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Gender differentiated perceptions held for triggers of child neglect in post-conflict northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Although considerable research exists on Child Neglect (CN), gender-differentiated perceptions that fuel CN are not yet known. In the patriarchal family settings, the perception often held of mothers is that of childcare and fathers as providers. Drawing on interviews with 35 parents reported for CN in post-conflict northern Uganda, this paper explores the gendered triggers of CN and interventions directed at children under CN. The paper uses radical feminism and nested ecological theories to examine gendered perceptions often held about motherhood and fatherhood in relation to childcare and explains the risk factors for CN for caretakers from northern Uganda. Narrative responses were audio-recorded and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis was used to scrutinize parents' perceptions on CN. Parents highlighted triggers for CN as; spousal separation and custody of children, polygamy, disorientation of cultural and social norms and the burden of single parenting. Case reporting and community dialogues were identified as interventions. The paper argues for mainstreaming gender into family and child protection strategies for improved childcare while targeting both fathers and mothers to enhance safety of children. This paper contributes to the debate on CN by bringing out gender perspectives on parents' intentional CN in northern Uganda.

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Gender; child neglect; motherhood; fatherhood; post-conflict

Introduction

Child Neglect (CN) remains the most common form of child maltreatment in Uganda according to the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse & Neglect (ANPPCAN) (ANPPCAN, 2011). CN refers to the failure of a parent to provide for the development of a child, when the parent is position to do so, in areas of education, health, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe living conditions (ANPPCAN, 2011; Runyan, Wattan, Ikeda, Hassan, & Ramiro, 2002). This form of child maltreatment continues to be reported among the top leading crimes in Uganda, for example cases of CN that were registered were; 3,645 in 2014 and 12,152 in 2017 (Uganda Police, 2014, 2017). CN has also been conceptualized in different domains such as physical, supervisory, cognitive and emotional violence where parents and caregivers fail to play key roles in the lives of their children (Straus & Kaufman, 2005). In the current study, CN was understood to refer to situations when parents and caregivers intentionally either abandoned, deserted, denied educational needs, denied healthcare, clothing, food and supervision to their children. The effects of neglect are

detrimental to the survivors, and neglected children are more likely to have severe cognitive and academic deficits as well as increased social deficits (Lounds, Borkowski, & Whitman, 2006).

Northern Uganda continues to report very high cases of CN (Uganda Police, 2014, 2017) compared to other regions in Uganda. The northern region experienced civil conflict and the civilian population got exposed to a lot of suffering, and children were trapped into a combination of enduring, witnessing and applying violence (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2013). This conflict started in 1986 and ended with the signing of the cessation of hostility agreement in 2006 involving peace talks (Annan, Blattman, Mazurana, & Carlson, 2011). Abducted children were forced to participate in raids, wounding, and killings, often directed at own families, friends, and neighbours in order to sever social ties and discourage them from escaping (Vindevoegel et al., 2011). Around 1.8 million people were internally displaced and put in camps by the Uganda government to protect them from abduction and atrocities by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency (Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda, 2006).

The experiences of the conflict left the entire population in this region not only traumatized but also in extreme poverty (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Men lost access to traditional economic livelihoods as sources of authority and power and the clan systems were degraded (Reinke, 2016). In addition, there was loss of property including loss of cattle (Reinke, 2016). This research had focussed on the Acholi and Lango communities only even though there were many ethnic groups in northern Uganda who were equally affected by the LRA conflict.

Traditionally, Acholi and Lango societies are patriarchal and men's interests are prioritized over those of women (Omona & Aduo, 2013). Polygamy is considered culturally acceptable (Amone, 2019) and the man has a social obligation to provide for every woman (Sengupta & Calo, 2016). In reality, most men do not fulfil this obligation leading to gender-based violence in the homes. During the LRA conflict, gender roles changed. Men used to provide for all the material needs of the family and protect the women and children. This was disoriented by the conflict (Sengupta & Calo, 2016). Women's primary roles were to manage the homes by taking care of children, cook food, wash clothes and welcome visitors in the home. All these changed after the conflict, women started providing for almost all the needs of their households by themselves (Sengupta & Calo, 2016). Many children in the region reside in poor households coupled with limited access to education, health, clean water and dietary diversity (UNICEF, 2015).

