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Children and young mothers' agency in the context of conflict: A review of the experiences of formerly abducted young people in Northern Uganda☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the experiences of formerly abducted young women during their captivity with the Lord Resistance Army rebels and in the resettlement and reintegration period. Special attention is given to their exercise of agency and choices. Using a qualitative design, narrative interviews were conducted with child mothers ($N = 21$), local and civic actors ($N = 17$), and the general community through focus groups ($N = 10$). Data transcripts were analyzed using template analysis methods to derive meanings and increase understanding of the situation. Abducted children faced significant difficulties during their captivity and also during their resettlement and reintegration process, yet they continued to exhibit strong agency to cope with the new realities. Despite these difficulties, opportunities existed which were utilized by the young people, albeit to different degrees depending on each young person's ability and initiative (agency). Situational factors limiting the child mothers' agency were identified as embedded within the latter's environment. This study raises the importance of appreciation of the young women's agency in both the bush-captivity experience and resettlement and reintegration processes within the community, post-conflict.

Introduction

Despite the existence of international watchdogs such as the United Nations and increased global advocacy for respect for human rights and promotion of good governance, armed conflict continues to be a defining characteristic of the geo-political situation found in many countries (Kaldor, 2006; Keen, 2008; Nilsson, 2013). Moreover, new research also notes the changing dimensions of armed conflict and how children have been entrapped in them (Nilsson, 2013; UNICEF, 2009). Wars and armed conflicts have had significant and deleterious effects on children in different parts of the world. Children's lives have been disrupted in many ways including being displaced from familiar surroundings, having their education disrupted, and being forced to participate directly in hostilities (Nilsson, 2013; Ozerdem & Podder, 2011; UNESCO, 2011; Wessells, 2006). Also, the livelihoods of children and their communities have not been spared the ravages of war. Many children return from rebel captivity to an unfamiliar context devoid of the earlier protective and supportive environment that would have nurtured them into adulthood (Allen & Vlassenroot, 2010).

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Recent contemporary conflicts in Africa have included the protracted civil war in Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, Chad, Ivory Coast, and the Ethiopia-Eritrean war. Other conflicts have occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, and Burundi (Achvarina, Nordas, Ostby, & Rustard, 2008; Ozerdem & Podder, 2011).

Uganda has experienced several conflicts since independence from Britain in 1962 (Bainomugisha, 2011). Most of these conflicts have had far reaching consequences for children. The most prominent of all these conflicts has involved the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda. Led by rebel commander Joseph Kony, the LRA has drawn most of its forces from abducting young children (Allen & Schomerus, 2006). The conscription of child soldiers is not a new phenomenon in Uganda's history. The involvement of children in armed conflict can be traced as far back as 1972 and also to the 1978–79 wars of liberations against the brutal dictatorship of Idi Amin (Bainomugisha, 2011). Studies suggest, however, that the scale of abduction and conscription of children into armed conflict in northern Uganda has been unprecedented in the country. Since the beginning of the conflict, between 25,000 and 30,000 children (both boys and girls) are estimated to have been abducted (Human Rights Watch, 2006). McKay and Mazurana (2004) put the proportion of girls abducted at 30% of the total number of abducted children, but Annan, Blattman, and Horton (2006) indicated a figure of 15%. The abducted children (both boys and girls) were subjected to extreme brutality, including walking long distances on foot and being trained to fight and forced to kill fellow children and other community members.

The abducted young girls found themselves playing a multiplicity of roles within the rebel establishment. They were subjected to sexual abuse and were forcefully made to be "wives" to the rebel commanders. As a result, many have taken on the role of motherhood at a very early age (below 18 years). They have thus been described as *child mothers* (Mazurana & Carlson, 2006; McKay, 2004). The young girls and child mothers within the bush had to fight to defend their positions, procure food, and fend off their enemies.

Child Mothers as Agents and Actors

The experiences of formerly abducted child mothers in rebel captivity and in the aftermath of resettlement within the community as they attempt to negotiate the reintegration process can be understood in the context of the literature on agency. From this perspective, the child mothers are viewed as *agents* and not simply passive objects within their environment (Bjorkhaug, 2010; Honwana, 2006). This agency refers to the dexterity, physical strength, knowledge, and emotional intelligence (commitment) which facilitates the exercise of action (Sewell, 1992). Dessler (1989) argued that while human agents have power or influence on their situations and initiate some actions, these powers are exercised within an historical space which regulates such actions (structural influence). In a study spanning 10 years (1995–2005) and involving over 400 former child soldiers, Wessells (2006) found that despite the fact that children are often subjected to great cruelty and extreme difficulties while in rebel captivity, they demonstrate strong agency and attempts to influence their situations. This issue is often underestimated by other actors and stakeholders. Wessells' observations are similar to Boyden and De Berry (2004) regarding children's agency both within and in the aftermath of war. Boyden and De Berry (2004: p. xvii) state that "even when confronted by appalling adversities, it is revealed that many [children-and child mothers] are able to influence positively their own fate and that of others. . .." A similar study exploring the issues pertaining to the reintegration of formerly abducted persons in northern Uganda also highlighted the agency of the formerly abducted persons (including the child mothers) as a critical issue in the reintegration process (Okeny, 2009).

