

We Are All the Same

Experiences of children born into LRA
captivity

JRP Field Note 23, December 2015

About the Justice and Reconciliation Project

The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) was established in 2005 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.

Find out more about JRP at <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.com> or email info@justiceandreconciliation.com

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Acronyms

CBC	Children born in captivity
CBW	Children born of wartime sexual violence
GoU	Government of Uganda
GUSCO	Gulu Support the Children Organisation
IDP	Internally displaced persons
JRP	Justice and Reconciliation Project
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRA	National Resistance Army
PAR	Participatory Action Research
TJ	Transitional justice
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UPDF	Uganda People's Defence Forces
WAN	Women's Advocacy Network

Executive summary

Thousands of children were born into the captivity of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). These children live all over greater northern Uganda, especially in the Acholi sub-region, and face a multitude of unique challenges and hardships. This field note is based on the lived experiences of a group of children born into LRA captivity documented over three years. It argues that they must be recognised as a child survivor population with unique needs and potentials.

The following are short summaries of the main research findings:

The children face significant stigma from communities, peers, and even at times from family members, including violent abuse from stepfathers, so they employ strategies to keep their identities secret. Those whose fathers are top commanders still at-large fear for their safety if their fathers are captured. Other children do not know their lineages and long to connect. All the mothers find it difficult to tell them the realities of their identities. Despite such stigma and uncertain identities, the children insist they are the same as other children.

Support from family members is vital to their sense of well-being,

especially with their mothers whom they love deeply. Many children lost siblings in the bush.

Many children live with memories and trauma. They remember the violence from the bush and feel the loss of a parent, or of both parents. Remembering is triggered by sadness resulting from quarrelling, beatings, or sickness. For some, their memories are physically embodied and manifest as spiritual problems, or psychosis. All the children who remember employ strategies to forget.

Religion is important in the children's lives and prayer offers them a form of meditation to help them quiet their minds, while church provides them with a welcoming place to be among friends.

Children are unlikely to access their land inheritances, and they feel hopeless.

The children dream of a bright future for themselves, but the layering of their unique hardships on top of the significant poverty they live in makes that unlikely.

The children found the project to be transformative. The participatory action research methodology and opportunity to play enabled deep

friendships to develop while the children learned about themselves, their mothers, and how to manage their identities and challenge intergenerational problems.

A number of the children's rights have been violated and require redress. They should be active agents in processes of transitional justice.

Important recommendations:

1. Documentation of children born into LRA captivity must continue and should include records of children who died.
2. Broad community sensitisation initiatives must be implemented.
3. The children must be appropriately engaged to identify needs and peer support activities such as this project should be expanded across the region.
4. Mothers must be empowered with livelihood skills and grants.
5. Fathers must be held accountable for support of their children.
6. The government must support the children so they grow into productive citizens

Introduction

Children born into the captivity of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) remain a largely neglected and overlooked child survivor population. The children who successfully transitioned out of the LRA exist on the margins of their society, stigmatised and with limited life opportunities. This field note offers a review of the lives of 29 such children living in the urban centre of Gulu town, drawn from a three-year project documenting their lives. While the children have developed strategies to conceal their true identities, this report determines ways to support their future well-being, while simultaneously contributing to the reconciliation process of their communities.

This field note begins with a brief review of the context in which this study is situated, its methodology, and limitations, followed by an explanation about the critical importance of a project grounded in the voices of the children themselves.

The subsequent sections highlight the key issues raised by the children throughout the project period. First, the field note examines how stigma and the issue of identity define their everyday encounters and relationships. The children face stigma both in intimate relationships

and in their wider communities. As they move toward adulthood, the problem of who they are and where they belong grows. Many live without knowing their lineages. Mothers struggle to disclose the truth about their identities to their children who are desperate to know. Yet, despite these problems, the children profoundly state that they are the same as other children and should not be stigmatised.

The next section "Living with traumatic memories" examines the realities of living with the trauma that is unique to their life experiences. What they remember, when and how they remember are significant to how they experience life and who they are. Some children embody their trauma and experience spiritual problems, or psychosis. The children who remember employ strategic "forgetting" as a mechanism to cope and to move beyond their pasts and their identities and the immediate hurt that remembering invokes.

Next, the section "Family support" illuminates the importance of intimate relationships with family members (mothers, paternal families, siblings, lost and half siblings). These connections often provide comfort, key survival resources, and a sense

of belonging. And yet, Section VI demonstrates the significance of absent families – either due to stigma, loss, or unknown lineages. Without such support, many remain without access to land and the security that brings. Living with unknown paternal families, boys remain unable to inherit the land they are customarily due and that is required to belong.

The section “Prayer” explores how, for some children, prayer and going to church offer them a place of belonging and a means of meditation and social learning.

The next section, “The future,” looks forward, recognising the children's lives will always be shaped by their pasts, despite their best efforts and intentions. And “Project outcomes” outlines the positive impacts the project has had on the children's lives. Finally, this field note explores the implications these findings have on the field of transitional justice, followed by significant and major recommendations.

Background

Northern Uganda has experienced decades of war, resulting in widespread social, cultural, political, and economic insecurity. The war between the LRA and the state forces

of the Government of Uganda (GoU) under President Yoweri Museveni began in 1986 and devastated the people and landscape of the North until the LRA moved operations into neighbouring countries by 2007, after peace talks failed.¹ The war displaced over 1.8 million civilians.² The Acholi people were hardest hit by the conflict and the consequences of the war persist in daily life across the Acholi sub-region. The war's opposing actors are often presented in ambiguous ways, with the LRA usually depicted as waging a holy war against the Ugandan state forces. In reality, however, the information documented and analysed over the preceding decades presents a very complex political confrontation in which neither actor can be identified as the primary aggressor.³

During the war, the leader of the LRA, Joseph Kony, pursued the abduction of his own Acholi people in part to develop “a new moral order, a forceful purification of the old and the birth of a ‘new Acholi,’” or Acholi *manyen*.⁴ Forced marriage was thus a political project in which Acholi men and women, boys and girls were forced to “marry” and bear children as “families” in an effort to expand this new Acholi population. The children born into LRA captivity were kept within this highly regulated moral order and often

1 Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2009). “Attacks on Civilians in Western and Central Equatoria States, Southern Sudan, Between 15 December 2008 and 10 March 2009 by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).”

2 JRP Field Note XIII (2011).

3 C. Dolan (2013). *Social torture: the case of northern Uganda, 1986-2006* (Vol. 4). Berghahn Books, p.103.

4 E. Baines (2014). “Forced marriage as a political project,” *Journal of Peace Research*, pp. 405-417.

bore the brunt of violence against the LRA. In media and GoU documentation, such children were said to be “rescued” by the Uganda People’s Defence Forces (UPDF) while the LRA fighters were killed. By all accounts, however, the government included these children (including infants) as “rebels” in their death tolls.⁵

The high number of people abducted during the war led to the birth of an estimated more than 2,000 of these children, a practice that continues to this day within the LRA in neighbouring countries.⁶ Only recently with the efforts of Watye ki Gen (a community-based organisation partnered with Children as Peacebuilders International) and the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) has their unique status begun to be documented.⁷ Once they transition to their mothers’ Acholi homeland, many of these children face stigma, poverty, sickness, and

limited education. To this date, however, very little research has been done to identify and address these issues, particularly from the viewpoint of the children themselves.

Around the world, children born of wartime sexual violence (CBW) remain a highly marginalised child survivor population. Very little has been written about CBW and what exists is primarily from the perspectives of mothers, while the voices of the children remain largely absent. Charli Carpenter argues that their marginalisation stems from the fact that they are objectified in rights discourse and international advocacy networks as the evidence of the violations experienced by their mothers.⁸ Such positioning negates the rights of the children themselves. Like other children born of war around the world, those born into LRA captivity are highly stigmatised by their families, peers, and communities

5 A. Weber & J. Rone (2003). *Uganda, Abducted and Abused: Renewed Conflict in Northern Uganda* (Vol. 12). Human Rights Watch, p.32.

6 This is the lead researcher’s estimation based on the current number of children born into LRA captivity living in the Acholi sub-region who have been documented by Watye ki Gen (a small membership organisation of formerly abducted women whose focus is on children born into LRA captivity, partnered with Children as Peacebuilders International) and including an estimated 500 or so who died, who remain in captivity, who live outside the documented region, or who failed to be counted.

7 Watye ki Gen began building a database of children born into LRA captivity living across the Acholi sub-region in 2013. As they state in

their summary report, they are documenting the “numbers and living situations of [children born into LRA captivity] and their families in Acholiland.”(Summary, p.1) So far, they have documented more than 1,500 children born into LRA captivity currently living in seven districts. In 2014, JRP conducted surveys with almost 400 war-affected women who are members of the Women’s Advocacy Network (WAN). It is available at <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Alone-Like-A-Tree-Reintegration-Challenges-Facing-Children-Born-of-War-and-Their-Mothers-in-Northern-Uganda1.pdf>

8 C. Carpenter (2010). *Forgetting Children Born of War: Setting the Human Rights Agenda in Bosnia and Beyond*. Columbia University Press.

and have experienced significant violations of their rights as children.

The experiences and perspectives of children born into the captivity (CBC) of the LRA offer valuable insights into the social and cultural needs that are necessary for equality, and thus reconciliation in their society. The results of this project therefore concludes that this child survivor population remains highly marginalised but should instead be included as active partners in the reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts of their communities.

Methodology

The qualitative data informing this field note was collected at various points over a three-year period, 2011-2014. The research was collaboratively carried out by Beth W. Stewart, a PhD Candidate at the University of British Columbia, and JRP, with particular assistance and guidance from the organisation's Gender Justice department. An independent research assistant interpreted, transcribed and facilitated the activities over the three years.

There was a total of 15 girls and 14 boys in the project, aged 11-15 years old in 2011. Two of the original male participants dropped out, while two new boys were added in 2012. One girl dropped out of the project and three girls were added in 2012. There were three pairs of full-siblings (one boy, one girl), and 11 participants had a half-sibling in the project (shared mother or shared father).

All activities were conducted in gender-inclusive groups of all boys or all girls. The research methods included participatory activities, drawing, semi-structured and open-ended interviews with the children and mothers (separately), 11 group discussions for each group, personal journals, home visits and participant observation throughout. This combination of methods was intended to encourage creative and reflexive expression and to allow for local knowledge-based understanding and analysis. Furthermore, the project was designed to engage the participants in ways that emphasise empowerment and well-being.

Approximately 70% of the participants were selected randomly from a list of approximately 70 children born into LRA captivity in the requested age range who were living in Gulu town in 2011. This list of children was compiled by a JRP volunteer, a formerly-abducted woman and leader among groups of formerly-abducted women across the Acholi sub-region. The master list is representative of a snowball sampling of children, gathered by formerly-abducted women connected to the volunteer through her advocacy and outreach. The other 30% were selected from this list by the volunteer, reflecting her sense of who would be enthusiastic participants and her personal network.

All participants were accepted into the project once consent was acquired after a home visit with the child's guardian. The purpose of the initial home visit was to introduce the

researchers to both the guardian and child, explain the project to the guardian, and verify the child's age and confirm the child knew s/he was born into LRA captivity. In an effort to avoid possible falsification of the child's age and the child's knowledge about their birth, guardians were informed there would be no material benefit gained from the child's participation. While the guardians of all the participants guaranteed their child(ren) knew they were born into LRA captivity, it became apparent during the course of the project that at least one of them did not.

At the beginning of each research day, the children were given details about the day's activities, the project was reviewed, and their written consent was acquired. The activities were conducted in private settings. Each child received a code and all data was recorded using those codes. Most discussions and interviews were recorded then later transcribed. Given that all the children understand the risks involved in divulging their identities, they readily agreed and kept private the identities of the other participants and the knowledge that was shared during activities.⁹

Limitations

At the start of the project all but one of the participants lived within or very near the municipality of Gulu. While some of the children have since moved to surrounding villages part- or full-time, their experiences are largely within the urban context. The views and experiences of children living in rural areas should be thoroughly examined and understood in future research. Hearsay suggests the stigma is worse in rural areas than in the towns, but this needs to be substantiated.

While mothers were interviewed and consulted, no fathers or stepfathers were engaged. The project aimed to be primarily grounded in the perspectives of the children, yet a variety of perspectives may have benefited the overall understanding. However, given the reportedly volatile relationships of children with their stepfathers and mothers with the children's fathers (the few who remained partnered with their children's biological fathers), the researchers chose not to risk the chance of instigating domestic tensions.

The project involved a relatively small number of participants in order to examine the issues in depth, recognising both the limited funding

9 The issue of privacy was reviewed at the beginning and end of every meeting and often included physical activities to evoke reflection on the importance of maintaining privacy. From almost all accounts, privacy was maintained. There was one exception in which

a boy participant told a classmate that their friend (another participant) was born into LRA captivity. After the other participant talked with the mutual friend, he agreed not to tell anyone. The boy participant who told this story is confident the mutual friend will not tell anyone.

and time constraints of the researchers, but also in recognition of the issue's sensitivity and the necessary establishment of trust. This limited scope, however, means that the data cannot be considered representative. While the issues are relevant to the general case of this marginalised child survivor population and the depth of this research has allowed for complex analysis, the breadth must be expanded in future research to better represent all children born into LRA captivity.

Purpose

Many children born during the war suffered, whether they were in villages, internally-displaced persons (IDP) camps, or the bush. Children born into LRA captivity are a population worthy of attention because they remain relatively obscured in policy and programming, yet their needs and numbers are significant and unique. Furthermore, in many ways their well-being reflects the well-being of their society; their exclusion and stigmatisation reflect their communities' difficulties with reconciling the past.