Using radical feminism and nested ecological theories, this qualitative study explored gender-differentiated triggers for CN. One of the central beliefs of radical feminism is that women are oppressed under the system of patriarchy (Damant et al., 2008; Walby, 1990). This oppression can be understood through radical feminism insights of 'personal is political' and 'consciousness-raising' by situating women's daily experiences in a social context (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018). For example, the primary responsibility for rearing children is assigned to women (Bridig & Taylor, 2006; Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivée, & Trocmé, 2008) and male domination prevails in social structures and practices (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Ritzer, 2008). Women may maltreat their children as a means of defence or as a survival strategy as a group with little power (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Damant et al., 2008).

Radical feminist scholars associate motherhood in less supportive relationships with CN (Damant et al., 2008; Guterman, Lee, Shawn, Waldfogel, & Rathouz, 2009). Mothering and caring continue to be socially constructed as women's work (Bridig & Taylor, 2006; Turney, 2000). Motherhood intensifies the helplessness of both women and children (Mullender et al., 2002). The obligation of motherhood demands selfless devotion to children and a subordination of one's own life to the needs of children and family (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). The belief that a woman's ultimate fulfilment is in being a mother is often held strongly (Lindsey, 2011). Feminists argue that for many women as a disadvantaged group, children present a gesture of achievement and power (Damant et al., 2008). On the other hand, fathers' roles have been socially constructed to be related to providing the material needs for their families (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Aspects of fatherhood and fathers' involvement in family life play significant roles in influencing CN. Fathers' employment, their status, age, their own socialization or experiences in childhood, characteristics of their relationships with the

mother and the child and their potential use of substances; all these have potential to define whether they will be neglectful of their children or not (Guterman & Lee, 2005).

The nested ecological theory demonstrates that child maltreatment is a socio-psychological phenomenon determined by forces at work in the individual, nested in the family, the community and the culture (Belsky, 1980, 1993). The theory is heavily drawn from Bronfenbrenner's work on the interaction between an individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The theory explains what direct influence the surroundings have on children's development (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Ecological theory was used to understand the relationship between child neglect and the socio-cultural economic surroundings (Belsky, 1980) for each of the individuals in the study.

In this research, both ecological and radical feminist perspectives were used to understand how gender identities, roles, expectations about mothering or fathering are influenced by the social setting, and how these influenced CN in northern Uganda. The paper therefore examined gender-differentiated triggers of CN by parents who were reported for neglecting their children and the interventions to mitigate CN in the post-conflict region of northern Uganda. This article is part of the PhD study that examined gender and child abuse occurrences in post-conflict northern Uganda.

Materials and methods

Sample

The study was carried out in the districts of Gulu, Kitgum and Lira in the northern Uganda. The study involved 35 parents (20 males and 15 females) and the participants were from Lira ($n = 13$), Gulu ($n = 12$) and Kitgum ($n = 10$). The parents were purposively selected. All these were parents who were reported for neglecting their children and could be traced, whether free or incarcerated. Parents were in the age groupings of 16–20 years ($n = 1$ mother), 21–25 years ($n = 3$ all mothers), 26–30 years ($n = 4$; 1 father & 3 mothers) and 31–35 years ($n = 27$; 19 fathers & 8 mothers). Parents identified themselves as separated or divorced ($n = 15$), cohabiting ($n = 10$), married ($n = 8$) and single ($n = 2$). Parents had between 1 and 7 children under their care. According to self-report, the majority of the participants depended on farm work ($n = 20$), others on casual work ($n = 9$), private work ($n = 3$), no work ($n = 2$) and formal employment ($n = 1$). On educational level, the majority of the participants had primary level education ($n = 22$), followed by those with secondary (Ordinary level) education ($n = 9$), secondary (Advanced level) education ($n = 2$), tertiary education ($n = 1$) and never gone to school ($n = 1$). All parents from Gulu and Kitgum spoke Acholi and those from Lira spoke Lango.