Recent scholarship on children and young people recognizes the importance of agency in understanding the experience of young people [child mothers inclusive] (see Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, 2011; Ezeah, 2012; ILO, 2010; Ochen, 2012). This spans the area of education, post-conflict reconstruction, and youth quest for livelihoods in both urban and rural areas. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2011) noted that the challenges of programming for vulnerable children and young people come from the limited definition of the concept of vulnerability which focuses on the individuated classification of vulnerability. This they argue is based on "a range of risks and shocks that affect one or more of a variety of livelihoods assets" (p. 12). Yet they suggests that "rather than focusing on risks as an exogenously given factor to be managed, vulnerability is conceptualized as emerging from and embedded in the socio-political context. . .".

Moreover where the focus is mainly in economic issues, inclusion and exclusion are never effectively addressed, and there is tendency of sustained discrimination against particular groups (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004). Experiences from Northern Uganda suggest that child mothers are faced with brittle discrimination and exclusions (both subtle and overt) from the communities in which they have resettled. While the action research done by McKay, Veale, Worthen, and Wessels (2010) recognizes the importance of agency of the child mothers and their efforts at transforming their situation and that of their children, it also points at the important roles that can be played by intervening development agencies and external change agents. The latter study like ILO (2010) recognizes the challenges of reintegration faced by the FAYM returning to a significantly changed community, with many experiencing double orphan hood and thus little recourse to extended family support. Both ILO (2010) and McKay et al. (2010) recognize the significance of support by external agencies but suggests that these should be responsive to the socio-economic and legal factors within the intervention context. The vulnerability of the young mothers within this context is also considered and with it their need for special support from actors and agencies. Yet while such views are expressed, little efforts are made to effectively address them. Nyambedha (2011) argues for a framework which recognizes and support traditional elements of social protection.

Studies in Uganda, Sierra Leone and Liberia suggest an approach to social protection for child mothers which aims at addressing structural vulnerabilities, which also looks at social protection from a transformative perspective. They suggests that social protection interventions needs to consider different aspects of the life course so that emergent needs and challenges, including material and social deprivations faced by the targeted individuals (child mothers) are factored in program design (Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011; Mazurana, Carlson, Blattman, & Annan, 2008; McKay et al., 2010). My analysis from the preceding is that while the young women's agency is important they are also exercised within a structural context which is likely to present constraints and significant bottlenecks and suggests that these structural forces and impediments are dismantled and removed.

Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2011, p. 359) extols the importance of voice and agency and argues that "social participation within everyday context can provide for more ownership and self-determination than is possible in provide decision making." They note that agency is important to ensure young people not only have a say on their affairs but exercise more active citizenship (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). As agency is deepening young women's citizenship, it is also important to reflect on this concept. Smith and Bjerke (2009) conceptualize citizenship as belonging to the community, society or group and argue that the construction of young people as citizens *now* increases their salience, visibility and importance in the society. Such construction brings out their *voice*, as active decision makers rather than passive recipients of decisions made by adults. This *voice* is an expression of children and young people agency. They perceive children as citizens *now* not in the future and roots for *difference-model of citizenship*, which they suggest emphasize rights of citizens to be different and equal and are transformational in nature (p. 17). That this model as contrasted with the *libertarian model* emphasize uniqueness of individuals and therefore acknowledges children and young people "participation in multiple relationships and their voice and agency in these relationships" p. 17. This is the same situation for child mothers. Yet it is important that the child mothers' agency is theorized within the socio-political contexts such young people live in and exercise their agency. Construction of the child mothers as active citizens enhances their participation and ability to embrace such roles. It is also important to note that globally different societies hold different and varied beliefs about children citizenship roles and as such availability or not of opportunities for the young people. As the child mothers resettles within the communities with their children on return from rebel captivity, it implies the need for continued support for them to effectively exercise agency and citizenship (see Smith & Bjerke, 2009). Moreover it is important to also consider the factors that influence the exercise of agency among the child mothers. Abebe (2013) suggests that while the agency of [child mothers] shapes their individual actions and choices it largely depends on the family contexts, livelihoods opportunities and constraints experienced. He also suggests that appreciation of young people's livelihood strategies (the child mothers inclusive) should recognize that such strategies are contingent on many factors, not least the complex relationship web that young people belong to and are influenced by.

Purpose of the Study

The situations of the child mothers and their individual experiences and construction of events around them during captivity and in the community presents an experience which is yet to be fully explored in the study of children and young people affected by conflict. In appreciating the post-conflict experiences and reintegration efforts of the formerly abducted child mothers, it is imperative that these be understood within the context of their experiences while in captivity. The uniqueness of the individual and the experiences each person has been subjected to presents important insight for responding to their varied needs and situations. Moreover, the ability to exercise agency is also partly predicated by the young women's experiences of rebel captivity and how they had negotiated risks, vulnerabilities and challenges in the bush.

