Chapter 12
Human Rights Abuse and Deprivation of Childhood: A Case of Girl Mothers in Northern Uganda

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12.1 Background

There is widespread consensus among the children's rights activists, including policy makers, stakeholders from the child protection sector and academics, among others, on the critical importance of addressing the protection and promotion of the rights of the girl child. Girls still bear the worst human rights abuses during armed conflict and after (Mazurana and Carlson 2006). Using the case of the Gulu District in Uganda, this paper assesses how human rights abuses deprived girl mothers of their childhood. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) considers childhood as a separate space from adulthood and recognizes that what is appropriate for an adult may not be suitable for a child. Despite the intellectual debate about the definition of childhood and cultural differences about what to expect for and from children, there has been always a substantial degree of shared understanding that childhood implies a separate and safe space demarcated from adulthood in which children can grow, play and develop (UNICEF 2007). Childhood means more than just the time between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It also refers to the state and condition of a child's life, to the quality of those years. Childhood is also understood as the early phase of the life course of all people in all societies. It is characterized by rapid physiological and psychological development, and represents the beginning of the process of maturation to adulthood (James and James 2012).

Scholars in childhood studies argue that although children grow up and out of childhood as they develop into adults, childhood remains. It is a constant social space and is occupied by the next generation. The ongoing debate about universalism and particularism of childhood is disappearing. For instance, Postman (2003)

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and Elkind (1981) argue that because of changes in technology and children's increased access to consumer goods, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are dissolving. In their view, this collapsing of generational boundaries is detrimental to children's well-being (James and James 2012). However, scholars like Buckingham (2000) dispute this claim and argue that childhood is changing its form rather than disappearing. Buckingham's view (2000) may be true to a certain extent; however, there is a possibility of losing one's childhood. For instance, this chapter intends to show that under different circumstances, specifically armed conflict situations, children are deprived of their childhood due to the abuse of their rights.

The present chapter is about the Acholi in Gulu District. The study was done in Gulu District one of the Districts in Northern Uganda where the Acholi live predominantly. The region is commonly known as Acholi Land (Mpyangu 2010). The Acholi are a Luo speaking ethnic group of people found in Northern Uganda occupying districts of Gulu, Kitgum, Pader, Amuru, Agago and Nwoya, collectively known as the Acholi Land (Carlson and Mazurana 2008; Acholi Inn Hotel Blog 2015).

In examining the concept of childhood, it is therefore important to look at the Acholi view of childhood. It is important to note that in the Acholi society children were considered to be priceless and treasurable; therefore, they were jealously guarded and protected. However, the war and its aftermath made it difficult to ensure children's protection (Women's Refugee Commission for Women and Children 2008; Zerrougui 2014). Childhood constitutes a time of fulfilling parents' and children's obligations. For instance, many Acholi proverbs and riddles advised both parents and children to fulfill their obligations to each other (Ochen 2011). In the normal Acholi society, girls are supposed to be socialized into the Acholi culture. For example, they used to work along with their mothers doing household chores and digging. According to Ochen (2011), community chastisement of children was practiced to show that the expectation of good behavior came from both parents and the community. Such practices clearly indicate that children in Acholi grew up in a supportive and protective environment. In addition, like in other societies, children in the Acholi traditional society were not involved or accustomed to wars, making them vulnerable to its effects.

As the most widely endorsed human rights treaty in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989, in effect, represents a global consensus on the terms of childhood (UNICEF 2005). Although there is no absolute agreement on the interpretation of each and every provision of the Convention, there is substantial common ground on what the standards of childhood should be. There have been significant advances since the Convention was adopted in the fulfillment of children's rights to survival, health and education through the provision of essential goods and services. There has also been a growing recognition of the need to create a protective environment to shield children from exploitation, abuse and violence. However, in several regions and countries some of these gains appear to be in danger of reversal from three key threats: poverty, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS. The Convention represents the culmination of a process of recognizing the rights of children and the special status of childhood

that gained significant momentum as the twentieth century progressed (UNICEF 2005). Children's rights are the perceived human rights of children with particular attention to the rights of special protection and care afforded to the young. This includes their right to association with both biological parents, human dignity as well as their basic needs for food, education, health care and criminal laws appropriate for the age and development of the child.

Historically, the needs of children were not well differentiated from those of adults. Like adults, able-bodied children traditionally engaged in arduous labor and were often combatants in battle. But the Convention, citing the "special care and assistance" that children require, recognizes that what is appropriate for an adult may not be suitable for a child. This is why, for instance, it sets a minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces and participation in armed conflict. Its recognition of childhood as a 'separate space' means that even when children face the same challenges as adults, they may require different solutions (UNICEF 2005).

At the global level, the rights of over one billion children are violated because they are severely deprived of at least one or more of the basic goods and services which are required for surviving, growing and developing. Millions of children are growing up in families and communities torn apart by armed conflict. In Sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS has led to rising child mortality rates, sharp reductions in life expectancy and millions of orphans. Although the problem is most acute in Africa, HIV prevalence rates are also rising in other parts of the world. These are not the only factors that undermine childhood, but they are certainly among the most significant, with profoundly damaging effects on a child's chances of survival and development after the early years of life. The harm they cause lingers well beyond childhood, increasing the likelihood that the next generation will be affected by the same threats.

