

Case 5: Healing from Trauma and Reclaiming Dignity through Economic Independence



		Thematic Areas	
Country	Uganda		
Organization	Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI)	Policy	Law
Programme	Women's Access to Justice	Community	Socioeconomics
			Psychology

Summary

Between 2004 and 2015, in the aftermath of Uganda's civil war with the extremist Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI) has received more than 600 young women and girls returning from the bush who have suffered from various types of trauma as both victims and perpetrators of violence. KIWEPI provides rehabilitation services including medical treatment, psychosocial therapy, mentoring, vocational and life skills training, and accompaniment throughout the process of reintegration in society. KIWEPI works with community leaders to sensitize them to the needs of women and girl returnees and address their stigmatization. KIWEPI advocated for these women and girl's legal rights and their access to justice by mediating land dispute cases, facilitating community dialogues, and establishing village savings and loan associations to promote livelihoods for women and men. This experience has enabled KIWEPI to assist the Government of Uganda to integrate a gender-responsive lens in the National Peace and Recovery Framework.

Context

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, has waged war against the Government of Uganda since 1987.²⁴⁵ Designated a terrorist organization by the United States government, the LRA has perpetrated brutal violence including rape, maiming, and killing, against Ugandan civilians, and abducted at least 20,000 children to use as soldiers, sex slaves, and domestic servants.²⁴⁶ Kony, a self-described prophet bent on ruling Uganda according to the Ten Commandments, instructed his followers to kidnap children as young as eight years old and brainwash them into killing their neighbours.²⁴⁷ Girls and boys were often abducted on their way to school or from their homes after witnessing the murder of their parents. They were then brainwashed in the bush and would be killed or tortured if they tried to escape. Women and girls played different roles within the LRA, carrying food, caring for children, and serving as wives and even commanders. Nearly two million people were displaced due to the conflict.²⁴⁸ When the LRA was driven out of northern Uganda, they were pushed to neighbouring countries and remain active in the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan, where it's reported that nearly 5,000 people who were abducted or joined the group have returned since 2000.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Christopher R. Day (2017): "Survival Mode": Rebel Resilience and the Lord's Resistance Army, Terrorism and Political Violence (available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1300580>).

²⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch (2003), Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda, Vol.15, No. 7 (A).

²⁴⁷ Lidman, Melanie (2017), "Heart of forgiveness: Ugandan women once child soldiers now lead peace." Global Sisters Report.

²⁴⁸ Hayden, Sally (2018), "Returning LRA hostages face new ordeal over land conflicts in rural Uganda" (available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-war-landrights/returning-lra-hostages-face-new-ordeal-over-land-conflicts-in-rural-uganda-idUSKBN11417E>).

²⁴⁹ LRA Crisis Tracker. Accessed June 22, 2018 (available at: <https://crisistracker.org/dashboard>).

There were few policies in place at the time to inform responses to those returning from the LRA, especially women and children. When children appeared in the camps and were received at reception centres, humanitarian staff didn't know where to refer them. In some cases, commanders from the LRA tried to identify them and bring them back to the bush, posing a security challenge to camp administrators and highlighting the need for agreement on policies for their protection. Problems, such as police using intimidation rather than investigative tactics when interacting with communities, abounded.

Women were not recognized as ex-combatants due to prevailing gender stereotypes and taking on multiple roles within the group, a fact that continues to yield confusion about how to deal with returning women and girls. The lack of programmes left them without compensation, support services, trauma counselling, or other rehabilitation. Those with children from LRA fighters faced the burden of how to care for them while facing stigma and questions about their paternity. In Uganda's social structure, a child's clan affiliation is determined by his or her father. With paternity unknown, mothers point children to their grandfathers, breeding confusion: "How can that one be my father as he is your father?," they ask.²⁵⁰ Gladys Canogura, Executive Director of the Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI), fears that failure to address the identity crisis stemming from children not knowing their roots makes society susceptible to further conflict. Today more than 1,000 children remain missing, and while the ongoing search can provide closure for some through reunification, for others it is through burial of their loved ones, as mass graves are now being unearthed during development projects. Grieving parents remain in communities now receiving former LRA members, compounding the challenge of reintegration. Many of these issues stem from the fact that the initial National Peace and Recovery Framework, developed by the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Gender, was not gender-responsive.



Gladys Canogura, KIWEPI, during participatory workshop convened for this research

The Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI) is an independent women-led civil society organization established in 1999 to advocate for peace, reconciliation, rehabilitation and reintegration of formerly abducted women and girls. KIWEPI was initiated to foster a peaceful and informed society that is engaged in sustainable development. In 2008, KIWEPI joined a task force steered by Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE), an international organization headquartered in Uganda. KIWEPI and other CSOs mobilized to review the National Peace and Recovery Framework and related documents and identify gender gaps and became part of the working committees together with staff in the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry of Gender, and other women-led organizations. They were charged with integrating this perspective and ensuring the participation of women and girls in the country's demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programmes.