Supporting young people emerging out of protracted conflict to re-establish meaningful socio-economic engagements and livelihoods is fundamental to their participation in the affairs of the community, and therefore, exercising of their active citizenship. Such processes of engagement are crucial to the post-conflict reintegration of young people whose livelihoods and socio-economic ways of life have been significantly affected by the conflict (see Abola, Omach, Ochen, Anena, & Barongo, 2009; Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2007; Annan et al., 2006; McKay et al., 2010). For northern Uganda and the Acholi sub-region in particular, which has the worst poverty rates in the country, the perceived or real exclusions of young people from the process of change, community actions, and citizen action affects their ability to experience socio-economic progress. In the midst of these challenges, what policy prescriptions are appropriate in enhancing young mothers' citizenship and voice? This study adds to the debate on critical development theory about how young people influence and are influenced by their environment in a bid to make important life choices and decisions.

This study makes an important contribution to the post-conflict reconstruction discourse and the roles that can be played by young people, including those that have become mothers in the most unlikely and difficult of circumstances. Moreover, the narratives of these young people's experiences as they negotiate the difficult terrain of post-conflict northern Uganda (*e.g.* moving from the internally displaced person camps to original homes) are important in developing a more grounded approach to addressing their challenges and deepening their citizenship and their inclusion in development and governance processes. It is also envisaged that the study findings will add to the body of knowledge on post-conflict work and human interactions in communities emerging out of conflict and utilization of quasi-anthropological methodologies in such situations. This is important in enhancing the socio-economic integration of the young people, whose lives have been fundamentally impacted by armed conflict.

Methodology

Participants

This qualitative study was conducted between September 2009 and February 2012 in the Gulu and Amuru districts of northern Uganda. The sample consisted of 21 child mothers aged between 17 and 25 years. Each had returned with children born to them while in rebel captivity. All of them were abducted between the ages of 9 and 11. All the child mothers interviewed spent between two and nine years in the bush. At the time of the interviews they had spent at least two years in the community (post-resettlement). The researcher considered two years an appropriate time frame to assess resettlement issues and its dynamics. This position is backed by actors and agencies working on resettlement and reintegration of children and young people affected by armed conflict.

In deepening the understanding of the information from the primary participants in the study (child mothers), several key informant interviews ($N = 17$) were held. Key informants were purposively selected based on their responsibility in respect to the child mothers and included local leaders and nongovernmental organization (NGO) and district officials whose duties link them to the young people. Key informant interviews helped in exploring the resources in place to support reintegration and also in validating and contextualizing the experiences of the child mothers.

It was also deemed crucial to include the general community in the study sample because the study explored the lived experiences of children and child mothers. A total of 10 focus group discussions were carried out with the youth and other young people, local community leaders, religious leaders, members of the Child Protection Committees (CPCs), and parents or guardians of the child mothers. Each focus group comprised between 10 and 12 participants and was homogenous. For example, the female youth and male youth met separately, and parents and CPC members met separately. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand how these actors regarded their relationships with the child mothers and how they perceived the reintegration initiatives and support networks and systems in place.

Procedures

For the narrative interviews, the researcher relied substantively on the openness and cooperation of the child mothers who had been identified and recruited to participate in the study. A local organization supporting the child mothers was utilized as an initial point of contact to get information about potential study participants. A list of potential participants and their contact details was created in the initial period out of which a final list was selected. The main criteria were longevity and duration in the bush, conception and delivery in the bush, approachability, location of settlement (to balance rural and urban resettlements) and ease of accessibility of the young women and their willingness to speak about their experiences. Those women who had initially been selected but did not express outright willingness to participate were replaced with those more ready and willing to participate. As the residence of these participants were known, they were traced though informal contacts and follow up reports provided by the local agency. The procedures used to identify and select the young women did not put them into any risks or breach of their privacy and confidentiality.

Interviews with the Child Mothers. No interpreter was needed for the interview because the researcher spoke the local language fluently. This was important in developing rapport with the participants, as the researcher told them of his experience working as a social worker with children affected by war several years earlier. The interview involved giving the young mothers enough time to talk about their experiences with the rebels, with the researcher mainly listening to and giving encouragement as and when required. Each interview lasted on an average one and half hours although some took slightly over two hours. The interviews were conducted solely by the researcher in secured locations in the homes of the participants, away from other people for privacy and confidentiality purposes. The narrative started from the abduction point, continued throughout their lives in the bush (captivity), through to return and reintegration including, experiences in the reception and rehabilitation center (RRC) and the community. The researcher was, however, aware of the limitations of the narrative interview, especially its inability to depict contextual factors (Flick, 2006). The tool was thus adapted to also explore perceptions about the community and issues affecting the environment.

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups with Communities. People who occupy positions of leadership or influence pertaining to the wellbeing of children and young people were considered important to the research process. Key informants were thus identified and selected based on their proximity to the participants, as well as a deep understanding of the challenges and dilemmas the participants come face to face with. Some of the key informants were local government officials, others were social workers of psychosocial support agencies and some were local and traditional leaders.

After being identified and selected, key informants were met and interviewed in their offices or homes, depending on their locations. Focus groups were carried out in the community, both rural and peri-urban. Efforts were made to facilitate the discussion with the community (focus groups) to ensure that all participants had an equal opportunity to give their views in a favorable environment. Questions for the focus groups and key informant interviews addressed issue of relationships and interactions with the young women and also community perspectives in challenges they face. Key informant interviews and focus groups lasted approximately two hours.

