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Changing the world
with women and girls

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Leading the way:

Civil society movements reshaping
peace & security in Northern Uganda

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1

Introduction

This policy brief has pulled together evidence, stories and experiences from women, young people, and their organisations involved in activities on peacebuilding, conflict prevention and post-conflict recovery. It has explored their lived experiences to better understand and document their work in conflict-affected regions, including the challenges they faced and solutions they found.

The findings demonstrate the effects of conflict and violence on women and their communities, which has affected Uganda since independence, and has led to complex conflict dynamics and increased armed conflict. More specifically, a range of uprisings and civil wars, clashes and insurgencies have led to devastating consequences for many communities across Uganda. This policy report focuses on Northern Uganda, which has experienced the most prolonged and protracted crisis in the region, following the civil war of 1986 to 1994.

For many community members we spoke to in Northern Uganda, the idea of a post-conflict 'recovery' and the concept of 'peace' is still perceived as an illusion. War survivors in Northern Uganda, especially women, continue to live with a sense of loss, injustice, neglect, and a widespread feeling that post-conflict life has not lived up to its promise. These perceptions are deeply entrenched and must be taken into consideration, both for their potential influence on behaviour and the lived realities of thousands working towards peace.

Despite this, civil society organisations, specifically women-led and youth-led organisations and movements, have found alternative ways to reshape what peace and security means for them. It is vital to understand

that these national and local, women and youth led initiatives have the potential to play a unique role in the WPS space, which is often inaccessible to the international community. ActionAid has worked with these organisations to document their challenges and alternative solutions.

1.1 Country context and the WPS agenda

Northern Uganda has a complex history of conflict. Following the 1987 civil war, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) aimed to overthrow the Ugandan government.¹ This led to significant violence and disruption throughout the country in the 1990s and early 2000s. The conflict, which lasted almost 20 years, led to mass atrocities, extreme violence and repression, including mass abductions, killings and displacement. Civilians, especially women and children, bore the brunt of the conflict, with over 100,000 killed, 60,000 to 100,000 children abducted, and more than 1.5 million people displaced between 1987 to 2012.²

Whilst the conflict in Uganda effectively ended in 2008, the LRA has remained active in neighbouring countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and South Sudan, increasing border insecurity. The impact of the conflict is still felt in Uganda today, with ongoing efforts to rebuild and support affected communities and manage ongoing regional conflict. This has had a significant impact on civilians and communities in the region, in particular affecting women, girls and young people, with an increase in physical and economic insecurity, and post-conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.

Efforts have been made to address the needs of those affected by the conflict, with programmes both by non-governmental and governmental entities focusing on trauma healing, economic

Today, Northern Uganda still holds a large number of internally displaced people's camps and survivors of sexual and gender-based crimes. An estimated 4,000-8,000 children were born to abducted women, and former child soldiers, who have limited access to accountability and support.

empowerment, and legal justice for victims. The Government of Uganda formulated the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan (PRDP), as a strategy for post-conflict recovery and to propagate community reconciliation as a basis for sustainable development in the region.³ This led to the 2006-2008 Juba peace processes, which helped to define a comprehensive national framework to prevent the recurrence of conflict, as well as the development of the National Transitional Justice Policy and the setup of the War Crimes Division. An Amnesty Act was set up in 2000 to encourage combatants to stop fighting, without the fear of punishment, as it pardoned those who were engaged in acts of rebellion against the Government of Uganda since 1986, on the condition that they surrender their weapons and disengage with any rebellious activities. Individuals were supported with resettlement packages to reintegrate into their communities. For some, the Amnesty Act laid the groundwork for reintegration, healing and reconciliation within families and communities

torn apart by armed conflicts. However, this process also hindered accountability for serious crimes, prioritising the needs of perpetrators over victims and not considering the specific needs of returning women and children born of captivity.⁴

Today, Northern Uganda still holds a large number of internally displaced people's camps and survivors of sexual and gender-based crimes.⁵ An estimated 4,000-8,000 children were born to abducted women,⁶ and former child soldiers, who have limited access to accountability and support. The Acholi sub-region has been ranked as having the highest percentage of gender-based and sexual violence according to a report by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development. The report indicates that 78% of women in the sub-region have experienced gender-based violence, and 64% have been subjected to sexual violence.⁷ Land disputes, family tracing and re-integration of communities and individuals who were formerly abducted has led to a profound and complex humanitarian emergency.⁸ The question of justice remains.

