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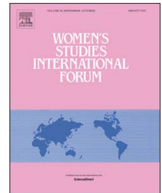
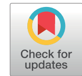


# Marriage for the 'New Woman' from the Lord's Resistance Army: Experiences of female ex-abductees in Acholi region of Uganda☆



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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have documented and analyzed forced marriage patterns and realities of girls within the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). However, the impact of wartime abduction, captivity and forced marriage on forging and sustaining post-LRA marriage relationships has been under-researched. This article contributes to addressing this gap by examining how stigma against female LRA ex-abductees influences their prospects for choices in marriage as they seek to reintegrate in communities of Uganda. Drawing on findings from Acholi area of northern Uganda, the article discusses how cultural and traditional perspectives stigmatize female ex-abductees, considered as 'unacceptable', 'stained' and therefore 'unmarriageable'. The findings suggest that stigma adversely affects access to key community relationships such as marriage, thereby hindering social and economic opportunities for recovery and reintegration among the female ex-abductees in Uganda.

## Introduction

A number of studies have documented forced marriage patterns and realities of girls/young women within the guerilla Lord's Resistance Army (henceforth LRA) (see, for example Carlson & Mazurana, 2008; Kramer, 2012; Watye & CAP International, 2014, Baines, 2014). However, research focusing on women (and men) ex-abductees' marriage experiences post-LRA is limited. Most detailed studies on female ex-abductees of the LRA focus on the modalities of reintegration or immediate experiences of exiting the armed group, most commonly at their initial point of entry, Internally Displaced Persons' camps, and very soon after their return into their community. Many studies relating to female ex-abductees cover the first two years following their exit from the LRA captivity (see Susan McKay's studies in northern Uganda). Although female ex-abductees have been included in important surveys (see, for example Survey of War Affected Youth (SWAY)), empirical research on cultural and social experiences and realities encountered by LRA ex-abductees is limited. This paper explores what happens when these young women attempt to get married. We focus on marriage as a cultural, social and economic determinant of recovery and reintegration. While we do not suggest that female ex-abductees in Acholi society must get married to be reintegrated, nevertheless, it is important to explore critical factors that shape and determine life opportunities within Acholi society. How relationships with and marriages to ex-abductees are not only perceived by their families and local communities but also maintained and negotiated by the women themselves, is crucially important for appreciating reintegration.

Acholi is one of the seven sub-regions of Uganda. Almost all five northern sub-regions of Uganda were devastated by the prolonged conflict and are currently dealing with its impacts. However, the present study is restricted to Acholi sub-region (also known as Acholiland).[1] In the 1990s, Acholiland was made up of three districts – Gulu, Kitgum, and Pader – but four more districts (Lamwo, Agago, Amuru, and Nwoya) have since been created out of the initial three as part of a government decentralization policy. The seven districts are further sub-divided into manageable sub-counties. Acholiland borders the Republic of South Sudan to the north, Karamoja to the east, Lango to the south and West Nile sub-region to the west.

The patriarchal setting in rural Acholiland is based on extended families. A typical *dog gang* (family) consists of a husband, wife(s), and unmarried children, grandparents (parents to the husband), unmarried siblings, offspring of deceased siblings, among other relatives. Members of such a family share a compound that comprises of houses and circular huts with a high peak finished in the mud. These buildings face each other, a practice which acknowledges the authority of the head of the family, who in most cases is a father/husband. In addition to the

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[1] For a detailed political history and origin of Acholi people and culture, see Atkinson (1994).

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point mentioned this closeness designed to promote cooperative families which share most activities, including farming. When a woman marries into such a homestead, her daily obligations are not only to her husband and children (as the case in nuclear settings in towns) but to everyone in the homestead, including married and unmarried in-laws.

Normally as head of the family, the father or husband has absolute control over decision making in the household. He protects, guides and carries the responsibility of up keeping the family. On the other hand, the wife also is a great contributor to the maintenance of the family, particularly in childbearing and rearing, as well as in providing domestic and farming services. While such expectations apply to both urban and rural locations, this paper refers to the family as organized in rural areas (where most participants resided), not the nuclear family found in urban centres, but the extended family. In the Acholi society, young people are adults only after getting married and giving birth. Until then, they are not in a position to take on responsibilities within their clans and villages (we return to this later on). Even in adulthood, a person's lineage and *kaka* (clan) are held legally responsible for their actions throughout their life.

Family in Acholi is the primary institution for socialization, for passing on cultural norms and values, and smooth functioning of the clan system. A *kaka* (clan) can be defined as a small unit of social organization made up of many families who trace their origin to a common ancestor (all Acholi people share the same heritage and culture) (see Atkinson, 1994; Girling, 1960). Clan elders, by definition, are the most senior people in this family circle (*kaka*). They have the responsibility to preserve and transfer culture, tradition, and knowledge to younger generations. Because the clan elders are the regulators of the clans and are representatives at the village level, they have always been highly respected in the family and villages (Atkinson, 1994; Girling, 1960). These are the familial and ethnical customs, institutions upon the community's integrity and cultural development depend, and as such, the Acholi children grow up recognizing and respecting these customs and hierarchy.

As the centre of the conflict with the LRA, Acholi community and in this case, girls had significant direct participation in the conflict where many of them were abducted and lived in captivity for a number of years. Subjected to forced marriage and early pregnancy, several of the girls returned with children fathered by LRA fighters. Focusing on Acholi provides a unique opportunity to identify the lasting impacts of wartime abduction, captivity, sexual and labour slavery on girls/women, family/community relationships, and social and cultural institutions. With social issues like marriage being subjected to significant strain in post-conflict Acholi society (Kiconco, 2015), it is vital to trace the long-term effects of captivity on the marriage prospects of female ex-abductees. We are not suggesting that only abducted girls/women of the Acholi were affected by the LRA insurgency (see below), rather we argue that while many youth face marriage stress in post-war Acholi (see for example Isis-WICCE, 2001:45; Rodrigez, 2006; Schlecht, Rowley, & Babirye, 2013), it remains particularly challenging for female ex-abductees. The central argument of this paper is that stigmatization has very high negative impacts on ex-abductees' marriages, relationships, and other opportunities. In addition, intimate partner violence exacerbates their marriage situation and problems. The paper demonstrates that challenges and frustrations confronting these women's marriage aspirations are shuttered by multiple factors and institutions, including traditions and the attitude of the public.