Analysis of the Data

All interviews and focus group discussions were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. These were then analyzed thematically using Template Analysis. Template Analysis is a useful method in analyzing textual data emerging from fieldwork (Cassels and Symon, 2012; King, 2012). Template analysis involves reducing large amount of data into a framework of a few pages to simplify the process. This is an adaptation of thematic analysis in qualitative research and has been successfully applied in the field of qualitative research. The preference for Template analysis is premised on its provision of opportunities to include some *a priori* themes rather than usage of a totally bottom-up approach in data analysis, and also provides flexibility in the coding structure which allows different depth of coding for different aspects of the data. Some applications of template analysis in social science research have been in the study of orphans and vulnerable children as well as young teenage parents. Ferguson and Heidemann (2009) applies template analysis (TA) to social research with orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya, East Africa. The focus of this qualitative study was to identify the strengths and challenges relating to provision of services to orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). In this study template analysis provided a framework and opportunity to "uncover insights about the recursive relationship between micro and macro realities in Kenyan NGOs and the accompanying human and social transformation that results from providing services to OVCs" (Ferguson & Heidemann, 2009, p. 354). Here TA was applied to the qualitative data sets from the interviews where the initial templates were drawn up from the research questions, aims and concepts from the structuration theory (which underpinned the study). In another study exploring the end of life care for children diagnosed with terminal illness (Jones, 2006), a mixed method design was used involving analysis of qualitative focus groups data through template analysis and more quantitative data analysis for the questions administered. The researcher suggested that the combination of the two analysis methods enhanced the professional and technical rigor of the datasets. Template analysis was also applied to a study to assess support needs of teenage mother/parents on their housing requirements in a developed country context (Martin, Sweeney, & Cooke, 2005).

Template Analysis was also particularly applicable to the broader philosophical approach of the study which borrowed extensively from phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of the research participants (see also Wainright & Waring, 2007).

Manual analysis was relied upon in ordering the information on an acceptable template. This involved pulling out a large *manila* paper (3/4 of a square meter) and an initial template was drawn in pencil and all emerging themes and sub-themes added to it as the data collection process evolves. This paper was later enriched by considering the themes emerging from the data. Further adjustment to the template were made during the data transcription process when more codes were applied to the initial template and modification made to the original template. Data interpretation was overall guided by the research questions and theoretical frameworks for analysis.

Ethical Procedures

This study strictly adhered to ethical principles in the whole management of the research process. Consent of the respondents was sought after explaining that the study might require them to give information they may not be comfortable with. Before commencement of fieldwork, preparations were made to ensure that the data collection process went well. Overall permission for the study was obtained from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), whose guidelines for research with human subjects was strictly followed and adhered to. There was no need to seek parental consent for any of the young people as they were all aged at least 17 years. The UNCST regulation does not require getting assent for a child aged 17 years. Besides many of these young women are effectively household heads and stay alone, some in rented places far away from their family home.

During the interview/discussion, participants were given freedom to skip questions or issues they were not comfortable with. Confidentiality and privacy of participants were assured by conducting interviews in private locations or at a safe distance away from other people. Permission was sought from the participants to use direct quotations in the presentation of findings. This was duly agreed to by the participants who assented to their voice being used in the report by signing the consent form or making a consent statement. The key informants and members of the focus groups also gave their consent to use the information and quote them directly.

Taking into consideration the fact that the study involved participants reliving their experiences with the rebels, arrangements were made with one of the counseling centers to provide follow-up psychosocial support where necessary. In the event that participants might be hesitant about participation, arrangements were made to replace them with other people who did not feel threatened in any way by the study. This, however, did not happen as all identified and selected participants agreed to participate in the study and share their experiences.

The researcher made efforts to protect the identity of the study participants. In no circumstances were the research participants identified with their real names and in the presentation of findings the participants have been identified by the use of pseudonyms. The recruitment procedures and interview arrangements did not present any known risk to the participants' anonymity. While the resource persons gave us an indication of where to meet the young women, they were not privy to the interviews or who was eventually mobilized.

Results

Abduction of Children in Northern Uganda: Failure in the Child Protection Regime?

The child mothers' journeys began at abduction by LRA rebels. Here, the terms *children*, *child mothers*, and *young women* are used to reflect the changing nature and multiple identities assumed by the same people as they went through life in rebel captivity, and returned and resettled in the community after rehabilitation support. Both key informant interviews and narrative interviews with the child mothers attested to the brutality and insensitivity of abduction. Many of the abducted children were forcefully taken away when they were as young as 9 to 11 years of age, and in some cases, even younger. Abduction of children was a brutal invasion of not only their childhood and innocence but also freedom and an affront on their wellbeing as individuals.