There is widespread use of children in conflicts despite the fact that they lack knowledge about the causes of these conflicts. The majority of children become part of the war due to recruitment into armed groups. Children join armed groups mainly due to employment, poverty, forceful recruitment and protection, among other reasons (Honwana 2006; Machel 1996). Children are always among the first to be affected by conflict, whether directly or indirectly. Armed conflict alters their lives in many ways, and even if they are not killed or injured, they can be orphaned, forcefully abducted, raped or left with deep emotional scars and psychosocial trauma from direct exposure to violence, dislocation, poverty or the loss of loved ones. They also experience unwanted pregnancies, and, after delivery, they have to shift roles from childhood to parenthood.

12.2 Methods

Conflict and violence have plagued much of Uganda since independence, from Idi Amin's military coup in 1971 to the 14 insurgencies since Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army/Movement (NRA/M) took power in 1986. The most

outstanding of these conflicts was the continuing war in Northern Uganda which lasted for 20 years, until 2006, and encompassed five different rebellions. The study was conducted in Gulu District because this is one of the areas in Northern Uganda which experienced horrendous atrocities during the 20 years of conflict. Furthermore, since 1986, Gulu was at the center of civil wars between various groups such as the Western Nile Bank Front (WNBF), Holy Spirit Movement (HSM),Uganda's People Army (UPA) and Federal Democratic Movement (FEDEMU), among others (De Berry 2004; Behrend 1999; Muhereza 2011).

Children affected by armed conflict, such as captives, child ex-combatants, child mothers who were forced to marry rebels and had children at a young age and unaccompanied minors, among others, are categorized as critically vulnerable. In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) abducted and recruited large numbers of children into the rebel movement. It is estimated that 85 % of the LRA's captives in Uganda were children; most of them were between 11 and 16 years of age (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour 2005; Anderson et al. 2005). Children, including young girls, provided labor and served as sex slaves, which had an adverse impact on their health and social lives. Furthermore, they were brutalized and manipulated by the LRA leadership into becoming weapons of terror against their own parents and community (Anderson et al. 2005).

The district is located in Northern Uganda, some 332 kilometers north of the national capital, Kampala. During July 2007, three focus group discussions and eight in-depth interviews (life stories) were conducted with girls (aged 15–18 years of age) who returned with children born in captivity in Gulu District, Northern Uganda. The majority of girls (64.7 %) were abducted between 10 and 14 years of age. Most of these girls (43.8 %) spent 1–5 years in captivity, while some (26.5 %) spent 6–10 years, and others (8.1 %) spent 11–15 years. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 key informants, such as practitioners including psycho-social program officers, probation and social welfare officers, child protection officers, community development officers, community leaders and district administrators. We collected data on the girls' experiences, specifically abuse, during captivity and upon return from captivity.

The study was cleared by the higher degrees committee of the School of Social Sciences, Makerere University. In Gulu, the district administrative authorities, such as the Local Council Chairman 5 and the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), were contacted and informed about the study. It is important to note that the community leaders of the different areas in Gulu where the study was done were informed about the study. The community leaders were consulted beforehand, and we demonstrated commitment and transparency to avoid any suspicions. The process began by seeking consent from the girls. In addition, both guardians and children were assured of confidentiality. The sexually abused and formerly abducted children could not be exposed to the stringent rules governing children in studies, because they were traumatized. Furthermore, these were a different category of children from those children who have protection from families and institutions. Utmost care was taken to ensure that the girls in question were participating from their own free will and that

their rights were fully respected in the research process. Confidentiality, privacy and emotional well-being (Kumar 2011) in respect of the children was promised and strictly observed in all cases. Anonymity was guaranteed by removing the respondents' names from the data and interviewing children in privacy. This was particularly important because the children were sharing very personal and sensitive information about their experiences related to sexual abuse.

12.3 Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that due to violations of human rights, most children lost their childhood. There are various ways in which the children's rights were abused, and this chapter gives a few examples.

12.3.1 Abduction

Abduction is the removal, seizure, apprehension, taking custody, detention or capture of an individual temporarily or permanently by force, threat or deception for involvement in armed forces or armed groups or for participation in sexual slavery and forced labor (UN High Commission for Human Rights 2006). It is estimated that the LRA abducted and recruited 54,000 to 75,000 people, including 25,000 to 38,000 children (Pham et al. 2009). Of these, 7500 were girls and 1000 became 'child mothers' while in captivity (UNICEF 2006).

The majority of girls were abducted when they were less than 20 years of age. It is saddening to note that some children were abducted at a very young age of 5–9 years; however, the majority were abducted at 10–14 years followed by those between 15 and 19 years of age. According to Angucia (2010), each abduction was unique and marked the beginning of a change in their lives. Most girls were abducted once, though some experienced multiple abductions. For instance, some girls had been abducted two, three or four times.

