Women survivors and their children born of wartime sexual violence in northern Uganda

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Girls and women who bear children owing to wartime sexual violence committed by armed actors face challenges in gaining acceptance on return to their families and societies. This study analyses the lives of women survivors and their children born of wartime sexual violence in Uganda. It draws on a population-based survey of 1,844 households in the Acholi and Lango sub-regions of northern Uganda, as well as on in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015 with 67 purposefully selected women survivors of wartime sexual violence. The study finds that: stigma is linked to broader gender discriminatory sociocultural norms and practices and changes under different circumstances; women's economic agency is essential to reducing stigma; households with members who suffered war-related sexual violence experienced significantly higher rates of violence post conflict than did other households; and the passage of time is less of a determining factor in their acceptance and reintegration than previously thought.

Introduction

The focus on women survivors of wartime sexual violence has resulted in increased attention being paid to its long-term impact on their social acceptance in post–conflict environments. Coulter (2009) and Denov and Ricard-Guay (2013) are critical of the fact that discussions about these women have centred primarily on their marginality and vulnerability, overlooking their agency at times. Girls and women survivors of wartime sexual violence often are treated as a homogenous group; however, studies show that those who return from conflict with children born of war–related sexual violence experience more and different challenges than those who do not (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Annan et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009).

    This paper situates itself within an emerging subfield of sexual and gender based violence in conflict that theorises and documents the experiences of girls and women who bear children owing to sexual violence by parties to an armed conflict (Porter, 2013, 2017; Theidon, 2015). It records and assesses how they respond to and shape

their social relations with their family and community in the post-conflict period in the context of northern Uganda. In particular, it investigates how stigma associated with them manifests and to what effect, and the ways in which they can overcome it. Wartime sexual violence includes forced marriage, forced pregnancy and child bearing, rape, and sexual enslavement by warring parties, in this case the armed forces of the Government of Uganda (GoU) and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).[1]

This paper adds to the development of existing theory on and knowledge of female survivors and their children born of wartime sexual violence by applying Porter's (2017) concept of social harmony, yielding a more nuanced understanding of family and community treatment of them in post-conflict northern Uganda. Social harmony refers to widely shared and highly valued ideals that denote 'good' and 'normal' relations among the living and between the living and the dead and seeks to attain moral order, social balance, and spiritual stability. These ideals are norms and underpin what are considered to be 'appropriate' and 'respectable' ways of life for members of a society. They are not always just, particularly where they are based on patriarchal structures that subordinate women and girls and privilege broader social considerations over individual rights and lives (Porter, 2017, pp. 3–4).

Utilising the first systematic large-scale representative study of serious crimes, the paper adds unique empirical evidence to the study of women and their children born of wartime sexual violence, comparing them to other women survivors who did not have children as a result of such violations. Furthermore, it contributes a solid description of the oft-cited stigma associated with these women and their children and their efforts to mitigate it, particularly through economic empowerment.

The research was conducted, as noted, in northern Uganda, where some two decades of violence and armed conflict (1986–2006) greatly affected the populations of the Acholi and Lango sub-regions of the country. Many acts have taken a huge toll, including: the abduction and forced recruitment of adults and children; the deaths and disappearances of family members; the destruction of families; the erosion of trust within communities and between citizens and the state; forced pregnancy and child-bearing within the LRA; massive asset stripping; the targeting and destruction of schools, health centres, trading posts, and other forms of infrastructure; systematic rape; and war-related physical injury and emotional distress (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2007; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner and Uganda Human Rights Commission, 2011).

Methodology

This study uses qualitative and quantitative data collected by the authors between February 2013 and December 2015. The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)-Uganda, of which Dyan Mazurana and Teddy Atim are the country leads, carried out a population-based survey that gathered data between January and February 2013 from 1,877 households in Acholi and Lango, the two most conflict-affected sub-

regions of northern Uganda, with a population of approximately 3.63 million people (Mazurana et al., 2014).

A two-stage randomised cluster sample design was employed, and the sample size was calculated using a 95 per cent confidence level and a power of 0.80 for a total sample of 1,844 households. Villages, serving as the cluster, were selected in the first stage and households within those clusters in the second stage. Probability-proportional-to-size sampling was performed to generate the number of sub-counties to be sampled in each district, for a total of 80 sub-counties or clusters. The sub-counties were randomly selected, and from each sub-county at least one village was randomly selected, for a total of 90 villages. In each village, approximately 20 households were randomly selected. The final sample included 1,857 household observations of which 1,772 captured information on household heads. Attrition occurred at 16 per cent between waves one and two, for a total of 1,552 households surveyed in 2015.