Women and girls across Northern Uganda have been disproportionately impacted; they are the last and least to be involved within reconciliation conversations, they are still experiencing post conflict mitigation, and they are endangered by increased sexual violence in internally displaced camps. The opportunity to advocate for women's and young people's participation and leadership in peace and conflict-resolution has been squandered, which has stalled progression to Uganda's WPS commitments.⁹

The northern Uganda conflict attracted a wide range of actors at all levels of leadership. During the war, UN agencies such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Human Rights (UNHR), donors and INGOs, pursued peace advocacy campaigns to bring an end

to hostilities. They worked as mediators and facilitators of the peace process and provided relief services to the communities, especially those in IDPCs. While governments, donors, UN and INGOs did support post-conflict interventions, our research findings indicate there are still needs to be addressed, specifically around wartime injuries and the gendered impacts of war, that are stalling meaningful post-conflict recovery and development in conflict-affected communities in Northern Uganda.

Despite these challenges, the women's rights organisations (WROs), women-led organisations (WLOs) and youth-led organisations (YLOs) have been advocating for accountability and justice, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance as a means to work towards reconciliation and peace. This report explores the lived realities of some of the women and youth leaders supporting re-

construction and peace building in the region, to showcase how they facilitated dialogue, provided support for the reintegration of former combatants, and helped to address the root causes of the conflict.

1.2 Methodology

The brief explores how women's rights organisations and youth groups in Northern Uganda perceive and deal with post-conflict issues, influenced by the legacy of the LRA war. It specifically covers the districts of Amuru, Kitgum, and Gulu in the Acholi and Lango regions, which experienced extensive conflict from the 1990s to 2006, and where the impacts are still felt today.

ActionAid adopts a feminist approach to research, seeing it as a tool to bring about



ActionAid Focal Group discussions on Women Peace and Security, conflict resolution and justice.

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shifts in power, through ActionAid's Feminist Research Guidelines.²⁶ Research findings and evidence are used to dismantle potential bias from decision-makers views and actions, and to challenge how and where power negatively manifests and reproduces oppression. The voices of women and girls from communities and women-led organisations and women's rights organisations are prioritised as evidence. Women-only and girl-only spaces are created for evidence generation. By focusing on 'people-centred evidence', ActionAid's research builds solidarity and shift power.

Aligned with this, the policy brief adopted a feminist approach, centring the experiences and rights of those who are most at risk of being marginalised within conflict affected regions, and interrogating the causes of inequalities. To do so, this research took a participatory, reflexive and feminist approach throughout, co-developing and validating the evidencing questions and findings with all participants. To do so, the research questions were co-designed with the women leaders and partner organisations ActionAid works with in Northern Uganda. Qualitative data was collected through 12 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 9 focus group discussions (FGDs) at a total of 190 participants, to gain in-depth insights. KIIs allowed individuals to share personal experiences, while FGDs revealed group perspectives on issues, to cross-check findings and allow a variety of diverse voices to be heard.

The policy brief is a cross-sectional design with a mixed-method approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data for comprehensive analysis. Secondary data was reviewed through literature, and a structured questionnaire was used for quantitative data collection from project participants. The quality of the assessment was maintained by the use of strategic monitoring measures at all stages, including planning, data collection, and data

management (data cleaning and analysis), interpretation and write-up. All data was validated with the research participants, and the final recommendations were co-developed by the research participants.

2

Findings: Gendered impacts of conflict in Northern Uganda

Years of armed conflict and civil wars have had a significant impact on women and young people's access to rights, land and freedom. This research highlights that the conflict increased gender-based violence and exploitation, which has had detrimental impacts on women and girl's access to livelihood and education, and increased risks to women's reproductive health and girls' safety.

The increased militarisation has further perpetrated harmful cultural norms that have increased barriers for women and young people in participating in peacebuilding mechanisms. The protracted nature of the conflict increased displacement, social stigma and reintegration challenges for many women, children and young people.

2.1 Displacement and livelihood opportunities

The conflict led to the displacement of over 1.5 million people, disrupting social structures and community support systems. People endured forced displacement, lost households, relocation to campsites, and increased abductions and killings.

