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How formerly abducted women in post-conflict situations are reasserting their humanity in a hostile environment: photovoice evidence from northern Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Northern Uganda received significant international attention during and immediately after the conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army, in which over 20,000 women and children were abducted and trafficked. However, globally there has been little investigation into the long-term impacts on formerly abducted women in post-conflict reconstruction, or on their own efforts to improve their conditions. This article presents original photovoice evidence from 13 co-researchers; all members of the Women's Advocacy Network, a grassroots organisation seeking to improve life in northern Uganda for women. All the co-researchers are from the Acholi ethnic group and were formerly abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army. They are all engaged in rebuilding their lives in Gulu, northern Uganda. The article seeks to present the work of the co-researchers and explores the long-term needs they identify for formerly abducted women in conflict zones. It also explores how their own experiences with abduction continues to erode the recognition of their humanity, both in terms of how they are perceived by their communities and how they view themselves, and how they are individually and collectively working to reassert their place in the moral universe.

Le nord de l'Ouganda a fait l'objet d'une attention internationale considérable durant et juste après le conflit entre le gouvernement de l'Ouganda et l'Armée de résistance du Seigneur, conflit durant lequel plus de 20 000 femmes et enfants ont été enlevés et ont été victimes de traite. Cependant, à l'échelle mondiale, il n'y a guère eu d'études sur les impacts à long terme sur les femmes rescapées dans les contextes de reconstruction post-conflit, ou sur leurs propres efforts en vue d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie. Cet article présente des données originales recueillies grâce à la méthode Photovoice par 13 co-chercheuses, toutes membres du Women's Advocacy Network, une organisation de la base populaire qui cherche à améliorer la vie des femmes dans le nord de l'Ouganda. Toutes les co-chercheuses sont issues du groupe ethnique des Acholis et sont des rescapées de l'Armée de résistance du Seigneur. Elles tentent toutes de reconstruire leur vie à Gulu, dans le nord de l'Ouganda. Cet article entend présenter le travail des co-chercheuses et examine les besoins à long terme qu'elles identifient pour les femmes rescapées dans les zones en conflit. Il examine par ailleurs la manière dont leurs propres expériences de l'enlèvement continuent d'éroder la reconnaissance de leur humanité, tant sur le plan de la manière dont elles sont perçues

KEYWORDS

Post-conflict; human trafficking; Photovoice; Uganda; Lord's Resistance Army; women's groups

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par leurs communautés respectives que sur celui de la manière dont elles se voient elles-mêmes, et comment elles s'efforcent, individuellement et collectivement, de réaffirmer leur place dans l'univers moral.

El norte de Uganda fue objeto de una importante atención internacional durante e inmediatamente después del conflicto entre el gobierno de Uganda y el Ejército de Resistencia del Señor, en el que más de 20 000 mujeres y niños fueron secuestrados y traficados. A pesar de ello, en la reconstrucción posterior al conflicto las investigaciones sobre los impactos experimentados a largo plazo por mujeres que fueron secuestradas o sobre los esfuerzos que realizan para mejorar sus condiciones son escasas a nivel mundial. El presente artículo aporta evidencia inédita, obtenida mediante la aplicación de la metodología de fotovoz; la misma es proporcionada por 13 coinvestigadoras, todas ellas miembros de la Women's Advocacy Network [Red de Incidencia de las Mujeres], una organización de base cuyo objetivo es mejorar la vida de las mujeres en el norte de Uganda. Todas las coinvestigadoras pertenecen al grupo étnico acholi y fueron secuestradas por el Ejército de Resistencia del Señor. Asimismo, todas están implicadas en la reconstrucción de sus vidas en Gulu, al norte de Uganda. El artículo expone el trabajo que efectúan y examina las necesidades a largo plazo identificadas por ellas como mujeres anteriormente secuestradas en zonas de conflicto. Además, analiza cómo sus vivencias durante el secuestro siguen erosionando el reconocimiento de su humanidad, en términos de cómo son percibidas por sus comunidades, cómo se ven a sí mismas, y cómo están trabajando individual y colectivamente para reafirmar su lugar en un universo moral.

Introduction

Human abduction and trafficking in conflict zones has increased in recent years, so too has attention to humanitarian intervention on behalf of abducted individuals during conflicts, and on post-conflict transitional human justice for systematic human rights abuses in conflict zones (Cockayne and Walker 2016). However, there has been little investigation into the long-term impacts on formerly abducted women in post-conflict reconstruction, or on their own efforts to improve their conditions. There is still much too little recognition of the self-help that women offer themselves and other women through grassroots organisations.

Since 2016, the international community, led by the United Nations and the World Bank, have been developing joined-up ways of working that focus on all parts of *the humanitarian–development–peace nexus* (International Council of Voluntary Agencies 2018). This triple nexus seeks renewed collaboration in conflict and post-conflict contexts between the international community, humanitarian actors, and local peacebuilders towards long-term prevention of violence and future conflicts. The triple nexus seeks to address both the seeds of conflict that lie in poor humanitarian and post-conflict responses, as well conflicts protracted over many years. An important goal of the triple nexus is to build long-term planning even into short-term assistance so that humanitarian action fosters trust, cohesion, and self-reliance in conflict and post-conflict societies (Weber 2018).

