What constitutes efficacious child protection programmes for girls formerly associated with fighting forces in post-conflict contexts?

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Abstract

This presentation describes activities I engaged in as a Fulbright Scholar to the Program on Forced Migration & Health, Columbia University, New York. The Program works in the field of humanitarian responses in complex emergencies. Globally, there has been a significant increase in psychosocial interventions in the aftermath of political violence. During my time as a Fulbright Scholar, I sought to develop elements of my work in recent years, such as to critically examine assumptions inherent in the psychosocial reintegration of girls and young women formerly associated with fighting forces.

Here, I present two complementary research projects undertaken during my time as a Fulbright Scholar which involved spending part of my time in Africa doing fieldwork.

Project 1 explores the social reintegration of young mothers and their children returned from captivity in the Lords Resistance Army, a rebel group in Northern Uganda from the perspective of local communities.

Project 2 introduces an innovative participatory action research project (PAR) entitled *Girl mothers in fighting forces and their Children in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone/Liberia: Action research to assess and improve their situations.*

Results convey the power of action research to facilitate girl mothers as active agents in their social reintegration as they take on roles of researchers, advocates & community mobilisers, thus promoting resiliency and empowerment.

Introduction

From November 2007 to June 2008, I was a Fulbright Scholar at the Program on Forced Migration & Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York. My research examined efficacious psychosocial programming for girls and young women formerly associated with fighting forces.

Female formerly-abducted child soldiers and their children born in captivity have been identified as an extremely vulnerable group (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

❖ What does 'reintegration' mean for young women abducted as children now returning home with young children themselves?

❖ What are the communities' experiences of the return of formerly-abducted girl mothers and their children?

❖ How can we ensure formerly-abducted girls experience power & autonomy in psychosocial programming in order to support their social reintegration?

DEFINING SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

The Paris Principles (2007) define Child Reintegration as "the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation".

Children define social reintegration as "Being loved and cared for by their families, being accepted and welcomed by the community and living in peace and unity with others".

Project 1

Community perspectives on formerly-abducted girls' social reintegration, Northern Uganda with Fiona Shanahan, University College Cork.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

To understand factors that constrain or motivate communities to facilitate formerly-abducted girls' to access opportunities to develop skilled, mature identities in their communities.

METHOD

Fifty in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with young women, men, elders, ajwakas (traditional healers), local authorities, & NGO staff.

RESULTS

❖ Extent of sexual violence against formerly-abducted girls by LRA rebels and many girls by government forces and within displacement camps.
"In our culture women are very special people but because of the war most of these cultural norms that have been associated with women have been destroyed … an Acholi girl would not be taken outside and slept with in the bush …. It is taboo, a very big one."
Okello, An Acholi Elder, Gulu

❖ Collective impact of sexual violence.
"The men were very very hurt. It is a confirmation by the perpetrator that the man was useless, because the impossible could happen in his presence. So… Women should not take it that men didn't suffer, psychologically men suffered worst."
Otim, An Acholi Elder, Gulu

❖ Power relations, low status, internalised 'inferiority complex' a constraining factor in formerly-abducted girls' social reintegration.

❖ Formal justice, traditional justice, social justice in social reintegration.

  • The endemic nature of sexual violence exists as a barrier to apology and acknowledgement.

  • Community girls perceived that boys and men who return from the bush can get away with rape, that they are used to doing things by force and see nothing wrong with it.

  • Impunity regarding community rape due to police corruption; disenfranchisement due to poverty; stigma; silencing.