The problems faced by the children originate in the situations of their birth and are intrinsically connected to the injustices experienced by their mothers. Women who were abducted by the LRA as girls and forced to

“marry” into its ranks face a number of serious challenges that are unique to their common past of living with the rebels.¹⁰ In a petition presented to the Parliament of Uganda in February 2014 to address the plight of conflict-affected women, Amongy Evelyn, chairperson for the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) at JRP, an advocacy group of war-affected women from across northern Uganda, explained that in addition to the failure to be protected from abduction, they endured tremendous physical and mental suffering during their time in the bush. Then, once they returned, they often faced severe stigma, loss of family connections and the challenge of raising their children alone with no support. Many of these women were abducted before they had reached a significant level of education and were forced to bear children when they were still very young, both of which make it very difficult for the women to find gainful employment to support their children.

Some of us were abducted, tortured, raped, mutilated, forced to become wives of rebel commanders, provided forced labor in rebel camps and were also forcefully conscripted to engage in combat. We were forced to bear children under harsh and deplorable conditions. As a result, we developed

10 JRP Field Note II (2006); E. Baines & B. Stewart (2011). “I cannot accept what I have not done:’ Storytelling, Gender and Transitional Justice.” *Journal of Human Rights*

Practice 3(3): 6–14.; E. Baines (2011) “Gender, responsibility, and the grey zone: Considerations for transitional justice.” *Journal of Human Rights* 10(4), 477–493.

health complications such as gynecological problems, chronic back problems, gunshot wounds and were exposed to traumatic experiences. We also gave birth to children in captivity who are being ostracised by the communities we live in.¹¹

by placing the experiences and ideas of children and youth at the centre of analysis. Additional recommendations based on their insights are critical to realise meaningful and positive social change.

In response to the above petition and the associated motion tabled by Aswa county, Gulu district Member of Parliament, Honorable Ronald Reagan Okumu, Parliament passed a resolution in April 2014 calling for a series of measures to support the needs of people affected by the conflict. A three-member committee has been appointed to follow up on the implementation of the resolution. Notably, the resolution recognises the unique needs of children born into LRA captivity. The resolution includes recommendations for funding to support their education, in addition to provision of sensitisation training for teachers. It also recognises the need to support efforts to “identify, integrate and resettle child victims of formerly-abducted women whose clans, social, tribal and cultural belongings are unknown.”¹²

These are welcomed recommendations and a first step towards positive change in the children’s lives. This field note seeks to build upon these accomplishments

11 “Petition by Women’s Advocacy Network to the Parliament of the Republic of Uganda Seeking its Intervention in Addressing Issues and Challenges Faced by War Affected

Women in the Acholi Sub Region.” February 24, 2014.

12 JRP. “Applauding Parliament for Adopting a Resolution on Reparations for War-Affected Women and Children.” April 11, 2014.

Stigma and identity

“If maybe I am hurt inside, then I begin to think about him [father]... If I don’t think about it, I will not know exactly who and what I am.”¹³

Children born into LRA captivity experience life in ways that are unique to their identities. Despite the traumatic hardships they were forced to endure while in the bush, they were accepted and valued within the LRA. Upon their transitions to civil society, however, they faced stigma and social exclusion. Their familial and peer relationships are consequently complex and often based on their identity as a child from the bush. After their transitions, some connected to families they never knew they had, others began to long for the families they may never know – usually their paternal families. The pain of not belonging and not knowing their extended families is experienced as fear for some (particularly those with fathers who are/were top commanders), and sadness by all. Mothers avoid the truth to protect themselves and their children from stigma and the traumatic memories that the truth invokes. Despite their unique lives, the children insist they

are just like other children and should be treated as such.

Stigma

Being “from the bush” carries a certain social identity that encompasses a great deal of moral assumptions. So for many children, they keep this part of their identity very secret. Or else, said one boy, *“They will be jiving, teasing me.”¹⁴* If someone finds out, one girl (not fathered by Kony) said, *“They shame you with it. If you do anything they say you are Kony’s child.”¹⁵* Another girl said, *“Some people will start to use it to jive at you, mock at you.”¹⁶* The mother of a boy reported in 2014 that a neighbour child recently told her son:

You, you know what? If I were you, I would have died. You children who were born in the bush do not even deserve to live because they

13 Male participant, 2014.

14 Male participant, 2011.

15 Female participant, 2011.

16 Female participant, 2011.

don't have anything good in their future. They can never do anything good. So if I were you I would die... You just deserve to die.¹⁷

Such painful stigma can also come from the children's extended families. Mothers returned to mixed greeting by their families. Many of them were shunned, which forced them to live in urban areas, away from the support of extended family. In Acholi culture, a woman customarily lives with her husband's clan once a bride price is paid. Expectations about the rules of marriage continue, but the reality of life in and after war for most Acholi has meant that few are able to fulfill these expectations.¹⁸ For young women returning with children, these expectations are often held against her by her own family. A mother reported in 2013 that her brother informed her that her son's safety and well-being were in danger in their village where he went to school due to growing tensions within the family against him. After returning from captivity, one mother recalled how her family had chased her when the Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO)¹⁹ attempted to reunite her with her family, yelling after her, "*We don't want a rebel!*"²⁰ Other children, however, report positive relationships with their maternal families. Several children drew pictures of their

maternal villages as places where they felt loved. One girl longed to visit her mother's village during their holiday explaining, "*There are very many people, playing is nice and living there is nice. My grandmother is also there. She tells very old interesting stories.*"²¹

For those who have connected with their paternal families, these relationships are sometimes fraught with stigma. A boy reported hearing that a half-sibling born in captivity is experiencing stigma from the paternal family:

I heard that only one person is staying there. And that person is also not staying there comfortably. What they say about that person stigmatises very much. So it's not easy to even stay in that home.²²

Another boy spoke about a recent visit he made to his paternal family to visit his brother and sister whom the paternal family had kept from returning home to their mother. He was not received well and he found his siblings not adequately cared for:

But then those people from my paternal side, I don't like them. I went there last holiday, third term holidays

17 Mother of a male and a female participant (siblings), 2014.

18 JRP Field Note II (2006).

19 GUSCO is a rehabilitation reception centre for formerly abducted people and children born into LRA captivity. Since 1994, it has

provided a variety of services to thousands of returnees, including psycho-social support and family reunifications.

20 Mother of female participant, 2013.

21 Female participant, 2011.

22 Male participant, 2014.

of last year. I went there, no one received me well. Even my own grandfather didn't receive me well. I just want to visit my brother and sister who are staying there, but I found those children were also not in school. My brother is not in school. But the sister is staying with another paternal aunt of mine, so even that one is not in school. The children go to school but they don't stay in school because they chase them just because their school fees were not paid. I was surprised, even my own grandfather did not receive me well when I went there.²³

Some children experience the stigma by purposeful avoidance by the paternal families: *"My mother is still just looking for them [paternal family]. She has not yet got [their home] but when we had just returned and we were at World Vision [reception centre], that was the time they came... but never returned."*²⁴ A boy blamed this experience of feeling unwelcome or unwanted within their paternal families on their fathers not being there to mediate and formalise the relationships: "For you to be loved in your clan, at least your father must first also be there."²⁵

But two of the children who are or have been connected to their paternal families report positive, even loving

relationships: *"My mother thinks that my father's family side spoils me and they don't help her with any school fees so there is no need to go there... [S]taying there was not bad. They even loved us."*²⁶ A mother reports that her son's paternal family receives him well.

No patterns can be deciphered from the project sample to explain why some were received well and others were not. One mother, however, reported in 2013 that the level of stigma has decreased because *"people are beginning to be educated."* She further explained that organisations go into villages and educate people about stigma and there have also been radio broadcasts aimed at sensitising people about the issue of stigma of formerly abducted people and children born into LRA captivity. Further research is needed to better understand what factors lead to positive receptions.

Stepfathers

Step fathers consistently represent a painful source of stigma and oppression for the children. The mothers report difficulties finding men willing to support them and who will not ostracise their children who were born in captivity. A mother of two girls who were born in captivity shared the story of her new husband's ultimatum:

What pained me so much is he told me that, "If you want

23 Male participant, 2014.

24 Female participant, 2011.

25 Male group discussion, 2014.

26 Female participant, 2011.

me to stay with you, then you need to find some place to put these two girls." So I told him only one thing. I said, "You know what, when you came to me you found me when I had these children and I don't have any other place where I can take these children; they cannot live anywhere else... I will not separate with these children."²⁷

But for some of these women, particularly those whose families refused them upon returning from the bush, having a husband represents their only way to regain some social respect and a means to survive. One mother whose own family stigmatised her and her children badly sought out a man in order to escape their abuses, only to be abused and stigmatised by him. At his home, she recalled, they were often told by him and his mother, "*You from the bush! You spoiled our home!*" and, "*Rebel!*"²⁸ The young mother confronted her new husband and mother-in-law and the next day her daughter (a project participant) began vomiting blood from what the mother suspects was poisoning.

Rarely are stepfathers reported as positive, or even neutral, figures in the lives of the children. When they are

neutral, it is early in the relationship, and the children expect him to change: "*I feel not bad yet because he still has not done anything bad to us.*"²⁹ One boy felt his stepfather made him long for his real father: "*I feel bad [when I think of my real father because] that father who is there keeps on beating us,*"³⁰ while a girl similarly said, "*I just feel that maybe if my father was there he would not beat me.*"³¹ Another girl wrote in her journal in 2014, in her own English words:

I have my mother but I don't have my father; he died from the bush. And my mother got married to another man but that man, he doesn't like us. And my mother, after returning from the bush, her own father refused her and we are not to stay with her as my stepfather wants. If it was that I knew before that it would happen like this, I would have remained and die from the bush because it is too much for me and am the biggest. Since he hates me too much now when I am around, like if am back from the school, the mood also changes.³²

Despite such examples of abuse,³³ it remains unclear if most stepfathers resent the children because they are

27 Mother of female participant, 2014.

28 Mother of female participant, 2013.

29 Female participant, 2014.

30 Male participant, 2011.

31 Female participant, 2011.

32 Female participant, journal entry, 2014.

33 When reports of abuse suggested the child was in danger, the researchers met with the mother or guardian and devised a plan accordingly that would minimise risk of further abuse for the child. The children were also connected to psychosocial support services.

from the bush, or simply because they are not their biological offspring. One mother reflected on the ways of masculinity saying, “*These men in Uganda do not want to support children that are not their own.*”³⁴ Nevertheless, the fear of stigma has led the mother of at least one child in the project to hide the child's identity from the stepfather. Furthermore, from most of the stories gathered in this project, it seems that the child's past provides legitimacy to their stepfather's disinterest and even abuse. It is thus likely that the general social permissibility of stigma toward children born into LRA captivity contributes to their reportedly high rates of domestic insecurity.

Children of top commanders at-large

The children in the project who were fathered by some of the LRA's top commanders face an additional level of stigma and fear about revealing their identities, particularly those whose fathers are still alive and being hunted by military forces. And their strategies are consequently more extreme. Many of the children remember very different men than the ones portrayed as evil warlords, responsible for killing and abducting tens of thousands. To them, they were often loving, doting fathers. One boy asked his mother, “*Did my father really love me? [She said] he really does love me.*”³⁵ Referring to a picture he drew of his father (see Illustration

1), a boy explained, “*Because I love him.*”³⁶ A girl similarly explained her drawing of her father by saying, “*Because I like thinking about him.*”³⁷



Illustration 1: A boy's drawing of his father, "Because I love him," 2014.

So these particular children personally struggle to identify as their fathers' beloved children in the face of such depictions: “*My father, if someone else is saying bad things about him, I feel bad. Some people even say things which he did not do,*” the boy continued. “*And some of the things, anyway, his soldiers did but he did not do. All that I think they will count on him... My father, I did not even see him holding any gun. But his soldiers, I think everything people say they did, they did.*”³⁸ One girl said that when she heard about the American

34 Mother of female participant, 2013.

35 Male participant, 2014.

36 Male participant, 2014.

37 Female participant, 2014.

38 Male participant, 2014.

Special Forces sent to capture Kony and the other top commanders, *“I feel bad. Because the aim they said of those commandos was to kill him or capture him, so I cannot feel happy.”*³⁹

A project assistant once overheard a teacher talking about a girl in the project whose father is a top commander, saying that she was caught cheating in class but it is to be expected since she is the child of a top LRA commander. Such negative associations follow the children and will follow them through life, they fear. One girl expressed concern in 2014 that people may come after them if her father is captured and killed: *“They may kill us the way they kill him.”*⁴⁰ One boy who, by 2014 at the age of 16, had spent a great deal of time pondering the issue of his identity and similarly expressed concern for his safety:

What I know is that most of the children of this terrorist, after maybe sometime they may begin to trace for the children... Maybe if accidentally he is caught they will look for all his children and kill them along with him, just the way it happened to those of Bin Laden and so on. So, for me, what I want, I want to study fine. After studying, I want to go and live in a country where people can't identify me easily to avoid all that

problem. So I will work for money from there and then I will come and support, visit my mom. So, I just want to live in a country where no one can identify me.⁴¹

At the start of the project in 2011, he expressed a strong need to remember his father and his life in the bush. He would often ask his half-sister (also a participant) for her memories to help him remember; he felt it was an integral part of who he is. In 2014, his thoughts had clearly shifted into fear and concern for his future if and when his father is captured and/or killed. Here are some of his reflections from 2014:

Sometimes there are even students who come to me and say, “You! Your father did such and such a thing to me.” Like this, like that. So I find it difficult, but I tell them that, “It's not me. I don't know. It's not me.” Sometimes I just keep quiet. So I feel it is going to be really difficult for me because many people are getting to know me. And so in the future, even if I study, I think Gulu is not the best place for me to live in.

I also thought that maybe if he gets captured it is not going to be easy for us. And also here even in Uganda

39 Participant group discussion, 2014.

40 Participant group discussion, 2014.

41 Male group discussion, 2014.

getting a job. Like me, if maybe some people get to know that I am a son to [a commander], so I may not even get a job here easily. Because someone may say, "I am not giving a job to this boy because he's the son to this man, and this man killed my father."

I don't feel very comfortable now because very many people know me. For example, there was a day I was walking on the road then some soldier called my name, "[Boy's name]!" Then I responded because it's my name. When I responded he said, "Yeah, you enter in the vehicle. I'll take you home." I was scared. But then anyway I entered. So after he drove and brought me almost up to our home. So it made me start thinking now in the future in case anything like that happens, very many people know me.

