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Mothering in a Time of Conflict

Acholi Women's Experience of Child Rearing in the Displacement Camps of Northern Uganda

The purpose of this investigation was to explore the challenges experienced by mothers rearing children in the context of war and displacement in Northern Uganda. Design: Sixty-three mothers participated in the study (26 in interview, 37 in focus group discussion) while living in internal displacement during the 20-year war waged by rebels in Northern Uganda. Using open-ended questions and probing, they were asked to discuss the challenges of parenting in the context of war. Results: The women expressed they had faced significant challenges in fulfilling their maternal roles in the context of conflict and displacement. Their life circumstances forced a sustained focus on survival, challenged their traditional familial relational patterns and interfered with their ability to socialize their children, instilling in the mothers apprehension about their children's future. Nonetheless, mothers also displayed resilience and persistence in facing the barrage of threats to their families. Conclusions: The difficult and sometimes horrendous circumstances of conflict and displacement alter cultural and relational parenting patterns and impact profoundly on mothers and children.

Introduction

Twenty years of conflict waged by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the north of Uganda has deeply challenged mothers in this area. The terror, displacement, economic destitution and disease that have proliferated during the war have forced mothers and children to rapidly adapt for their survival. This paper presents results from a qualitative research study conducted with women living in three displacement camps of Northern Uganda in 2005. Through a review of historical and current literature and the accounts of these women we explore the impact of the conflict and displacement on perceived maternal roles and familial relations.

Pre-War Cultural Practices and Relational Patterns in Rural Acholi Communities

Traditionally, in this patriarchal and patrilineal culture, women came to their husband's village through marriage, and as outsiders gained privilege, status and respect through giving birth to and raising children (Girling; Ominde). Acholi mothers held beliefs and knowledge regarding desirable outcomes for their children and the necessary parenting practices for achieving these outcomes. These ethnotheories of child development and parenting (Greenfield et al.) were passed down through generations.

The Context of Conflict in Northern Uganda

Much has been written outlining the complexities of the 20-year conflict waged by the LRA in Northern Uganda, (e.g. Allen; Finnstrom, 2006, 2008; Annan et. al; Annan, Blattman and Horton; Vinck et al.; Refugee Law Project; Gersony). The LRA, a rebel group composed of primarily Acholi persons and lead by Joseph Kony, began the conflict against the Ugandan government in the mid 1980s. While initial LRA attacks focused on government forces, in the early 1990s the focus shifted to the civilian population in retribution for perceived support the population gave to government forces (Refugee Law Project).

Using unpredictable and brutal attacks on unprotected civilians going about their daily lives in villages, schools, camps, roads, and health centres, the fighting forces terrorized the Acholi people and stole and destroyed community resources and infrastructure to destabilize the population. It has recently been estimated that 66,000 youths aged 14-30 years were abducted into service of the rebel group (Annan et. al.). Captives abducted as LRA recruits were regularly forced to commit atrocities against their families and communities to sever their relational ties (Refugee Law Project). Many more were abducted for gruelling short-term service or to bear witness to the brutality of the LRA so they could return to their communities to share the fear (Allen). This vicious and lengthy conflict resulted in economic disaster in the region, thousands of deaths, abductions, an atmosphere of fear and distrust, and widespread displacement of the population from their villages (Gersony; Refugee Law Project; FEMRITE; OXFAM International; UNHCR; Allen).

Many Acholi civilians were forced to flee their villages following attacks by the LRA. Many more were forcibly displaced into camps by the government to deny the rebels resources and to offer the population protection—protection that largely did not materialize before or after the relocation (Refugee Law Project; Dolan; Finnstrom; FEMRITE; Bagenda and Hovil). Abductions continued in the camps and in addition to fear, camp residents were often faced with squalid conditions, lack of services and infrastructure, overcrowding, disease, hunger, abject poverty and dependence on relief services (Refugee

Law Project; FEMRITE; OXFAM International; UNHCR). By the end of the conflict, there was reported to be 1.8 million internally displaced persons in the north of Uganda (OXFAM International). In 2005, when this research was conducted, 90% of the population was reported to be dislocated (Finnstrom, 2006; Ministry of Health of Uganda, UNICEF and WHO).

Mothers in War

Mothers impacted by conflict experience significant stressors such as coping with their own experience of trauma, economic destitution, loss of familial support and/or mental health breakdown (Dybdahl). The demands of war on mothers and their need to focus on survival often renders them less able to provide the full range of support that they may have offered in more typical, safe and stable circumstances (Wessells and Monteiro; Punamaki 1987 in Cairns and Dawes; Ajdukovic and Ajdukovic).

