Research Paper History

Armed Conflict and Violence against Women in Northern Uganda, 1986 to 2014

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ABSTRACT

The eruption of armed violence in northern Uganda in 1986 was the greatest catastrophic event of the region. Social services like education, medical care and telecommunication were disrupted for two decades during which the entire population was forced to live in squalid conditions of the internally displaced persons' camps. Women became entangled in the war both as combatants and victims of the combatants' mode of operation. This research addresses the grim effects of the war on the women folk. I employed the narrative and feminist approach during which women voluntarily offered to tell stories about their conditions before, during and after the war. The study reveals that although women were the least involved in the battle fronts, they were the worst affected. The changed economic conditions, the trauma generated and the lawlessness created meant that society could no longer protect women from physical, sexual and psychological abuse.

KEYWORDS War, Women, Torture, Trauma, Rape, Rebels, Northern Uganda.

Introduction

Violence against women and girls continues to be a global epidemic that kills, tortures, and maims them physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. It is one of the most pervasive of human rights violations, denying women and girls equality, security, dignity, self-worth, and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms (Innocenti Digest, 2000). Human rights' advocates all over the world are faced with the grim fact that physical and sexual violence, particularly towards women and children, occur with greater regularity during and after armed conflict. Women experience rape and forced pregnancy, forced sex work and sexual slavery, often at the hands of 'peacekeepers', police or occupying forces, rebels or government soldiers as occurred in Bosnia and Uganda (Amin, 2002).

While the overwhelming focus of research on the impacts of armed conflict especially for mental health is on the collective violence of armed groups, recent study suggests a link between exposure to violence by armed groups and domestic violence. In armed conflict, women may be exposed to both direct war experience and intimate partner violence, and consequences can be compounded when sexual violence by armed groups results in rejection from families and communities (Jeannie and Moriah, 2010). This was what happened in Northern Uganda for twenty years between 1986 and 2006.

Jinan etal (2008), have reported that wars have devastating effects on a nation's population as a whole but seem to affect women and men in different ways. Whereas men are often forced to fight and are frequently killed in wars, women's bodies can become battlegrounds where sexual violence becomes a weapon of war used to express power and to humiliate, dominate, or disrupt social ties among them. This research delves into the escalation of violence against women in Northern Uganda as a result of the twenty year armed conflict. It shows that even when the war ended, its effects on violence against women still continue to reverberate.

Methods

I employed a narrative research to analyse violence against women in Northern Uganda during and after the war. This is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then retold or re-storied by the researcher into a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative combines views from the participant's life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (John W. Creswell, 2003).

Three Research Assistants and myself set out to record the narratives of women aged 18 to 68 years in four districts of northern Uganda namely Gulu, Kitgum, Lira and Apac. The three Research Assistants were women one of whom had been in rebel captivity for two years. We sought narratives about the conditions of women in the region before, during and after the twenty year conflict. Besides collecting narratives, we participated in women groups' activities of farming, village saving schemes (Bolicup) and periodic meetings. I triangulated the narratives and came out with views that represent the generic feeling of women in Northern Uganda in lieu of their experiences before, during and after the war of 1986 to 2006.

Armed conflict in Northern Uganda

Armed conflicts wrecked northern Uganda from 1986 when the current leader, Yoweri Museveni, captured power from General Tito Okello ending decades of political dominance by Nilotics over the majority Bantu in the political landscape of Uganda. Uganda attained independence from Britain in 1962 having been a Protectorate since 1894. Successive regimes headed by northerners from 1962 to 1986 had created a lot of enmity between the two regions. The entire population of Acholi hated the new government of 1986 and many youths took up arms to try and recapture power.

The first rebel movement formed was headed by the former soldiers of Tito Okello. It was called the Uganda Peoples' Democratic Army (UPDA). After one year of fighting, this force became spent largely due to poor leadership and stinging victories by the government forces. A priestess called Alice Auma Lakwena regrouped the disintegrated rebels, reinvigorated them and formed the Holy Spirit Mobile Army which was equally routed by the National Resistance Army (NRA) of Yoweri Museveni. Lakwena's father, Severino Lukoya, led the remnants for a short time before capture by the NRA. The mantle of rebellion then passed on to Joseph Kony who is still fighting up to today, albeit being forced out of northern Uganda since 2006. His rebel outfit was first called the Lord's Salvation Army before he renamed it the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) as it is known today.

