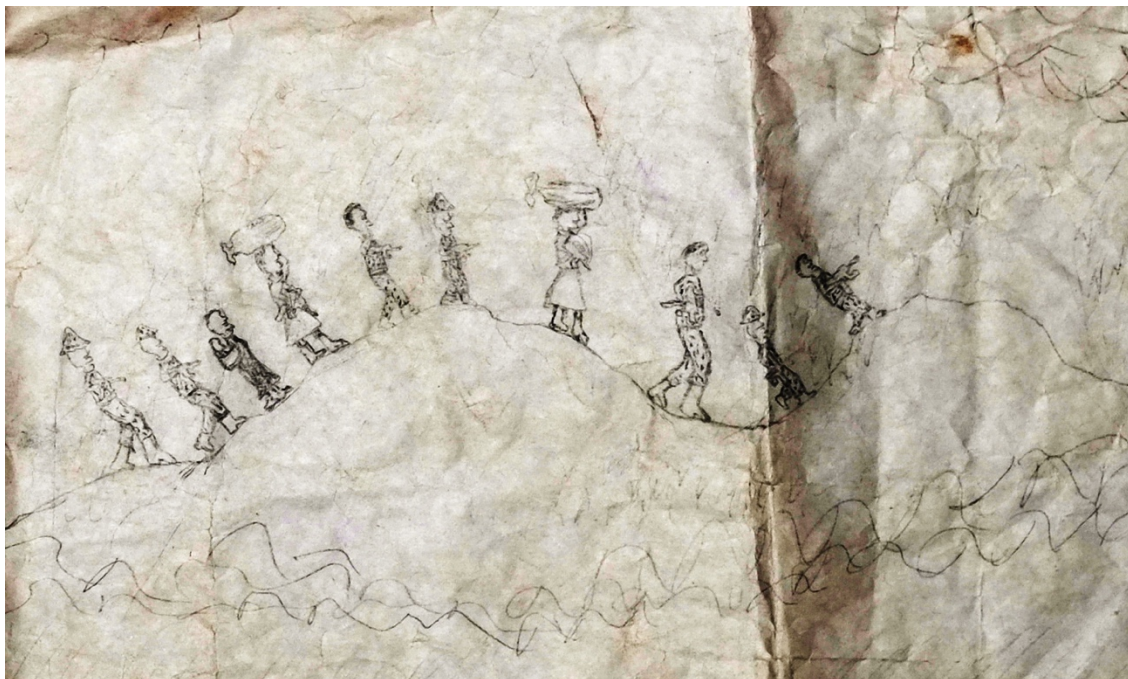


# Child tracing in post-conflict northern Uganda

A social project to unite children  
born of war with their paternal clans



October 2018

Women's Advocacy Network  
The School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, University of British Columbia

## About this report

Researched and written by: Tinashe Mutsonziwa, Ketty Anyeko & Erin Baines in Vancouver, Canada and Grace Acan & Evelyn Amony in Gulu, Uganda. This report is the result of collaboration between the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) and the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs (SPPGA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), with the support of the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP). It was supported by the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies (PWIAS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant (SSHRC PG) Conjugal Slavery in War (CSiW): A partnership for the study of enslavement, marriage and masculinities.

The original research for the report was envisioned to focus on women's experiences of seeking reparations for sexual violence, funded by the PWIAS, at the University of British Columbia. Through a process of consultations with WAN members, however, the process of child tracing emerged as a social project considered vital to the well-being of children born as the result of forced marriages in wartime. At the time of writing, child tracing activities were on-going at various stages outlined in the report. Mothers and their children, some now young adults, initiated the process of child tracing on their own. With the assistance of WAN members and networks, community leaders and non-governmental organizations such as JRP and Women's Initiative for Gender Justice (WIGJ), these informal efforts received wider social support, particular with funding to the initiative from WIGJ between 2016-17.

The report involved a review of secondary data collected by WAN and JRP, including reports, recordings and video-tapes, field notes, and interviews and focus group discussions with WAN members and child tracing team leaders and project officers at JRP and WAN. It is intended to highlight the process and possibilities of child tracing for stakeholders.

