



## UGANDA

MOVING TOWARDS PEACE





## OUR HOPES ARE WORN

Our hopes are worn,  
Out with pain, of crimes committed against us  
Facing death, rape, torture and slavery  
What hope do we have?

Like animals we are hunted, our homes are destroyed,  
Parents, brother, sisters killed.  
Where then is our home?

To the community we have become enemies,  
We are being isolated, rejected, ignored,  
By our brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers,  
Meanwhile rebels, murderers and robbers,  
Have become our names.  
Daily our hope withers thereby.

Our children born in captivity,  
Where the crime scars,  
That we thought would vanish,  
When we return back home,  
Are not excepted in the community,  
By our people,  
Then where should we belong?  
Or should we end our lives by going back to the bush

Let us wake up,  
And struggle for peace together.  
For the new generation.

Lucy Aol, 17 years old.

# THE SITUATION IN UGANDA

## OVERVIEW



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**Northern Uganda's conflict is often described as a war against children. While all have suffered in this war, the abuse of young people has been extraordinary.**

**It is estimated that more than 40,000 children were abducted by the Lords Resistance Army.**

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Northern Uganda is emerging from a brutal civil war which began in the mid 1980s and lasted for over 21 years. The Lords Resistance Army (LRA), led by Joseph Kony, was the chief instigator of this conflict, though it was also fuelled by long-standing tensions between the country's north and southern regions. The LRA were notorious for random attacks; the looting and destruction of villages; bizarre atrocities; and most of all, the abduction of children. The LRA'S goal seemed to be the destabilization of the region, a tactic that was largely successful.

By the early 2000s the Northern Uganda countryside was empty. Over 1.5 million people had fled their home villages to live in camps for the internally displaced. These camps were places of abject misery – hot and crowded with hundreds of thatched huts huddled together on grounds with neither grass nor trees to provide relief from the sun or shelter from rain.

People accustomed to long days of hard work, based on an agricultural economy, were consigned to years of idleness and dependence on the World Food Program. Camp life was plagued by problems of jealousy, drunkenness and violence reflecting a general feeling of helplessness.

Northern Uganda's conflict is often described as a war against children. While all have suffered in this war, the abuse of young people has been extraordinary. It is estimated that between 30,000 - 70,000 children<sup>1</sup> were abducted by the Lords Resistance Army. (SWAY, accessed Jan 2009). Many died from attacks on their villages or the severity of life in the camps. The rhythms of an Acholi upbringing were denied all children, as was evident in the sight of the child "night commuters" leaving their homes each evening to seek the greater safety of nearby towns.

Children captured by the LRA fought for survival inside a vicious world. Punishment for the smallest disobedience was swift and brutal. Young recruits were forced into armed combat, the pillaging of villages and abduction of other children. Female adolescents were given to commanders.

Returnees speak of the huge burden of guilt they feel for their participation in atrocities which involved the killing of friends and family members. Those who escaped the LRA have had



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**The average length of time that females were held in captivity was eight years, much longer than for boys.**

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difficult re-entries as idyllic memories of home villages were replaced by the reality of camp life and hostility from former neighbours.

Northern Uganda is currently going through a major transition. There is hope this war is finally finished. Though no signed peace agreement exists, the LRA has ceased its operations in Northern Uganda. IDP camps are closing; families are returning to their villages. Often these are complicated transitions with bitter land disputes and lack of materials for rebuilding.

To date, the peace process has been largely limited to formal negotiations. Young people have been given no role, though many, such as CAP Uganda's youth membership, have expressed their strong desire to do so. Many have expressed bitterness, saying that they are the forgotten ones, that children were used in this war but have been shut out in the work for peace.

## **FORMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

The actions of the LRA were the central fact of Northern Uganda's war. But in addition to the terror and devastation they directly caused, they also created an environment of despair and insecurity which triggered new forms of violence, ones that had major consequences for girls. The following information provides an overview of the dynamics of both these situations and the types of sexual violence they produced.

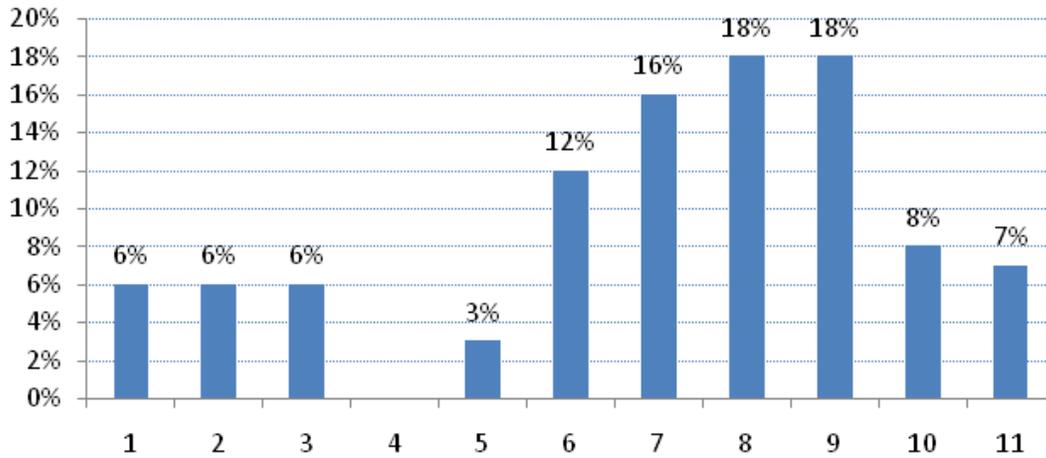
### **Experiences of Girls Abducted By the Lords Resistance Army**

First-hand accounts of life inside the LRA are best provided by girls' stories, artwork and interviews in this section. This includes materials produced since 1998, the first time CAP held an art workshop with female returnees.

The girls describe a world where their survival was in the hands of ruthless, brutal men. As indicated in the chart <sup>2</sup> on the following page, the average length of time that females were held in captivity was eight years, which was longer than for boys. This was because girls were closely watched and were often kept near the LRA headquarters in southern Sudan, especially once they became pregnant or had children.