Between 1996 and 2006 the entire population of northern Uganda was forced to migrate to and live in internally dis-

placed persons' camps. Meanwhile during the war, thousands of young men and women were abducted by the rebels to become fighters, fighters' wives and porters. An estimated twenty thousand of them have now returned and been reintegrated into the communities of Northern Uganda where they continue to be persecuted for the crimes committed by the different rebel groups. Although violence against women in this part of the world existed even before the war, we found that the armed conflict exacerbated inequalities in gender relations that existed in the pre-conflict period.

Babugura (2007) has stated that raping women has become a strategy of war used by fighting forces to frighten communities or symbolize victory over their enemy. It is used to supply armed forces with service women. Female combatants are also usually subjected to exploitation and abuse. For the case of northern Uganda, this research reveals that females both combatant and non-combatant were sexually exploited by the warring parties of the conflict. Violence became so pervasive that even when the war ended, women still face systemic abuse in the hands of their spouses, brothers, uncles, guardians, other relatives and village folks. The war seems to have given a gate pass to men to abuse women.

Armed conflict and Violence against Women

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women during the General Assembly of December 1993 noted that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women. Whereas this is true, violence against women continues to persist around the world, with indications of a particularly high risk in conflict affected settings. The conflict in northern Uganda has reinforced social and cultural factors that are thought to perpetuate violence against women. A culture of impunity remains regarding certain forms of gender-based violence, which are not understood to constitute any violation of the rights of women and girls. After years of violence, Northern Uganda is finally peaceful, but the region continues to struggle with remnants of the systematic violence of war and displacement (Stark et.al, 2009).

The war created abject poverty in northern Uganda especially due to the fact that the entire cattle population was looted and people were forced into the displaced persons' camps. Farming, the main economic activity of the people, was curtailed because of the inability to access farmland. One of the survival strategies for young women was elopement. Parents have been known to set their daughters up with soldiers, in the mistaken belief that they will be protected and provided for (Judy and Ibrahim, 2005). The young wives are often defenseless against their much older husbands and this has led to worst case scenarios of domestic violence including wife buttering and murder.

There are cases where some men set up home with economically active women for reasons of economic security. Many of such women are widows of fallen soldiers, the business class and civil servants. Not surprisingly, some of the widows are HIV positive. According to Perina Latoo, "Cwara okela two ki I Lai". Meaning, "My husband got infected with HIV from the township, came back home and infected me". She explained that when her husband failed to provide for their home, he got married to a business lady, many years his senior, who lived in the township. The lady chased him away after a short while and the man returned home already infected.

During the war many women were raped but even after the war, they still continue to be raped. Thus,

The construction of the identities of women in their gendered roles as 'mothers' and 'guardians of the culture' implies they are 'victims', thus justifying the intensified use of power and violence to 'protect' them. Often there is a perception that this 'protection' has failed, as is the case where public acts of physical and sexual violence such as rape occur. Sexual crimes, which disproportionately affect women, may be carried out in full view of family and community, thereby rendering the victims as 'tainted' and unworthy of protection (Bennett et al. 1995).

Indeed, many of the women who were raped continued to show signs of lack of self-worth years after the war ended.

Women also suffer from name-calling following a failed marriage. Poverty coupled with war trauma has contributed to fragile marital relations all over northern Uganda. Yet the culture of the people admonishes marrying women of failed marriage or those who had a child out of wedlock. This means that women who return with children from rebel captivity cannot get married. Anybody man who marries them is seen among folks as a failure. Likewise any woman who became pregnant with a rapist cannot get married and she cannot abort the pregnancy because its' illegal and even criminal. All over northern Uganda, a woman who has a child or children but is not married to the father of the children is given derogatory names like "Okalocwan", "Gekeree", "Carimaa" etc all meaning that they are worthless immoral women who cannot be married by any realistic man. The worst bit of it is that their male counterparts are spared the criticism and name-calling.

Where women are not physically and sexually abused, they are intimidated by their husbands many of whom were former soldiers either of the rebel of government armies. According to (Fernando, 2004), intimidating behaviors are actions that instill fear. Such behaviors have a wide range. They vary from subtle acts such as looks, changes in tone of voice and "body language" or posture, or constant interruptions when another attempts to speak, to more severe acts such as rageful behavior, swearing, threats of physical harm to the partner or others, screaming, throwing things, etc. The war taught people to use force or intimidation and men resort to this either to defend themselves after committing an offense or to make spouses obey them all the time.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence to indicate vulnerability of women during war. The exposure to various categories of men holding weapons coupled with deprivation of essential goods and services suffered by IDPs in northern Uganda had a greater effect on women than men. Men cause wars and women suffer the consequences. Women are at particularly high risk of mental, physical and sexual abuse. They continue to suffer from various human rights abuses such as killings, rape and torture at the hands of the combatants and non-combatants alike including their husbands, friends and relatives.

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