Women, who traditionally played key roles in maintaining family and community cohesion, faced increased burdens as they navigated life in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The financial survival of the family came to be heavily dependent on women, as many men died or were injured within the conflict, leading to women solely taking up household responsibilities and re-emphasising traditional household roles,

increasing women's responsibility to be both the carers and breadwinners.

Displacement and living in camps meant that women and their families had limited access to land, and travelling to take up work opportunities meant that women risked being hurt or killed in crossfire or rebel attacks. The loss of economic stability alongside the pre-existing patriarchal discrimination of women has had long-term effects on women's ability to support their families and recover post conflict. One women leader stressed: *"Life became very complicated. No one was helping me with my children. There is a problem of land. I am an orphan. My father passed away. My mother is unwell, and my brothers can't give us land to till. There are serious land wrangles. They don't consider us when they are distributing land."* In addition to this, children born out of captivity do not have a 'right' to land, as land is passed by their fathers' families, making inheriting land almost impossible, with a women returnee flagging: *"With the lack of access to resources like land and government welfare programs, this has greatly contributed to the high rates of poverty. We as returnees are unable to meet the needs of our children."*

This has left many individuals completely dependent on aid. 63 per cent of people in Northern Uganda are dependent on humanitarian relief, the highest in the 2022 UBOS' multidimensional poverty index report.¹⁰ This is substantially higher than the rest of the region (followed by the Eastern region 46%), and has long-term livelihood implications on women and their families, further entrenching their economic marginalisation.

A woman leader who participated in an ActionAid and CSO led tailoring and Garment cutting training in North Uganda



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2.2 Sexual and Gender-based violence

A common testimony in interviews was widespread sexual violence, including forced marriages and sexual slavery. Survivors of such violence often struggled with trauma, stigmatisation, and health implications, including sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies and gynaecological complications. A women leader explained: *“while in the bush, many of us become teen mothers against our will since marriage to rebels was forceful. In the bush, you do not select a husband, they just give, if you refuse, they kill you. I got two children in the bush.”* Another participant stressed that her and her companions were simply *“given as wives to men who were much older than us. Most of us have now ended up with challenges with our reproductive system, because we were still young girls, and we were allocated men who were quite old.”* This had a further effect on the lives of women and girls today, many of whom became stigmatised and struggle to re-engage with society after years of imprisonment and lack of schooling opportunities.

The women leaders we spoke to also highlighted that being survivors of conflict-related sexual violence also affected their, and their families', social standing. They were heavily discriminated against and did not feel 'safe' or 'confident' to access social services or travel to open spaces and markets. This has continued to make it particularly difficult to access healthcare and get appropriate medical care.

Investment for sexual and reproductive health is still not prioritised in post-conflict recovery, despite the very high numbers of conflict-related sexual violence in Northern Uganda. Women leaders told us that there were limited support mechanisms within the country, and a lack of adequate mechanisms to report gender-based violence (GBV). Gender-based violence is an everyday threat for Ugandan women and girls. National demographic data from 2020 revealed that 56% of married women aged 15-49 reported having suffered physical and/or sexual violence by a husband.¹¹ These statistics from 2020, show that more than one in three women (36%) had

experienced sexual violence, with child sexual abuse being pervasive, with 59% of women reporting sexual abuse in childhood. At the time, Northern Uganda recorded 56% of GBV cases with 80% residents in the North Region particularly likely to think of domestic violence as a private matter compared to 56%-60% in the other regions.¹²

2.3 Forced recruitment and a 'rejected' generation

Many young people were abducted during the years of war in Northern Uganda. Young boys were often conscripted as child soldiers and placed into combat roles, while women and girls become 'wives' of the LRA commanders, enduring repeated sexual assaults and exploitation, and forced into manual labour:



In 1991, I was only 13 years and had begun my first year of secondary school [...] in Northern Uganda with a dream of becoming a doctor. However, without warning, disaster struck. Rebels attacked our school during prep time and abducted us. They took us to a nearby trading centre where they looted so much property and made us to carry it all the way to the rebel base in Sudan.”

