The Gender Equality and Peacebuilding Imperatives of Supporting Children Born of War

Lead researcher: Heather Tasker, York University

Collaborators: Dr. Teddy Atim, Dr. Sylvie Bodineau

Overview

Sexual violence in times of war and conflict has long been an under-recognized atrocity only recently has gaining prominence in international policies and agendas. The challenges faced by children born as a result of this violence remain largely unseen and unaddressed in programmes and policy.

Research has shown that children born of forced or exploitative sexual relations in times of war (children born of war-CBoW) are a specifically vulnerable population, under-recognized and underserved across many contexts. CBoW often live in poverty, lack access to formal education, and experience community stigma, partly because of their fathers' participation in armed conflict. There is a possibility of intergenerational trauma resulting from the violence mothers experienced. These challenges intersect to constrain the potential of CBoW and infringe on their rights to a safe childhood and fulfilling future. Our research, alongside recent work by Atim, Mazurana and Marshak (2018); Denov (2015, 2020); and Lee (2017), point to the importance of better understanding the needs of CBoW and the development of policy initiatives for their support and social inclusion grounded in the advancement of their rights.

This policy brief describes the central concerns facing children born of conflict-related sexual violence in sub-Saharan Africa and suggests key policy developments to address these needs. It draws on the expertise of community based actors and organizations working to advance gender equality and support survivors of violence, to explain their support needs, as well as the long term peacebuilding and gender equality imperatives. The research findings result from consultations with community partners in Liberia, Uganda, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, and on sixty-nine (69) interviews they conducted with children born of war in Liberia, Uganda, and Sierra Leone.

Most contemporary research on CBoW in Africa has been conducted in Uganda; less is known about CBoW in West and Central Africa. Relatedly, there are few support programs available for CBoW in most countries. Interviews conducted in 2018 by CSiW partners in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda show some similarities of experience, along with significant differences. These specificities must be better understood. Across conflict and post-conflict contexts we see little recognition of the unique needs of CBoW.

Sexual violence in conflict results from pre-existing gender inequality and leads to stigmatization and social isolation for survivors and their children. Preliminary research has shown that girls who are CBoW are often married earlier and have fewer opportunities to attend school. Policy

interventions may help disrupt this cycle of exclusion and contribute to the empowerment of survivors and their children. Economic opportunities and supports, education, and greater gender equality in post-conflict contexts lead to more stable and long-lasting peace and security outcomes.

Canadian policy interventions in support of CBoW connect to two priority themes within Global Affairs: Canadian-led or -supported approaches that champion changes in power structures and social norms that address global **gender inequality**; Canadian-led or –supported approaches to promoting economic security in order to **strengthen international peace and security**. Policy developments for CBoW fit within the foreign policy and international assistance mandates.

Key Findings

'Even making friends is difficult because no one wants to be close to you' (Uganda)

The needs and challenges of CBoW are not uniform across contexts; they vary based on political commitments, history and time period of the conflict, as well as local gender and cultural norms. Our research has, however, uncovered prevalent concerns that were shared across the countries in the study. These should be understood as the key priorities for broader policy commitments, while more targeted programming may be developed for specific regions.

Education: In all research countries, the importance of education was emphasized as a crucial means to secure livelihood, social status, and self-worth. In addition to the career prospects associated with formal education, school also provides an important space to forge social connections and offers a sense of inclusion and hope for the future. Primary and secondary schools, as well as trade schools or skills training, are too often inaccessible to CBoW who are unable to consistently pay school fees or who face stigma within their education. In Uganda, some young people shared that school was where they first learned that their father was a member of the LRA, resulting in their earliest experience of social exclusion. Success in school had a highly positive impact on CBoW's self worth and feelings that they could obtain a fulfilling future, whereas not being able to attend school or attending only sporadically led to a sense that options were reduced and they would be unable to have the sort of life they wanted. Not attending school also contributed to feelings of isolation and lack of community belonging.

SCHOOL FEES PAID, BUT NO MONEY FOR BOOKS

In Sierra Leone, community partners at Women's Forum emphasize that school fees alone are not enough to address education inequality for CBoW. While Sierra Leone has committed to covering fees for government and government-assisted primary, junior, and secondary schools, CBoW and other vulnerable young people have been unable to buy the books, uniforms, and other supplies necessary to attend.