Gladys Canogura (right), KIWEPI, conducts trauma counseling workshop with Dr. Helen Liebling

²⁵⁰ Remarks by Gladys Canogura, GSX Workshop, April 2018 in Oslo, Norway.

The task force advocated to include indicators for monitoring implementation of the Framework, including on livelihoods, peacebuilding, psychosocial services, education, water and sanitation, and health and hygiene. This work helped to shape the guidelines: All the health centres and hospitals had solar panels constructed to provide light for women during deliveries, and pregnant mothers got “Mama Kits” with mosquito nets. Health infrastructure received attention, was staffed and relatively well-stocked with equipment and medications. Community access to health centres was improved through referrals. In the agricultural sector, women were included in the leadership of various farmers’ groups to supervise and monitor allocation of livestock, seedlings, seeds, fertilizers and equipment. Women were also included equally in procurement processes, so they could participate in contracted work and evaluations.

While it may not be obvious to everyone, maternal care and equal access to business contracts are both highly relevant to the effective rehabilitation and reintegration of women and girls who have suffered from sexual violence and have become heads of households as a result of the war. Uganda’s National Peace and Recovery Framework and subsequent efforts to gender its implementation highlight the multidimensional nature of this work.



Gladys Canogura (right) receives EU human rights award

OBJECTIVES	STAKEHOLDERS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Educate the community on peacebuilding and conflict resolution and provide comprehensive psychosocial support and trauma management for the healing of war-affected women and girls, and their children. ■ Increase women’s capacity to participate in income-generating activities to increase their household income for sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment. ■ Educate and engage women in the process of reviving positive cultural practices in Acholi in order to integrate their children born in captivity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Women and girl returnees including child mothers, orphans and other vulnerable children ■ KIWEPI ■ Isis-WICCE ■ Coalition for Action on 1325 (CoACT) ■ CEWIGO, Uganda Women Network, Peoples’ Voice for Peace, Teso Women Peace Activist, KICWA, CPA, Luwero Women Development Association ■ Coventry University ■ Amnesty International ■ St. Joseph Hospital, Kitgum Government Hospital, and Mulago National Referrals Hospital and Mutabika National Referrals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development ■ Private foundations ■ Community leaders including Ker Kalkwaro Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative ■ Businesspeople and associations including the Lorado market vendors, Kitgum Business Forum, and Kitgum Chamber of Commerce ■ Gulu University, Makerere University, St. Bakihta Girls Secondary, Y.Y.Okot Memorial College, Kitgum Comprehensive College, Kitgum Town College, Kitgum Boys Primary School, Kitgum Girls Primary School, and Akado Primary School

Programme Strategy and Implementation

KIWEPI focuses on the rehabilitation and reintegration of women and girls from the ages of 16 to 23 years old returning from the LRA, both those caught and disarmed by government forces and those who voluntarily surrendered. Working across four districts in northern Uganda (Kitgum, Lamwo, Pader, and Agago), KIWEPI's programming is comprehensive, including:

- Peacebuilding and economic empowerment for sustainable livelihoods;
- Psychosocial support and trauma management for formerly abducted girls and women survivors of gender-based violence, and documentation of their experiences;
- Social protection, legal services and parenting skills-building;
- Life skills and vocational trainings for formerly abducted women and girls, including child mothers;
- Advocacy for gender equality, human rights, democracy, good governance and social accountability, including the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and 1820.

Many women and girls returned because their commander had died from AIDS or they were pregnant or had children. When they first started to appear, the girls were initially unable to talk due to trauma.

"I cried several times alone in the wilderness and in my bedroom without sharing with anyone my pain, sentiments, and feelings of the experiences I had underwent. It was not easy to tell anybody what I was going through, it was difficult to open up with people and friends especially on sexual abuses and offences, the situation was too shameful."

– Formerly abducted child mother, KIWEPI-KITGUM

KIWEPI gave them time and activities to engage their minds and reduce symptoms like nightmares. Sometimes KIWEPI would invite a religious leader to pray for them and assist with spiritual rehabilitation, religious counselling, and spiritual healing designed to foster hope, build confidence and help manage trauma. The women and girls believe that, by taking their suffering and pain to the cross, the church can contribute to the healing of their traumatic wounds.

They also introduced vocational skills training but observed that many girls still could not communicate with each other. With time, individual counselling, sharing experiences of other people affected by conflict in other countries, and building interpersonal skills and communication, they started to disclose their traumatic experiences. In order to cope with their emotions and the trauma of being abducted, the girls began acting in plays, playing music, and dancing. Those who had reached primary school level three and beyond were able to further express their feelings through drawing.