Here, we seek to inform the further development and implementation of the triple nexus by pointing out the specific long-term concerns of women abducted in conflict situations, as well as the importance of local women's organisations in mitigating and responding to crises that erode human dignity. The article focuses on women who have survived extreme sexual and gender-based violence. These same women have been greatly underserved by humanitarian and government responses in the region. In fact, formerly abducted women in conflict zones face acute challenges in asserting their humanity, and their rightful claims to support from the international community of non-government organisations (NGOs) and inter-governmental bodies that oversee post-conflict reconstruction. International development donors, scholars, and practitioners commonly miss or ignore the long-term impacts of conflict and abduction on women in terms of their day-to-day conditions, their individual and collective agential responses to post-conflict conditions, and their priorities for long-term humanitarian responses. Women's claims on social, political, and economic structures in short- and long-term post-conflict humanitarian responses are often excluded in favour of interests deemed more vital to local stability and economic development (Deiana 2016). Yet ironically, feminist perspectives on post-conflict situations emphasise the unique opportunities that they may offer for true social transformation that improves women's ability to participate fully in society (Porter 2016).

Northern Uganda is a key context where these struggles are occurring, and where researchers can gain understanding of women's realities. The region received significant international attention during and immediately after the conflict between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), in which over 20,000 women and children were abducted and trafficked (Human Rights Watch 2012). However, in the decade that followed the cessation of hostilities in 2006, there has been a significant departure of NGOs present in the region and an extensive scaling back of international and national attention to the area. There remain deep fissures in society, and few institutions are willing to engage critically in transformative community-building activities that address the gendered causes of conflict, or the dehumanising forces that act on formerly abducted women.

Formerly abducted women have short-, medium- and long-term needs that range from immediate survival, following liberation, to the everyday needs of long-term autonomous living after re-integration into their communities (Aron *et al.* 2006). Cathy Zimmerman *et al.* describe abduction and trafficking as a 'multi-stage process of cumulative harm' (2011, 327), where victims continue to experience negative effects long after liberation. Within this framework, reintegration is the long-term last stage where the formerly abducted achieve full economic, cultural, civil, and political acceptance in their community (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2002). A recurring observation is that the long-term impacts of all types of abduction and trafficking are under-appreciated and under-serviced, especially physical and mental health and livelihood prospects for women (McCarthy 2018; Tsai 2017). Of particular relevance here, Luke Bearup (2016) argues that full reintegration may be impossible for formerly abducted women because NGOs' programmatic responses grossly misunderstand the social and cultural challenges of reintegration.

Research suggests that long-term reintegration efforts for those formerly abducted by the LRA have faced serious challenges (Maina 2009). There appears to be no difference in mental health measures between those served by reintegration centres and those that self-reintegrated (Muldoon *et al.* 2014). In fact, formerly abducted individuals in northern Uganda – the context of our article – have very high rates of depression, post-traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation (Ertl *et al.* 2014). Further, as will be explored below, formerly abducted women have great difficulty remarrying, causing extended challenges for accessing community resources and reintegration (Kiconco and Nthakomwa 2018).

This article presents original photovoice evidence from 13 co-researchers who are members of the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN), a grassroots organisation seeking to improve life in northern Uganda for women. The women involved in the initiative are from the Acholi ethnic group. They were all forcibly abducted by the LRA, held captive against their will, and made to be forced solders, labourers, and wives. Among themselves, those abducted by the LRA often use the term 'formerly abducted individuals', a term that we will also use within this article. They are all rebuilding their lives in Gulu, the principal town of northern Uganda.

In the next section, we share some theoretical insights that we find useful in understanding the issues raised by the co-researchers, which emphasise the gendered and racialised nature of the exclusion and invisibility that formerly abducted women experience. We then present the work of the co-researchers, using photovoice. This is a participatory action research method, combining ideas from feminist thought, critical pedagogy traditions, and documentary practices. It is often used in complex policy contexts where individual identities interact with daily life in complex ways (Harris 2017). As we relate here, using photovoice enabled women not only to assert their humanity and their right to be perceived as human, but also to identify long-term needs of formerly abducted women in conflict zones. They are individually and collectively reasserting their place in the moral universe, and their rights to be seen and heard in post-reconstruction processes.

Using the concept of the 'social contract'

We use the notion of the 'social contract' to help shed light on the way in which formerly abducted women are denied their humanity and a sense of belonging in post-conflict contexts. The social contract is a familiar idea in Western philosophy.[1] Broadly, it implies that the members of a given society decide to live together based on shared agreement (D'Agostino *et al.* 2017). At the heart of contract theory is the idea of consent – that everyone agrees to abide by the principles and laws established by the contract. This contract can be regarded as an invisible and unacknowledged system that undergirds society, and controls who gets what and who gets left out. It determines who belongs to a moral universe where one's humanity is recognised, respected, and valued, and who does not.

