



The risk of return: Intimate partner violence in Northern Uganda's armed conflict[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 23 October 2009

Keywords:

Uganda
Gender
Armed conflict
Women
War
Violence
Domestic violence
Intimate partner violence (IPV)

ABSTRACT

The physical and psychological consequences of armed conflict and intimate partner violence are well documented. Less research focuses on their intersection and the linkages between domestic violence, gender-based discrimination, and the structural violence of poverty in armed conflict. This paper describes emerging themes from qualitative interviews with young women who have returned from abduction into the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, many of whom were forcibly given as "wives" to commanders. Their interviews reveal multiple levels of violence that some women experience in war, including physical and sexual violence in an armed group, verbal and physical abuse from extended family members, and intimate partner violence. Striking is the violence they describe *after* escaping from the rebels, when they are back with their families. The interviews point to how abduction into the armed group may exacerbate problems but highlight the structural factors that permit and sustain intimate partner violence, including gender inequalities, corruption in the police system, and devastating poverty. Findings suggest that decreasing household violence will depend on the strength of interventions to address all levels, including increasing educational and economic opportunities, increasing accountability of the criminal justice system, minimizing substance abuse, and improving the coping mechanisms of families and individuals exposed to extreme violence.

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Violence against women—both by armed groups and intimate partners—has grave physical and psychological impacts, including injuries, poor reproductive health, PTSD, and depression (Campbell, 2002; Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Johnson et al., 2008; McNutt, Carlson, Persaud, & Postmus, 2002; Small et al., 2008). While the overwhelming focus of research on the impacts of armed conflict—especially for mental health—is on the collective violence of armed groups (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006), recent study suggests a link between exposure to violence by armed groups and domestic violence (Catani, Jacob, Schauer, Kohila, & Neuner, 2008; Gupta, et al., 2009). In armed conflict, women may be exposed to both direct war experience and intimate partner violence (Usta, Farver, & Zein, 2008), and consequences can

be compounded when sexual violence by armed groups results in rejection from families and communities (Nordstrom, 1991; Onyango, Atyam, Arwai, & Acan, 2005; Sideris, 2003). We must deepen our understanding of the multiple forms of violence against women, including structural violence—the gender-based discrimination, poverty, normative attitudes, and inadequate justice systems that allow such violence to occur (Galtung, 1969).

Recently we have grown more aware of the myriad experiences and roles females have in armed conflict. Along with being targets and victims of armed groups in communities, girls and women serve as combatants, in supportive and domestic roles, and as sexual slaves and "wives" (Brett, 2002, 2004; Corbin, 2008; Machel, 1996; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). While some research has focused on the stigma females face after being associated with an armed group (Mazurana, McKay, Carlson, & Kasper, 2002), others report that the majority of female ex-combatants in Rwanda, Uganda and Sierra Leone were well received by their families upon return (MRDP, 2008). In northern Uganda, over 90% reported no problems of insult, blame or aggression with their families in relation to abduction (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, 2008), suggesting a need to better understand the factors involved for the minority who do report problems. This paper uses qualitative data

[☆] The authors wish to thank Christopher Blattman, Dyan Mazurana, Khristopher Carlson, Alice Acan, AVSI-Uganda, the SWAY survey team, Okot Godfrey, Kristen DeRemer, Nathan Hansen, and the CIRA seminar members for invaluable contributions to the research and manuscript. For financial support, we thank UNICEF, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the United States Institute of Peace, and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

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to explore family problems among females returning from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda, with a focus on barriers to reintegration. Through women's narratives, it investigates how violence from an armed group interacts with family violence, poverty and structural barriers to justice, potentially increasing the risk of intimate partner violence and related health consequences.