❖ Elders reported that social justice is important, in order to support girls in making a good life.
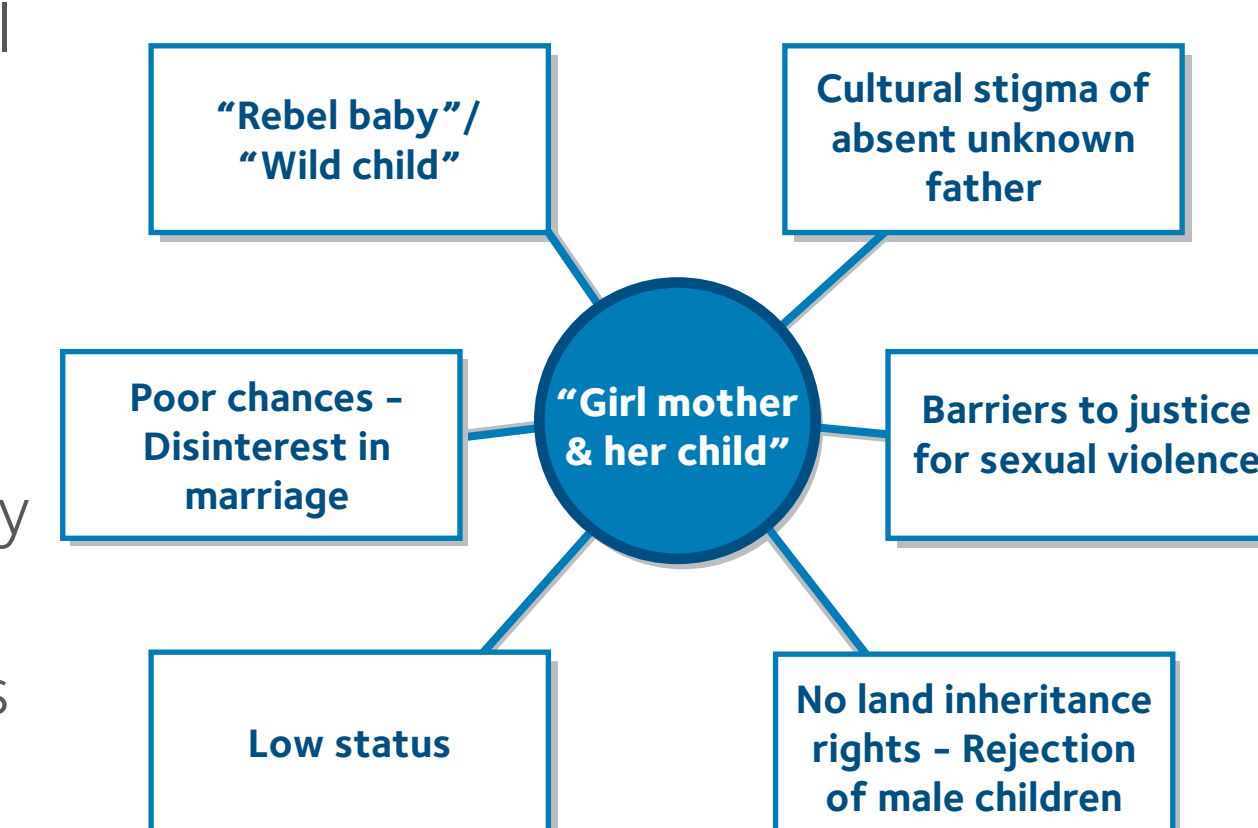
Project 2

Girl mothers in fighting Forces and their Children in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone/Liberia: Participatory action research to assess and improve their situations with Prof. Susan McKay, University of Wyoming; Prof. Mike Wessells, Christian Children's Fund (CCF)/ Columbia University & Miranda Worthen, University of California, Berkeley.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

To engage formerly-abducted girl mothers and community girl mothers in generating and analysing information about their situation, in order to develop solutions to the problems they face so they may be effective agents in their social reintegration.

PRINCIPLES

❖ No research without action
❖ Girls' participation and agency is central.
❖ Empower girls to make decisions
❖ Enhance alliances, especially with community

METHOD

Step 1: Girls gather information about their situation. Methods include weekly meetings, drama, mediated family discussions, community consultation..

Step 2: Girls identify, prioritise and implement social action plans with community support. Girls prioritised income-generating activities, e.g. hair-braiding; petty trading; group cultivation; livestock rearing; food vending & restaurant businesses.

Step 3: Girls learn to analyse their information and share it with community through discussions and community dramas to inform others about their lives, educate other girls, and build positive community relations.

EMERGING PROJECT OUTCOMES

Positive impact of girls' meetings and mutual support
"Our meetings have created a sense of one-ness among each other and now we share our burdens. We are each others' sisters."

More acceptance & support from parents & families
"The money from my livelihood (palm oil production) has helped improved my relationship with my parents. Since I can now meet some of my needs."

Stigma/discrimination being addressed
"We did a drama about what it was like when we came back from the bush and people shied away from us. We did our play to the community and they said that they wanted to join us and join in our activities. Before, others were shy of us and now they talk upright to us."

Gender-relations improving

For more information see – http://www.uwyo.edu/girlmotherspar/

Conclusion

From these two complementary research projects, we learn that efficacious child protection programming for the social reintegration of formerly abducted girls needs a holistic, community-based approach. Efficacious programming has to address the impact of violence on individuals and the collective-the suffering of fathers of formerly abducted girls, and the impact of widespread sexual violence on never-abducted girls and women. It has to create opportunities for the positive restructuring of social relations. It has to facilitate girls to identify their core issues and act from their own motivation. It has to understand the factors that mobilise community members to facilitate girls' reintegration. As girls take initiative, community members sense hope and want to be part of it.

Diagram centre: "Girl mother & her child"
- "Rebel baby"/ "Wild child"
- Cultural stigma of absent unknown father
- Poor chances – Disinterest in marriage
- Barriers to justice for sexual violence
- Low status
- No land inheritance rights - Rejection of male children

References
McKay, S. & Mazurana, D. (2004). Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War. Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development.
Paris Principles, Feb. 2007 http://www.info.gov.hk/info/eoc/annex6_e.pdf