The social contract has both gendered and racialised dimensions. Feminist theorist Carole Pateman (1988) argued that patriarchy undergirds the workings of the social contract. She points out that in patriarchal societies, men were the only signatories to the social contract (just as only men were conceived as having human rights, or possessing the status of

citizen) and, secondly, that the social contract is a contract between men who agree that they will dominate women through marriage, motherhood, and sexual exploitation.

Charles Mills' writing offers important perspectives on race and, by extension, reminds us that international development can be critiqued for its post-colonial overtones of Western support to 'developing' countries, on the terms that the West dictates. In *The Racial Contract*, Charles Mills (1997) provides a remarkable account of the West's will to dominate and control non-Western people of colour. Charles Mills argues that the Western social contract is a contact agreed to by white men and, secondly, that the social contract is really an agreement that white men will dominate all others. In addition, perhaps Charles Mills' most significant contribution to the field of critical race theory is his analysis of *who counts* or *who is recognised* as a person. To say that there is a racial contract that undergirds society is to argue for an invisible and unacknowledged system that controls who gets what and who gets left out. This contract determines who belongs to a moral universe where one's humanity is recognised, respected, and valued, and who does not.

Using Carole Pateman's and Charles Mills' work as a critical lens, we note how long-term post-conflict conditions continue to erode the humanity of formerly abducted women, and how, as individuals, they go about reasserting their place in the moral universe. What is interesting is that members of WAN – and other women who returned from the bush – *acquired* the status of being less than human *after* returning from the bush; before their return, they were normal members of the community, recognised and protected by the rules of the moral universe to which they were born. But, on their return, they became sub-human in the eyes of their society.

The notion of a social contract provides a useful way to understand the continued struggle for recognition sought by WAN members and other war-affected women and children who suffer from stigmatism after returning from the 'bush'. Formerly abducted women are excluded from the social contract in a context where patriarchal and post-colonial power relations are embedded in local, national, and international power relations. While these power relations exist in times of peace in Uganda, a post-colonial developing nation, these dynamics are certainly heightened in conflict and post-conflict conditions due to increased outside interventions and the dynamic changes that occur in post-conflict communities. The worldviews of policymakers, practitioners, and humanitarian agencies are formed by and operate within these power relations and impact how agendas and strategies are prioritised. Thus, the exclusion from the social contract experienced by formerly abducted women cannot be separated from or understood without recognising it as a form of gendered and racialised injustice in which all post-conflict reconstruction actors participate.

Another researcher, Erin Baines (2011), provides useful insights for us in this discussion. She notes that in the post-conflict context of northern Uganda, notions of responsibility and blame are binary. Individuals were either combatants that aided the LRA and were complicit in the atrocities of war, or they were non-combatant victims. Erin Baines argues that there is a missing 'grey area' that recognises that women who were formerly abducted by the LRA had no choice, or that the notion of choice loses meaning given their experiences. However, as it is, formerly abducted individuals are forced into the binary and seen as sub-human monsters excluded from the social contract.

Introducing the WAN Photovoice Project

Institutions and organisations involved

WAN[2] was founded in 2008 by war-affected women in northern Uganda to empower its members to realise economic security, health and well-being, and social justice. It operates programmes for livelihood projects, health, social and educational services, peer support, familial tracing of the paternal clan for children, reconciliation with the families of the men who fathered their children, searching for missing children, reducing stigma and social exclusion, and seeking justice and reparation. In 2014, WAN presented a petition[3] to the Ugandan Parliament. This not only called for recognition of the severe impact of the war on women, but also called for reparations and budgetary commitments from the national government for women and children in northern Uganda. But while the petition was heard on the floor of parliament, no action has yet been taken by the national government to address the stated concerns.

The Center for Peace and Development (CPD) at the University of Oklahoma in the USA works with grassroots women's organisations in northern Uganda to realise those organisations' mission of fostering peace and change for the region. WAN and CPD were introduced to each other through mutual collaboration with St. Monica's Vocational School in Gulu. WAN and CPD have an ongoing partnership that has involved several grassroots initiatives and action research projects.

Our article draws on the first-hand experience of Grace Acan and Evelyn Amony. Grace Acan is the WAN Program Officer and a community rights advocate, working with war-affected communities to promote truth, dialogue, and reconciliation. She is an abduction survivor, and has written a book about her experience of captivity with the LRA (Acan 2018). Evelyn Amony is a human rights advocate in Uganda, an abduction survivor, and mother of five girls. After escaping from LRA captivity, she joined the peace negotiations to try to end the conflict. She is the WAN Chairperson, a founding member of the organisation, a co-researcher in the photovoice project, and has also written a book about her experience (Amony 2015). Maria del Guadalupe Davidson is a female-identified, Black-Latina feminist scholar who is invested in coalitional politics. She has worked in partnership with John Harris and WAN since 2015. John Harris is a male-identified, White scholar of regional and city planning. He is Co-Director of the CPD.