The villages were the primary sampling units. Probability weights were added to each of the observations based on population numbers extrapolated using the 2002 population census and the Uganda population growth rate. All of the analysis accounts for the research design effect.[2]

The qualitative information draws on interviews held between 2013 and 2015 with 57 purposefully selected females who are survivors of wartime sexual violence perpetrated by parties to the armed conflict (30 from Lango and 27 from Acholi), comprising 67 interviews in total.[3] These women were not part of the SLRC-Uganda survey, and were chosen to ensure diversity in age, ethnicity, and war experience, childbearing, length spent in captivity, and marriage. Women known to Teddy Atim were selected first, and then a female survivor of forced marriage and childbearing was employed as a research assistant to reach out to other women. While the methodology enabled us to discuss in detail a difficult subject with the women, it also limits the representativeness of the findings.

Women interviewed ranged from 20–40 years of age. Thirty-seven of the women had spent more than a year within the LRA. Those abducted before 2001 had lived for five years or more with the LRA, whereas those abducted after 2001 spent a relatively shorter time in captivity. Of the 57 women interviewed, 36 returned with a child or children born of war or returned pregnant and delivered subsequently, and 21 did not return with a child. In Acholi, 23 of the 27 women interviewed returned with a child, whereas in Lango, only seven of the 30 women interviewed returned with a child. At the time of the interviews, 24 women were single (16 in Acholi, 8 in Lango), 14 were married (5 from Acholi, 9 from Lango), 10 were separated (2 from Acholi, 8 from Lango), and 9 were cohabiting.

Effects of wartime sexual violence on girls and women

Many governments and development partners assume that, in the aftermath of armed conflict, life will normalise and households will begin to follow a slow but relatively

steady upwards progression ('recovery'). The reality, though, is not so straightforward (Mazurana et al., 2014; Levine, 2016; Marshak et al., 2017; Maxwell et al., 2017). Research from numerous countries finds that suffering sexual violence at the hands of warring parties can have lifelong consequences for girls and women, which are magnified when they bear children as a result of it.

The stigma experienced is embedded in the pre-war and war-related gendered social inequalities that heighten vulnerability (Utas, 2005; Betancourt et al., 2008; McKay et al., 2010; Theidon, 2015). Unequal gender relations within the family and society, the subordinate status of girls and women, and the acceptance of violence against them are grounded in social systems; conflict exacerbates these forms of violence (Fisher, 2010). Coulter (2009) found that women returning with children born of wartime sexual violence in Sierra Leone had to assume traditional and subservient gender roles, as expected of them, to smooth their acceptance into the family and community. Women who transgressed prescribed roles and expectations of a 'good woman/wife' risked punishment and ostracisation. They also risked further discrimination and harm as they lived in a setting where women's purity and value were attached to being a virgin, as a prerequisite to being a good woman/wife and hence marriageable. Coulter (2009) discovered that some women attempted to renegotiate their status and position in the family by using their work and income to lessen stigma within their larger communities.

Denov (2010), in a study of youth soldiers in the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, found that girls' experienced various forms of rejection and stigma on their return to their family and community. This was more profound among girls that returned with children fathered through wartime sexual violence, given the double shame of their association with the rebels and being visible victims of sexual violence. Like Coulter (2009), Denov (2007, 2010) notes that experience of wartime sexual violence violated community norms of virginity before marriage, undermined the paternal identity of children in patrilineal settings, and reduced women's potential to marry in the post-conflict period. What is more, wartime sexual violence complicated the future prospects of mothers and their children, particularly as marriage bestows status and access to key resources such as economic security, land, and protection.

Annan et al. (2008) report that, in northern Uganda, one-quarter of all girls and women abducted by the LRA that were kept in captivity for more than two weeks became the forced wives of commanders and other fighters; of these, one-half gave birth to children. The girls and women who suffered sexual violence during the conflict but did not have children as an outcome of it did not experience stigma at anywhere near the level of those who did return with children, although both sets of victims found that their experience of stigma lessened over time.

