant along playing. Their innocence shadows the stories we are listening to for a moment. It threatens to rain but we are reluctant to move. Jodie is the next to narrate her story:

We came back from school at lunch time and took jerry cans to go fetch water. As we walked on our way back, I was in front and my friends were behind. I heard a strange noise coming from the nearby bush. Someone told me to sit down and I stopped. My friend asked me why I stopped. As soon as I sat, the water that I was carrying poured on one of my friends and she asked, "Why are you quivering?" I told her that there was nothing wrong. She asked again, "Then, what is the matter? Have

you seen soldiers?’

The rebels asked, “Where are the other girls?”

I told them that they were behind and one of the girls heard what I said. She threw away her water container and ran away but three others remained. They captured all of us. We were all from the same village. Being the youngest of all the other girls, the commander told me not to carry any luggage but the other four girls did. We went up to Apar where we cooked and slept.

Joyce picks up from there.

I was abducted together with my older brother. My father died when I was young and our mother struggled to take care of us. Those who abducted us later said they were initially not going to our home, but they were told that there was a young girl in our home. My mother pleaded with them to leave me because I was young. They told her that if she wanted me back they would give her my corpse. The other girls in the area were not abducted. I was the only one taken.

Chapter 2: Journey to Sudan

*'My brother attempted to escape on the way to Sudan.
When he was caught, I was told to beat him, but I didn't.'*

After the young girls were abducted they were taken to Sudan where the LRA had set up camp. The journey was fraught with battles, hunger and severe suffering. This was the beginning of their exposure to a multitude of experiences. Not all of the abductees made it to Sudan, some escaped and went back home or died, while others stayed in Uganda with the rebels. We continue to listen to their tale of the dreadful journey to Sudan. It was the journey through the shadow of death. Joyce continues her story:

We walked and reached a home where people were celebrating their harvest and the New Year. The rebels told the people they were government soldiers and told them to continue dancing. They asked who had brought the music and when they were shown, they killed the young boy. Most of the people at the party were abducted. We walked and were told to uproot cassava while on the way and we did. The rebels went to attack a centre and we remained behind. They went to loot goods that they needed. We waited so that we could carry the loot. They had a lot of luggage.

We began the journey to Sudan from Atiak. We

found Unyama River was very full but we had to cross it. We held each other's hands to cross the river. The person who held my hand slipped and I fell in the water and was washed away. Fortunately the bag I was carrying got stuck on the rocks otherwise I would have died. I was rescued and was taken to the shore where I was helped to recover.

We began to walk. We were thirsty. People suffered from thirst but by the time you reached where there was water, it was either finished or muddy. We were tied up and if one person stopped we all fell. We the recruits did not drink any water, only the rebels did. I was given luggage to carry and told to carry it very well. The luggage had a pair of trousers, a dress, *anyeri* (edible rat) and *sim-sim* (sesame seeds). Some of the rebels fought for the luggage I was carrying. I was going to be killed because I was causing chaos.

My brother attempted to escape on the way to Sudan when he had been sent to fetch water. He was caught and brought back. I was told to beat him but I didn't. Then one person brought some canes and beat him seriously. He was cut on the cheek with a *panga*. His cheek got swollen. When we were about to start moving, they separated us. To date I do not know where my brother is. Last I heard that he died in Lango two days after eating wild fruits. He began to vomit and died.

On the way to Sudan, when a rebel who was injured complained that you knocked him or hurt him, you were killed. People moved in groups. Every brigade moves on their own path. Let's say you were in Stockree² brigade, you were not to leave your group. If you did you were killed. There were some boys who killed you if they saw that the luggage you were carrying was good. They lured you to rest and as you rested, they killed you and shared your luggage. When your leg was swollen, the young boys called you to rest but if you did they killed you.

On the second day of our journey to Sudan, they said civilians should not be near soldiers. This was before

² The name of a brigade.

the girls were initiated to be rebels. All the girls were gathered together. They were removed and raped by the rebels. You were warned not to say that you were raped. It was risky to report such cases. If the rebels knew of it both you and the man who raped you would be killed. You were blamed for not reporting the matter after you were raped and it was later discovered. If the man who raped you knew that you reported him or had plans to do, he killed you. Sometimes you failed to recognise the person who raped you, if for example it was in the night. It is also hard to recognise people when you are still new and scared.

While Joyce narrates her story, I remember something I had heard before from the women about how they had to undergo certain initiation ceremonies before they became part of the rebels. Before you ate with the rebels you were smeared with Shea nut oil and camouflage. This was the initiation. I was told how rape and promiscuity was also prohibited by the LRA. Joyce's soft voice brings me back as she begins to speak. It reminds me of my friends in secondary school, except that what she said is so different from what we discussed in school while we read and talked all night, oblivious to what was happening to girls our age. Maggie narrates what happened to her.

After I had stayed in the sick bay for one year we went to Sudan. A sick bay was where the LRA treated the sick and wounded. At the time I was abducted there was no convoy. We stayed with the sick people until the convoy came. The sick bay was in the jungles of Kilak. This was not the only bay but the main one. There were no houses or shelter in this place. It was a very thick forest. Only those who were very sick slept in tents. We girls were very useful in the bay. We were taught how to take care of the sick. We were taught how to give medicine, injections and nurse wounds. We worked as nurses. Commanders came when they got injured. They were nursed and went back to fight. There were also women who were midwives and

helped women who were brought to the sickbay to give birth. There were times, though, when some women gave birth on the way especially during battles or operations or when they were on convoy. During serious battles there were many patients to take care of. We were also taught how to mix herbs to cure ailments.

After staying in the bay for some time we walked to go to Sudan. They told us we were going to 'Kampala'.³ We walked day and night. You would not know how dawn or dusk came. A stone cut my leg during the journey and it got swollen. We were told that we would be killed if we failed to walk. We walked for three days. It took us three days to reach Sudan. We reached somewhere and they said a car would pick us. We reached barracks and found vehicles to go to Aruu. We were so many and someone stepped on me in the truck.

³ The rebels codenamed Sudan Kampala.

Chapter 3: Life in Captivity

‘When you were abducted it was not nice to be a woman.’

Some of the abductees reached Sudan after trekking for days and nights. While in Sudan, the women in captivity became mothers, wives, soldiers, baby sitters, cooks and porters. So much happened to the women here that one of them says, “when you were abducted it was not nice to be a woman”. We listened to stories of Aruu, Gong, Palutaka, Nicitu, Juba, Hematong and other places in Sudan. Aling continues to tell us her story.