Methodology

Photovoice is a participatory action research method. It combines ideas from feminist thought, critical pedagogy traditions, and documentary practices. It asks individuals to photograph some aspect of their daily environment and use those images to tell the story of an important aspect of their life (Wang 1999). Photovoice seeks to centre the analysis of complicated social contexts where existing governance and service provision seem inadequate. It (re)centres knowledge on everyday local experiences, knowledge, and values (*ibid.*).

Photovoice involves three steps. First, personal reflections about the strengths and concerns about one's community or one's daily life are gathered through individual

photography. Second, knowledge and critical dialogue are promoted through group discussion of the photos each member has taken. Third, the method emphasises the transformative potential of speaking truth to power through presentation and discussion of the images and the stories associated with them (*ibid.*).

In initial meetings to discuss a potential WAN–CPD partnership, WAN prioritised initiatives that would amplify the voices of war-affected women. Despite international press and long-time NGO involvement in the region, WAN asserted that the everyday reality of war-affected women in northern Uganda is not widely known. Co-author John Harris had used photovoice in a number of settings and, with Lupe Davidson, offered the method to WAN. It was decided the collaboration would work towards the goal of creating both an internet-based platform and a physical exhibition to bring those everyday realities to a larger audience as a part of WAN's advocacy agenda. The project was funded by the University of Oklahoma. Project activities started in January 2017, when Davidson and Harris and five University of Oklahoma students worked with WAN's leadership and 13 co-researchers from local subgroups in Gulu to conduct the project. The group met four times during the initial phase in January 2017 at St. Monica's Vocational School, and then two additional follow-up meetings in March and June of the same year. All conversations were translated between English and Acholi and recorded.

It is important to note what ethical precautions were included. There was significant discussion of the co-researchers' own consent and control over the project. Examples of similar websites were shown to the groups. At the beginning of every session or meeting, co-researchers were encouraged only to share from their experiences if they felt comfortable; they should not discuss with the group or include information in the project that they did not want to include.

Discussions were also held about how the co-researchers' images had been used previously by NGOs, and how the co-researchers wanted this project to be different. For instance, co-researchers wanted to control most aspects of how they were presented, including regular reports on the website development. They also wanted physical copies of the images, and a physical report of their work in addition to the website. Co-researchers were provided a printed set of their photographs, printed reports of the photovoice work, and printed prototypes of the website so that they would understand what images were being used and what captions were associated with the images.

At the March and June 2017 meetings all images and captions were reviewed with co-researchers and adjusted to meet their specifications. All co-researchers were offered the option of complete anonymity, including the option to not use their real name and not include images of themselves. Some chose to use pseudonyms, or to change the nature of the captions to suit their level of comfort, while others felt this was a chance to tell their own story in their own name to a wider audience.

Lengthy discussions were also had about how no one in the wider community should be photographed without their consent, and that the pictures should not be used to tell stories about any individual that the individual did not want told about themselves. Co-researchers were given instruction on how to talk to potential photography subjects about the project, how their images would be used on the internet, and what information might

accompany the images. Through the website prototype provided to the co-researchers, all images and captions were checked to confirm that all humans had verbally consented to being included in the project and that they understood how their images would be used. Written consent was not used, due to low rates of literacy in the region. When images were created where the co-researcher did not receive verbal consent, or could not remember if she explained how the image was to be used to the person in the picture, those pictures were excluded from publication. Many co-researchers took pictures of children, but only images of the co-researcher's family were used. The option of blurring the faces of children were offered to the co-researchers.

The co-researchers received training on how to use a digital camera, and were presented with the following two prompts for their own photography:

1. Please photograph things, people, places that are important to you that impact your life positively. These are things that you wish others to know about your life in a positive way. What helps you? What makes your life better? What helps you support yourself?
2. Please photograph aspects of your life that are important to you that impact you negatively or which make your life more difficult. What is challenging to you in your life? What would you like to see changed to improve your life?

The co-researchers then took several days to take photographs. The group reconvened several times for three purposes. First, each co-researcher dictated a statement about themselves they wanted the world to know. This was to be used as an introduction to their own photographs. Second, each co-researcher explained her photographs and their meaning to the rest of the group. Some co-researchers took fewer than ten photos, others over a hundred, but each was given time to present them to each individual's satisfaction. Third, after individual discussion of the photos, lengthy group discussions were held about what they meant to the group collectively.

It is important to note that co-researchers directed how their images and information were used. Faculty and students from CPD compiled the photographs with captions translated from audio recordings of co-researchers' explanations. These photographs and their captions were presented back to the co-researchers twice – in March and June – so that co-researchers could confirm and correct all aspects of the material.

The website, http://wan.photovoice.oucreate.com, contains the entirety of the WAN Photovoice Project.

As discussed above, WAN has an ongoing agenda for advocacy and action. The photovoice project is being used to advance that agenda. In additional to its online presence, the WAN Photovoice Project has been shown in multiple venues in Uganda and Oklahoma, USA. It was featured at the Women's Grassroots Peacebuilding Conference in Gulu in June 2018, which brought together nine grassroots women's peace activist groups from around northern Uganda.