Porter (2013, 2017) underlines that abduction and sexual violence inside the LRA transgressed Acholi norms of marriage and love, underpinning morality and social harmony. She finds that many women survivors of wartime sexual violence in northern Uganda experienced social difficulties in their parental homes and with new

husbands (Porter, 2013, p. 246). In part, women's challenges centred on the action of sex in the 'bush', which was seen as harmful and entailed cosmological consequences unless cleansed; as opposed to sex at 'home', which was seen as for creation and to cement a marital relationship. Children born of war-related sexual violence also have ambiguous social belonging in society, as they are viewed as liminal or temporarily in their mother's clan and not belonging to the father's clan owing to a lack of customary exchanges. This complicates their access to burial ground, dispute resolution, and land, key identity markers among the Acholi and Langi.[4]

This paper contributes to this literature pool by using one of the first large-scale, population-based survey of serious crimes to explore in detail women who have experienced sexual wartime violence, and it complements this dataset with in-depth interviews with such women. It is also among the first works to provide a solid description of the various forms of stigma suffered by these women and their children born of wartime sexual violence, and the ways in which some of them are able to overcome the challenges through economic engagement and by building new socio-economic networks.

Female survivors of wartime sexual violence

The SLRC-Uganda study estimates conservatively that approximately 20,770 households have members who experienced wartime sexual violence by parties to the conflict (14,601 in Acholi and 6,169 in Lango), with 24,689 individual victims of sexual war crimes (14,346 in Acholi and 10,343 in Lango).[5] The same study also estimates conservatively that 1:50 households in Lango and 1:25 households in Acholi had a member who experienced wartime sexual violence by parties to the conflict, and that some 3,000–8,000 households in the two sub-regions have children born of wartime sexual violence (Mazurana et al., 2014).

Wealth and women's livelihoods

The SLRC-Uganda survey revealed that households in the Acholi and Lango sub-regions with members who experienced wartime sexual violence were more likely to be in the lower wealth category. Women who were customarily married[6] were significantly more likely to live within better-off households than those who were unmarried. Notably, the survey found no significant difference in marriage rates between women who were sexually violated by parties to the conflict (57 per cent of whom were married when surveyed) and those who were not (54 per cent). Those who returned with children born of wartime sexual violence, however, were significantly (at the one per cent level) less likely to be married, with marriage rates of around 30 per cent. Importantly, households in which victims of wartime sexual violence were customarily married enjoyed better food security than those in non-marital relationships or those who had separated from their husband. This could be

because married households have better access to land and receive extra support for food production from their spouse, as compared to unmarried or separated women.

The vast majority of women from rural areas reported that farming was their primary livelihood, alongside other small business activities, such as bead work, brewing alcohol, selling clothes, and tailoring. Women in urban areas mainly engaged in small business activities for the reason of survival, at times with a rural–urban linkage. Only a few were formally employed. While the multiplicity and diversification of income sources among women exemplifies livelihood resilience, it also points to the degree of economic and livelihood volatility with which most of these women live, as confirmed by the second panel of the SLRC-Uganda survey (Marshak et al., 2017).

Interestingly, vocational skills played a minor part in women's livelihoods. Most women interviewed in the qualitative study had trained in vocational activities (mainly tailoring), but the majority were unable to utilise the skills to support themselves. Most rehabilitation programmes in northern Uganda prioritised vocational training over formal education (Annan et al. 2008). Only five women had salaried employment; all of them had re-entered formal schooling and received training on professional courses. This finding raises questions about the efficacy of short-term vocational training in enhancing livelihoods where a multitude of factors affect a woman's ability to use these skills.

Health complications resulting from war-related injuries also affect the livelihood activities of women. Difficulties in pursuing agricultural initiatives were significantly (at the one per cent level) correlated with suffering sexual violence war crimes (Mazurana et al., 2014). The qualitative study showed that women who were trained as tailors (the majority as part of non-governmental organisation (NGO) programmes) complained of constant backache owing to unhealed injuries due to carrying children and heavy loads of loot over long distances, exposure to bomb fragments, beatings, burnings, and other injuries sustained while in LRA captivity. The situations of these women are compounded by the lack of effective treatment for injuries suffered; many relied on painkillers to relieve their discomfort, and many were unable to receive therapeutic treatment. Consequently, most of the women interviewed looked for livelihoods suited to their poor health conditions. Yet, choices are limited, as one woman remarked (interview, Lira town, September 2014):

> *I have to concentrate on my tailoring because it's my life, even though I feel a lot of chest pain that affects my concentration when on the machine. In captivity, I carried my first child on my back for nearly four years every time we were in flight or walking. Additionally, carrying heavy loots while in captivity causes me severe back pain to date.*

The findings in this subsection point to the lifelong consequences of conflict and wartime sexual violence for women's livelihoods and earnings, affecting, in turn, their ability to live in harmony with their family and society. Many women have limited options to engage in sustainable livelihoods owing to interrupted education, limited viable skills, and ill health. Of the 57 women interviewed, 52 did not return

to formal education and only 5 completed secondary school—with education level associated with improved household wealth and food security (Mazurana et al., 2014); the majority are engaged in low-paying activities, keeping them trapped in poverty (see also Marshak et al., 2017). Women with children have the additional burden of care, education, and health expenses.