"the good thing about me is that I want to be educated"(Liberia)

Stigma and Belonging: CBoW experience community stigma and feelings of ostracism for a number of reasons, including their father's identity, father's absence, being perceived to be biracial or bi-ethnic, poverty, and intergenerational stigma from their mother's status as a survivor of sexual violence. In all the countries surveyed, community partners stated that being the child of a member of an armed group contributed to stigma. This

was particularly strong in Uganda, where children fathered by Lord's Resistance Army fighters are taunted with names such as "Kony's child" or "LRA son/daughter". In Sierra Leone and Liberia, any perceived aggression or bad temper on the part of the young person was often associated with the father's identity as a soldier. One interviewee was told, for example, that he "eats like a killer". In Rwanda, young people fathered by 'genocidaires' are sometimes associated with the heinous violence of the genocide and their father's perpetration of sexual violence. Young people shared that they feel like outcasts as a result of this significant stigma. The effects of this ostracism and exclusion potentially carry larger social impacts as well, with some young people from Uganda expressing a preference for life within the LRA over the community as they felt a greater sense of belonging within the armed group, partially as a result of believing they were connected with their fathers during that time and longing to re-establish this bond, even if this sense of connection is partially a product of their imagination. In Uganda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, there is community concern that young people who have few opportunities and are stigmatized are more likely to be involved with criminal activities and possibly join armed groups, leading to increased instability and violence. It is difficult to disentangle actual and perceived risk of CBoW engaging in violent or criminal behaviour given the stigma they face: it is possible that preconceptions of the violent natures of CBoW contribute to the belief that they are at greater risk for inflicting violence than other young people, whereas this in fact may have a self-fulfilling component if young people do not feel they have other opportunities and are already pre-determined to be aggressive or untrustworthy as a result of their fathers' actions.

Citizenship In all research contexts, children born while their mothers were in captivity or who were birthed without medical support often do not have birth certificates and are unregistered. In Liberia citizenship is passed through the father, so children born outside the country to non-Liberian fathers do not automatically have citizenship. This is an important gender equality and political problem.

Even in instances where the children are eligible to naturalize, the fees associated with doing so are often prohibitive[1]. This has significant impacts on access to higher education, obtaining certain jobs, political engagement, ability to travel, and sense of belonging and social recognition. This issue has gained attention recently through debates about the status of children born to ISIS fighters who left their countries of origin to join the insurgency. While not a context explored in this research, it does raise important questions of belonging, state responsibility and citizenship rights for CBoW across regions, emphasizing the need to support young people living in violent and difficult circumstances not of their own making.

> *"when other citizens are resettled or compensated for acts of war committed against them in Liberia, women victims of conjugal slavery and their children are not considered."* (ADWANGA)

Violence and Early Marriage: Girls who are living in precarious circumstances and do not have the support of their fathers and patrilineal family are more likely to be married earlier than

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[1] UNHCR, Stateless in Liberia. https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/stateless-in-liberia/

their peers. Many young women and girls in Liberia shared that they began sexual relationships at young ages because of the lack of family support; these sometimes resulted in abuse, sexual violence, and early pregnancies. These young women do not feel they have proper support to raise their children, continuing the cycle of precarity and poverty. Community-based activists in Uganda shared that in cases where the mother remarries, her new family may value the daughter she brought into the marriage less than other children and may marry her out earlier to access bridewealth payments and avoid having to continue supporting her. Boys and young men also face marriage difficulties as a result of their status as CBoW. In Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda, male interview participants identified lack of access to land inheritances, passed down through their fathers' families, as a significant impediment to marriage. Within their own families, CBoW experience increased rates of physical and emotional abuse. This is particularly common when the mother remarries as the new husband may reject the child/children she had before her marriage. Abuse in the home leads to young people leaving home early, which in turn puts them at risk for further violence. This finding was especially notable for girls in Liberia and Sierra Leone who shared that they experienced sexual violence after leaving their family homes as a result of abuse.

PEACEKEEPER FATHERED CHILDREN

The category of CBoW can also include children born from sexual relations between peacekeepers and members of the host community. These interactions may be violent, exploitative or consensual but, in many cases, children are left without support and their mothers experience community stigma, often struggling to raise their children. Accountability has been difficult to obtain at the state or multilateral level, and international advocacy for the rights of these children is greatly needed.