Others spoke about the 'rejection' of returnees and children born of war, some of whom are now adults. Former abductees who bore children as a result of rape also faced additional ostracisation due to cultural taboos, leaving both the women and their children stigmatised and 'paralysed in society'. This has led to a large number of returnees who felt 'unwanted' and experienced 'a lack of sense of belonging'. They felt that they had missed out on opportunities such as receiving an education or having a job. Some shared that close family ties were severed, because their families and communities believed that survivors had killed people during their time in abduction and might have turned into a rebel themselves. Survivors' past experiences are still

used as a 'justification for rejection' by a range of communities in Northern Uganda. Others flagged challenges in accessing governmental services because they can't get identity documents, such as a National ID, that require comprehensive details of family history. Many children born out of captivity have incomplete information about their parents, often only knowing the name of their mother, and lacking information about their father, who may have been a combatant. This inability to access documentation complicates the bureaucratic process and prevents children from obtaining identity documents that are crucial for enrolling in school, accessing healthcare, and benefiting from social welfare programs. Children born from captivity are left in a legal limbo, unable to fully integrate into society or access opportunities that are readily available to others. Targeted policy interventions and support systems that recognise these unique circumstances are needed to ensure returnees and their children are not excluded from accessing essential services and opportunities.

2.4 Mental wellbeing and psychological support



They came to our school [...] in the middle of the night. We were hiding under the beds, but they banged on the beds and told us to come out. They tied us and led us out [...] at about 6am. They made us stop and they lined us up in two lines and made us walk between them while they kicked us. On the third day a little girl tried to escape, and they made us beat her and she bled to death. Then they made us lie down and they beat us fifteen strokes each, because they said we had known she would try to escape. The pain, fear, and shock combined created a numbness, a dizziness - a sense, at times, that madness is not far off as we never got to meet our families again in a very long time.”

This testimony is just one example of the harrowing experiences of abducted people.

The research in this report shows that limited adequate mental health support over the many years of conflict has led to a range of long-term mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The ongoing systematic abuse over the years of war inflicted lasting psychological harm and enduring repercussions for the health and dignity of women, girls and young people.

This stigmatisation of being a *'victim'* or *'part'* of war, has further isolated survivors, hindering their recovery and impacting their ability to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society. Some of the research participants described this as having a *'lost identity'* and being viewed with distrust. One participant explained:



There is strong bias against former abductees. They do not allow us to speak... they do not listen to us. They do not take us as important people. They look at us as returnees as useless people."

Women shared that, though the conflict is over, they cannot forget what happened. Their traumatic experiences are exacerbated by insults and stigma in their community as they struggle to be able to financially support and care for the children they returned with from captivity. This has affected their relationship with families, intimate partners, and children. This is closely tied to heightened gender norms and taboos, which, along with psychological distress, hinder trauma recovery and cause ongoing suffering for women survivors. Many survivors report that they are *"either living with or surrounded by conflict-related stressors"*, and by *"multiple trauma triggers that keep on wounding [their] resilience further"*.

This stigmatisation of being a 'victim' or 'part' of war, has further isolated survivors, hindering their recovery and impacting their ability to rebuild their lives and reintegrate into society.

3

Findings: Civil society action amidst challenges

All the WROs and young people's groups we spoke to highlighted the importance of national and local civil society work in supporting communities during and post conflict, both with humanitarian and peacebuilding reconstruction.

Yet, operating in a situation of ongoing armed conflict has presented many obstacles for women's rights and women-led organisations in responding to the immediate and long-term needs of the communities they work with. Our findings found that, for our partners in Northern Uganda, the main barriers to their participation were discrimination and patriarchal norms, concerns on safety, the lack of meaningful engagement by the international community, and limited funding and partnership opportunities.

3.1 Discrimination, push back and patriarchal norms



The biggest problem we are encountering is behavioural change, mindset change and attitude... This is what is affecting the implementation of Women Peace and Security Agenda - women are rarely given a voice at the negotiation table."

Women Leader, Northern Uganda

Dominant patriarchal and societal norms and pre-existing gender discrimination was highlighted as a prominent challenge for women and young people's engagement in post-conflict response. In Northern Uganda, men dominate the social, economic, and political realms of communities

while women are underrepresented and discouraged due to the perceived notions of the traditional roles of men and women. Young people are expected to 'obey' their elders, limiting their access to decision-making platforms.