Continued victimisation and discrimination

The survey found that households with a member who had suffered sexual violence during the conflict were more likely (at the five per cent level) to have experienced at least one or more crimes in the past three years as compared to households without a member who had experienced wartime sexual violence (see Table 1). This relation remained even when controlling for marital status and regional differences. In contrast to other households, those with members who had suffered wartime sexual violence reported significantly more experience of crime in the past three years: disappearance of family members, housebreaking (burglary), land grabbing, livestock theft, physical attack or assault, serious physical harm to a child, and general theft (all significant at the one per cent level); poisoning of a family member (significant at the five per cent level); and rape or sexual assault (significant at the 10 per cent level).

The treatment of women survivors within their families and communities is attributable to their experience of wartime sexual violence (taboo in local culture) and perceived role in perpetrating violence against civilians as members

Table 1. Proportion of households reporting crimes

Crimes in past three years	Households reporting a war crime involving sexual violence			Households reporting a war crime but not involving sexual violence			Households reporting neither a war crime nor sexual violence		
	Mean (%)	Frequency	Observations	Mean (%)	Frequency	Observations	Mean (%)	Frequency	Observations
General theft	48	24	50	39	236	612	23	175	762
Housebreaking (burglary)	36	18	50	28	171	611	12	94	762
Livestock theft	30	15	50	22	136	612	14	108	762
Land grabbing/dispossession	24	12	50	19	119	612	10	74	762
Serious physical harm to a child	14	7	50	7	45	612	4	30	762
Poisoning of a family member	14	7	50	6	34	611	8	64	761
Disappearance of family members	12	6	50	4	24	612	0	6	762
Rape or sexual assault	10	5	50	8	51	611	2	16	762
Physical attack or assault	10	5	50	7	44	612	1	14	762

Source: authors.

of the LRA. Both transgressed traditional gender ideals and disrupted social harmony, structures, and support systems, generating new vulnerabilities and risks to these households and the wider society. The consequences manifested in the form of physical and social attacks on households many years after the conflict. These attacks are gendered multipliers of violence, in which past crimes compound and spawn present and future crimes and forms of harm (Walker, 2009; Mazurana and Proctor, 2014; International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015; Wako et al., 2015). The finding suggests that the passage of time is perhaps not as crucial in lessening survivor's experience of stigma as stated in past studies (see, for example, Annan et al., 2008). Rather, other economic and sociocultural factors seem to be more important in explaining re-victimisation.

Intimate relations and family life

Women survivors of wartime sexual violence were significantly more likely to be unmarried as their counterparts who did not endure such an ordeal (in both cases, approximately one-half were married, and one-half were single or cohabiting). However, the situation was different for women who returned with children born of wartime sexual violence, with only 30 per cent of them customarily married at the time of the interview (as compared to about one-half of females who returned without children).

Women who returned with children described how men (intimates) treated them because of their wartime experiences. Some men used it to abuse the women emotionally, physically, sexually, and verbally, as well as a reason to desert them and their children born of war.

Most women interviewed during the qualitative work shouldered the bulk of daily care and provisioning for the household. The women earn money to pay for food and schooling, to meet rent, and to fulfil medical needs for themselves and their children. As one woman from Lango explained (interview, Kole, September 2014):

> My husband never supports me at all . . . not even school fees or any household needs does he provide. I do everything on my own . . . [he] comes over [at] the weekend . . . and goes back on Sunday without leaving any money or anything to run the family. Instead, he will even pick my own money to use for his transport back to town.

Marriage and family life is idealised by many in the sub-region as an arrangement that buffers women and their children from vulnerability and supports them in the daily running of the household. As these women made known, though, their relationships often led to additional deprivation, humiliation, and violence entering their lives. Hence, while women may move closer to an idealised vision of social harmony through marriage, in some cases the lived reality is that the treatment of women in marriage represses their dignity and rights, as well as those of their children.

Some women had multiple sexual relationships, at times bearing children by different men who subsequently neglected them, adding to their burden and vulnerability

(Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015b). One woman from Lango with two children born of rape in the LRA, and on return lived with a man with whom she had more children, noted that (interview, Oyam, September 2014):

> *When my twin children were born and one got sick, the man didn't show up anywhere. And when one died, he did not accept the body or show up at the funeral or provide support. . . . My elder brother and family buried the child on our land while I was in hospital with the surviving child.*

This example illustrates the ambiguous status of some children born of wartime rape, where even their burial sites are contested.