Thank you to the following persons and organizations for their assistance and support: Kasiva Mulli, Grace Acan, Beth Stewart, Joyce Alabo, Docus Atieno, Isaac Okwir Odiya, Lindsay Marsh and Rebekah Kartal; The Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies (UBC) SPPGA, (UBC), and CWIS: <http://csiw-ectg.org/> (Hosted by York University); WAN and JRP [justiceandreconciliation.com](http://justiceandreconciliation.com).

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## Executive Summary

1. During and following the war in northern Uganda (1986/7-2008), tens of thousands of women abducted as girls by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) were released and escaped to return home, many with children born of forced marriages to commanders.
2. In the post-conflict period, violence against survivors and their children extends to their social exclusion and invisibility in post-conflict policy and implementation processes.
3. The Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) has 500 members of war affected women, including persons forced into marriage and motherhood by the LRA.
4. Child tracing is an activity led by WAN. It refers to a process of locating a child's paternal clan, often unknown due to the circumstances of birth; in Acholi culture, the paternal clan is responsible for the health and well-being of children.
5. Child tracing is most often initiated by mothers after their children request to learn the identity of their paternal clan. Other cases are initiated by the children themselves. A smaller but increasing number of cases are initiated by fathers who returned, or by the paternal clan.
6. Successful child tracing promotes a child's sense of belonging, identity and dignity, and realizes their social and economic security through land and cultural inheritance, as well as access to education.
7. Child tracing requires the support of community actors, including elders, local leaders, former commanders, non-governmental organizations, to ensure a positive result. As such, it is a social project that promotes social repair of relationships strained during war and displacement.
8. Child tracing is an extremely sensitive and emotionally charged process, one that requires a careful, considered and diplomatic approach focused on the best interests of the child. A child may face stigma, discrimination, victimisation and rejection from maternal and paternal clans and the community. Safeguards are required at each stage to protect them.
9. Child tracing is a social project that does not override international and national human rights laws. Rather it seeks to ensure that the rights of children enshrined in various human rights instruments are realised through community-based peace processes and peace building initiatives. It is a place- based approach promoting the welfare of children born out of war; this means ensuring the child interests come first.
10. Child tracing can be strengthened through partner collaboration, documentation and archiving, social learning and policy formulation.

## Introduction

*“I would like to say that child tracing is good, it made my child know their home origin and relatives” - Mother*

Some years following her escape from the Lord’s Resistance Army, Beatrice began to look for her children’s paternal clan. Her children had begun to continuously ask about the identity of their father and circumstances of their birth. Living in her maternal home, Beatrice and her children encountered daily reminders of their past experience. Her own family was reluctant to care for the ‘children of rebels’ who had made civilians suffer during the war. Her children also experienced discrimination and not knowing their paternal clan denied them of their cultural right to inherit land and the support necessary to access education and health.

Beatrice’s son and daughter are two of potentially thousands of children who were born as the result of a forced relationship to commanders of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) during the war in northern Uganda (1986-2008) and more recently, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR) where the LRA continue to operate today.

Facing poverty and social exclusion, and with the urging of her children, Beatrice turned to the Women’s Advocacy Network (WAN), a network of war affected women that had formed to support one another, raise awareness of their experiences, reduce stigma and to seek reparations. With their support, Beatrice began the difficult work of identifying and locating the children’s relatives. Their father was dead, his identity unknown, but working with other survivors in WAN, community leaders and organizations such as the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP), Beatrice was able to identify the children’s clan. Through a slow process of exchange, the paternal clan recognized the children and assumed responsibility for them.

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*“You realize the kids are growing but do not know both their paternal families or clan and they ask questions like, ‘Mum, where is my father, which clan do I belong to?’” - Mother*

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Child tracing is a place-based practice that follows a sequence of events, involving acknowledgement, satisfaction, repair and redress. It begins to foster a relationship in which paternal clans may offer monetary support to meet the educational and health needs of the children. It may further safeguard spiritual wellbeing and a sense of belonging of the child. For the child, it may bring inheritance of land, in addition to an identity.

