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## Mothering in the Aftermath of Forced Marriage and Wartime Rape

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### The Complexities of Motherhood in Postwar Northern Uganda

*During northern Uganda's civil war (1986–2007), the abduction, forced marriage, and impregnation of females was a key military strategy of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA abducted an estimated sixty thousand children—30 percent of which were girls—who were used as combatants, porters, domestic workers, and were forced to marry male commanders. Roughly ten thousand of these abducted girls became pregnant from sexual violence, and gave birth to two or more children each. This paper explores the realities of mothering in the aftermath of wartime sexual violence. Drawing upon interviews with a sample of twenty-seven northern Ugandan mothers who bore children as a result of wartime rape, the paper explores the ambivalence and complexities of mothering in the postwar period—including sexual violence, pregnancy and mothering during LRA captivity, as well as stigma and rejection, and changing family structures in the postwar period. The paper highlights the ways in which war shapes and informs all aspects of mothering—both during and following the conflict—and how it alters how women come to understand their life stories as part of the motherline. We conclude with key implications for service provision and policy.*

From 1986 to 2007, the Acholi of northern Uganda suffered the direct consequences of a bloody twenty-year war between the government and a local rebel faction, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Led by Joseph Kony, the LRA was formed to counter the consistent and palpable abuse, exclusion, and oppression that the Acholi experienced at the hands of the Ugandan government (Allen; Finnstrom; Schomerus and Walmsley). Yet the LRA itself was responsible for brutal war crimes, atrocities, and gross human rights violations against civilians. Included in such war crimes was the abduction and recruitment of

children. The LRA abducted an estimated sixty thousand children—30 percent of which were girls—who were used as combatants, porters, domestic workers, and were forced to marry male commanders (Carlson and Mazurana; Veale et al.). Roughly ten thousand of these abducted girls became pregnant from sexual violence, and gave birth to two or more children each (Akello). Although not all of these children survived LRA captivity, thousands are currently living in postwar northern Uganda.

Sexual violence, forced marriage, and the reproductive roles of girls represent key gendered markers of women's and girls' experiences in armed groups. Moreover, both during armed conflict and following demobilization, pregnancy and maternity constitute key life events that significantly shape the lives and futures of women and girls. During conflict, given the precarious circumstances under which females live, pregnancy and the eventual delivery of a child represent situations of great risk for the health and wellbeing of both the mother and the baby, which make motherhood and mothering both during and following conflict of great importance (Denov and Ricard-Guay, 2013). In a conflict's aftermath—although it is now well known that many girls return from armed groups pregnant or with children, and despite a recent surge of research dedicated to girl mothers (Veale et al.)—mothers continue to be marginalized within postwar reintegration programs. Motherhood affects all dimensions of the reintegration process, whether in relation to education, employment and livelihood, health, or identity. Without adequate support, motherhood can become a barrier for girls and women in terms of access to educational and employment opportunities, which can lead to long-term poverty and marginalization (Worthen et al.). Furthermore, given that children conceived during armed conflict may be considered a violation of accepted community and cultural norms, mothers and their children may face ostracism, thereby increasing their realities of shame, guilt, and social exclusion. However, motherhood does not carry only negative implications or harmful realities for the postconflict lives of mothers. Instead, pregnancy and motherhood can be a source of hope, optimism, and security. These factors highlight the intricacies of motherhood and mothering both during and following war.

Addressing the complexities of motherhood in conflict and postconflict settings, this paper explores the realities of mothering for twenty-seven women formerly abducted into the LRA. Drawing upon the concept of the motherline, this paper also shows the ways in which war and armed conflict shape, form, and affect women's lives and motherline stories, while demonstrating how motherline stories of war may, at times, enable intergenerational rifts to be resolved. The paper begins with an overview of children's involvement in the northern Ugandan conflict, particularly as it relates to girls abducted into the LRA. Following a description of the study's methodology, we draw upon the

voices of women who, as adolescents, were abducted, forced into marriage, and raped, and then who gave birth to children born in LRA captivity. In particular, we address the ambivalence and complexities of mothering both during war and in the postwar period—including sexual violence, pregnancy and mothering during LRA captivity, as well as stigma and rejection, and changing family structures in the postwar period. All of these realities are vital to understanding participants' conceptions of their motherline and the fundamental role that war and captivity have played in their motherline stories and narratives. We conclude with the research's implications for service provision and policy.