If I manage to go out [of Uganda], I finish my studies and then get to be a mature man now – married, with a family and everything – so I can say it in the news openly

that I am the son of [a commander].... I will have to really, really study the environment. If I'm stable already, I'm married and I've studied, everything, I will have to weigh the situation. One, look at who's in leadership. If it is still people from the other side, the Buganda and the so-on, it may not be easy for me.⁴² They may follow me up and bring me down. That is one. Then secondly, I may look at it – has my father been captured? Has he gone to court? Those are the things I will consider. Is he very weak now? Is he... so I will look at so many things, then I will make a decision to come out. If the answers are favourable, then I will come out.⁴³

Even when they are just trying to belong and playing with other children, hoping to forget, the stigma can arise. As one boy lamented, "*I play with children, with other students and do all the things. But then they say it sometimes even just when they are teasing me. Like when we are playing and someone says, 'Ah! The son of the big man!' Something like*

42 A. Branch (2011). *Displacing Human Rights: War and Intervention in Northern Uganda*. Oxford University Press. According to Branch, the Baganda elites were the primary beneficiaries in Uganda under British colonial rule. Then, when staging its rebellion, the National Resistance Army (NRA), headed by

Museveni, allied with the Baganda and established its base in the centre of their kingdom. This alliance continued through the war and fueled strong ethnic divisions between the Acholi and Baganda, which persists today.

43 Male participant, 2014.

that.”⁴⁴ It is a difficult identity to carry, one fraught with conflicting assumptions and judgments. Not only must the children guard the secret of where they come from, but they must keep secret the identity of their father as well as their love for him. For they believe it could be a matter of life and death.

Managing stigma

To avoid painful incidents of stigma, the children keep the secret of their identities very guarded. They employ strategies of avoiding, pretending, and when all else fails, intimidation. “*I don't tell the story to anyone,*”⁴⁵ said one girl. Another similarly stated, “*I didn't say it to anyone.*”⁴⁶ For a girl in boarding school, she avoids people knowing by dodging the topic: “*Sometimes if they bring that topic up I always change the topic so they don't get the chance of asking me those questions.*”⁴⁷ Another girl studying in boarding school said when others ask her about the war she tells them, “*I was born in Kampala, I don't know. I tell them I was not there. I don't answer.*”⁴⁸

One girl described a fight she had with a classmate who had discovered she was born into LRA captivity. It seems the girl had learned from her father (the head teacher at their school) and publicly teased her about it in school yelling, “*You people who were born from the bush!*” Fearing others would begin to believe this classmate and

taunt her also, the girl in the project gathered two friends who were also born in captivity: “*So we got sticks... we told her that, 'Do you think that we wanted to be born from the bush? That is not proper for us, so for that matter we are going to beat you.'*”⁴⁹ The classmate never spoke of it again. Physical intimidation is not a preferable reaction for the children and is only a last resort. Unfortunately, there are times when they feel so threatened and cannot trust those meant to protect them – such as the school's head teacher.

Unknown lineage

Knowing one's “home” (paternal village) is an integral component of social belonging in Acholi culture. Many children born into LRA captivity, however, will never know their “home” because their fathers are gone and did not provide the mothers with accurate information, such as their real names and their actual home villages for fear of reprisals upon their families. Some fathers, however, sent messages to family members that their wives and children had returned, others had shared their truthful information with the mothers, and in one case a mother explained how her son's father had purposefully taken her to see his home so she would know it. Unfortunately, she does not remember it now and is still searching for her son's home:

44 Male participant, 2014.

45 Female participant, 2011.

46 Female participant, 2014.

47 Female in group discussion, 2014.

48 Female in group discussion, 2014.

49 Female participant, 2011.

[O]ne day when we were in the bush, we went up to his home and he abducted his own brother. Then, we walked a bit with his brother, then he released the brother. Then, he told me when we reached his home, he told me, 'This is our home.' But because I was young, I thought it was not important. I feel I have forgotten everything.⁵⁰

The children find not knowing their home to be a painful void in their sense of identity. As one mother said of her daughter, “[*She*] *has always wanted to know where her clan is. She doesn't want to go, she only wants to know.*”⁵¹ A girl expressed a similar longing, “*I only want to know people from there, just to know the family.*”⁵² Some hold out hope that one day they will get to know their home, as does this boy, whose mother told us his father died when he was still an infant:

For me, my mother told me that my father is not there. But then this group here at least they struggle to trace people's homes, where there are their fathers. That is why for me also I sit here, I sometimes think, 'Ok my father is not there, maybe I will see him one day.' I have

not met them. I don't even know where their village is.⁵³

Some children transitioned out of the bush with neither parent. In reception centres, these children were referred to as “unaccompanied minors.” Many of them became full orphans in the bush, while others have either one or both living parents remaining among the LRA. There are two such children in the project. One has been adopted by a co-wife from the bush and is being raised as her own daughter, after being found mistreated by the maternal cousin who had accepted her from GUSCO as a baby. Both her mother and father remain in the bush. The girl knows she shares the same father as her sisters, but she has yet to be informed by her adopted mother about her biological mother. One day a neighbour told the girl about her true identity and the girl came home asking if she had suckled her breast or not. Her adopted mother, however, continues to be unsure of the best way to address her questions truthfully, although she's clear that she should be the person to tell her daughter and not a neighbour, teacher, or other family member.

The other “unaccompanied minor” in the project remembers his parents well but has been unable to successfully trace his maternal family. At around age 6, the boy was brought to GUSCO. He was picked up by the UPDF the same day he witnessed his parents and younger brother killed in

50 Mother of male participant, 2014.

51 Mother of a male and a female participant (siblings), 2014.

52 Female in group discussion, 2014.

53 Male participant, 2014.

a battle. After some time, he was sent to live with a woman who claimed to be his maternal grandmother. After approximately seven years, another woman came forward claiming to be his maternal grandmother. He was returned to GUSCO and because his maternal lineage could not be confirmed, he was sent to live with his paternal family, who had shown little interest in having him. In 2011 he revealed that his older cousin regularly beats him, “*Because my mother is not there,*” he said.⁵⁴

Considering that so many parents lost their children in the war, it is plausible that both women claiming to be his maternal grandmother are longing for some connection to their lost daughters. Although, the boy reports that the first maternal grandmother used him for his labour and did not care for him. Indeed, he was approximately 14 when he started the project and had only reached P3, despite being a bright boy. The case could therefore be one of child exploitation where, at least the first woman, sought out vulnerable children to work for her.

Unfortunately, in 2014 the boy's paternal uncle died leaving another great loss in his life. Knowing his real maternal family feels more critical now than ever, particularly since he believes he is now 18. He desperately wants somewhere to belong.

Mothers' fears of sharing the truth

Many mothers have expressed a great deal of trepidation around the issue of talking to their children about their pasts; some children do not have living memories of their time in the bush. The mothers who advocated for this project agreed that age 11 or 12 is a good age for such children to find out. Even though one girl transitioned out of the bush at the age of five, her memories were not clear. She first asked her mother about their past when she was in P1: “*I asked when I was still young. I said, ‘For me, where is my father?’ She told me that first I should grow... She told me from P4.*”⁵⁵ The mothers strive to protect their children from the inevitable stigma that comes with their identities and they fear a young child may not be able to keep the secret.

But even when the children reach an appropriate age, many mothers still struggle to tell them the truth. Over the three-year period of the project, it became clear that several of the children, particularly the younger ones, began to learn who they were from the project. Asked about this, one girl said in 2014, “*I got to know everything when I was already in the project.*”⁵⁶ Another girl began to piece together some clues once she became aware of why she was part of the project: “*Before the project, I used to see her leg which was shot, but I*

54 Male participant, 2011.

55 Female participant, 2011.

56 Female participant, 2014.

didn't know what happened. So after the project began, I knew."⁵⁷ Some of the children reported that the project motivated them to ask their mothers questions and those mothers report being grateful for their initiative to begin the conversation about such a sensitive and difficult topic.

Having children so young has at times felt shameful and not easy to explain, so some mothers choose to tell their children that they are their sisters, at least when the children are still young. This practice served to avoid having to answer the children's difficult questions. But sometimes the children's desire to know the truth is too much, as this mother's story suggests:

He used to ask me very many times. But I used to confuse him and tell him, "My home, where we usually go, is also your village." But I could see it in his face. He would be angry and he would get annoyed with me. And he would tell me, "No, I don't think that is true. Your home cannot be my home." Then he would stay and after some time he asked me again, "But honestly, where is my family? Where is my father?" Then I told him, "My father is your father." And he'd say, "No, you're lying. Your father cannot be my father." So when he insisted

after some time I decided to tell him the truth. I told him, "Look here, in the past I was abducted. After the abduction I went to the bush and among the soldiers of the LRA, one was your father. But unfortunately, he passed away when you were only several months in the womb. So he also never saw you."⁵⁸

It is not known how the boy reacted upon learning this.

On being treated same as other children

Despite being confronted with stigma from peers and family and living with the fear of their identities being revealed, and sometimes with their biological identities unknown, all of the children in the project vehemently and unanimously maintain that they are the same as other children, even those who had begun the project unaware of their pasts. "*We need to be treated equally,*" said one boy.⁵⁹ Because, as another boy explained, "*I feel we are all the same.*" And referencing other children who are orphaned, one boy sympathised, "*Even me, my father is not there with me. Only my mother. We are all the same.*"⁶⁰ A girl reflected that they who were born into LRA captivity deserve to be given the same love as other children, "*We have to be*

57 Female participant, 2014.

58 Male participant, 2014.

59 Male participant, 2011.

60 Male participant, 2011.

treated equally by treating us well and by loving us the same way like the other children."⁶¹

Unlike the stigmatising inference that they are inherently bad, the children are extremely hard-working and strive



Illustration 2: Boy's drawing of the home he would like in the future, 2014.

to be good Acholi adults. When asked what they will be like as adults, the girls appear to strive to be of modest, selfless and have a social conscience. *"I want to be a woman who can be trusted, that under-looks at herself, who sacrifices herself to help others,"* said one girl.⁶² *"I want to be a kind of woman who helps people. When another woman is in trouble, I help,"* said another.⁶³ And recognising the benevolence provided to her by her own mother

and family and friends, one girl said, *"I want to be a woman who helps because for me if I wasn't helped I would not be anyone."*⁶⁴ These portrayals of the kinds of women these girls hope to embody is very much in line with the Acholi characteristics of womanhood described by Acholi scholar Okot p'Bitek as loyal, hard-working and centred around their identities as mothers and caregivers.⁶⁵

The boys tended to strive to be more independent, saying they will be income earners and home owners and men who can take care of their families. *"I don't want to be a poor person,"* explained one boy.⁶⁶ *"[I] should struggle to get a home that is at least like this [points to his drawing of a house, see Illustration 2],"* said one boy,⁶⁷ while another referred to his own drawing stating, *"I drew a picture of my future home with my wife."*⁶⁸ Culturally, Acholi men are expected to become the providers for their families, which in urban areas means earning an income. The boys in the project strive to fulfill their gender roles: *"After I have studied I will start work and earn money."*⁶⁹

61 Female participant, 2011.

62 Female group discussion, 2014.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 O. p'Bitek (1986). *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd.

66 Male group discussion, 2014.

67 Male participant, 2014.

68 Male participant, 2014.

69 Male participant, 2014.

Notably, only four boys desire to be soldiers like their fathers, and two of those are boys whose fathers are currently in the UPDF, and another whose father remains a top commander in the LRA. These boys are likely impressed by the power and respect they see in their fathers' high positions or simply in their uniforms. However, that only four boys desire to be soldiers as adults is arguably significant because it suggests a reopening, at least in possibilities, of non-violent ways for boys to imagine being masculine. After so many years of war, masculinity had become synonymous with violence and war. While their futures may pan out differently than they hope and becoming a soldier may present as their only viable option for income as an adult, there can be at least some optimism that most of these boys, many of whom have witnessed a great deal of violence, strive to be something other than what they have always known.

Family support

*"When I am with my mother I feel so happy."*⁷⁰

Family members are an integral part of the children's well-being. This includes primarily mothers, siblings, stepmothers, and extended family. Without a broad network of support people, it seems that the children suffer more. In other words, the more family members that are positively involved in their lives, the better.

Mothers

Mothers are deeply loved and respected by the children. For many mothers, having children so young (most often between the ages of 14-17) and not having learned how to be a parent left many of them feeling inadequate and unsure. Nevertheless, the mothers carry stories of survival and selfless efforts to protect their children. One mother, for example, was released by the LRA in 2002 with her son, but refused to leave because she did not have her daughter with her. They remained in captivity for two more years before finally escaping with her son, daughter, and a baby in the womb.



Illustration 3: Girl's drawing, "I love my mother," 2014.

There have, however, been unfortunate reports (not in the project) of mothers killing their children in anger, blaming the children for their suffering. One boy reported that when his mother is angry, she tells him about the "bad women" who abandoned their children in the bush and says he should treat her well because, "if she was a bad woman, she would have thrown me in the

70 Female participant, 2011.

*bush.*⁷¹ On a lighter note but with a similar reference, one girl said laughing, “*My mother, when she is talking, she often says she needed to leave me there in the bush because I’m very stubborn.*”⁷²

One mother, who was just 15 when her son was born, described how she came to love and appreciate her son, despite the suffering his dependency brought to her young life.