In some estimates, the LRA was responsible for the abduction of up to 60,000 children and youth in northern Uganda during the course of the war that lasted for two decades (1986/7-2008).<sup>i</sup> Women who escaped after an extended period of time inside the armed group, often did so with the children of LRA commanders with whom they had been coerced into sexual and domestic relationships. As with Beatrice, the women and their children faced challenges reintegrating into a society that perceived them as perpetrators and enablers of the torture they endured at the hands of the LRA.<sup>ii</sup> They were not viewed as victims of wartime sexual violence and unwilling participants; on the contrary, a majority of women who had escaped the LRA found themselves in another form of captivity characterised by social marginalization, stigma and displacement. Few policies addressed the plight of war survivors and even fewer organisations were willing to stand in the gap and advocate on their behalf for reparations due to the sensitivity surrounding government involvement and the thin line that separated victims from perpetrators.

In many instances, the identity of the father was purposely concealed from the mother and children to protect his own paternal clan from retaliation by the state, the LRA, or maternal clan. The paternal clan may remain unwilling to come forward, even if they know that their son had a child or children in the LRA who have since returned because they are aware of the stigma and retaliation from both the Ugandan government and the LRA that may come with such an admission. Also, paternal clans may remain unknown because the children's maternal clan forbids child tracing, insisting that no formal marriage had been approved or arranged and therefore the children belong with them. Still, as the children grow older and more insistent, and where the material needs of children become more pressing with age, the desire to initiate contact and establish a relationship becomes more prevalent.

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*"I have continued to trace the paternal home of my children because I need to prepare them for the future, 'I want them to live well on their own, even when I am no longer alive'." - Mother*

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The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court recognizes sexual violence – rape, forced pregnancy and prostitution including other similar acts of sexual violence - as a crime against humanity.<sup>iii</sup> Though many legal instruments and protocols address the issue of sexual violence during conflict and post- conflict, children born of war are often overlooked as victims of sexual violence crimes.<sup>iv</sup> However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child have provisions that address the rights and wellbeing of children living in conflict and post-conflict settings. They both speak to a child's right to an identity, education, health, and their right to be heard and protected. Article (34) of the Ugandan Constitution provides children "The right to know and be cared for by their parents or other people." The Constitution also stipulates that the welfare of the child should be the guiding principle when making decisions concerning the child's wellbeing.<sup>v</sup>

Child tracing is a social project that does not override international and national human rights laws. Rather it seeks to ensure that the rights of children enshrined in various human rights instruments are realised through community-based peace processes and peace building initiatives. It is a place-based approach promoting the welfare of children born out of war; this means ensuring the child interests come first. Child tracing also does not seek to sanitize atrocities committed by the LRA during the conflict but highlights how communities can work together to address stigma and discrimination faced by both women and children who escaped captivity and sensitise communities regarding the need and importance of forgiveness and social repair.

This report outlines the process of child tracing. We consider the origins of this work, how it has changed and expanded over time with the support of partners. While the focus is on mothers' efforts to trace the identity of their children and on behalf of them, we recognize that others have begun to approach WAN for help in searching for lost, missed, or missing relatives, indicating that child tracing is taking on greater significance in repairing social relations amongst survivors of the LRA, their families and the communities that are victims of LRA brutality. For instance, children and young adults have begun to approach WAN on their own initiative. Grandparents with sons who did not return, have begun to seek help finding their grandchildren. Fathers, living separately from their children, have asked WAN to help mediate visits with them and the maternal clan. Given the increasingly significant role played by WAN and the process of child tracing, and recognizing that each tracing initiative is unique and must be understood as such, we develop a general set of lessons learned for stakeholders. While we recognize the myriad ways child tracing leads to social repair of extended families and communities fragmented by war, the report is mindful of the rights and protection of the children at the centre of these processes.

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*"For the grandparents, whose son is now dead, his child keeps their hope alive. They console the bereaved family. The child is their heir." - WAN*