### **Context: Armed Conflict, Sexual Violence, and the Lord's Resistance Army**

Incidents of sexual violence have been documented with increasing regularity in contemporary wars, transcending countries and contexts. They serve as a weapon of war to intimidate the enemy and terrorize local populations as well as a form of gendered power relations, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (Weitsman). Literature on wartime sexual violence has explored important areas, one of which has examined the factors contributing to wartime sexual violence, its patterns, and its functions (Isikozlu and Millard). A second area has traced the consequences of wartime sexual violence on victims—such as stigma, exclusion, decreased marriageability and economic insecurity (Mackenzie; Mukamana and Brysiewicz). Other scholarship has studied perpetrators of wartime sexual violence: their motives, psychology, and their prosecution (Bensel; Henry). Research has also examined the legal implications and recognition of sexual violence, forced marriage, and forced impregnation as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (Markovic; Henry). An important area of study is the complexities of mothering in the aftermath of wartime sexual violence, particularly for those women who have given birth to children as a result of rape. Although some literature has addressed the realities of these mothers in multiple postwar contexts (Shanahan and Veale; Kantengwa; Umulisa; Zraly et al.), further research is important, particularly in northern Uganda.

During northern Uganda's civil war and in their battle against the Ugandan government, the LRA abducted approximately sixty thousand children into armed conflict (Shanahan and Veale). Although all children were potential targets, girls ages ten to fourteen were most commonly selected for abduction and were involved in multiple roles and tasks as porters, combatants, and cooks (Veale et al.; McKay and Mazurana). Moreover, as a critical part of his military and ideological operations, LRA leader Joseph Kony organized and implemented a forced wife system (Denov and Lakor). Within this system, captured girls—with a preference for those who had reached age twelve or

thirteen—were given to commander “husbands.” The wives became the exclusive property of the commanders: they were required to obey any and every command and to never refuse their husband’s sexual requests. The majority of these females became mothers, and their pregnancies were the result of continual sexual violence by their commander “husbands.” This forced wife system had a clear objective—to produce a new clan. Kony repeatedly spoke of the need for “multiplying” and saw this as the solution for northern Uganda: to create a new class of people who had, from his perspective, benefitted from LRA training and life in the bush.

Within this context of war, sexual violence, militarized families, and ongoing fear, the relational dynamics between women and their children born in captivity (CBC) are complex and powerful for both mother and child. Women and girls living in LRA captivity, had their children at a very young age, conceived out of sexual violence, and born under extreme conditions of forced marriage and war. The birth of a child under these circumstances elicited a myriad of different, sometimes contradictory, responses from women and girls, which affected the process of carrying a child to term, giving birth, and protecting a child within ongoing, brutal violence. The goal of this paper is to highlight the complexities of motherhood and mothering under these challenging circumstances and to underscore the participants’ abilities and capacities to mother in the wartime conditions of duress and violence, and in the postwar context of stigma and marginalization. Importantly, we also address how these realities ultimately shape the notion of participants’ motherline and motherline stories. Before doing so, however, we address the study’s methodology.

## Methodology

This research was conducted by researchers at McGill University in partnership with researchers at Watye Ki Gen—a local community-based organization of women formerly abducted into the LRA—based in Gulu, Uganda. Data collection was carried out between June and October 2015 in Gulu, Pader, and Agago Districts of northern Uganda. The authors conducted qualitative in-depth semistructured interviews with twenty-seven mothers formerly abducted into the LRA, who gave birth to children while in captivity.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were primarily conducted in Acholi, with English translation for the non-Acholi speaking researchers. All interviews were audio recorded with permission and then translated and transcribed into English.