The next sections share some key findings. We include the co-researchers' photos and their captions, together with the co-researcher's opening statements, and material from group discussions. Within the findings, photos and statements are associated with the

names chosen by the co-researchers, but quotations from group discussions are anonymised. While the presentation below has been curated by this article's authors, we believe it accurately represents the work of the co-researchers.

Findings: long-term impacts

Rejection from society

One of the most important long-term implications of the co-researchers' experiences with abduction is the rejection and continued stigmatisation they experience from family and community upon return. Women returning from captivity were blamed for the atrocities committed by the LRA. Further, they returned to communities and families who themselves were impacted by the war, and had few resources to spare. As a result, women who were formerly abducted are often cut off from their families and communities and are largely excluded from the social and economic support systems these provide. Additionally, most women returned from the bush with children, a result of their forced marriages. These children face considerable stigma because they are thought of as children of LRA soldiers.

This exclusion is particularly troubling to co-researchers. During captivity, they maintained hope that they and their children would be welcomed back into loving homes. As one co-researcher stated during group discussions:

> We who were taken as children into the bush, we did not find love there, we were not given love by our captors. When we came back home as adults we expected to find love from our parents. Instead, our parents also denied us love.

Another co-researcher explained:

> In my case, when I first came back … I was so happy that I would be going back home. I would be with my parents together with my child. Since the father of my child passed away while I was in captivity, and I didn't know where his home was, so I thought this child of mine would be like my brother and my mother would help me take care of him. But when I went back home from the rehabilitation centre, my mother rejected me. It was so hard that I thought of going back to the bush [to re-join my captors]. I asked God why he didn't kill me just like so many others that passed away there.

The children of the co-researchers are also excluded from local social and economic systems. This makes it difficult for the women to provide for their children and constrains their long-term prospects for education and livelihoods. Abwola Betty discussed this in her statement to the world:

> Currently our children are fatherless and ostracised. In the villages, this means they have no right to education or property … The women in northern Uganda were abducted as children and taken to the bush. They were forced to have children as children. They became mothers and were given the full responsibility of children against their will. When they returned from captivity the women of northern Uganda had to take the full burden of these children; children they did not choose to have. The majority of these children have no fathers because they died in the bush, and the children cannot be returned to the husband's family because we often do not even know which village the men came from.

Aber Santa explored this theme in Photo 1.

Photo 1. Aber Santa. I had just completed primary school and was starting Secondary 1 when I was abducted. When I returned from the bush my mother loved and accepted me, however, my father rejected me. With the help of my mother I tried to go back to school but had to abandon school to care for my child because whenever I was at school my father abused my child because she was a child of the rebels. Because of this I decided to leave my parents' home and rent a home for myself and my child. I prayed for a man that would love my child because I didn't know the history of my child's father from the bush and could not find him or his family.

Rejection requires formerly abducted women to recreate social and economic support systems for themselves; a new social contract. As will be discussed below, this in part led to the formation of WAN and other organisations like it. Piloya Margaret discusses this in relation to Photo 2.

Photo 2. Piloya Margret. This picture is of a woman who stands [by] me. She is not a relative but she is my friend. At the time that I came home from the bush my mother had died, I had been rejected from home and had no one to turn to. She started to give me advice and told me to rent a house in town to provide for myself. Anytime I am lonely I go to her and she will comfort me. She has been like my mom, and she plays the role of a mother to me. This is her picture.

Education of children born in captivity

As discussed, one of the most important long-term consequences of abduction is women raising children alone, outside familial support networks. As one co-researcher explained in group discussion: 'My family told me to take my children to the government', instead of relying on the ethic of extended family care that is traditional in northern Uganda societies. The co-researchers stressed that one of the heaviest burdens they bear comes from trying to send their children to school. This is evident in Plan's statement to the world:

> I came back from the bush with three children who I am taking sole responsibility for. I work very hard to send them to school since I never had the opportunity [to go myself]. This year they will be in Secondary 2, but I need support if they are to continue to senior levels. I know the struggle of not going to school and I do not want that for them. I tailor and farm for a living, but the money I make is not enough to send all of them to school.

The co-researchers expressed concern that their inability to send their children to school will not only constrain their children's futures but will contribute to future instability in the region. Betty Abwola said in her statement to the world:

> Mothers are working hard to send their children to school, but the kind of schools they can afford are of a low standard. The children receive below-standard education and cannot excel. I am fearful that these undereducated children will ask 'why couldn't my mother send me to a good school?' and when they find out they will begin another conflict.

Co-researchers' limited education and livelihoods

Most women abducted by the LRA were taken as children, which deprived them of opportunities for an education. Co-researchers connect their lack of education to both a sense of their own personal limitations and their struggles to provide for their children due to limited livelihood options. This is a cause of sorrow and long-term concern for the co-researchers. As Amony Jennifer said in her statement to the world:

> When I was abducted at the age of 14, I was denied education and a better future. The time I should have spent studying I spent in the bush. The world left me behind.

