Armed Violence and Street Children in Northern Uganda, 1986 To 2014

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ABSTRACT

The armed conflict in northern Uganda between 1986 and 2006 was, above all, a war against children. This paper examines the origins of street children in Northern Uganda with the view to elucidate the role played by this 20 year insurgency. Key informants’ interviews were conducted with street children, returned rebel abductees, child mothers and Local Government leaders. We found that when the war started in 1986, traditional social structures especially among the Acholi, broke down making it difficult to control children. And when the population was forced into internally displaced persons’ camps, early pregnancies, domestic violence and divorce increased as much as the abduction of children by rebels. This, coupled with the high rate of HIV infection, created many orphans and homeless children to whom the street of Gulu and Kitgum Towns became home.

Keywords: Armed violence, street children, community leaders

INTRODUCTION

The definition of street children as cited by the United Nations is “Any boy or girl, for whom the street, in the widest sense of the word, has become his or her habitual abode or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults”. This means that street children survive entirely on the street, or outside of a normal family environment (UNICEF 2008).

Traditionally, street-children have come from some semblance of a home – even if dysfunctional. They have some connection to their roots – their history. For many street children of northern Uganda, there are no roots. Having been born and reared in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps, they are without any sense of personal identity, do not know who/where their families are or what their histories might be.

Armed violence erupted in northern Uganda in 1986 leading to an estimated 30,000 children being abducted from their homes to serve as fighters, porters, sex slaves and baby-sitters. The war metamorphosed from different groups. First, it was the Uganda Peoples Democratic Army (UPDA). Then, the Holy Spirit Mobile Army (HSMA) of Alice Lakwena, and finally the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony (Ruddy and Vlassenroot, 1999). Before the war began, there were no street children in northern Uganda but today they are seen in all the major towns. The main purpose of the research was to examine the role of armed violence in creating street children in northern Uganda.

METHODS

The study was conducted in Northern Uganda among the people living in the districts of Kitgum, Pader, Gulu, Amuru, Lamwo, Agago and Nwoya. The sample consisted of 120 respondents selected from amongst the people living in northern Uganda. The study population was the residents of Northern Uganda comprising of street children, parents, teachers and community development workers who had lived through and witnessed the high rate of street children in the major towns of northern Uganda.
The study targeted 120 respondents in total; picking 30 from each of the major selected towns in northern Uganda. The categories of respondents included 40 parents, 40 street children, 20 local community leaders, 10 police officers and 10 former LRA abductees. They were selected using the simple random sampling technique, such that each individual gets an equal chance of being chosen and this ensured equal representation and prevented unnecessary biases associated with other sampling methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Category of Respondents</th>
<th>No of Samples</th>
<th>Data Collection Method to Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Street children</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Interview/Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Local community leaders</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The police officers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Former LRA Abductees</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Key informants interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Methods of data collection included the use of personal interview schedule with the respondents who were not able to express themselves in writing, self-administered questionnaires observations and documentary reviews. Respondents were asked questions from the list such that their responses helped to examine the LRA war and street children in northern Uganda. We used mostly open ended questions which gave chance to the respondents to express their views freely.

Observation was employed concurrently during the interview with the street children in northern Uganda as the researchers stayed for one month in each selected districts. This is where the researchers used all their senses to perceive and understand the experiences and therefore examine the LRA war and street children in northern Uganda. It involved the direct observation of the behaviors of the street children in validating data from other sources as well as involving questions during the in-depth interview.

Upon completion of data collection exercise, data clearing and processing followed. This process involved tabulating, editing and coding all research instruments administered to various respondents according to the major themes. The aim was to identify any inconsistency that could have probably arisen during data collection by editing and checking for uniformity, accuracy and comprehensiveness. Qualitative data obtained through observation were presented using content analysis. This included the use of tables and direct quotations of the respondents to validate the study. The researchers tried hard to eliminate the likely barriers to the study. Finally the data were entered into the tables and interpretation of row data into percentages done and matched with table of responses of questionnaires from selected respondents.