Background

In 1988, a spiritual leader named Joseph Kony assembled the remnants of several failed insurgent groups into a new guerrilla force, the LRA. From its inception, the LRA commanded little public support in their ethnically-Acholi home region. With little popularity and virtually no material resources, the LRA immediately took to looting homes for supplies and abducting youth to serve as fighters, servants and "wives". Following increased support from the Sudanese government, abduction increased and from 1995 to 2004 became large-scale and widespread, with estimated 60,000 to 80,000 youth taken by the LRA (Annan, Blattman, & Horton, 2006; Pham, 2007). Abduction lengths have ranged widely—from one day to over ten years—due to rebel strategy and captives escaping at different times. By 2004 the rebels weakened and abductions in Uganda all but ceased. Peace talks with the Ugandan government began in 2006, but deteriorated and collapsed in 2008. The LRA have remained in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The LRA tightly regulated sexual relations and violence within its ranks. Non-abducted civilians were seldom raped, and sex was forbidden outside of marriage (Annan, Blattman, Carlson, & Mazurana, unpublished manuscript). Rather, female abductees were forcibly "married" to commanders and other soldiers. One quarter of female abductees eventually became forced "wives", and these "marriages" were to produce relationships where women bore children and took care of domestic responsibilities (Allen & Schomerus, 2006; Carlson & Mazurana, 2008). Approximately half bore children (Annan, Blattman & Horton, 2006).

When youth from the northern Acholi districts escaped—or, more rarely, were rescued or released—from the LRA, half of them passed through a formal reintegration process (especially those who stayed longer with the LRA). The remainder went directly home to their families (Allen & Schomerus, 2006). The formal reintegration process consisted of reporting to an authority for an amnesty certificate, reporting to government army barracks, and passing through a reintegration center run by NGOs. At the centers, the youth receive medical treatment, "counseling" or advice-giving, preparation for return to families, and transport home (see Allen and Schomerus, 2006 for full description).

Tragically, for most youth who returned in northern Uganda, this did not mean returning to their original homes. In 2002, the Ugandan government forced the rural population into displaced camps, arguing that depopulation of the countryside would allow the government to provide adequate protection from the rebels. In 2006, when our first interviews took place, there were 1.7 million people—nearly 90% of the Acholi population—in displaced camps. Most fell far below emergency standards for hygiene and availability of water (CSOPNU, 2006; Sphere, 2004). When interviews for this paper were conducted in 2007, some of the population had left the camps and many were starting to access their land for farming.

Methodology

This paper focuses on emerging themes from qualitative interviews, and draws on related descriptive data from quantitative surveys. Quantitative data are from the second phase of the Survey

of War Affected Youth (SWAY), a representative survey of female youth (ages 14 to 35) in eight rural sub-counties in the districts of Kitgum and Pader in 2007. In September 2005 we randomly sampled 1,162 households from 2002 U.N. World Food Programme lists and developed a roster of youth living in the household in 1996 (a year predating abduction and recalled because of a significant election). In 2007, 857 females were selected, stratified by sub-county and abduction experience, of which 619 were located.

Following the survey we conducted 36 qualitative interviews over five weeks in August and December 2007. This included a purposive sub-sample of 21 females from the survey sample focusing on females who reported problems with families or communities on the survey. We also sampled for variability in current age, abduction length, abduction age, and war experiences such as being a forced "wife" or having a child with the LRA. The respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 30 years old. Sixteen had been given to men as "wives" during their captivity in the LRA and 11 had children from their LRA captor. Twelve were currently married (none to their LRA "husband"). Details on these individuals can be found in Table 1.

Along with the purposive sample from the survey respondents, we sought out cases outside of the survey sample to follow up on emergent issues, including individual interviews with eight formerly abducted women referred from reception centers. To gain additional perspectives, interviews were held with key informants—seven reception center social workers who had worked closely with returning youth for years, and five family members of respondents.

All interviews were conducted in privacy by the first author or another interviewer together with an interpreter. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted 45 to 90 minutes. Interviewers explored topics about daily life: relationships with family, husband, and children; LRA abduction and experiences; and experiences of returning from the LRA. Interviews started with leading questions; follow up or probe questions were used to explore topics and elicit detailed narratives about the young women's experiences, allowing respondents to discuss issues that were important to them. Questions and topics were based on previous research in the region and the literature in the field, but developed over time as new information and issues emerged. Some of the questions included:

1. *Lead Question:* Can you tell me about a typical day for you? Please describe every detail so I can imagine what your days are like.
 - Follow up Questions:
 - It sounds like you are experiencing problems with _____. Can you tell me more about this?
 - Can you tell me about the most difficult challenge you have faced in the past couple of months?
2. *Lead question:* Can you tell me about your coming home after your abduction? I'm interested in what happened and also about your thought and feelings during the process.
 - Follow up questions:
 - Can you tell me more about things you did with your family when you came back?
 - What were the most difficult things about coming home?
 - Were there things you remember your family doing/saying that helped or hurt?
 - If formerly abducted mother:
 - Can you tell me what it was like for your children when you returned?
 - How did your family/neighbors treat them when you first came back? Now?
 - How are your children doing now?