Interview protocol & procedure

The research team sought permission from the Directorate of Research and Planning of the Uganda Police to grant access to parents reported for CN at each of the district's central police stations. Upon identification, parents were then followed up for interviews. Prior to the start of each interview, a parent was requested for consent to participate in the study. For parents in incarceration, permission to access and conduct the interviews was sought from the Uganda Police and Uganda Prisons Service. Research assistants were all social work graduates, fluent in Acholi, Lango and English languages and were all trained on how to conduct the interviews prior to the data collection. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the vernacular of the area that was understood by all the participants and translated after the interview by the research team. All interviews were voice-recorded. Interviews explored circumstances surrounding why parents were accused of CN and the forms of CN manifested. The Research Assistants were given a guide with open-ended questions to have participants' narratives recorded. Interview time ranged from 50 to 80 minutes for each participant.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim using audio recordings by two research assistants and transcriptions were verified by all team members who participated in conducting the interviews to ensure accuracy. The data collection team included two Research Assistants and the Principal Investigator (PI). Following data collection, the research team members would compare field notes and audio recordings daily upon return from the field. Qualitative content analysis was used to have in-depth understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of those involved (Patton, 2002; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Both inductive and deductive analytic approaches (Patton, 2002) were applied at different situations. Inductive content analysis helped in coding categories that were derived directly from the raw data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) through critical reading of transcripts (Thomas, 2006). Inductive approach was useful in figuring out possible categories, patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). Therefore, interview scripts were distributed to research assistants and read independently several times to identify emerging themes and sub-themes. Joint discussions with research assistants were held to compare themes and sub-themes that were identified. A deductive approach at some stage was involved in analysis to relate identified categories to individual risk factors related to CN in a family environment (Belsky, 1980) and socially constructed gender roles ascribed to CN (Turney, 2000).

Data coding began during data collection and went on even after data collection and this enhanced continuous analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Raw data consisted of interview transcripts, field notes and participant observation. The coding of the data involved steps ranging from specific coding to a more generalized coding of the data. The PI and the Research Assistants were involved in the coding process and for each interview, they did this independently. After every interview, the responses would be read word by word (Thomas, 2006) and codes developed to reflect the exact thoughts and meaning of the participant (Bernard, 2011; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The generated codes were shared and discussed to have agreeable codes. A table of codes was thus developed and reviewed. This coding process led to creation of categories or themes and subcategories or sub-themes as the authors got familiar with the coding tables. The patterns on triggers of CN among parents started to emerge gradually from the data and were categorized into main categories and subcategories. The coding guide was used to have some categories expanded and/or combined to get a higher category. Extracts from the transcripts are provided in the results.

Results

Separation and custody of children

There was rampant spousal separation that resulted into child desertion and/or neglect in the post-conflict era of northern Uganda. Throughout the interview, female and male parents noted that they had at some point broken up from an intimate relationship that had a child or children. Parents in this category described how it was easy to get a partner, have children and separate thereafter following a disagreement. Parents described how custody of children after separation was contributory to CN. This category was divided into fathers' lack of motivation and mothers' inability to provide for children's needs as was embedded in gender roles.

Lack of motivation to provide children's needs

Majority of the fathers noted that child custody was a male obligation. Fathers falling in this category described how it was demotivating to provide for children who were not staying with them. Such fathers noted that assistance given to children staying with mothers only had benefitted the latter. Such fathers noted a loss of attachment with their children.

I cannot pay school fees for children not staying with me. She knows children are mine, and I am entitled to their custody. Why does that woman take my children yet there is a nearby school? Why take all my children to her home? You can't work on what you don't see (interview with a 31-year-old father).

In accordance with patriarchal perspectives from Acholi and Langi, children's custody after a broken marriage falls in the hands of the father by virtue of his position as the man in the home. Patriarchy demands that the patrilineal lineage be followed and yet some men cannot take care of the children. Fathers described the struggle they went through to maintain custody of their children, including getting other wives to play the role of childcare on behalf of the children's actual biological mothers.