The life stories indicate that the majority of the girls were abducted from their homes, as they were sleeping, seated around a fire or hiding, while some had left the Internally Displaced Persons camps to gather food. Others were abducted while they were involved in their daily activities, such as digging in the garden, on their way to or from school, at the trading centers, on the way to fetch water from the wells or swimming in the river. Abduction of these children deprived them of several rights, including the right to live with their families, food, adequate shelter and education. For instance, children would march from morning to evening without food and water. McDonnell and Akallo's study (McDonnell and Akallo 2007) reveals that while the commanders had drinking water, the children were forced to drink urine or water from muddy ditches. This is a clear indication of denying a

child her/his survival rights. Studies (Mackay and Mazurana 2004; UNICEF 2005; Kiconco 2015) indicate that girls are primary targets for abduction during armed conflict with the objective of forcing them to become warriors or sexual and domestic partners. There is a significant correlation between the abduction and forced recruitment of girls and their widespread and systematic sexual exploitation and abuse. Due to abduction, the girls were separated from their parents who were typically the primary care providers of food and other basic needs**.** The above mentioned experiences of children during abduction clearly show that children were taken away from their parents by force, and this is against articles 9 and 35 of the UNCRC which stipulate that a child should not be separated from his or her parents against their will or subjected to any form of abduction, respectively. During abduction the girls' rights were violated. These violations are discussed below.

12.3.1.1 Looting and Carrying Heavy Loads

At the time of abduction, the rebels were also involved in looting items such as food, clothing, soap, cooking oil, fish, chicken, goats and cattle. After being abducted, the girls were given heavy loads of the looted items to carry. One of the girls reported that her brother was given 50 kilograms of posho (maize flour) to carry, but he could not carry the bag and had to stealthily abandon it. Another girl was given a heavy bag of salt to carry up to Sudan, and consequently, she lost her hair and got chest pain. Other tasks included burning houses and granaries. According to Angucia (2010), there was a time looting food became a normal activity; it had become "collecting food from the garden." In some stories looting food was portrayed as a right and, at the very least, as a survival need. All this clearly shows that instead of protecting children, the children were subjected to harmful forced labor that entailed carrying heavy loads and being treated as adults. It is important to note that according to the UNCRC, children have a right to protection from any kind of exploitation or from being taken advantage of, but this was not the case.

12.3.1.2 Killing and Witnessing Murder

The girls witnessed numerous people being killed. For instance, upon reaching the villages, parents, siblings and relatives, like cousins and uncles, were killed in the presence of the girls and other children.

> I was in Amuru, what happened that time, I saw a lot of killing and burning of houses from morning to evening. (Life Story, Girl, Amuru Village)

On the other hand, sometimes the children were forced to kill their parents or siblings. This kind of execution was painful to the children because it involved hacking a child to death with a machete or beating the person with clubs or sticks. Some children were forced to commit atrocities against their own families as a way of severing all ties with their communities (UNICEF 2005). The LRA commanders

often forced the children to kill their siblings just to ensure the children's loyalty to the LRA movement and not to the family (McDonnell and Akallo 2007). Children were also deliberately exposed to horrific scenes to harden them to violence. This is contrary to what the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) stipulates: that "the child for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality should grow up in a family environment." Therefore, instead of depending on the family, the children had to depend on the rebels who had a completely different kind of life. In other cases, if the abductees could not walk due to swollen legs, carrying heavy luggage or fatigue; attempted to escape; or refused to direct the rebel where they wanted to go, they would be killed. There generally was a great deal of killing.

12.3.1.3 Beating

Beating was a strategy the rebels used to make the abductees obey their commands. In such cases, the beating could inflict bodily harm on the girls and also affect them psychologically and emotionally. Many girls reported that they were beaten because they attempted to escape from the rebels while still at home or on their way to Sudan. On other occasions, they were beaten when they were unable to move fast. In one case a girl was beaten for dropping the load she was carrying.

12.3.1.4 Walking Long Distances

When they were being taken away, the majority of girls walked very long distances, sometimes up to Sudan, while carrying very heavy loads of looted items. Most girls complained that their legs became swollen. The unfortunate ones were killed, because their legs were swollen and they could not move or keep up the pace at which others were moving.

12.3.1.5 Crossing Bodies of Water

The findings also indicate that in most cases as the girls moved with the rebels they had to cross rivers, such as the River Aswa. In the process of crossing water, they were given various instructions. For instance, they were told that the loads they carried should not touch the water. To cross bodies of water, ropes were tied to the abductees' waists as they moved in a line. Some children, who did not know how to swim, drowned, because the water was so deep. One girl testified that she did not drown, because she knew how to swim. This shows that the girls/children were not provided any protection, especially as the rebels' main aim was to capture as many girls as possible in disregard of their rights.

12.3.2 Role of Children in Captivity

While in captivity the children played different roles. The majority were recruited to fight (combatants) or were wives, while others were domestic servants and cooks. A few girls were involved in babysitting, served as sexual slaves, or worked as porters or spies. Girls were subjected to forced labor.

12.3.3 Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is one of the most notable practices that violate children's rights during war situations in Uganda and other countries, such as Liberia and Rwanda. Sexual violence takes many forms in armed conflicts across time and cultures (Leatherman 2011), and it is used as a weapon of war (Clifford 2008; Brown 2011). The sexual violence of the children interviewed took different forms including forced marriage and forced sex and sexual slavery, which are discussed in the following sections.