Table 1
Characteristics of females interviewed with data available from survey.

Name ^a	Age	Years of education	Married	Orphan	Age at abduction	Length of Abduction	Forcibly Married in LRA	Bore child with LRA	Returned home after LRA
Amito	21	2	no	No	11	6 years	yes	Yes	yes
Janet	30	4	yes	yes	21	1 month	yes	No	yes
Adong	30	6	yes	yes	24	3 months	no	No	yes
Aciro	21	1	yes	no	12	1 year	yes	Yes	yes
Alice	25	0	yes	no	14	7 years	yes	Yes	yes
Akello	18	11	no	yes	13	1 month	yes	No	yes
Molly	31	6	yes	no	14	6 months	yes	Yes	yes
Anne	27	3	yes	no	11	1 year	yes	No	yes
Aloyo	18	4	no	no	15	1 year	no	No	yes
Jennifer	25	0	yes	no	12	10 years	yes	Yes	yes
Acen	18	10	no	yes	11	6 years	yes	Yes	yes
Hellen	23	1	yes	no	16	4 years	no	No	yes
Ajok	23	5	no	no	16	3 years	yes	Yes	yes
Susan	20	0	yes	no	15	2 years	yes	Yes	yes
Apio	16	6	no	no	12	9 months	no	No	yes
Adule	18	0	no	yes	7	5 years	yes	Yes	yes
Betty	20	5	no	yes	13	18 months	yes	no	yes
Grace	21	0	yes	no	9	5 years	yes	yes	yes
Sarah	27	10	yes	no	18	1 month	yes	no	yes
Aryemo	20	5	yes	no	13	3 months	no	no	yes
Cathy	20	7	no	no	17	2 years	yes	yes	yes

^a All names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality of respondents.

The qualitative research was guided by grounded theory, an approach that allows theories to emerge from data in an inductive fashion (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Twenty one individual interviews with females were audio taped and transcribed in Luo, the Acholi language, and translated into English; the remaining interviews were transcribed from field notes. Interviews were entered into Atlas.ti 5.2 to facilitate the coding and analysis, and they were open coded by both authors through multiple readings. The authors then used focused coding to categorize the data, discussing and comparing codes and themes as they emerged, then writing memos to further explore themes. Codes and themes were modified throughout discussions between authors and by re-reading interviews. Findings were debriefed with the director of a reception center in northern Uganda and with two colleagues who have been conducting research in the region for several years.

All respondents provided verbal informed consent prior to participation, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Indiana University and the Ugandan National Institute of Science and Technology. Participants identified as in need of emergency assistance were referred to an agency with their verbal consent. Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

Findings and reflections

Findings are divided into three sections. The first section describes young women's relationships with their families and themes related to family problems after returning from the LRA, including 1) death of biological parents, 2) scarce resources, and 3) alcohol abuse. These problems are not exclusive to females returning from the LRA but are issues that many women in this region face. The second section focuses on issues more specific to women returning from the armed group, including psychological distress from experiences with the LRA and stress surrounding returning with children. These issues combined with familial conflicts led some to seek refuge with partners outside of families, and yet, these new relationships brought a different set of problems. The third section focuses on relationships with partners, where the following themes emerged: 1) lack of financial assistance from partners, 2) conflicts with co-wives and in-laws, and 3) alcohol use and intimate partner violence. Whether women were living with relatives or partners, they describe structural

barriers that prevented them from stopping domestic abuse, including ineffectiveness and corruption of the police force combined with social pressures to stay with their husbands.

Persistent family problems

Death of biological parents

Nearly all abducted youth who returned to their biological parents after escaping or being released from the rebel group described a warm welcome from their parents. Conflicts were instead with other family members—aunts, step-mothers, uncles and brothers—with only one of the seven conflicts described with a parent.