She went with my children by force and yet I had brought another wife who would take care of my children. So, I brought them back by force and in the process one of my children died because she (mother of the child) did not inform me that one child was not well. I was unaware of the sickness. You can see how that woman (referring to the mother of his child) killed my child (interview with a 33-year-old father).

Fathers noted how female custody of children after separation was used as a tool for getting financial assistance and a way of enhancing loss of child-father attachment.

My children look at me and run away. I have decided to neglect all of them. Let them come and stay with me but not that woman. I feel I am not attached to my children because their mother has soiled their attitude. The mother uses my children as a tool to get financial assistance from me. I will only provide if they realize that I am their father (interview with a 35-year-old father).

Inability to provide for children's needs

Mothers described how it was desirable for them to provide childcare but lacked the means and support from husbands. Mothers in this category noted how difficult it was to provide children's needs on their own. They also noted that they could not be accepted back into their natal homes with their children. These mothers noted that their families became very poor after the LRA war of 1986–2006 and therefore they were better off married. Mothers in this category described how they, thus, had children at a young age and with none to low formal education.

I gave birth to my first three children when I was still young at the age of 15 shortly after coming from the 'bush' (rebel captivity). Every time I give birth, my husband goes to an unknown place. Taking care of his children has not been easy for me . . . besides I have a strange sickness I got when I was abducted by the LRA and I usually get attacks at night when I am alone with his children. Because I cannot manage, I decided to leave his children including a baby of 10 days to their grandmother. I came to this man with no child. Why should I suffer with them? At home, they are so poor and cannot accept me with his children. But my mother-in-law reported me to police for deserting their children and here I am in prison (interview with incarcerated 23-year-old mother).

Mothers described how they feared to become homeless after a broken marital relationship. Having a marital relationship was perceived as having acquired a desirable status and future by the majority of women and failed attempts were received with apathy.

I would not have left my children. When he (the husband) got another woman, I became useless and he told me to go and leave his children to be cared for by his new wife. I love my children and want them to be helped because I have no money. I want my children to study and going with them would mean denying them education. Even my mother can't manage, she is homeless. But I was arrested for desertion of children (interview with an incarcerated 21-year-old mother).

Polygamy

This category emerged as many parents described how their spouses' involvement in polygamous relationships led them into neglecting their children. This category was further subdivided to include gender reflections on parents' own experience with CN. These subcategories involved wife unfaithfulness and loss of husband's support. Both subcategories reflect gender experiences and perceptions of the actions that evolved from extra-marital relationships.

Wife unfaithful

Female spouses who were involved in extra marital relationships were labelled as prostitutes by their male partners. Such female conduct was not socially acceptable and was intolerable to male spouses in this subcategory and the latter retaliated by neglecting the children.

I went to Laroo to work on the house where I was supposed to shift with my family. On returning, I found my wife had eloped with another man. I have abandoned this prostitute and disowned the two children I have with her (interview with a 35-year-old father).

Loss of spousal support

Wives whose spouses were involved in extra-marital relationships discussed how they were neglected and not given any support by their spouses. The support to wives by their spouses either reduced drastically or vanished as a result of extra-marital affairs causing children's welfare to suffocate. The gendered expected role for males in Acholi and Lango was to provide for household members whereas females was that of childcare. Mothers who felt constrained in childcare under such circumstances opted to abandon their children.

My husband got another wife and stopped thinking about me and the children. He refused to support us. I am helpless and I don't have anywhere to get money. I decided to abandon a 15-months old baby with him. Later, I was arrested by police for child desertion (interview with an 18-year-old mother).

Mothers described how their spouses abandoned their families after engaging in extra-marital relationships and left them with huge responsibilities of raising children single-handedly. Mothers in this category described the situation as state of isolation and rejection which turned to be a risk factor for CN.

