EDUCATING AND RE-INTEGRATING FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS OF THE NORTHERN UGANDAN WAR: OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEDIA

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Introduction
Northern Uganda was embroiled in a two-decade war between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and Ugandan army. During the war, about 30,000 children were abducted by LRA soldiers and used as child soldiers. Many of these were primary and high school girls. These girls were raped, abused and used as girl soldiers. The war ended in 2006, and most of the girls returned to their communities as outcasts, unskilled and uneducated. They have peculiar needs: some have children born from rapes, STD's and are past school enrolment age. Rehabilitation of these former girl soldiers has been arduous, and many social agents are being involved. These agents include local and community media (Whitmore, 2010; Ojebode & Owacgiu, forthcoming).

Available evidence shows that there are efforts by some of the media organisations to support and promote the education and reintegration process. Through programmes, news and collaboration with governmental, non-governmental and community-based organisations, some local and community newspapers and radio attempt to educate both the former girl soldiers and their communities on rehabilitation and reconciliation. Efforts at equipping the girls on income-generating activities are also supported by some of the local media. However, many local and community media organisations avoid this important social responsibility.

What political, economic, training and technical factors promote or impede the contributions of the local and community media to the education and reintegration of former girl soldiers? How do these explain involvement and non-involvement of the local media in the reintegration process? What impact have the media efforts had on the former girl soldiers?

In this paper, we first present an overview of the war in Northern Uganda and its aftermath. We summarise the efforts being made to rehabilitate former girl soldiers and then turn our focus on the media and their efforts.

War in the north and its aftermath
The Northern Uganda region has been the location of a 20 year-long internal conflict between the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan national government between 1986 and 2006. While originally the LRA and other rebel groups with some popular recognition claimed to fight against the marginalization of the Northern Ugandan region, in the course of the internal conflict the civilian population became
the main target group of the rebel attacks that also included as a combat strategy
the abduction of children and youth for later incorporation as child soldiers,
respectively for girls “rebels wives”/sexual slaves, into the LRA. From the beginning of
the armed conflict, groups of differing numbers of the population were subjected to
refuge to (peri-) urban centres of the region, as well as forced internal displacement.
From 1996 the national government armed forces used a policy of forced “protective
displacement” to prevent further rebel attacks on the sparsely populated region and
to be able to protect the civilian population better from the LRA. The internal conflict
however continued, with periodic interruptions after which attacks were taken up
again with increasing intensity. At the peak of the conflict in 2005 it was estimated
that at least 90% of the population was displaced (Whitmore, 2010; Temmerman,
2009).

In the camps set up to accommodate the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), over
time the situation became more and more problematic as few livelihood
opportunities existed and rebel attacks continued, now on the IDP-camps.
Congestion, insufficient education, nutrition and occupation opportunities led to
mass impoverishment and a highly problematic social situation with women and
children victimized through a rising rate of gender-based violence, abuse, and forced
child labour, prostitution, girl-child marriages being increasingly used as economic
livelihood strategy (OCHA & IRIN, 2004). Another consequence was the breakdown
of social norms and –order, with family structure and traditional systems before used
for guiding young people, shattered, which had a negative effect on the children and
young people in particular.

Gulu district experienced a very high rate of child rights violations and HIV/AIDS
prevalence, compared with overall country statistics. The conflict destructively
affected functions like health, education, infrastructural development, and the people
became impoverished as they couldn’t do any meaningful economic and
developmental activities.

Since the cessation of hostilities agreement of mid-2006 the IDP-camps have been in
process of dissolution and the majority of the population has returned. However, the
dismal record of gender-based violence and abuse of child rights has not yet been
overcome. Former child-soldiers and “rebels wives” after the end of reintegration
programs find still few opportunities to establish themselves to satisfactory degree in
the local social order, which is in a reformation process per se. The general
population, of whom most were over long periods of time in IDP-camps, is both
struggling with the trauma of the past experiences and the difficult process of re-
establishing themselves socio-economically in the return areas. In this situation the
high rate of gender-based violence, stigmatisation of former child soldiers and child
abuse continues to be high. Despite the existence of district local government
strategies to address child rights issues and reintegration, both awareness and capacity are still insufficient to efficiently work on improvement (OCHA & IRIN, 2004).