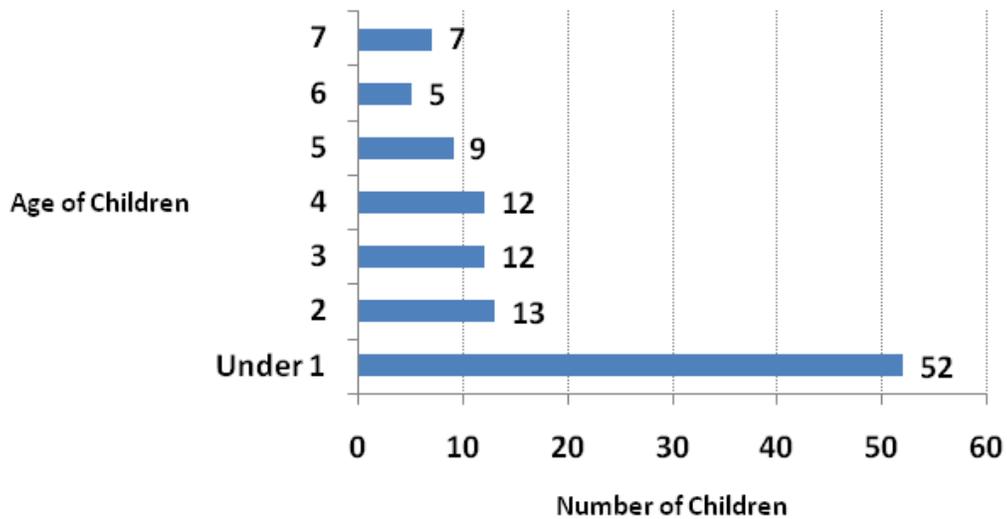
Girls who escaped the LRA have had complex transitions back into their communities. In addition to their personal recoveries from years of harsh treatment, they also had to cope with the reactions of neighbours and family members. Central to this were, and continues to be, the position of their children who were born in captivity.

### Years in Captivity with the LRA: Percentage of Female Returnees by Number of Years



Source: World Vision Reception Centre records

### Distribution of Children Born in the Bush By Age



Source: World Vision Reception Centre records

The chart titled “Children Born in the Bush”<sup>3</sup> provides an overview of the number of years children spent inside the LRA world. As noted there, the majority of children were under one year when they escaped with their mother. However, some children spent as many as six or seven years in captivity.

These young boys and girls have trouble being accepted by their extended families. They have little status – many see them as a reminder of a time everyone is trying to forget. Charles Watmon<sup>4</sup>, who has worked at both the World Vision Reception Centre and in community programs fears for the situation of these children:

“This is a very big problem how a child born in captivity can be accepted in the family. It will take time. The parents of the girl will pretend that they are trying to accept the child, but internally they are not happy, inside they are not happy.

They had different dreams for their daughter, that they would finish school. But now she comes back with a fatherless child, they may either know or not know who that man is. There was no program for that child – they will imagine what that child will do in the future, who will take care of it.

Now, when it is small, they can be a little different but that thought is still in their heads. And if the child makes a mistake – and it is normal for them to do that – then they can quickly say, “Oh, that is what your father used to do, you are the child of a rebel.” And they will call him by that name, and the child feels very bad.”

### Violence & Life In the IDP Camps

The IDP camps were established as a short term solution to provide security from raids by the LRA. However, this stop-gap measure became the conditions under which thousands of families lived for over ten years.

The organization and way of life in the camps was basically at odds with Acholi culture and traditions. For example, most families were limited to one hut, a major departure from local habits where families had separate sleeping quarters for parents and children. This caused problems for privacy and a sense of the proper organization of domestic life.

For most people, there was little, if anything, to do as security concerns prevented people going to their gardens during the day. Water and sanitation services were at a bare minimum. People were dependent on the World Food Program for their supplies.



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**“It is so good that the camps are finally closing, because if they had been there much longer, we would be finished, our social structure demolished completely. “**

**Charles Watmon**

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## WORKSHOP WITH CHILDREN WHO WERE BORN IN CAPTIVITY

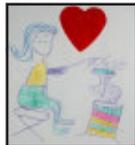


I have only one problem – that everyone hates me.

My biggest trouble in my life is that my mother hits me all the time, for no reason, I try so hard to be good.

My mother is weak, she is unhappy a lot of the time. I just want to help her.

My problem is my mother has a new husband. He hates me, he says he doesn't want to see me.



This is a heart for my mother.

I am happy, I have a new dress.

I am one of the best students in my class – number one or two. But the other students are often mean to me. They call me nicknames, that I have no brain, no head, that I am just a LRA child.

But the teachers, the teachers are nice to us.

I have a friend, she is my very best friend, we are together all the time.



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**“I wake up in the morning and I wait for the relief food. I have nothing else to do from morning to dusk.**

**I couldn't find anything else to do even if I wanted to.”**

*David, aged 17 yrs  
SWAY study*

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Many turned to alcohol as the solution to remove the burdens of a wretched existence. Men were the principal consumers. Females, particularly child mothers, made the brew as an income generator. But this came at a cost as drunken behaviour had a disastrous effect on family life and levels of violence. In CAP's research it was repeatedly identified as a major concern, with parents saying that it destroyed men's ability “to think in a protective way”.

Acholi society has a proud culture whose traditions guide relationships between parents and children. This includes respect for elders, a rigid organization of gender roles and the assumption that parents have a strong say in their children's lives and behaviour. It is a culture based on cooperation, a collective sense of responsibility for children and courtesy amongst neighbours and relatives.

IDP camp life has undermined these practices. Jealousy and suspicion of others became prominent. The position of the male as head of the household was weakened as camp life had nothing to reinforce this role. In focus group discussions, many complained of the “I don't care, do what you want, just don't bother me” attitude that parents have adopted with their teenagers. Overwhelmed by depression and feelings of hopelessness, they lacked the energy to keep up with these responsibilities.