Sexual abuse and sexual slavery were common during captivity. Sexual abuse of the girls was minimal during the actual process of abduction. This was attributed to the fact that the LRA soldiers were warned by their commanders against any involvement in sexual relations during the abductions, as reported by one of the girls during the life story interviews. This was attributed to a belief that such behavior "saves" the girls from exposure to sexually transmissible diseases, thereby ensuring that they are free from infection when assigned to their "husbands." During the interviews, one girl reported that some commanders, such as Vincent Otti, were so strict that they would follow up with people who broke the rules, and they would be killed. One of the key informants in Caritas reported as follows:

> One real notable thing with the LRA is that after abducting people, they don't go straight away into raping and defiling. That was considered as a grave offense among the LRA and if you were found defiling or raping a young girl you would be handed over to the commanders. So they abducted the girls and kept them until they reached puberty and the young girls were distributed to LRA commanders. And the LRA commanders were also under instructions not to sexually abuse the abductees when they had not reached stage of puberty. (Programme Coordinator, Caritas)

This shows that the abductors were allowed to have sex afterwards, especially when the abductees reached the camps as long as the girls were of the proper age. This concurs with Mackay's assertion (2006) that some fighting forces eschewed forced sex. There was some degree of protection of children from sexual violence. However, as soon as the girls reached puberty, they were sexually abused and exploited.

12.3.3.1 Forced Sex/Rape and Forced Marriage

Forced marriage was a common form of sexual violence experienced by girls abducted by the LRA. In international human rights law and many domestic legal regimes, forced marriage refers broadly to cases where one or both spouses are married without their full and free consent. In addition, the 1979 Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) called on governments to prohibit child marriage and require full and free consent to marriage (Bunting 2012). But this is not the case for the formerly abducted girls. It is clear that the girls were not protected from exploitation as stipulated in article 36 of the UNCRC.

The presence of forced wives in the LRA served to bolster fighter morale, and support the systems which perpetuate cycles of raiding, looting, killing, and abduction. The LRA leader, Joseph Kony, is thought to have forcibly married more than 40 females, and to have fathered dozens of children through rape and forced marriage. At any one time, his commanders had on average five forced wives, while lower level fighters had one to two wives (Bunting 2012).

The study findings indicate that rape, forced marriage and early marriage were synonymous. The girls were forcefully married to the commanders and men of other ranks, such as lieutenants, during captivity, which implies that they were married at an early age and, consequently, experienced forced sex. They were, therefore, forced to act as wives to the commanders. The girls reported that they were given off to men when they had just been abducted, and when many of them were still quite young. They had no choice but to accept their situation. For example, girls of 13 years of age would be given to men of 45–60 years of age and above. They were so young that they could not provide a clear description of the old men they were given to. On the other hand, some bush husbands were very young, below 18 years of age. Under the Ugandan Constitution (1995), children under the age of 18 years, whether boys or girls, are legally considered children, yet they were given very young girls as sexual partners. For example, a 12-year-old girl was given to a 15-year-old boy, even though he already had another wife. Having a wife or several wives was regarded in the bush as proof of manhood. Thus, if a boy was given a girl as a sexual partner, he was regarded as a man, while the girl was regarded as a woman. This is clear indication that the girls' rights were violated because they were married off at such an early age (below 18 years of age) and were expected to carry out sexual and adult obligations with their partners, and, consequently, they were deprived of their childhood. The above illustrations constitute child marriages. It is argued that child marriage usually takes place within a context of force, coercion and when a child lacks a choice or capacity to give their full consent to sexual activity (Amone and Anenocan 2014).

The LRA had different ways of allocating the girls to men. One method would be to display the shirts of the different men and allow the girls to select the shirts; the owner of the shirt would be the girl's husband. Being given a man was a form of initiation for the girls. One of the girls reported that,

> As an initiation, we were told to pick shirts, and I was given a man. (Young woman, Koro Purse Center)

Another method of selection was to put girls together in a group, and allow the men to point at the girl they wanted.

Some children (some of whom were less than six years old) were not given to men, because they were too young. However, they were assigned other roles, such as babysitting. When they grew older and began to menstruate, they were given to men. In Uganda 50 % of girls start menstruating by the age of 14. Additionally, urban girls start menstruating earlier than the rural girls. By age 13, 31 % of girls in urban areas have had their first period compared with 21 % of rural girls (ORC Macro 2002). This is a clear indication that the biological maturity of the young girls was thus respected, which suggests that the commanders of the LRA did have certain rules, regulations and norms to guide them when acquiring wives. Bunting (2012) asserts that evidence reveals that the crimes committed against these females were not haphazard but were methodically organized by the senior leadership of the LRA. Although the LRA respected the above mentioned rules, the girls were robbed of their childhood after their menses.

Most girls reported that rape occurred when they were given to men, regardless of whether these men were old or young. One of the girls expressed as follows:

> A man old enough to be your grandfather and most importantly you are just 9 years old and you have to attend to his sexual needs under terrible duress. That is one of the things that have always happened to nearly all the formerly abducted girls. Some of them got abducted at 13 but with rebels; if you are eight or nine you are already mature in sexuality. (FGD: Girl, Koro Purse Center)

This indicates that during captivity the girls were not given an opportunity to discover their sexuality themselves as they grew and developed. They did not receive healthy realistic messages about sexuality as some children do. Therefore, this left them without an understanding of healthy relationships, consent, boundaries or how to engage safely in sexual behaviors. The LRA leadership exercised rigid control over the sexuality of the abducted women and girls through intimidation, discrimination, and violence (Bunting 2012). Furthermore, there appears to have been little room for young people to talk and develop ideas about their own sexuality (Bywater and Jones 2007). Yet, it is the right of children to express their own views, and to make decisions on matters affecting their lives.