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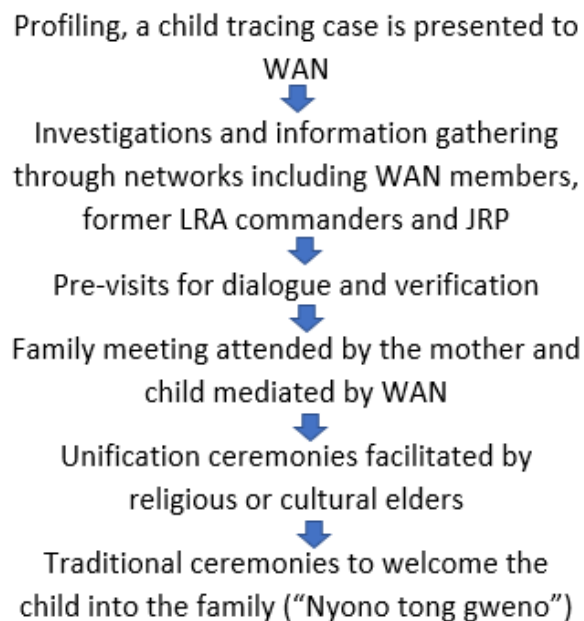


Photo by Beth Stewart, 2017.

## Child Tracing

While childbirth embodies hope and new beginnings, for many women during the war it signified eternal captivity. Many women who escaped the LRA following an extended period, returned with children who were conceived out of forced marriages and sexual violence. The Acholi people are a patriarchal community; therefore, children belong to the paternal family and taking children to their paternal homes is an obligation most women feel they have to their children and their own families. Knowing the paternal family means the child has an identity. Mothers feel this knowledge will help their child be treated with dignity and respect in the community. Mothers hope, also, it means the child will have access to education and be able to inherit land. Acholi boys can expect to inherit land through their paternal clan, the most valuable asset fathers can bequeath their children in the Acholi community. A child (boy or girl) has little claim to land in their maternal homes.

There are several reasons that push children to seek out their paternal clans. Given the pain that often surrounds their very existence, for many children born out of wartime sexual violence, unification with their bloodline seems to address their struggle for legitimacy. Some are driven by the simple need to know that they have a home and for others it is the abuse, stigma or rejection they encounter living with their maternal relatives or stepfathers. Family unification suddenly opens a new world of possibilities that appeared out of reach before connecting with their paternal family. This need for acceptance and belonging is the reason mothers and children initiate the search for their paternal family. When a child or mother approaches WAN to locate the paternal clan and before the unification of the child and the paternal family, there are steps taken to ensure that they locate the correct paternal clan and verify if indeed the child was born in captivity.



Each case of child tracing is a labyrinth that takes anywhere from a few months to years to complete. Engaging the paternal and maternal clans is a process that is also very sensitive because of the memories and responsibilities child tracing entails. WAN has been tactical in engaging both sides of the families to ensure they have confidence in the credibility of the process and outcomes. For the paternal clan, the verification process is very important because they usually have little evidence themselves. Child tracing measures include:

1. **Engaging local leaders** from the maternal and paternal hometown. Village chiefs and elders are held in high esteem and their presence and contribution to the dialogue endorses the legitimacy of WAN's child tracing efforts. In case of any conflict, local leaders also mediate.
2. **Pre-visits to the maternal and paternal clans** to inform them of the child or children's wish to initiate the process. The process does not proceed without their consent. Once parties agree, a date and time is set for the child tracing team to visit the paternal clan. The child is not involved at this stage to protect their wellbeing.
3. **Presenting evidence of the child's paternity:**
  - a. The child tracing team attempts to verify the identity of the child in the form of photographs. Also, children who were named after paternal clan members made the connection easier because it was proof that their son was responsible for the children;
  - b. The mother is provided an opportunity to give an account of her story and the paternal clan is given an opportunity to pose questions to the mother;
  - c. Other former abductees and LRA commanders who knew both the mother and father give factual accounts of their association in captivity.
4. **Including current husbands** allays their fears of any underhanded plans to reunite the parents through child tracing. It is also a sign of respect for the current husband's role in raising the child in the absence of their father.
5. **Consultations with the maternal clan.** Maternal clans are sometimes against the idea of child tracing and in some cases, there is open hostility. WAN strives to ensure involvement of the maternal clan at all stages of the child tracing processes (prior to pre-visit, and involvement in initial visits, for instance), mediating conflict that might arise.
6. **The child is formally introduced to the paternal clan.** This often takes places over several days, in the presence of the child tracing team, extended paternal family and the maternal family. It often involves welcome ceremonies for the child and family and the sharing of food. In some cases, the child remains for a period of time in the paternal clan. In others, they return with the maternal clan and negotiations over provisions for the care of the child are made.