The paper is organized as follows: a brief contextual background to the LRA insurgency in northern Uganda is first presented and is followed by a discussion of research methods. This leads to an exploration and discussion about Acholi tradition and marriage customs and the experiences of ex-abductees post-LRA. With a particular focus on challenges of reintegration, the paper develops a discussion on how stigmatization negatively influences ex-abductees' marriages, relationships and opportunities. Intimate partner violence exacerbate these experiences. The paper concludes with a discussion of why marriage remains an important element for ex-abductees' reintegration in post-war Acholi society. To appreciate the issue fully, however, some understanding of the background to the conflict and abduction may be beneficial.

## The Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in northern Uganda

Between 1986 and 2006, a substantial part of northern Uganda was involved in an armed conflict between the government of Uganda and a rebel group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA originally claimed to fight against the marginalization of Acholiland found support among disgruntled soldiers who had lost power to the southern-based National Resistance Army (NRA) (see Allen, 2005; Branch, 2011; Gersony, 1997). In a rather similar pattern to previous developments in northern Uganda, including the insurgencies of the Uganda People's Democratic Army (UPDA) and the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), the LRA engaged in operations against the NRA's regime (ibid.).

In the early 1990s, the LRA began losing Acholi support. The LRA leadership retaliated by launching a campaign of extreme brutality against the Acholi people, involving large-scale killings, maiming and looting directed against civilians (see Branch, 2011:68; HRW, 2005:15). The LRA leadership also adopted a policy of forced recruitment to fill their ranks. The LRA abductors focused more on adolescents and teenagers (aged ten to sixteen) rather than children under the age of ten or adults. In an attempt to sum up the abductions, Pham, Vinck & Stover (2007: 14) estimate that between 1986 and 2006 approximately 54,000 to 75,000 people, including 25,000 to 38,000 adolescents and teenagers, were abducted with the majority (89%) of them from Acholi subregion (see also Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; HRW, 2003). Approximately 30% of the armed group was girl abductees (McKay & Mazurana, 2004; UNICEF, 2001). In addition to being cut off from their kin groups and networks of dependence, there is overwhelming evidence that girls abducted by the LRA experienced sexual and labour slavery. This was orchestrated through a system we can call ‘forced marriage’. In addition to performing other duties, the LRA leaders forced girls to serve as conjugal partners (for more details on the LRA ‘forced marriages’, see Carlson & Mazurana, 2008; Kramer, 2012; Watye & CAP International, 2014; Baines, 2014).

Between November 1993 and February 1994 there were some efforts aimed at fostering peace. The government of Uganda and the LRA attempted to engage in what came to be known as the Bigombe Peace Talks. However, these failed and subsequently, the LRA retreated into the bush. The Sudanese government began providing direct support to the LRA and in return, the LRA supported Khartoum's war against the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in what is now South Sudan. Even though their base was in South Sudan, the LRA fighters often returned to northern Uganda to commit large-scale killings, maiming, abductions, terrorism and looting against civilians (see Branch, 2011; Dolan, 2005).

The most notable feature of the LRA insurgency was the mass forced displacement and internment in northern Uganda. In an attempt to protect the people affected by looting and mass abductions by the LRA fighters, the government in 1996 adopted a strategy of building camps to which the people were forcibly moved (see Branch, 2011; Weeks, 2002). It is important to note that close examination makes it clear that there were two forms of movement taking place in northern Uganda: one involving the abduction of young girls and boys into the bush by the LRA and another which involved the Ugandan government moving people into camps to provide some level of relative safety away from abductions. By the year 2005, such camps had risen in number to 200. These settlements soon came to be referred to as ‘protected villages/camps’ (HRW, 2003:4; Human Rights Focus, 2002:11). The strategy of ‘protected villages’ would later develop into what would in effect be Internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps. Thus, by mid-2005, 1.8 million people were internally displaced (Dolan, 2005:9). While the

situation of displacement caused by LRA abductions was commonplace in northern Uganda, the Acholi region had at 90%, the lion's share of displaced people (Berntsen, 2010: note 3; Dolan, 2005:9). This displacement resulted in increased vulnerability for the Acholi people in that there was increasing dependence on external material support. Relief organizations addressed some of this need through the distribution of food items (Dolan, 2005). Thus, perhaps fittingly, given that this episode was one of forced displacement, it came to be associated with "forced dependency, forced vulnerability, forced humiliation, forced congestion within camps and forced isolation from outside" (Atkinson, 2009:8).

On 16 December 2003, the Ugandan government launched a legal process referring the rebel LRA to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The government claimed the referral would bring peace and justice to people of northern Uganda. On 8 July 2005, the ICC prosecutor officially issued arrest warrants for Joseph Kony and his top four allies/commanders for war crimes and crimes against humanity (see Branch, 2007).

For the first time since the collapse of the Bigombe Peace Talks in 1993/4, new peace talks were initiated on the 14 July 2006 during which the government of Uganda and the LRA engaged in what came to be known as the Juba Peace Talks. These talks were generally productive because they culminated in an agreement on a number of issues, including cessation of hostilities, comprehensive solutions to the conflict, accountability, and reconciliation, permanent ceasefire agreement and demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration. Thus, peace seemed realizable, but Joseph Kony did not sign the final peace agreement partly for fear that he and his top commanders would be handed over to the ICC (see Atkinson, 2009; International Crisis Group, 2007; Schomerus, 2007).

Since 2006 there have been no LRA attacks in northern Uganda and with this relative security, people have returned to their villages. A collective effort to shift the region away from dependence on humanitarian assistance was immediately replaced by development assistance through national institutions. The government and development partners are rebuilding the region through initiatives such as the Peace, Recovery, and Development Plans 1 and 2 for northern Uganda (see Government of Uganda, 2007, 2011) and northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF). NUSAF (1, 2&3) – supported by the World Bank –aim at revitalizing the economy, targeting the most vulnerable households and persons in the region.[2] PRDP reports have indicated that the improved security in the region has enabled business and investments to run as expected, but the region remains poor, largely because of the conflict and the consequent weak state institutions (see also International Alert, 2014). These are some of the contextual issues facing formerly abducted individuals resulting into a struggle to reintegrate and provide for themselves and their families. Because of the destruction of existing livelihood strategies for households, there is a lack of economic structures to support formerly abducted and other vulnerable young people. The fluid economic situation presents a challenge to the reintegration process and life experience in general. The unwelcome treatment ex-abductees receive from their families and communities exacerbate their experiences. As will be shown in this paper, all these issues relate to marriage and reintegration.

