Volume : 3 | Issue : 4 | April 2014 • ISSN No 2277 - 8160

Research Paper History

Forced Migration and Prostitution in Acholi-Land, Northern Uganda, 1986 To 2014

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ABSTRACT *Large-scale forced migration occurred in Acholiland, northern Uganda, when war broke out in 1986 between the Government of Uganda and various rebel groups, the largest being the Lord's Resistance Army. The entire Acholi population migrated to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps where they lived in squalid and inhuman conditions for over ten years. Women and girls suffered most in the changed lifestyle of the camps. In this paper, the author tackles prostitution from the perspective of the changed lifestyle caused by confinement within the camps. Through interviews with key informants including prostitutes and with observation during transect walks in the camps and towns of northern Uganda during day and at night, he concludes that prostitution among the Acholi people is a product of war and years of camp life.*

KEYWORDS: Prostitution, Acholi-land, Sex, War, Changed Lifestyle.

Introduction

Migration is defined as a permanent or semi-permanent change of residence, usually across some type of administrative boundary (Wood, 1994). Forced migration is the coerced movement of people from their home to a new location. It is usually related to the movements of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Forced migration is a phenomenon that has existed throughout human history and it is different from voluntary migration. In forced migration, there is no prior intention or plan to leave (Babugura, 2007). Those who move across international boundaries become refugees while forced migrants within a country are taken to be internally displaced persons (IDPs). The more than 20 year war in Acholiland, northern Uganda, between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan Government resulted in the displacement of up to two million people within northern Uganda. The IDPs were forced to move to the camps by the Ugandan army to reportedly protect the civilians and aid the army's counter-insurgency campaign against the Lord's Resistance Army. The camps are characterised by chronic over-crowding, insecurity, social problems, and high rates of morbidity and mortality (Bayard, et.al, 2008).

Ever since the 1980s, there has been growing acknowledgment that women are the most disadvantaged during the processes of forced migration. However, even though women and children are the majority of the displaced in conflict situations, their needs and concerns are usually ignored when planning and implementing humanitarian aid (Byrne, 1995). In Northern Uganda, armed conflict has destroyed infrastructure and disrupted services like education, health and agriculture. This, in turn, paralysed the region's economic development as many civilians were killed, while nearly two million of them were forced to flee after traumatic experiences. The conflict resulted in absolute poverty while many women continue to bear poor health due to gender based violence (Babugura, 2007). Inevitably, the war created new dynamics in the lifestyle of the young women of northern Uganda. This paper discusses the role of forced migration into the camps and the resultant changed lifestyle in the promotion of prostitution in northern Uganda.

Methods

I interviewed respondents from several urban centers in Acholiland where various forms of prostitution occur. The urban centers were Gulu, Pader and Kitgum Towns plus the Town Boards of Anaka, Koc, Padibe, Palabek Atyak and Kalaongo. All these urban centers had Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) at the peak of the LRA war. A qualitative and feminist research design was carried out in internally displaced women using interviews and observations. The interviewed were prostitutes, teachers, religious leaders, cultural leaders and Local Government officials.

Those who told me that they were literate were asked if they would fill out a questionnaire which would take about 10 minutes. I read the questions to and wrote answers from those who couldn't do it on their own. Snowballing was used to identify the prostitutes while convenient and random sampling helped to get the rest of the respondents. I conducted individual and group interviews and observed the activities of street prostitutes in Gulu and Kitgum Towns. I also benefited from oral tradition as narrated to me by elders and traditional leaders. From oral tradition, I was able to get the cultural aspects of the Acholi people with respect to prostitution or any form of sexual misdemeanor.

Prostitution in Pre-warAcholi-land

Before war erupted in Acholiland, cases of prostitution were only heard in the two towns of the land namely Gulu, the regional headquarters, and Kitgum. The prostitutes were either ladies from down south societies of the Bantu or Acholi girls with poor upbringing including those chased away from home by step mothers, polygamy being an important social aspect of the people (Personal communication with Layado Aber, an Acholi elder). Clinical and behavioral reports and research studies have long linked childhood victimization to a variety of negative health and behavioral consequences including promiscuity, teenage pregnancy and prostitution (Widom and Kuhns, 1996). The few Acholi prostitutes were girls who had had a troubled childhood.

The absence of prostitution in pre-war Acholi society was because of the sanctity of marriage to the people. Every Acholi lady longed to be married and have a stable marriage. Gay practices never existed, and both gay and prostitution have no equivalent word in Lwo, the language of the Acholi. There was early marriage, an Acholi woman was simply transformed from a girl to a wife. In this situation there was no free sex or sex for money. It is possible that sex was not even for love; it was a marital obligation.