Participants were recruited through Watye Ki Gen, who had ongoing contact with these women as a result of their ongoing work and advocacy for women and children born in LRA captivity. The women participants, between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-three, were living in Gulu (eight), Pader (eleven), and

Agago (eight) districts of northern Uganda. These mothers were between nine and fourteen years old when they were abducted, and had been held captive in the LRA between three and nineteen years. The average time spent in captivity was ten years. Participants had between one and six children born in captivity.

This study received ethical approval from two research ethics boards: the first was from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology/Office of the President of Uganda, and the second was from the Research Ethics Board of McGill University.

During interviews, women participants were asked questions about their abduction into the LRA, their lives during captivity, mothering during and after armed conflict, and postconflict realities—including mental and physical health; education; identity and heritage; stigma and community belonging; inheritance and land issues; marriage; and future goals and dreams.

Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach whereby knowledge is generated by an iterative process involving the continual analysis of qualitative data. Through inductive analysis, researchers gain insights into patterns existing in the social world grounded in the experiences of individuals acting in it (Glaser and Strauss). In line with a grounded theory approach, transcribed interviews were analyzed, and prominent themes in the data were identified and coded using qualitative software, which allowed for significant themes and patterns to emerge. To facilitate analysis, a conceptual coding tree was created using qualitative software, allowing patterns and the relationship between themes to be visually mapped.

### **Mothering during LRA Captivity: Children as Sources of Resentment, Joy, and Ambivalence**

Within the LRA, abducted girls were normally “given” to commanders as forced wives once the girl began menstruating. Commanders were expected to impregnate their wives and father children to be raised as Kony’s next generation of fighters. According to Watye Ki Gen, Kony ordered his troops to kill older members within the LRA (and those with grey hair) in order to make way for his new generation of fighters born in captivity. Moreover, Kony began training his own sons as soldiers, and later instituted military training for all CBC. Within this context, the LRA valued children born within these forced marriages, oftentimes much more so than their mothers, and the children were a source of pride for fathers (Denov and Lakor). Among the twenty-seven mothers interviewed, the average age a girl had her first pregnancy within a forced marriage was thirteen, giving birth to her first child at age fourteen. For some mothers, the birth of their child was seen as a “gift from God” or a reason to continue living within difficult

circumstances. At the same time, however, the arrival of a child represented a profound burden. Girls knew that having a child to care for would seriously limit their chances of a successful escape from the LRA, or even their own survival. Having a child could also be dangerous and could slow girls down during ambushes and fighting when they were required to run. Girls and women were also harshly punished, including being beaten, if their babies cried and drew attention to their position in the bush. In the following section, we highlight the participants' perspectives on the realities of mothering during LRA captivity, particularly as it relates to their views on the experiences of pregnancy and birthing a child born in captivity. We demonstrate the ambivalence of mothering during war for participants, whereby children were perceived as sources of both resentment and joy.

### *Wartime Sexual Violence, Pregnancy, and Birth*

Girls in captivity were forced into marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood as a result of threats to their lives and survival. The violence accompanying their forced impregnation, and the loss of power and agency over their bodies, further intensified the extremely difficult circumstances under which their children were conceived and in which they became mothers. These participants explained:

[In the bush], there is no love and no relationships. They just select you and take you to be their women whether you like it or not. We never had any voice to make choices. Whether he is old or young, and you fear they will kill you, so you have no option.

On Christmas, we were called to a wide field. We were told to line up, and they also told a group of men to line up and our line should face the men in line. Then they told those men to come and choose a lady ... to pick a lady to be his. Then they picked us, and we started crying because it was not our wish to have those men as our husbands. They told us that if we continue to cry then they would kill us. We kept quiet. Then other ladies who were abducted before us started teaching us how we should adapt to those situations. And that was how we started living with them forcefully. For me, I refused to go and sleep with that man given to me for one week. He went and reported me to the commander that I refused to sleep and have sex with him. Then they decided that I should be killed the next day. My friend leaked the information to me that if I failed to sleep with that man today, the next day I would be killed. She said: "Have you seen those sticks spread in the sun? ... Those sticks are for caning you until you

die.” On that day, I forced myself to sleep with that man given to me as my husband.