## Research methods

We utilized a qualitative strategy to generate data for this research. The study required the establishment of direct contact with female ex-abductees in Acholi region through fieldwork (Aug 2012–Feb 2013).[3] The research utilized both structured and semi-structured interviews with groups and individuals in four districts: Gulu, Kitgum, Lamwo, and Pader. Because the study sought to compare experiences according to location, we conducted interviews in towns (Gulu and Kitgum) and in the more remote sub-counties of Kitgum (Labong-Amida and Omiya Anyima) and Lamwo (Lokung Sub County) districts. The study interviewed and held conversations with 170 participants on issues relevant to post-LRA marriage, recovery and cultural and social reintegration. From the number of participants above, we conducted in-depth interviews with 50 women. Guiding this selection for interviews were specific criteria: a) that at the time of abduction the women were under the age of 18, b) the length of time in captivity was over 1 year and c) that the women had returned with children. Of the 50 participants, we purposefully selected 40 because they had been abducted as adolescents and teenagers and left the armed group with children fathered by the LRA fighters. Ten were abducted as adolescents but did not return with children.

The authors relied on a snowball technique to recruit female ex-abductees. Because ex-abductees persons are known and easily identifiable in their areas of residence, locating at least three female ex-abductees in a village was enough to start snowball recruitment. Such women maintained a sort of network among themselves. Many of them knew fellow ex-abductees, including those who had returned with a child or not, had been in abduction for months or years and those pretending to be ex-abductees. Only a few of the women asked how the research team had known they were ex-abductees, and when told it was through a fellow female ex-abductee (s), there were positive reactions.

To complement the information generated via in-depth interviews, twelve Focus Group Discussions were organized with community members and young women (both ex-abductees and never abducted). We became aware of eight key informants and their deep knowledge of the issues on female ex-abductees, recovery, and reintegration within the community; we also interviewed them. These informants included staff from the reception centres,[4] local government officers, and village women leaders. One unique characteristic of key informants, observers or reflective members is their familiarity with both the topic and the local culture. The informants had experience of working with and living among ex-abductee persons and, as such, they had the invaluable knowledge to contribute to this research on a range of issues. For example, around why some female ex-abductees had made some notable progress while others struggled. The opportunity to undertake focus group discussions and interviews with key informants assisted the authors to develop a deeper appreciation of how people in Acholi made sense of and attributed meaning to war and its aftermath, and how this is reflected in the attitudes towards female ex-abductees. Thus, arguments and quotations utilized to illustrate and provide the understanding of developments around the Acholi sub-region relied heavily on these individual interviews. Based on the data generated, in the sections below we discuss some of the findings of the part of the

[2] For information on NUSAF3 (2015–2020), see http://projects.worldbank.org/P149965?lang=en.

[3] This was a larger Ph.D. research project on abduction, rehabilitation and reintegration experiences of female LRA ex-abductees. The arguments of this paper emerged from this research as a key insight (the information discussed in the present paper is from

(*footnote continued*)
chapter five of the Ph.D. thesis). An earlier version of this paper was presented at Cadbury Conference, May 2017, *Marriage in Africa*, the University of Birmingham (UK).

[4] In northern Uganda, there were two forms of returning home, through rehabilitation centres and 'going straight home'. The rehabilitation centres, commonly referred to as reception centres in northern Uganda included Kitgum Concerned Women's Association (KICWA), Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO), World Vision Rehabilitation Centres, Concerned Parents Association (CPA), Christian Counselling Fellowship (CCF), Caritas Canter, Rachele Centre, and Kitgum Women Peace Initiative (KIWEPI), among others. Most of the centres received and rehabilitated adolescents and teenagers but some, like World Vision and KIWEPI took on adults as well. Such centres (financed by UN Agencies, national and international NGOs) provided early return support including medical care, family tracing and preparation and reinsertion/resettlement support. Rehabilitation through the centres was the formal way reintegrate and most of the participants discussed in the present paper found their way to their families and villages through the assistance of reception centres. Following the end of the war, some of the centres closed and others turned into community based-organizations that work with vulnerable groups of people around the region, including ex-abductees.

research that specifically explored the process and challenges of getting married and the nature of relationships with partners. Through this approach, severe stigmatization theme emerged. We also observed a sub-theme of intimate partner violence. At this point in our discussion, we need to briefly look at Acholi marriage customs and how these have been affected by the LRA's protracted war and the resulting ex-abductees' experiences with relationships in general and marriage in particular.

## Marriage customs in Acholi society

Keesing (1981:252) defines marriage as:

> an institution which legitimates sexual relations and parentage; …it defines the social position of individuals and their memberships in groups; it establishes legal rights and interests; it creates domestic economic units; it relates individuals to kin groups other than their own.…

This definition is important for analyzing the institution of marriage in Acholi society. It describes issues and aspects of marriage that apply to and affect female ex-abductees and other young women in this region. In order to understand the marriage situation and the challenges surrounding female ex-abductees of the LRA, it is necessary to look at Acholi marriage customs and how they have been affected by war.

Marriage plays a crucial socio-economic role in Acholi. It is an initiation from *wang-tino* ('childhood') to maturity. According to Acholi custom, an unmarried person is still a child no matter how old she or he may be. Marriage status is still such an important aspect of an individual's socialization, a rite of passage (in terms of recognition, respect, pride) and a source of well-being. As such, there is tremendous pressure to get married, both for females and for males of marriageable age. A bachelor and unmarried woman have no place in this culture. The unmarried young adults are disfavoured and stereotyped as incomplete, unserious, irresponsible, and unable to execute their allocated roles (Dolan, 2005:282; Finnström, 2008:235). The presence and voice of the unmarried are in most cases ignored or overlooked. The late anthropologist (and an Acholi), p'Bitek (1966) puts it precisely: "you might be a giant of a man, you may begin to grow grey hair, you may be old and toothless with age, but if you are unmarried, you are nothing." Conversely, because they have children and run homes, all married adults are perceived to be responsible, respectful and reliable (Dolan, 2005:282). With such stereotyping, unmarried youth find it hard to have their concerns considered and urgently met. Their participation in social, economic and political life is also limited (ibid.).

Beyond an individual understanding, marriage is a significant aspect whose central role is to unify *kaka* (clans) and control procreation (see Atkinson, 1994; Girling, 1960). Marriages are patrilineal and patrilocal (Baines & Gauvin, 2014:287; Girling, 1960:21). When *nyaka* ('a girl') gets married, she joins and becomes part of her husband's clan. Through this union and transfer, she gains a place in that family and village as a woman and mother. Apart from marriage defining an individual's ability and status in a village, it is one of the most important institutions of support for female ex-abductees and other vulnerable young women (see Justice and Reconciliation Project (henceforth JRP), 2006). Finnström, (2008:193) notes that "a formal marriage with bridewealth may assist in neutralizing such threatening potentials [*cen* – the vengeful spirit of the dead] of former rebel women." In addition, when a woman partners with a man in a *formal* marriage, she achieves a right to access family resources (land for farming, livestock). Marriage is social security, which for some women may only be gained from such association. Furthermore, apart from representing a principle basis of respect, self-esteem, and pride—with an unmarried woman experiencing limitations, isolation and stigmatization in a village— marriage provides a woman freedom to function as an accepted member of a wider society, which is considerably limited for an unmarried female of marriageable age.