Methods

Participants and sampling

This paper represents a sub analysis of a research initiative completed in the displacement camps of Northern Uganda from July 2004 to June 2005 (Spittal et. al.). This period occurred one year before the government and LRA signed the August 2006 agreement to cease hostilities in Northern Uganda (OXFAM International) and negotiate peace. Sampling was purposive. Respondents were recruited from 3 displacement camps in northern Uganda: Palenga, Awer and Pabo (Spittal et. al.). In 2005, Pabo was the largest of the camps with a population of 48,455, followed by Awer at 15,412 and Palenga at 8,123 (UNWFP). The camps were composed of thousands of round, grass- thatched mud huts packed tightly together. Latrines, bathing shelters and boreholes were communal. While surrounding landscapes were covered in grass and bush (formerly agricultural land), in the camps themselves there was little green space as the environment had been largely stripped of natural resources, making for a barren, dusty, densely crowded setting. People came to the camps from a range of villages, and hence had a range of backgrounds, lifestyles and traditional practices.

We analysed the responses given by the 63 older women in the 26 semi structured interviews and 4 focus group discussions. The women were between the ages of 30 and 67 years, were living in displacement camps at the time of study and all had children. Respondents had lived their childhood and young adulthood in the villages. They offered a unique perspective in that they re-membered the past before the camps and knew what of their culture had been altered. Many of the women reported having lost children by causes such as violence or disease and several of the women also described fostering orphan children of relatives. The women had low educational attainment, consistent with the results found in other studies in the region (Annan et. al.).

Procedures

Qualitative data collection consisted of: 1) focus group discussion, 2) semi-structured interviews and 3) observation. Three trained Acholi Research Assistants, fluent both in the Luo language and English, collected the data. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and translated. Interviews were conducted in a private location and lasted between 1-2 hours. Informed consent was obtained prior to research commencing and ethics approval was attained through Ugandan review boards.

The trustworthiness or credibility of data was enhanced through employing a range of data collection methods and collecting data from diverse women in a range of camp settings (Miles and Huberman; Harris, Jerome and Fawcett). The respondents were asked at the beginning of the interview to describe their experience of raising children in the context of conflict and displacement. They were probed on their answers. Their reported experience of raising children is the focus of this paper.

Analysis

The qualitative data set was initially analyzed using 'bottom-up' or inductive processes (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte; LeCompte and Schensul), meaning the data was first read through repeatedly to explore the most basic item (or variable) level. A coding scheme (based on single ideas) was devised, and was then applied manually to all transcripts. Codes that were similar were grouped into increasingly broader concepts described as: sub factors, factors and finally the three over-riding domains presented in this paper (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte). These domains capture the recurrent themes (the three broad challenges) presented by mothers: 1) ensuring physical survival and promoting the health of children, 2) building children's productive capacity and 3) socializing children. Triangulation of the data analysts ensured the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives were captured, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

Results

1) The challenge of ensuring physical survival and promoting the health of children in the context of conflict and displacement:

The circumstances of conflict and displacement in Northern Uganda frequently challenged and limited mothers' ability to protect the well-being and even the lives of their children. While the camps were established to offer protection from the rebel forces, this protection often did not materialize, leaving the population vulnerable to attack, destruction and looting. Mothers were constantly living with the very real threats of violence and abduction being perpetrated against themselves or their children by a range of actors:

> *As parents, it is God protecting us. Now, we have been confined in camps.*

> *When rebels enter into the camps, the soldiers who are supposed to protect us all run away, leaving the people unprotected. If the rebels reach your house, they loot, abduct and kill your household members, depending on their mission.* (35-year-old caregiver of eight children, interviewed while living in Awer camp, her home of eight years)

This violent, on-going conflict and confinement in the camps meant that mothers were restricted from accessing their agricultural land; the source of their livelihood. With these restrictions came severe limitation and thwarting of the most basic maternal role; the ability to meet the material and survival needs of children. The women recalled the former competence of the family unit in providing nutritious varied food, clothes, and other basics, such as money for school or bride price for marriage. This shift from perceived sufficiency to economic desperation was demoralizing to mothers, as can be heard in the statements below:

> *…those days our parents could plant varieties of crops but now there is nowhere to plant those crops and if there is no money your children must die or suffer from hunger and this suffering from hunger, this is terrible.* (45-year-old mother of eight living in Pabo camp struggling to care for her children alone as her husband is seriously ill)