**How Armed Violence Led To the Phenomenon of Street Children**

The 20 year war in northern Uganda greatly affected children in a number of ways: children were kidnapped and taken to the bush and forced to become soldiers and kill innocent people, they were raped and defiled, beaten and all other inhuman acts inflicted on them. Similarly
many orphans were left when their parents are killed by the LRA. In a recent study conducted by Héloïse Ruaudel and Andrew Timpson, it was reported that:

Kony’s ideological foundation for the rebellion took up the themes of the UPDA and HSM insurgencies, but soon the LRA would distinguish itself by its more extreme millennial beliefs and excessively violent methods. Unlike the military campaigns of the HSM, which were aimed at the Ugandan army, the main victims of this violence were the Acholi themselves. The LRA launched the most vicious attacks on both displaced and rural populations (Ruaudel and Timpson, 2005).

Many children emerged out of the camps. They were born in the IDP camps, their parents died from the camps and now that the majority of the people have resettled to their original homes, the children have remained. The majority of the population still remaining in the camps is the children who are desperate and have nowhere to go. Such children often become street kids.

When young girls resorted to prostitution as a way of earning life during the war, they were exposed to high risks of HIV infection. Some girls and women were forced to get married to armed personnel to earn a living. Sexual abuse increased, rape and other sexual harassment became rampant. This caused a high rate of HIV transmission. It has been observed that:

Coupled with the breakdown in the health infrastructure, Northern Uganda has persistently posted the poorest health indices in the country. Compared to the rest of the country, Northern Uganda has the highest HIV prevalence rate of 10.5% (national average of 6.4%), the lowest rate of contraceptive use at 12% (national average of 23%) and a high rate of abortions and unwanted pregnancies (1 in every 5 pregnant women in Northern Uganda carries out an abortion, while 50% of pregnancies are unwanted (World Health Organization, 2007). The main health problems faced by the women survivors of the conflict include gynecological problems, HIV/AIDS, lack of access to safe motherhood services, lack of modern contraceptives and untreated ailments leading to infertility in a society where every woman values motherhood, resulting in a high burden of mental illnesses and trauma. Respondents in a recent survey carried out by the International Centre for Transitional Justice in Northern Uganda said health was their main priority at 45.2% (Liebling-Kalifani et al, 2008).

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in northern Uganda couple with poor health services in the region means that many parents are dying and leaving behind children who end up on the streets.

Another issue is the phenomenon of “night commuting”. The government’s failure to defeat the LRA early enough was, among others, due to the very high level of abductions. Ruaudel and Timpson (2005) have stated that:

Children, some as young as 6 years old, were the favoured target of the LRA. This tactic persuaded many parents that it was safer to have their children leave the camps at night for the main district towns in Acholiland to avoid abduction. This unique phenomenon is known as “night commuting”. Night commuting now has become embedded into the lives of children who are living in camps close to Gulu, Kitgum and Kalongo towns. There is even migration of children at night from the periphery of many camps to structures such as schools and health centers in the center of those camps. What has become more worrying is a night commuter routine now, where children still venture into night commuter shelters, even when there is a reduced threat of LRA actions.
Therefore, even after 2006 when relative prevailed in northern Uganda, the children who had become accustomed to night commuting continued to roam the streets and survive on handouts as street children.

Due to growing poverty in the region, the number of children neglected by their parents is on the rise and police statistics show that the highest offending rates are being recorded in the northern region, prompting warnings that district officials, police and community leaders are failing to cope with the challenge. A recent report states:

Northern Uganda lags behind the rest of the country in terms of human development. The insecurity of the north has led to gross human right violations, loss of productive assets of the poor, retarded economic activity, and restricted access to social services and markets. The human development index (HDI) for northern Uganda in 2001 was 0.350, which is lower than 0.449, the national average, or 0.552 for the central district, for example (UNDP 2002). The region has also persistently had the highest incidence of poverty at an average of 66 per cent over the last ten years (Table 4). This is much higher than the national average of 46 per cent or that of the other districts (Nannyonjo, 2005).

Growing poverty in northern Uganda implies that many parents cannot afford to educate their children. Many are forced to pull their children out of school so as to provide labour on the family farm in order to cope with the growing poverty and need for basic goods including food.