*When WAN traced the paternal family of Catherine's children, the paternal grandmother was so happy that though she was old and weak, the joy she felt gave her strength to carry the children and had them sit on her lap. The occasion showed the power of unity and love that is brought out through child tracing. The grandmother was overwhelmed with emotion upon seeing her grandchildren despite her own son, Odong, missing. The grandmother said, "I am happy that before my death, I have gotten that chance to see my grandchildren, something I had never thought of ever since my son was abducted". She saw her son through her grandchildren. She urged her sons to take full responsibility of the wives and children of Odong and that the land should be shown to them so that they can farm and settle while they will wait for their father to return.*

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*"I am happy that before my death, I have gotten that chance to see my grandchildren, something I had never thought of ever since my son was abducted" - Grandmother*

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JRP and WAN members meet paternal family in Nwoya district to discuss unification. Photo by JRP, 2017.

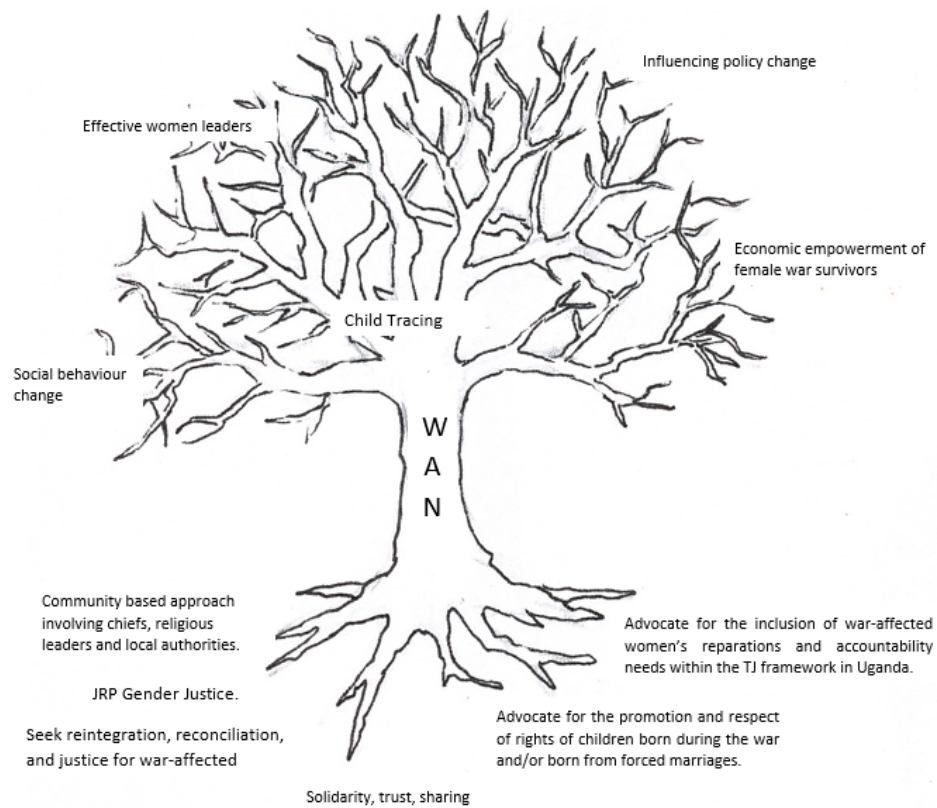
## Challenges

Child tracing can be an extremely complex exercise. Each case comes with its own challenges, which can stall the process or end it completely.