A lack of alternatives traps some women and their children born of rape in emotionally and physically abusive relationships (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015). They feel that they are neither able to return home nor leave an abusive relationship. As a woman from Lango who has five children and now cohabits with a man put it (interview, Lira, September 2014): '[i]f I had somewhere to go, I would have left long ago, but I stay because I don't have anywhere to go—considering the problems in my family . . . these children would have nowhere to go.'

Some potential in-laws created problems and eroded the possibility of acceptance and marriage in a non-abusive home. Even when the man is willing to settle down with the woman and her children, his family may pressure him to find a 'better wife'. The perception of these women and their children as tainted is premised on the assumption that persons who lived inside the LRA are affected by *cen*, an evil spirit that desires vengeance. Affliction by *cen* can result from witnessing or committing violence or even from association with the exposed person. Families fear that the females and their children could turn asocial, amoral, and violent once burdened with this condition, and that it could contaminate the lineage owing to association, effecting social harmony (Porter, 2017, pp. 135–136). Although *cen* can be cleansed to restore social harmony, widespread poverty and destitution often make it impossible for families to afford the ritual requirements.

Women frequently spoke of experiencing rejection and poor treatment by their own family members as well. Some parents rejected their daughters outright upon their return from captivity. One female from Acholi said (interview, Gulu, September 2013): '[m]y parents deserted me . . . when I go to them they would say, "Do we have anything of yours so we give it back to you?"'. Another mother of two children born of wartime sexual violence added: 'I hate home so much. I don't like to stay home, it's the reason I now stay here in town' (interview, Lira, August 2013). They claim that this treatment is, in part, what drove them into marriage, cohabiting, or moving away to live in peri-urban areas, detaching themselves from daily humiliation and rejection by their families.

Women mentioned that male relatives were particularly unwelcoming and harsh towards them and their children. A mother with two children born of wartime sexual violence pointed out (interview, Lira, September 2014):

My brother told the family he wants no child of his sister's at home, they should go look for their father. When he said that, I left to come to town with all my children and have never gone back to stay, I only go to visit. . . . But my mother defended my children saying I had the two children against my will.

Some women also stated that their families came into conflict with them over the NGO support they received as part of their reintegration; they became estranged from their relatives as a result. The story of a 29-year-old woman who married because of the frustration she met at home illuminates this point. When she got her amnesty package, which included UGX 264,000 (equivalent to approximately USD 83), she used it to purchase a few personal items for herself, her daughter, and her mother who had just given birth. She then gave the balance of UGX 150,000 (USD 47) to her father so that he could buy her one cow to keep for her daughter's future. However, the father had expected her to hand over all of the money. He thought that she would only take out UGX 4,000 (USD 1.19) for her transport. Because she had spent some of the money without his approval, he became very angry, refused to speak to her, took all the items that she received as part of her reintegration package, and then used the money she had given him to buy a cow for himself. He also ordered her mother not to assist her. She decided to leave: '[a]fter this incident, I realised I had nothing at our home which was mine or my daughter's, so I decided to start a life of my own' (interview, Kole, September 2014).

Male hostility towards these women appears to be linked to cultural customs. Women's experience of wartime sexual violence and having children as a consequence burdens the family and disrupts the practice of a bride price (received by males) owing to the diminished possibility of marriage. Moreover, women learnt self-survival mechanisms during the war, which at times go against traditional norms of male control and dominance, severing social ties. Children born of wartime sexual violence and with an unclear patrilineal identity, furthermore, pose a threat to land inheritance by a mother's brothers. Male relatives have little incentive, therefore, to protect and provide for these women and their children.

Children born of wartime sexual violence

Married or cohabiting women spoke of the unequal treatment of their children born of wartime sexual violence as compared to children conceived with their partners, such as sending the latter to school, while the former are left at home (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015a). Some men have even tried to sabotage the school support provided to the children by external actors. Male children born of wartime sexual violence have been especially ill-treated and least accepted by the men with whom their mothers reside, as they viewed them as a threat to resources and the inheritance of land and property. Many families who are struggling to survive see these children as an additional mouth to feed, breeding further resentment towards them (Mazurana et al., 2013).