The co-researchers noted that they piece together livelihoods through multiple means. Some have received basic training in tailoring or handicraft production. WAN has also worked to provide training and help women start their own small businesses. Betty Scovia's photos (Photos 3 and 4) and Evelyn Amony's photo (Photo 5) show some of the ways the co-researchers are supporting themselves, and how they connect their livelihoods to their continued stigmatisation and social and economic exclusion.

Photo 3. Betty Scovia. This picture shows me farming. I went to many Women's Advocacy Network trainings on ways to support myself. I realised that farming was the best way to support myself because if you are not educated you can farm. Because I was abducted I could not finish school. Here I am harvesting groundnuts (peanuts).

Photo 4. Betty Scovia. This picture shows how I support myself when I am in town. I make beads and sell them to feed my family, but sometimes there is no market for beads. This is what I do for a living.

Photo 5. Evelyn Amony. This photo shows my business and the quarry ground where I do my business. This also shows how many of the women that have returned home have struggled. There are many women at the quarry ground like me, and this is how I provide for myself with these kinds of activities. When I came here there were other women who taught me how to do this so I could support myself. I have friends that help me with the stones that I cannot manage. We break the larger stones into smaller pieces. That jerry can is a symbol of pride. It is worth 1,000 shillings (US$0.29), if it is full. I can make 1,000 a day to 3,000 shillings a day. Some people can make 10,000 shillings (US$2.87) a day. The rocks were used as protection in the bush, but now I use them for resources for my business.

Land and housing

The co-researchers noted the special significance of their limited land access and housing options. When the formerly abducted women returned and were cut off from their communities, it included exclusion from traditional local land distribution systems that allocate land for households to build a home and cultivate for subsistence agriculture. While not all formerly abducted women have been entirely cut off from land distributions systems, it is a common experience. It is well-documented that land is a flashpoint in post-conflict northern Uganda, where communally managed lands are rapidly converting to private ownership and accumulated by elites through 'land grabs' (Capraro and Woodroffe 2018, 4). In this context, women, and especially formerly abducted women who exist outside the social contract, are distinctly disadvantaged. Those without land access are often forced to migrate to urban areas like Gulu. This requires them to rent housing in informal settlements, adding to household resource strain.

One co-researcher said the following in group discussion:

> Life is different than before the war. Now in a homestead you find that a brother and sister will not look each other in the eye. Today, brothers and sisters will decide to kill each other because of land. Everyone wants to own land individually now. Before the war, land was owned communally, everyone had authority over land. For example, we who have returned from captivity don't have land now back in the villages. They have not accepted to give us land as daughters of the soil.

This is a painful lost opportunity for the co-researchers as farming skills are one of the few productive things learned in captivity. As one co-researcher said during group discussion:

> Because the way they used us in the bush, we did a lot of farming; now that we are home we want to do the same for ourselves. We can farm a big piece of land and when we do that they become jealous and say, 'this is my land'.

Betty Sovia's photo (Photo 6) captures the local turmoil over land.

Photo 6. Betty Scovia. This picture shows the issue of land. When people were in the camps they did not have access to land like this. And now, everyone really knows the value of land. So now everyone is fighting over land. There are so many land conflicts at home.

The co-researchers linked the issue of their limited access to land to their need to rent housing in town. Renting in town is a constant reminder to the co-researchers of the stigma and rejection they face as a result of their experiences in captivity. One co-researcher explained in group discussions:

> In the old days before the war, there was nothing like renting a house, because they would give you land to stay on and farm. If you were found renting a house they will look at you as a prostitute. But today we are all renting because of the land wrangling. We have been rejected.

Amony Jennifer's photo (Photo 7) depicts her house. The house represents a form of security in contrast to the conditions that Amony Jennifer had experienced during her abduction experience.

Photo 7. Amony Jennifer. This is a picture of my family outside of the grass hut that I lived in when I returned from captivity. When I returned, I didn't have anywhere to go since my mother abandoned me at a young age. A lady offered me this home so I could live in it with my children. This house is very important to me because it symbolises my life now. When I lived in the bush, it would rain, I had to run, and I would sleep wherever I could. This is now my own home.

Remarriage

Most formerly abducted women desire to marry and establish traditional households. This is very challenging. One co-researcher described it in group discussion as follows:

> We no longer hear gun shots, we no longer run away for our lives, but still we are in problems. We have a challenge; because of the war we no longer have a future. As a typical African woman you grow up in a good family and you are supposed to be married, but you find in our case there is no one who can marry us. Men just want to use us to produce [children] with us and just leave us … we have good qualities that men want, but you find that we are not married. This hurts – when you know you have good qualities, but you are side-lined. What kind of person am I if I don't deserve to be married?

Even for those that can remarry, it is rare for a new husband to financially support children born in captivity, and new husbands are often emotionally and physically abusive towards those children. The co-researchers described how sexual abuse of their daughters by new husbands is common, because children born in the bush are not regarded as full humans. This means that many formerly abducted women decide to live alone, further excluding them from traditional social safety nets or opportunities for shared resources.

Health and ongoing violence

Formerly abducted women live with significant health problems related to their time in captivity. Many have to deal with physical injuries sustained during the war; others returned with HIV or other chronic illness. The photos by Laker Lucy Opio (Photos 8 and 9) illustrate this well.