I ran back there also. I came back and found that he was seriously crying. So I carried him. On his leg here, someone stepped on him with a gum boot, there was a wound already. When I carried him he was still crying. I dropped my luggage to carry him, then I started going with him. So he cried and we just continued. I cried. At that very moment, I also cried. I told myself that this is my child. This is the child who spoiled my future... so I cried and walked together with these people. Now that I've returned home and I sit and look at [him], I see he's the very person who spoiled my future... But again, though he's the one who spoiled my future, I still look at him as the blessing at the same time for me because God knows how He does His things. You see,

when I returned here, it was not easy. I was not received well. So maybe God knew that if I returned at that very time with no child, it would be worse for me. So I look at him as the key to my bright future. So always when I look at [him], I see he's something good for me. He's the only one who is going to open the doors for me. So these other children of mine do not know that I honour him, that I like him so much, that I treasure him so much...I believe he knows I struggled with him so much when I was in the bush. I had to protect him. I had to do everything. If I raise him and he becomes a man, I am sure he is going to struggle to develop his life and to put his life in a very good state, which will always give me pride as a mother who struggled with her child.⁷³

It seems that the children overwhelmingly recognise the suffering their mothers endured for their well-being and survival. When asked how he feels about his mother, one boy said, “*I feel my mother is important because she suffered for me.*”⁷⁴ Another boy who was in boarding school demonstrated a tender concern for his mother: “*When I’m alone... I think about home. I think of my mother. I think that if something*

71 Male participant, 2011.

72 Female participant, 2011.

73 Mother of male participant, 2014.

74 Male participant, 2014.

*should happen to my mother... That because I am not near her, something might happen to her.*⁷⁵ One girl said she feels close to her mother when she tells her stories about their past in the bush, but it also saddens her: *“I like it when my mom talks about the past, but I feel pain in my heart to hear that she suffered so much.”*⁷⁶ And another girl felt that they have a special bond with their mothers because of the difficult past they shared:

There is a special relationship because of the past. For example, if maybe something has gone wrong, then they need to punish the children... the mother will just say “Ah, for me you don’t punish my child. You don’t know how much I suffered with this child.” So they protect you.⁷⁷

And the children recognise their mothers’ ongoing struggles as they work hard to provide for them alone, mostly in the informal sector: *“If it wasn’t for her we would not eat because she is the one who looks for food.”*⁷⁸ Others draw a clear link between her past experience of abduction and captivity to her current struggles to provide. One girl made this connection in a journal entry (in her own English words):

Before she was working in [a business] as a seamstress, but now she can stay at home and sew from home, and if people do not bring their clothes that means we are not supposed to eat and our lives depend on the customers. Sometimes we stay for two days without eating... And my mother was abducted when she was in P2 and she grew from there and gave birth to two of us and after returning back she is still suffering with us, so why God not to help her?⁷⁹

The children often attribute their good values and characteristics to their mothers: *“My mother, she keeps on watching us. If we try to do something bad she gets tough on us so she hardens up.”*⁸⁰ Another boy said he learned to be a good person from his mother, by *“listening to what my mother tells me I should be doing.”*⁸¹ And a girl shared her respect for her mother, recognising her sacrifice: *“For me how I see, I have only my mother. She’s both my mother and my father. She’s the one who kept me up to this age and she made me what I am up to today.”*⁸² Mothers sometimes teach humility by drawing on their difficult past. One said his mother tells him not to have the same expectations as other children, *“Because for me she tells me that I*

75 Male participant, 2011.

76 Female participant, 2013.

77 Female group discussion, 2014.

78 Male participant, 2011.

79 Female participant, 2011.

80 Male participant, 2011.

81 Male participant, 2011.

82 Female participant, 2014.

was born from the bush. I don't have to be like the children of some rich people here.”⁸³ They are also motivated by their mothers' struggles to work and study hard, “I feel that since my mom did not study and now she struggles so much to look for a good job and it's very difficult for her to get one. So I feel I should study hard and help her in the future.” Similarly, another girl reflected, “Because your parents did not study, so you have to study hard.”⁸⁴

Since the project participants are the eldest living child(ren) in the family, telling stories with their mothers is often a bond they share with her because the other children do not remember or have not yet been told that their mother was once abducted. The girls in particular say that their mothers sometimes talk about those times and that they enjoy the stories. One girl, for example, likes it when her mother tells the story of how she walked all the way from Juba to Uganda as a five-year-old: *“I hear when she is telling stories. She says that I walked from Juba to Uganda at the age of 5. When she is telling stories about the bush, I also go sit there [to listen]. I like to listen to how I was when I was young.”⁸⁵*

Paternal families

Most children born into LRA captivity do not know their paternal families; only five children in the project had connected with their paternal families at some point in their lives. In Acholi culture, children are born into their paternal family and thus acquire the identity of that clan. Additionally, boys are expected to inherit land from their fathers in order to establish their own families.

Upon their return, a small percentage of mothers were reunited (largely unwillingly or reluctantly)⁸⁶ with their bush “husbands.” Six of the mothers in the project had done so, but only one remains in a marriage-like relationship with him. Of these six, only three of them were the biological fathers of the children in the project. Sometimes a woman's “husband” died in the bush, and she was then given a new man. Commonly, women did not learn the actual names and homes of their children's fathers.⁸⁷ For this reason, few of the mothers have managed to successfully trace their children's paternal families. Family tracing initiatives like that of JRP and WAN have been successful, however, in numerous other instances.

83 Male participant, 2014.

84 Female participant, 2014.

85 Female participant, 2011.

86 JRP Field Note II (2006).

87 It was common for people to use aliases and state incorrect home villages to avoid the

possible persecution of their families.

Furthermore, talking about “home” and families was generally forbidden within the LRA.

But two of the children who are or have been connected to their paternal families report positive, even loving relationships: “My mother thinks that my father’s family side spoils me, and they don’t help her with any school fees, so there is no need to go there... [S]taying there was not bad. They even loved us.”⁸⁸ A mother reports that her son’s paternal family receives him well.

Siblings

Siblings often provide a source of support, friendship, and pain for the children born into LRA captivity, not unlike other children. While many of the children’s relationships with their siblings seem no different than others, there are some aspects that are unique to their pasts that are worth identifying because they highlight the presence of a particularly close bond with family who have been through the struggle of the bush and the subsequent stigma and hardships – a shared understanding.

Several families in the project consist of two siblings from the bush – sometimes same mother but multiple fathers. In these cases, each sibling struggles with the void of their missing father and often not knowing their paternal family. Sometimes, one father is present. This shared experience is one they rarely talk about with each other, but in confidence they reveal that it matters. One girl worries about her sister who

must live with her violent biological father because their mother cannot afford to pay her school fees. In 2014, she expressed concern for her sister’s well-being saying:

She’s not fine from there because she says that when she’s there she has to do a lot of work. She has to go and weed potatoes, and she comes back without eating. She has to start cooking food again. She normally eats at around 8pm in the evening. And the father is so rude on her.⁸⁹

A testament of the deep emotional sibling relationships these children experience is the story of two sisters, the eldest is in the project. The mother had just given birth in the middle of a battle after no one had eaten or drunk in a week. She was exhausted and unable to carry her new child, forcing her to lay the newborn down and continue on without her. Without prompting and realising the baby would have to be left in the bush, the older sister strapped her baby sister on her back and carried her until her mother had recovered strength.

Another example is a brother and sister with different fathers who both died in the bush, who seem to share a special bond in their troubles and loss. Together they endured a violent stepfather who segregated them because they were not his children. Although this man was their mother’s

88 Female participant, 2011.

89 Female participant, 2014.

(third) bush husband, the now-UPDF soldier had little tolerance for the two fathered by other LRA soldiers.⁹⁰ Their loving mother recently told him to leave, and the brother decided he and his sister need a home of their own to avoid any future trouble like that. So the brother has made large piles of bricks he is hoping to use to construct a small home for just him and his sister, with whom he feels has shared a similar plight of ostracisation as himself.

The relationships between half-siblings who share a father but not mother are inconsistent across families, although there are some unique and notable examples of relationships that were fostered during their time in the bush and remain strong. In large part, these relationships have been fostered by the mothers, but part of their enduring closeness is due to the familial sense in the bush. In the bush, children were always accepted and if a woman was given to another man after her husband died, her child(ren) were expected to be fully accepted and not treated differently.⁹¹ Based on the children in the group and their stories of ostracisation by their mothers' subsequent bush husbands once they had transitioned out of the bush, such acceptance seems to have been superficial or at least partial. Mothers were expected to keep all children, including those of their co-wives, as

their own. Due to the extreme conditions under which they lived in the bush and the scarcity of resources, however, women often favoured their own children over others out of necessity. When there wasn't enough to go around, co-wives vied for favours and tried their best to give their children the best chances for survival.

Life among co-wives was often very difficult. But there are nevertheless cases out of the bush where these co-wives support each other and nurture the relationships between their children. One group of half-siblings in the project, for example, go between their mother's home and their half-siblings' homes and some semi-permanent living arrangements have even been negotiated between the mothers. Some of the children call their stepmothers "mama" and there appears to be a real affection by the mothers to their children's half-siblings. This cooperation has fostered a valuable support network for the children. In situations where mothers are not so connected, the children often seek out their half-siblings at school. There are several children in the project who said their best friends at school were their half-siblings. Certainly, there is an ease they feel when they are among their half-siblings, and they are free to be open about everything. Sometimes, they share stories about the past with

90 In the bush, men were expected to treat their stepchildren (his wife's children from a deceased LRA fighter) equally as their own. From all accounts, this practice was strictly enforced and little difference was noticed.

Once they transitioned out of the bush, however, stepchildren were treated quite differently.

91 Mother of participant, 2014.

each other. Sometimes, they work together to keep the secret of their identities. Some half-siblings remain in the bush and the children worry about their well-being and long to play with them again. A boy who lost both his parents longs to reconnect with his half-sibling who he remembers playing with and who is his age-mate, but her whereabouts are unknown. In his heart, she represents his closest blood relation.

Lost siblings

Another example of the significance of sibling relations from the bush is the sincerely missed brothers and sisters who died or went missing before they could transition out of the bush.⁹² Eight of the children lost a sibling in the bush, and they are remembered carefully, despite very little to remember them by. One girl, for example, loves to sit and listen to her mother tell stories about their time in the bush, and she especially likes it when her mother talks about her brother who was killed in a fire that also permanently scarred large parts of her body. A boy witnessed his brother die as he was strapped onto his mother's back. She was shot by a UPDF soldier as she ran for cover

during a battle: "*Only my mom and brother were the ones who died together because he was strapped on her back... My mother was running and she knocked herself and fell and they shot her... I had stood under some tree [watching].*"⁹³ He was still young at the time, and has very few clear memories, but he holds onto what he has: "*Apart from playing with [my brother], there is nothing... I don't remember.*"⁹⁴ And there are other siblings they will never know, other than through their mothers' stories. One girl's older brother was dropped in the river as a baby by the escort who carried him during a battle. Others died in a big fire, died of sickness, or were killed in a battle. The presence of these lost children is significant in the lives of both the siblings and mothers, yet there has been no documentation efforts or official policy to recognise these lost lives. They were never documented, but their lives mattered. They were given life out of a war they never wanted and that life was taken away by a war in which they were simply victims. There should be some accountability.

92 At least one full-sibling remains missing. Accounts suggest she was taken during a battle and her sister and half-siblings remain

hopeful she will one day be found. Several other full-siblings remain in captivity.

93 Male participant, 2014.

94 Ibid.

Living with traumatic memory: coping and resilience

"I have to remember so that when I have grown and I'm a big man I will know where I came from."⁹⁵

The children who were old enough to remember their fathers and/or their time in the bush have strong memories and feelings related to those times. Most of these children said that they think of those times when someone is quarreling with them or beating them, when they're ill, or when their needs are not being met. At these difficult moments, they think about deaths they witnessed in the bush, or times they saw others being beaten (sometimes to death), or simply how much they miss their fathers (and in some cases their mothers). Overwhelmingly, the memories are bad, but one boy said he had some funny ones and he proceeded to share several with the researchers and the two male participants next to him. Only one girl said she had some good memories. Sometimes, the memories appear in their dreams at night. Many of the children reported physical manifestations of the emotional pain associated with memories, such as headaches and chest pains and

spiritual problems are sometimes disabling. Conscious of the negative impact remembering has on their well-being, the children have developed numerous strategies to help them stop thinking, or in their words, "to forget." Still, some of the children find comfort in stories from the bush, reminding them of their childhoods, a part of their identities that is often denied in their everyday lives.

95 Male participant, 2014.

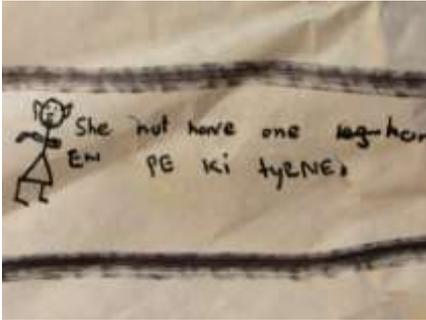


Illustration 4



Illustration 8



Illustration 7



Illustration 6

What they remember



Illustration 9: "This is what I saw," a boy's journal drawing, 2011.

At difficult times, the children who remember invoke a variety of incidents: "[I remember] very many people dying from there;"⁹⁶ "I think of the time when we were climbing mountains;"⁹⁷ "I used to walk a lot with my mother. So when we would walk and reach somewhere they would sit and then kill some people and they cut people's ears."⁹⁸ See Illustrations 4-7 that girls drew in response to the instructions, "Draw on this body [life-size outline of a body] harms that you saw done to other children born in captivity."

For some, they remember in their dreams: "*When I sleep at night, I see*

those pictures come back into my mind. Pictures of dead people."⁹⁹ The dreams are often not specific memories, but rather acts of remembering and missing loved ones.

I only dreamt that I was eating with my father. I just dreamt that we were sitting together with my father and we started eating and then my two brothers [who remain in the bush] were there, we were also eating with

them. Then I woke up. I thought I was with my father.¹⁰⁰

Several children and their mothers report disturbed sleep because of bad dreams, which they believe result from their time in the bush.

96 Male participant, 2011.

97 Female participant, 2011.

98 Male participant, 2011.

99 Male participant, 2011.

100 Female participant, 2011.



Illustration 10: "What I remember," a boy's journal drawing, 2011.

When they were together in school in 2011, one boy regularly asked his older half-sister to remind him what it was like when they were in the bush because he does not want to forget. The sister described in great detail the day she and several siblings and half-siblings were rescued by the UPDF. The level of detail in her story suggests that she remembers not only vividly but that she remembers often.