I find it important to mention this. The rebels simply distribute women to men. Whoever abducted you demanded to use you as his wife and would not allow you to be given to another. I see that as rape. Women suffered a lot in terms of sexual abuse. At times you are given to a very old man and you had to accept. You bore children with such a man.

I was taken to the home of one of the commanders who later on gave me to be a wife to his junior soldier. He was around 28 years old. After seven months, the junior soldier called me to his house. He told his first wife that I should lay the bed for him. After he came from the mess⁴ he asked, “Where is my civilian?” Then he asked if I had

⁴ Where commanders used to meet and eat.

laid the bed. He asked for a toothbrush and brushed his teeth. He asked me if I had laid the bed and I said I hadn't. He held my hand and put me near the bed then told me to lay it. He showed me how to lie on the bed and I did. Then he closed the door. After some time he pulled me to bed. That day I cried.

The next day he came when everyone had gone to the bed. He called me again. He closed the door and cocked his gun. He said he would shoot me if I was not going to the bed. He got a wire lock and beat me 15 strokes. He told me not to cry. I went to the bed and he forced me to have sex. Afterwards I went behind the house and sat. He told me to bathe. The next day he again told me to come and lay the bed. He asked his first wife to come and that day she was the one who slept with him.

Later he went to Nicitu. I had gone to the frontline in Aruu to cook for the fighters. He got injured and said I should go to treat him in Nicitu. I took care of him and that was when I became pregnant. I was the younger woman. He had chased the older wife and two of us remained.

When the LRA rebels came to Uganda, I remained in Sudan. It was hard to cross the border and I went back with the rest. Life became hard. This was in 2002. He had gone with all the escorts and I had no one to help me. Taking care of the kids became hard. I had only one escort. We had to loot food to survive. There was no one to raid for me food or give me any help. We survived on ants or wild plants called *anunu* and *adyebo*. My child was very thin and malnourished. You felt like throwing away your child. When Operation Iron Fist in around 2002 began we had to walk in the mountains. I had to walk with a stick and was always left behind. We had to leave the camps we had settled in.

When the rebels began to cross over to Uganda I was pregnant. I was given a recruit who was too weak to help me. This was when the rebels were attacked and had to leave. We walked in the mountains. I was so heavy. I

could not climb the mountains. One day I slept at the foot of the mountain and people were told to come for me. As we were moving I began to have labour pains. In the morning when they whistled for people to move⁵, the child came out. The rest of the group had begun to walk. One of the women was told to help me finish giving birth. She helped me cut the child's umbilical cord and walked away. Two boys stayed to help me. I carried the child as we walked. I could not bathe the baby. There was no time to bathe or clean up. We used to just walk to avoid being shot. We would not even make fire because smoke would show where the rebels were. We did not even have time to rest because soldiers were following us. We had to run for our lives. Bullets and bombs cannot differentiate who is a rebel and not. So many children and women died. There were bombs detonated. Foot soldiers and fighting planes were everywhere. There were days when we did not rest from battles. The battle was so intense that the rebels were helpless. They could not fight off the planes. I remember seeing body parts on trees. If you were not strong you couldn't eat meat.

When I gave birth the placenta stayed in the womb. That same day we were attacked by soldiers and I had to run, yet I had just given birth. I carried only the child and a sheet. I could see soldiers running after me. They called me to stop and said they would not hurt me but I kept on running. If I was not strong I would have thrown the child. I walked until it was dark. That was when I rested. Eventually we came to Uganda. That was when I joined the man. He gave me two *tingtings* (babysitters) to help me.

Soon after that I was separated from my children. One of the boys staying with us escaped with them. He had lured the kids with honey. I cried when I heard the kids had left. It seems the man had planned for the kids to be brought home. I was beaten so much because they said I knew where the kids were taken and I had planned

for it. I was beaten 150 strokes. I was told to say the truth if I had really planned the children's escape. After the kids went I was put under tight security. They thought I was going to escape.

Aling keeps quiet for some time to recompose herself. Such moments are always emotional. The women always say if you are not strong you can never narrate your story but they know that they need to tell their story so that people know what they went through. What makes us get strength to continue is that every time we go to them, they are brighter and feel better. They get stronger after every story telling session. We just listen and do not push any of them to talk. They take charge of the discussion and talk about what they want.

When Aling was talking, most of the women were reminded of the condition they gave birth in. Lamunu starts talking while Aling is quiet and tells us:

This was how I delivered, I started feeling labour pain when we were in the convoy. I had pains for a full day but continued moving. When we reached a certain road the following day my husband left me with three escorts to take care of me. On the third day, my labour pain intensified and my water broke, I started pushing and delivered there. They dug a hole and buried the placenta as I carried my baby. My private part was cut during delivery because it was small. I was not stitched because there was no one to do so. I got healed without medical attention.

During battles we women had a problem with taking care of the children. If you had many children it was difficult to run with them. Sometimes you ended up losing them all. Men did not mind about children. It was up to women to take care of the children. We gave birth to very many children from there. For me, I now have six children because I started giving birth when I was still very young. Whenever there was a battle it was the women to carry the children. When one of the children

got shot, you left him behind and continued to run for your life. Sometimes you delivered when you were on the run with no water to clean up yourself after delivery. Flies covered you because of the bleeding.

Newborn babies were tied on their mothers' necks to make it easy to carry them. If the mother was shot then the baby remained behind with her. Many of our children perished in the bush. Sometimes their babysitters were killed and the babies remained with them. They later on starved to death. Other kids were shot and killed by fighting planes or guns while they were being carried on the back by either their mothers or baby sitters.

Maggie tells us how she was infected with HIV.

When we were in the bush, the man sent one of his wives home and she got infected with HIV/AIDS. She came back during the time when peace talks were held. Atuku⁶ also took part in the peace talks so this was around January of 1994. Kony had warned my husband that he should not meet the woman but he slept with her. She came back home with the peace talk team and we went to Sudan. Three years later the man began to fall sick, by then he had 34 wives. In 1997 he died in Khartoum hospital.

Kony told us he had died from a liver disease but one of us had gone to take care of him and she was told from the hospital that he had died of AIDS. She came and told us that we should be strong that the man died of the disease. Only one of the wives he stayed with did not have HIV/AIDS. She had been testing and has always had negative results. The 33 of us were all infected. In 1998 the girls who were his wives were released because it was thought they would spread the virus among the LRA. We the mothers and two Aboke girls were left behind. They said for us we had children and could control our passion.

⁶ Then Member of Parliament, Hon Betty Bigombe.