As many parents noted, adolescents have begun to operate as fairly autonomous agents, making their own rules and resisting any advice from their elders. Disco life has become a big draw for young people looking for a diversion and entertainment inside a generally bleak environment.

In CAP's discussion groups both adults and youth expressed alarm about the high rates of violence that they see as being caused by these social conditions. As in most situations, it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the level of sexual violence. However, the prevailing feeling is that these violations are common and increasing. This view is shared by service organizations<sup>5</sup> such as MSF, CARE and World Vision that have provided assistance to camp residents. According to CARE staff the 14 – 17 age group is the most affected by sexual violence.

## THE YOUTH SAY



“The borehole is always a source of problems for girls, especially when you are carrying the water because you can’t look around so well. You also have to be careful when you go looking for firewood, because that will be in isolated areas, there will be no one to help you if you get in trouble.”

“In the camps there can be restrictions, sometimes they will say that all the doors have to be closed by a certain hour. Girls who are out moving late can be in trouble, they can get caught by men.”



“A lot of young people don’t sleep in their family’s hut. Sometimes this is because they have been thrown out by their father; other times it is because this is what they prefer. Either way, it can leave them out on their own late at night when there are gangs or drunken men around.”

“Sexual violence mostly occurs at night. For example, in the video hall, they turn out the lights so boys will grab you.”



“In the barracks near the camps, sometimes the girls will go to visit the soldiers. The soldiers will promise them gifts. Yes, sometimes girls are like prostitutes, but it is also a way of surviving, particularly for those who were in bush, because their families won’t support them sometimes, they are put out by their parents.”

In a focus group discussion, boys said that girls had to understand that sex was expected and that a true male never accepts no as an answer.

“We are very hungry. And when you see ‘food’ on the table, you want to eat.”

They expressed fear about others mocking them if they did not live up to this code of behaviour. Some of the points that were identified:

- You need to prove your manhood.
- “Boys who have been a long time in the bush, they are accustomed to using force to get what they want. They can see themselves as superior to girls. They are also very strong.”



“There is the problem of the sugar daddies, especially for female returnees. When the World Food Program food was provided to the camps, some men would have a way of knowing how to get more of that food. So if you want a share of it, you have to do what they want.”

“In the bush it is just a natural happening, girls are always being raped by their husbands. But back here, in the camps, the stigma is very high for someone who has been raped.”



“When parents drink a lot, the kids will not be brought up well.”

“I am not sure if this is sexual violence, but you can see young girls who are forced by their parents to marry older men. The parents say that it is for protection but you can also see that they are gaining financially from this.”

## THE PARENTS SAY



“The biggest worry is the defilement of girls.” [Defilement is defined as sexual activity of a girl under 18, whether she is willing or not. Under Ugandan law this is a criminal offence punishable with a prison term. Defilement is a major concern for parents, partly because traditional culture assumes that a girl is a virgin when she is married. ]

“It is useless to give a report to the police. And if you go to the local leaders they will want you to pay some money to them.”



“ These boys, I don’t think there is any way of controlling them, so girls need to be taught self defence, when the best times for walking are and also to come out. The boys also have to know what the danger is if they are caught – seven years if you are convicted. Their eyes need to be opened – sometimes boys can take it as a game. That could be something that the boys could do with each other. “

“ There are a lot of young people who have been affected by the war. Some have become disorderly, there can be problems with drugs and this can lead to violence, maybe groups of boys going after a girl.”



“There is always the problem with the male teachers, but that has always been there, it is not new to this time.”

Parents talked about how they tried to do their best but their children wouldn’t listen to them. Also they spoke of how they would things would happen that they wouldn’t have predicted. The situation of the night commuters was given as an example of substituting one security problem for another.

The night commuters refers to the nightly migrations of hundreds of children from their villages and IDP camps to the greater safety of nearby towns.

This practice, which was very active from 2004 – 2006, was first supported by parents. However, they soon found that this solution was creating new threats as girls were being grabbed by motorcyclists and were vulnerable to men’s advances while sleeping on the town verandas. So, a somewhat desperate measure to create better protection resulted in other vulnerabilities for girls.

## INFORMATION FROM SOCIAL AGENCIES:

### 1. High rates of domestic violence.

This is confirmed by a report by the Uganda Law Reform Commission in 2006. This study states that domestic violence rates in Northern Uganda are 78%, over twice the national rate of 30%.<sup>1</sup> Sexual abuse inside families is not recorded though people would often allude to their ‘concern’ about the potential for this violence, particularly when men were drunk.

### 2. High rates of teen pregnancies and adolescent, unmarried mothers

The teen pregnancy rate for Northern Uganda is 31% (six points above the national average.) Teenage mothers with their babies are a common sight in the IDP camps and the streets of Gulu, the main town for the Acholi region. There have been many programs established to provide livelihoods, maternal health care and childrearing support for young mothers, with the demand being seemingly endless for these services.

In discussions with girls, many said that motherhood was not a choice so much as a consequence of life in the camps. Others actively chose to become pregnant, hoping that a relationship with a man and a new family would bring happiness. In most cases, these are make-shift unions which are not formalized by marriage, a major departure from traditional Acholi life. Such romances are often short-lived as young men, who also face uncertain futures, have a tendency to wander away when too many demands are placed on them.

### 3. High rate of HIV infection.

Fear of HIV infection is a major concern for both parents and youth. According to a study by World Vision<sup>1</sup> released in May 2009 HIV infection rate across the northern districts stands at 11.9%, much higher than the national rate of 6.4%. While it is difficult to determine the percentage of youth included in these numbers, it is probably safe to assume they are highly implicated as they comprised 50% of the IDP camp population.

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Northern Uganda is at a major turning point in its history. Recovery from this war will be complicated – the habits of violence are well established and challenges to these patterns will be difficult. A return to traditional norms is probably impossible. New solutions will need to be identified, including shifts in social roles and gender identities. Young people’s participation in these processes will be critical, both because they have been the principal targets of the injustices and also because their energy and commitment for change will be essential to achieve a new and positive direction.