**Why Female ex-Child Soldiers Need for Open Learning**

Though there are numerous opportunities for formal education in Uganda, former female ex-soldiers could not access these opportunities for a number of reasons. First of these is the age of the women. The war in Northern Uganda lasted 20 years. In the last ten of these years, massive abductions of children took place. Most of the abducted children were school-age, teenage children. The implication of this was that by the time the war came over, many of the children were too old to join normal formal schools. Many returned when they were already in the mid-twenties. They could not return to Year One of High School to continue their education.

The second reason that former girl soldiers could not return to formal school was the fact that they were mothers. There are numerous cases of young adults returning to primary or secondary school after their release from LRA or the end of the war. But most of these were men. Cases of over-aged women returning to school are rare. Many of these former girls were raped and impregnated by male soldiers and commanders whom they were forced to serve as wives. They returned carrying babies for whom no father is ready to care. Joining former schools was therefore not a top priority item. Fending for themselves and for the fatherless babies is more pressing issue. Even if they want to join formal schools, there are no facilities in formal secondary school to cater for mother-students in Uganda. The female ex-abductees were thus specially disadvantaged.

Funding was the third reason that the former ex-soldiers especially the women cannot attend formal education. Although some schools in Uganda charge as little as USD$200 per term for tuition, feeding and boarding, many female ex-soldiers cannot afford this amount. Even basic survival is a big challenge for them. They lack a source of income and do not enjoy social welfare from government.

The fourth reason that formal girl soldiers do not fit into the existing formal educational system has to do with societal jeers and rejection they face. Temmerman (2009) writing about the abduction of 139 school girls from St Mary’s College, Aboke, in Uganda, by LRA commanders noted that some of the girls were released shortly after their abduction; some escaped on their own while some died or could not be traced. Among those who were released or escaped, many returned to their schools. These faced taunts and jeers from their former classmates who labelled them as "Kony wives" and gave them several derogatory appellations. The situation of the former girl soldiers has only grown worse. They are rejected in society and are not helped by government. Many of them have therefore become recluses, retreating from society and any social gathering. Schools are large regular social gatherings and are, therefore, not the places these women would rather go.

Finally, many of these women had suffered severe physical and psychological trauma that make it impossible for them to engage in the usual competitive activities that characterise formal schooling. Lost limbs, eyes, impaired hearing system, and
even retarded thinking and information processing abilities are common among the formal women abductees which make it difficult if not impossible for them to cope with formal schooling if they manage to enrol in one.

The major implication of the foregoing is that a different form of educational system is needed for the formal girl soldiers. From all indications, the non-formal system of education is the best for them. Open learning system is the most promising method for these women. This because open learning is flexible learner-centred, and result-oriented, rather than certification-oriented (Brügelmann, 1999).

**Local Radio and Efforts to Reintegrate Former Abductees**

In Gulu district many national and international organisations have been active in the field of relief. Since 1995 two NGOs have been responsible for reintegration process of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda. One is Gulu Support the Children Organisation (GUSCO) a local NGO that is supported by various international organisations like Save the Children in Uganda and UN, UNICEF. GUSCO bases its rehabilitation and reintegration process on traditional Acholi ways, such as involving clan leaders and traditional cleansing ceremony in the process. The other organisation is World vision (WV) an international Christian relief and development organisation. Its format for counselling and reintegration has roots in Christian Idea about confession and repentance of sins and healing by forgiveness.

The local media, especially local radio stations in Gulu have been active in the rehabilitation and reintegration process. They support reintegration in a number of ways: return call and proclamation; testimonial programmes and peace education programmes. There are also collaboration programmes with NGOs to provide non-formal skills-based programmes.