Their father (referring to the spouse) got another woman and I am left with a responsibility I cannot handle. He does not even talk to me. I am compared with a dog in this community so I treat his children in a similar way. Let him (spouse) hear from people what his children are going through. I have no time to cook for his children (her children as well) (interview with a 20-year-old mother).

Disorientation of cultural and social norms

Fathers described how CN was used as a mechanism to fight for lost status in marital relationships. Fathers reported emergence of female dominance and such culture was not socially acceptable. Husbands lost control over wives due to inability to provide for their households. Females noted that their spouses were irresponsible and spent all the time and resources in alcohol consumption and remarrying. In the Acholi and Lango cultures, a man's family commits to pay the woman's family an agreed amount of bride wealth for the females to be legally accepted in the man's family. Females noted loss of social status as majority were not formally recognized in their marriages and their position as mothers and wives was at stake. CN was used by both genders as a fighting weapon to gain the lost position as husbands and wives. This category was subdivided to reflect gender experiences in the event of CN. The subcategories involved were interference in male dominance and reinforcement of female oppression.

Interference in male dominance

Majority of fathers described how their spouses were taking lead in decision making. Fathers in this category noted that the spouses were accessing family assets including dwellings and land for cultivation but did not care for the children and husbands. Females denied their spouses food and cash from agricultural produce which was offensive to masculinity. For males, it was a problem to see female spouses controlling them including restricting their movements. They also abhorred the idea of having female relatives heavily involved in their family's decisions. Fathers construed such female conduct as female dominance and that this conduct was socially unacceptable.

I don't provide for my children because their mother does not respect me as a man, she doesn't want me to eat, not even to touch anything in my house. She wants to know everywhere I go as if she is a man. I have decided to leave her and see whether she will manage (interview with a 30-year-old father).

Reinforcement of female oppression

Mothers described how they were insulted by their spouses and these in turn transferred the aggression to their children. Mothers in this category noted that their spouses were alcoholics. These mothers noted that their spouses became violent after excessive alcohol consumption and that this was a risk factor for CN. In cases where mothers remarried, they were reported for denying their own children food, education and subjecting the children to daily beatings and casual labour in order to protect their new marriages. Their biological children were rejected right away by their stepfathers and their kin. Children in such relationships were labelled as 'rebels' with no future in the new clan into which their mothers remarried and this was risk factor to CN.

My second husband abuses me every time he comes home drunk, that I am wasting time taking care of another man's children and this makes me annoyed and I transfer my aggression to them (my children) by denying them food. I am not comfortable staying with my biological children of the first marriage in this second marriage. I hate them because I need to protect my new marriage (interview with a 33-year-old mother).

Mothers reported the need for formal marriage relationships as a way to gain marital recognition which their male counterparts were objecting. Majority of male spouses had refused to pay bride price to parents of their female spouses which is a cultural obligation expected from males prior to marriage. Mothers in this category used CN to attract their spouses' attention.

He had not paid bride price and I went home so that he can fulfill his cultural obligation. But instead, he forced me to bring his children if they are to have school fees. He denied me to go back with any child because he already had a woman who was going to take care of his children. When I left his children, he went to police and reported me for CN (interview with a 32-year-old mother).

Single parenting

Mothers in this category experienced parenting difficulties with their children. These mothers noted that their children did not listen to them as mothers and they attributed this to absence of fathers. Children's failure to comply with parental demands subjected them to denial of basic needs as a disciplinary measure. These mothers depended on casual labour for survival and needed their children's cooperation. This category affected only mothers and had a single subcategory of unsupportive children.

Unsupportive children

Mothers described how children were not helping them in search of survival means. Mothers noted limitations in resource accessibility and they depended on casual labour. They expected their children to learn how to survive on their own.

Whenever I send my boy of ten years in people's gardens to work for money so that we survive, he refuses. I make him sleep hungry, sleep without bedsheets, sleep down on the floor not even giving him water to drink and food. I want him to learn how to survive. I am a single mother with three children and no husband to take care for us. I don't cook for those who don't want to work (Interview with a 28-year-old mother).