Jodie continues to tell us the dilemma of an abducted woman.

When I was pregnant with the second baby the man was shot and killed. When the man died you were given to other homes so that someone took care of you. Later on we were taken to different homes even if we did not want to be separated. After six months we the widows were taken to the yard⁷ for a ceremony to be performed. Sometimes widows stayed for three months before they were initiated. The duration varied. One evening we went to the well and our hair was shaved. We were immersed in water and then we came back. At night we again went to the well. They tied *opobo*⁸ on our hands then smeared us with camouflage⁹ and *moya* (shea nut oil).

Even if the rebels said that as a widow who has been initiated you had a right to go to the man you wanted, sometimes you could not refuse a man. Not so many men had to come to you many times. Being single was not encouraged. They said it would lead to promiscuity and that soldiers would fight for you leading to enmity. Cheating and sleeping with other men was prohibited. You were killed when you slept with someone whom you had not been given to. For example, one day a boy and a girl went to get wood for making houses. They sneaked and had sex. It seems they were seen. Later on they were both killed. The boy said the girl told him she was free and had no man.

After this ceremony you were free to get a man you wanted. I refused to stay with any man and stayed alone but I was later given to another man forcefully. However he died without sleeping with me. After he died I was initiated again. Then another man came to me. I had refused but I was told to go to him because he would take care of me. I stayed with the man.

There was a commander who died and left behind his wives. Kony had told people not to sleep with any of

7 The place where rebels prayed or assembled.

8 A type of plant.

9 A mixture used by rebels for initiation.

the widows because their husband had slept with a wife to another commander who had died of AIDS. At that time I was pregnant. The man I was with slept with one of the widows and she got pregnant without my knowledge. By the time I found out he had already infected me with HIV. He was beaten and escaped home. Apart from infecting me with AIDS he mistreated me a lot. There was a rule among the rebels that when a woman was in her menses, she was to stay alone and not do anything. She was not to touch anything that other people were to touch. They said it was a bad omen if a woman in her menses interacted with other people. This man used to make me stay out in the cold when I was on my menses. I stayed in the cold and at times it rained on me. This used to happen until my menses were over and went to sleep with the other women because we only had one hut. He also beat me so much. One day he beat me till morning. He came to see me when he learnt that I had returned. I had to forgive him because it would hurt me if I carried that bitterness. He gave me HIV but I forgave him so that I don't feel bad.

Daisy is light skinned and has an accent unlike most northerners. She usually prefers to sit on a chair and not a mat like most of the women. After she gives us drinks she sits down and says:

The boys who stayed in the home of the man who later on became my husband were the ones who abducted me. At first I refused to sleep with him and escaped from his home. He sent his escorts to capture me and take me to him. He said if I refused he would kill me. After a month, I was told I would be killed if I did not go back to my husband. He was older than my father. When I went back, he took me to his house and I had to tolerate.

One day a battle began, the man I had been given to went to fight. We were taken to the home of one of the commanders to be taken care of. This man raped us yet he was not our husband. Only one commander knew

about it. He told us not to mind and that the commander who raped us would find his fate. The man who raped us had a higher rank and was feared. No one mentioned it. Only the three of us knew of it. We the two girls he raped and the other commander.

Anying is quiet most of the time when we are having the *wang-oo*. She is always the one who maintains order during the storytelling sessions and makes sure people are punctual and comfortable. She usually explains to us in detail what topic the women are going to talk about and lets the rest begin to talk. While her son is suckling she decides to tell us:

There was a time the rebels said girls who had been abducted were supposed to be soldiers and not just wives. We went for military training in Gong. All recruits were taken there. We were taught how to operate guns. When you learnt how to use a gun, you were told to shoot it to show that you were good. After that you had to be ready to go for standby.¹⁰ We also fought as soldiers. I was once taken for standby when I began menstruating. I conceived and did not know.

One day in a place called Lukung, I carried a motor. Hearing gunshots from afar was not good; you would rather go to the frontline to not feel helpless. The noise was less at the battle ground. As an armed soldier, there was no way you would not use your gun. At times during battles we carried ammunition and nursed the injured. My first time in a battle ground was in Pajok. I went together with the man I had been given to.

There women had to fight and do domestic work during battles like cooking for the fighters. The role of the woman depended on the man she stayed with. When we fought the Dinkas in Pajok I went to sleep with the man I was given to. We shared the same sheets. He woke me up in the middle of the night when there was another attack. I was a coward and took long to go to the front. I went

¹⁰ Any operation by the LRA.

and shot only one magazine of bullets. Later on when the LRA won we went to pick food for the people who were attacked and cooked and nursed the injured.

You know there used to be rules at times not to have sex during battles because if you did, you got injured. Some of them men did not have sex during battles but the man I stayed with had sex even during battles even when conjugal relations were not allowed at all. I got injured together with the man in Pajok and was taken to the sick bay. A bullet shot through my legs and it pains up to now. I was carried on a stretcher to the nearest sickbay. When I was with the man in the sick bay he still impregnated me even though I was still injured.

One of the worst incidents that happened to me when I was a fighter was that whenever evening came we all had to lie down with our guns in our hands in a line up as security for the commander. One night, the man got up and found we were stupidly asleep. He picked all our guns and said, "You claim to be body guards but what kind of body guard sleeps recklessly like that?" The next morning he said all of us should be caned. When he gave such orders there was no mercy. You had to get ready for the canes. They cut sticks and we were thoroughly beaten. If you are to see my back, you will appreciate that a cloth is very useful. Our buttocks would be caned until it bled and this too has left marks behind. That day we were caned so much and later our guns were handed back to us. There was a time we were sent for standby in Aruu and we used up all the water. We got thirsty and drank each other's urine. You were killed if you refused to give your urine. Many of us died because of thirst that time.

After Aling has recomposed herself, she continues as if there was something she forgot to say earlier on. She says:

We had to dig for the Movement.¹¹ At two in the night we went to dig. It was dark and you would not know what you

¹¹ The women often refer to the LRA as "the Movement".

were digging. By the time morning came we would have finished our part and another group would come. The field was very big. We were to work continuously without standing to take a break. We were beaten so badly when we refused to dig. We dug morning and evening. After digging there was no food to eat. If you were to eat it was very little. You had to eat once a day.

We had to cut grass for thatching houses. I cut so much grass for the rebels that if I had cut all of that grass for myself then it would have been something else. I still have the scar from the sickle while cutting grass. It was terrible.