> I was abducted on my way to Guru-guru. I was riding a bicycle from Lacor because my aunt was in Lacor hospital. We also used to get food from Guru-guru. Although insecurity was at its peak, people would still travel for lack of an alternative. It was at around 6pm when the rebels abducted me. They removed the bicycle from me and cut it into pieces while I was watching, so we walked and went and stayed at Got-atoo for three weeks. (Harriet Abalo)
>
> When the rebels came, we were just from school. . .. We were six; and out of the six, I think they just liked me. We hadn't reached home. They told me to show them the path going to the main road. [After moving with them a few meters] I said this is the path going to the main road. . ..yet many of them had already gone ahead. The top commander said I should go with them, I was very frightened; I started trembling, he said 'why are you trembling? Just show us the way then you will come back'. I started walking, thinking that after showing them the way they would release me and I would come back home. As we walked, we passed homes, they started looting and catching chicken. They caught a very big cock and gave it to me to carry and I realized I was already taken by the rebels. (Anena Jackie)

It was the view of the key informants, especially local government and NGO staff, that the decision to abduct young girls barely able to understand sexual matters was apparently predicated on the presumption that they would be free from HIV/AIDS. Most of the child mothers expressed a sense of betrayal from their society: an *inaction* which resulted in their abduction. While recognizing that they were living in a conflict-affected context, the children expected to be protected by their families, communities, and government. This protection did not happen for many of them. This view was also shared by the custodian of the cultural institution (the Paramount Chief of the Acholi) who said:

> The girls and boys who were abducted by the rebels did not go on their own accord but as a result of failure in their protection. As members of society; we did not prevent their abductions. All stakeholders in child protection failed these children. The local leadership structures, the local government, the central government, the police, the military, the community, the family in which these children were domiciled; the religious leaders and the cultural institutions did not effectively provide protection.

As indicated in the quotation, it is possible that such abduction were not preventable on the part of the majority of the population as the rule of law had severely broken down, and in many areas the presence of government was virtually non-existent. Moreover, the weakness of the Ugandan state in the midst of the conflict and its inability to secure the protection of both lives and property also compounded the incapacity to respond to such issues and challenges.

Child Mothers as Child Soldiers (Fighters) in the Bush: A Nurturing of Agency?

An examination of the intra-bush lives of the child mothers and formerly abducted children indicate the multiplicity of the experiences. Closer scrutiny suggests that the young people maintained both hope and strong fortitude which kept them alive and later facilitated escapes. Although the young people were subjected to very strong structural rules and regulations which also controlled and regulated their movements and actions, some windows of opportunities still emerged from these situations. It emerged from the interview with the young people that their military training was instrumental in their identification and utilization of certain agencies at different times in the bush. While children were not to be subject to the rigor and depth of the military training that many of the young women were given, this was later perceived as a resource and opportunity to cope and manage the several skirmishes and battles which were experienced.

Narrative interviews with the child mothers suggests that on abduction, they were all made to undergo military training to prepare them for their primary responsibility as soldiers. Considering that many were abducted at age 9 to 11, the training took place when they were still young and un-attached to men as wives and child mothers. Many of the young girls (later child mothers) experienced battles of different magnitudes, sometimes well before the military training, as indicated by one of the child mothers:

> We walked and crossed the stream [Unyama] and [immediately] entered an ambush. People started running [away in fear and panic], for me I was still tied up with the rope, they started pulling me even among thorns now. . . they were just pulling on them but we managed to get away. In that encounter other people got a chance of escaping, some were killed and others were captured by the army [government]. . . but for me I could not escape because I was still tied up. (Lorna Acii)

In the above quotation, Lorna is presented with a difficult situation. They entered an ambush when still tied to each other, a situation which almost exposed her to certain death. But even in the midst of this adversity, agency is at play. In the bush, there were three circumstances predisposing the child mothers to battles: when the women were chosen to accompany a standby fighting brigade to Uganda; indirect ambushes by Sudan people liberation Army (SPLA), local militia and other fighting forces within Sudan; and attacks by the Ugandan government forces on the LRA bases in Sudan, especially during operation "iron fist" in 2002.

In the early 2000s the LRA rebels had their main bases in southern Sudan from where occasional incursions into Uganda would be made. Narrative interviews further suggested that many child mothers (including expectant ones) and girls were made to accompany their *husbands* for operation to Uganda from Sudan, with or without their children. It should be noted that on abduction and socialization in the rebel culture, the young girls would be given to rebel soldiers as *wives* to meet their sexual needs, and attend to other chores. This allocation of *wives* is however against socio-cultural practices among the Acholi (who make up the majority of the rebels) where marriage would be accompanied with ceremonies and other cultural rituals. In such situations they were made to perform all roles of fighters including engaging their enemy when attacked. They were also selected in smaller fighting groups to carry out raids and counter raids on Uganda people defense Forces (UPDF) positions within the bushes of Uganda or to loot foodstuffs. Some of the child mothers were high ranking rebel soldiers, like in the case of (Ladira Maggie) who was a lieutenant in the rebel establishment. She was commander of a unit which comprised both male and female soldiers and was also a *wife* to one of the top commanders with whom she had an abusive relationship which forced her to later escape and abandon the LRA. Ladira had several missions to Uganda in the same *standby* as her *husband* and traveled with her children on many occasions. She revealed that when commanding battles her children would be carried by other junior soldiers. In her case, her 'favorable treatment' was because of her rank and also due to the fact that her *husband* was one of the top rebel commanders.