The children are also a major point of disagreement between the women and their male partners, at times leading to separation (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015b). The women have a dilemma: they cannot leave the man who they feel can provide access to resources and status, nor can they send their children away, as often their natal families do not accept or want them. Hence, they and their children endure abuse and humiliation by the husband or domestic partner, or strike out on their own.

Children born of wartime sexual violence clearly were seen as disruptions to social harmony and reported mistreatment within the larger family and community. Women mentioned that whenever their children went out to play in the community, other children would call them names, including 'Kony's children' or 'LRA children', or depict them as 'cold hearted', 'cruel', 'harsh', 'troublesome', 'violent', and 'wild'. In other instances, family members mistreated them, sometimes calling them 'insane children'. They were blamed for fights and scapegoated for ills that befell families. The children also suffer abuse, discrimination, and humiliation at school. One mother noted that, at times, teachers segregate these children and treat them differently from the rest (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015).

Children's identity and access to key resources are based on patrilineal lineage solidified through customary exchanges. Despite the lack of customary exchanges, some women in Acholi have traced their former captor's family in an effort to give their children access to land and to ensure clan belonging. The majority of Acholi women, though, do not approach their captors' family, and to our knowledge only a few have done so among the Langi (Apio, 2016). As their children frequently are not accepted at home, some women have left natal homes to settle in urban peripheries where they reside in shanty settlements with their children. Yet, this further distances the children from familial attachment that perhaps they could fall back on in the absence of their mothers. The women's choice to move out of their families and communities reflects the negative effects of social harmony on those deemed to be outside of the moral order.

The identity and association of these children with their LRA fathers and the circumstances of their birth (in the bush) transgresses social harmony and norms. Consequently, they occupy an ambiguous social space, neither belonging to the family of their mother nor their father, leaving them facing the lifelong ramifications of not belonging and having an unstable identity (Porter, 2013). The fate of the children greatly worries the mothers (see also ICTJ, 2015), who spoke of the gloomy life and future that awaits them. Importantly, without an education, land, resources, skills, and a stable source of income, mothers are unsure of what will become of their children. One mother who returned with two children born of wartime sexual violence noted (interview, Lira town, August 2013):

> I worry about how my children will go to school, if I consider the school fees now and the way I live today, I don't think I can afford it. That is my biggest worry including their future life. If they don't get education, where will they live? They could farm the land but which land?

The liminal status of the children has lifelong implications for their economic and social status.

Ongoing school support for some of these children provided by external sources (usually NGOs) was also said to increase community animosity and resentment. Some community members felt that these females and their children are not deserving of any support, seeing those who were once with the LRA as responsible for their suffering (Annan, Blattman, and Horton, 2006). Some women reported suffering community anger and outrage. One underlined that: '[m]y neighbours are jealous of my [two] children born of war who are being supported to go to [a] good school, something they cannot afford' (interview, Lira, September 2013). Nonetheless, most women view their children as their future, and the children's education as their only hope and means of escape from their present predicament of marginalisation and poverty.

Women emphasised that their experiences of abduction, wartime sexual violence, and returning with a child have become a central component of their identity in the eyes of other people, owing to the transgression of local norms, the disruption of social harmony, and pollution. As one woman put it, '[i]t is as though I have a big writing on my back written "Kony", everywhere I go, it's there, it will never go away' (interview, Lira, September 2014). Most of the women interviewed believe that their past thwarts every opportunity to settle down and continue to shape their lives. One remarked (interview, Kole, September 2014): '[t]his problem will never end, it's like a stamp on our body. It also includes the children born of war, any problem on me will also face my child'. Furthermore, the consequences that mothers endure are passed on to their children, and will continue to be in the future (Walker, 2009; International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015).

Social and communal life

As women survivors and their children born of wartime sexual violence attempt to negotiate their space in communities, they confront continual abuse and victimisation. The long periods of conflict and the resultant destitution and poverty have ruptured the social networks that people normally would utilise to function in their families and societies; the outcome is animosity, competition, and mistrust among some community members (Mazurana et al., 2013). Social networks in traditional societies underpin survival and protection in times of difficulty and vulnerability. The networks offer members access to material and non-material benefits. Inability to draw on them, therefore, can have a devastating impact on network members in a situation where there are limited to no state or external social protection systems in place. However, social networks can themselves constitute a subjugation mechanism, particularly with respect to girls and women in patriarchal societies where access to them is conditional on people's gendered behaviour and ability to fulfil social obligations. The reality of such contexts forces girls and women without male protection or sponsorship to employ various strategies to negotiate their social space to

evade social censure and the risk of being denied the material benefits that accrue from these networks. At times, this means allowing oneself to be abused or exploited, and taking on roles in which women must demonstrate subservience to men to attain wider social harmony at the expense of their own rights and well-being (Kandiyoti, 1988; Coulter, 2009; Ramnarain, 2015).