We also had to burn trees to leave room for the plants to grow. We did not just cut them. We were told to do that for our leisure. We burnt trees while we rested. We would go back home at seven in the night and again leave at two in the night. Our work was not appreciated yet we worked so hard. They insulted us: "You are stupid and useless. If you were home you would not be taken by any man. We are taking good care of you. You are like rubbish from washed water. We are doing you good."

There were some commanders who were not so bad but the one I stayed with was terrible. If you stayed home you had to cook for everyone, grind the millet and cook for the mess. Your hands became rough. You took care of all the children. We took care of all the kids even if they were not yours. When there was a harvest we picked everything. We picked the harvest all night. It was a big field. You would not see the person in front or behind. You would not see the end of the field. We harvested all night. He did not allow us to eat. When he was away at least we would cook in the garden. During times when we could not dig we had to look for food to cook for the rest of the group. We looked for wild plants like *adyebo* to cook. We prepared these without salt and ate. These were very difficult moments.

Jodie swallows hard as though her mind has flashed back to

something really bad.

When I was abducted, I did not know what a co-wife is. I was taken to be a *tingting*. At first the lady took good care of me. Later her friends asked why she was taking good care of me yet I would become a wife to the man later on, she was told to mistreat me when I was still young before I became a wife. She stopped giving me food and treating me well.

Chapter 4: Escape

'They told us we would be poisoned if we escaped.'

We are still seated in a circle in the compound of one of the women. Her neighbours are going on with their work oblivious to what we are talking about. To an outsider we look like we are giving in *bolicup*¹² and nothing more. The afternoon has dragged on and it is coming to evening. The women have chores to do at home but they decide to finish telling us their story. The birds are quiet and I wonder if it was also about time we stopped, but since the women have finally opened up we patiently wait for them to finish. Anying puts down the doll she was making and says:

The reason why we stayed for so long in captivity is that if you left they tracked you to your home and killed your relatives and neighbours. We were told that whenever someone escaped and they were found, they were killed because the rebels did not have a jail. The alternative prison they had was death. There was no amnesty before 2000 and whoever returned home was killed. There was a girl who was killed from home by the rebels. She was followed up to her home. This was why many people were scared to come back home. If you returned the government also said you were an LRA spy. They said

12 Small savings that women give in informal savings groups.

you were there to get information and then go back to the bush. When I was abducted, seven of the people that I was abducted with were killed in my presence because they tried to escape. How could I escape after seeing that?

Beating was common among the rebels. Sometimes women were beaten until they were unconscious or died. Escaping was discouraged and whoever was found was beaten or killed. When I arrived in Sudan I tried to escape but I was caught and caned on the buttocks, about 300 strokes. The wounds became septic. It took me about two years to heal. My friend who knew about my escape was also punished. She was pregnant and did not survive after the caning. She died. Still, I could not stop thinking about escaping.

My older child suffered when we were moving. The boy who carried him never used to protect him, even from thorns. The child was scratched all over with thorns. I managed to escape after staying in the bush for long. I first tried to escape but was found and beaten 40 strokes. Life was hard. I stayed with the rebels and got pregnant again. My new born and my older children were suffering so I decided to escape again. There was no food and we only survived on wild plants like *adyebo* and *anumu*. My child was as thin as a skeleton. All his bones could be seen. I asked the boy who was carrying my child to give him to me. I carried both my children. I had made up my mind to leave. I even told the rebels. They thought I was joking because I had stayed for long. As we were moving, I waited for everyone to go then I squatted somewhere until they all walked passed me. That was how I remained and managed to escape and return home.

Daisy also narrates her escape story. She says:

I used to fear escaping even if I thought about it all the time. I never forgot of home and missed my parents every day. Actually, many abducted children developed diarrhoea and fell sick when they thought of home and

died. We were told not to think of home if we did not want to die. They also told us we would be poisoned from home if we escaped because we stayed with rebels. They just threatened us but we didn't know. They told us that if we escaped with our boys their penises would be cut off and he would turn into a woman. I had given birth to a boy. We thought this was true since we were young and naïve.

When you escaped and was found you were at times killed there and then. However I made up my mind to escape one day during a battle. That day many people died. I planned to escape together with my friend. People were scattered and we separated from the rest of the group.

We stayed alone for three days. I escaped with the babysitter and my child. I decided to escape with the sitter because he took care of my child and brought him back to me during the battle. We were told by the rebels that when you escaped and soldiers found you, you were raped and killed. I had that fear. I dressed up my child as a girl because they said girls were not harmed. We ran and reached a certain home in Acholibur and spent a night. The next day we were taken to Acholibur barracks. I found other people who had been captured and those who escaped. The other girls began to have relationships with the men in the barracks. They did not mind of their problems. I felt so bad. There was no food in the barracks. We ate boiled beans and bad *posho*. We came when soldiers had just been paid. The soldiers wooed women with the money.

One day a government commander called us and talked to us. He did not know Acholi very well. He said that most of the soldiers were sick. He said that since we were from suffering we should mind of our lives and not think that the men's money would help us. Others left the barracks pregnant with the soldiers children. I made up my mind that even if I was to be killed in the barracks I would not sleep with any man. The army's plane came

and picked us. We were then taken to Lira in Rakelle reception centre and stayed there for three months. There were only tents in the rehabilitation centre and no building yet at that time. We were the first survivors to come.

Chapter 5: Home

'This is not my child.'

When some of the women returned, they found home was not what they had expected to be despite having longed for years to return where their hearts belonged. Anying is the first to tell us her experience when she returned home.

Very many women died because of the war and even us who have returned still have problems. When I came back home, my brother came to check on me. When he went to tell my mother, she did not believe him. She said, "If you want to laugh at my fate then you continue." He did not know what to do. She said I had been killed before, that I had been bombed on a tree. My brother said I was alive and had come back. She was told to come and see me but she refused saying I had died. My brother came alone.

GUSCO,¹³ the rehabilitation centre I stayed in, was told about what was happening and they said my mother should be brought to see me. She was told to go and check on the person who was being mistaken to be her daughter even if I was not the one.

¹³ Gulu Support the Children Organisation, a rehabilitation centre on the outskirts of Gulu where many of the women first stayed upon return.

When she came to the rehabilitation centre she was counselled before meeting me. She was advised not refuse me. She was told to ask me details of our home, relatives and parents. When I met her she asked me questions but while she did so she did not seem to welcome me and the children. She asked me what her name was and my father's. I told her my father's name and hers, my sibling's names and the neighbours. Later she said, "This is not my child, by the time my child was abducted she was not this ugly." I felt so bad.