When the plane passed, it now started dropping bombs. So I also ran. Then, I recalled some teaching they taught us that when the plane is dropping bombs, you have to run and go under it. Because for it, it throws its bombs behind so it's safer if you go and you run under it... When we were running, my stepmother told me to remove my brother's clothes. He was wearing a school uniform. Here was

white, even the arm was stripped a little white, then the other parts were blue... On our way back to return to the others, I saw my [other] stepmother, she was lying there. They [UPDF] had stomped on her stomach and she was dead, even her baby. The army men [UPDF] stomped her head.¹⁰¹

Several children drew distressing and detailed memories in their journals of LRA village raids and UPDF bombings, revealing the clarity of their memories (see Illustrations 8, 9). For one girl, her memories are largely vague and when her older half-sister shared a particularly significant memory from the bush, the girl asked her, "Was I there?"¹⁰² She was. Nonetheless, she demonstrated on several occasions that she remembers, as was demonstrated in one of her journal entries. Her journal was filled with drawings depicting

101 Female participant, 2011.

102 Female participant, 2011.



Illustration 11: A girl's journal drawing, 2011.

daily life – women selling food in the market, cooking food, children playing, crops growing. But partway through the journal, one page is very different (Illustration 10). On this page, the girl drew a forest with big snakes slithering through it and a plane flying overhead releasing a bomb. Lower on the page, she drew dead people lying on the ground and a child running to her mother. She explained that she was remembering and felt compelled to draw her memory. The drawing on the page

immediately after her memory is one of a smiling girl standing beside three pots. Such contrasting images reflect the role memory plays in their lives – it is always there, revealing itself from time to time and it is often very harsh.

When they remember

The children remember during difficult moments, such as when someone is quarrelling with them, beating them, stigmatising them, or when they are ill. A boy who saw both his parents killed admitted that this thought consumes him when he is sick and feeling alone and scared: “[My father] died after my mom. It was the same day.

When I'm sick, I only think about that. When I'm sick, the reason that I think about it is because I think that maybe I will also follow them.”¹⁰³

Other boys are reminded of such dark thoughts when their emotions are unsettled: “*When there are radio announcements, when we read about death and so many things, I worry about those things;*”¹⁰⁴ “*When I'm hurting or when I'm angry I think about those things;*”¹⁰⁵ “[*I remember the past] when my heart feels pain;*”¹⁰⁶ “*When they have quarreled on me.*

103 Male participant, 2014.

104 Male participant, 2011.

105 Male participant, 2011.

106 Male participant, 2011.

Because it hurts me. Because when they are quarreling they keep talking about the death of my mother."¹⁰⁷

Stigma also leads to painful memories as this girl said, *"It makes me think. It makes me think of things which happened in the past when they have done something on you. 'That look at that woman's child who was from the bush!'"*¹⁰⁸

One girl reflected that the many difficulties she faces at home resulting from their poverty make her remember, yet she is able to find solace at school (she is sponsored): *"I drew a picture of our school down here because I like our school so much... When I'm at home I will face a lot of problems, which will make me think of what happened in the past."*¹⁰⁹

In other ways, poverty reminds them about their pasts as they think of their absent fathers when they experience unmet needs, such as lacking school fees and school requirements, clothing or food. *"Sometimes, when the school needs school requirements which you don't have, so you get that thought in your mind that maybe if my dad was there he would buy this for me."*¹¹⁰ And even more simply put: *"If my dad were there I would not be suffering."*¹¹¹

Spiritual haunting and embodiment of traumatic memories

The memories can also arise for no apparent reason, but the resulting pain still hurts and is experienced physically: *"It's my chest which begins to pain. It starts that pricking pain. Nothing bad had happened, but I had thought about the past. That's why I started the paining in my chest."*¹¹² As he describes, this boy physically experiences the pain of remembering, as do others: *"I feel pain in my heart,"*¹¹³ *"I feel bad, I hurt in my heart,"*¹¹⁴ *"I feel that my head is going to ache or pain me."*¹¹⁵

Spiritual problems, however, are the most distressing expression of trauma affecting the children in their daily lives and impacting their self-esteem, family relations, education and physical well-being. In Western discourse, their experiences look very much like manifestations of trauma. Studies of war-affected children have found that children who have direct experience with acute war violence are at greater risk of developing "psychotic" problems post-conflict.¹¹⁶ Problems associated with trauma can include depression, anxiety,

107 Male participant, 2011.

108 Female group discussion, 2014.

109 Female participant, 2014.

110 Female participant, 2014.

111 Male participant, 2014.

112 Male participant, 2014.

113 Male participant, 2011.

114 Female participant, 2011.

115 Female participant, 2014.

116 K. Amone-P'Olak, et al. (2014). "War Experiences and Psychotic Symptoms among Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: The Mediating Role of Post-War Hardships – the WAYS Study." *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 49(11), 1783–1792.

psychosis, sleep and eating disorders, anger, and suicidal thoughts.¹¹⁷

For those in the project who experience such problems, they are understood as spiritual problems. Some spiritual problems are directly related to their pasts in the bush. Others experience the problems because current life difficulties are layered on top of their painful pasts. This “accumulation of risk factors,” or stressors has been shown to contribute to ongoing psychological symptoms well after a child has left war.¹¹⁸ One mother explained this compounding effect: *“I think she thinks so much; she gets so stressed. Because when she hears anything bad from here, when she hears, ‘Your mother is like this, such and such,’ she just goes down now with that problem with the spirit. It’s just too heavy for her.”*¹¹⁹

Many people returning from the bush face stigma related to people's fears that they are spiritually haunted.¹²⁰ This sort of stigma is difficult for people returning because the isolation often accentuates their difficulties and makes it more difficult for them to access help to heal and remove any bad spirits that may be

troubling them. While *cen* is most often associated with people who have killed, it is still a concept used to describe the spiritual problems of children who were born into LRA captivity who witnessed death, but did not kill, or children whose parents are believed to have killed. As one mother explained:

To me, if it's not something from her family, then probably it's spirits, bad spirits which caught her when we were walking in the forest. Because the time when we walked much already she was now a child. [Her little sister] was already there so she was a little big. So I could hold her hand in mine and walk with her. So I guess the bad spirits entered into her.¹²¹

After describing his spiritual problems, one boy said, “The whole thing my mom told me, it seems when we were coming back and we were walking in the bush it seems that I passed over the bones of dead bodies, so maybe that is why this happens.”¹²²

117 K. Ehntholt, W. Yule (2006). “Practitioner Review: Assessment and treatment of refugee children and adolescents who have experienced war-related trauma.” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(12), 1197-1210.

118 T. Betancourt, et al. (2010). “Sierra Leone’s Former Child Soldiers: A Longitudinal Study of Risk, Protective Factors, and Mental Health.” *Journal of the American Academy of*

Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 49(6), 606–615; K. Amone-P’Olak, et al. (2014).

119 Mother of female participant, 2014.

120 JRP Field Note I (2006); JRP Field Note II (2006); JRP Field Note XVII (2012); Baines and Stewart (2011).

121 Mother of female participant, 2014.

122 Male participant, 2014.

These spiritual hauntings are manifested primarily in ways that Western psychological discourse terms “psychosis.”¹²³ But the children experience a spiritual possession in which the bad spirits that entered them when they were in the bush take over their bodies and minds and make them do things they cannot control. One of several incidents by a girl in the project was described by a mother like this:

The first thing was specifically the cen. That was first term. That was horrible because it carried her and dropped her into the dormitory, so all the students ran away. All her clothes were mixed up. What the [Catholic] Sisters [at the school] decided to do when she was down now like that, they called and me and said now you come to school. Hurry, just hurry to school now. Come and help us... [S]he continued crying and then she threw herself on the ground and started rolling. So all her clothes were now mixed with the dust and everything. After that, the Sisters called me as that was still happening. The rest of the students at least tried to calm her down, but they failed. She pulled a blanket

and covered herself. Three students tried to pull off the blanket from her; they could not. So another teacher came and added onto those students. But [she] got up and knocked that teacher down. So now the Sisters, the management of the school, called me and said you have to hurry to school and I hurried to school. I went there and found when she was unconscious. She did not know anyone. So I started calling her, “Do you know me?” But she could not recognise me. Then after some time when she opened her eyes and she saw it was me, she just continued crying.¹²⁴

A troubled boy explained how he experiences his spiritual problems: “Even in the night, sometimes, I’m supposed to be sleeping but I find myself up. I talk many things, but when I don’t know... [O]ne time I sat during the day. Then, some thought came into my mind that I should go kick the table. So I went and kicked the table. So I hurt myself much. The whole of the skin was off, so they took me to the hospital and stitched that part.”¹²⁵ One boy said a spell from a witchdoctor related to his parents being killed in the bush makes him do

123 F. Klasen, G. Oettingen, J. Daniels, M. Post, C. Hoyer & H. Adam, (2010). “Posttraumatic resilience in former Ugandan

child soldiers.” *Child Development*, 81(4), 1096–1113.

124 Mother of female participant, 2014.

125 Male participant, 2014.

bad things, such as steal and hurt people.

All of the children impacted by spirits feel strongly that traditional ceremonies would end these problems. Several of the children were able to undergo some form of traditional cleansing ceremony upon their transition out of the bush and to their mothers' homes. These were usually *nyono tong gweno*,¹²⁶ or stepping of the egg, in which the mother held her small child(ren) and performed the act, or the mother broke the egg and her children walked over it after her. One mother and child walked through a shower of water from a bucket over the doorway to her home. These rituals proved effective at keeping away spirits for most, but not in all cases, as some bad spirits persisted in their haunting. For these children, further, more elaborate ceremonies have been suggested by elders and witchdoctors. Usually these require the sacrifice of a goat or the presence of the paternal family, which is in all cases in the project impossible.

Another obstacle to performing the ceremonies is conflicting opinions among the community of mothers

about what is best. Earlier in the project there had been some talk among some mothers of the children in the project and of others born in captivity of gathering the spiritually troubled children who were born in the bush and go to Ker Kal Kwero, the Acholi cultural institution, for a group ceremony, but some mothers felt strongly that traditional exorcism should be admonished and prayer ought to be the only way to deal with bad spirits.¹²⁷ It seems, however, that the mothers and children in the project now firmly believe that traditional ceremonies are their best hope. As one mother explained:

I've been trying prayers. There was a time when I took her to saved people, those people who are saved, born again Christians. They prayed so hard, so much on her. I thought the bad spirit had gone forever. But again, surprisingly, I saw it again in first term. So I think for this thing, for it to be done best, that ceremony will need a witchdoctor to do that thing of which I think elderly

126 A traditional ceremony performed to welcome those who have stayed away from home for a long period of time. An egg is stepped on, cleansing the returnee of any evil begotten while away. In 2002, Ker Kwaro Acholi (the Acholi cultural institution) revised the ritual to a communal level to "welcome home" former members of the LRA. JRP Field Note I (2006).

127 Born Again and evangelical Christians, in particular, perceive such traditional practices

to be Satanic. Many mothers in the project identify as Born Again Christians. A previous JRP Field Note I (2006) reported that clan elders found group reconciliation ceremonies performed by Ker Kwaro Acholi to be ineffective because each person's spiritual affliction is unique and needs to be treated independently. Nevertheless, the necessary ceremonies are often too costly for most affected families.

people can know best what exactly should be done.¹²⁸

Forgetting

The children unanimously take steps to stop the physical and emotional distress caused by remembering, and often do so quickly to avoid affect.

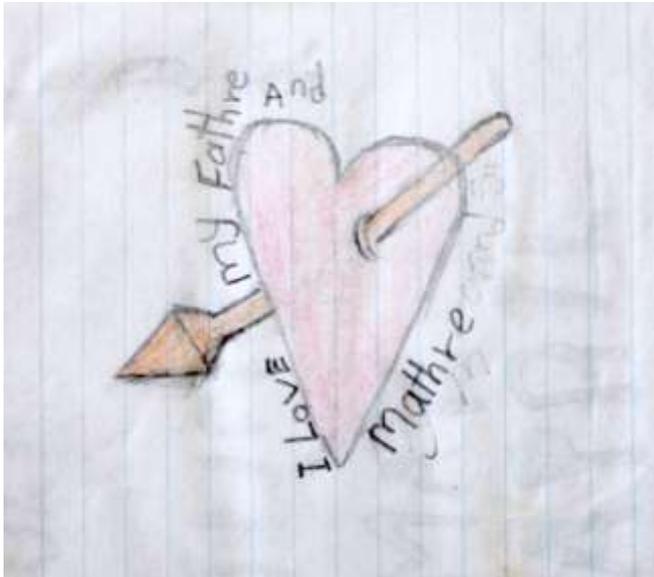


Illustration 12: A boy's journal drawing, 2011.

*"Me, I don't normally think about it. Only once in a while. So that I don't feel sad."*¹²⁹ To not think about it, they have developed strategies to keep the dark thoughts from taking over. Their strategies include playing, reading, drawing, sitting alone, and being with

friends. They refer to these strategies as "forgetting."

When a boy's older relatives quarrel with him, for example, he said he thinks of bad times when he was in the bush. Mostly, however, he remembers seeing his family killed.

He explained that he prefers to forget those times and chooses instead to play football with neighbouring children:

*"Sometimes I stop thinking about it. I get up and go to play somewhere. My own [ball] is not there. I play football with the children who rent houses there."*¹³⁰ Because

there was no one to pay for school fees, he was often left trying to forget when no kids or ball were there. At these lonely times, he

said he chooses to remove himself from those who have been quarrelling and sit alone. *"There is nothing I do [when the other children are at school]... I just sit and be quiet and also I don't respond."*¹³¹ The journal supplied during the period of the project provided an additional distraction to help him forget.

128 Mother of female participant, 2014.

129 Female participant, 2011.

130 Male participant, 2011.

131 Male participant, 2011.

Nonetheless, it also revealed that he remembered his parents in the solitary moments he spent drawing in his journal. In the midst of drawings of football players and household objects, the boy drew a heart, around which he wrote, "I love my father and mother" (Illustration 11). He rarely ever mentioned his parents during the project, but it seems that their memory – or at least the memory of having a mother and father – is still very much a part of his life.