1. **Mistaken or unknown identity** - WAN and JRP have encountered cases in which the identity of a father is contested. For instance, in one case, three different families had a son who was previously abducted with the same name, each of whom could have been the father of the child. In such cases WAN relies on the assistance of former LRA commanders, other war survivors and surrounding communities who might have known the father before or during the conflict. Another related challenge is when the father used a pseudonym or nickname during his time with the LRA. Many rebels used pseudonyms to hide their identity and protect the families from government retaliation and recognition by the community. In such cases, it is difficult for the mother to initiate the search.
2. **Family pressure** - Despite pressure from their children, for some women the trauma experienced during captivity deters them and their families from searching for their children's paternal family. One mother remembers her family rejecting the idea of child tracing *"When I told my mother, she convened my brothers and told them, but they rejected the idea"*. The refusal by their families to locate the paternal clan is often fueled by years of anguish and not knowing if their daughter was still alive or dead in captivity. The families also feel the children belong with them because they never received any bride price or token acknowledging the wrong done by their daughter's abductor. In such cases, for the maternal family, finding the paternal clan is like sending their child back to their abductor. Maternal clans are also reluctant to encourage their daughter to initiate child tracing when the children involved are girls in anticipation of the bride price that will come when the child gets married. In some extreme cases the children are victims of abuse in their maternal homes. They are deprived of the opportunity to attend school and are used as labourers.
3. **Rejection, stigma and discrimination** - Some children face rejection from the paternal families, despite efforts by those involved in child tracing to mediate the process. The fact that their son is accused of committing atrocities in his community results in a rejection of grandchildren. Paternal clans stated their grandchildren could have spirits, or cen, that would propel him/her to commit the same crimes their father did. In other paternal families the rejection stems from the realisation that they might have to provide land for the child, something that they might not be willing to do. The rejection is also exacerbated by the stigma and discrimination that already exists in the community towards war survivors and the children they bore during captivity.

## Child tracing as a collaborative social project

Child tracing would not be possible without the collaborative efforts of the community and multiple stakeholders. WAN is an initiative under the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP), which was formed in 2005. The community-based approach implemented by WAN fosters social inclusion and cohesion. The involvement of several community actors such as elders, chiefs, religious leaders and local authorities creates a safe and supportive environment for victims of gender-based wartime sexual violence to advocate for their issues.



A WAN concept map. ©Tree drawing courtesy of dumielauxepices.net

WAN helps to reshape the realities of women who have experienced rejection, discrimination sexual and emotional violence from the LRA, their families and communities. At the heart of WAN is a relationship-based approach to leadership and empowerment that is characterised by the ethics of listening, sharing and exchanging knowledge. Activities, such as bead-making and wang-oo (traditional storytelling forums) provide a safe space for women to talk about what is in their hearts, from relationships and children to the daily struggles of survival. They confide in each other about their fears and hopes for the future and it offers a space that fosters transformation amidst the current pressures of life. The solidarity shared among members is the

foundation for building trust that translates into entrusting WAN with the responsibility of child tracing.<sup>vi</sup>

Crucially, the relationships that WAN is able to build directly with the community greatly improves the trust, transparency, and capacity of the child tracing initiative. This has resulted in the effective implementation of the program by WAN and its partners. WAN is meeting the need within their community because their operational model engenders a sense of positive social feedback between themselves and the public.

*We contribute support to solve a problem in one of our colleagues' home. For example, Nighty was left by her husband. Had nothing to eat. Grace also. Aba wanted to commit suicide with all her children. Even Margaret. Jenifer got in an accident but no relative came to help her. WAN took care of her and supported her recovery. We raised funding for her. The group bought land for her. Alero died, but WAN and JRP supported her burial and took her children to an orphanage. Adok lost her child and WAN members helped her with the burial. Even me, group members came for my mum's funeral in large numbers. – WAN member*



Some of the members of the WAN child tracing team, 2017.

## Child tracing as social repair

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*“Child tracing really widens the social network. We in Acholi rely on community for advice to move on with life. When a child is not wanted in the maternal home or by a new husband, it is the community that helps us. Child tracing helps the mother who loves her child so much to bring them to a place, the paternal clan, where they will be loved and cared for.” - JRP*

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Child tracing is more than a unification activity, it is also a mechanism for social repair. Given the pain that surrounds their existence, some children never felt the love of their mothers because they remind her of the violent nature in which they were conceived, an act which was in most cases void of love and affection. For some mothers, their children symbolised the trauma endured in captivity. However, for both mother and child, child tracing opens avenues for healing and acceptance. As one mother reflected, child tracing “is good because it improves the relationship between mothers and their children.”

Failure by the government of Uganda to respond to a petition submitted by WAN seeking formal reparations in 2014 strengthened WAN’s resolve to continue the community-led, informal reparative processes through child tracing.<sup>vii</sup> Child tracing acts as a justice-seeking mechanism and is a process that presents an opportunity for both mother and child to start a new life.