While in captivity, rape, in most cases, took place when the girls were given to commanders. This was confirmed by one of the girls as follows:

> Rape takes place when you are given to a man and by that time one is still young. As long as you are given a man, rape takes place. (Girl mother, Lamogi)

Most girls explained that they were still young at that stage and not ready to sleep with men, nor did they have any knowledge about sex-related issues. In order to force them into sex, their bush husbands would threaten to kill or beat them, or the girls were in fact beaten. Such acts left the girls with no choice but to give in to the sexual demands of their imposed husbands. Inevitably, the girls were sexually abused and coerced to engage in sexual activities.

Polygamous marriages in the bush were the norm, with one man having several wives; these were always forced marriages, not voluntary ones. The majority of the bush husbands were involved in polygamous marriages. Some had 1 to 4 wives, while others had 6 to 10 wives or 11 to 15 wives. The life histories revealed that the largest number of wives married to one of the highest commanders (30 years of age) was 17, followed by 15 wives married to a 60-year-old major and 13 wives married to a 60-year-old lieutenant. This deprived the girls of time and space to enjoy their childhood.

In contrast to the forced marriages that took place in the bush, marriage, according to the Acholi tradition, is supposed to be a long process that begins with courting, and continues until the young man wins the girl's consent and then pays a dowry (Kiconco 2015). Thus, there was a profound difference between marriage in the bush and traditional Acholi marriage. In the bush, marriage was forced and there was neither room nor time for courting; it was thus a violation of the Acholi values, even more so, because the parents of both individuals were not involved in the selection process, as required by tradition (Bailey 2009). In addition, there was no approval given by the parents, and no form of dowry. Coulter (2010) similarly argues that, although these young girls and women were called wives, and their relationships with their bush husbands were called marriages, such marriages were not culturally valid, because they were forced and had taken place in the bush. In both Sierra Leone and Uganda, girls/women spoke of being referred to as a 'wife' despite the fact that in neither country would they be considered legally married, in customary or civil law (Bunting 2012). The life histories and focus group discussions indicate that the girls saw themselves as wives of commanders, although some acknowledged that when they were given to the commanders they were still very young. In addition, these are considered as early marriages/child marriages, which are against societal norms. Instead of ushering in a lifetime of love, happiness, and security, marriage can be one of the worst things to happen to a girl. Marrying young is linked to adolescent girls leaving school, a heightened risk of domestic violence, and girls having babies while still children themselves. The consequences can be fatal; complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death in developing countries (MGLSD and UNICEF 2015). Childbirth complications for girls whose bodies are not fully developed are the leading cause of maternal mortality for girls 15 to 19 in developing countries (Hervish and Feldman-Jacobs 2011). An estimated 70,000 adolescent mothers die each year, mostly in developing countries, because they have children before they are physically ready for parenthood, with girls under age 14 at greatest risk (UNICEF 2008).

Child marriage affects all aspects of a child's life and is a violation of children's rights. It exposes children to multiple vulnerabilities including increased risk for HIV/AIDS (Sekiwungu and Whyte 2009), pregnancy complications that lead to death or disability-obstructed labor or obstetric fistula (Bantebya et al. 2013). Child marriage puts girls at risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives. Girls who marry as children are more likely to be beaten or threatened by their husbands than girls who marry later. Girls who marry as children are also more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced (Gangoli et al. 2009; Girls Not Brides 2015).

Child marriage also violates girls' human rights, including their right to choose if, when and whom to marry. Several African human rights instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990, article 21), The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (1995, article 6), The African Youth Charter (article 8), and the National (Uganda) Strategy to End Child Marriage (2015) condemn child marriage and/or establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage.

12.3.3.2 Sexual Slavery

According to the life stories told, sexual slavery was common. The girls would be sorted into groups of 10, and then the top commanders would select the girls they wanted. Many of the girls were used as sex slaves and wives by commanders while in captivity. One girl stated,

> You can see as many as 20 or 30 girls to one commander and they were bringing in new ones to add on to the ones already acquired. (Girl mother, Layibi)

On occasion, the young boys would also rape them, such as when the girls were given boys to escort them to carry out certain tasks. The girls reported that Kony, who was an important leader, would get first choice, and, thereafter, the girls were given away at random to the top commanders. The commanders had their separate houses, and, when they wanted a particular woman, they would order her to go to one of the houses where she would be sexually exploited. The girls reported that there was no way of resisting, and nowhere to report this behavior, because it was so common. Due to sexual slavery, the girls were deprived of their sense of agency (as children) and had to respond to the commanders' sexual demands.

12.3.4 Problems Experienced Due to Sexual Violence

During their captivity, the girls experienced many problems as a result of the sexual violence perpetrated against them. This is also confirmed by some scholars, including Annan et al. (2009), Denov (2010), Pham et al. (2009) and Koos (2015).

12.3.4.1 Unwanted Pregnancies

Most of the girls who returned from captivity had children. This concurs with the findings of other studies, which indicate that many girls and young women became pregnant and had children during captivity as a of result of rape or forced marriages with bush husbands (Coulter 2006; Honwana 2006; Mackay and Mazurana 2004). The results revealed that 54.1 % of the girls had children while in captivity (Kamya 2013). This was attributed to the fact that, once the girls had been raped at 13–16

years of age, they were at a greater risk of becoming pregnant. This constituted unwanted/forced pregnancies, whereby the girls had to bear children they were not ready for. In addition, the girls experienced early childbearing, which robbed them of their childhood. This is because the appropriate age to start childbearing in Uganda is above 19 years.