**Return calls and proclamations**: During the peak of the war, the local radio made several calls every day to children and adults fighting on the LRA side to return home. They made spot announcements and played songs urging the abductees and their commanders to lay down arms and embrace amnesty. Each time a returnee or escapee is found, the radio stations proclaim his/her return and escape. This, it is believed, strengthened the resolve of other children to return home and stop fighting. In post-return interviews, many children testified that their resolve to return was aided by the radio announcements. The radio stations also made calls to GUSCO and World Vision once a returnee is found so that these organisations can begin the rehabilitation process for the returnee.

**Roundtable Discussions**: Local radio stations, for instance, Choice FM, organised and aired programmes that brought together stakeholders to discuss the situation of returnees. This programme brought different stakeholders from civil society (such as World Vision), district authorities and education personnel from Avis discussing the plight of formerly abducted girls with special focus on their education. This
programme was for 1 hour on weekly basis. The programme discussed issues concerning formerly abducted reintegration, education and health.

An important segment of the Choice FM programme was the call in programme that enabled listeners including the former abductees to air their views and make suggestions. NGOs have, through the programme, made connections with abductees to further assist them. Many identified rejects have been followed up (once connected through the radio programme) and reintegrated with their communities/

Testimonials and Skill-Enhancement Programme: Local radio stations in Gulu have talk shows that feature formerly abducted girl soldiers who talk about their experiences with the community; the struggles for survival and give courage and advice to others in similar situations. They encourage and advice others on how to start IGA activities. Basic entrepreneurial skills, rudimentary book keeping and business skills are discussed and promoted in this programme

Challenges faced by the stations
Are the radio stations performing optimally in the informal education and reintegration of the formerly abducted girls? The answer is in the negative. There are many factors responsible for this. Following is a discussion of the challenges faced by the radio stations. These emanated from our interviews with the radio station staff.

Absence of a proper structure: There is no proper open learning structure which included these radio stations. Traditionally, open learning or distance learning centres are independent government agencies or part of a university. Radio stations then made as outlets of these (Brügelmann, 1999). The organisations, working with the media, give structure and direction to the activities and role of the media. This does not exist in Uganda. As a result of this, the activities of the stations are uncoordinated. Their efforts are unconnected with specified and structure learning tasks such as development of literacy which should have measurable objectives.

Training: A number of journalists and radio talk show hosts lack training in open distance education, and even in peace and development journalism. They are therefore not sensitive to the unique re-integration problems of especially the girls. Journalists confessed to making comments or jokes on air that were out of place and which they later realised must have hurt the former abductees.

Funding: The radio stations are unable to air many well-conceived educational programmes because there are no funds.

Political challenges: Journalists in Northern Uganda face political challenges. They feel that the central government discriminates against them in many ways and even try to muzzle them. While their counterparts from other parts enjoy favours from
government such as invitation to government events and travels, they are seen as anti-government and are treated with little friendliness. As a result, the journalists are not enthusiastic about supporting government's reintegration efforts.

**Implications for Open and Distance Learning**

Here we briefly summarise the implications of this small study for open and distance learning.

First, open learning, in spite of its ability to bypass the traditional constraints can also be a victim of political intrigues and power play. There is need to deepen democratic values and strengthen media organisations in order for them to fully participate in open learning.

Second, a good choice to make is to have radio station devoted to open learning in Uganda as it is in many other countries such as India (Chandar & Sharma, 2003). Such stations, if independent of government, can give devoted attention to the reintegration and education of the abducted girl soldiers and others in similar conditions.

Third, NGO's seeking to employ radio stations in open learning should reckon with the need to provide financial support for the stations.

Fourth, training and re-training of journalists for open learning and other related skills is mandatory. Journalists in Uganda will benefit immensely from short-term training opportunities such as those organised by Radio Netherlands Worldwide. This is because many of them cannot afford to take off time for long-term courses.

Successful and impactful open learning will take collaboration among several stakeholders: radio stations, communities, NGOs and government. The radio stations alone cannot fully educate the former abductees. Such a task requires the synergy that comes from jointly coordinated efforts.

**References**


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