She never gave me the things she carried for me from home. She told my brother, "If you take another clan's child to your home then you will be the one to sort it out. It is up to you. I have to go."

The staff at the rehabilitation centre said she needed time and had to be counselled. She was talked to and slowly I began to see her change. She later accepted to go with me even if I was not her child. That was when I realised she was changing. I was happy because I knew that she had accepted that I was her child. I had been heartbroken before she accepted me because she was the only person I had. My father was injured when I was abducted. He fell sick and died later on. Now she loves me and supports me. They have been talking to her slowly but when the news had just been broken to her she acted strange.

The father to the child I came back with neglected us. He does not take care of the child. He seems not to even remember that he had a child in the bush. I have to take care of the child alone. He is actually being paid as a soldier by the army but does not give support to the child. He stays with a few of his children but not all. Some of the women he had are surviving on their own and taking care of the children.

Jodie also tells us her challenge when she was reintegrated back in the community.

When we returned we were welcomed well. Many people came to see us at the airfield. From the bush we were told that we would be killed when we came back home. I used to think that there were no people at home. We were brought with a plane from Juba. We were happy. First, we were taken to the barracks. We slept there for one night then we were taken to GUSCO. The time we stayed in GUSCO differed depending on your situation. After staying there for a while it was my time to go home.

I was welcomed well in GUSCO but when I reached home I was not welcomed well. I thought that maybe this was because I was an orphan. No one from my family checked on me from the rehabilitation centre. None of my family followed me up when I went back to the centre. They did not even tell my maternal family.

When I left GUSCO, one of the social workers at the centre took me home to make sure I would be welcomed well. When we reached home we found my uncle but he did not welcome me well. The staff at the rehabilitation centre saw that my family was not very welcoming. They told me to first get a house to rent. I went and looked for a house. My auntie's son came to pick me but he was stopped by the rehabilitation centre. They were not sure if they would take good care of me. He came for me five times but the rehabilitation centre said they would be the ones to take me home.

The second time I went home I found my uncle had locked the house I was supposed to stay in. He told me to go to my father's sister. We found she was drunk. She said, "It is good you have brought her here. She has come with things from the bush and will help me. Her things will help me."

I said, "Take me back in the car, I am not staying here. I would rather get somewhere else to stay."

My auntie then said, "She has come back from the rebels and now she does not want to stay home. She does not want her people. Lakwena¹⁴ can make people

14 Rebels.

confused.” I told people from the rehabilitation centre not to mind her.

I was given everything to start a house from the rehabilitation centre. I was given *odii* (peanut butter) and *magadi* (soda ash) to start my first meal. I asked for a mingling stick and my auntie refused. I broke a stick and mingled food.

The way I was welcomed was not good. I thought that if my parents were there it would have been different. My maternal relatives heard of my return and came to check on me. At least they welcomed me unlike my paternal relatives. When they welcomed me my life became better.

Right now I am living on my own. The child I came back with from the bush is the challenge I have. I do not know where the child’s clan is. Right now he is being segregated in the community because he was born from the bush. We also gave birth to the girls when we were still young and they are almost our size now. When you decide to get married and move in with your daughter, the man can sleep with her when you are not around. It has happened to some of the women. This is so painful. When I think about this, I decide that men are useless. There are many examples of such incidences.

When kids from the bush are in a school they are called names. This hurts them. Other kids are stopped from playing with them because they are from the bush. When our children fight people say that they have *cen*¹⁵ yet people fight even if they are not from the bush. You will always be sad because of such comments and walk out of the marriage. When you are not strong, you can fail to bring up your child. When your brothers go for dowry, people say Kony slept with your sister without paying anything. She is already old. This hurts me a lot. I cannot go to any man’s home. I cannot stay with a man without him paying my dowry.

15 Ghostly vengeance.

Aling puts down her baby after it has suckled and tells us:

When I returned I was taken to World Vision rehabilitation centre. My family was called to pick me since I had stayed for long in captivity. None of them came for me. I looked for the home with the things I was given from the rehabilitation centre. I used a bicycle to go home. No one was happy to see me when I reached. They did not even remove the luggage from my head. My parents had died and I had to go to my auntie's home. There was no one I could stay with. There was no ritual that was done for me when I returned because there was no one to do it for me. My brothers could not do it. My auntie did not want the children I came back with to play with her son's children. She did not want me to get food to prepare. Life was hard.

Eventually I left my aunties' home. I could not stay with my brothers because I have many children so I decided to buy a small piece of land because I had nowhere to go. One day someone came and said I should leave. He said I had no rights over the land. He said my money should be paid back. I had to leave the village and rent a place to stay in.

When I went to rent one day the landlord said I can easily kill their children because I am from the bush. My life was hard when people knew that I was from the bush. When my child beats another they say he is beating the other child because he stayed in the bush. They say his mind is not okay. My older child is rough but people are born differently. One day he was playing with his friends and said he was going to his father. His friends asked him his father's name and where he was. He said, "My father's name is Kony." The other children ran to tell their mothers. I did not know what was happening. I found my child being interrogated. I asked him why he was being asked questions. He said it was because they were asking him about his father. There was a man called Wonkom whom my child calls his father.

I had to move because they began to look at the

child in a bad way. As a young child he is innocent. He does not know what he says offends anyone. Recently I went to the hospital and when I came back his feet were swollen and could not walk. He just dragged himself. Yet when I left he was fine. I don't know if he was beaten or not. I was sad because I thought that maybe they thought the child was from the bush and he was bewitched. I have decided to stay there because if I move school would be far for him. I cannot move again.

Rebecca narrates how she has failed to settle in marriages because of her past.

When I settle in any relationship, the men begin to say that I should go to their villages and dig. I cannot go to the village because my child is under a sponsorship programme in town. The person who is paying for my child's education says that when I take the child to the village, he will not pay for him. I do not have the capacity to pay for the child's education. The child's fees will be paid by him up to senior six. I think of my child's future and continue to stay in town. The men tell me that if I want my child to study in Gulu town then I can continue staying alone in town. They eventually leave. This is what is making it hard for me to be married. There is also no man who will take care of your children from the bush and his. He will only take care of his children.

Men these days have abandoned the responsibility of raising children. I have to struggle to care of the children I gave birth to at home and in the bush. I am not doing anything to earn a living. There are times when we do not have money to buy medicine or take the children to the hospital. We then have to take care of the children we gave birth to from the bush and at home. When I was married I was not to fall sick or do anything. They said I was from the bush and would kill them. When I fought with my co-wives they said I was from the bush and would kill them. They said my children were from the

bush and would spoil other children. I said bad things to people because of anger. I told them I would show them my 'bush mind'. It was because I was annoyed.