All participants in our sample became pregnant as a result of wartime rape. During their first pregnancy, participants reported a lack of knowledge of their young bodies; they did not know they were pregnant, or they were in denial when other women commented on the signs of pregnancy they observed. Some participants recalled feelings of fear, anger, or resentment during pregnancy. Reflecting on the very negative implications of having a child in the bush, some were fearful that their bodies were not physically mature enough to withstand childbirth. Others were resentful because they were young, and believed that their futures would be ruined because of the baby or because the pregnancy was not conceived out of love. Some wished to die or to abort the baby. These participants shared their feelings upon learning of the pregnancy:

I was unhappy about the pregnancy. I saw that my parents were not there now. I’m pregnant and am going back with a child whose father is not there. My education is spoiled. How will I keep and care for the child?

I felt bad [about getting pregnant] because if I give birth from the bush how will I escape with the child? How will I keep the child alive in the bush? [Being pregnant] meant that I will die in the bush.

For some participants, given their circumstances within the LRA, feelings of resentment, anger, and hatred continued after the child was born:

I didn’t like her [the baby] at all. In fact, I hated her with all my heart. I wished this child would be born dead so that it could give me time to be free ... to escape [the LRA] just like as other people did.

I was unhappy about the child and angry after seeing that the baby was a boy. If I had had a baby girl—in the future, she will look for a home and get married. But a boy, where will I keep and put my son? But I consoled myself that it is a God’s plan, and I have to take it like that.

I first wished that the child would die so that I could look for a way to come back home.

I didn’t have love for the child ... I even wanted the child to die but God did not accept. I even feared that they [the LRA] would kill

me. I wanted to strangle the child but I thought that if I kill the child they will kill me too, so I didn't.

In contrast, some mothers reported feeling love for their children after their birth, and viewed them as a gift from God—a source of joy, which gave participants the strength and a reason to keep fighting to survive within the harsh context of LRA captivity. These participants said the following:

[The] situation [was not] easy, but when I look at my two children, I feel happy and try to forget the past. Like the two are symbols of what happened in captivity. When I look at them I get overjoyed and say to myself “God has done something good in my life.”

And I just loved my child, and I used to say that if God helps me and if I reach home, I will keep my child.

I used to love the child, and when we were travelling in Uganda, my second born was still in the womb. So when UPDF [government military forces] launched their attacks, we were forced to love our children and care for them so that they didn't cry and bring the government soldiers to us. And I just loved my child.

However, what became evident in the participants' narratives was the ambivalence and contradictory feelings concerning the child, as birthing and mothering a child in captivity meant that chances of escape, flight from violent government ambushes, and basic survival became more onerous. Under such difficult conditions, participants struggled with conflicting instincts to save themselves and to protect their children. This tension was reflected in the participant's narratives, told as discrete moments in time where a choice was made between abandoning the child and running for their lives, or self-sacrificing to ensure the child's survival. These participants shared the following:

They began firing at us. We were about five in number; they continued shooting at us without stopping. At one point, I ran, leaving my first born child behind. My son kept crying while shouting out my name saying, “Mother, why are you leaving me? Mother, do you want me to die while you remain alive?” I then stopped running and went back for him. I lifted him, and I continued running with my head lowered. When we crossed a certain river, I then carried him on my shoulders.



My child grew so thin that I thought he would die, but it was God who helped me, and I took care of him. During those days where there was fierce fighting, I would drag my son on his chest. We would begin running from morning till evening. My son's throat would develop sores, and he was passing blood. When the fighting would begin, I would sometimes run for a long distance, leaving him behind. But after a second thought, I would go back for him. I would tell him that "I can decide to leave you behind because we will all die." I struggled hard to ensure that he survived. Sometimes the fighting would separate us; but after the fighting, I would look for him and find him.

These narratives highlight the complexity of motherhood during captivity, and, in particular, demonstrate the challenges, hardships, and also positive elements brought forth as a result of giving birth to a child born in LRA captivity. Abducted as girls, and surviving horrific forms of violence, the girls' experience of LRA captivity became deeply rooted in their motherline stories. Sharon Abbey notes that the motherline has been called a "primordial mirror" with which to envision the full sense of female development. Although armed conflict fundamentally disrupted girls' development, their motherline stories and deep reflection on their experiences can be seen as a mechanism, however small, to enable them to reconnect and reclaim what has been lost and taken away.