Child tracing is a testament to how communities can build resilience and tolerance in the aftermath of conflict. Bridging the knowledge disconnect between war survivors and civilians, tracing has contributed to the gradual mending of the social fabric that had been torn by decades of war. Child tracing has helped to address the information asymmetry through inclusive dialogue with both victims and perpetrators of violence; it has become a vehicle for forgiveness, healing and progress. For some families, child tracing has brought with it joy and a new-found strength to continue living.

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*“Child tracing is good because it improves the relationship between mothers and their children.” - Mother*

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## Lessons Learned

It is important to recognise the unique skills and capabilities of WAN and its partners in solving child tracing cases. The ability to turn victims into informants of this survivor-led initiative is empowering and illustrates the courage of the women who decide to take part in it. The success of the program has also been due to the WAN model of engagement that leverages the trust and local capacity of communities to achieve social cohesion. The child tracing initiative is an example of how community-based initiatives can thrive. The following are key lessons from this model:

1. **Involving community leaders:** Working in a post-conflict society requires gaining the trust of the community. The trauma of war continues many years after the battles are fought. For WAN, working with community leaders helped them gain the trust of the people. WAN adopted strategies that include sending letters, visiting and engaging with community leaders, such as local, parish and traditional chiefs, and elders before they visit villages to carry out child tracing activities. Involving community leaders helped formalize communication with the paternal and maternal families and increased the likelihood they would fully cooperate.
2. **Identity verification:** The paternal clan pre-visits enabled WAN to engage with the families and verify the identity of the father or mother and build trust.
3. **Sensitization:** There are some people who believe that women who were in captivity remained there because they wanted to. These people are not aware of the challenges abductees faced in captivity, which included death if they tried to escape. Many women and children who managed to escape from captivity experienced stigma and discrimination, which was mainly driven by lack of knowledge or lies perpetuated throughout their communities. Child tracing gives a platform for survivors to share their stories, which helps to sensitize communities on the experiences of abductees in captivity and ensures that accurate information is shared in the community.
4. **Fathers and child tracing:** Fathers to children have sought the help of WAN and JRP, and benefited from child tracing activities, meeting with maternal clans and, in some cases, bringing their children to the paternal clan. While the report focused on women, and while women continue to be the majority of those who initiate the process at the urging of their children, greater understanding is needed to identify the challenges fathers face. This includes the perception that child tracing is only for mothers. Another challenge is the perception that men were all perpetrators. Maternal clans and policies often reinforce this perception. Finally, there were a few cases where a father who recently returned from the DRC had been unable to bring his children home due to international laws on nationality.

Regardless of the culpability of a father, a child and their grandparents have the right, according to Acholi culture, to know of each other's existence; as does the child the identity of his or her father. WAN can make a deliberate effort to engage men who escaped captivity after their wives had already returned, and work with different agencies to address questions of perceived or real culpability.

5. **Sharing success stories:** Having a mediation team that comprises of people with successful child tracing stories encourages women and men who were in captivity to search for their children's families. It helps people to understand the concept of child tracing from a cultural and humanitarian perspective. WAN has also been taking part in knowledge and experience sharing workshops with other support organisations of women who have survived wartime and electoral violence in Africa. These platforms have been leadership opportunities for WAN to showcase their support programmes and inspire other women to influence policy and change their communities' behaviour and attitudes toward survivors. Radio programmes regarding the process has also led to more grandparents approaching WAN and seeking their support to find their grandchildren.
6. **Archiving and building social capital:** WAN's success has also been due to capitalizing on the memory of war survivors and building reliable networks, which include NGOs, former LRA commanders and community informants. Documenting child tracing will become a reference point in building effective, resilient communities and sustainable networks in other conflict and post conflict regions. The documentation of child tracing activities is relevant to:  
a) informing future justice processes; b) informing truth seeking processes; c) Holding former LRA rebels accountable for the abductions and atrocities committed towards women who were in captivity; d) Informing research and e) Informing future policy making (e.g seeking reparations at the state level). In addition to documenting current child tracing initiatives in Northern Uganda, future literature on comparative studies of other post conflict societies, in Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sierra, Yemen, DRC, Bosnia, etc., could clarify how they have approached paternity issues of children born of war.
7. **Social repair:** Members of child tracing teams often have eye witness accounts of the fathers and other abductees during their time in captivity. Where the son of the paternal clan was abducted, and when they have had no contact or information on the whereabouts of their son, child tracing teams can provide closure and promotes acceptance of the child.
8. **Involving social services:** Involving relevant child protection authorities helps protect the welfare of the child during child tracing and following family unification. This could include working with child officers or cultural institutions to ensure that the child will be safe in the new environment or that the paternal clan will not in any way endanger the child.