Single parenting of children with disabilities had multiple challenges due to lack of social support. In this study, a single mother refused to pay school fees for her child and she referred to the child as 'wiye onywene' (Luo language) which is a derogatory reference to a person who is mentally challenged.

I have struggled with this boy for many years without the help of the father who left me when he was just 6 months. My child is not supportive also, he even burns the books I buy for him. I am broken now, I feel I am tired,

he is making my life very hard. Sometimes I deny him food so that he can die and I rest (interview with a 31-year-old mother).

Gender and CN interventions

Identifying, reporting and referring of cases

Parents noted that Child Protection Committees (CPCs) and para-social workers provided the avenues through which CN cases were identified and handled and difficult ones subsequently referred to the Uganda police. The CPCs reported to Community Development Officers (CDOs) at sub county level, who in turn reported to District Probation and Social Welfare Officers (DPSOs). The para-social workers reported the CN cases to Non-Government Organizations (NGO's) involved in child protection or CDOs and they were most active in identifying, handling and referring of cases of neglect. Police in charge of family and child protection handled cases that were beyond CPCs and para social workers. Mothers who were spouses to police officers and were reported for CN noted difficulties in reporting to male police officers in charge of family and child protection.

I abandoned my children because he (spouse) tortured me a lot. He told me he will kill me one day but nobody wants to listen to my voice. All these police officers are blaming me for deserting his children. I have nothing to do. I am only told that I have to go back to him and look after his children or else I will die in custody. But I can't stand the torture of that man (referring to her spouse) who will even kill me. (interview with a 26-year-old mother and a wife to a police officer).

Community dialogues

Community dialogue in this study refers to a meeting of local people within a particular community mainly organized by child protection officers with an aim of gathering public opinions on burning issues that were affecting the families. This was a common intervention avenue for CN that we found. Parents who participated in community dialogues noted improvements in parenting practices, awareness of child rights and effects of domestic violence on CN.

I learnt good practices of parenting from my fellow parents who shared experiences with handling their children in the meeting. I am now a better father and husband (Interview with a 32-year-old father).

Other parents noted that domestic violence has an effect on children and they tried to avoid occasions of fighting in presence of children.

I have learnt that fighting with my wife can affect the lives of our children. Now even if I am drunk, I don't fight or quarrel with my wife. I am a changed person. (interview with a 35-year-old father)

However, majority of parents noted obstacles that hindered their participation in community dialogue to include; long distance to the meeting venues, busy schedules, lack of information, refusal from spouses and a lack of motivation to attend the meetings.

My husband doesn't want me to go to such programmes since he is always suspicious that I might be given wrong advice like information on harming him and the children. He stopped me from attending. I normally hear that those programmes have taken place (interview with a 30-year-old mother).

Discussion

Women gendered role of childcare was featured vital in CN in relationships where fathers were unable to provide for the family. The findings demonstrate that, deficits in mothering affected childcare leading to CN and it also increased marital discontent as mothers failed to nurture. In a previous study by Lindsey (2011), it is argued that a woman's ultimate role is mothering which is socially constructed and deemed as a woman's work. Further, a study in northern Uganda showed that mothers are expected to raise children even in impoverished kinship relationships and

economic hardships (Baines & Gauvin, 2014). Our findings show that CN in the form of mothers' abandonment and desertion of children was triggered by lack of spousal support and violence and that had significant gender implications on childcare. For men, such mothers were perceived as heartless for deliberate denial of childcare and a misconduct that created room for other females willing to bridge that gender role gap. In a previous study, the breakdown in the provision of childcare is attributable to a woman, and by extension, of breakdown of 'mothering' (Turney & Tanner, 2001), a paramount characteristic of CN (Turney, 2000).