The loss of parents was not uncommon among abducted and non-abducted; one in five surveyed females had lost both parents. Some parents had died during the women's time with the rebels, compounding the potentially traumatic experiences they had from abduction and disrupting the family structure. Eighteen-year old Akello, reported,

At the time I was abducted, my parents were both killed so when I returned, I did not have a place to stay. My uncle came and took us to his place

Q. How was your uncle treating you?

A. He was not taking good care of me because if he is drunk, he could tell me that am not his child and he can [verbally] abuse me together with my late parents. At times I could leave home and return when he is already asleep.

Scarce resources

Dependent on food aid and with little access to land, adequate food and resources were major concerns for the entire population. Young women who returned from the LRA had to rely on extended family members, and many conflicts seemed to be triggered by the burden of another mouth to feed.

Adule described coming back to find both her parents and siblings killed. She returned to her uncle's home where she described a difficult situation.

There wasn't enough food for me and my child. There were abusive words from my aunt, like "I'm not here to take care of

people from the bush.” I knew my uncle before abduction but he wasn’t married then. My aunt treats me differently from others. She treats others okay. She says, “I’m not there to take care of orphans and those from the bush. I’m not the one who killed their parents.”

Other stories of insults and rejection similarly mention the burden of caretaking or feeding. Having a family member return from abduction seemed to increase the fear that resources would become even more limited. For others, this was not specific to abduction. The brother of Aciro explained that his aunt and neighbors would mistreat and insult all of the children in their family—that it was not merely the abduction of his sister that was triggering familial conflict.

Alcohol

Pervasive alcohol abuse exacerbates the tension caused by scarce resources. Alcohol was often discussed as a cause of the conflict between family members and those who returned from the rebels, as Molly pointed out,

My parents welcomed me, but my elder brother disturbed me a lot. If he was drunk, he could come and abuse me. He was quarrelsome and he could fight me. He abused me that I am a rebel, I am very stupid and I don’t understand

Alcohol abuse seemed ubiquitous, with public drinking seen early in the morning and public intoxication common. Among all women on the survey who had some form of employment in the region, 43% reported brewing alcohol as their main form of work, indicating its widespread use. Alcohol was most often brewed and sold near one’s home, bringing potential risks for women particularly if they were single and not protected by men in the home. Akello explained,

Q. You said when you were at home, you were working very hard in the garden, what else were you doing to help you generate some income?

A. I was brewing alcohol

Q. ...Did you get any difficulty with men who come to drink from you?

A. Yes at times they disturbed me. Particularly one tried to rape me.

Akello described how her uncle tried to settle the case by having her marry this same man. When she refused, her uncle no longer paid for her school fees and she had to seek help from a distant relative.

Distress, aggression and other behavior change

Social workers and relatives described the same problems with reintegration as the women in interviews, including family member’s alcohol abuse or the scarcity of resources. They also described problems with the returning women themselves, including high levels of distress and some aggression. One aunt described the reactions of her niece, Dorine,

When she left home she was different and when she returned, I realized changes in her behavior because whenever I could ask her question, she broke into tears...she could not say a word. I had to leave her so that her mind should first get settled. At times if I asked a question, she could break into loud crying and at times she just kept quiet long. And in most cases I could fail to predict what was wrong with her or the reason for her silence. So knowing what exactly had happened to her was difficult ...If she was annoyed with her fellow children, she would just beat them. So when we realized the changes in her, we all got scared of her.

Most females described extremely difficult situations during their time with the rebels of going without food, walking long distances, as well as witnessing, experiencing, and some even being forced to perpetrate violence against strangers and peers. Nearly everyone in the region experienced some war violence, but abducted females experienced significantly higher levels: 13 types of violence were reported in the full survey compared to eight by non-abducted females (Annan et al., 2008).

Upon return, some of the respondents described nightmares and wanting to isolate themselves from others. Akello described her nightmares,

I dream of dead people. At times I could dream that am killing some one. I can’t sleep at night because of too much thinking. At night I could find myself talking alone and sometimes my friends could ask me if am normal because of the things I was doing at night. I always go to one of the teachers for advice because even if I try to read my books I don’t understand what is in the book. I always get thoughts of the things which were happening to me when I was still in the bush.