## Opok's Story

The story of Opok (18) shows how children initiate child tracing. He returned from captivity with his mother and began living with an aunt. Like many other children born in captivity, he was not attending school and was being ill-treated by his relatives. He approached WAN to help him trace his paternal home with the prospects of finding better living conditions and the opportunity to go to school. The child tracing team was composed of four members of WAN, the Justice and Reconciliation Project, local leaders and a former LRA commander who knew Opok's father during the war. Together, the team travelled to the village thought to be of the son's father, Okello, in Kitgum District.

The first task was to identify the village of Okello's family. The former LRA commander had known him during the war, and where he hailed from. This was corroborated by a member of WAN, who also recalled that Okello came from the same village of another commander whom was popularly known in the war. She also recalled that Okello had told her that one of his sisters was called Lakiye, a detail they would later share to convince the parents that Opok was indeed their grandchild.

Upon contacting Okello's family of their intentions to visit them, his parents were fearful. At first, they denied being related to Okello. During the war, they had been under strict surveillance by the Ugandan government soldiers (UPDF) who suspected their son, Okello, was clandestinely supporting them. To build confidence, the child tracing team reassured them of the purpose of their visit. They then told the family to take time to consider their request.

Later that very day, the child tracing team received a call from the Okello's family, who confirmed they were indeed Okello's family. They agreed on a meeting date and also requested Opok accompany them. Opok's mother agreed to travel with the team and her son in order to establish whether or not they were willing to acknowledge and care for the child. However, upon reaching the homestead, the child tracing team found the clan had already met to discuss who would assume responsibility for Opok, and had already agreed. Immediately upon entering the compound, the family began to prepare to perform rituals (nyono twon gweno) to welcoming the child into the home. After they performed the rituals, Opok was escorted inside the house. As soon as they took him in, the celebrations began. As one member of the child tracing team recalled, there were so many people celebrating and dancing that it was hard to believe, given how uncertain the whole process had started.

The paternal family was informed that it was their duty to go to the maternal family's home with a token of appreciation to thank them for taking care of him and asking for permission to take him home with them. Such a process follows Acholi protocols as a sign of respect to the maternal family. Okello's sister, Lakiye, promised to take care of Opok. She then informed Opok that one of his brothers – a child to the late Okello – was also staying at the homestead. Opok's brother, also born into the LRA, had managed to find the Okello homestead by himself after his mother told him the name of his grandfather and where the home is located. When he reached Kitgum, he began to ask random people for directions to the homestead until he found it. The family welcomed the boy and his aunt and Okello's sister is also taking care of him and paying for his education.



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A grandmother meets her grandson for the first time. Although the picture is obscured for confidentiality, you can see the outline of the grandmother holding grandson (in red), now a young man, on her lap.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The precise number of children (under 18) and youth (14-30) abducted is difficult to state definitely. In a 2006

<sup>ii</sup> See Ladish, 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> United Nations | International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals. The United Nation Court Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. <http://www.icty.org/en/features/crimes-sexual-violence>

<sup>iv</sup> On the role of the ICC in Protecting the Rights of Children Born of Rape in War, see Neenan, 2018

<sup>v</sup> A collection of children Laws . A simplified handbook on international and national laws & policies on children. [https://www.unicef.org/uganda/collection\\_of\\_children\\_laws\\_finale\\_110711.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/uganda/collection_of_children_laws_finale_110711.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> For more on the Women's Advocacy Network see <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.org/initiatives/womens-advocacy-network/>

<sup>vii</sup> Women's Advocacy Network submits petition, <http://www.justiceandreconciliation.org/blog/2014/womens-advocacy-network-delivers-petition/>

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## Child Tracing

A social project to unite children  
born of war with their paternal clans

2018

Women's Advocacy Network  
The School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, University of British Columbia