## ART WORK BY FEMALE RETURNEES

The paintings, drawing and writing in this section include materials that have been produced since the late 1999s as CAP has conducted many art workshops with girl returnees over the past ten years. Rather than a date, the labels say whether the writer or artist was a recent returnee or had been out of the bush for some time. In some cases, girls have participated in several events and so their artwork reflects changes in their thoughts, confidence and needs as they adjust to both their memories and present situations.

Artists and writers who are identified through labels or photographs are female leaders who are involved in reconciliation work and frequently speak about their experiences as a way of gaining respect and recognition for the experiences of girls who were held by the LRA.



**I was 13.** You can see in the picture that I was coming home from school. There I am with my schoolbag. The rebels were hiding in the bushes. When I got closer they shouted, "Hey you, come over here." I did that. Then one pointed his gun at me and said, "Take off your blouse." I did that. Then all I had was my skirt. They tied my hands behind my back. They said, "Walk." I did that.

There was a man carrying a RPG in front and another one behind. I was all by myself, just me and these two soldiers, just me and them. I was so scared. I thought they were going to kill me. Instead they took me to a camp where there other girls and boys.

They never gave me back my blouse.



**We were going to the well to fetch water with my mother.** The rebels were there. They started beating me because each one was saying I was his, each one was saying I was his. They told me to carry the water and we moved. They took away the water from me and they gave me a mattress to carry and two bags to carry. And what pained me so much is we were chosen to kill those who could not walk.



## PORTRAITS OF OUR SOLDIER HUSBANDS

### ***My Soldier Husband***

When you first arrive, they put all the girls together.  
Then they call the officers so they can pick who they want for a wife.  
Even if you are very young.

I was given to a really big man. He was blind on one side.  
So he didn't see that I was very young.

### ***My Soldier Husband***

This is the picture of the man who was my husband.  
It is the face of death.

### ***My Soldier Husband***

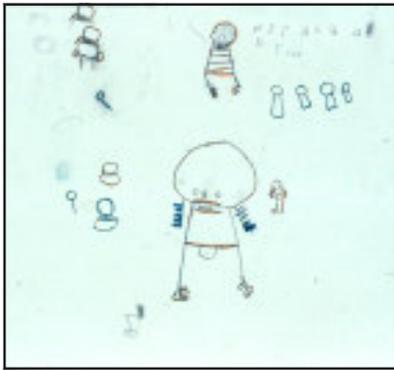
This is a picture of the man who was my husband.  
He was always eager to kill.

He said, "You are going to come to my bed." I refused.  
I went to sleep in another place.  
So he sent someone to get me. I still refused.

Then he came with a knife. And he hit me four times.  
It really hurt. So I went to his place.  
He said, "If you continue to refuse, I am going to beat you until you die."

**So I didn't refuse anymore.**

Note: These caricatures were made in the late 1990s, shortly after these girls had escaped the LRA.



### ***This is Me***

We had to collect water so our commanders could bathe.

Water is hard to get, especially in Sudan. It is about two miles of walking. But you had to go.

The commanders liked their baths.



### ***The Saucepan***

This is a picture of the man I was given to. He was very cruel.

One time when we were moving with the rebels there was a helicopter shooting at us. We got all scared and we started running. I threw the luggage I was carrying away so I could run faster.

I even threw the saucepan away. A saucepan is very important – girls must carry it everywhere they go.

In the evening I had to cook. But I didn't have the saucepan. He got very angry. He said that I had thrown away the saucepan on purpose. He said I was working with the enemy. He ordered me to be whipped – 50 strokes. Because of the saucepan.



**In the bush the rebels always tell you that the Ugandan soldiers will rape us and kill us.** So everyone is scared of them. So I hid from the soldiers because I knew that they might kill me or rape me.

But when they caught me they didn't do it, they didn't do anything to me. Instead they took me from the one barracks to the other and then finally they brought me to Gulu. I didn't know that I was pregnant. When I came they took me to the hospital and discovered that I was pregnant. I am always worried.



**Most of the girls when they flee they have fear.** Fear that you might meet with the LRA and they will abduct you again and sometimes **fear, fear** of the civilians around, that they will kill you, and also **fear, fear** the government soldiers, because we were told that if you flee the government soldiers would kill you.

So that **fear** will always be in the heart of a child who runs away from the rebels. And sometimes when you have escaped and maybe you go to a barracks you fear that they might rape you, or they might kill you, so that **fear** continues, even when you report to the barracks.

Some of the soldiers, they come sometimes at night where the girls are kept, and they can take the girls, that is what you **fear**.

**And the nightmares.** Sometimes you find a girl who's staying three hours without knowing what is happening to her, sometimes the whole night or the whole day, so these things have been disturbing.

You find the girls wake up shouting, all startled, and when you ask.... what is happening, she cannot tell you. And dreams of dead bodies, friends killed in the bush.

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When I went home, my parents were very, very happy, to see me because they thought I was dead, so when I came home I was so happy that I was carried. When I reached home I was carrying my baby, and they carried me and the baby. I was welcomed. All my friends and the neighbours assembled to welcome me.

And some of them, whose children were still in the bush would also come when they hear that we have come back, to ask about their children who are still in the bush, if we know them.

Some of them would say "Look at these girls, they have abducted our children and left our children in the bush, now they have come home to enjoy."



Sometimes they would say "Don't be proud you "You were just a wife of the commander," they would say that to us.

And some people, instead of encouraging us, they would say "Look, now you have come back home, your mother is dead, your father is dead, if it would have been better if you had not come back home, because now you are going to suffer without your parents."

## COLOUR SELF PORTRAITS



### ***My Self Portrait***

The red shows sadness. The yellow is for happiness. The black is the past, the darkness in the past when I was in the bush.

The brown is the present. It is not all good but not all bad. When I meet my friends, some of them encourage me.

The blue is for the future. It is something that I am not sure of, I don't know what it will be.



### ***My Self Portrait***

The black is for the sadness in my head. Also the red, because of the danger when I was in the bush. When I came back, there was no war here but the sadness was still there. So the red went away but the black stayed there.

