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## Northern Uganda's Girl Soldiers Find a Harsh Homecoming

By Beatrice Lamwaka  
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*Reintegration is hard for all child soldiers in northern Uganda who were abducted and forced to commit atrocities for insurgents. For girls who also had to marry and have children with rebels, the social rejection can be particularly acute.*

### Subhead:

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### Byline:

Beatrice Lamwaka

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GULU, Uganda (WOMENSENEWS)--Rebels with the Lord's Resistance Army abducted Florence Ayot, 31, in 1989, when she was 9 years old.

She served as a wife to Dominic Ongwen, a rebel commander who is now wanted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Ayot had two children with Ongwen, a daughter, 8, and son, 6.



Florence Amony, now 34, became a child soldier in 1990.

*Credit: Beatrice Lamwaka*

She says she used to want to escape, but now she'd rather still be in captivity because she hasn't been able to rebuild her life here. Villagers constantly give her unwanted attention because of her former husband.

"I am always called a killer possessed with the evil spirit," she says. "Life in captivity was much better because then I had a home with the rebels."

The more than two-decade armed conflict between the Ugandan government and rebels with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) left tens of thousands of people dead and 2 million people displaced in northern Uganda, according to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, a nonprofit organization.

LRA rebels abducted tens of thousands of children, with estimates by various organizations ranging from 30,000 to 60,000. The rebels forced many of the abducted children to become child soldiers who raped, maimed, tortured and killed.

Rebels trained Ayot to be a soldier. She says women fought with their babies strapped to their backs. Ayot escaped in 2005 after her infant son was shot while he was on her back during a fight with government troops.

She now lives in a rented home in Holy Rosary settlement camp, along with approximately 30 other women who returned from LRA captivity with children.

"I feel that my return is useless," she says. "The government has abandoned me and my two children. I cannot afford to pay for my children's school fees."

## Women Struggle Most

Although all former child soldiers struggle to reintegrate into the communities where they were once forced to commit atrocities, advocates say that it is the women in northern Uganda, especially those who had children with LRA rebels, who struggle the most.

While contending with community rejection, they must also cope with the traumatizing experiences they endured in captivity. Those include rape, other forms of sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies and combat injuries, according to testimonies of 35 formerly abducted mothers gathered by the Uganda Association of Women Lawyers, an advocacy group. These women have limited access to health facilities and health-related information.

The government and various humanitarian organizations have set up interventions to assist former abductees. But many of the women say that current approaches overlook them, take advantage of them and can't make up for everything they lost.

In 2000, the government passed the Amnesty Act, which offered blanket immunity and reintegration packages, including money and basic necessities, to LRA rebels who laid down their weapons in order to help them start new lives.

In 2006, the government and LRA rebels signed a truce brokered by neighboring South Sudan and began peace talks. LRA leader Joseph Kony has repeatedly refused to sign a final peace deal, according to press reports.

Meanwhile, the people of northern Uganda and former abductees say they still suffer the hangover of the LRA insurgency.

Ayot says she has difficulty relating to men because of her abduction. She was in a relationship with a man, but he left her when he found out she'd been Ongwen's wife. She says he took all the contents of her reintegration package from the government, which included an amnesty certificate, blankets, saucepans and some money.

Ayot now washes people's clothes and plasters the walls of people's houses with cow dung to earn money. She says the government should pardon her former husband, whose current whereabouts are unknown, so he can return home and take responsibility for his children.

"My former husband was also abducted," she says.

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## Amnesty Certificates 'Ineffective'

Sam Lawino, a northern Ugandan journalist, says the amnesty certificates given to the returnees to protect them from being labeled as killers and attracting revenge are ineffective.

Gladys Cano-Ogura is the coordinator of Women Peace Initiative, a community-based organization that helps formerly abducted girls in Kitgum, a district in northern Uganda.

"They are meeting a lot of challenges in reintegrating," Cano-Ogura says. "When they came back under the amnesty law, some of them were not fully accepted by their parents since they had children whose fathers' clan was not known."

Steven Oola, head of research and advocacy for the Refugee Law Project, which provides legal aid to internally displaced people here, has done extensive research in northern Uganda.

"The unclear distinction between victims and perpetrators of the LRA insurgency makes reintegration a huge task," he says. "The abducted children were forced to commit severe atrocities in their own villages, sometimes on family members. The distinction between abductees and combatant was blurred in the eyes of their own family members."

Oola says male and female returnees have different reintegration experiences.

"While both male and female returnees face enormous stereotypes and rejection from communities, female returnees suffer disproportionately more," he says.

He says one reason is because many women were forced to marry and bear children with the LRA rebels.

"First, the female abductees were forcefully given off to senior commanders as wives and mistresses," he says. "Many were also impregnated and forced to bear children without consent. A woman returning home with children is bound to be rejected by her own family members."

He says the women who return with children pose a problem for their communities' land distribution.

"Female returnees bearing girls were more likely to be received home than those with boys," he says. "Apparently, this was because the community perceives girls as likely to be married off but the boys grow up and start claiming land."



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