KIWEPI also provides training in advocacy and communication skills and encourages women and girls to advocate for compensation from the Government of Uganda. Access to justice remains a challenge for many women, so KIWEPI sends advocates to court when returnees choose to engage the legal process. KIWEPI has also advocated with religious and cultural leaders to mediate such disputes due to the role of customary laws in these conflicts.

*"[Counselling] has made me more merciful, my nightmares are fewer and I am now able to forgive compared to when I was in the bush."*²⁵¹

– Alice, a KIWEPI programme participant

KIWEPI also works with women to form cooperatives, known as village savings loan associations, to foster returnees' economic independence. The groups provide a safe gathering space for women, where they can share sensitive information, such as resources for survivors of gender-based violence. These livelihood programmes reflect 70 percent female and 30 percent male participation to respond to the economic vulnerability of both genders while also promoting women's voices. The women are now engaged in small-scale businesses, such as marketing of produce and tailoring, and are able to pay for school supplies and uniforms for their children in primary school.

In addition to the rehabilitation and preparation of returning women and girls for re-entering society, the reintegration process requires engaging the receiving community. In Uganda, communities shunned the returnees because their presence is "a reminder of the things they did and people they killed, a reminder of impossible loss."²⁵² Women returning to husbands face an additional challenge when they have gynaecological problems stemming from sexual violence, children from another father, or have contracted HIV. Child mothers and girls caring for younger siblings require additional support such as educational sponsorship for children born in captivity and health support for the removal of bomb fragments and bullets from their bodies. KIWEPI engages community leaders and family members to facilitate the acceptance of returning women and girls, using music, dance, and drama to sensitize communities to the experiences and needs of returnees and educate the public about stigma and the harm it causes. Dialogues establish the status of the returnees and foster engagement with the community. KIWEPI follows up after a few months to observe how they have reintegrated into their communities.

Progress and Results

- KIWEPI has worked with legal aides to settle five land dispute cases for returnees.
- More than 150 women are running small-scale businesses and are now self-reliant and economically independent.
- Educational sponsorship has been provided for at least 50 children born in captivity.
- At least six girls have completed some form of higher education: one is a laboratory technician now volunteering with Gulu Referrals Hospital, two are doing social work, one has joined the security forces, and two are still seeking employment.
- Many returnees have been rehabilitated to the point that they were able to get married. At least 20 have supportive husbands.
- Local leaders have been mobilized to combat stigma. They are trying to sensitize the community and enforce laws protecting returnees' human rights, as well as implement the Violence Act, enacted in 2010, and CEDAW.

²⁵¹ The Star (2012), Female child soldiers with the Lord's Resistance Army struggle to return to normal, (available at: https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2012/05/19/female_child_soldiers_with_the_lords_resistance_army_struggle_to_return_to_normal.html).

²⁵² Lidman, Melanie (2017), "Heart of forgiveness: Ugandan women once child soldiers now lead peace" (available at: <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/equality/heart-forgiveness-ugandan-women-once-child-soldiers-now-lead-peace-51061>).

Pham, P. et al. (2007), When the War Ends: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Peace, Justice, and Social Reconstruction in Northern Uganda (available at: <https://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/when-war-ends-population-based-survey-attitudes-about-peace-justice-and-social>).

Lessons Learned and Challenges

- When the girls need to interact with authorities or military officials, KIWEPI asks the authorities to leave their uniforms and guns behind, as the presence of weapons and uniforms can trigger a traumatic response.
- Despite their rehabilitation and reintegration work, some of the returnees' marriages are not working well.
- Including men in programmes targeted for women can be effective if structured well to preserve women's leadership and security. This engagement mobilizes men to act as change agents and encourage fellow men to allow women's participation in leadership and decision-making processes.
- Stigma is more prevalent in certain locations where alcohol consumption is very high, KIWEPI has learned through regular home visits, community dialogues, and talk show programmes.
- Structural inequalities such as lack of access to justice and land inhibit successful rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Returnees are vulnerable to drug addiction as a coping mechanism to deal with trauma and ongoing stigma. In response, KIWEPI supported the Kitgum District Local Government to formulate policies aimed at reducing alcohol, drug and substance abuse.

Sustainability and Potential Application

By sharing their experience and expertise through the task force on the National Peace and Reconciliation Framework, KIWEPI is supporting systemic change at the national level. The experience of Ugandan women and girls who returned from LRA is instructive for policymakers and practitioners dealing with current conflict contexts where violent extremist groups are primary actors. For example, returnees from Boko Haram, many of whom were also abducted, face strikingly similar challenges upon their return. The complexity of such contexts, where armed conflict and peace processes intersect imperfectly with counter-terrorism measures and efforts to prevent violent extremism, remains a challenge to formal DDR processes.



The members of this choir are returnees for whom singing is a part of their rehabilitation