Although the ecological model perspective places emphasis on childhood histories of neglectful parents to neglect of their off-springs (Belsky, 1980), the current study found out that CN was used as a fighting weapon in spousal conflicts. Our findings show that men and women whose marital relationships failed, got into other intimate relationships for reasons that were influenced by their gender needs; women wanted financial support and men wanted women who would take care of their children. Further, children whose fathers denied educational needs, food, shelter and medical care were most vulnerable to hardships and homelessness as their mothers could not afford to provide these needs. This is in line with a previous study which stated that less supportive relationships and little perceived parental support may increase the risk for CN (Guterman & Lee, 2005). Fathers in the current study were expected to have authority over wives and the children and good fatherhood involved family needs provision and protection. In a previous study, fatherhood is associated with power, authority and status where a good father is a good provider (Marchbank & Letherby, 2007). In the current study, men's authority and power diminished with loss of livelihoods as a result of the conflict and they resorted to over drinking and polygamous lifestyle. Wives were dissatisfied in their marital relationships since husbands failed to meet their expected obligations including dowry payment and family needs provision. Thus, women opted to abandon their children. In a previous study, women accused such men of being 'useless and good-for-nothing' especially where the role of breadwinning had switched over to women (Omona & Aduo, 2013).

Children's custody in failed marriages came out strongly in the current study as contributory to CN. Being a patriarchal society, children belonged to men while childcare was primarily a female role. Children were most affected in case of separation including failure to be attended to for sick children. A previous study indicated biological factors of fatherhood to be vital for a child's identity and status than caring and nurturing or childcare which are for motherhood (Marchbank & Letherby, 2007). In the current study, paternity for a child's identity was crucial, and children of women from previous marriages were rejected in cases of remarriages and also at their natal homes. Such women cared for the current husbands' children even at the expense of their own biological children to have their current marriages last longer. Women left with responsibility of children's custody after marital separation were unable to financially support themselves and their children. They were denied spousal assistance and risked rejection in alternate marital relationships giving way to CN as the only option.

Women in the current study depended entirely on their spouses for support and became helpless when marital relationships failed leading to CN. Previous studies link low fatherly support to abusive maternal behaviours towards the children (Guterman et al., 2009). This is in agreement with the current study where women who had little spousal support gave up their marital relationships and left the children under the care of patrilineal families. In radical feminist perspective, the patriarchal belief is that men are expected to head households and determine important decisions, including decisions about the children (Ali & Naylor, 2013). This belief was evident in the current study as women always referred to their own biological children as 'his children' or sarcastically as '*lotino pa lamingi*' meaning the children of that fool. The application of personal is political in radical feminism (Rogan & Budgeon, 2018) was helpful in exploring and understanding gendered experiences in CN in the post conflict northern Uganda. For example, the radical feminist view of mothering in patriarchy as another dimension of women's oppression (Damant et al., 2008; Walby, 1990) was depicted in the current study where women were imprisoned for abandoning children of a few days after prolonged spousal desertion. The abandonment and desertion of children by their mothers in the current study portrays women's consciousness of the

politics of patriarchal oppression. In so fighting the politics, women ended up being accused of CN. While women were imprisoned for CN, men were not and this was manifestation of patriarchal control and expectation from women to embrace childcare as mandatory and as their role. Efforts to mitigate CN in the current study involved community dialogues that were avenues for consciousness-raising which is an aspect of radical feminism, and parents had benefitted from collective shared social experiences.

Conclusion and policy implications

The disintegration of families in the post-conflict northern Uganda left a huge vacuum in the area of childcare. Results from this study reflect fathers' loss of being breadwinners and less authoritative in the family and abdicating on the cultural demand for females to get married traditionally and before having children. The current ecological surroundings were not favourable for conducive childcare for both males and females in this post-conflict region due to the family dysfunctionality, loose intimate relationships and lack of income. This paper recommends for designing appropriate family programmes that equip both fathers and mothers with interpersonal and parenting skills which promote child protection for better childcare outcomes. Also needed, is the necessity to enhance the functionality of child protection agencies with adequate budget to cater for home visits for quick identification and reporting of children at risk of CN.

While the study provides an important contribution to knowledge on the parents' perceived triggers to CN, it is important to note its limitation. The goal of the qualitative study was to explore and understand the phenomenon in a specific context and only parents who were reported for CN were considered for interviews, thus, it cannot be generalizable to the whole country but rather understood in the context of the three districts.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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