The girl who drew the picture of the forest and airplane says that she likes to play with friends to help her forget. Interestingly, though, her closest friends are her half-siblings, who also struggle to "forget." That so many of the children prefer to play with half-siblings might suggest that the act of keeping secrets creates more opportunities to remember, and being with friends who know their secrets allows them to "forget."

Prayer

Religious prayer plays an important role in the lives of the children, particularly as a means of meditation, belonging and hope. Some find solace in being part of their religious community and feeling a sense of belonging before God. The act of praying is often used as a mechanism to calm their minds and ease their stress. And prayer offers hope at difficult times.

Many mothers reflect on their pasts and their children's pasts within a religious framework. Often, they see their children who were born in the bush as a divine gift. The children also understand their lives within this framework, giving thanks to God for protecting them and allowing them to transition safely. As one boy stated, *"I think it's very important for us to pray because prayers they really helped most of us, the children, in the past. So we always have to be thanking God for how he protected us."*¹³² A girl similarly said, *"I should thank God for what he has done to keep me up to today together with my mom. Because back in the bush, there you could die at any time. But now since God kept you and brought you to a good place so you have to thank him*

*and ask him to continue protecting you."*¹³³ Believing that God saved them, gives them a sense of belonging and purpose in life. Seeing and experiencing so much suffering and loss while in the bush has provided them with examples of God's work that inspires their ongoing relationships with religion. A boy shared an example of how his past informs his current religious dedication:

[T]here was a time when we were still in the bush. Then, my mother went away with some soldiers of my dad. And for us, we had remained home. So you know my father could know if something bad was going to happen. So he said, "Soldiers from the government are coming so we have to be careful now." It did not take long. I don't know what happened, our father disappeared with his soldiers. For me I was with some boy... Then all of a sudden we saw planes coming and the government soldiers coming and they

132 Male participant, 2014.

133 Female group discussion, 2014.

started shooting. So we ran, me and [that boy I was with], and we hid under some very small leaves. But when we stopped there, these soldiers, the government soldiers would come and run there and a very big bomb was thrown just in front of us and heaps of soil came out of that hole. But still, God protected us. They never saw us and they never shot us. So we should thank God.¹³⁴

In their faith, the children also experience belonging with friends and in school. They feel church is a place where everyone is equal and it feels good to be in that environment where they trust that God sees them as equal. Several children said they go to church but also the mosque, suggesting the act of going to pray or perhaps the social aspect was more important than the specific doctrines. Similarly several children went to different churches than their mothers, often citing friends who go to their church.

Not always obvious to those around them, many of the children experience significant internal distress, related to past memories from their time in the bush. The pain of these difficult memories are often compounded by more current challenges, such as abuse by

stepfathers, hunger, unmet needs, or quarreling by peers or caregivers. Prayer and going to church is used as a kind of meditation and moral compass. Most of the children drew a church or mosque as one of the most important places in their lives: *"I drew a picture of a church... I love to pray."*¹³⁵ When asked why he drew a church, one boy said it helps him to forget the stresses related to his past: *"When you pray... it makes you feel good and you forget that thing."*¹³⁶ A girl reflected in similar ways how prayer helps to relieve her from her painful memories: *"Praying unties your heart from bad things which you think of."*¹³⁷ A boy said he liked going to church and when asked what he liked about it, he said he liked drawing as a way to keep his thoughts in the present moment, *"I like drawing the church and people who are going to pray."*¹³⁸ He added three years later, *"If you find that life is difficult or it's hard to just stay there, you go to church and pray and relax there and come back."*¹³⁹

More than using prayer and church as a means to stay in the present moment and not dwell on the past or life's stresses, the children find comfort and guidance through listening to the teachings: *"Praying, you know the church when you have gone there, you hear some good talks concerning teachings."*¹⁴⁰ And a boy similarly found social guidance and

134 Male participant, 2014.

135 Male participant, 2014.

136 Male participant, 2011.

137 Female participant, 2014.

138 Male participant, 2011.

139 Male participant, 2014.

140 Female participant, 2011.

order and clarity despite the seeming chaos of his life, “[I like going to church] because they talk good things from there. Like they say when you are home you should respect big people.”¹⁴¹

Prayer offers an opportunity to reflect, to dream, and most importantly to hope. Asking God for things that can only be wished for, such as school fees, is common. This strategy is most frequently employed by the children in the most dire situations of poverty and with the least amount of family support. “*When exams are coming, I pray,*”¹⁴² said one boy while another explained that, “*If you want, something you pray for it, for me and for other people.*”¹⁴³ A boy with neither parent living described how he prayed: “*You close your eyes, you bend your head down, then you talk to God, you tell him what you want.*”¹⁴⁴ After successfully completing P7, one girl told her mother they must fast for a week so that God would answer their prayers and help them find the money for school fees. A girl living with a stepfather who dislikes her and her sibling who were born in the bush and with no extended family to look to for support, wrote in her journal (in her own English), “*And if God could help me, He could see the way am suffering. He [would] help me so that I get somewhere where I can stay in peace.*”¹⁴⁵ Further in her journal, she begs for an answer from God but settles in her trust that He will provide:

And my mother was abducted when she was in P2, and from there she grows from there, and gave birth to two of us, and after returning back she is still suffering with us, so why God not to help her and right now as I write this I feel like to hung or kill myself because being me is not nice... I can ask myself that “Why is God real punishing me like that?”... Although my thought is telling me that I can encourage myself that, “With God everything is possible.” If God could help me so that someone could buy for us land where I can stay with my mother and our children.¹⁴⁶

141 Male participant, 2011.

142 Male participant, 2011.

143 Male participant, 2011.

144 Male participant, 2014.

145 Female participant, journal entry, 2014.

146 Ibid.

Land

In Acholiland, land is customarily passed down to sons through the paternal family. So not only is identity intimately tied to paternity, but so too is a boy's future security. Over the three-year period of the project, the issue of land inheritance moved from an issue of mild concern to one of great significance for the boys. This change is certainly reflective of their advance toward adulthood and thinking about their future security. But the mothers of the children have consistently maintained its significance, struggling to find their children's paternal families and to make that connection in order to secure their son's rightful land inheritance. Given the pervasive poverty of the area and so many people vying for the same land, securing land for these children who are often already stigmatised by families has been difficult, if not completely unsuccessful.

Understanding that land is integral to security, one mother laments that her children may die just like her, with no land and thus impoverished and with no security:

To me, I feel that land inheritance is very, very, very important. And that is one thing that pains in my heart more than anything! Land inheritance is my biggest problem. Sometimes even when I'm listening to the radio and they're talking about land, it hurts me so much to the extent that I turn off the radio because I cannot continue listening to it. A boy like my son, I don't even know where his home is.... It hurts me so much! I even end up saying, "It's ok, there's nothing you can do. Let me just die the way I am, my children will also die the way I am."... They will never have anywhere to have a voice in. So that is one thing that hurts me so much but I know land inheritance is really, really, really important.¹⁴⁷

At the beginning of the project in 2011, when these boys were younger, they felt less concerned about the issue of land inheritance. As a boy explained then, "*The issue of the land*

147 Mother of male participant, 2014.

is held by elders... [Children] don't know what to discuss... That is things for grown people."¹⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the worries were present. One boy shared in 2011 that he worries about the issue of land inheritance, "*Because I don't know*" – his paternal family has not successfully been traced.¹⁴⁹ When asked if there is anything he can do about it, he replied sadly, "*It's not there.*"¹⁵⁰ By 2014, the boys expressed a greater urgency and despair about the issue of land. As they approach adulthood, it becomes culturally inappropriate for a boy to sleep in the same home as his mother, but the challenge is often that her poverty does not afford another home to rent.

Asked to draw the important places in his life in 2014, an older boy drew land and later explained, with a sense of disillusionment about his future, why land is so important for him:

I'm finding some difficulties now because I don't have anywhere to live. Where my mom is staying she's also renting. It's difficult for me now. I don't have anywhere to stay. I feel that way [that it is related to my past]. I feel that if maybe my father was there, he could get for me a place, a home at least to stay. But now he's not there.

That is why I think so much that my future is not there.¹⁵¹

Some boys are insistent about their right to land and are firm about asserting their legitimate claims. As one boy said, "*For him, he was also born there, my father. That is my paternal land, so he has to give that to me.*"¹⁵² This boy's paternal family has been traced, but they have not offered to make any connection. Because he feels so strongly that he is deserving of that land, he insists:

I'm interested in connecting with those people. Land is also the reason. What I know is that at my age [16], I'm still young like this. I may not yet be given land. But when I grow older, they will give me. I will go just by myself and tell them I need my share. I won't fight. I'll just go and tell them I need my share... What you do is you go to that person's land who is the paternal relative and you live on that person's land.¹⁵³

While they feel they have a right to inherit land from their paternal family, many mothers and their children recognise the improbability. But understanding the necessity of land to secure any kind of future stability, many have sought out alternative means of establishing a "home." This leads them to seek out alternative

148 Male participant, 2011.

149 Male participant, 2011.

150 Male participant, 2011.

151 Male participant, 2014.

152 Male participant, 2014.

153 Ibid.

ways to access land. Mothers' options are limited for some due to stigma in their own families, but also because land is rarely inherited through maternal lineage. One mother, for example, experiences stigma from her family against her and her children up to today, with her uncles and cousins calling them "rebels." Her father had died while she was in captivity and when her paternal grandfather died, his plot of land was sold by her uncles. When she requested just a small plot of land to construct a small hut, the family rose up against her and told her angrily, "You are just a woman!" Then, revealing their discrimination for her and her children's past, they told her, "...they did not want to mix with [my children's] blood."¹⁵⁴ Her brothers had continued to explain their refusal to allow her to build a small hut on her maternal land saying, "Here, a girl's children are not supposed to live here. They have their home [their paternal family]. They will grow and have a different perspective and how will they exist with our kids?" Then, they proceeded to physically attack her, but she managed to find a machete to protect herself. "So now," she reasoned, "It would be better if I could save every small bit of money, so that one day I can buy a small plot, or my children's future will not be there."¹⁵⁵ One boy whose paternal family has

not been traced suggested, "For me I think of my [maternal] grandmother's land. She has some land in the village, so I also think I should get that one."¹⁵⁶ Another boy had hoped he could inherit land from his maternal grandfather, but that chance is now lost: "My problem is from my grandfather who misbehaved. He sold off the land where I needed to stay. So now I don't have anywhere to stay. So that is the source of my problem."¹⁵⁷

Girls spoke of land in the context of hoping their mothers could buy a small plot anywhere so they would have somewhere to go if and when they find themselves struggling. Mothers shared this goal and referred to the need of securing a "home" for their children, both girls and boys. As one mother with a son and daughter in the project put it:

I wanted to buy a plot of land in any village for my children. Because in this world, for us human beings we're like flowers. Anytime you can wither off. So, it's very difficult for me. I just want my children to remain in a place where they call home. Now I still work. If I am able to save some money like that, I want to get a plot of land for them.¹⁵⁸

154 Mother of a female participant, 2013.

155 Ibid.

156 Mother of a male participant, 2014.

157 Male group discussion, 2014.

158 Mother of a male and a female participant.

The future

The children have big dreams for the future, which are primarily hinged on their ability to access education. The goal for most is to help their mothers. Their mothers also look to their children as their hope for a better future. But sadly, the outlook is increasingly bleak. The level of poverty relating to the mothers' abduction and the stigma they experienced and continue to experience has marginalised the children to the point of exclusion from a real possibility of accessing a future.

Challenging stereotypes

Unlike the negative assumptions people have about the children, they see themselves as productive, moral, and good Acholi women and men. Their future goals also lie in contrast to international assumptions about such children as evidentiary objects of their mothers' victimhood. Their

hopes for the future also suggest a possible opening up of gender possibilities - away from the militarisation of boys and men and the narrow highly-feminised and domesticated expectations of girls



Illustration 13: Boy's drawing of himself as a doctor.

and women.

To give a sense of this opening of gender expectations, below are some of the career goals for the children, as of August 2014:

Boys	Girls
Doctor	Doctor
Driver	Lawyer
Mechanic	Judge
Teacher	Teacher
Bank teller	Bank manager
Soldier	Nurse

Importance of education

Each of the children understands education to be the single most important component to securing a better future. The girls, especially, understand their mothers' difficulties to be direct consequences of missing out on being educated because they were abducted at a young age. For example, one girl explained, *“Most of the men our mothers got are not highly educated. That’s why they do the things they do. But if you get a man who is at least educated, he may do certain things which are annoying to you, but it will not be to the extent of what our stepfathers do to our*

*mothers.”*¹⁵⁹ Referring to these “men our mothers got,” another girl added, *“When you have studied, you will be earning enough money for yourself, so when they start doing bad things to you, you will leave them. You’ll let them go. You live your life.”*¹⁶⁰ The girls also felt that because their mothers were not educated, they are often too rooted in traditional ways and thinking. The example they gave was with regards to beating them. But two years later, however, most of the children reported their mothers no longer beat them because they had attended a workshop at JRP that explained the perils of beating your children.