Marriage is a source of wealth to the girl's parents through *otongo-keny* (bridewealth), a defining element in contracting a customary marriage. As in most Ugandan ethnic groups that consider bridewealth as a significant practice for authenticating a customary marriage (see Hague, Thiara, & Turner, 2011), paying bride wealth is still common in Acholi. In principle, when a young man has identified a girl to marry, he alerts his family and clan members who approach the girl's family to ask her hand in marriage and to agree on the sufficient *otongo-keny* (see Baines & Gauvin, 2014:189). The important issue here is the agreement and promise to pay the assigned *otongo-keny*. With the groom's family paying *otongo-keny* in exchange for the woman's reproductive and productive value, Acholi families hope to gain from this marriage practice. *Otongo-keny* typically consists of livestock, household items, foodstuffs, iron objects and money. The value depends on the status of the girl, for example, whether virgin or/and educated (JRP, 2006). However, traditionally, reasonable *otongo-keny* should include cattle (see Girling, 1960:71).

When *otongo-keny* negotiations are completed and the first instalment is paid, the couple is considered engaged and the young man takes the girl to his home – Girling (1960:21, 72) calls this stage of customary marriage "cohabitation". The couple can be engaged or cohabiting for a while and upon the completion of bride wealth payment, the bride's status changes from *nyako* (girl) to *dako-ot* (housewife). As Finnström (2008:192) writes about Acholi: "if bridewealth is provided, the woman's position in the social setting can be secured and made certain." Until this custom is fulfilled, the woman and children formally belong to her *kaka* and the husband has limited rights to dominate the welfare of his family. In addition, completing *otongo-keny* serves to finally sign a contract of marriage between the woman's and man's family/clan (see also Baines & Gauvin, 2014:189).

While full payment of *otongo-keny* enables a girl to become a housewife, her status and position in her husband's family and community is made permanent after giving birth. Procreation is the ultimate goal of marriage and a way of extending Acholi practices and values to the next generation. Therefore, the birth of the first child marriage confirms the marriage (Baines & Gauvin, 2014:287; Girling, 1960:21, 72; p'Bitek, 1966:105). Customarily, paying full *otongo-keny* implies that "the man's clan has established a right to a productive womb in the woman's family" (Girling, 1960:72) and the woman is typically blamed for the couple's inability to produce (ibid.). Because children are highly prized and giving birth within a marriage remains so significant, the barren and impotent are considered cursed and in need of cleansing.

Until the birth of the first child, the newlywed young woman sleeps in the husband's *ot* (pl. *odi* – hut/house) but continues to share domestic items and the fireplace with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Here, the mother-in-law treats her as one of her daughters, watching and teaching her how to be a wife. After giving birth, the couple moves into their own *ot* where the *dako-ot* now becomes the min *ot* (literally, 'hut mother'). With this accomplishment and establishment, the young woman stops being a menial assistant to the mother-in-law. She becomes the owner of the household, with her own garden, granary and cooking hut (see also Girling, 1960:21, 72). Being *formally* married is, therefore, a huge achievement, and this explains why women in Acholi refer to *being married* as "having a home – 'my home'" as opposed to "our home", meaning the parental home. When a female reaches marriageable age, she is expected to leave her 'mother's home' and look for 'her own home' (get married). With this accomplishment, a woman's position, social role, identity and rights as a wife and mother in the society are established (see also Baines & Gauvin, 2014:189).

The above-discussed process of legally getting married in Acholi is not limited to female ex-abductees of the LRA. All females have to go through these procedures as they attempt to achieve a culturally recognized marriage. We have also seen that customary marriage in Acholi can be in two forms: cultural marriage (*otongo-keny* completed) or cohabitation (where bridewealth is paid in instalments— this

marriage may be acknowledged by community members over time or not). From the Acholi perspective, marriage is a formal/fixed union accepted by the society and culture to be marriage, exclusive of courtship, dating, and any other loose partnerships. However in recent years, there has been a shift from fixed customary unions and cohabitation, as explained above, towards other loose forms of marriage, including elopements[5] and single parenthood living. The protracted war and stay in IDP camps have exacerbated this shift. Insecurity, displacement, and internment have affected the Acholi marriage system, and marriage as a key mechanism for creating social cohesion is felt to be changing significantly (Dolan, 2005:290; Schlecht et al., 2013). Forced marriages, elopements, divorce and single parenthood living are considerably higher than pre-war (see Bailey, 2009:19; JRP, 2006; Rodrigez, 2006). Female ex-abductees (not virgins, undereducated, poor health and military background) are no longer eligible for a legitimate marriage, as their parents are unlikely to get significant bridewealth out of them. They target elopement marriages that are becoming 'normal' and popular (see JRP, 2006; Schlecht et al., 2013). As we shall see, when such unions fail, such women settle for single parenthood living.

## Marriage patterns and realities post-LRA

Our findings show that time in captivity does not diminish women's desire to get married when they exit armed groups. Because they "may want to return to what they perceive as the stability of the pre-war arrangements" (Meintjes, Pillay, & Turshen, 2001:6), they endeavour to realize their marriage dreams. Indeed, of the participants, 54% described themselves as married women, while 39% had entered into some form of marriage and separated. Only 7% described themselves as single mothers. The length of marriages ranged from 1 to 8 years, including those who had separated from their partners at the time of interviews. The majority (73.68%) had been married for a period ranging from 1 to 5 years. Of those who described themselves as married women, the majority had entered marriage by eloping. Only two participants, both still married to their LRA husbands, had their bridewealth completed. The eventual completion of bridewealth by the partner to the ex-abductee's family is the ultimate goal, and in this regard, we recorded the two women as having achieved formal marriages and the rest as having failed to secure culturally acceptable marriages at the time of the interviews.