The yellow is for half sad, half happy. The blue is for the world. When I see children, I see the future and it has a happy feeling for me. The brown is for the present – that is a little bit of happiness. The red is for the danger that is also here, though it is not like before.



### ***My Self Portrait***

The white means that I am happy. It signifies happiness for me. The black on the back of my mind is for how sometimes I feel sad about how I am treated and also how people treat all the formerly abducted, especially the girls. When we were coming back, we had so many hopes that we were going to have a happy life.

The memory of the times before still stays in my mind. I don't know what will change it. That is the black part. The yellow is for my future. I know I have to work hard to have a future.

Note: These images were made in 2009 by girls who have been home 4 - 6 years.



### ***My Self Portrait***

The yellow is for the thoughts that I have in my brain. The black part is for the sadness, from my lips down to my heart. It is about what I remember in the past – it was a dark time. I was with the rebels for four year.

The white is for happiness. The green is for my future. I am seeing my future coming a little bit better, I hope that it will be bright. But sometimes I think that my life has been spoiled, because of my past in the bush.



### ***My Self Portrait***

The red colour represents the past when I was abducted by the rebels. It shows my feelings about what I was forced to do and what I saw – the killing of people. And also about all of us, how we were given to men by force which was not of our choice.

The colour inside my head is about my feelings. Some of them are about my thoughts when I first returned from captivity, when I had just come back and my thoughts were only about the bad things.

But you can see closer to my face the colours are lighter because my thinking changed. I am happy now so I have stopped thinking about these things. The green represents my present.

I am very happy now because I feel free from this oppression. I can do what I like doing, my own wishes. I am a good tailor and I can make my own money. I also have the right to chose my own husband not like in the past when they just forced you to have it. The white colour is for the future it is me thinking about what I will do for myself, my children.

I hope I will be okay.



### ***My Self Portrait***

The colours inside me – this red represents the fact that I have settled things in my mind. It represents my happiness about that. The blue is about the difficulties in my brain, that are still there. Because in my home they used to abuse me.

And the black is for the past – for the memories in the past and my time in the bush. And this other blue, it is also for unhappiness and difficulties. My mother hits me a lot and also says cruel things to me. The yellow is for some feelings of happiness that I have. I can feel proud of myself. I can discuss things, talk about things.

## INSIDER'S VIEW: LIFE WITH THE LRA

This transcript was based on a conversation with Grace and Rose who were both held by the LRA for many years. They became friends while they were in captivity and escaped together. Both Grace and Rose are youth leaders and active members of CAP Uganda. Grace recently received the Uganda's Woman Achiever of the Year (2009) award for her work in peacebuilding and support for female returnees.

This conversation was conducted over lunch with Linda, Grace, Rose and Rose's new baby, Peace.

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**Linda: Could you describe what happens when you are first taken?**

**Rose:** They first put olive oil on you - both boys and girls. They also spray the water on you and remove the blouses and shirts of both boys and girls.

They don't like the old ones - those females older than 18 years. Because they are not strong enough to move the way you have to move. They are already too old for that. So if they have picked up some old ones, they might kill them or give them to old men. They take the girls and have them line up for the officers - even in Uganda they do that, at the position camps.

**L: Are there problems with rape or sexual assault in these camps?**

**Rose:** No - they don't do that - having sex in the position camps. There are always rumours about this, but no. Maybe there are rare cases where a commander did it but if the high officers found out, he would be killed straight away.

**Grace:** I was often sent into Uganda and I helped abduct many girls. When we would arrive back at the camp they would always ask the girls if anyone interfered with them. And if one of the girls said something then you would be severely punished or killed. Because they felt that this was a big break with morality and that morality was very important to maintain.

They feared that if the younger soldiers went and got their own wives that it would undermine the discipline. It was only the commanders who were supposed to control the girls.

**And during the attacks on the villages?**

**Grace:** No, not there either - all the focus was on the abductions, getting the recruits and also the looting. But



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You have to understand that the whole way the girls are treated is part of the overall strategy of the LRA.

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sometimes we would have also had a command to do killing or maybe amputations.

You have to understand that the whole way the girls are treated is part of the overall strategy of the LRA. How they control the girls is an important part of what you do.

**Could you explain about how girls are selected? Is the age of the girl important?**

**Rose:** They want younger females who are fresh. They can see from your face – and you will not even hide – if they look and see that you are 11, you should be having your period. So you are old enough then to be given to a commander.

**I have heard about them examining the girls' breasts as one way of picking them.**

**Rose:** About the breasts and the breasts sticking out straight – yes that is true, but it is also because this is the way that the younger ones are, and they always want the young ones. The breasts are supposed to be straight and in the process of taking off your blouse and also sprinkling the water on you, they can see, they are examining your breasts.

**How was this selection organized?**

**Rose:** Usually you are taken to the place where the commanders are. Sometimes that was in Uganda, but mostly that was in southern Sudan.

The marching to Sudan is very hard. In my case, people were suffering so much because there was no food and people were dying of hunger and thirst. Also, they were beating us so much. When we finally arrived the girls were given to the commanders.

Once you arrive in the headquarters, the girls are lined up for the commanders to come and take their pick. Nobody can touch us except them – they put water on us. We had to be totally fresh for the commanders. The man I was given to was so wild, he would beat us every time.

**Grace:** Kony always had first pick. He has the privilege to chose the ones he likes first. Kony had about 100. He had three types – the wives, the young ones who are still growing but soon would be wives – called tin tins – they were sort of in training. And then the small small ones - the youngest.

Mostly he picked the young ones who in a year or so would be ready. Kony might pick a very young one – say around 8 - because he could see that she was already pretty and that she would probably be very beautiful when she got older.

Next the top commanders get to choose and so on down. The top commanders get the first choice. They say, “This



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**Some boys will refuse a wife, saying that they want to concentrate on their fighting. But for a girl, there is no choosing. All girls are given.**

**They don't do this courtship.**

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one, this one" – they pick the prettiest and the ones with the lighter skin.