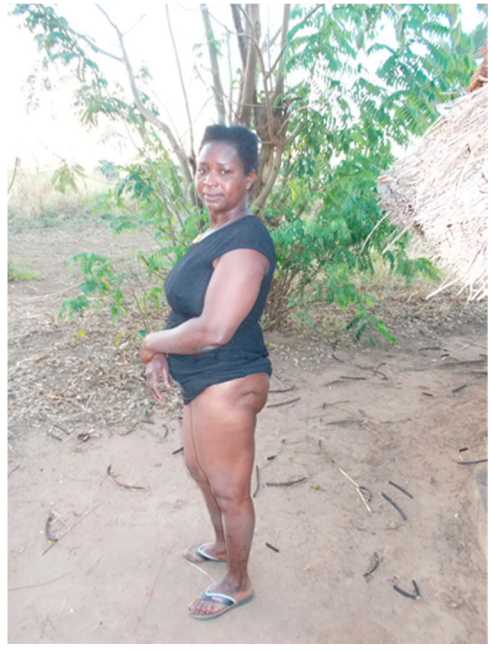

Photo 8. Laker Lucy Opio. This picture shows what happened when I had been abducted as we were crossing over into Sudan. When we reached the river there was a fight between the LRA and the government. At that time, I was shot; this picture shows the scar. When I finally got back home, the doctors performed an operation and removed the bullet from my leg. There was a complication with the surgery and it causes me a lot of pain. The doctors said I should not be able to walk, but with God I was able to walk.

Photo 9. Laker Lucy Opio. This is a picture where you see me taking drugs. When I was abducted I was taken to the bush and I was given to a man who was as old as my father, but that man had a wife at home. The man's wife was sent to the bush to follow the husband, she was HIV positive, and passed it to the man. The husband also infected us. While in the bush this man had twenty wives. When we returned we were all taken to the rehabilitation centre. They tested us and found that we were all HIV positive. I made the decision on my own to enrol with drugs [to take the medication]. As you see me now, I am healthy, but it has not always been that way.

Formerly abducted women face further health challenges due to past sexual violence. Alun Margaret, in her statement to the world said:

> We witnessed violence just as the men did, but we also were exposed to sexual violence at a premature age. That has led to a lot of complications in our womanhood, complications that make us weak and unable to labour as much. As a result of our injuries, hard labour is difficult, yet we hold full responsibility of the children in our care.

Returned women and their children also face ongoing gender-based violence. As Amony Jennifer stated:

> The women in northern Uganda are experiencing continuing violence and cannot speak about it. In Acholi culture, women have no voice. Whether or not they are experiencing violence they keep quiet.

The co-researchers described that they and their children are targeted for sexual violence because men, and even their own relatives, think that violating them is not an act against a person, but an act of revenge for LRA atrocities.

Organising for mutual support and survival

Given the common experiences of social exclusion, the co-researchers connected their own personal rejection to both their migration to Gulu and the need to organise themselves in a WAN group for mutual support, to meet daily needs and to recreate their human connectivity. As one co-researcher explained in a group discussion:

> That is why you find many of us who have returned from the bush are concentrated in town; because we know each other, and we help each other.

Another co-researcher, when discussing the search for the kinds of familial love she was denied in captivity, stated:

> Without WAN, I'd not be the way I am today. When I returned from captivity I found my mother was dead, but my father still alive. He rejected me and sent me away from home. That is why up to now I am living in town and renting for myself and taking care of my children. I look at the WAN members as my sisters and brothers.

The co-researchers' account of their self-organisation made it clear that this also stemmed from the growing sense of frustration with NGOs and government programmes. All 13 of the co-researchers told stories of being promised support or services from local and international NGOs and local and national levels of government, only to be disappointed. Worse, the co-researchers know they and their children have been exploited and their experiences in captivity have been used to make money for others. As one co-researcher explained in group discussion:

> [NGOs] would say, let me take your picture, tell me your story, let me advocate … they would go and make money from us.

The co-researchers explained that they all stopped seeking NGO and governmental services within a year or two after returning from captivity. The common experience shared

by almost all co-researchers is that they are called to register with an NGO, international or local, for a programme intended to benefit them or their children, including relocation, housing programmes, school fee sponsorships, or in-kind distributions of material support. Their names and pictures are taken and after waiting in vain to hear from the NGO, they inquire about the programme only to be told that enrolment is closed, that all programme benefits have concluded, or that their names cannot be found in the computer of registered beneficiaries. Co-researchers presume that NGO workers or government officials divert resources to their own relatives, ethnic group, or that programme resources are diverted to other parts of Uganda. One co-researcher summarised this experience during group discussion as follows:

> So much money intended for us has been diverted. Money raised in our names is taken by NGOs and government officials. There must be more accountability. It is important to come to the ground and see what is happening. The reasons for organising the network [WAN] is because we were under individual pressure to provide for ourselves in the face of corruption. We are being used for other people's benefit. There is not one of us that has not been used. You are asked to stand next to a TV or a refrigerator as though it has been provided for you, but no one goes with it [receives the benefit]. We are bringing riches to other people. How can the world help us to receive the assistance that is meant for us?