Recommendations

"Our mothers support us with the scarce resources that they have." (Sierra Leone)

Support Mothers Across research contexts, strong relationships with mothers provided protection from the most damaging impacts of stigma, poverty, and abuse faced by some CBoW. Young people who felt close to their mothers had stronger self-esteem and more easily imagined a happy future for themselves, despite difficult social and economic circumstances. Often, however, mothers of CBoW have not had the support needed to address the trauma resulting from sexual violence and may themselves experience social stigma with this extended to their child. This leaves mothers with little support and can contribute to women associating their children with the violence they suffered. This finding was particularly notable in Rwanda, where mothers sometimes blamed their children for their hardships and considered the children the source of their life's difficulties. In northeast Nigeria, programs are being established to support women to reintegrate into their communities following escape/rescue from Boko Haram. Community leaders are working with women's organizations to sensitize community members to the realities of abduction and sexual violence in order to ease transitions and improve the lives of women and their children by preventing ongoing stigmatization. It is too early to determine the outcomes of these programs, but the community practitioners consulted for this brief are hopeful. In Uganda, survivor-led organizations provide peer support to women who were held in LRA captivity and work to support one another in raising their children, finding employment, and

recovering from violence. Providing medical and psycho-social support to survivors of sexual violence is crucial for their recovery and can help them bond with their children. Activities within the broader community to sensitize people to the realities of sexual violence and to combat stigma of survivors and their children is necessary for both mothers and CBoW so that both can live in a supportive and non-hostile environment.

Advocate for government acknowledgement / recognition Governments could consider a public acknowledgement of CBoW to combat discrimination and stereotypes, much like President Koroma's apology in 2010 to women victims in Sierra Leone for the SGBV they endured during the war. Policymakers can work with government departments, civil society organizations, and survivors' groups to develop age appropriate and context-specific programming for CBoW; these programs could include anti-stigma training for teachers and social workers, safe spaces for CBoW and their families, and birth registration for children born outside the country. Canada could further leverage their Feminist International Assistance Policy to advocate for inclusive and gender equal citizenship laws that pass nationality equally from mothers and fathers and for governments to waive naturalization fees for CBoW.

Increase Opportunities Economic supports to CBoW are crucial for helping them develop and recognize their long-term potential. Disrupting cycles of poverty through education and cash transfers would lead to CBoW being better able to develop careers and provide for their own families. Across contexts, CBoW explained that having access to education and opportunities is necessary not only for their economic futures but for their sense of belonging and self-worth. Policies should be developed to pay for school fees, books and other incidentals for young children, and skills training for CBoW too old to return to school. This is also an important step in repairing conflict-related harms and demonstrates a commitment from state parties to supporting young people most affected by violent conflict.

Redefine Expertise CBoW understand their own lived experiences better than anyone and should be consulted in the development of policy and programs aimed at supporting them. In many contexts CBoW are now adolescents or young adults, capable of reflecting on their challenges and what would be most helpful. The young people interviewed in this research had great insight into the reasonings behind their stigmatization and what supports they need to address these challenges. While this brief has focused on the difficulties CBoW face, it is important to recognize that, despite constrained circumstances, many interview participants expressed a deep sense of hope for the future, finding solace and strength in the belief that they are good people who can have fulfilling lives if given the opportunity. This resilience should be recognized and drawn upon throughout programming and policy advancements. CSOs that include participation by CBoW and/or peer run CBoW groups would be especially strong candidates for direct funding.

Given contextual variation in the experiences and needs of CBoW, it is necessary to rely on local expertise to determine how best to implement programmatic supports. Community-based and civil society organizations working to support survivors of sexual violence and CBoW have in-depth knowledge about the needs and priorities of those they work with and are also well-suited to ameliorate potential tensions and challenges that arise is distributing support. Direct funding to these organizations to develop and implement support programs will help ensure that money goes directly into the communities it is intended for and will strengthen civil society capacity to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups. The complexity and nuance inherent in issues like community stigma and early marriage are best understood and addressed by those living in the communities where they are experienced; direct support to CSOs appropriately recognizes and draws upon this expertise to increase efficacy of programmatic interventions.

CSO SUPPORTS

Approaches taken by CSOs to support CBoW range from individual counselling and psycho-social support, to peer group support, arts and theatre workshops, and in some cases tracing and reconnecting children with their paternal families.