Within Southern Sudan the rebels mainly fought with the Sudanese people liberation army (SPLA) rebels at the reported behest of Khartoum government and to protect their camps. Child mothers were also forced to engage local communities within Sudan to look for food, especially in the period after 2002 when their gardens and food stores were destroyed by the UPDF assault on their bases within southern Sudan. In such situations most of the rebel forces were preoccupied with fighting the UPDF, and the child mothers had to look for food for their households on their own. The food had to be taken by force after exchange of fire, and in many cases, shedding of blood. As depicted by one of the child mothers (Anena Jackie), "If you did not fight you do not get the food and no one would give it to you." The Child mothers thus had to choose between fighting for the food and starving in the bush. Anena Jackie added:

> In 2002, we went up the mountain but did not take long. The UPDF soldiers were everywhere and there was no food. One day, I was very hungry, my child was one year old but he was still breastfeeding and he was good. They would send girls to go and look for food; sometimes you eat only one piece of potato. We were around 100 people in Kony's home. One day we decided to go and look for food. I decided to come with them, leaving my child behind. . . . And we all had guns because we were trained on how to use them. You must fight with Lutugu Mordir [a tribe in Southern Sudan] to get food because they also had guns. (Anena Jackie)

It is clear, therefore, that whether in Sudan or in the bushes of Northern Uganda, the child mothers faced significant risks and challenges as soldiers within the bush. Testimonies of the child mothers indicated that many of their compatriots died in battles, some lost their children and many were severely maimed in battles. Interviews with child mothers indicated that in some cases, children were shot dead with their mothers as they engaged other fighting forces, while others died on the back of their mothers who escaped alive. During battles therefore, the child mothers were faced with a complex situation: they had to ensure protection of their children, born, unborn and also fight for their own survival. One child mother remarked:

> As a child mother fighter you had many challenges. You had to hold your child or in some cases children, carry your guns and munitions as well as other children's paraphernalia and take cover at the same time. This was no easy feat. . .actually in some cases you are forced to either throw the gun or run (if we have to retreat) or throw down the child. . .which was a more difficult option! We always tried to ensure that we have the children at all times. As a mother you feel so bad for your children being caught up in this very difficult environment. (Oroma Nancy)

In other situations some of the girls/child mothers were made to kill other abductees or those rebels deemed to have violated orders or shown cowardice at the front line (battle). Could the decision to obey the order be seen as a quest for survival and further demonstration of agency however negative its effects on others? In the narration of their experience with the rebels, participation in killing innocent children exerted a strong impact on the girls. Their recall of these events was accompanied by regret and deep emotional pain. In other situations the participants wept openly when they remembered such incidents and realized the full weight of what happened in the bush. It is visible therefore that while training in combat could have violated the psychological and physical integrity as well as emotional and mental wellbeing of the young girls, it also provided them with a skill which they could use to negotiate (agency) the difficult and complex intricacies of the bush lives, many of which required some forms of defense for survival, and the military skills came in handy in such cases.

The Formerly Abducted Child Mothers in the Resettlement Phase

At resettlement many of the child mothers had grown into young women, some above 18 years. These young women initiated many activities to meet their needs. According to one child mother who resettled in a rural area:

> It is true for us who returned from captivity we always work a lot and when people look at you working they think that you are a slave or a drug addict. For example, if you go to our home now you will find what I have harvested and you would think that there is a man in my life but I do not have any man. . . .. but when I harvest what I planted they [other family members] come and get a full truck of my harvest, beans saying that they are going to keep them in town but once it reaches town they sell everything and don't give me the money. (Abalo Harriet)

As seen in the preceding quotation, this child mother has transferred all her energy into cultivation. It is noteworthy that in a traditional Acholi home (male-headed), the man is responsible for opening the land (initial land preparation) but in a female-headed family, the woman has to do this on her own. In the case of Abalo Harriet, while she has exhibited strong positive agency in working to ensure food for her household (including for children she returned with from the bush), the control over the products has been hijacked by some family members. This is a situation where social structures (family network) have acted negatively to constrain child mothers' agency. Child mothers' agency had however, been significantly buttressed by external support as indicated in this comment from a Project Coordinator of an Agency supporting child mothers in the community:

> The support is there for the young mothers and when you interact with them they would say that without the support from World Vision, they would be worse-off. Many of them are thinking of expanding their Income Generating Activities (IGAs) and a number of them have already acquired animals like goats, chicken and other livestock. . .. we do hope in the long term that these things will come to pass and they will earn a lot more money out of their project. . .but they have already exceeded the expectations of the organization. (Okumu David)

Individual child mothers reacted to and managed the same situation differently. This is also a testament to the different levels of individual resources and personal strengths of the child mothers which had a significant bearing on the agency.

Influence of Gender on Acceptance of Child Mothers' Children

An issue which emerged from the study, but which was not a focus of the original study, was how gender affects the acceptability of the children born in captivity (CBC) once the child mothers returned home. It appears as if the acceptability and the citizenship as well as their social belongingness was heavily predicated by whether they were male or female children. According to Mathew Aboda, a senior district official in the community development department, an emerging scenario has been the lack of acceptance of male children in child mothers' maternal homes:

> The message we have been receiving from some sections of the community is that families are showing signs of rejection of child mothers who returned with male children. This is because the families imagine that the children would compete with their own children for limited family resources. So we now have a situation where instead of families celebrating the return of their daughters, it appears as if some of them were not prepared to accept the children they returned with.