This is reflected in decision-making platforms across the country; only 33.8% of the seats in the parliament of Uganda are taken by women.¹³ In the Uganda Police Force, women represent only 18.3% of the work force,¹⁴ and Ugandan women only represent 8 percent of both the combat and support staff of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF).¹⁵ A research participant explained that society does not *"understand the importance and value of women's participation in all spheres... For example, the wrangle in [retracted for anonymity] didn't want women to contribute in any decision making discussions."* This attitude has led to a limited recognition of women's rights within communities.

Even when WROs and YLOs gain access to global and national humanitarian spaces, including peace negotiations, their meaningful participation in decision-making processes remains a huge challenge, with one ActionAid partner reporting that *"women and young people are rarely given a voice at the negotiation table."* Through our quantitative analysis, 66% of participants felt that the international community does not recognise the work women, and their organisations do in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

3.2 Lack of meaningful engagement by international community

Less than half (46%) of participants reported having sufficient engagement with humanitarian and/or international actors during conflict

emergencies, while a quarter (24%) felt they did have enough engagement. Only 28% of the respondents felt they had the same access to peace building spaces as other central actors.

Respondents to this research spoke of a power dynamic between the international community and their own organisations. They reported having limited access to information which prevented them from being able to access opportunities and feeling unable to apply for certain funding bids due to a lack of available information, particularly for bids for programmes targeting women.

Another issue flagged by participants was the length of projects funded by international actors, who tend to prioritise short-term interventions over long-term programmes. They reported that these short-term investments typically prioritise immediate relief or specific project-based outcomes, making it difficult to deliver lasting impact in complex post-conflict contexts. Only 4% of survey respondents started that they receive any form of long-term grants (3+ years), with 64% of respondents stating the funding they typically receive is inflexible, mostly for service delivery and programme implementation, aimed at responding to an emergency or for a specific response.

The technical and strategic support provided alongside funding is also often limited. This can hinder the effectiveness of the projects, especially when dealing with complex issues like gender-based violence or community reconciliation, as core costs are often limited to specific projects. As a result, there is limited integration of post-conflict programmes in district annual plans and budgets for Northern Uganda. According to the WROs and youth groups we spoke to, there was a growing recognition of the need of more flexible and long-term funding mechanisms that align better with the realities of the conflict, and post-conflict context. 52% of the key informants stated that the most common type of funding is short-term grants of less than 1 year.

Even though Ugandan women, youth groups and their organisations made great strides to negotiate an end to the war, stop the abduction of children, help rehabilitate survivors of war, and encourage fighters to return to their communities, they are often perceived only as ‘victims of war’.

3.3 De-colonisation of aid and ‘victimising’ civil society

Even though Ugandan women, youth groups and their organisations made great strides to negotiate an end to the war, stop the abduction of children, help rehabilitate survivors of war, and encourage fighters to return to their communities, they are often perceived only as ‘victims of war’. This is despite the many peacekeeping activities they have left, including formation of the Uganda Women’s Coalition for Peace (UWCP) in late 2006 in response to the absence of women in the peace process. The coalition was created with the sole purpose to ensure that women’s needs, concerns and priorities were reflected in the peace agreement and subsequent processes.

Only 34% of the study respondents agreed that international community recognises the work women, and their organisations do in conflict prevention and peace-building. This is reflected by the participants, who flagged that “Some

organisations use our stories for fundraising but never come back to support them”, and some researchers misrepresent war victims as they use them for their own benefit.

In addition, youth groups and children survivors, have a unique role to play in Northern Uganda, taking on roles to break the cycle of low-productivity farming, increase their earning potential and contribute to the northern region economic development and the national economy at large. And yet, according to the Status of Youth Employment report by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics in 2019, 43% of the youth

in employment in Uganda work for themselves as own-account workers, with the proportion for male youth (39%) higher than that for female youth (31%)¹⁶ with young people struggling to access opportunities due to poor access to finance, education and support services, and restrictive and damaging gender roles, dismissing opportunities for their meaningful re-conciliation, and increasing taboos for children born from captivity in accessing opportunities of engagement.



ActionAid and Civil society partner food relief distribution, post the 2020 lock-down in conflict affected regions of Northern Uganda

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Movement's alternative solutions for peace and security in action

Despite these challenges, women leaders and youth activists have remained at the forefront of peacebuilding reform and negotiations to end the war.