Additional Considerations

In working to address the particular needs of CBoW, it is important not to contribute to community resentment or stigma through these actions being seen as "special treatment". Indeed, in communities where CBoW live there are many people facing similar challenges without having been born as a result of sexual violence. Through their work with children born as a result of rape in the DRC, UNICEF and the Pole Institute recommend programs that include other vulnerable or war affected youth rather than a narrow focus on CBoW. The report authors recognize, however, that there may be unique needs and experiences for CBoW and working with communities to show how these young people are unfairly affected may help reduce stigma in the longer term[2]. Within our own research there were differing opinions about the utility of working with CBoW as a category separate from other war-affected young people; this varied between country contexts and seemed to be partially linked to what other programs are or were made available following the conflict and how recent the conflict was. Working closely with community partners will help address this ambiguity, and program and policy design must be flexible and adaptive enough to respond to the different needs and experiences in each region where supports are implemented.

In contending with the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to recognize how vulnerabilities and precarity is exacerbated in times of crisis. CBoW face hardship related to poverty and lack of education opportunities, conditions that only worsen during humanitarian crises such as natural disasters and widespread communicable illness. The 2014-2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa resulted in dramatic increases in intimate partner

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[2] Michels, A.; Sematumba, O. N.D. Children born of sexual violence in conflict zones: Democratic Republic of the Congo country report. UNICEF and Pole Institute.

violence, sexual exploitation, and adolescent pregnancies[3], with those already marginalized experiencing the worst of these impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to result in similar outcomes, emphasizing the urgency in establishing and fortifying support structures for young people living in constrained and difficult circumstances.

Feminist Foreign Policy Imperatives

Canada is positioned as a leader in advancing support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and recognizing the needs of children born of rape, as demonstrated in the statement delivered during the open debate on UNSCR 2467 (2019). Policy interventions for CBoW intersect in important ways with Canada's commitment to a feminist foreign policy and the Canadian National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security. Further research into and development of policy for CBoW advances Canada's feminist foreign policy goals and makes a worthwhile contribution to an under-resourced issue. The 2017 NAP broke important ground by centring support and respect for community-based organisations' expertise. Policy developments on CBoW will be more effective and better reach the target beneficiaries through partnerships with organisations in the communities where the policies are implemented.

In advancing feminist policy, consultation with diverse groups is central. Through the course of this research, we attempted to distribute an online survey to capture perspectives from CSOs on the unique needs and priorities of CBoW. The survey had poor uptake, but this approach may prove useful in developing policy initiatives in the future and we recommend GAC use this or a similar approach to ensure the inclusion of multiple perspectives from those acting at various levels of government, CSOs and grassroots organizations.

Challenges facing CBoW are widespread and cut across numerous programs and policies supported or implemented by Global Affairs Canada. Considerations of CBoW should be mainstreamed into Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programming as it is not uncommon for girls associated with armed forces or armed groups to return or be rescued with children. It is an issue equally relevant to Women Peace and Security priorities focused on intersectional approaches to peacebuilding and gender inclusiveness, and policies concerned with ending violence against children and enhancing access to education. By integrating supports for CBoW across relevant divisions,

Recommendations:

Support Mothers

Combat Stigma

Political Acknowledgement

Increase Opportunities

Youth & CSOs as Experts

Consult Widely

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[3]Yayboke, E., & Abdullah, H. F. (2020). Elevating Women Peacebuilders amidst Covid-19. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.

policies, and programs, the unique needs of CBoW will begin to be addressed with respect for their diversity of experiences.

Conclusion

While the specific challenges experienced by CBoW vary somewhat across contexts, research makes clear that they are an under-recognized group that requires urgent support. In addition to the humanitarian imperatives of meeting young people's needs, providing support to CBoW may have larger peacebuilding and gender equality impacts by reducing the factors leading to participation in conflict, help to prevent early marriage, and decrease vulnerability to violence. Enhancing CBoW's social and political participation advances intersectional perspectives and viewpoints into post-conflict societies with potential long term impacts on social progress and equality. Canada is well-positioned to act as a leader through its commitment to feminist foreign policy and recognize CBoW as a distinct category of vulnerable young people in need of direct support to secure their safer, more peaceful and equitable futures.

Acknowledgements

Additional Resources

The Conjugal Slavery in War Partnership Project http://csiw-ectg.org/

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