### **Mothering Postconflict: Ambivalence in the Context of Stigma and New Family Structures**

Following their rescue, escape, or release from LRA captivity, participants transitioned through one of northern Uganda's reception and rehabilitation centres before being integrated back into civilian life. The length of time spent at a reception centre varied from a couple of weeks and months to a year. At the reception centres, participants received support in the form of medical care, food, shelter, and psychosocial counselling support. This support, however, was short lived. Returning to civilian life after years in captivity, the children they brought back with them only compounded the stigma and socioeconomic marginalization the women faced as uneducated single mothers transitioning into families and communities scarred by war. Important themes and challenges outlined by participants included stigma and rejection, the complexities of new family structures, and ambivalent mothering and motherhood. Each of these is addressed below.

#### *Postwar Stigma and Rejection*

Upon their return from captivity, mothers (and their children) experienced

pervasive stigma at the hands of family and community, manifesting as rejection and social exclusion, which severely affected their social reintegration. Returning with children who were fathered by LRA commanders, both mothers and children were stigmatized and labelled as “rebels”; they were considered to have dangerous mindsets and behaviours learned in the bush. As a result of their former affiliation with the LRA, both mothers and children were associated with LRA-led atrocities against civilians. In this way, many returnees were rejected by their communities and some or all of their family, and they were shunned or excluded from accessing family-owned land. These participants shared their experiences of stigma, violence, and rejection at the hands of family and community members:

They started changing their minds and said they don't want rebel children in their home. That when these rebel children grow up they will cause problems because they have their father's minds. So they said I should leave; they threw me away with my things outside. I left—never to turn back.

When I reached home, my brothers kept harassing me. Even my children are stopped from playing with other children from home. They say that my children are rebel children and they have those “bush behaviours.” Most days, I am not happy because my children are beaten by people at home. I don't feel good about it. Most of the time, I just keep crying.

[After] only two weeks, people from home started stigmatizing me. They said all my children are rebels and they are bad children because in the future, they will become chicken thieves, and they should drop my children in the toilet. So life is very difficult for us because even the land that we are on, people are struggling for it, and they want to chase us away.

Since these mothers were robbed of their chance of obtaining an education upon return from the bush, raising a child born in captivity led to additional and powerful forms of stigma for mothers. This stigma and rejection made it difficult for participants to reestablish and nurture family relationships, hold positions of status and power within their communities, and find sustainable employment to ensure their family's most basic needs.

### *The Complexities of New Family Structures*

Another major concern for mothers returning from captivity was social

and economic advancement through marriage, which is considered an important mechanism for economic stability as well as an important cultural marker of social status. Most women had the desire to remarry upon return from the bush; however, as a result of stigma, formerly abducted women had difficulty remarrying, even more so if they had children born in captivity. For those who did remarry, participants reported that their new husbands did not accept the CBC as part of the family. They refused to support them, and they mistreated them:

He [new husband] is not treating my CBC well, and he is not paying for my CBC to go to school. Because of my CBC, he even chased me away from his home for two years ... No one normally accepts to keep a child who is not his. My child is in a difficult condition. She has very many problems and ... my CBC is in a very difficult condition, and I am totally not happy about that. I feel that I should get someone to take care of my CBC, but I don't have any power and energy to do that. I have lots of problems because that husband of mine is very tough on my CBC staying at his home.

Some participants reported that their new husbands refused to allow the CBC to live in the family home, and believed the CBC was an outsider and a threat to security:

My CBC remained with my parents at the time. I was with my current husband, but whenever my CBC came to visit me, he would stigmatize my CBC. He would say no one should bring a "rebel child" in his home. He said that someone who brings a rebel in his home is also a rebel and must leave his home.

Given the frequent rejection by the new husband, participants found themselves in a difficult position. Even if they felt deep love and concern about their child's welfare, they did not see a clear way out. As such, some participants were reluctant to continue to live with their CBC and, in some cases, sent the child away to live with extended family members in order to preserve the new marriage and family:

I had to send her to live with my uncle because my new husband who is her stepfather does not have a good heart for my daughter. So I thought that sending her to my uncle would free my mind a bit.