Their marriage narratives post-LRA tell of different experiences for female ex-abductees, with some describing their marriages as 'good' or 'normal' – 'like for anyone else.' Good marriages post-LRA are achieved when husbands treat them well, including being supportive of farm work and non-violent. 'Being treated well' also involved the individual husband not referring to a woman's past (captivity experiences) during arguments, respecting and defending her before her in-laws. A good marriage for a female ex-abductee occurs when she lives in harmony with her husband, in-laws, neighbours and other villagers: "when there are ceremonies in the village, for example, funerals or any other activity, Joyce [ex-abductee] is very active and mixes freely with people. She is not like other female ex-abductees who have weird behaviour…," (a participant in a family discussion describing her daughter-in-law).[6] Living 'in harmony' with people in her immediate setting and behaving as the society expects or demands show that a female ex-abductee has successfully *reinserted* into the community (see also Gulu Support the Children Organization, 2010:14). According to Acholi culture, a good person knows his or her duties, understands and follows the Acholi morality and sociality (see Apako, 1967). From the villagers' perspective, ability to participate in neighbourhood events, live peacefully, associate respectfully with in-laws and other people, and sustain a marriage determines whether an ex-abductee is making progress with her reintegration or not. Living otherwise (in isolation or withdrawn from other people) is interpreted as having unusual or antisocial behaviour and failed social reintegration.

From individual marriage narratives, it is clear that getting into and sustaining a marriage comes with a sense of pride, belonging, success and acceptance for female ex-abductees. This, however, varies according to the nature of the marriage. The established customarily married and cohabiting women draw more respect from their families and villages and have rights to family/clan resources, unlike the eloping women. If we are to compare cohabiting and elopement, cohabiting may be a safer marriage option for female ex-abductees because even if the husbands have not completed paying bridewealth, the reality that they are claiming full rights over their 'wife'/partner and children provides women with some stability and social security. However, whether the individual husband is willing or able to eventually complete bridewealth and legalize the union creates tensions, uncertainties, and instabilities among the cohabiting women. One participant expressed it this way:

> For a man to stay well with his wife and be sure that she loves him, he should fully marry her [completing payment of bride wealth] because if he does not, he will never see her true colours and complete love. This is because she will stay with the man while unsure about the marriage, and not knowing whether she will live at that man's home forever or not.[7]

We have already seen that a woman is married into her husband's clan/patrilineage and, before bride-wealth is completed, she is considered an 'outsider' by her in-laws, thus her loyalty to the husband and marriage can easily change (see Girling, 1960:72). Until the bride wealth is cleared, even if she gives birth, she is still seen as a newly married woman who, according to Allen (1994:131), may be dangerous: "she may be a sorcerer/poisoner. She may be unpredictable, her loyalties are unclear, and she is a threat to her husband's sisters living at home and to other wives and their children" (see also Finnström, 2008:192). Therefore, even if female ex-abductees can be in 'good' cohabitation marriages, as long as their bridewealth is not fully paid, they are still *outsiders* in 'their own homes'. Equally, women's families do not fully respect their husbands. In relation to marriage as a determinant of successful recovery and reintegration, as with their peers in elopements, women in cohabitation unions have also not obtained a formal position in their new societal context as married women and mothers. Until their bridewealth is fully paid, their position in their marital family and villages remains unsecured and uncertain (see also Finnström, 2008:193).

## Discordance between the 'New' Woman and culture

### *Stigmatization as a leading obstacle to 'having a home'*

Although factors like poverty, unsupportive partners, womanizing husbands, pressure over bridewealth, poor health and domestic violence among others, hinder marriage attempts among young women in general, for female ex-abductees, stigmatization stands out as the single most influential reason for their marriage failures. Their stigma and unmarriageability stem from their military background (see Bailey, 2009:32; Kiconco, 2015:130; Stavros, Stewart, & Stravrou, 2000:16).

There is an abiding assumption in Acholi that different LRA men repeatedly raped abducted girls (gang rape) while in captivity and female ex-abductees are possibly infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Comments like "do you know how many

[5] Elopements are sexual relationships where a young woman lives with her partner without him paying any instalment of the customary *otongo-keny* to receive their parents' marriage blessings.

[6] Mother-in-law, FGD02, 10/10/2012.

[7] Respondent, FGD02, Young Women, Kitgum town.

men slept with/used that one [female ex-abductee]?" are common among male youth:

> Suppose people hear that a certain man is dating you, they will start scaring him off by asking him questions like, "this woman who returned from the bush, don't you think she is infected with HIV/AIDS,[8] knowing how in the bush there, the LRA men were roaming with them [abducted girls] just anyhow"?[9]

Such quotations indicate the perception that female ex-abductees were willing wives of the rebels or simply gang rape victims.

Female ex-abductees are also seen as having participated in killings, leaving them contaminated with evil spirits of the dead (*cen*). Due to this contamination, when possessed, they can be harmful and unknowingly wreak havoc in their families and villages. Seen as carriers of this 'vengeful spirit', they should be avoided and excluded from marriage so that the evil spirits do not attack, kill or transfer to 'normal' individuals. While most people in Acholi acknowledge that female ex-abductees were recruited against their will, their stigmatization derives from their assumed 'stained' and 'polluted' personality (possession of *cen*) and what they did or was done to them while in captivity. It is also alleged that female ex-abductees were accustomed to violence and looting in the LRA and are thus deemed as capable of such wrongdoing back in the villages. They are seen as still capable of striking and being destructive if things do not go their way. Indeed, this experience concurs with the statement of a participant in a research study conducted by Finnström, (2008:191) with a group of elderly men who remarked that "she [female ex-abductee] can even kill you while you are asleep". There is a lingering suspicion that such wives who were abductees can do harm to husbands.

Female ex-abductees are thus seen as unmarriageable, with an ability to introduce misfortunes and illness to their marital homes. Finnström, (2008:191) further observes that "many of my young male informants in Gulu town claimed that former rebel girls are morally compromised, thus dangerous, and not suitable marriage partners." Although both males and females face stigmatization, it remains severe for females: "[a] in deeper sense, however, girls are also more often held to be impure sexually and thus morally more dubious, even more dangerous, than boys" (ibid.: 193). This perception particularly affects such women's attempts to get married.

Due to this background (stigma), families/clans encourage their sons to go for girls with no military past. Many women in our study repeatedly expressed frustration with the treatment they receive from their in-laws: "my sisters-in-law say I was in the bush and not fit to be with their brother and that he should leave me and bring somebody else… Being stigmatized in my marriage makes life hard. It is so painful."[10] Many men who go ahead and marry female ex-abductees are ridiculed into abandoning them, and those who stick by their women are often told never to boast of having a wife because they are harbouring a 'rebel' with a 'bush/military mentality' who might turn on them anytime (see also JRP, 2006).

This view of female ex-abductees originates from the fact that Acholi is a patriarchal society where violent behaviour is still attached to males. Women are accepted as nurturers and any experience of aggression is unnatural, bush-like, uncomfortable and unacceptable. If a 'bush mentality' (dangerous, unintelligent, offensive, intolerant, terrible and uncivilized mindset or behaviour) is coupled with their feared military experience, they are seen as coming from a very poor background, as unwomanly and therefore heavily resented (Kiconco, 2015:130).