Nightmares and flashbacks in this region are perceived as manifestations of spirits haunting those who perpetrated or witnessed killings (Harlacher, Okot, Obonyo, Balthazard, & Atkinson, 2005). Some women also attributed physical sickness—their own and their children’s—to spirits, leading them to seek rituals or herbal treatment for healing in place of or together with clinical services.

Relatives and social workers also described concern that some women who returned from the LRA engaged in multiple sexual relationships, which they saw as taboo. One of the social workers said she felt women who returned from the LRA more easily entered sexual relationships with men due to a lowered sense of self-worth and insecurities about relationships. This is further elaborated on below.

Family welcoming of children but pressure of immediate material needs

Surprisingly, in the full survey, only 20% of those who returned with children from the LRA described their children as creating problems with family members. The majority did not describe the rejection of or stigma toward their children that other research has described (Nordstrom, 1991; Onyango et al., 2005; Sideris, 2003). The qualitative interviews support this conclusion. Amito, a woman who had spent six years in abduction, reported,

Q. How did your people treat your children when you returned from the bush?

A. They welcomed my children and started treating them like their children.

However, Alice, went on to describe, as did seven others in the interviews, that the neighbors were not as welcoming of the children,

Q. How did the community welcome your children when you returned?

A. The people in our area especially the neighbors were not so good to the children. They didn’t love my children and they were calling them names relating to the time they were in the bush. They didn’t want their children to play with my children.

In the full survey, eleven percent of the women with children reported that their neighbors did not allow their children to play

together and in interviews, several women emphasized that these neighbors were not part of their family clan. Displacement camps have caused social disruption in many ways, including forcing people to live in close quarters with non-relatives. Before the mass displacement in 2002, the majority of the population lived on large farms where neighbors were often from the same family network.

Rather than stigma, the most prominent issue that emerged about returning with children from the LRA was the need to provide for their care upon return. Though all mothers in these camps and villages—abducted or not—faced the harsh challenges of poverty, mothers who returned from the LRA lacked the father and his family, a crucial part of the financial support system in this region. Amito described her concerns,

When I had just returned from the bush with my children, I use to have lots of thought [worries] on how I will look after the children in case of sickness since their father is not there.

Many of the rebel fathers had been killed, and most still alive were not in contact with their children or formerly abducted “wives”. Not only did returning women face the general challenges of reintegration, they had to immediately assume the role of sole provider in a place with few economic and educational opportunities. In the full survey, none of the women who returned with children went back to school (Annan et al., 2008).

Pressure toward marriage

Mounting pressures— from protracted family conflicts, scarce resources, alcohol use, relationship insecurities, psychological distress, and single motherhood— pushed returning women to look for a husband. Few other options existed for leaving difficult family situations. Unfortunately, women often described new partner relationships as compounding their problems rather than relieving them. For example, Adule, abducted for five years, explained,

I was mistreated by aunt and so I decided to get a man because I couldn't bear the conditions. If I didn't get married, no one could help me or advise me. But then I got married and there is no proper care like I thought. My husband allows me to stay with my child from the LRA and gives me some money for feeding, but he doesn't help at all with gardening. He helps his other wife. When I ask him to help, he says that he has never been to the bush [with the LRA] so he doesn't want someone from the bush disturbing him.

The external pressures seemed to interact with distress and insecurities around finding a husband and feeling unwanted. While survey data shows that formerly abducted women (including those given as forced “wives”) are just as likely to get married as other women in the community (Annan et al., 2008), social workers explained that it seemed more likely for women who returned from the LRA to become second wives, especially if they came back with children. While polygamous marriages are common, women as second wives are seen to have less power in households than first wives.

One social worker observed that women's insecurities about social status combined with economic pressures to push them into relationships faster than their peers—some entering negative relationships, confirming their insecurities about having less value than other women. Susan returned with a child and quickly became involved with another man. She explained,

It is hard for women who return from the LRA to get a man because sometimes you think ‘if I accept this man with a wife, it won't be a good situation because I may be abused’. Also I

think there is a way people look at [abducted women] from the bush. Sometimes you feel like there is no choice. You think that if you take long without a man, you want to get a man. If I were to give advice to another abducted woman, I would say first, study the man who comes to you. See if that man can take good care of your child and you. Weigh the whole situation to see.