Early childbearing may be life-threatening to both the mother and the child. It is important to note that early childbearing has a medical/health, economic and psychological impact. With regard to their health, mothers younger than 17 face an increased risk of maternal morbidity and mortality from unsafe abortions, greater risks for delivery complications, low-birth weight infants and child mortality (Plummer et al. 2008; Kurth et al. 2010) and preterm deliveries (Magadi 2006). This may be attributed to physiological immaturity at childbirth in combination with poor nutritional status and poor healthcare during pregnancy, or they may not wish to acknowledge a conception, thus delaying prenatal care and endangering the health of the child and mother (Lee 2010).

It is difficult to disentangle whether the poorer socioeconomic status of women who begin childbearing in their teens is associated with early childbearing itself or with the generally poorer socioeconomic circumstances into which most adolescent mothers are born (Hindin 2012). However, the human capital theory holds that teenage childbearing has a real causal effect on socioeconomic outcomes because it directly interferes with adolescents' investment in human capital (Berthelon and Kruger 2014). Since teenagers are still at an early developmental stage of life, being a teen mother makes it more difficult to take on the appropriate economic, social and psychological responsibilities (Lee 2010). Early childbearing can also lead to psychosocial problems, such as severe emotional depression and stress. These problems are associated with feelings of failure, low esteem and an external locus of control (Pinzon and Jones 2012), which greatly affects the future of the young mothers.

12.3.4.2 Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

The study findings reveal that approximately 4 % of the girls admitted that they suffered from STIs, and this is confirmed by findings from the in-depth interviews with key informants. Some of the girls were infected with HIV/AIDS either during their abduction or during captivity, and this proved to be a serious problem. One of the key informants said:

> I will actually tell you that some of them are HIV positive and they got infected during captivity and that doubles the magnitude of their problem and makes their needs even more unique. (Counsellor, TASO)

A key informant interviewee also revealed that;

> Out of ten, you may find seven are positive and you know this is a very big number because it was not only the commanders that were using these girls but even the soldiers in the bush. (Programme Coordinator, Empowering Hands)

The findings in the quotations above indicate that a significant number of the abducted girls had acquired HIV/AIDS and/or STIs. The situation was complicated by the fact that sometimes, as they escaped, they would meet armed forces, such as the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) soldiers, and that many things happened along the way in the name of helping them out of the bush. Consequently, the girls and young women would often be raped, which made it far more likely for them to be infected with HIV/AIDS.

The girls suffered from other STIs including syphilis, gonorrhea and vaginal candidiasis. It is important to note that not all of the girls who suffered from STIs admitted that they had STIs. This was confirmed by one of the key informants from the AIDS Support Organisation (TASO), who said that some girls did not want to talk about their infections, which meant that many of them would keep quiet and not receive the treatment they needed. Some girls were ignorant of what was happening to their bodies, because they were very young.

12.3.4.3 Damage to Reproductive Organs

Very few girls reported that their reproductive organs were damaged, even when they were. It is likely that the girls were generally unwilling to talk about sensitive issues related to their sexual abuse experiences and to admit when they had sexual health related problems. Furthermore, some of the girls suffered from fistula, which is defined as an abnormal connection between the vagina and the urinary tract (usually the bladder) or between the vagina and the alimentary tract, usually the rectum or both. A fistula is very uncomfortable; it leads to uncontrollable leakage of urine or feces or both through the vagina (Hinrichsen 2004). A health practitioner at one of the reception centers reported that one of the girls who gave birth while in captivity had damaged her bladder, which led to a fistula developing. This led to her passing urine all the time. Ultimately, it required reconstructive surgery (Steiner et al. 2009).

12.3.4.4 Abdominal Pains

Abdominal pains were mainly attributed to sexual violence committed against the girls while in the bush. This was confirmed by one of the girls who reported that, she had abdominal pain because she had been raped at a young age. Others reported that they had abdominal pains due to pregnancy. In addition, some girls reported that they faced health problems, such as miscarriages in subsequent pregnancies upon their return due to pregnancy.

12.3.5 Parenthood/Motherhood

The girls experienced transformations in their identities, particularly as children, because they became mothers due to forced sex. Children born in captivity were mainly a product of sexual violence (Carpenter 2007; Mackay 2006; Rimmer 2007), and thus, unplanned pregnancies. Kostelny (2006) asserts that the girls no longer view themselves as girls (children) despite their chronological age, because girlhood/childhood may be perceived to end when marriage and motherhood begin, as is true in most cultures. Similarly, the study findings revealed that the girl mothers viewed themselves as adults. For instance, when their parents sent them for errands like buying things from a shop after they had returned home, they felt offended, because they perceived that such errands were for young children. This concurs with the Acholi traditions whereby girls with children are treated as adults, since normally it is the adults who are expected to have children (Ochen 2011). The majority of the girls, who had been sexually abused during captivity and returned with children, referred to their children as war babies/children. Most of them were child mothers, or very young mothers, and had an average of three children. Those who had more than three children at the time of the study, had given birth to them after returning home from captivity, when they got married to men within the community.