Other participants chose to leave their husband to protect the CBC from

abuse, whereas others refused to separate from their CBC, which resulted in the husband abandoning the whole family:

My husband doesn't want me to go and visit my child. If I want to go and visit her, I have to just escape. If I escape and I come back home, he beats me.... If he knows that I am paying school fees for my child born in captivity, he will fight me. So we mothers of CBCs, we are getting a lot of problems with our children born in captivity because we were given by force to our husband in the bush. We do not even know their [father's] family, so there is no way we can get these children father's family. These children are also breaking our relationships or making us divorce with our husbands because we would see our CBC sleeping hungrily, and the child has started moving to look for food, and you would see that your child is suffering and you find yourself coming back home to take care of them.

Changing family structures and the pressures and complexities of new relationships created challenging situations for mothers, and, ultimately, contributed to maternal ambivalence, vacillation, and uncertainty.

*Ambivalent Mothering: Close Bonds versus Rejection*

Several of the mothers interviewed described a fierce love and an unshakable bond between them and their children born in the bush, as they had to endure immeasurable suffering alongside them. In a few instances, mothers reported a closer bond with their CBC compared with their children born in the aftermath of the war. They stated that their CBC was all alone without a father and was therefore more in need of their love and protection:

It's because the suffering that we both passed through when we were in the bush. That is the reason as to why today I see myself as a mother. So the suffering I passed through, fighting, sleeping hungry, sometime you sleep for two days without eating. Walking ... you can walk for two weeks without sitting down. So I was suffering with my children that were somehow bigger, four years by then. He was conscious and aware ... he too was walking on foot; sometimes there was no one to carry him. So I find that this child is so close to me.

My children are so important to me. I cannot separate from them because I have suffered with them a lot. I find it important that I should not be separated from them. I don't want any of my children to stay away from me. My heart pains if they are not near me. I think

much about my children every day. I don't treat these children differently [from my other children], but I love the two that I came back with from the bush because I see the pain I persevered with them.

I'm very close to my child that I gave birth to in the bush because he listens to me and he also tells me that "Mum, I don't have any relatives on this world apart from you mum." I see he has love for me and he listens to my words.

When one participated was asked which child she is closest to, she responded, "More so for the first born. When the helicopters started shooting us in Uganda, she would be on my back and I would be running with her and hiding under the trees. She would be praying and telling me that 'Mum it is God who will help us; God help us so that we survive from this fighting.'"

Confronted with stigma, rejection, and violence, CBC and their mothers tended to lean on one another for mutual support and protection. Children were aware of their mother's marginalized social position, and CBC often appeared to take on a parental role—sharing or taking on the worries and responsibilities of a parent, and providing emotional support to their mother:

I am close to and I love all of them. But I can share ideas to those three children who are older. But the one that I feel may be a good child in the future is [Milly] ... She listens to how her uncle insults us ... she finds me crying, and she consoles me that I should stop crying. And sometimes she even cries with me and tells me that she also feels angry.

What I noticed from this boy is that he is so much into future achievement and concern. Because sometime if he sees me seated quietly even when he is playing, he will stop playing and he comes and asks me what am I thinking about, or is there anything the problem? ... But I told him there is nothing [wrong]; he keeps on insisting a lot with assurance that all will be alright and I should stop worrying. He wants me to tell him all my problems and if I don't tell him, he will not go away from me. So I told him, my son, I am worried because I see the way my children are; you have no family home, and I don't have any financial support to buy a land for us to settle in. And about when you are all grown up where are we going to stay; when shall we stop renting a house? After this, he starts to cry again. He tells me: "Mom, God is going to help us; you continue struggling to pay our school fees. As for us, we shall study hard and in future, God is

going to bless us with jobs, and so we will be able to buy our land for all of us. Now you stop crying because if you continue crying I will be more worried. Even when I am at school, I will be thinking about you knowing that you are crying, and it will affect me and my concentration at school.”