Mothers instead became dependent upon government and international organizations to provide basics such as food in the context of forced camp living. Yet even this dependence was vulnerable as it was reported that external providers were often unable to sufficiently meet basic needs. As such, deprivation became a pervasive life experience:

> *If world food programme with their relief distribution happen to come, the little you will get from them must again be sold. Within two weeks you find that you are left with nothing at all in the house.* (48-year-old mother struggling to care for her children alone, in Pabo camp after being abandoned by a husband with alcoholism. Food was sold to provide for other basic necessities)

Mothers were distressed by the congestion in camps and felt that it contributed to a number of problems such as poor hygiene/sanitation, rampant spread of disease (i.e. HIV/AIDS, diarrhoea), hut fires and other issues that greatly restricted their ability to protect the health and survival of their children. The high rate of disease in the camp environment was one of the most frequently mentioned problems:

> *It is not easy to stay in the camp here because of poor sanitation. And this is why diseases are common.* (Mother in focus group, Palenga camp)

2) The challenge of building children's productive capacity in the context of conflict and displacement:

Mothers in this study reported that the context and confines of camp living prevented them from teaching their children the productive skills they would need later in life. In the past, children and youth worked alongside their families and were mentored in skills, knowledge and work values:

> *In the past, a boy of six years was able to graze the cattle, now a child cannot dig (cultivate) because he does not know what digging is all about.* (mother in focus group discussion, Palenga camp)

However, while living in displacement, parents feared their children could be abducted if they went to the agricultural land, and so left them in the camps during the day with minimal, if any, supervision. The drive to protect children took priority over fostering the children's capacity to be productive and economically self-maintaining in the future:

> *It's I who volunteers and exposes myself to carry firewood, cassava and anything with which to feed them so that they should remain within the camp; they shouldn't go anywhere, they stay within the camp. This is why they have never been abducted.* (42-year-old woman with seven children living in Pabo camp for eight years)

Confined to camps, mothers feared children were socialized to leisure and idleness, a sharp contrast to past values of productivity. Some saw young people as undisciplined and/or unmotivated and worried about how the children would provide for themselves and their families in the future. It was difficult for some mothers to imagine future productive roles of unskilled, uneducated youth:

> *We are facing a lot of problems with children, we have no hope in our children the way our parents had hope on us in the past.* (52-year-old mother of a formally abducted girl, living in Palenga camp)

3) The challenge of socializing children in the context of conflict and displacement:

Mothers expressed deep concern about the numerous social threats that existed within the camps and that restricted their ability to foster social competence and pass on cultural values to their children. In the camp, children were exposed to many people and social situations that they would not have encountered in a village setting. Traditional Acholi homesteads had consisted of numerous huts within a compound that would house various members of the extended family. Child rearing and socialization was largely a family responsibility and the interdependent nature of communities was reflected in their use of space and proximity to kin. In conflict and displacement, mothers reported that families were often divided. This severely weakened the family unit as the main

source of socialization and limited the support that mothers previously had in socializing, disciplining, protecting and nurturing their children:

> …there are even no aunties at Palenga here and uncles are also not there. People are scattered, that is why if guidance is to be provided by relatives it becomes impossible because people are scattered due to war; that is why relatives cannot give guidance to young girls, people are staying far from one another; that is why we are defeated. Among us here; there is no relationship. (mother in focus group discussion, Palenga camp)

The traditional places and practices that promoted socialization in daily life, such as working together in the fields or sharing lessons, stories and connection around the evening campfires (wang oo) were lost in displacement. Camps brought limited space, scattered families, restrictions to interaction and movement (i.e. night curfews, movement restrictions), no privacy and a large increase in outside influences:

> You would gather the children in the compound by the fireside. Then you start to tell them, that in the past we had our ancestors who would tell us this and that. But these days there is no fireside. When it begins to get dark the child has to bathe and just go to sleep. The teaching you should have given him about traditional culture and other teaching, you cannot do now because the Wang OO (fireside) is no longer there. (widowed mother living in Palenga camp)

Mothers described camps as places of social temptation for children, making their maternal roles of teaching and disciplining difficult. Unlike in the villages, in camps there was exposure to discos, bars, prostitutes and movie halls where children could go unsupervised. Alcoholism was reported to be a common problem, particularly but not exclusively for males, and was mentioned as a contributing factor in domestic violence, quarrelling, poverty in the home, lack of productivity, disobedience in youth, and the spread of HIV/AIDS:

> They search for ways of enjoying themselves. He will realize that if you take alcohol, it gives you courage or makes you a friend. All this he learns from association. Association with bad company is spiriting the children. (mother in focus group discussion, Awer camp)

The camps also offered children much more social interaction with strangers than had been possible in the village. People came to the camps with diverse lifestyles and manners and what was modelled for children in the camps was not always desirable as far as mothers were concerned. From receiving bad advice to full predation, perpetrators of negative influence were reported to take many forms: peers, parents and family, other adults (shop owners, mar-

ried men, sugar daddies and mamas, soldier's wives, traders, neighbours) and authority figures (soldiers, teachers).