The man listened to his relatives and we had to separate. He said since I was from the bush he even doubted if the children were his. He said he would not stay with me because we did many things in the bush. He said I might kill him. I went back home and unfortunately my grandfather was just given the land we are staying in. It did not belong to him. When my father and his siblings died, we were all chased from the land. We did not know that it belonged to our grandfather's friend since we were young.

There is nowhere I can stay with these children. I don't know where my children can stay. I am now in town renting and taking care of my children. I have hopes that one day the future will change and it will be better. Since am a grown up woman I wanted to stay with a man.

When people went home from the camps there was a lot of stigma. People began to tell our children they were rebel's kids. Even my relatives did that apart from my immediate family. I could not answer them because they would say that I have *cen*. I had to keep quiet. When I began to rent, my neighbours told their visitors that people from the bush were living near them. I did not show them that I was annoyed because I thought they would continue to talk about us. They also began to tell the landlord he had brought someone with *cen*. When we started sharing our stories in the group we realised how we could handle these people and ignore their comments. I supported those who insulted me and was close to them when they were in trouble.

Maggie tells us:

In 2000 all of us wives to the man who had remained behind escaped to come back home. When I came back home I knew I was already sick. In 2006 I went to the

hospital and began to take ARVs. I was so angry. I had no choice but to be infected. I had been forced to have the virus. This is what hurts most. I did not want to but I got it. I wanted to die after all my family had already seen me one more time. I did not know how to break the news to my mother but one day I found the courage and told her that the man I stayed with in the bush had HIV/AIDS. She was supportive and now I am living positively. She encouraged me and said many people were HIV positive and taking ARVs.

On the 3rd of August 2006 I began to take ARVs. I began to live positively. Not every woman who came back with the virus is lucky to have a supportive family. One of my friends got infected when her husband abducted a girl with HIV. She gave him the virus and he also passed it on to his wives. She is home and always crying and sad because her children are being rejected by her family. She wonders what will happen to them if she dies. When she takes her children to her mother, they suffer a lot. They are used like slaves. They are always in the garden and stay hungry. She once found them with wounds all over their bodies. She came back home with the man but they later separated. He is not helping her take care of the children. He is actually acting like a lunatic and once sold off their child to a certain lady. She only got the child almost a year later when the authorities intervened. She is on ARVs but her major problem is taking care of her children. She is always stressed because of their welfare yet doctors tell us we should not be stressed or else we fall sick.

It is not good to fall sick when you have HIV. When I went to the village I met one of my friends who is also sick. She had lost a lot of weight. She told me she digs a lot and it has contributed to her sickness but she has no other source of income. Her chest also pains because of the luggage she carried in the past. She is also having a problem with land wrangles with her relatives. They chased her away from her father's land and told her

she has no rights over it. She is being threatened with death. They say she was once a rebel and can easily kill them. They actually blame her for one of the killings that happened in her village when she was still in captivity that she is the one who sent the rebels to her home.

People with HIV/AIDS are still being stigmatised in the communities. On top of being stigmatised as a formerly abducted woman you are also stigmatised as an AIDS patient. Being formerly abducted and HIV positive makes life more difficult.

Daisy also finds the courage to talk about her suffering at home.

I was not allowed to go back to the place from where I was abducted. My uncle thought I would be heartbroken if I knew that my parents had died. He later told me that rebels found my parents on the way and killed them. Our last born was two months and was the only one who survived the attack. I began to think of how my parents used to take good care of me. I don't think I will still have that same life. My mother left behind eight children. When I think of it today I cry. Those who were to take care of my mother's children were also killed. My grandma is old. There is no one to take care of my children and siblings.

I stayed with my uncle's wife and she looked at me like an enemy. Her family was killed by the rebels. I left to get married. I suffered from a sexually transmitted disease and when I told the man he told me I should not disturb him. He says I got the disease from the bush. He left and I am now taking care of the kids alone.

I wanted to go back to school but there was nowhere to take my child. I was then advised to go for tailoring. I am the one to take care of my mother's children up to now. Our last born is staying with me. I am the one who has to take care of my siblings. I want to go school but there is no one to help me. I have to struggle for the kids to eat. At times we sleep hungry. Life is hard. If you are to think of it you can commit suicide.

I pray to God that one day Kony and Museveni would think. I am sad because the war spoilt my future. My parents were working hard and would have paid for me to go to school. I pray to God that this war would stop with me and not my children. My prayer day and night is that Kony and Museveni should have mercy so that Ugandans don't suffer and that it is not repeated. God should change the heart of Ugandans and Acholi. We didn't want to go to the bush. We are suffering in the community. We should be supported. We just ask mercifully.

Oroma who has been quiet all along and is our final story teller says:

At times when I am at home the memories of the past flash back to me. I still have dreams and night mares of the past. My child also has hallucinations and sees certain things others don't see. There was a time he had to stay home because he could not be managed in school. People say it is *cen*. I also think it is *cen*. He was prayed for and rituals done for him but he is not yet fine.

Sometimes when I am walking I see things that remind me of the past. For example, when I was going home one day and I saw *adyebo*. We didn't have enough food at home that day so I picked some to cook. When my mother saw it she asked me what kind of vegetable it was. I told her it was the food we used to eat in the bush. She told me that was a weed and should not to be eaten. I had to throw it away.

I could not tell my neighbour the details of my life in captivity because I don't want to break her heart, even if I know it is good to share some of these things to be relieved. When I see *adyebo* these days it reminds me of where we came from and what we went through. It reminds of how we survived. It gives me the courage to move on. I have seen it all and there is nothing I can now fear. I need to start a new beginning and not suffer like in

the past. I know I survived for a reason.

The women finish telling us their stories for the day. We say a closing prayer and trek on the muddy road home with our feet getting stuck every few metres. We walk together for some time until we all break up to go in different directions as dusk approaches.

Chapter 6: Breaking the Silence

‘We shall be advocating for ourselves, we shall not wait for anyone to do it on our behalf.’

In 2009, as part of her research work, JRP’s co founder began a story telling project. This project’s main objective was to assist formerly abducted women, who we realised were shrouded in silence, to speak up about their experiences and support them to heal. The organisation has now adopted a familiar concept of *wang-oo*, which is embedded in the Acholi culture whereby people would sit around the fire to listen to stories. This led to the birth of the “Ododo Wa” (“Our Stories” in Acholi) project in 2011. Under the project, women meet weekly in groups, sit on a mat under a tree and narrate their experiences as they make beads and toys which they do to earn a living. This setting not only provides a space for women to speak freely but also provides peer support from women who have gone through similar experiences.