At times, community members blamed the women and their children for the harm that the community suffered during the war. They asserted that they were responsible for rebel attacks—as the LRA frequently forced captives to lead assaults on their villages—making their life in the villages impossibly difficult. For instance, a woman whose family lives near a massacre site in Lira said that when she returned from captivity the community talked badly about her, and on one occasion she was attacked by a man for allegedly being among those who participated in the bloody events. As a result, she said she cannot go back regularly to her village for fear of possible reprisals.

Even though it is common knowledge that these women were forcibly abducted because of a lack of protection, and thus are not responsible for what happened to them, they still face rejection and stigma. When families and communities feel that their own needs have not been addressed, it is hard for them to accept and offer support to these women and their children. The absence of appropriate victims' assistance programmes to redress conflict-related violations deepens feelings of animosity towards these women and their children, further fraying existing communal and social ties, and support for their reintegration (Mazurana et al., 2013; International Center for Transitional Justice, 2015). At the same time, the presence of the women and their children born of wartime sexual violence in their families and communities is a reminder of war's rupture of local norms and disruption of social harmony.

Coping with ongoing challenges: agency and survival

Girls and women in northern Uganda play an important part in the production and maintenance of their families and communities' social capital through material and social exchanges, day-to-day cooperation, and informal social networks that help to promote wider social order (Mazurana et al., 2013). Despite the post-conflict challenges confronting these women and their children, some of the women exhibit remarkable strength as they struggle with livelihoods and to establish meaning in their lives.

Most women interviewed were engaged in a range of livelihood activities within the informal sector. Some said that they rode on trucks to access local markets to sell goods in villages, while some worked in alcohol and cotton ginning factories, jobs traditionally held by men. Since most live as single mothers, their livelihood activities have enabled them to meet their households' daily needs, and to make choices and take new directions in their lives. For married women, their livelihood activities have allowed them to have their own income and not to have to rely exclusively on their husbands. They underscored that, owing to their earnings, they had more ability to make family-related choices and decisions.

The women reported that their work gave them some pride and satisfaction, providing them with motivation and a purpose in life. Many mentioned that because of their work, they are always busy, which they felt helped them to make good choices about how to spend their money and time. Importantly, their work enabled them to maintain a positive image of themselves despite the negative behaviour of some of their family members and people in the community. Those who were able to return to and complete school spoke of gaining more knowledge and self-confidence.

The study found that making an income permitted women to be less dependent on social networks and to carve out a more independent life and be seen as assets in their families and communities; the women were still aware of their exclusion at times, however, which was painful. Women said that their livelihoods activities matter in terms of how they are viewed and treated by society, and that through their labour, their standing in the family and society is enhanced. Married women specifically noted that their labour improved their relationships with their spouse and family, who saw them as contributing members. A woman who returned from captivity with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) said that (interview, Oyam, September 2014):

> *After my brothers saw I was able to survive on my own . . . they now relate well with me. My work has also changed people's feeling towards me. You know people, if you don't have anything and you ask for help no one helps, but now that I have something of my own, they can help and it keeps me close with people.*

Some women also used their earnings to extend support to their ageing parents and other extended family members, helping to negotiate their belonging and relations in the family and community and to rebuild social harmony. For those who went to school, their networks and opportunities expanded from the new relationships built.

The social and other non-material benefits that accrue from women's work are important. As Carr (2013) points out, livelihoods must be seen as an effort to meet material and non-material needs, and they are linked to both social relations and identities. For these women, therefore, being survivors of wartime sexual violence that carries with it long-lasting harm provides them with a much stronger imperative to engage in activities that can increase their mutuality in kinship and social relationships.

In a handful of cases, women from relatively affluent and educated families had their children born of wartime sexual violence taken over and raised, leaving them relatively free of any parental responsibilities. Some families offered land to their daughters and their children, reducing the burden of care on the women. While this is contrary to the experiences of most of the women interviewed, whose families rejected them and their children, the practice upholds the region's past local culture wherein the woman's natal family absorbed children born outside of traditional marriage.

Other women who returned from LRA captivity and who were married spoke of relying on the support and goodwill of their husbands for their survival. For example, a few had started their business with the financial support of their spouse.