Given that most females were abducted in pre- or early adolescence, many likely had their first sexual experience as sexual violence. As described, sexual violence and rape in the LRA was not an isolated event but took place in the context of forced relationships with the aim of producing children.

Marriage after return from the LRA

Lack of financial help

Faced with the overwhelming challenge of being a single mother and pressured by conflicts stemming from scarce resources, some women left their families in hopes that husbands would help them financially. Seven women described, however, that their husbands worsened their daily financial struggles. For example, Adong mentioned,

The way my husband treats me. He drinks a lot. He argues. He says he wants to take food from the harvest and sell it because it is his land. He came and took four sacks of ground nuts and two of sesame seeds.

Not all new marriages were negative. However, even in two of the three relationships that were described in the most positive terms, the woman explained that her husband had an injury or illness and was financially dependent on her.

Problems with co-wives and in-laws

Women often blamed co-wives and in-laws for problems with their new husbands. Co-wives seemed at odds with each other because of the patriarchal lineage where women compete for scarce resources and a place in the hierarchy. Some women described being targeted or insulted specifically because of their time with the rebels. Alice explained,

My real co-wife was the one abusing me. That I am a rebel and have brought my children who are also rebels to her husband to look after them instead of taking them to their father.

In-laws were brought up as another source of conflict. Anne, for example, reported,

Yes, my mother-in-law used to talk bad about me. When she is drunk, she begins to speak obscene languages and behaved funnily. Now when I stop her from doing her nonsense, she begins abusing me that I am a fool, I don't understand. She doesn't want a bush woman to disturb her. But you know it was not my wish to be a bush woman. It was just against my will.

In an environment with so many reasons for suspicion and where conflicts between women and in-laws are not uncommon, being formerly abducted becomes an added burden, and can lead to being a scapegoat in families.

Treatment of children in patriarchal system

Along with problems with in-laws, children born from the LRA were not well received by new husbands. All but two women explained that husbands treated these children differently from their own children. Some described neglect or harsh treatment. Two returning mothers had given their children to their own

parents for help with caregiving although this was not possible for all of the women. Alice explained,

My problem is I have children who are without a father because I produced them when I was still in the bush. So the problem I have is how to keep these children. When I think of taking them to my mother, I feel I can't because she is not able to look after the children and I can't add more burden for her. From my side, I have nothing because the man am staying with is not the father of these children. So this is giving me problems and if their[LRA] father was there, I would think of taking them back to him but he died and there is no where I can take the children.

Interviews with social workers revealed that these children were not necessarily being treated differently because they were from the LRA, but rather children from another man are commonly treated differently by a new husband. Given the strong patriarchy, children are considered to belong to the man's family. In traditional marriage and divorce (where dowry has been paid), children stay with the father's family and are considered part of his lineage. Similar treatment was explained by women who became guardians of their relatives' children. Adong explained,

I am taking care of my sister's children and my husband became jealous that I was giving money to the children from the other business that I was doing.

Children are not necessarily rejected because they are rebel children, but rather because they are of a different patriarchal lineage.

Alcohol use and intimate partner violence

Six of the women interviewed in the sub-sample described being abused by their husbands. (In the representative survey, 14% of married women reported being physically abused in the previous two months. There was no significant difference between abducted and non-abducted women (Annan et al., 2007)). Two out of six described having been so severely beaten that they had to be taken to the hospital. Janet, thirty years of age, reported,

Like one day, he took alcohol, came back home and began to quarrel a lot up to a point where he got two pangas [machetes] and sat with them in front of the door. When I saw that, I went to his brother and the brother had to come and settle that problem.

Alcohol was stated as a problem in every case of intimate partner violence. In the full survey, 60% of women reported that their husbands drank alcohol and 30% reported that their husbands were frequently intoxicated.

Structural factors and intimate partner violence

Women in abusive relationships described multiple structural barriers to reporting and ending partner violence. This included social pressure not to report abuse—advice that one should not try to change men or that these types of problems are common. Akello described advice from her neighbors in relation to her frequently intoxicated husband,

[The neighbors] are good to me and they also give me advice on how I should stay. They said I must be strong hearted even if my husband is not helping me. I should know that it's bad to change men.