4.1 Re-building peace and security for Uganda and the region



We support each other through mediation initiatives for group members who are having conflicts with the community or with in their household. We continue to meet to share our challenges and devise solutions to cope with the pressure and stress of life

Women Leader, Northern Uganda

Women's networks and youth groups flagged that the concept of re-building their own justice and resolving their own peace was of particular significance. When formal peace processes had not yet started, women and their organisations took the responsibility of becoming negotiators and mediators of peace: they came together to dissuade their male family members from participating in the war and urged fighters to return to their communities. This was done via alliances and information sharing.

In addition, women's organisations enhanced knowledge within communities and shared awareness-raising platforms, helping re-build peace. This renewed the interest and relationship of faith and community leaders, who have been instrumental in reducing stigma towards survivors of war. Cultural institutions and leaders were, and still are, instrumental in peace building and dispute processes. They were able to resolve customary land disputes,

family, and communal conflicts. They helped conduct family tracing, confirm identities and reunite children born in captivity to their families; to resettle and reintegrate the formerly abducted; and to facilitate forgiveness, healing and reconciliation within communities using specific ceremonies and rituals. They are can also quickly resolve conflicts and address concerns without the cost implications of the formal justice process.

4.2 Re-integration of women's movements in peace mediation

Women movements, WROs and YLOs mobilised resources for the participation of selected women representatives to advocate for peace in different spaces within Uganda.

Through consultative meetings, views of grassroots women on their experiences, needs and priorities were solicited by the Uganda Women's Coalition for Peace (UWCP) and tabled during the 2006-2008 Juba peace talks. The UWCP documented the mobilisation of WROs during the peace process, including creating videos, documentaries and booklets. This was critical in expanding the database of history on women's initiatives in peace building processes in Africa.

The work of WROs during the peace talks has supported community dialogues today in reshaping relationships affected by war, abductions, and sexual violence. The creation of education centres and information sharing platforms have allowed family members and friends of survivors to better understand the trauma their relatives have faced and helped them to provide better care and support.

Promoting positive social norms, like land inheritance for women, is an important result of these efforts. By documenting the challenges and successes of these interventions, we can support the sustainability and efficiency of future recovery and support programs.

4.3 Peace via campaigns and advocacy

WROs and youth groups have held campaigns on the re-imagining of peace, through the use of campaigns and advocacy – through the use of peaceful demonstration, rallies and awareness sessions. Local organisations we spoke to, such as Kitgum Women Peace Initiative (KIWEPI) have invested in improving the capacity of community workers so they can provide effective psychosocial care to survivors in their communities. Others have re-united abductees and children born of abductees, in order to have a sense of collective purpose. This includes advocating for national documentation for children born in captivity and ensuring women's participation in these critical areas.

This has encouraged returnees and survivors of violence to go back to school and to stay in school. There have been community dialogues, and women's empowerment activities with women leaders holding educational programmes to raise awareness of women's rights, with one flagging: *"Out of the 320 students that we have, majority are girls. We have done education. We have also provided sanitary pads to girls so that they are at school. We were also supporting the households through their caregivers. We have provided mosquito nets for the pregnant woman. We have also done advocacy especially for gender-based violence cases."*

Stories of Change: Civil society promoting peace

Whilst the formal peace negotiations to address Northern Uganda's conflict only began in 2006, nearly 20 years after the active conflict, from 1989, Gulu District Women's Development Committee conducted a peaceful demonstration by marching into Gulu town singing funeral songs and chanting for peace. Following the demonstration, many LRA fighters returned to their communities and there was a brief period of peace before conflict recommenced. Another example of peaceful rallies was conducted by a coalition of women's groups and youth groups, that led a peace caravan and peace torch which were both strategic tools to mobilise Ugandans to be involved and interested in the peace process in November 2006. The caravan started in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), travelled to Kenya and Uganda as a gesture of women's support for the peace process. The caravan sensitised Ugandans about the extent of the conflict in Northern Uganda and mobilised support for engendering the peace process. Along the way, signatures in support of the peace processes were collected as endorsement. The peace torch was handed over to the Chief Mediator along with representatives of the negotiating parties in December 2006.

4.4 Feminist and alternative funding for longer term resilience

Due to the limited and often short-term nature of funding from donors, youth and women groups in Northern Uganda have been compelled to seek alternative mechanisms to secure long-term resilience and sustainability for their initiatives.