You don't know who you will get. Sometimes the young girls are given to big men and some of them are very brutal.

**After the picking, what happens?**

**Rose:** You are registered in the book. But before that you have the first caning. That caning means that you have been accepted. After you have been selected they say, "Now we have to cane you. The level of the caning depends on the commander you have been given to. It can be 50 or 100.

Both the boys and the girls are caned but the girls are caned first. The boys do it – and they have to do it strong.

**How are things organized inside the LRA headquarters?**

**Grace:** Each commander has his own guards, wives and young ones. The wives make the food. Each night the commander would have maybe one girl while all the others would sleep in a hut together. Once you have been given, they will not change you, they don't share, they don't mix up. They took the idea of a wife very seriously.

**What is the difference between a wife and a "young one"?**

**Rose:** Mostly around menstruation. You are called a young one until your menstruation has begun. Then you become a wife. They have some culture about this.

For example, it was forbidden for a girl who was menstruating to cook or fetch water. You will not even eat with others, you have to eat alone – you sleep in your own tent. You are not allowed to fight. This is not an Acholi tradition. They said that it came more from the Bible, from Moses who said that a female was unclean when she had her period. They know that this only takes 5 days – if you try to pretend that it is longer than that, they will punish you.

**Are some wives more important than others?**

**Grace:** Yes, for example, even if you are young, if you are a wife of Kony or one of the high commanders, the others would have to call you mamma. You have a special status, the boys cannot call your name directly. You are not allowed to call a top commander's wife just her name.

For me, because I was the wife of the second in command, the others would have to call me mamma as a sign of respect, even the soldiers - there is a chain of command. And all the people know that you are the first wife, even if you are not the favourite one, they have to respect you. Even if there is one who he prefers, she has to pay respect to the first wife.



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**The boys were always considered ahead of the girls. Even if a boy and girl were abducted at the same time and did the same amount of fighting the boy would get a post first.**

**Boys would be considered to be strong and very bright. Girls are expected to be aggressive in fighting but when you got back to the headquarters you had to go back to being a wife.**

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**Was there competition amongst the girls?**

**Rose:** Yes that one was there. Each one is fighting for her own soul, herself – particularly the first wives. And also there are some wives who want others to suffer as they have suffered, especially the new recruits.

They don't like the new ones, the younger ones, especially if they are pretty. So the first wives can be worried about them, jealous. They want to be sure to control them. So they boss them around.

**How are things different between boys and girls?**

**Grace:** Well, in some ways it was the same - both could be killed or punished for nothing. But there were also a lot of differences. For example, the boys did not have to be a wife as well as a fighter. Boys would be instructed to beat a girl if she did something wrong. But a girl, regardless of her rank, would never be instructed to whip or cane a boy. That just didn't happen. The girls had a lower position somehow.

It is possible that a girl soldier could be given a group who are under her guidance during a battle. I was a sergeant. When we were out, I was in charge. But at the headquarters I wasn't in charge of anyone, I was a wife.

**Rose:** The boys were always considered ahead of the girls. Even if a boy and girl were abducted at the same time and did the same amount of fighting the boy would get a post first. Boys would be considered to be strong and very bright. Girls are expected to be aggressive in fighting but when you got back to the headquarters you had to go back to being a wife.

**Grace:** The boys are closer to the commanders. They are more trusted than the girls. They respect you, they call you mama but you are not so important to the commander as the boys.

**Rose:** Some boys who are only privates are given a wife. It depends on how hard a fighter you are, the heart you have for fighting - that is always what is most important.

They look at you in the battlefield. When they bring girls, the commanders might say, "I have been watching this one and he has been responsible, I think he can have a wife now." But even with that, there are restrictions. They have restrictions – they are really strict about sex because they want to control it.

For example, there is the belief that if a soldier has sex before going to battle, and the commander has forbidden him to do so, that he will die in the battle. And some boys will refuse a wife, saying that they want to concentrate on their fighting. But for a girl, there is no choosing. All girls are given. They don't do this courtship.



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**All we took was some warm clothing for the babies. We walked until dawn, going through dangerous terrain.**

**The babies seemed to understand what was going on. They didn't cry at all.**

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#### **And girls stay longer than boys in the bush?**

**Rose:** Yes, a lot of girls are there six years, eight years. It is because of how it is organized. Once you are given to a man, depending on the commander you may not come back to Uganda. So that means you have less chance to escape. For boys within six months they may be back in Uganda and so they have chances to escape when they are on the battlefield.

#### **But many girls do escape – can you tell me your story?**

**Grace:** Yes. My situation had changed because my first husband had been killed and I had a new husband who wasn't as powerful. That day I had quarrelled with the commander who used to measure the size of the area to be dug we had to dig. I complained and refused to dig, saying that it was just too big. He became very angry, saying that he was going to report me and promised that I would be severely punished. In my mind I was thinking that this must be my last suffering in the bush.

It was at about midnight. Everyone was asleep. The night guards had settled in their positions. Rose and I had planned it with another girl. Both had babies of about six months. We finalized our plan that day while we were in the garden.

But when it came to actually doing it the other two were frozen with fear. They were so worried that they wouldn't be able to move quickly with their babies and that their babies would start crying. They feared that if we were caught that we would be executed – that was often the punishment, that or a severe whipping.



For about an hour we talked and I was finally able to convince them that we would be alright. I did not want to leave them behind. I had been their spokesperson and shield. I knew that if I wasn't there they would have no one to protect them and that they would surely die of beating or over-work.

At about 1:00 am we crept out of the camp. I left everything – my gun and any belongings I had. The others did the same. All we took was some warm clothing for the babies.

We walked until dawn, going through dangerous terrain. Sometimes I would walk ahead to make sure that everything was safe. The babies seemed to understand what was going on. They didn't cry at all.

## SUPPORTING GIRL RETURNEES



Florence Lako



Charles Watmon

This transcript is based on discussions between Linda Dale (CAP) and Florence Lako and Charles Watmon, who worked for many years as counselors at the World Vision Reception Centre in Northern Uganda. At points, the conversations recalled workshops these three had done together.