For many boys, education represents their only way to a better future in the

159 Female group discussion, 2014.

160 Ibid.

face of lack of land inheritance. Getting an education means, to them, getting employment to enable them to buy their own land and thus build a family of their own. A boy who has not successfully traced his paternal family wrote in his journal, "*What makes me happy: Learning is the most important thing I have known.*"¹⁶¹

Overall, most children hinge their futures on their ability to study: they

believe that education will give them a future different than their mothers', one without their current struggles. "*If I grow up, study very hard and become a lawyer, I will make sure that my children live a good life. In other words they will not suffer the way I did. I [will] make sure that they eat good food, sleep in a good house and learn in a very good school.*"¹⁶²

"Education"

(By girl, age 16)

*Oh! out there,
Oppressed, beaten, tortured,
Mistreated, misused, abused, denied,
Taken for labour and sacrifice.*

*Oh! Little ones, how long will this be?
Pressed in rags and addicted to drugs, wandering aimlessly on streets.
A child in a home whose life is easy
But a sad story whose voice is never heard
Whose song is never sung.*

*Arise and defend your rights,
Arise up and fight for your rights.
A right to parents at home.
To be protected and cared for.
Above all, a right to education.*

*The key for better life and bright future.
Here there is no discrimination.
Girls and boys are equal.
For poor there's an opportunity,
Whether you're being blind or deaf,
there is chance.*

Let all children go to school

161 Male participant, journal entry, 2011.

162 Female participant, journal entry, 2011.

“My children will get for me”

Among the Acholi, there is a saying that goes something like this: If I fail to get, my children will get for me. This is a common hope among the mothers, especially those who are struggling to access the most basic resources, such as this mother:

I feel [my daughter's] future should be good and a bright one. But sometimes I get so heartbroken when I see the things [spirits] which are happening to her. To me, I feel she's the one who is going to open for me, who is going to change my future. So I just pray and wish that her future is good and that these things should stop happening to her.¹⁶³

The children said this pressure to be the ones who help their mothers is not a burden but rather an inspiration and motivates them to study hard. One girl explained how her mother's hard work and struggles motivate her to work hard and to do her share to improve their situation:

So now my mother is working hand in hand to live a better life. She is working hard to pay me to school. [For a long time] she ha[d]

nowhere to stay, and now she is renting. So I thank my mother for what she is doing. Even me, I wanted to work hard... I want to be a doctor or teacher. My mother is a tailor, so I want to work hard and then we work together to live a better life.¹⁶⁴

Outlook

The prognosis, however, for many of the children did not look good as of August 2014. With many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) closing or cutting back on programming, employment for the mothers is also disappearing. This means that while saving enough for school fees was already difficult and some children were already being chased from school or living in their mothers' villages, it will soon become impossible for many others, particularly once the children move into secondary school and the school fees and requirements are significantly more. A lucky few are sponsored but usually the sponsorship is incomplete, requiring mothers to pay for all requirements, or ending once they reach senior school, while others stop sponsoring if they fail to perform well, without regard to their many additional life challenges.

For two girls in the project, their educations have already ended, as they are now caring for their own

163 Mother of female participant, 2014.

164 Female participant, journal entry, 2011.

babies. Over the course of the project, two mothers had to send their children to an orphanage to ensure they could continue their education. Some children were sent to live with maternal families that stigmatised them, in the hopes of accessing education.

One girl's situation reveals how everything gets compounded for someone like this: "My mother wasn't fine at all [this year] because she had a lot of problems anyway. The struggle to get money for feeding. And then also at worse, the boy... also kept falling sick and she didn't have money for buying medicine for him."¹⁶⁵ Her mother was employed at an NGO, but this ended in November 2014. The skills she learned at that employment are not transferable to find other work. And the conditions required to maintain employment forced the girl's mother to sometimes choose between feeding and caring for her children's health. The sick boy was, therefore, taken only once to Gulu Referral Hospital "because there was no time also. At her work, when you miss work they chase you."¹⁶⁶ Explaining her brother's chronic respiratory illness, she recalls, "*We were being beaten by the rains when we were there [in the bush]. So we got certain diseases that needed to be treated. But now it's difficult to get medication for that... When it used to rain from there, there was no house even for hiding.*"¹⁶⁷

When feeding is a challenge, school fees cannot be the top priority. This same girl explains how even though she desperately wants to go to school, her education is not consistent. Here, she explains what happened the previous term:

The first and second week I went to school and studied. The third week I was chased. I stayed home one week, then I went back to school. Then I studied Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, then I was chased home. I stayed home one week, then I went back and they had me study until we did exams.

Even when she is allowed to be in class, hunger is sometimes too much:

I don't feel good at all. Because the next morning if today I've slept hungry, it's very difficult to wake up to go to school. And also that morning again I go to school without eating. If I go to school without eating anything, at lunch I return home again there's nothing. In the afternoon I don't have any energy left to go back to class.

Explaining how this hunger happens even though her mother is employed:

When we buy today 1kg of beans, in that kilogram there

165 Female participant, 2014.

166 Ibid.

167 Ibid.

are two cups so we can have it today and tomorrow. If tomorrow next there is nothing, we sleep hungry so then if the next day we have something we wait and we cook. If we get something the next day, we cook. If we don't get anything, then again we sleep until when something maybe is got. If we are to add it up in a month, it can be one week. Because my mother, at her work place, they pay them after two weeks. So after the two weeks, we realise there is some money, we have to eat out of that, what she has got as her pay. Because they pay them for the work they have done. So, some we will continue eating, some she will have to pay for things which she has borrowed before she got her salary and also some she has to divide to take to school for school fees. So at the end of the day, the money is not enough. So we end up in total I think we stay one week in a month without food.

With her only extended family being an aged parent who comes to the mother for support, the mother faces

stigma from the family of the violent man she recently left, criticising her inability to adequately care for her children. The girl carries a heavy heart for her mother's difficult situation:

The oldest daughter of [my stepfather] abused my mom, when my mom was at the hospital – that she's a very dense woman who went to the bush and now has returned with children who were born from the bush.... She said that my mother is a very dense woman who was in the bush and she has children who were born in the bush, so she doesn't know anything which is in town. I didn't feel good at all because she was abusing my mother and also my mother did not choose to go to the bush.

Reflecting on ways her past has impacted her life, the girl drew attention to a common consequence of living in the bush that is often overlooked, particularly after Operation Iron Fist¹⁶⁸ began in 2002: *"[My past] has affected my life in the line of education. I needed to begin education early, but because I was in the bush, I began school very late."*

168 The UPDF began a large military offensive against the LRA in 2002, which they called Operation Iron Fist. The operation forced the LRA to move back into Uganda from where they had been located in southern Sudan (now South Sudan), including the

mothers and children. The trek to Uganda from Sudan was difficult, especially for the young children who often walked the whole distance because their mothers carried smaller children or luggage.

The challenges of dealing with her past and her mother's past are compounded by the psychological wounds resulting from abuse by her stepfather. Her half-sister must live part of the week with him, and she returns with tales of abuse, reminding the girl of those bad times:

I was not thinking [about the past]. But then, the reports that [my sister] comes back with is what makes me think. In other words, I think. I think about the time I was together with [my stepfather]... I stop thinking about it when I feel a bit of headache because I will definitely get up and start to play because I want to stop thinking about it... Talking about it, I don't feel so good really because it reminds me of the past.¹⁶⁹

Another mother who also recently left a violent partner reflected on the ways her and her children's trauma has been compounded, in much the same ways as what happened with this girl: *"If I added on the difficulties which was there in the past [in the bush,] then the conditions under which I was going again, that was again difficult. So, past and past now. Two pasts."*¹⁷⁰

With her mother having no practical skills training and losing her employment soon, no extended

family to help, frequent hunger, stigma, and the chronic illness of her brother, this girl's outlook is not very good. Recognising the importance of money and feeling the injustice of her mother's income fragility, the girl dreams of someday becoming a bank manager to understand how money works, to ensure they will no longer be cheated. Even to dream of such power through education is evidence of this girl's insight into her marginality and her refusal to be oppressed. Also clear is her determination to have her mother's fight to provide for her children justly pay off:

I want to be a bank manager because I know for them they know how to exchange money, how to change money from here, from Ugandan money to another country's money. And also they cannot cheat them with money, so I want to know how to deal with money. It's important because I want to help other children that have remained behind to educate them...it will make me know money...I want my future to be bright so that I help my mother because without her I would not study.¹⁷¹

Recognising their marginality, the girl observes that her mother must work so much harder than some others to overcome their obstacles to access

169 Ibid.

170 Mother of a male participant and a female participant, 2014.

171 Female participant, 2014.

their basic rights (such as food and education), to put her children on equal footing as their peers: "*[My mother struggles so hard] because she wants us to be healthy. She wants us to be like the other children.*"¹⁷² The girl's awareness and insight into her situation is power unto itself and she has strategised a way

out of it – by being a bank manager. She knows she is equal and that they in no way deserve their oppression, as is observed in her indignation that, "*My mother did not choose to go to the bush.*" Unfortunately, the structural obstacles may prove insurmountable without effective intervention.

172 Ibid.

Project outcomes

"I am very happy today because me, and (Researcher), and (Research Assistant) and my friends we were so happy because we eat, we play, we discuss, we knows ourselves and my mother even ask me about what we talk about."¹⁷³

The project that this field note is based on was predicated on the ideas of participatory action research (PAR), aiming to foster opportunities of empowerment through participatory engagement.¹⁷⁴ The project consequently resulted in some valuable outcomes, leading to important recommendations (see section XI for recommendations).

Friendships

In the initial meetings, the children helped construct a visual web of relations – each indicating which participants they knew before the project began and how they knew them. Only two children did not know any of their other participants in their gender group, while others knew many – for example, one girl knew all but one of the other female participants. One of the most

impressive outcomes of the project, however, was the facilitation of new friendships, while strengthening or reconnecting old connections. For example, some of the children remembered each other from their time together in GUSCO, but they had not seen each other since: *"We know*



each other from long ago, long ago in GUSCO,"¹⁷⁵ explained one boy. And similarly, "[The project] enabled me to be connected with some people whom I had seen before but now at

173 Male participant, journal entry after a participatory workshop, 2011.

174 For more information about PAR, see: M. Minkler (2000). "Using Participatory Action Research to build Healthy Communities." *Public Health Reports* 115(2-3), 191–197; S. Kidd, M. Kral (2005). "Practicing participatory action research." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 52(2), 187-195.

175 Male participant, 2011.

*one point I had forgotten them.*¹⁷⁶ Some lived close to each other but had never connected. A small few had no previous connection to children born into LRA captivity, at least knowingly, since they returned. *“[The project] made me meet some people I never thought I would meet.”*¹⁷⁷

These new and strengthened connections have provided lasting support throughout the project and continue to remain significant in their lives as they move toward adulthood. Demonstrating the centrality of these relationships in their lives, a mother reported, *“He has made new friends, good relationships with the children that go there,”* so that when her son returns for holidays *“he goes to his friends, his friends from the project.”*¹⁷⁸ A boy explained that the project, *“...helped some of the thoughts to disappear from my head because it brought me together with other friends. I can play with them. We can also tell stories among ourselves.”*¹⁷⁹ While most of their stories relate to their everyday experiences of life in Gulu, some of their stories are ones from their past – funny ones that leave the boys laughing together. One story, for example, was a memory one boy remembered in which airplanes were flying overhead and everyone ran to hide, and one man was so frightened that he jumped into a pool of mud. When the airplanes left, the man emerged, completely covered in mud.

The bonds forged through this project are strong: *“It has given us unity among us here, it has united us,”*¹⁸⁰ said one boy.

Family connections

A unique part of this project was the interconnections of siblings. There are four full-sibling pairs in the project, in which there is one brother and one sister. These siblings share very little between themselves about the project. But particularly significant is the group of 10 participants who share the same father who is a top commander. For these children, the project has nurtured their bonds as siblings and brought them much closer. As one of these siblings said after two years in the project, *“I want to thank you for bringing us together as brothers and sisters.”*¹⁸¹ By tightening their bond, the children have expanded their network of support. When on holidays, they visit each other almost daily. They share stories and laugh freely. They exchange homes comfortably and call some of their stepmothers, “mama.” For those children with little to no extended family in their lives, this connection and support offers at least some of what they are missing.

176 Male participant, 2014.

177 Female participant, 2014.

178 Mother of male participant, 2014.

179 Male participant, 2014.

180 Male participant, 2014.

181 Female participant, journal entry, 2013.

Learning about themselves

After two years in the project, all of the boys, except two, said the project led them to ask their mothers more about their pasts, while most of the girls said this. Other than opening the communication channel between child and mother, the sharing among peers with similar pasts proved also empowering. For example, the mother of one boy who is not shy but particularly reserved when it comes to sharing anything related to his past and identity said that she feels he is troubled by it and the project is so good for him to “*know others who are like him.*”¹⁸² As they move toward adulthood, and even in some cases enter adulthood, they continue to learn and explore issues about their identities, including how to manage their identities in new and future situations, such as when looking for work. Each meeting also involves general empowerment discussions and activities, including facilitated conversations about marriage, gender relations, domestic violence, and HIV. In some activities, the children have been challenged both physically and mentally so that they learn to overcome internal obstacles and problem-solve. Many activities were designed to strengthen the children's cultural ties to their communities and so they learned and

practiced traditional songs and dances, as well proverbs.

Understanding their mothers

The children who live with their mothers bettered and deepened their understanding of what their mothers have been through. As they move closer to adulthood, however, two boys at least have begun to lament their mothers' struggles and place blame on them for their lack of basic needs, claiming “*even if she can give to you, she can refuse to give it to you,*”¹⁸³ and “*I feel the things she gives me are not enough.*”¹⁸⁴ For these boys, the project provided them with a platform to vent their frustrations, but also to hear the more emphatic perspectives of other boys in similar situations, as this boy who responded, “*Sometimes it's maybe because it's just not there and it takes some long period of time to get it.*”¹⁸⁵

The girls also used group discussions to discuss frustrations but no girl blamed her mother for her inability to provide. The older girls used their journals as an opportunity to reflect on their mothers' struggles and how her past impacts their current poverty, suggesting a deep level of understanding and empathy. “*When we were in the bush, the problem that our [mothers] faced was so painful... Then after when we were back home,*

182 Mother of male participant, 2013.

183 Male group discussion, 2014.

184 Ibid.

185 Ibid.

our [mothers] were facing many problems. So now my mother is working hand in hand to live a better life... So I thank my mother for what she is doing.”¹⁸⁶

Support for managing stigma

The group discussions provided the youth with opportunities to share stories about stigma, how to deal with it and how to manage other issues relating to identities as children born into LRA captivity. Responding to leaks about their secret identities with violence was common, for example. But through discussions and peer support, the children came to recognise that this was not usually necessary or productive. Opening the lines of communication between the mothers and children also offers an alternative way to address the problem by talking to their mothers for guidance. Many of the children cited “advice” as one of the most significant aspects of the project.