Three years after its formation, the women had not only broken the silence but managed to find a sense of healing. As one of them explains, “It is good for us to share ideas as a group. We can talk to each other.” Another woman described sharing their experiences during story telling as “healing a wound”. Today JRP works with nine women groups and has plans to expand.

One of the women who was rejected by her mother says

storytelling helped to give her the courage to talk to her mother. She says:

Before we began to share our issues we could not go to talk to someone and ask them why they treated us badly. After sharing my story with my friends I found the courage to look for where my mother was. Without a mother it was like I was still in the bush. I wrote to my mother and sent the letter through a vehicle. I wanted her to come and we stay with me and live in peace because I felt bad. I couldn't call someone else's other mother mine, yet mine is there. She listened to me and came back. We began to live together. Even if she was not bothered about me she is now changing slowly. Story telling made me realise I can talk to someone about what I think.

Storytelling has also helped the women to share ideas on how they can solve some reintegration issues like stigma. One of the women gave her friends advice during one of the storytelling sessions. She says:

As a girl who came from the bush, you have to forgive yourself as an individual. Be calm when someone comes to you in a rude way. She will be ashamed when you are calm yet she is rude. She will come and ask for forgiveness. No one knows that I came from the bush in the area where I stay. I live with everyone equally. When I am annoyed over something, I leave the place and go somewhere else. There are some things we can control individually. If you cannot control your temper, everyone in the area you are staying in will know that you came from the bush. Be humble with people.

The time that most women, children and boys spent in rehabilitation centres was not enough for them to come to terms with the past. Sharing their stories for the past years has made the women accept their past and come to terms with it. This has helped them solve the problem of stigma. Most of the women

we have been working with have said that since they began to talk about their past they are less provoked when called names in the community and are not violent like they used to be. Stories make it possible for us to find common ground and common cause making it possible for them to overcome their differences which made it easy for the women to come together and fight for a common cause. It has also helped them reclaim their dignity and get a desire to fight for justice and empowerment. After sharing their stories among themselves the women decided it was important for other people to also know what they went through. They decided to form themselves into a network.

The Women's Advocacy Network (WAN)

On 17th May 2011, twelve women representatives from the nine women's storytelling groups together with the JRP Gender Justice Team came together to create the Women's Advocacy Network. What had been discussed during storytelling by the women was to be put into reality. The objective was to find a platform for the women to speak about their issues and seek audience from responsible actors. The women saw this initiative as a forum through which they will discuss issues of concern to them and deliberate on transitional justice processes being planned in Uganda. One participant said the Network was started "so that in the future our voice as women can be heard".

The women said they had often been silenced in justice debates and were afraid to speak sometimes because they did not have the chance to study or did not have avenues for talking. They felt that through this network, they would be heard. The women felt that unless they spoke their plight may never be known or addressed but by organising themselves they would be able to discuss issues that affect women and approach responsible stakeholders to respond to their needs. The women felt that being organised in a network was empowering. They said, "We feel it is important and that we are people with a message to pass across. We are able to work towards creating change in our own lives for instance fighting stigma and enable meaningful reintegration of

women.”

JRP supported this initiative as part of its objective to empowering vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to conduct advocacy for justice. The Women’s Advocacy Network advocates for all war affected women because they all face similar challenges after the conflict. They do not advocate for only formerly abducted women. Rather, they aim to create change in a war affected society. During one community outreach, an elderly man said: “This is good because you are creating change in the whole community.”

Issues women are advocating for

Children

Children form part of the most important advocacy point of the Women’s Advocacy Network. They want to trace the clans of their children in order for the children to know their paternal relatives. One of the women says, “To me, I find it very proper for a child to know his or her identity because, first of all, it is a government law at the moment that every child has a right to know his identity, his tribe and parents.”

Some of the children are already asking where their fathers come from. The women feel they have to show the children their homes to avoid such questions. One of the storytellers says, “Our children have already started asking us to show them their paternal homes, which is so hurting because as mothers we do not know what to say.” Traditionally, a child’s identity belongs to the father’s clan and JRP assists women, who choose to, to mediate and help reunite their children with their paternal clans. This process of child tracing has also led to or created an environment of reconciliation in some clans.

Most of the women are taking care of the children they gave birth to while in captivity alone. When commanders returned home, many seem to have forgotten about the women and the children. As such, the women are struggling to take care of the kids and need help. One of the women says, “We have difficulty in upbringing the children born when we were still young and

paying their school fees. Seeing my child not go to school is what breaks my heart most.”

It is important for the welfare of these children to be taken up seriously by the government and various institutions and not left to only the women since the men who forced them to have the children are not being supportive. The women also advocate for assistance in taking care of their children in the form of free education.

Some of their children are not psychologically stable. The women therefore feel they need intervention by traditional leaders and cultural institutions to help them solve this problem and find the root cause of what is making the children act this way. One woman says, “When we returned we realised that some of our children were behaving in strange manners. It was as if they are running mad. This does not please us. Who knows? It could be because of what we went through.”

The women are also advocating for access to land as women so that they have a place take care of their children. Some of the women came back and cannot access land belonging to their parents or share a portion of land with their families. We conduct outreaches sensitising the community on the rights of women and girls over land so that women can have access and rights to land in the communities where customary laws are used when handling land matters.

Stigma

Stigma is one of the primary issues that the women are advocating to get rid of in the communities. They feel they have not been accepted fully in the communities together with their children. One of the women discourages stigma against children and says, “If children are stigmatised, they will become bitter. They will grow up thinking of the words that people tell them. He will be bitter and this will disrupt peace in this country.” JRP is supporting them through community outreaches and using radio talk shows to address the problem. It is still important for the communities to be sensitised on accepting the women and their children.

Social and economic empowerment

Many of the women were abducted when they were young and missed out on opportunities to get an education and have a better life. There is an urgent need for livelihoods programs to support them so as to empower them economically life. The women have to look for income to take care of the children they gave birth to. They need skill training, access to education and income generating activities so that they can take care of themselves and the children.