The WV Centre was the first to receive children escaping from the LRA. It operated for over ten years and assisted in the reintegration of thousands of children. This interview focused on the experiences and needs of female returnees.

**Linda:** Are there certain characteristics that are common to the girls returning from the bush?

**Florence:** Those who were in the bush a long time, they are always hard. The girls are more difficult to handle than the boys. They don't want to talk, they are secretive.

**Charles:** And the boys who come back can be stubborn – they will point at the girls saying, “Hey, I remember you, you were the wife of a commander.” These boys, they remember who they abducted, so they had the power of that fear – they feel they are above them. So these things can make girls quiet.

**Florence:** Once a girl has been defiled sexually she becomes reserved, she feels ashamed, she feels that something terrible has happened to her. So that is the reason that girls will keep to themselves and to each other because they have the same problem, they understand each other and they don't trust anybody.

The man does so many things – he beats you, he rapes you, all kinds of things. He can say anything, do anything.

**Charles:** I can remember one girl saying to me that whenever she sees a man she remembers the rebel. And she will think, “The man has come to rape me.” It is because of the way she was treated. It will take her time to find a man that she is comfortable with – so this is special problem for many girls.

**Florence:** Many girls still feel connected to the commanders who were their husbands so they don't want to say anything bad about them. It is typical for them to fall in love with their husbands, they begin to look at them like they are totally in control. They have a funny kind of dependency on the man.



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**Linda:** I remember at the workshop with girls who had just come back from the bush, that they had trouble doing a self portrait exercise. I remember that they kept saying, "Just tell us what you want and we will do it."

Then you and I agreed to begin the next session by making fun of men and their habits. I remember how first they were surprised and then how much they liked this and also doing the caricatures of their husbands.

**Florence:** Yes, that was so good. They enjoyed it so much – I had never seen them laugh so much, even Janet. Because they had never been given permission to say their thoughts out loud and also because doing that exercise, of making pictures of their husbands, is what they knew about. They didn't know about themselves so to ask them to do that would be impossible for them. In counseling we need to remember that – to begin at the point where they are.

**Charles:** This is another thing that we saw. Girls can bring back their feelings of their time in the bush, especially those who were the wives of high commanders.

The tin tins, the young ones have to pay a lot of respect to the wives of the top commanders – fetching water, doing errands, preparing food, everything. And we found in the centre, these former wives were still doing this.

We didn't notice it at first but we were wondering why the wives never came to the kitchen, why they are always in the dormitory while the young, young ones were always rushing to the kitchen, getting food, getting water.

We had to say, "No, here everyone is at par – when it comes to getting food, you have to get your own food, wash your own children." They were not willing at first, they got angry. After a while it went well.

**Florence:** Yes, there is a funny hierarchy but at the same time, there is a common basis. They have all been abducted, they were all given forcibly to a man, they did not pay any dowry for us, against our will. Also when one person did something wrong, all the wives were punished. So they develop close bonds, they are like sisters who protect each other, they love one another.

Also, once a girl became pregnant she would be more accepted, the mothers felt closer to each other. They knew that they had all suffered the same, that was important.

**What are the biggest problems?**

**Florence:** They have a high need for control. But at the same time they do not feel that they have the power to make decisions. They have been taught to be very passive, they have learned that this is how they must be to survive.



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**What disturbs them the most is that they had no control over their lives. So they want to get that back.**

**They need to feel they are in control – this is more important for them than boys.**

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So they don't know how to make decisions for themselves, they didn't have the usual natural progression of learning how to express their wishes and to assimilate those with others' ideas. But they want this and so they can have a strange kind of assertion – they will insist on small things. It can make them very stubborn. There is one time when they went on strike – they decided that they would refuse food.

They said, “We are not going to eat. We have decided that we are not going to take breakfast.”  
I said, “Why?”  
They said, “We are not going to tell you, we want to see the manager.  
We will speak only to him, no talking.”

I said okay, but I explained if the problem is something about the centre, I need to know because he will ask me what the problem is. If it is a problem with me, that is different, then you can go to the manager, but if not, you need to tell me first as it would be very embarrassing for me if I can't explain it to him.

Then they started to tell me, this and that, we are not happy. So after they had been talking for a while, then they said maybe we don't need to speak to the manager right now.

So they need to speak, they need to feel that they are being listened to. They operate as a group – once they make a decision together, you can't break them – they operate as a pack, they have a strong pack mentality.

**Do they want to talk about being with the commanders?**

**Florence:** They want to talk about when they were raped the first time- that is a very significant event for them, very scary. Because it happened with a man who does not love you but looks at you like something he can use, that is all. They know that they cannot challenge these men, that if they do they will continue to mistreat them. They become very dependent on this man.

**How does their time in the bush affect their attitudes to men?**

**Florence:** It creates a mentality. Even after they are safe, the big thing for them is to find a man. They have become too dependent and their mentality is such that they think they are useless without a man. So they can have a tendency to go to men who are not really serious with them. But they complain about these men so much.



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**We have tried to give them information about family planning, but they don't like it at all. For them, somehow they don't believe in it.**

**They believe that when you are with a man you have to give birth.**

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They feel helpless, they hate men but they cannot do without them. They hate men – that is why they cannot stay with them - so they keep on changing. I know a girl who has three children with three different men.

It also affects their attitudes to sex. They see it as a power. They had their first sex experience when they were small and they had no control over it, they don't value their body anymore, they don't see it the same way as those who have had a more normal introduction to sex.

**So they have a kind of approach and avoidance of men?**

Yes, and it is made worse by how the LRA see females. The basic idea is that women are evil. The higher commanders, for example, will make orders, saying during this period you should not sleep with a woman and if you do you will die. Because these men are soldiers; they are fighters and that is their whole orientation. They don't want to get familiar with girls because they say these girls can make you die.

**Do they have physical problems as well? How do they see their bodies?**

**Florence:** Some of them come back with HIV, but that is not that common. What is more common are other types of STDs. We try to teach them about their bodies, to help with this connection. After that you can find so many things. A lot of them complain about itching, itching all over their bodies, particularly in their private parts.