Although the feeling of disdain for male children appears to be subtle, it seems that some families would willingly accept their daughter's female children but have reservations about accepting the boy children. The apparent acceptability of girl-children is predicated on the fact that girls are married off when they come of age (18+) and would not take up permanent spaces within the home. Contrastingly, the boy children permanently belong to that home and will be expected to start up own families within that homestead. The fear of the families and communities where the CBC and their parents have resettled would be that if the boy children grow up in their (relative's) homes [In family settlement in Acholi rural villages one family (normally comprising several households) settles in one homestead although huts for different households would be situated in different parts of the homesteads. There are salient indicators identifying one homestead from another, and the home is normally called by the name of the grand father (patriarch).], they could in future struggle/fight for available resources within the family, especially land, with their own children (maternal relatives').

The above scenario has thus narrowed the citizenship or belongingness of the young boys born by the child mothers with rebel husbands and hastened their social exclusion. Already testimonies of the young children being treated badly or with derisions has emerged, with some of the CBC's own playmates used by their families to indicate that they do not belong to that family. With such subtle but very strong position prevailing within the community, any inaction regarding them will only serve to narrow the opportunities that will be available for the CBCs as they develop into young adults and minimize their psychosocial wellbeing.

A positive development towards resolving this situation has been the pronouncement of the traditional cultural institution (Ker Kwaro Acholi) on the future of the CBC. According to the Paramount Chief:

> As a cultural institution we also decree that the children born in captivity belong to the clan of the mothers. These should be treated as any other child in the home where the mothers have settled and should not be reminded of

their past background when still young. We recognize that children are innocent and could not determine the circumstances in which they should be born. In this regard therefore, they have a right to enjoy an unfettered childhood as other children who were born in the natural family situation outside the bush. We also decree that it is culturally unacceptable for any person to treat children born in captivity and their mothers as less than human.

Discussion

Girl Children's Experiences of Rebel Captivity: Limits of Agency and Resilience?

As seen earlier, *agency* in this study is taken to refer to the initiatives, the actions (more than just intentions), and the fortitude of the child mothers to prevail over extreme difficulties and personal challenges and undertake certain actions (see Abebe, 2013; Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Sewell, 1992). In some cases, this agency required employing special resources (intra-personal or otherwise) for the child mothers to manage the situation they were in. It should be noted that this agency is exercised within a socio-economic and politico–cultural context which is both complex and dynamic at the same time.

In explaining the experiences of the young women, Giddens' (1984) views of agency – of an active and creative individual – are useful. The child mothers were not just passive but initiated actions to influence their situations. While analyzing the experiences of abducted children in Mozambique and Angola, Honwana (2006) questioned the amount of power held by the children in the bush, equating agency to power, and wonders whether the children were in any way aware of the things they had control over. Honwana thus takes the position that child combatants in captivity can be considered as agents in their own right because they mobilize resources at certain moments to alter their activities or those of others. Such behaviors included pretending to be ill and making numerous efforts to escape. It is, however, important to point out that in this study, different degrees of agency and opportunity were available to the child mothers at different times, but the *space* for *choice* was itself very constricted or determined by specific prevailing circumstances. The limitations of the choices or alternatives within the rebel establishment for example, explain why many of the young women returned with children fathered by the rebels, although in my view the decision and action to escape is an indicator of agency. The bush was not considered the best place to raise children by the young women (see also Angucia, 2010; Honwana, 2006). It is also suggested that although the children are not passive victims, the extent of choices available to them is shaped by "particular experiences and circumstances" (Bjorkhaug, 2010, p. 1). This suggests that the range of choices impact the exercise of agency. It should be recognized however that the efforts of the girls in trying to navigate through difficult circumstances, show the innate power of agency although its constraints are also appreciated (see Honwana, 2006; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Smith & Bjerke, 2009). In most situations, whoever has a greater access to and control of power or resources will set the rules and determine the structure which regulates the behavior and actions of those with less power and access to controlling resources. This indicates the complexity of the interplay between agency and structure in human interactions. Although some schools of thought (such as the interpretative school) underplays the significance of external structures and emphasize human actions and relationships as principal forces in agency (King, 1999), in circumstances in which human rights, socio-political stability and social justice are undermined, such as in conflict situations, structure may play a greater rather than lesser role.

It is inappropriate to depict the formerly abducted young women as docile victims even during the period of their captivity with the rebels. These child mothers were self-directing, took responsibility for their personal safety in the bush (and that of their children), and in many cases, initiated the process of returning home (see also Allen & Schomerus, 2006). It is thus arguable that it was the *strong will*, against all kinds of odds that precipitated the return of many of the child mothers alive. In many cases, however, this expression of agency did not provide total safety and many girls died in the process of return or were severely maimed. Looked at another way, obedient acquiescence and strict compliance to the expectations of the rebel commanders and a pretended show of "trust" in the rebel systems was also a form of agency demonstrated by the girls to enhance opportunities for survival and later escape. In such situations attempts at escape would be avoided to give the impression of a relationship of *trust* between captor and captive or "husband" and "wife". Because the rebels perceived that the girls could be trusted they were given greater freedom which was then used later for actual escape.