> … *the girls, they are also becoming difficult for us to handle because we are in a bad place. There are big people who entice girls with money, things to eat like sweets, biscuits, sodas.* (mother in focus group discussion, Palenga camp)

Mothers described a range of situations that their children were lured into including: sex, elopement, marriage, drinking, smoking, dropping out of school, infanticide, deceiving parents (hiding pregnancy, going out at night), and idleness or leisure pursuits. The susceptibility of young people to this predation was reported to stem from the loss of the family unit's ability to provide basic necessities and the corrupting social environments of camps. Mothers cited the following reasons for children's vulnerability: neediness/lack of food, clothes or other basic resources, hoping for a better life situation, trying to solve their problems, lured in by coveting what they saw others possessed, peer pressure, wooing/attraction, persuasion and following the advice of friends.

> ….*after you have guided (advised or instructed) your child, he/she goes and meets his/her friend and he or she gets another advice from that friend. This can really make you waste your efforts because your advice will never be taken seriously.* (48-year-old mother in Pabo camp)

Mothers often reported feeling defeated in their attempts to maintain their parental authority and roles as advisors in the camp setting. The most common grievance mothers had about raising children in a camp environment was that their children did not listen to them anymore and had become disobedient. This idea arose 63 times in the transcripts. Mothers frequently reported being in the hapless situation of not knowing where their children were, what they were doing and/or being deceived about their children's activities. Unlike in the past when families were a main source of social support, mothers reported that in the camps their guidance was only sought in the rare case that their children needed something or when they got sick or were abandoned and they came home to be cared for. Children had equal or even greater access to information than their parents through peers, community educators and schools:

> *Children cannot be herded like animals. Human beings are not herded like animals. The children we have now are so spoilt. The camp has spoilt them all. Children today have a kind of wisdom that their parents cannot understand. They can fool you right under your nose. The children have defeated us parents.* (45-year-old widow caring for two children in Awer camp, her home of nine years)

It is evident that many mothers were convinced that much of their cultural values and practices had changed or perished because of the conflict and the social environment of camps. Many mothers expressed a longing for an end to camp living so they could resume their former social arrangements and raise their children properly. For some, being able to return home was seen as the only means of fully regaining control of their lives and the lives of their children:

> …*if the war ends, everybody is allowed to go back to his or her home. So then we can go and bring up our children well.* (56-year-old widow in Pabo camp, her home of 13 years, mother to seven living children, and five who have passed away)

4) Resilient mothers: adapting and fighting to maintain threatened maternal roles:

While many mothers talked of how their maternal roles were diminished in the camps, many resisted this loss and fought to retain their place as providers, protectors and advisors for their children and grandchildren. They continued to advise their children, even if they didn't listen. In situations where fathers were absent, unable or unwilling to participate, some mothers even reported assuming the role of advisors to male children, a role traditionally held by fathers. In situations where adult children passed away, mothers reported taking over the care of their grandchildren:

> *I have children to whom I am brother, mother and father.* (focus group discussion participant, Awer camp)

They continued their efforts to provide food and meet basic needs, often at great personal sacrifice and with limited support. Many women reported risking their security, going back to their land (or the land of others) to try to cultivate food for consumption. They also sought out other forms of labour including doing small jobs for other camp dwellers or travelling to the bush to collect firewood to use or sell. Hence the conflict also brought a shift in responsibility, with women who traditionally carried out unpaid service and care in their homes and communities now earning wages to provide for household livelihood; a traditionally male dominated role (i.e. hiring out one's labour, conducting petty trade). They did not relinquish their maternal roles but fought to retain them, albeit in new ways because of bad circumstances. Additionally in the context of conflict and displacement, women did what was necessary to provide for their children even when this involved assuming new roles.

Discussion

Child rearing is known to involve practices and beliefs that are culturally, socially, psychologically and contextually (economically, ecologically) mediated (Levine;

Miller and Harwood; Bornstein, Venuti and Hahn). As is seen through the voices of mothers in this study, twenty years of conflict greatly impacted these mediating factors and had a profound impact on mothers' ability to rear their children. Mothers' parenting and developmental ethnotheories (Greenfield et al.) were seriously challenged by the camp context.