The war also affected education. With the destruction of schools, looting of supplies and shortage of teachers, education in northern Uganda has been severely affected by conflict. Schools were closed or relocated, and those still operating were forced to limit their teaching times to those considered to be safe for children to attend (10 am to 3 pm). Many are not attending school for fear of LRA killings and abductions while others, teachers included, have moved to more secure districts where they add to the congestion of the towns. This has created shortages of shelter for teachers and students, scholastic materials, classrooms, drugs, water and sanitation, and recreation facilities. In addition, the learning and effective participation of children in the classroom is affected by their traumatic experiences. Moreover, universal primary education is not matched to the curriculum needs of traumatized or displaced children (Nannyonjo, 2005). These problems make children lose concentration in class activities and eventually force them out of school and to the streets.

During the camp life, people earned free supplies of essentials like food and medicine. Even education was free. However, with the return of relative peace in the region, most of these children have failed to learn or to have the resources to earn a living. Due to the fact that rehabilitation programmes available—especially in Gulu District—send these children to their poor family units without tangible support, the children later become street kids in search of valuables to earn a living.

One of the impacts of wars was increased domestic violence. Where women are not physically and sexually abused, they are intimidated by their husbands many of whom were former soldiers either of the rebel of government armies. According to (Fernando, 2004), intimidating behaviors are actions that instill fear. Such behaviors have a wide range. They vary from subtle acts such as looks, changes in tone of voice and “body language” or posture, or constant interruptions when another attempts to speak, to more severe acts such as rageful behavior, swearing, threats of physical harm to the partner or others, screaming, throwing things, etc. The war taught people to use force or intimidation and men resort to this either to defend themselves after committing an offense or to make spouses obey them all the time.
The abused children and those from broken families often find solace in the streets of Gulu and Kitgum towns.

With the return of peace to Northern Uganda and the apparent movement of some of the displaced persons to their original villages, some of the children who were formerly night committers’ and others whose parents are moving to the villages ended up on the street of Gulu for various problems affecting the parents/guidance and others particularly affecting children. During the community resettlement to their villages, they leave their children behind in the town suburbs for lack of social services like education in the villages. These unaccompanied children now face the daunting tasks of fending for their own needs and that of their other siblings. This phenomenon has led to an influx of the children on the street (The National Center on Family Homelessness December, 2011).

Beside, abduction was widespread during the war; 26 percent of female youth (aged 14–35) and 47 percent of male youth were ever abducted. Abduction length ranged from a few hours to 12 years, averaging 11.4 months for females and 9.1 months for males. A total of 64 percent of females were abducted for more than two weeks, and 11 percent were kept for over a year. The thousands abducted were used as child soldiers and sex slaves, beaten and forced to torture and kill friends, family and innocent people. Those lucky enough to escape the clutches of the LRA deal with ongoing psychological trauma from their experiences, and face huge problems reintegrating into their communities (Jeannie et al, 2011).

Hundreds and thousands have been displaced from their homes and are forced to live in camps with poor sanitation and health facilities. As a result, some of children end up their life in the streets of major towns in northern Uganda. Even those not directly in contact with the LRA suffer the consequences of poor education due to schools being destroyed by rebels and not being able to afford fees.

Females were mainly recruited to become ‘wives’ and mothers. In our sample, 27 percent of all abducted females were forced to marry, including 44 percent of those abducted over two weeks. Rape was relatively rare outside these forced marriages; 93.5 percent of forced wives said they were sexually abused or forced to have sex with a man, compared to 6.9 percent of never-married abductees and 1.7 percent of non-abductees. Among forced wives, 25 percent were “married” within nine days of abduction, 50 percent within two months, and 75 percent within a year. Interviews suggest that rebels divided females into three groups: prepubescent girls, young adolescents, and older adolescents and adults thought to have had sexual experience. Prepubescent girls were kept as servants to be forcibly married later; young adolescents were forcibly married sooner. Older adolescents and young adults, seen as potential carriers of sexual diseases, were more seldom given as wives and were more often released. The forced marriages were largely coercive relationships without the consent of the female or her family, characterized by shared domicile, domestic responsibilities, exclusivity, and sex carried out under threat. The relationships were familial, and children were born and raised by abducted mothers and captor husbands. Half of forced wives bore children. The longer a female stayed with the rebels, the more likely she was forced to become a “wife” and mother. Educated abductees also were forced to “marry” sooner—1.5 months faster for each extra year of education (Jeannie et al, 2011).