Health needs

Health services are one of the advocacy issues. Most of the women gave birth before their bodies were ready for motherhood and some of them developed complications or were torn while giving birth and due to lack of proper medical attention in the bush they still feel pain up to now. Some of the women were also hurt during battles while others still have bullets in their bodies that need to be removed. Some of the women also returned home with HIV. On top of all the problems they are going through they also have to face the challenges of living with HIV/AIDs. A woman with a bullet in her body says, “I got injured by a bullet on my knee and it is still buried there. The pain is seasonal but when it comes it becomes difficult for me to walk.” They also carried heavy luggage for long and developed back pains that persist up to date. Others still complain of chest pain.

The health needs of the women are a big priority since they cannot take part in active day to day activities. Some cannot dig because of the complications they have. The women cannot afford to foot the hospital bills and there are few organisations right now that provide them with support to access medical care. Others need to undergo very expensive surgery. The government and various institutions need to come up and support the health needs of the women.

Psychosocial support

The women also need continuous psychosocial support even after they have been reintegrated back in the communities after staying in rehabilitation centres. The women still need support to overcome what they went through. One of them says during a discussion, “After I was taken by the rebels I suffered a lot leading

to the distortion of my mind and I ran mad at one time. I got saved and now I feel better although I still get confused whenever the moon is up.”

Acknowledgment, apology and forgiveness

The majority of commanders who mistreated the women and violated them were given blanket amnesty, returned home and appear to be going on with their lives without any remorse. The women feel these men should ask for forgiveness from them because of what they did. Some of the women have managed to forgive the men on their own but others have not. One of the women who forgave the man says, “I usually see him and he asks me to greet him. I thank God that I have now forgiven him.”

Another woman who has not forgiven and says, “He was given blanket amnesty but I can’t forgive him. This is because of the terrible things he did. He even refused to release me when the other women were released.”

The majority of the women feel it is important for the men to apologise for what they did. Some of the commanders who abducted them are now home and the women often meet them. The women also feel the government should also apologise. One of the women says, “If the president knows that we were abducted because of their failure to protect us he should come and ask for forgiveness from us.”

To make matters worse men have been employed by the army but they are not supporting the children. The men have left the responsibility of taking care of the children to the women alone. It is therefore important for the men to apologise to the women even through institutions in place such as churches and traditional leaders. The men also have to be forced to take responsibility of the children.

The women also disagree with the way amnesty was issued. A woman explains: “If it was explained to us that we were given amnesty because we were fighting the government, I wouldn’t have gotten amnesty at all. I know that I didn’t join the rebels to fight the government. After giving us amnesty, the government should make sure that we are resettled well.” The women came back with an extra burden of the children and they feel this should have been considered when being given amnesty packages. It is

therefore important for all processes to be gender sensitive and not handle everyone collectively since everyone has different needs in society to produce satisfying results.

Reconciliation

The women are also advocating for reconciliation to take place. They believe this will solve the problem of stigma and also make their children to be accepted. They are advocating for forgiveness within the communities. A woman says, “My prayer is that people should be sensitised so that they can forgive each other.” They also think it is important for both victims and perpetrators within the communities to apologise to each other. A woman says, “Reconciliation is important because if you hit someone with a car and the person dies and you run away without apologising of course people will be angry with you forever unless you come and apologise.”

Justice without reconciliation is not whole, which is why it is important to have either formal or informal truth telling processes that will lead to reconciliation. This will support the victims and survivors of the war to move on and begin to relate well with each other. Genuine apology and forgiveness can help to heal wounds of the past and make people continue with life positively. Women want genuine reconciliation to take place so that they are accepted together with their children. A woman laments, “What we are going through is like a septic wound. I call upon my people, my tribe-mates, religious, traditional leaders, I know that you have forgiven us but not with your entire heart. We have people who have been accepted by their parents but they say we can accept you but not your child.”

How these issues are addressed

WAN works with stakeholders such as traditional and religious institutions, community leaders, government institutions, international organisations, the media, policy makers, other women networks and civil society organisations that understand their experiences and work in the field of justice, peace, human rights and gender related issues. WAN participates in invited

events and meetings on issues that pertain to their welfare and redress to the violations they experienced. For instance, they have begun to dialogue with Government on compensation and reparation, organising events where these stakeholders will take part in, consulting with them on how to move on with this initiative as well as seeking their support to advance their cause. WAN works with institutions or individuals whose work is relevant to their issues and which work to address them best. WAN also holds community outreaches to have dialogues with the community. The women have hopes of widening their advocacy network outreach from national to international level.

‘We need to give hope to other war affected women like us.’

Final Word by the Chairlady of WAN

During the conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda, young girls suffered a lot. They went through hell and were very lucky to have survived. These girls were robbed of a normal life, a chance to go to school, a chance to enjoy fundamental human rights entitled to all. These are some of the testimonies of girls who were abducted, they are heartbreaking and real. These women are the lucky ones who survived, however, many others are still missing. We hope and pray that something will be done to ensure their safe return back home.

When we returned, we hoped to be welcomed with open arms, but reading from the testimonies, we can conclude that it was not always the case. Many girls who returned continue to face challenges which include stigmatisation from a community that is bitter about the war. Many people in our community have not reconciled. We could have recoiled in our own cocoon and let things be, but no we realise that we have a role to play to help rebuild our community.

That is why I am happy about the formation of Women’s Advocacy Network. Through this platform we are now talking to communities at the grass roots encouraging them to embrace

peace and reconciliation. We were all affected by the war, we all lost our loved ones, our homes and our livelihoods, but we stand strong wanting to move on, ensuring that people know what we went through and the challenges we continue to face.

We realise that we are the only ones who can be advocates of our own cause. We are working hard to seek justice and reconciliation. We are working hard to fight stigmatisation and we are working hard to ensure that our children have a normal life like other children. We know this is not an easy journey, but even though we did not go to school we are embracing this as our battle to conquer and we shall conquer. We shall be the change we want to see and as the saying goes when a woman and God agree nothing will stand in their way.

Chairlady Women's Advocacy Network, Amony Evelyn Naima.

A *dyebo* is a compilation of stories told at a 'storytelling' session organised by the Justice and Reconciliation Project, an NGO based in Gulu, northern Uganda. It is the story of women of different ages and backgrounds in northern Uganda that were abducted during the height of the Lord's Resistance Army conflict in the region. Starting at the beginning of their journey from Uganda to Sudan and back home, their stories illustrate the unique challenges faced by women during and after conflict.

About the Justice and Reconciliation Project

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was established in 2010 as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Gulu, Uganda to understand and explain the interests, needs, concerns and views of communities affected by conflict and to promote sustainable peace through the active involvement of war-affected communities in research and advocacy.