We have tried to give them information about family planning, but they don't like it at all. For them, somehow they don't believe in it. They believe that when you are with a man you have to give birth. And remember in the bush, when you give birth it means that you have reduced your problems – you have become a mother and you will be appreciated more by a man that has so much control over you.

So I think that mentality is still there – they don't like the family planning. Every time I find them with another baby. They seem to feel important when they have a baby. Even if the information is there – as it is – they are not interested in that information. I think we need to approach it from another way.

**I imagine that these girls have many different emotions.**

**Florence:** Yes, a lot of emotions. For example, screaming in the night – they do that a lot when they are first at the reception centre. I think this is because what they have seen – people being killed – and also because they are scared – so in the night they scream. It is more than a nightmare – it is a kind of flashback.

People will sometimes accuse them of being demonic, because of the screaming. But I think what they need is counselling and someone to talk to. They will say I am always seeing

visions of people being killed. They repress these images during the day but they can't in the night so they scream.

They also can get very upset and angry easily. When they are upset or angry, if you say, "What is the problem?" they will start complaining, saying everyone is against them, that people are doing things against them. They can be so sure that everyone hates them, that everyone is looking down on them, thinking that they are just someone from the bush.

They will do things to create problems. So, for example, a basin might get broken and then they will come for another one, a replacement. It is like a test, to see what you will do. Some of the counsellors might say, well what happened – why are the things we give you always getting broken. I think it is better to say, well it is broken now and they need a new one, whether they did it on purpose or not.

**What is it like for these girls when they return home?**

A lot of them have trouble with their families. People look at them in a bad way, thinking these are people who have murdered, they could even do it again, they are wild, so people who are not their parents don't want to have anything to do with them, they fear them.

Parents who are in the camps – who are suffering or are poor, they look at them as they are bringing us more problems. This is how they see the girls - they don't see the boys that way. This is partly because boys don't show anything about their time in the bush. They seem to forget it and then other people do too. But for girls it is different and so people have a tendency to keep remembering about their past.

Most of the girls have all had sexual abuse and they continue to have a strange relationship about this. They continue to have sex, often with different men. And they can't control their emotions so well. Everything that people do to them, they register it, they think about it and can become angry if it doesn't please them or they feel they are not being treated with respect.

They have short patience – it is not the same with boys. Girls are quick to get angry and can sh - this can single them out.

**Charles:** There can be a problem with the soldiers, hunting the girls. They see these girls as available. And the girls often do not have a clear income, they are very weak economically. You know soldiers can be very loose with money. So they take advantage of these girls, take advantage of their poverty. They just take them for their use, not as a permanent wife. You find a girl moving from one soldier, one man to another – this is very outside Acholi tradition.



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**They are more like an onion – there are many layers. Most of them were abducted when they were young and they may have taken 7 or 8 years in the bush.**

**When they come out from suffering, the scar remains there, the hurting continues. It stays inside them.**

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Normally an Acholi woman would try her best to have only one father for her children. But this has changed, particularly for these girls. And it has caused a problem because these men will not be willing to look after the child of another man. He will say, “I can’t do that.” So the only way is continue is for the girls will move from one place to another – and this is not good, in our culture it is not accepted.

**Linda: How do you see the recovery process?**

**Florence:** They are more like an onion – there are many layers. Most of them were abducted when they were young and they may have taken 7 or 8 years in the bush. When they come out from suffering, the scar remains there, the hurting continues. It stays inside them.

At the centre, when they first come back, the healing begins. But it is a continuous process, it doesn’t end at the centre. There needs to be follow-up – new problems can topple on top of these other problems. And as these memories come back, she can feel that she is never going to be able to cope, that all her life will be about suffering. That is very common, that girls feel that way, they can feel that they are victims, even though they will be angry about it.

What I have learned from counselling is that people want you to listen to them – I always listen to children, it is important. You have to ask them what they are thinking about it. Then they can phrase things according to their ideas, how they see things. But you have to also be careful, even if they say what they want, you also have to ask their permission for you to intervene. This issue of control is so important, especially for these girls.

For the girls it was good to get support from their friends, the ones they have trust in from their time together in the bush. Also, they can laugh and say things to each other that an adult could never do with them. This is important.

It is also good to understand that their needs change. Also, their capacity to listen and think about their lives can improve. So we need to be careful not to see them the same way as they were when they first came back from the bush. And we need to encourage them to also change their thinking about themselves, that things can improve for them

## END NOTES

1. There is considerable debate over the number of children who were abducted by the Lords Resistance Army. UNICEF often quotes the number 40,000. In its study titled “The State of Female Youth in Northern Uganda: Findings From the Survey of War Affected Youth” dated April 2008 SWAY states: “Abductions have been under-reported: we calculate that at least 66,000 youth between the ages of 14 and 30 were abducted.” They base this assertion on the fact that many youth did not go through the formal process of re-entry, preferring to melt back into their communities and so avoid stigmatization.
2. The charts included in this report are based on World Vision Reception Centre records. CAP is grateful to WV for providing the project access to these records. It should be noted that the numbers reflect only those who went through the formal reintegration process and thus is probably somewhat biased in terms of representing the experiences of those who were held in captivity for longer periods of time. However, it should also be noted that for girls this was normally the case as they were closely guarded.
3. These numbers are based on a profile study that the World Vision Reception Centre conducted of the children who were coming home with their mothers. A question that is often asked about children born in captivity focuses on their citizenship status. Legally, these children do not have a problem as their name/legal status is through their mother. So it does not matter if the father has been identified, they are still eligible for Ugandan citizenship. However, on a social level it is much more complicated as children who are born outside a married situation have an ambiguous status.
4. As part of its research CAP conducted an interview with Charles Watmon. Charles has considerable experience with returnees. He coordinated the reception centre for two years and then went on to work in community based projects.
5. These groups were consulted as a part of CAP Uganda’s research. These interviews were conducted by child mothers.