Large numbers of girls who were captured by rebels have returned from the bush as single mothers, having born children while in captivity. “When you go to northern Uganda, you find that the conflict that ended left a lot of challenges,” said David Odoch, spokesperson for the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect, based in the capital, Kampala. Many of the former captives who returned with babies have since got married. But the stepfather often refuses to accept children born in LRA captivity, and these
often end up on the streets. “Only in rare circumstances does the man accept both the mother and the child,” Alice Latigo Komakech, a Gulu-based lawyer who runs a firm that handles child cases, said. “The children are often considered as not part of the family.”

The war also led to land conflicts and the landless children had to run to towns. Northern Uganda is particularly prone to land grabbing. At the moment former Internally Displaced People (IDP) - commonly referred to as returnees; are locked in land disputes over boundaries as original land marks have disappeared during the LRA war. Boundary conflicts have even become harder to solve as most elders who knew the boundaries have died over the period before passing on the information. For instance in Gulu district, the returnees are locked in land disputes over uncertain boundary demarcations (such as trees, stone markers etc.) that were removed during the war period. Absence of such clear demarcations often encourages land grabbers to claim full right of ownership over land purportedly seen as “idle”. As a result, land grabbing reports citing powerful individuals like military officers, politicians and a section of wealthy Acholi are on increase in this region since the end of the LRA armed rebellion (Mabikke, 2011).

Asked how the LRA war in northern Uganda has contributed to the increased number of street children in major towns and municipalities, respondents gave different answers. The causes of this phenomenon were found to be varied, but are often related to domestic, economic, or social disruption; including, but not limited to poverty, breakdown of homes and/or families, political unrest and sexual disorientation among others. Some of the key findings are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Showing how armed violence has led to increase of street children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>No of Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The parents of children were killed due to war</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The war led to domestic violence leading to street children</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The war has led to land conflict and children ran to towns</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other IDP camps were in towns and children remained in towns</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The war resulted into poverty and inability to pay school fees</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It led to prostitution as young girls come to towns to look for potential market</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>120</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: primary data 2014)

The table above shows that the problems facing children in northern Uganda are magnified by the legacy of the over 20-years insurgency which saw thousands of parents killed by rebels, leaving children behind as orphans accounting for 16.7% of the total responses.

One of the respondents was quoted saying:

Many of the former captives who returned with babies have since been rejected by their own relatives who often refuse to accept children born in LRA captivity, and these often end up on the streets. Even if they get married to other men, only in rare circumstances does the man accept both the mother and the child.
In northern Uganda, both the children returning from rebel captivity and their child mothers face social stigma and fail to effectively re-integrate in society with the effect that many become street children.

Another key issue is that the long-running conflict in northern Uganda led to major violations of human rights against civilians, destruction of infrastructure, reduced access to social services, and paralyzed economic activity. Creating peace and fostering reconciliation in the region have not been successful either, thereby hindering development and relief activities, which are further constrained by insufficient funding, and lack of capacity at the district and community levels as revealed by Nannyonjo (2005). In terms of economic development, there is now a clear disparity between urban and rural northern Uganda. Children prefer to stay in urban centers where there are disco halls, video halls, mobile telephones, hospitals etc. even if it means staying as a street child.

CONCLUSION

Violence and socialization into armed groups may have a direct effect on family or community acceptance, as well as indirect effects due to the impact of poverty and distress on social relations. Conventional wisdom holds that ex-combatants become social pariahs. Women and girls returning from armed groups such as the LRA are thought to be more ostracized than males, and to need specialized reintegration assistance. The most vulnerable females, in this view, are the sexually abused and those who bore children. They are thought less likely to marry or find livelihoods and, together with their children, to experience high rates of rejection and stigmatization by their families and communities (Jeannie et al, 2011).

The armed violence in northern Uganda led to the abduction of thousands of children, increased domestic violence, breakdown of families, the escalation of HIV infection and death of young couples that left behind many orphans most of whom became street children.
REFERENCES