With their military background, ex-abductee women are assumed unable to submit to their husbands as is culturally expected of all wives. Villagers, especially older women, who participated in this study argued that, when it comes to marriage and general relationships, female ex-abductees have attitudes contrary to those of other 'normal' (never-abducted) young women. Two of them had this to say:

> In Acholi culture, a wife has to follow the husband's orders but not these people [female ex-abductees]. They bring in their *bush mentality*, which their husbands, with no abduction experiences cannot understand. The women want to be controlling and the husbands cannot take that pressure…leading to problems in their marriages…[11]

> These women do not listen to advice. If you try to be harsh when talking to them, they become angry saying you want to control them. They become so rude and hard to live with.[12]

These claims and reasoning seem common in African post-conflict situations. While soldiering in captivity, girls learn how to survive, and they— particularly those who stay with the fighting forces for a long time— deviate seriously from the norm. It has been suggested that they may end up with behavioural problems or antisocial behaviour (violent, aggressive, quarrelsome, using offensive/foul language, etc.) during their time in captivity, which affects the way they relate to other people (McKay & Mazurana, 2004:36). These behaviours may be hard to break, even after years of being in a normal society. Back in the villages, Acholi female ex-abductees are found or assumed to have behavioural problems and are accused of behaving contrary to their non-abducted peers. Acholi society expects them to re-adapt the cultural status of a submissive woman/wife where they are not to question the man's (or any person's) authority (see also McKay & Mazurana, 2004:17). However, for some of them, having been in the military environment for a long time left them with a changed way of thinking and responding to social issues. Although they are aware they have to be submissive, this remains difficult to achieve:

> Life in captivity has greatly affected my attitude. I have become a woman who does not allow a man or anyone to control me. I hate it when someone tries to force me to do something I do not want. This is bad because according to Acholi culture, a woman should have a submissive nature.[13]

Others are judged according to how they behave and respond to other people:

> People say I am rude. For example, my mother-in-law says I do not talk but command. That everything I say, I say it in a commanding tone. She also says when I want something done I want it done so quickly. But if I am told to do something, I do not listen…She also says that I like staring people straight in the eye when they are talking to me…these are the reasons she gives for not liking me.[14]

When confronted with severe stigmatization and other challenges in their marriages, some female ex-abductees respond with extreme violence. In a family discussion, one participant described how one of her two ex-abductee daughters had shocked her husband and in-laws with excessive violence:

> Their [female ex-abductees] marriages are failing because people still call them rebels and at times, they cannot take these insults. For

[8] This perception and ill-treatment are often directed at already married rape survivors where they either are rejected by their husbands, other family members or lose support from spouses. Men fear that their raped wives could have been infected with the HIV virus (see Human Rights Watch, 2005:34; Isis-WICCE, 2001:46).

[9] This perception and ill-treatment are often directed at already married rape survivors where they either are rejected by their husbands, other family members or lose support from spouses. Men fear that their raped wives could have been infected with the HIV virus (see Human Rights Watch, 2005:34; Isis-WICCE, 2001:46).

[10] Interview, female ex-abductee, Aminda Sub county, 7/10/2012.

[11] Participant, FGD02 Kitgum town centre, 16/11/2012.

[12] Participant, FGD02.

[13] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amida, 8/10/2012.

[14] Interview, female ex-abductee, Kitgum town.

example, Filder has left her marital home because somebody provoked and called her a rebel. Filder picked a razor blade and began cutting that person's body. When the person started running and screaming, Filder picked a hoe and began chasing the person. We [Filder's family] were immediately called there [marital home] and she was handed to us. That is why she is back home now.[15]

Although girl soldiers and abductees survive by being aggressive and violent, such reactions often interfere with their life back home, hindering their reintegration (see also McKay & Mazurana, 2004:37). Antisocial behaviour, extreme violence, and violation of gender norms affect their ability to readjust to the expectations of the society.

*Intimate partner violence exacerbates marriage situations and problems*

As we have already seen, most relationships men create with female ex-abductees are not serious and do not end in a respected customary marriage. However, because these young women are desperate to 'have a home', they end up moving in with some of these men. Because of their past and present circumstances, female ex-abductees mostly end up with poor, uneducated, violent, and alcoholic men. When unions fail, men abandon them, leaving female ex-abductees in a more psychologically, culturally, socially and economically complex position and situation.

However, some men do stay with female ex-abductees, but exercise their power by bestowing less respect, being violent, and viewing the women as 'mentally unstable' and/or 'stupid'. We found that for female ex-abductees who endure stigmatization to 'have a home', intimate partner violence (IPV) exacerbates their marriage situation and problems. In addition to other factors, abduction background contributes to IPV among formerly abducted women (see also Annan & Brier, 2010). Most of our married participants repeatedly experienced verbal abuse (threats, shouting or yelling) from their husbands. Among these, some experience physical threats or violence including pushing, slapping or holding them down: "my husband is very quarrelsome. He beats me. He verbally abuses me that I am from the bush, stupid and not mentally sound…."[16] Men usually violate them when they are under the influence of alcohol or if there is a disagreement in the family (see also Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2008). Alcohol consumption before sex or at any other time not only emotionally distresses women, it is majorly responsible for domestic violence in their marital homes. Studies have shown that the male partners' characters are predictors of their violent behaviour towards their spouses and have found a strong connection between consumption of alcohol or drugs and violent behaviour (see Karamagi, Tumwine, Tylleskar, & Heggenhougen, 2006; Weinsheimer, Schermer, Malcoe, Balduf, & Bloomfield, 2005).While this article discusses IPV from the perspective of female ex-abductees, it points to problems of abuse of young women in the wider Acholi society (see Okello & Hovil, 2007). In Acholi (and indeed other Ugandan ethnic groups) there is a belief that a woman should be punished (by beating) if she does not pay heed to her husband or father or brother(s)-in-law (see Speizer, 2010; Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2000–2001, 2006:411; Uganda Women's Network, 2012:3). Considering that in Acholi, the customary law seems to overrule civil law females have to find ways to live with this situation. Among our participants, unlike those in towns, women in remote villages seemed to endure the violence. Town participants were more likely to condemn and walk away from violent marriages. Their remote village counterparts were left trapped in their marriages because, as complete dependants of men, they hoped to gain material and social security, access to resources like land and to search for fulfilment of their needs. Consequently, engaging in marriage for them is more of a need than a desire. It is not their choice to endure the stigmatization and domestic violence, but with no other alternative, they decide to stay in the marriages.