The economy of the Acholi before the war was very strong. The Acholi practiced mixed agriculture with millet, seasim, sorghum and a variety of other crops grown alongside cattle, goat and sheep rearing. Trade, which involved exchange of homemade products, existed internally and with outsiders such as the Madi, Langi, Alur and Banyoro. An Acholi man was able to provide adequately for his family as told to me by Okeny Aldo, an Acholi clan leader in a personal communication). Since every Acholi female was either a daughter or wife of somebody, there were no pressing economic needs that would drive somebody to prostitution. Today there are Acholi prostitutes because their parents or husband are or were unable at some point to provide to them. As Edlund and Korn (2002) have stated, prostitution has been associated with poverty. Low potential for female labor market earnings is often taken to be an important reason why women go into prostitution, and in any society a higher proportion of poor women prostitute themselves.

The element of training and informal education also worked against prostitution. Like in most traditional African societies, informal education was very strong among the Acholi. Girls were taught by their mothers and boys, fathers. Girls also received training from aunties, elder sisters and every old woman in the neighborhood. They were couched on matters of morality, discipline, cooking, entertainment etc. Even orphans had someone to train and educate them on those issues. Hence due to the strength of informal education, neither prostitutes nor their clients were found in the traditional and prewar Acholi societies.

Internally Displaced Persons' Camps and the Changed lifestyle

The armed conflict in northern Uganda, which started in 1986, led to gross violations of human rights against women forcing them to flee their homes and find refuge in overcrowded resettlement camps (Babugura, 2007). With internal displacement affecting more than 90 percent of the population in the Acholi districts, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the scale of the displacement crisis, as the number of IDPs had tripled from some 500,000 to 1.3 million in less than a year. The "protected villages" were a tawdry euphemism for camps. The internally displaced people (IDPs) were forced to live in extremely squalid and congested conditions. They lost access to their land: their principal source of livelihood. They also lost their freedom of movement by being compelled to remain within a certain perimeter outside the camps. Anyone outside this perimeter could be accused of being a rebel collaborator and could be shot or assaulted by the Uganda Peoples' Defense Forces (UPDF) if they ventured too far into the bush (Héloïse Ruaudel and Andrew Timpson, 2005).

The young Acholi girls confined within the camps took to prostitution to earn money and a modest living. Money payment is an essential element in public professional prostitution. But in cases of secret prostitution the element of payment is much in the background and skillfully veiled. So it is better to treat as prostitution all cases of sexual relations for material advantage whether for money or not (Sharanappa, 2014). When war erupted in 1986, many women moved for the first time in urban centers. Here, there were desperate men with money hungry for sex. They engaged the services of women and girls who were equally desperate for cash and survival; depending on how much money is available (Rujumba and Kwiringira, 2010).

Both women and men suffer war abuses, traumas, disruptions and loss of resources. The impact of these losses is experienced in different ways and women are often disproportionately affected (Amani El Jack, 2003). One of the changes in gender roles caused by this particular war was that women began to fend for their families. Before the war, men were in charge because of the animals including cattle, sheep and goats as well as the land which they owned. By tilling the land, every man provided for his family. During the war, the Acholiman was "disarmed" and women took charge by engaging in petty trade which in some cases included prostitution (Personal communication with a prostitute in Kitgum Town).

It is widely recognised that periods of war or disaster can produce ruptures or crises within

societies from which new orders can emerge. Acholi society is no exception. One such new order was the rise of child headed families. Apart from the parents who were killed by government or rebel soldiers, HIV/AIDS also took its toll. If many people in the IDP camps were unable to cater for their own children and wives, what about orphans? Children, including young girls became family heads. Such little girls could naturally not refuse the enticement of lustful men too exchange sex with money, food, clothes and other basic needs (Personal communication with Chairman, Palabek kal Local Council).

Sexual violence against women became rampant in Acholiland during the war. Women including young unmarried girls were raped by soldiers. The rape victims did not know how to cope with this experience especially when society failed to understand them. According to Amani El Jack (2003), after incidences of sexual violence, women are often rejected by family or community. Despite pity for the trauma the women have suffered, society marks the victims as 'damaged goods'. In the opinion of a prostitute in Gulu Town, the 'damaged goods' of the Acholi resorted to prostitution because nobody could marry them.

Conclusion

The war that erupted in 1986 was the most traumatic experience in the history of the Acholi people. The entire Acholi population of northern Uganda was forced to migrate to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camps. With farming becoming impossible due to confinement in the IDP camps, the entire livestock population looted and commercial activities bogged down by impassable roads, the Acholi economy collapsed. This created a dramatic impact on Acholi society. Many men turned to alcohol, drugs and lustful sex as a coping mechanism. Other committed suicide. Women did 'better' by turning to trade including that of the flesh.

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