In response to these challenges, women have increasingly taken on critical economic roles within their communities, leveraging available economic opportunities to ensure their families' livelihoods and security. They have diversified their income sources, engaging in agriculture by farming and selling a variety of produce, as well as setting up businesses as stallholders and vendors in local markets. Women leaders we spoke to sell cereals, vegetables, fish, other foodstuffs, and second-hand clothes as an additional source of income. In addition, they have engaged in 'community-driven fundraising' partnerships with other local groups, to sustain their work and focus on collaborative growth:



As a group we started a village saving and loan association. We meet every Friday to save and have sustained the group by engaging in joint farming, where the proceeds add on our capital. We also give loans to our members and make profits for our group. We also support our members for example if one requires farming assistance on their land, we dig as a group and add it to our capital. We ensure that every member is engaged in a business or farming. We also stand with each other when we have challenges. Members can borrow for school fees. We also contribute for members when they have challenges."

WRO member, Northern Uganda

This entrepreneurial spirit has not only provided immediate financial relief but has also helped to build economic resilience in the face of funding uncertainties. By engaging in both formal and informal cash-generating activities, women are not just securing their own economic advancement but also contributing to the broader community's stability and growth. These efforts are crucial, particularly in the absence of long-term donor funding, as they help maintain the momentum of local peacebuilding and development initiatives led by youth and women's groups and are becoming increasingly vital for sustaining long-term peace and development in the region.



Stories of Change: Post-conflict support

ActionAid Uganda, alongside women's right organisation partners such as *War Victims and Children's Network*, *Woman's Advocacy Network*, and *Golden Women Vision in Uganda*, has worked on a Women's Land, Peace, Security and Justice project to reduce poverty, promote women's land rights, and challenge harmful cultural practices. Activities included supporting women with access to, and control of, land in the Acholi Subregion and providing mobile legal aid and justice structures to better serve women's needs. This has led to:

1) An increase in customary land documentation and registration under the Ministry of Land

79% (41) of cases have been resolved, giving women full access and control over land through consent agreements, maps and boundary markers.

2) An increase in land registration application

The number of submitted applications increased by 1,500-1,300 (1,700), with 15% (255) submitted by women. 45 women were provided with Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) and 15 parcels of land were surveyed with boundary markers. Disability caucus supported 35 women's land cases with their court submissions and provided pro-bono representation, resulting in the registration of 446 women's land and GBV cases, of which 168 land and 63 GBV cases were resolved through Alternative Dispute Resolutions.

3) Increased collaboration towards women's access to land

61% (63) of project participants reported an increase in networking and collaborative activities in their groups. This involved advisory roles and joined functions. The regional dialogue held

ActionAid Focal Group discussions on Women Peace and Security, conflict resolution and justice.

to boost women's land rights resulted in certifying customary marriages, defining land inspection fees, rising awareness, improving coordination on land rights issues, and advocating for land structure in new government units.

4) Improved case study collection and increased public health awareness

Participants reported an increase in public health events, with a total of 91 women (38 with disabilities) and 85 men (20 with disabilities) attending the events. Overall, the project significantly advanced women's land rights, improved access to justice and fostered community and institutional support in Northern Uganda.

Our findings found that, to date, post-conflict recovery efforts have frequently fallen short in addressing the specific needs of women and girls who were disproportionately affected during the conflict in Northern Uganda, with some women and young girls feeling ‘invisible’.

The questions of justice, accountability and reconciliation remains. Land disputes, family tracing and the re-integration of communities and individuals who were formerly abducted has led to a complex humanitarian emergency.

The opportunity to advocate for women’s and young people’s participation and leadership in peace and conflict-resolution has been disregarded, stalling progress to Uganda’s WPS commitments. The challenges faced by survivors and their families can only be addressed through the collaboration of multiple stakeholders working with post-conflict-affected communities. These include local governments, non-governmental organisations, faith leaders, traditional elders, care providers, community workers, researchers, as well as survivors themselves.

Women and girls across Northern Uganda continue to be last and least to be involved within reconciliation conversations and continue to live with the effects of the sexual violence they experienced during the war. This is despite our findings, that WROs and youth groups play a critical role in peace building and must be involved in peace building as they play a significant role in promoting peacebuilding initiatives and dialogues within their communities. Strengthening partnerships with organisations doing work on transitional justice is key for joint advocacy and making a lasting impact in the communities they

serve. This includes supporting them to build the capacity of groups of affected communities and provide livelihood training, such as developing technical expertise on agricultural and livestock management, financial support, technical assistance, and inclusive approaches that recognise the unique contributions of women and youth-led organisations in peacebuilding and development.