Some women spoke of belonging to new savings group networks (both in towns and villages) that they can utilise in times of need. These networks remain a vital form of livelihoods support for the women, especially for financing their business ventures and meeting other requirements. For those who lack strong kin support, these groups become their new livelihoods and social support networks. However, not all women belonged to such a group; the poorest women could not raise sufficient income on a monthly basis to contribute to regular group savings and hence were unable to join (Marshak et al., 2017).

Some of the women who participated in the qualitative interviews had left their family homes in the village to live in a town, where they tried to remain anonymous. They noted that here they can live more freely from their past, and build new social networks and relationships, including with men. The new spaces have enabled them to limit the kinship and social pressures present in rural settings that define expectations of a 'good wife/woman'. Their relationships with men were sought primarily to secure financial support, to gain access to land, and to receive the status that comes with being married (the hoped-for goal of many). Furthermore, the choice of some women to live away from their families and communities afforded them the opportunity not to be subdued by repressive patriarchal norms that require them to conform to certain behaviours and ways of life. Disharmony or disinterest in maintaining social harmony with their natal family and community supplied the impetus for these women to claim individual rights and to seek well-being in new spaces.

In rare instances (in fact, there was only one in the study), women returned to their former LRA captor 'husband' or their captor's family (Apio, 2016). Such an action potentially could grant them and their children identity and belonging to their patrilineal family, increasing their chances of gaining access to essential resources, including land. Some of the Acholi women are said to have requested traditional leaders in the area to help identify the families of their former captors for this purpose. The case of a 29-year-old Acholi woman from Gulu is illustrative. Upon return, she cohabited with her former LRA forced-husband's brother in the hope of securing land rights for her two male children born of wartime sexual violence. In her own words (interview, Gulu, October 2014):

> *With boys, there was no way I could go anywhere with them, so I decided to stay with him.*

She hopes that the man she lives with can officially marry her someday even though he already has two other wives and several children. Importantly, we did not find (or hear of) such cases among the Langi women, who tend to shun their former captors (mostly Acholi) and their families (Apio, 2016). Women going back to their rapists or former captors as it is the only option to secure resources for their children born of war denotes a situation where efforts to attain social harmony further violate women's rights and well-being.

Conclusion

Women survivors of wartime sexual violence and their children face many challenges in the post-conflict period. Their experience of harm owing to wartime sexual violence can multiply and amplify over time in the form of alienation, exclusion, a lack of social acceptance, rejection, and stigma, resulting, at times, in new harm. This study confirms earlier findings that women with children born of wartime sexual violence suffer more stigma than do their peers who return without children. It finds too that social harmony functions in ways that can include and/or exclude women and their children born of wartime sexual violence, at times violently.

It is not simply the passing of time that seems to lessen the stigma. Rather, different factors play important roles in mediating the experiences of stigma and acceptance of these women and their children. In particular, some women renegotiate their identity through economic empowerment, so as not to be viewed as a burden on households and social networks. Their improved economic standing enables both material and social mutuality. Others move into new spaces, in the urban periphery where they have created new ways of presenting themselves and their histories, joined new socioeconomic networks, and achieved some level of economic independence and autonomy, negotiating their place and treatment within the family and society.

Relatedly, the disruption and distress caused by decades of war and underdevelopment in the region partly shapes the experience of stigma and rejection of these women and their children. Consequently, wider sociocultural and economic factors should be central to decisions aimed at addressing their plight.

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Endnotes

[1] We could not locate women who experienced these crimes at the hands of GoU forces, particularly those pertaining to forced marriage, pregnancy, and sexual enslavement. Consequently, the study focuses on women victimised by the LRA.

[2] Relationships are identified as significant if the p-value is less than 10 per cent. Data were weighted to account for the sampling scheme and population figures for the regions sampled. The analysis was carried out using the STATA 12 software package.

[3] Some women were interviewed twice, hence the difference between the number of interviews (67) and respondents (57).

[4] See Theidon (2015) for similar dynamics in post-war Peru.

[5] Although the survey enquired about male and female experiences of sexual violence, respondents only revealed sexual abuse of females. See United Nations Human Rights Office of the High

Commissioner and Uganda Human Rights Commission (2011), citing the Refugee Law Project, for findings concerning male experiences of wartime sexual violence in northern Uganda.

6   Customary marriage is an indigenous practice in Acholi and Lango cultures, normally marked by the payment of a bride price and accompanying payments to the family of the bride by the groom's family. Acholis and Langis practise polygamy.

7   War crimes that had a significant impact on household livelihoods included abduction, attempted murder, deliberate immolation, and severe beating or torture.

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