The Utilization and Exercise of Agency by FACM in the Resettlement Areas

In the post-bush environment there was greater control by the young women of their own *agency* with regard to survival, re-adjustment and resettlement within the community. However, while the young women showed strong agential initiatives in working to transform their lives and those of their children, gendered social expectations also acted as a constraint to social reintegration. This study indicates that the creation of young women-owned structures where the membership of groups and interactive frameworks are based on shared experiences helped to improve their post-conflict situation (see also Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004, 2011). These structures promoted the exercise of agency and increased the child mothers' success in socio-economic activities. This situation was enhanced by improved accessibility to resources, and seed grants (see Allen & Schomerus, 2006; McKay et al., 2010) and highlights the importance of the interaction between the child mothers, non-governmental organizations and local government structures. Current interventions have however not done much to promote this collective agency in order to create a stronger social initiatives for the child mothers to positively influence their reintegration. Considerations could be made to focus efforts at creating a situation within communities which

not only fully and manifestly promote the rights of the young mothers and their children but also address the latent and subtle constraints that affect self-actualization (see Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2011).

Implications for Child Protection Theory and Practice and Rights Discourse

This study raised significant implications for child protection theory and practice. It brings important attention to the issue of self-agency and the very important concept of self-protection, which the children and young people were made to adopt and adapt to in the absence of institutional protection. Some agencies, such as World Vision, already engage with the concept of self-protection in their interventions, although it is at the moment not widely utilized in the child protection discourse. It is recommended that conscious efforts be made to put emphasis on building and promoting the concept of self-protection and how it can be encouraged to promote the development of agency and enhancing protection of the children and young people. This is in consonance with the experience of agency but with important lesson for child protection programming.

Child protection practice should also consider and enquire further how children and young people adapt in situations of difficulties when all other forces seems to be working against them or pushing them to adopt a line of behavior and actions that might be beyond comfort zones. Investigations could also be directed at finding out what this mean for later psychosocial and socio-economic reintegration and recovery interventions.

This study also brings to the fore the issue of subtlety and latent oppression and violation of the rights of children as was evident in the case of the children born in captivity, which by account of their gender are reportedly being discriminated against. This realization also calls for novel interventions that provide important avenues to engage with the very structures and fabrics of society that act as obstacles to young people's agency.

It is suggested that issues of resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of children and young people affected by armed conflict should be given a stronger emphasis within child protection and youth development legislative and policy practice. Key issues here are to ensure that the unique experiences and situations of such people are addressed effectively by the legislations and policies in place, so that there are no inadvertent exclusions due to omissions within such policy and legislative framework. Furthermore, there is need to put emphasis on support and interventions which identify, builds on agency and promotes the agential strengths of the young women by focusing on a life course process which directly considers the developmental changes the young people undergoes in a particular social context. Of importance here is deepening child mothers' citizenship and enhancing their inclusions in community and society's affairs.

Limitation of the Study

This study is not without limitations. While the study focused on utilization of agency among child mother returning from rebel captivity, certain aspects of agency conceptualization among the target group were not easily discernible. I note also that many factors within the environment and the locations of the young people in their varied and different experiences could also have played a key role in shaping their agency and how they make decisions based on this agency and the environment within which they live. I note, however, that in some cases the former could not be easily pinpointed nor effectively attributed as source or cause of actions. This is due to the nature of the social environment and the dynamics within which the study population are domiciled. I also recognize that the experiences described in this study could not be generalized to child mothers or young women in other locations outside northern Uganda but presents important lessons nevertheless for supporting children and young women emerging out of conflict.

Conclusions

In this study it has been argued that the young children of northern Uganda were abducted as a result of failure of the state and other social institutions to protect them from the brutality of rebel incursions. Abduction however, did not herald the end of hope which the young people actively sought through various exercise of agency both within the bush and in the resettlement process when they were rescued or escaped. This paper has also attempted to demonstrate that the concept of agency is imperative in rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration planning as it draws attention to the strengths, coping resources and opportunities available to the young women who went through the difficult process of abduction and rebel captivity (see also Haeri & PuerchGuirbal, 2010).

It is unfortunate however that many interventions in situations of conflict are focused on young people's weaknesses and needs. Even when development agencies claim to be utilizing a rights-based approach, the practical applications seem to be driven more by needs. Like Haeri and PuerchGuirbal (2010) this paper rejects the assumption and depiction of women as mere victims in conflict interventions. This study concurs with Haeri and PuerchGuirbal (2010) in contesting the construction of women as *vulnerable*; as such a description surely erases the *richness* and *complexity* of young women's experiences of war. It should be noted however that while young women's agency should be acknowledged in these complex and at times difficult circumstances; it should not take away the enormity of the situation which is a product of oppression, rights violations and at times persecution. It should therefore be emphasized that the identification of young women's agency and fortitude during conflict should not minimize the brutality of these experiences.

In the post-abduction situations and reintegration process, structure occasioned by socio-cultural circumstances (and perhaps a misinterpretation of culture itself), laws and other situational issues continue to exert significant influence on

the exercise of agency on the part of the young women. The study raises issue of *self-protection* as a new concept in child protection theory and practice. In many cases child protection actors and scholars takes a view of child protection which tends to put such a protection discourse in the hands of others. It is imperative that this is recognized as it is at the heart of agential child protection practice.

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