The organisations we spoke to collaborated to write the recommendations outlined below, which aim to enhance the participation of Ugandan women and youth in peacebuilding and humanitarian responses, both locally and internationally.

Recommendations for national and local civil society organisations:

1. Joint Peacebuilding Action:

Adopt a community-led approach for conflict and peace initiatives that promotes gender equality and transformative approaches through:

- (1) the inclusion of faith leaders and traditional elders as key stakeholders in WPS projects. Their influence in the community allows them to dispel stigma toward survivors of sexual violence and children born in captivity.
- (2) the consultation and collaboration with survivors of violence, as post-conflict returnee families.
- (3) the collaboration of joint activities, to have a wider reach and support in information sharing.

2. Women’s Protection and Healthcare:

Strengthen and tailor protection mechanisms and referral systems, for example: by reactivating the district and national level committees, through the leadership of women and young people activists, and calling out to the government for an increase of sexual, reproductive and maternal health units, especially in post-conflict affected regions. This is to ensure the needs of war survivors are considered separately, rather than being grouped in the general planning for the district.

Recommendations for the Government:

1. Women’s Protection:

Enhance services for conflict-related sexual violence survivors, and strengthen current protection mechanisms. This can be done by:

- Ensuring such services are integrated with other healthcare services and implemented with the feedback and support of communities.
- Develop risk-reduction strategies such as strong social connections and counselling for individuals who care for survivors. It’s important to protect them from secondary trauma.
- Invest in projects centered around women’s safety, recovery and justice.

2. Promote alternative livelihood opportunities:

Economic models should be transformed to become people and environmental centered, and based off the needs of those most at need. Any form of cash or economic recovery packages must be agreed in collaboration with communities (with special attention to women survivors and children returnees, who have lost their jobs or been forced to suspend their businesses and income-generating activities).

Recommendations for international actors:

1. Gender Transformative Programming:

Recognise the gendered impacts of the conflict, and put in place gender-transformative responses, in order to meaningfully support peace-building and any long-term resilience programming. Not doing so, means responses will lack adequate understanding of the root causes of conflict, and will not address the issues in a holistic manner. This can be done by:

- Designing post-conflict transitional justice interventions, in collaboration and coordination with WROs, YLOs and communities, to ensure their needs are represented.

2. Enhance women participation and leadership:

There is a need to advocate for the inclusion of women and WROs in decision-making structures, namely within peacebuilding taskforce, and governmental unit, in order to enhance justice

Recommendations for donors:

1. Fund capacity building initiatives on women's protection:

such as (1) for leaders of survivor-led groups who are providing informal care to survivors, through training in case management and psychosocial support, or (2) work in post-conflict settings which support women's full access to land and other property rights.

2. Invest in national level funding mechanisms:

for WPS advancement and ensuring the funding mechanisms include women, young people and CSOs from Northern Uganda as key decision makers of the fund.

and peace. This can be done via the leadership training for women on the frontline so they can engage in advocacy spaces and contribute to decision-making processes at all levels. in the general planning for the district.

3. Advocacy and Information Sharing:

- Facilitate learning exchanges at local, regional, and international levels. This will help promote peer-to-peer learning and replicate good practices from countries that have successfully recovered from post conflict.
- Support women peacebuilding activists in their work and continue to pursue capacity enhancement in women, peace and security advocacy in GBV prevention co-ordination mechanisms both nationally and globally, through the advancement of the commitments envisaged by signatories of the Call to Action on prevention of violence in emergencies.

3. Provide long-term, multi-year and flexible funding:

which can be adapted to the needs of the most affected communities, and allow for different mechanisms for funding streams, e.g. providing cash rather than bank transfers. Donors should set up in-country advisory meetings with WROs and WLOs to understand which funding mechanisms work best in their context.

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Women and youth leaders participating in this policy brief.
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Consinate Okeny A., Terra Renaissance War Victims
Rehabilitation Center-Gulu; Lucy Lalam GBV Survivor

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Member of WRO who attended ActionAid Focal Group discussions on Women Peace and Security, conflict resolution and justice.

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