Women reported going to their husband's family or their own family members for protection. In the quantitative survey, over half stated that they would first go to their husband's family to help them and 12% said they would go to their own family. In one of the more severe cases, Adong's father had taken her away from her husband for a brief period. However, she described how her father pressured her not to report the abuse to the police,

People wanted him to be arrested but my father did not want that. He did not want my co-wives to feel bad and then do something to me when I returned home.

Q. And you?

A. I wanted him to be arrested but I obeyed my father. If I jailed him, something might have happened to [my husband] and then their family members would take revenge.

Women also described concerns about corruption; only 2% reported on the survey that they would trust the police to help them. In reference to a rape in her family, Dorine's aunt said,

Going to the police will waste money and time besides I don't have money to waste.

Despite legal and social barriers, there were three cases where relatives or neighbors who harassed young women after they returned from the LRA were reported to local government council leaders. In two cases, the council stopped the insults. One woman explains here,

My uncle called me names. It was mostly when he was drunk. My sister told the LC [local councilor] about it and the LC called him and talked to him so he stopped.

Strikingly, this was not the case for any abuse reported in marriages.

Discussion

The women in this study describe multiple levels of violence that they experience in war, including physical and sexual violence by an armed group, verbal and physical abuse from extended families, and intimate partner violence. Most violence described is not exclusive to abducted women. Fig. 1 displays the multiple levels of violence described in this war-affected region and portrays how different experiences with war violence may interact with factors at individual, family, social and structural levels, compounding experiences and sustaining violence, even after war experiences are over.

We draw four key findings from the interviews and emerging themes. First, one of the most striking aspects of the young women's interviews was the partner, family and structural violence they encountered *after* escaping from the rebels, which has little focus in the literature compared to the focus on violence by armed

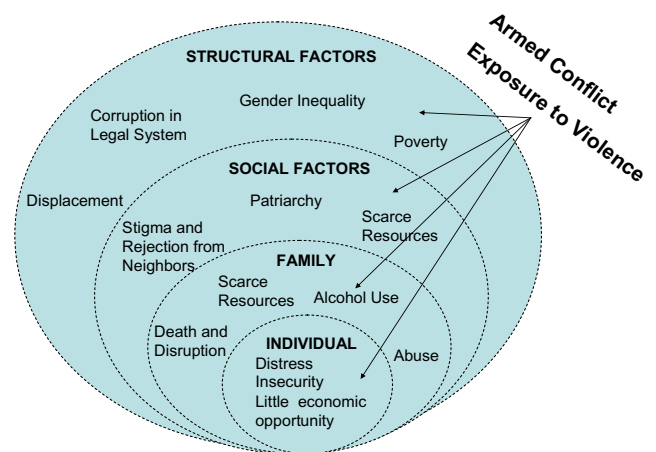


Fig. 1. Ecological Perspective of Gendered Violence and Inequality in Armed Conflict. The dotted lines represent the linkages between the different levels. Adapted from (Poundstone, Strathdee, & Celentano, 2004).

groups (Miller et al., 2006). Elements of their new relationships mirrored that of their forced “marriages” during abduction, such as the physical violence and inability to leave or escape these relationships. Our intention is not to minimize the horror of abduction and the slavery involved with the rebels, but rather to emphasize the violence in daily life once they have returned to “safety” and the increased risk of further health consequences known to be associated with intimate partner violence (Campbell, 2002; Coker et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 2008; McNutt et al., 2002; Small et al., 2008). While this article starts from the perspective of those who return from the LRA, it points to problems of abuse in the wider community (Okello & Hovil, 2007).

Second, the interviews suggest that while domestic violence is a general social problem, forced “marriage” in an armed group may have a prolonged impact on females’ relationships. This impact may be different from the physical and psychological consequences of sexual violence and rape in conflict that occurs outside of these relationships, and more similar to consequences of childhood sexual abuse, such as disregulated affect and difficulties with relationships throughout the life cycle (Briere, 2002). Little is known about how psychological factors, such as increased distress or lowered self-esteem, impact these relationships in combination with multiple environmental factors. While abducted women did not report more domestic violence on a representative survey than other women in this region, these interviews highlight issues that may be important for a subset. It may be that symptoms of distress and family conflict upon return are risk factors for intimate partner violence, similar to findings of depression and social functioning as risk factors for IPV in other settings (Keenan-Miller, Hammen, & Brennan, 2007). Further research should explore how experiences with an armed group, including forced “marriage”, impacts later functioning and partner relationships, including the key mechanisms.