Firstly and most basically, they were diminished in their attempts to meet their children's physical, health and survival needs. When the Acholi mothers and children were forced into displacement camps, they were forced into restricted and dependent living. Dependence on external aid eroded the value and practice of familial material/economic interdependence that existed historically through the performance of traditional communal agricultural labour. The social-ecological environment of the camp was one of destitution, congestion, disease and social dysfunction (violence, predation). This environment brought about significant physical, health and survival repercussions for everyone and particularly for the children. A morbidity and mortality survey in Acholiland conducted the same year as this research showed both crude mortality rates and under-five mortality rates were well above the emergency levels (Ministry of Health of Uganda, UNICEF and WHO).

Mothers struggled and were often frustrated in their attempts to teach their children the knowledge, values and skills that would make them able to economically support themselves and the family in the future. They were unable to take their children to the gardens due to insecurity, which resulted in minimal opportunity for mentoring in productive occupations. Far from the traditional practices where children and youth would work alongside kin, in camps, youth and children were often left idle and unsupervised during the day and education beyond primary level was often inaccessible due to poverty. Mothers worried about their children's futures and what would become of them if return to independent village living became viable.

Finally, we see mothers' effort and despair at being unable to foster their children's social and cultural competence in traditional Acholi ways. Congestion in the camps did not accommodate well for cultural relations and practices: there was a loss of traditional teaching spaces for children, and family were separated and scattered, breaking down support networks and increasing vulnerability. Maternal efforts to maintain control and instil familial obligation in the youth was constantly thwarted by an uncontrollable environment. This was in sharp contrast to the village environment, where youth were engaged in family activities and relatively isolated from non-familial peers and foreigners. Moreover, camps tested psychological interdependence of the family through separation, social predation, an inability to offer protection, significantly decreased adult supervision, and lost opportunities for familial bonding. This study, through looking at the child rearing experiences of mothers living in displacement settings, offers further support to findings demonstrating that political violence may bring about significant and rapid change in family relationships and patterns of coping and supporting children (Cairns and Dawes).

In analyzing the challenges reported by mothers we found that Levine's three universal hierarchical goals of parenting and socialization captured the concerns about parenting expressed by mothers in conflict and displacement. However in this context, the framework effectively captured not only their goals, but the areas in which mothers felt thwarted: (1) ensuring physical survival and promoting the health of children, (2) building children's capacity to be economically self-maintaining and (3) socializing children to internalize and behave in ways that are in keeping with the values of their culture (Marfo et al.). While mothers clearly expressed ethnotheories and practices that address all three areas, in conflict and displacement their capacity to carry out their roles as parents was severely compromised. Levine's framework (Levine cited in Marfo et al.) seems to present a way forward when planning how to support mothers in the complex context of conflict and displacement.

While some women talked of despair or hopelessness, the majority of the mothers in this study persisted, despite the odds, to somehow maintain and even expand maternal roles. Many recognized that their role as providers, advisors and protectors of children had been severely compromised in conflict and camp settings but still they persevered in their efforts to provide and nurture. Mothers worked when and where they could for wages, collected food as it was distributed, prepared food, spent hours collecting water (Ministry of Health of Uganda, UNICEF and WHO) and firewood, and even ventured out to their gardens at great personal risk. They advised their children even when they felt they weren't listening, cared for the sick, and took in their grandchildren. While there was an expression of deep loss in the mothers of northern Uganda, there was also tremendous resilience, as has been found in other studies (Annan et al.; Finnstrom 2008).

War and life in camps removed or severely diminished culturally defined roles of mothers. Cultures evolve and familial relations change with time and circumstance (Kagitcibasi; Weisner), but now that the war has ended we should ask, what will be the lasting impacts of conflict and displacement? It seems evident that Acholi mothers and their children are engrossed in a major cultural shift but as they emerge from the dependence and deprivation of camp living, the long-term consequences have yet to be revealed and they are fearful of what the future holds for their children:

> *The way to protect our children is when we take them home. As long as they are still here there is no rest.* (49-year-old widow in Pabo camp; one of her children died of disease, two were abducted by the LRA and died in captivity. She has one remaining adult child)

Conclusions

Mothers faced with the painful, destructive experience of conflict and displacement are seriously challenged and often thwarted in fulfilling the multifaceted

roles of care giving. Nonetheless, their drive to protect and nurture often pushes them forward in a taxing struggle to do what is necessary for the survival of the family, sometimes at their own peril.

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