While the impacts of physical abuse may be more visible than stigmatization, psychological scarring, shouting, humiliation and constant threats of violence and injury are more subtle and dangerous forms of violence directed at this category of women in their marriages. The marital home is often equated with or expected to be a sanctuary—a place where women seek love, safety, and protection. However, for many female ex-abductees, their marital homes (and at times biological families) are places that expose them to danger and breed severe forms of violence towards them. Annan and Brier (2010) found that: 'elements of their [female ex-abductees'] new relationships [mirror] that of their forced 'marriages' during abduction, such as the physical violence and inability to leave or escape these relationships.' Violence against them has become a cycle of abuse that has manifested itself in many forms throughout their lives (life in captivity and back home). Such domestic violence leaves them in a situation where they are often made to feel helpless and psychologically destabilized.

## Perspectives of the New Woman

Some of the participants were adamant that villagers are responsible for their marriage woes, pressurizing their never-abducted men into mistreating or abandoning them. Although this village-driven stigmatization affects the way the men relate to their ex-abductee wives, limiting the stigma problem to villagers' unsympathetic attitudes is not a sufficient reason to explain their marriages struggle. In an attempt to explain why marriages with non-abducted men rarely result in sustainable unions, JRP (2006:7) notes that this is because "spouses who had never experienced abduction or life in the 'bush' are unable to empathize or relate with those who did." The current findings support this argument. Instead of empathizing with their situation, their partners actually take advantage of the female ex-abductees' background and vulnerability:

> Since we [abductees] came back home, men are just fooling around with and using us. They pick you knowing about your abduction experience and go on to say they will stay with you but then later, they start calling you a rebel. For instance, when I returned home, a man asked to marry me. I even had a child with him but he shortly abandoned me and this has increased my problems because I have more children to support…[17]

> My bush experience has affected my social life. Had it not been my abduction past, I am sure I would be in my home [married]. I would be settled with a man in a family. However, this does not happen because when I get married; people are always stigmatizing me. That man [former husband] was beating me a lot and calling me a rebel, which is why I left him. The fact that I am an ex-abductee makes life difficult for me.[18]

Anyone would expect a man who opposes and ignores the ill feelings of their own families towards marrying an ex-abductee to sympathize with the women's situation and stigma. However, in most cases, as Annan & Brier (2010:156) noted, female ex-abductees perceived "new partner relationships as compounding their problems rather than relieving them." New partners are part of the problem or are the source of it: "Because of the stigmatization I go through in this village, my life has not been good since I came back home. My husband who could help to eradicate the stigmatization is also a party to it. This makes me very unhappy…."[19]

In other countries, such as Sierra Leone, former girl soldiers were encouraged by some reintegration agencies to marry their former

[15] Participant in FMD 01, Amida.

[16] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amida, 15/10/2012.

[17] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amiya Anyima, 10/11/2012.

[18] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amiya Anyima, 4/11/2012.

[19] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amiya Anyima, 7/11/2012.

commanders and captors (see, for example, Coulter, 2009:219), but this move was not seen as appropriate in Uganda. Rehabilitation agencies instead advised the female ex-abductees otherwise: 'have nothing to do with that bush husband', many were told. Even those with children fathered by the LRA fighters were dissuaded from tracing paternal roots for their children:

> I did not attempt to do anything like that [finding the child's father and paternal relatives] because we were advised from World Vision that there was no need doing that since we suffered in the bush carrying and delivering them. They [children] are our consolations and blessings that God has given us and that we should even never let the relatives of their fathers know. Even about the mere fact that we were related to them and had come back home…[20]

They were instead encouraged to find new partners and 'forget their past'. However, because of their stigmatized past, among other problems, new marriages with never-abducted men have also not been successful for many of them. Linking stigmatization and marriage, the findings show that ex-abductees do not marry each other. If they did, this would probably diminish some of the stigma in the marriage and perhaps allow them to be more open about their experiences. Based on our two participants who were still married to their LRA husbands, sharing similar past experiences seems to make marriage between ex-abductees "socially easier" (JRP, 2006:7). Their unions appear sustainable compared to the majority who were married to non-abductee men. The question of why ex-abductees do not marry each other was beyond the scope of our study.

### *Separation as the only response to Stigmatization and IPV*

However important marriage is to female ex-abductees, some resist the stigmatization, violence, and other problems they encounter in this institution. They do this by making selfless choices like deserting the unions. Particularly of the women who were eloping, 37% had deserted their unions and one of them had separated from her second partner. The separated women either end up living with their parents or renting homes in trading centres and town slums, while taking care of their children and other dependants (see also Baines & Gauvin, 2014:290). Of the 54% who were 'having a home' (married), 7% ($n = 4$) were attempting marriage for the second time since they exited the LRA. Although some of the participants were still living with their partners, plans of abandoning 'their homes' were revealed during the interviews. They were frustrated and had lost hope in their men and marriage:

> It [marriage] is not good because he abuses and insults me saying I am insane given that I came back from the bush. He also likes fighting and beating me a lot… Life is very hard for me here and I plan to leave.[21]

Leaving the marriage often happens after a considerable period, but in other cases, it occurs in less than a year:

> When I returned home, my parents had died and I struggled with life. I met a man and we started an informal marriage, which lasted less than a year. I left him because I could not stand what people there [marital home] were saying about me and my children. I left that home and started renting here in town and taking care of my children. Since 2009 to date, I am still not married.[22]

Even though the findings reveal high marriage separation rates among female ex-abductees, this should be set in the wider post-conflict Acholi context, and not only associated with an abduction past. When female ex-abductees' problematic marriages are compared to the situations of other young women within Acholi society, the study concludes that this turbulence in the marriage institution is a legacy of a long war. War and displacement affected and changed the formal marriage system in Acholi society (see Schlecht et al., 2013). After the war, the society was disrupted, with insecurity, displacement, extreme poverty, migration, modernization, intermarriage and education among others said to be responsible for this change. Growing up with a new outlook to marriage and life, and unable to meet marriage expectations, many youths are taking advantage of the emerging marriage changes to ensure that they too can participate in this important institution. As we mentioned earlier about female ex-abductees, many youth target cohabitation, and elopement marriages (see ibid.). When such unions fail, they settle for single parenthood living (see also Isis-WICCE, 2001:45). In an attempt to explain the high levels of 'marriage' separation among female ex-abductees and other young women (who mainly end up in loose marriage-like circumstances), the participants reported that when they encounter problems in 'their homes', they find abandoning them for newer unions or single parenthood living as the only solution. With no marriage counselling or any other related community support, for many of such women, separation is inevitable.