Third, the interviews point to the role of structural factors that permit and sustain intimate partner violence, including gender inequalities, corruption in the police system, and devastating poverty. Structural barriers that help to maintain intimate partner violence are common in many countries and are not exclusive to war-affected or developing areas (Bent-Goodley, 2007). Yet problems are undoubtedly exacerbated by prolonged armed conflict. In a broader discussion about gender based violence in northern Uganda, Okello and Hovil (2007) attribute violence to the men’s loss of traditional roles and identity due to displacement and an inability of men to care for their families. Also, as noted by Carlson and Mazurana (2008), domestic violence is commonly viewed as a private matter, not open to public inquiry.

It is hopeful, however, that in several cases of harassment local officials responded by protecting the formerly abducted youth who were victims. This is likely a result of many years of campaigning to accept the youth back into the communities and the creation of “by-laws” that forbid community members from harassing former abductees—an example of how the local justice system is capable of protecting those vulnerable to abuse. The strong patriarchy and the sense that IPV is a family affair may create more resistance to action against domestic violence, however. It is also notable that marital rape is not recognized as a crime in Uganda despite years of campaigning (HRW, 2005), showing further legal barriers to addressing IPV. Many international programs aiming to reduce gender based violence include awareness campaigns at their core; however, there is little evidence of their effectiveness in changing attitudes or behaviors—another needed area of research.

Health services that respond to the needs of survivors of domestic violence are needed but are not adequate to ensure that women access services. A recent study of gender based violence programs in this region showed that the services

provided were inadequate to the needs of survivors (Henttonen, Watts, Bayard, Kaducu, & Borchert, 2008). It also described that the emphasis of these services was on survivors of rape by strangers, whereas the interviews discussed in this article show the importance of services for women who experience violence in their families. These interviews also point to the many social and cultural barriers to seeking care in such a context, highlighting that along with availability of services, changes in social norms and practices will be key to enabling women to receive the care they need.

Finally, the frequent mention of alcohol in domestic violence stresses the importance of addressing substance use as part of violence prevention. Heavy alcohol use in this region is unsurprising; substance use is known to increase after exposure to traumatic events, especially among those with PTSD (Stewart, 1996), and trauma image cues can increase alcohol cravings (Coffey et al., 2002). Previous research supports the connection between alcohol use and domestic aggression (Fals-Stewart, 2003), and a recent study in Sri Lanka links exposure to war violence, father’s alcohol use and family violence against children (Catani et al., 2008). Yet, while programs for substance abuse abound in many health systems, little attention is paid to this issue in responses to armed conflict.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, qualitative interviews offer perspectives and insights from particular individuals within families, communities and systems in the region. These interviews explore potential relationships between constructs, but do not seek to draw causal conclusions. Second, purposive sampling means that one cannot generalize from the themes in the narratives (although information from the full representative sample shed light on issues in the larger population). Third, this study focused on interviewing women who reported family and community problems in order to develop “thick description” of these problems, and therefore did not explore experiences of women who had positive reintegration experiences. This approach risks overemphasizing problems. Finally, this paper focuses predominantly on the views of the women without including the husband’s perspectives. Further research should explore both the perspective of women who reintegrated well and of men and husbands to understand attitudes and expectations in marriage, including those specific to women associated with armed groups.

Conclusion

Women’s narratives reveal the multiple levels of violence that some women experience in war, including physical and sexual violence in an armed group, verbal and physical abuse from extended family members, and intimate partner violence. War experiences may exacerbate problems but they also interact with factors that permit and sustain domestic violence, including gender inequalities, competition for resources within a patriarchal family network, corruption in the police system, and poverty. This argues for moving beyond a narrow focus on the most dramatic war violence from armed groups to a broader view of gender based violence and inequity within areas of poverty and armed conflict. Decreasing household violence and mitigating its health consequences will likely depend on the strength of interventions to address multiple levels, including increasing educational and economic opportunities, decreasing dependence on males, treating substance abuse, increasing accountability of the criminal justice

system, and improving the coping mechanisms of families and individuals exposed to high levels of violence.

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