Although the above narratives highlight the ways in which many mothers loved and supported their children in the postwar period, the realities of rejection and exclusion coloured relationships between many mothers and their children following demobilization. In fact, some mothers saw the CBC as a continuance of their suffering from the bush, and as obstacles to their happiness and security:

I never felt well with her [CBC daughter], my heart was so bitter with her because even the reason as to why I switch men was because of her father. What her father did in my life that is why my life is all spoilt but her father died and she is still talking a very bad language on me, I was not happy with her at all. I even think the existence of her could be the reason as to why men are running away from me because she is always talking very bad thing in my life actually she is just hurting me.

The theme of maternal rejection (and leaving CBC with relatives) appeared to be more prevalent in the rural regions of Agago and Pader. In the postwar period, mothers in these regions received much less or no psychosocial counselling or maternal support surrounding their relationships with their children, compared to urban Gulu, where mothers could access counselling and psychoeducational workshops. Having little family support and being severely socioeconomically disadvantaged, the more isolated women faced the choice between enduring stigma and surviving on their own with their children, or disconnecting from their CBC and their bush identity to pursue a new marriage. Some CBC and family members interviewed reported that their mothers had abandoned them, and had rarely or never visited their children after leaving them with relatives. As this Agago grandmother raising her daughter's CBC described:

This [rejection by the mother] is common; it is because at the time of their abduction, they were young. So when they happen to return home from captivity by God's grace, she will not want to continue enduring suffering. So she will end up leaving the children with their grandparents. This is common; they would want to go and have a fresh start with life without any child.

However, some participants indicated they were able to shift their negative feelings toward their child after receiving social support in the way of psychosocial and spiritual counselling; they developed a strong connection with the child through the process of navigating through many hardships together.

When I started to pray to God, then I accepted him, like I am the one who produced him until now. I love him, but before that, I wasn't happy because he spoiled my future ... I started to love him when I was two years at home here. Yes, at two to three years old because when I came back home, I stayed at the counselling centre where I could see people praying, but I could only think about the past. But because I was not praying with other people, I was counselled for three years and then I realized that I am ok. I had gotten lost to mistreat my baby, since I am the one who produced him. So that is how I started loving him at three years old.

The narratives demonstrate how despite profound stigma, structural and interpersonal violence, marginalization, and multiple oppressions, participants began to rewrite their motherline stories, which enabled them to resolve complex forms of intergenerational rifts and ambivalence.

### **Addressing the Complexities and Ambivalence of Mothering: Supporting Mothers and Children through Service Provision**

This paper has highlighted the profound ambivalence and complexity surrounding the experience of mothering in relation to children born in LRA captivity. Participants' narratives have demonstrated the ways in which they experienced a broad range of negative, positive, and ambivalent feelings throughout the process of pregnancy, birth, and mothering, both during the war and in its aftermath. Moreover, our study has highlighted the ways in which war and organized mass violence shaped, informed, interrupted, and, in many ways, tainted women's motherline stories and realities. During the war, girls and young women living in LRA captivity were forced into motherhood through rape, violence, and coercion—not by choice. The ways in which participants made sense of their experience of mothering, and their feelings toward their children and their maternal role, were complex and varied. They ranged from fierce love and protectiveness, to ambivalence or hatred, whereas, at other moments, they struggled with conflicting instincts to save and protect themselves or their children.

Returning from the bush, participants struggled with maintaining a connection with the child. Others wanted a fresh start in a new marriage, and to

separate their LRA life and identity from their present life, which often meant distancing themselves from the child, both physically and emotionally. Others, through counselling and prayer, grew to accept and love their child over time.

Ultimately, responses to motherhood and the relational dynamics between mother and child shifted across time; they were influenced by environmental forces, such as the level of social and emotional support. In situations where mothers received little or no support from family and community members, mothers tended to see themselves as acting in solidarity with their CBC against a hostile world. Participants commonly spoke of struggling alone with their children. The motherline was therefore a dynamic and interactional process between mother and child—illustrated by some mother’s descriptions of the love and protectiveness the child had toward them and vice versa. Abbey notes that motherline stories can reflect generations of suffering and grief and that acknowledging feeling of rage allows intergenerational rifts to be resolved. Although war, armed conflict, captivity, forced marriage, and repeated sexual violence significantly affected and shaped women’s motherlines and experiences of motherhood, their stories, framed within the context of the motherline, can be seen as a place where powerful forms of intergenerational and shared trauma were acted, reenacted, and, in some cases, resolved.