Challenge intergenerational problems

The project gave the children opportunities to reflect and discuss ways to challenge and resist the social problems that often get passed down through generations, such as

domestic violence, substance abuse, negligent and absent fathers. Through various activities of identifying behaviours and attitudes they find problematic in the adults in their lives, the children have learned to spot impending problems and unhealthy dynamics while reflecting on their own behaviours. Topics discussed among the boys included being a responsible husband, being a good step father, and avoiding substance abuse. “A good man should have one wife only,” said one boy while another added, “A good man should just drink sodas so that he doesn’t get drunk and comes back home to beat the wife or even the children.”¹⁸⁷ Among the girls, discussions explored the issue of waiting to marry when they are older, assessing the character of a man, and studying for as long as they can. These reflexive opportunities have cultivated self-awareness about their capacity to make their futures better.

Play

Play supports the mental health and the cognitive, social, and physical



186 Female participant, journal entry, 2011.

187 Male group discussion, 2013.

development of children, particularly those affected by armed conflict and is codified in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).¹⁸⁸ The children all referred to the games and other playful activities as highlights of the project. *“When we come here and play football, I feel happy.”*¹⁸⁹ *“When we go there [to the project], we play.”*¹⁹⁰ Play was fundamental in building trust and

friendships within the project, both between participants and between the participants and researchers. The children played and had fun in a safe and open environment where they did not have to hide, and where they could be completely open about who they were. During interviews, games such as puzzles and drawing activities were provided and appeared to diffuse painful emotions.

188 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (1989). “Convention on the Rights of the Child”

<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

189 Male participant, 2011.

190 Mother of male participant, 2014.

Implications for transitional justice

The children shared many everyday experiences common to most children in northern Uganda. For example, all children hope for a better future. All children love to play and be with friends. And sadly, many children in northern Uganda struggle with poverty, largely associated to the war. For children born into LRA captivity, however, the project revealed that underlying these very common experiences are unique violations that they must manage in their everyday lives. In other words, as the children play and learn and struggle, they also must deceive, avoid, pretend, and try to forget in order to be accepted. While their efforts should be recognised, the situation is not sustainable and they require support in their efforts to be socially accepted and to have opportunities that will interrupt the intergenerational nature of trauma and adversity.

This call for help is not only meant to benefit these children, but it is an effort that will benefit their communities. Facilitating the acceptance and opportunities of the children will mean they become

full and accepted members of their families and communities, and thus be given the chance to be active and productive citizens. Particular to the aims of transitional justice (TJ), this section explores the possibility and potential value of involving these children in processes of TJ for their own needs but also to highlight the unique position they inhabit as symbolically key in their society's general effort to reconcile its past.

What are the injustices of children born into LRA captivity?

The children were asked directly if they felt as though they have experienced injustices because they were born in the bush. Some said yes; others said no. Some spoke about harms experienced by other children that were born in captivity, such as the story of a boy who was beaten badly because of his choiceless connection to the LRA, or the boy who was taunted because he was deaf and thus obviously a child born in captivity (he had been made deaf from exploding bombs). Nevertheless, one of the most important issues

they want this project to highlight is the fact that they have suffered so much and continue to do so. In other words, the injustices of these children are rooted in the situation of their births but they are experienced in their everyday lives – in addition to the violation that gave rise to their birth, the children continue to face additional violations because of their identities.

It may be most helpful to frame the injustices of these children as violations of their rights as children. From the data collected during this project, the rights they feel have been violated are: the right to an education, the right to know their biological parents, the right to live free of discrimination, the right to a standard of living that enables healthy development, the right to recover and integrate as a child victim of armed conflict, and the right to an identity.¹⁹¹

An important note to consider is that children born of wartime sexual violence and sexual coercion around the world are perceived by international advocacy narratives as the evidence of the harms done to their mothers – they are the objects that prove their mothers were sexually violated. This positioning has helped to advance

the justice needs of such mothers, while simultaneously obscuring the needs of her children. Rarely are the voices of these children acknowledged, particularly in the sense of them having justice needs of their own.

Who are the perpetrators?

From the perspective of the children, their fathers cannot be held responsible for their injustices. Many fathers were themselves abducted and can be considered victims in many ways, including being coerced to impregnate women they are told to marry.¹⁹² Most of the children love their fathers, whether they are alive or dead. The children whose fathers are top commanders still at large do not feel that they have experienced any harm or injustice from them. For example, when asked if he holds his father responsible for his mother's lack of education and their consequential struggles to eat, one boy reflected that, "*If our father did not abduct our mother, maybe we would not be here in the world. So it's difficult to answer that.*"¹⁹³

Often peers and neighbours are responsible for committing ongoing rights violations against the children. Meanwhile, the stigmatisation against these

191 Refer to Articles 2, 7, 8, 27, 28, 31, 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for more details about their specific rights that have been violated. 192 K. Carlson and D. Mazurana (2008). *Forced marriage within the Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda*. Feinstein

International Center. The lower ranking male fighters had no choice in the females they were forced to marry. Intercourse was required for the purpose of procreating and when a male refused, he could be severely punished.

193 Male participant, 2014.

children suggests that some people in their communities hold them (the children) responsible for the crimes of the LRA, or at least identify them as perpetrators by association. This misplaced blame relates to the lack of accountability and truth-telling processes available to communities. And there are few cultural, municipal, regional, or national policies aimed at protecting and supporting these children from further abuse and discrimination, implying that structural forces are to blame. Thus no obvious perpetrator exists, but rather there are a series of acts of commission and omission against these children by various persons and systems.

Transitional Justice

The children are active members of their families and communities. More than anything, the children want to be treated equally and have equal opportunities as their peers.

Refusing to wait for assistance or for attitudes to change, the children are actively, albeit superficially, achieving their primary goal – equality. Through strategies of forgetting and secrecy, the children compel their peers, family members, and communities to treat them equally. In other words, they are agents in the everyday enactment of transitional justice. Their efforts to compel their communities to accept them as equals should be commended but must be acknowledged as unsustainable. The children should be listened to and should actively participate in truth-telling processes as well as the development of policy and programming that can achieve true and open equality. From a transitional justice perspective, such inclusive and respectful action would begin to address the violations these children experience in their everyday lives.

Recommendations

Although the children are employing strategies to make people treat them equally, they require support, advocacy and accountability to enable their true integration and open acceptance. Strategies of secrecy, pretending, and forgetting require a great deal of effort and risk and do not change the underlying social problems. And while avoiding discrimination, they deny themselves one of their human rights – the right to their identities.

Furthermore, these children have immediate needs unmet by the current social structures and policies. The recommendations below serve as a starting point for stakeholders at all levels: families to support and nurture the development and well-being of the children, community-based organisations to advocate for their needs and to begin implementing children who were born into LRA captivity into their programming, local leaders and government to develop and implement programs to meet their needs and to ensure their protection, cultural leaders to assist in rituals of healing and cultural inclusion, and the national government to legitimise these children by acknowledging, documenting, and implementing projects that will include them as integral agents for building a peaceful Uganda. The recommendations also speak to government policy to improve support to women who were allowed to be abducted and forced to bear children before they were ready. The mothers want so much to help their children have better futures, so helping mothers will benefit their children.

1. **Civil society must continue the efforts to document the numbers and needs of children born into LRA captivity** to ensure all children are accounted for, as well as their many challenges identified and quantified. Family tracing should be part of this process. The documentation by JRP and Watye ki gen should be expanded and supported.
2. **Civil society must document the children who died or were lost while in captivity** to properly acknowledge their lives as well as the violations they endured. A significant population of children born into LRA captivity lived with no record. Many children were killed in battles, while others died because they could not access medical assistance. Others are simply missing. Their lives mattered and their existence must be documented in order to complete the history of the war,

particularly since many of the fatalities listed as “rebels” were actually these children. Therefore, their lives must be documented to make records more accurate. More importantly, such documentation will help reconcile the loss experienced by their parents and siblings, as well as some of the violations of the rights these children endured while living. The GoU should grant JRP the necessary funds to record the lives of all these children as its duty to fulfill Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

3. **Civil society and cultural leaders must collaborate to resolve the issue of land inheritance.** In addition to paternal family tracing (see also recommendation #1), mediation support must be provided when impasses are reached. Both civil society and cultural leaders must initiate efforts to sensitize communities about the rights of women and their children to inherit land and about accepting children born into LRA captivity as full and legitimate clan members who were simply born elsewhere. By 2014, the issue of land had become a serious concern for most of the children in the project.
4. **Civil society must mainstream children as partners and agents in reconstruction.** Presented as an example of TJ enacted at the level of the everyday and as children being agents of postwar reconstruction, this research challenges current policy and programming of TJ. The primary implication of this analysis compels local and foreign policy communities to reframe war-affected children from wounded victims into active agents. Children hold a tremendous amount of knowledge about the needs and attitudes of their communities. Rather than simply mainstreaming child protection in processes of reconstruction, this research suggests that policy communities should begin mainstreaming children as partners and agents.
5. **Civil society should collaboratively develop or identify a training manual for practitioners of age and context appropriate methods of engagement and analysis for working with children born into LRA captivity.** Given their extensive knowledge and experience and if provided the necessary resources, JRP and Watye ki Gen would be an appropriate leaders for this endeavour. Creative and fun activities should be the starting point for engagement with children. These methods should be sensitive to the emotional states of war-affected youth and to their need to protect their identities. Suggested methods include (not exclusively) the following:

- Drawing
- Games

- Music
- Sports
- Dance
- Storytelling

Methods of analysis should also be adapted to listen and interpret what children communicate.

6. **Civil society should work with JRP to expand the model of peer support groups used in this project and the government should fund it as a means of enacting Article 39 of the UNCRC.** The groups should be expanded into communities throughout the Acholi sub-region to ensure many more children born into LRA captivity have a safe venue to share problems and problem-solve, as well as to simply be in a safe space where they are free to be themselves. Every participant in this research project stressed how much they appreciated being part of a group that shared similar problems. In peer support groups, the children will have the opportunity to develop their own specific policy recommendations and begin advocating for their real inclusion. Older children with leadership qualities can be identified for the role of mentor and facilitator.
7. **Civil society must build advocacy outreach programs to reduce stigma and promote community-level reconciliation throughout the Acholi sub-region.** Such outreach programs should collaborate with schools and should involve:
 - Educational dramas;
 - Face-to-face discussions between different survivor groups;
 - Community dialogue sessions;
 - Radio talk shows including information, debates, storytelling about children born into LRA captivity and about stigma;
 - Public talks;
 - Music and dance performances;
 - Public art showings, including drawings by children born into LRA captivity.

These outreach/advocacy initiatives should target:

- School staff;
- School pupils;

- Community and cultural leaders;
 - NGOs involved in sponsoring or otherwise assisting children born in LRA captivity;
 - Civil society organisations involved in child protection and child programming;
 - Other survivor groups;
 - Other children who were born into the captivity of the LRA.
8. **Schools must end stigmatising school policies and discipline and educate insensitive teachers throughout the Acholi sub-region in various forms and from various sources.** Schools should coordinate with civil society's efforts under the #6 recommendation (above). In order to fulfill Article 2 of the UNCRC, the government should fund the creation and distribution of a training manual to educate teachers and school administration staff about the needs and appropriate treatment of children born into LRA captivity.
 9. **Extended families and communities should be encouraged to pool resources for necessary traditional healing and reconciliation ceremonies for children born into LRA captivity who require it.** Cultural leaders should be consulted and encouraged to help mediate the costs and thus be made partners in the project to reduce stigma and support these children's recovery and integration.
 10. **Civil society groups should provide educational opportunities, such as workshops and dramas, for mothers and other guardians and caregivers of children born into LRA captivity (such as stepfathers and grandmothers) to learn effective and positive parenting skills to help support their children and their many struggles.** Many of their mothers gave birth to their children too soon and too young and missed the valuable support of elder family to help them parent effectively. Opportunities to learn positive techniques will help the children feel safe and supported, and will also contribute toward their academic performances. These lessons should include the topic of domestic violence and how mothers can protect themselves and their children and what they can do if they are being abused by a partner. The children in this project lament abuse at home by caregivers and family members, and stepfathers in particular. Their safety at home must be considered within the context of child protection and these initiatives should thus be funded by the GoU.
 11. **GoU must fund income-generation skills training so that the mothers can replace the education they missed because they**

were abducted and live independently without a man. The stigma of children who were born in the bush is such that they are almost always refused and violently targeted by stepfathers. Income-generation training should differ from the redundant tailoring training provided to many of these women when they returned, such as agriculture and animal husbandry. Grants to groups of mothers engaged in *bolo cup* (revolving loan and saving scheme) would greatly strengthen entrepreneurial efforts. The GoU and civil society should also work with the mothers to develop markets for the mothers' products to ensure they can support their families on their own. This recommendation refers to the GoU's commitment to Article 27 of the UNCRC.

12. **GoU must ensure parental support of children born into LRA captivity. Particularly in cases where fathers earn government incomes as UPDF soldiers, a portion of that income is owed to their children.** This research reveals that many children do not receive support from their fathers. As the fathers of these children, they have a legal responsibility to support their children. This recommendation refers to Article 27 of the UNCRC.
13. **GoU must take responsibility for children born into LRA captivity to ensure they grow into healthy and productive citizens and in order to fulfill its commitments to the UNCRC.** This responsibility should be in the form of:
 - Financial assistance to organisations capable of tracing the paternal families (and maternal, when necessary);
 - Educational bursaries and scholarships;
 - Grants to for the implementation and facilitation of peer support groups;
 - Small grants for advocacy initiatives;
 - Child development centres to ensure their socio-cultural well-being, including long-term psychosocial counselling, healthcare, tutoring, maternal education;
 - A comprehensive plan in case of a period of mass transition (if the war is ever resolved and the remaining LRA return, for example), including psycho-social counselling, educational facilities, peer support centres, and diverse vocational training for mothers.