Parenthood, or motherhood, has led to several problems among the young mothers, upon their return, including rejection by their families. The girls' parents wanted to accept their girls back, but not their children, explaining that they could not accept the children of a person who had exploited their children or subjected them to sexual abuse. The return of their daughters from captivity put the parents in a serious dilemma, because they did not want the babies, but they did want the girls back. Moreover, the girls' bush husbands and rebel commander husbands remained behind in the bush or were killed in the war. Thus, the girls did not have anyone to lean on, which led many of the former captives to move away and live on their own. It is interesting, however, that some of the girls and young women did produce more children with men from the community on their return from captivity. Some girls were motivated to marry and have children with men from the community due to a desire for a re-established social security. Bailey (2009) also asserts that the girls were motivated by the social and economic strain of having children born in the bush, and the economic difficulties of living alone.

Some of the girls reported experiencing stigma and feeling rejected by their families and communities, because of the shame attached to rape and to giving birth to babies fathered by the girls' captors (UNICEF 2005). The qualitative findings indicate that, after the reception centers had traced their families and reunified the girls with their families, the majority of girls went to their parents' or step-parents' homes. Others, whose parents had died during the war, went to the homes of their uncles, grandmothers, mothers-in-law or other relatives. Most of them reported that they were welcomed by their parents, but some girls who were living with their

uncles and grandmothers reported that they experienced mistreatment. One of the girls said:

> I went to my grandmother in Jinja, but she wasn't treating me well and she was discriminating my children and I decided to continue staying in my hut. (Girl mother, Pece)

The above illustrations show that upon return the girls faced challenges including isolation, stigmatization and marginalization. Furthermore, their children faced numerous child protection problems such as neglect, rejection, abuse and a high level of vulnerability (Mackay et al. 2011).

Such experiences prompted the girls to leave their relatives, and rent houses in the peri-urban areas of Gulu. Therefore, the girls ended up living on their own as single parents and heads of households. The majority were single parents, because they lost their bush husbands due to war. Others had escaped and left their husbands in the bush. This shows that the girls had to take up adult roles and look after their children born of war and, consequently, lost their childhood. It also clearly indicates that the identities of the girl mothers also changed. The study found that, due to poverty, the young mothers, in particular, found it difficult to look after their children in terms of feeding, clothing, providing them with an education and taking them to hospital for medical treatment. This concurs with Mukangendo's (2007) findings, which indicate that children born of rape are more likely to fall ill or to be malnourished and that they are less likely to get the medical and health care they need.

Looking after children was complicated by their lack of other resources, such as income and land. Most of them were struggling on their own, trying to have their basic needs met, with very little support from their families and relatives. The parents of the formerly abducted girls could not afford to look after the girls and their children, because they were also impoverished by the war. This situation was even worse for the girls whose parents were dead. To make matters worse, the child mothers had limited parenting skills. Baldi and Mackenzie (2007) suggest that they had limited parenting skills, because they were involved with the fighting forces from childhood and had never been mothered or parented themselves. However, some of those who found their parents alive, especially the mothers, benefited from their support. The presence of mothers often made it easier for the young mothers to care for their children. This is because their mothers would keep and take care of their children, which helped those girls who were still of school-age to go back to school. Those who did not have adequate support from their families had to fend for themselves.

These young parents also exhibited limited awareness of the distinctive needs and vulnerabilities of young children (Mukangendo 2007) asserts that many young mothers face great difficulties in single-handedly taking care of their households under extremely difficult conditions. Findings from individual interviews with the girls indicate that some of them felt like committing suicide or killing their children (infanticide), because they could not cope nor look after them. This shows that children/adolescents get suicidal ideation due to problems they experience. This concurs with Kinyanda and colleagues' study (Kinyanda et al. 2010) done in

Northeastern Uganda, which indicates that social-economic disadvantage (environmental factors) is one of the risk factors for suicidality, especially among adolescents. This indicates that the children born in captivity were a heavy burden on the young mothers. It is clear from the findings that there is great need for family support for the girls upon their return to the community.

Some girls were motivated to marry and have children with men from the community due to a desire for a re-established social security. Bailey (2009) also asserts that the girls were motivated by the social and economic strain of having children born in the bush, and the economic difficulties of living alone. Nonetheless, some of the girls remained single because they wanted their "bush" children to be treated fairly. However, they were often trapped in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, if they chose to marry, their children would be rejected and stigmatized. On the other hand, if they remained single, they would face difficulties in raising their children on their own with little economic and social support.

All of the above reflect that mothering is a social construction and process that connotes protecting and preserving life, fostering growth and ensuring a child's acceptability in society (O'Reilly 2010). However, during a state of perpetual war and disruption, preserving and nurturing life is exceptionally difficult, especially for children who had to take on parental responsibilities when they were still young.

12.3.6 Recruitment in the Army

The current debate about child soldiers tends to focus on the use of children by armed groups. An estimated 300,000 child soldiers, boys and girls under the age of 18, are currently involved in more than 40 conflicts worldwide (Denov 2006). Some 40 %, or 120,000 child soldiers, are girls, whose plight is often unrecognized because international attention has largely focused on boy soldiers. In general, when people speak of child soldiers, the popular image is that of boys, rather than the thousands of girls who comprise the less visible 'shadow armies' in conflicts around the world (Mackay and Mazurana 2004).

Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children UNCRC (article 38) prohibits any person from recruiting children who are not 15 years old, children continue to be recruited as soldiers**.** The Convention on the Rights of the Child provides the normative and legal framework for the rights of children. This clearly dictates the rights of children in all contexts including the right to survival, to develop and form the fullest, to protection from harmful practices, abuse and exploitation and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The study findings show that most girls were recruited in the LRA and served as soldiers and combatants, which is not a new phenomenon as confirmed by other studies (Honwana 2006; Nkurunziza 2010; Angucia 2010)**.** Girls were abducted in large numbers by the LRA, some to become fighters and others to become "wives" or serve as slaves, performing household and sexual services.

Known risk factors for becoming a child soldier are poverty, less or no access to education, living in a war-torn region, displacement and separation from one's family, with orphans and refugees being particularly vulnerable (Verhey 2001). Nkurunziza (2010) asserts that a situation of war and poverty brings about fear, insecurity and hopelessness, which in turn make children leave their families and take up arms as a means of attaining a livelihood. Most children do this looking for protection and survival. Furthermore, the LRA targeted children, because they were easy to manipulate, easier to condition into unthinking obedience and cheaper than the adults, because they were not paid but manipulated and controlled (Nkurunziza 2010).

The children were abducted at a very early age, and were not socially prepared to assume the role of soldier, but were forced by circumstances. Whether armed groups forcibly recruit children or the children themselves volunteer, the same groups of children are most likely to become child soldiers. These groups include the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children: those without traditional families to protect them, those with little or no education and those from marginalized sectors of society. Because these children are deprived of the security provided by traditional familial structures and economic wealth, they are usually the first children recruited into the army. On the other hand, soldiering is often attractive to children because it provides meaning, identity and options, which civilian life does not offer (Wessells 2006).

Groups may force children to commit atrocities against people they know in order to harden them to violence. The leaders of these groups may brutalize children to teach them respect for authority (Bald 2002). Fighting groups generally treat child soldiers the same as adult recruits, and do not afford them special treatment because of their young age. Honwana (2006) asserts that children's involvement in fighting, or involvement in war, defies established and generally accepted norms and values with regard to the fundamental categories of childhood and adulthood. He further says that in modern societies, childhood is usually associated with innocence, weakness and dependence upon adult guidance and nurturance. In contrast, soldiers are associated with strength, aggression and the responsible maturity of adulthood. During war children should be protected and defended; on the other hand, a soldier's duty is to protect and defend. So, when the concepts of child and soldier are critically analyzed, it is quite confusing. This is because children find themselves in an unsanctioned position between childhood and adulthood. Furthermore, they are still children, but are no longer innocent as indicated above. While in captivity they are given adult tasks, but they are not yet adults. When they are given guns, and instructed to kill and carry out other atrocities, they lose their childhood or their childhood is removed, which also affects their identity. This is because they live in a twilight zone where the two worlds of childhood and adulthood rub against each other in an uneasy intimacy (DeBoeck 2000). In addition, the involvement of the girls in armed conflict is a violation of the children's rights in the UNCRC. Also, according to the Acholi culture, it deprives children of their childhood, because in this culture children are not supposed to go to war. Acholi societal

norms dictate that it is only men who should go to war. Studies show that children who undergo such experiences have trauma or are associated with trauma. It is important to note that children experienced trauma. Indeed, in this sample, there were children who experienced signs of trauma. However, the focus of this study did not include measuring trauma systematically.

12.4 Conclusion

This study established that the rights of girl mothers in Northern Uganda were heavily violated during captivity and upon return to the community. Rights abuses during captivity included, among others: abduction, forced labor, sexual violence, forced marriage/rape, sexual slavery, unwanted pregnancies and forced motherhood and recruitment in the army, which consequently led to a deprivation of their childhood. Upon return to their home areas, they experienced stigmatization, marginalization and rejection by families.

Due to loss of their bush husbands and little support from their parents and husbands, the girls had to take on adult roles to ensure their survival and the survival of their children. All this led to the transformation of the girls' identities. Consequently, the girl mothers found themselves in positions of vulnerability and risk, instead of enjoying their childhood. However, they also found themselves in positions of adult responsibility. Marriage and motherhood introduced the children to the roles and responsibilities of adult womanhood. In some societies emphasis is placed on roles rather than age. Yet, age is very crucial, especially in terms of protecting the rights of children. The girl mothers are therefore typically urged to take on traditional gender roles, as well as returning to traditional societal structures and patriarchal practices (Mackay and Mazurana 2004). A child who has been kidnapped by a paramilitary group and compelled to bear arms or forced into sexual slavery cannot have a childhood, and this is similar to a child who is far from family and home village. Children living in abject poverty without adequate food, access to education, safe water, sanitation facilities and shelter are also denied their childhood. When children are left unprotected and vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and maltreatment, their childhood is undermined. It is noteworthy that the communities were also in a dilemma for accepting the young mothers as children. These are girls with children, so should they continue to be treated as children?

Therefore, there is an urgent need for social work intervention to prioritize working with stakeholders such as duty bearers for children – governments, international organizations, civil society, families and individuals – to ensure that the rights of girl mothers, such as, education, health and survival affected by armed conflict are fulfilled and protected. It is also important to respect childhood, and children should be free from violation because they are our future. This can be achieved through comprehensive strategies that can empower them to lead better lives.

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