However, some female ex-abductees are unable to walk away from bad marriages. They cannot return to their parents or economically take care of themselves if they choose to stay single. The fact that a woman has never taken her partner to her family so that bridewealth is agreed upon and paid leaves her in a dilemma when the union fails:

> Staying with a man without sending something [bridewealth] back home, you feel ashamed because in the past if you are formally married in a family and maybe you separate from your husband, you easily go back home [parental]. In this case, if your bridewealth was transferred to marry your brother's wife, you will go and stay at your brother's house. However, if you are not married [eloping], you will fear to go back home when the union fails because you will be thinking, "if I separate with this man, where will I go and stay? Whose house will I enter to live in?"[23]

For some women, it is not bridewealth or the absence of it that hinders their mobility in this institution, but the burden of extra children. Even if the marriage/union is not working out as hoped, women are more concerned and worried about what will become of their children. Their children become the reason they endure 'bad' marriages: "If it was not because of my children I would have left him, but I already have three children with him and I cannot leave them or go away with them…."[24] With no economic independence, women have no power to take care of their children and themselves. The option of leaving the union and returning to their parental family with one or more children is also not an easy choice to make.

Another category of female ex-abductees is stuck in hopeless marriages because they simply do not have anyone or any family to escape to. These include total orphans with no alternative but to endure the 'bad' marriage. For example, 20-year-old Josephine had been eloping for two years and had one child at the time of the study. She desperately wanted to leave her marriage but, because she had nowhere or anyone to turn to, she was forced to go on with the marriage: "I am just staying here because there is nowhere else I can go. Only if there was somewhere I could go, I would not continue living like this, with people who despise me."[25] Such women are trapped in bad marriages because they have no one to turn to or simply because they cannot afford to live alone or move back in with parents where they will still be stigmatized and ridiculed for not getting 'their own home'.

[20] Interview, female ex-abductee, Gulu town, 2/2/2013.
[21] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amida, 11/10/2012.
[22] Interview, female ex-abductee, Kitgum town, 25/10/2012.
[23] Respondent, FGD02 Young Women, Kitgum town.
[24] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amiya Anyima, 12/11/2012.
[25] Interview, female ex-abductee, Amiya Anyima, 08/11/2012.

## Why marriage remains a significant element of reintegration

Regardless of the problems female ex-abductees encounter in their attempts to get married, this is an aspect of life they cannot afford to completely walk away from. To such women, marriage is life. Fear of being viewed as 'nothing', a *Malaya* (prostitute), and/or *Gekere* (second hand/class women), or even starving, causes them to stay in 'bad' unions or re-enter new ones. Abandoning a marriage means the cycle starts all over again for an individual woman – waiting and searching for another man to honour and give her 'a home'. This testing process may take a long time:

> I angrily left *my home* and came back to my *mother's home*. I have been here now for three years … I have failed to get *my home* because people say that, "if a man marries someone who has been in the bush, she might kill him one time" and this is why I am still living at *our home* [parental].[26]

At the time of interviews, many of our participants who had abandoned their marriages had been searching for new husbands for some time (about 2–4 years).

This continuous searching and longing for marriage are understandable. Considering that the participants' demographic data shows an average age of 26 years, many female ex-abductees are still young, with the chance of reattempting to have 'a home'. In addition, being unmarried beyond the age of 25 may prompt people to start perceiving them as 'abnormal', cursed, or carrying *cen*, and in need of cultural healing. Until they get 'potential' men to 'give them homes', they have to withstand stigmatization for having abandoned their marriage and returned to 'their mothers' homes'. They receive and are accorded very little respect because their marriage failure is simply concluded to be their total fault. They are viewed as undisciplined, irresponsible and unmarriageable: "we are constantly insulted in villages. They call us *Gekere*. We are not free; villagers insult us. Since we are not married, the community sees us as total failures."[27]

Because marriage is a cultural shared norm that they are expected to fulfil, and failure at it promotes social isolation and stigma, it is no surprise that at the time of interviews some of the participants had been married once or twice before they were even 25 years old. Although aware of the dangers that come with changing men, when they are stranded, unable to keep up with the social pressure and stigmatization, they opt to go back and forth in these irregular marriages:

> The man will come to you and convince you that, "with me, you will not have the same problem like the one you had in your previous marriage" and with the poverty you are facing, you decide to go for another marriage.[28]

The relationship between an individual female ex-abductee and her parents influences the former's decisions when she returns home after a marriage has failed. Inability to draw sympathy and support from their own families pushes them to desperate measures like going back to their same bad marriage:

> The problem is with our parents. Because your husband is terrible, you decide to go back to your home [parental]. However, your parents will talk to you in a bad way. This unpleasant treatment will annoy you all the time and when your ex-husband asks you to go back; you find you do not have any better alternative but to go back.[29]

All these factors drive them to either keep with their violent and stigmatizing husbands or enter another marriage, and if unlucky, the haste lands them in another bad union. The cycle starts all over again. Changing men does not provide any relief from their challenges but instead doubles their magnitudes, for example, producing a number of children with different men. This also increases their vulnerability, risk, and exposure to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. However, for them as individuals, considering the cultural importance of marriage, however frustrating and challenging they find these unions to be, with their social and economic standing, they cannot afford to give up on finding a stable 'home'. With no other means to survive, cope with stigmatization, and regain their deserved positions as Acholi women, the fight to secure a good marriage continues for this category of young women.

[26] Interview, female ex-abductee, Lokung, 13/12/2012.
[27] Participant FGD01, Kitgum town, 18/10/2012.
[28] Respondent FGD02, Young Women, Kitgum, 20/10/2012.
[29] Participant FGD01.

## Conclusion

The present paper has discussed female ex-abductees' marriage patterns and realities in Acholi sub-region. Among other factors, stigmatization, intimate partner violence, and patriarchal tendencies are the main challenges to their marriage attempts. Because of these hindrances within their marriages, some female ex-abductees in Acholi society are seeking new family forms, such as living as single heads of households. However, because being married is central to social identity and status and the women depend on marriage for socio-economic survival, many stick in 'bad' marriages or, alternatively, abandon them and attempt to remarry. Although it is not necessary for female ex-abductees to be remarried in order to be reintegrated, their experiences of marriage, as an important cultural institution, should be addressed in long-term reintegration programmes. Our findings suggest that decreasing household stigmatization and intimate partner violence will depend on persistent interventions, including increasing community awareness, improving mechanisms for female ex-abductees to cope with domestic violence, improving educational and economic opportunities for vulnerable youth, decreasing dependence on husbands, and minimizing alcohol consumption, among others.

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