Another co-researcher told the story during group discussion that when she was in the rehabilitation centre immediately after escaping captivity, a white person wanted to relocate her and her children abroad, but the rehabilitation centre staff convinced her to instead provide funds for buying a house to resettle her locally. The NGO staff kept the money and provided no house for her.

As is common in post-conflict environments, many of the NGO and government programmes operating immediately after the cessation of hostilities closed their offices and programmes and moved on to the next crisis. The co-researchers attributed this, in part, to having extracted all the resources they could from the situation and formerly abducted women. As one co-researcher said:

> Most NGOs up to today have collapsed [left the region or shut down activities], they have gotten a lot of money out of us … that is why [WAN] called us and said: 'What can we do together for ourselves?' The way other NGOs have made money and gone, that is why we decided to train ourselves with the skills; we are able to sew, make beads, and move on with our lives … we sit together to be creative and take care of ourselves and our children.

The co-researchers realised that they were on their own. If they wanted to provide materially for their families, advocate for issues and policies they care about, or create human support structures, they would have to organise to do it themselves and create a new social contract. The self-organising activities of the formerly abducted women provide the co-researchers with a sense of hope. Ocwee Beatrice's photo (Photo 10) shows this.

However, the co-researchers also noted that self-organising is challenging. Other organisations similar to WAN have collapsed due to infighting. Further, as NGOs have departed northern Uganda and as the world's attention turns to the next humanitarian crisis, WAN has struggled to fund its own activities.

Photo 10. Ocwee Beatrice. This is my daughter; she likes feeding the chickens … [WAN] helped me get these chickens and the income that they bring. My daughter loves to take care of these birds because she knows when I sell them it will bring her school fees. She is always checking these birds, she is checking to see if they are taking their water and if they have been fed.

Concluding thoughts

Our concluding thoughts focus in particular on reasserting redefined humanity through self-organising, and the need to include the formerly abducted in the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.

Through the photovoice project, the co-researchers were given an opportunity to outline significant long-term challenges they face due to their abduction. These include the general dehumanising effects they experience due to rejection by their families and communities; limited resources and livelihood options to provide for their families; the special impact of exclusion from traditional land and housing systems; ongoing violence and other health problems; and their inability to remarry.

Recalling the notion of the social contract and its gendered and racialised nature, these challenges serve as the mechanisms that separate the formerly abducted from the local social contract and therefore from full humanity, as locally defined. This multifaceted exclusion intersects with all post-conflict reconstruction actors in important ways. It is essential for humanitarian response practitioners and scholars to understand this, and reflect on the ways their actions may contribute to excluding the formerly abducted as well as develop ways to help formerly abducted individuals reassert their place in the moral universe after devastating experiences. As discussed in the introduction to this paper, the 'humanitarian–development–peace nexus' is driving thought and action in global post-conflict reconstruction. The challenges articulated here must be accounted for throughout the triple nexus as humanitarian actors, governments, long-term development practitioners, and local peacebuilders act together to mitigate the impact on the formerly abducted.

As this self-reflection takes place, it is also important to understand that the co-researchers are creatively redefining and recreating social structures for themselves. They are finding ways to reassert their agency, humanity, and place in the moral universe. They self-organise for everyday survival, including learning livelihood skills, but they also recreate the social contract through social bonds that give them place, meaning, and creativity among other humans. This is essential to the long-term needs of formerly abducted women.

We will conclude by offering a few suggestions for meaningful responses by humanitarian actors throughout the triple nexus:

1. Continue to expand knowledge of the specific impacts of conflict on women and improve the quality of programmatic strategies designed to address those impacts.
2. Recognise that in post-conflict reconstruction formerly abducted women will likely be forced out of the social contract and that humanitarian actions can either reinforce that dehumanising exclusion or mitigate it through direct action.
3. Build more accountability into post-conflict reconstruction efforts when those efforts interact with any marginalised or excluded groups. Such groups, like formerly abducted women, may be considered unworthy recipients of post-conflict resources due to gendered and racialised beliefs present throughout the triple nexus.
4. Support for women's own self-organisation is a key strategy. Already, major donors are recognising that supporting women as active agents in post-conflict reconstruction is key to shaping those processes in just and equitable ways (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2017), but more must be done especially where abduction and trafficking are present.
5. Listen to how formerly abducted women understand their own redefined humanity and the priorities they have for autonomous living and self-reliance. Only then can humanitarian responses meaningfully support women over the long term, as they rebuild their lives after experiencing abduction in conflict zones.

Notes

1. Social contract theory has a long and influential history in Western thought. For more information, see D'Agostino *et al.* (2017).
2. For more information on WAN, see https://blogs.ubc.ca/wanuganda/ or www.justiceandreconciliation.org/initiatives/womens-advocacy-network/ (last checked 27 April 2019).
3. The text of the petition can be found at www.justiceandreconciliation.org/uncategorized/2014/womens-advocacy-network-petition/ (last checked 27 April 2019).

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