Women formerly abducted into the LRA, and their children, are in dire need of local, national, and international supports and services to not only facilitate their postwar reintegration into society but foster meaningful relationships with one another and the wider community. As part of this research project, interviews with mothers explored their service provision needs and participants’ recommendations for both policy and practice. Although participants suggested multiple areas for improved service provision, we conclude by highlighting three areas they deemed vital to their and their children’s long-term wellbeing.

### *Livelihood Programs*

The most important area identified by participants was the need for livelihood programs targeting their socioeconomic marginalization and fostering self-sufficiency through income-generating activities. Participants recommended livelihood programs such as livestock rearing and agricultural projects, vocational training and other income-generating activities for both mothers and CBC. These programs would enable mothers to feed their children, afford their children’s school fees, rent land (reducing the pressure to remain with an abusive husband), and access medicine and healthcare. Significantly, mothers highlighted livelihood programs directed at alleviating socioeconomic strain that would allow women and their children to become self-sufficient and combat stigma. Their family and community members would view them more positively as productive and responsible members of the community.



### *Community Sensitization*

Participants stressed that their community needed to be taught how to live well together with formerly abducted populations and their children. Through their meaningful participation in society, mothers and CBC can play a role in challenging negative attitudes and combatting stigma. However, to fully foster acceptance, social integration, and healthy relationships between mothers, CBC, family, and community members, sensitization at every level—from family to the government level—was deemed essential. Participants presented strategies such as educational workshops directed at school teachers and administrators, students, family members, and community leaders, including radio talk shows broadcast widely across the country. These strategies will build awareness of the hardships and the strengths of those returned from captivity.

### *Psychosocial Support*

Because of the dearth of follow-up support services available to mothers, and the widespread denial surrounding their children's plight, participants underscored the need for follow-up support for CBC and their family members in the form of home visits, psychosocial counselling, and psychoeducational workshops that address the concerns, needs, and challenges facing parents and caregivers. Topics identified by mothers included coping with war-related trauma and relational issues—such as family violence, parenting skills, communication, and managing disclosure with their children in terms of their origins, their fathers, and family heritage. In the remote rural regions of northern Uganda where supports of any kind are scarce, participants stressed the need to mobilize and train local supports such as religious and local political leaders as well as other formerly abducted persons who are already well established in the community.

Under the most extreme circumstances of rape, coercion, and war, mothering was at times experienced as burdensome and dangerous, and as strengthening and hope giving. It was fundamental to the motherline and influenced mothers' experiences and sense of identity. The participants' experiences illustrate how the motherline—and the relationship between mother and child—is fraught with complexity and is influenced by time and context. Through the shared experience of enduring suffering and transcending adversity, a profound connection was woven, and many mothers and CBC later came to rely on each other for solidarity, support, and love. These women often attempted to rebuild motherlines that had been severed, which showed their profound resilience. By addressing the immediate and long-term service provision needs identified by participants, the realities of mothering in challenging contexts and the ambivalence of mothers to children born of war can be acknowledged and directly addressed. Scholarship on children's rights and protection has often shown that supporting and protecting mothers is one of the most vital ways to

protect children (Veale et al.). In the context of northern Uganda, supporting mothers will help the individual and collective lives of a group of women who have endured multiple forms of violence and trauma, but this support will also trickle down and positively impact the lives of their children. Culturally relevant and community-based support that aim to build on existing capacities and support self-sufficiency—while focusing on the relational dynamics between mother and child—will ultimately improve the health and psychosocial wellbeing of both mothers and their children born in captivity, their family, and their broader community.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Interviews were also conducted with seventy children born of wartime rape, twenty-one extended family members of these children, and four primary school teachers for a total of 122 participants. These interviews are not included in this analysis.

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