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## **Experiences of a young girl abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army, Northern Uganda.**

### **Context**

This is part of an interview with a woman who was abducted as a young girl by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda. The district of Kitgum has been at the very heart of the LRA terror campaign that lasted in northern Uganda for 21 years from 1986 to 2006. The rebel group, led by Joseph Kony, has caused untold damage to the lives, culture, health, education and livelihoods of the people of Kitgum and the other northern districts (see Amnesty International, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2005). Kony abducted more than 30,000 individuals, mostly teenage boys and girls. This was, in effect, to create a slave army (Blattman and Annan, 2010). Adolescents were deemed to be the most pliable, reliable and effective forced recruits. Kony's strategy was, according to those close to him, to abduct mainly young people that could be brainwashed into slaves who would blindly obey his orders to fight, kill, torture and yield their bodies for sexual services (Liebling and Baker, 2010).

The reported interview transcript was part of a British Academy funded research project entitled, 'The governance of sexual violence in northern Uganda' carried out in December 2009 (Liebling and Baker, 2010; Liebling-Kalifani and Baker, 2010). The main aim was to analyse the justice and health provision for former abductees and survivors of sexual violence. The anonymised interview was approved by Harriet (pseudonym) and highlights her experiences, the survival strategies used and the sense of in-justice harboured by the rebel leadership (Baker, 2011). It is hoped this knowledge will contribute to improved understanding of young former girl abductees' needs as recommended by previous authors (see Derulyn et al. 2004; Henttonen et al. 2008; McKay, 2004; Pham et al. 2007; 2008). The interview was carried out in Acholi, the language spoken in northern Uganda, and translated into English by a research assistant working

with Kitgum Women's Peace Initiative (KIWEPI). KIWEPI is a women's non-governmental organisation that assisted in the research fieldwork.

## **Interview**

*Interviewer:* Could you tell me about your experiences?

*Harriet:* My name is Harriet. I was abducted at the age of thirteen years. When the rebels came I ran for my life. Two of us were captured including my friend but the rebels said, 'We don't want that girl she is ugly; she should remain behind'. One of the rebels slapped me and said, 'If you would like to live continue with us. We are going to Sudan' and I was taken to meet the commander who asked, 'Why are they running away from us?' I replied that we feared the LRA soldiers. We walked to [the] Pader District when my legs were swollen because I had no shoes. Because of the rough roads and carrying I was unable to walk and the rebels said, 'This little girl should be left behind'. Others remarked, 'No, we are not setting her free. She's going to Juba to take care of Kony's children... she'll be a babysitter to Kony'.

We went to the camp, which was completely destroyed by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF)<sup>i</sup>. They had burnt everywhere and most people had escaped for their lives. As we were moving the rebels identified seven men and forced all of us newly abductees to take a club. We were told, 'Each one of you is going to beat these people' and we were made to kill them all. They said, 'Should you try to escape or be stubborn then you will all be killed like them'. Immediately after the killings we were taken to Sudan, put in a compound and the girls were given to men. I was given to an LRA commander.

*Interviewer:* How many girls were given to one commander?

*Harriet:* All the men got at least one woman. I went to the commander and the instruction was that I was there to work as a soldier and to be a wife. I was assigned to be on guard and when there was no food I was sent to look for it. One evening I was instructed to go to my commander and he tried to induce me to sex and I said, 'I can't'. I was insisting, 'I can't' whenever I went I would sit close to him. He was very big and due to his age he was like a father to me and I feared so much. This kept happening until one day he picked his escorts and they beat me every evening several times for refusing to sleep with him. Due to the frequent beatings I had to sleep with him and the first time I had sex I felt a lot of shame and pain.

*Interviewer:* What was he like?

*Harriet:* When we started staying together as husband and wife there were seven other girls and I was the eighth. The other girls would not give me food. I was not allowed to bathe and was very dirty, thin and not eating. The commander instructed the other girls to make me wash my clothes, bathe and eat. He was taking care of me very well and always moved with me. He said that if I tried to escape, 'I would not see his white teeth because I would become the food of the flies.' He used to say those threatening words meaning I would be killed. Eventually he impregnated me and we stayed in Sudan as I was not able to walk long distances. My husband worked closely with Kony who I know has very strong powers. His intention of abducting very many people is to indoctrinate them as soldiers to overthrow the Government. Kony said we needed to fight very hard in order to topple the government. I needed to believe in him as he said when we toppled the government we would be flown back to Uganda and there would be a new Acholi generation. We had a lot of confidence in him because of the way he convinced us of his powers.

*Interviewer:* What do you think was his attitude towards women?

*Harriet:* Kony does not like women because they do not follow his instructions. But, on the other hand, to fulfil his natural need he collects them as wives.

*Interviewer:* Why?

*Harriet:* Kony has a policy that only people below eighteen years should be abducted because they are easy to indoctrinate, healthy and energetic and can take up his roles very fast, and they are free of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, STD's.

*Interviewer:* What happened if they refused orders?

*Harriet:* Kony is an ordinary man but at the same time he is very rude because when the 'evil spirit' is not there he lives happily and interacts freely but other times people do not understand what he thinks. He says it is the evil spirit in him which is instructing that he must do what they say. When soldiers are coming to attack he senses it and calls for his commanders and instructs them. So, because of this most people trust and believe in him and feel he is very intelligent.

*Interviewer:* What is meant by the evil spirit?

*Harriet:* Some time back he assembled all his troops under big trees and started narrating stories about how he possessed the evil spirit. He told us that one day when he was taken from school 'evil' possessed him and he became 'disturbed and crazy'. His parents tried to treat him but he was talking nonsense. In the end he could not continue with his studies and his parents could not manage him. All of Kony's commanders were aware of the superpowers he possesses and they believed in them. Once four commanders tried to plan to kill him. They told one of the escorts to shoot him but surprisingly the gun never operated. It failed completely and people were surprised. The escort was arrested and revealed the plot. Kony told the crowd, 'I knew this thing would happen long ago but I wanted it to happen so you have learnt that I have the power and understand when you plot against me'.

*Interviewer:* How did the commander treat you?

*Harriet:* I was being treated very fair and the commander was taking full responsibility for me and when the child was eight months it was weaned and given to the co-wife because I could not carry the heavy bullets and guns with the child on my back. We were happy and living fairly well. One time the UPDF starting attacking us and my commander met his fate and was killed. Most people were killed but for me and my child we managed to escape.

*Interviewer:* Did his death upset you?

*Harriet:* I felt so bad because if the head of the family is not there it is very difficult to survive as there is no food. I was in a dilemma, alone and life became very difficult so because of the frequent attacks I had to escape. Kony and his followers had two different prayers one in our own language talking about the commandments and the other in Arabic. We could pray and pray especially when we were coming to fight in Uganda. We removed our clothes and remained bare-chested and God would help us go into Uganda and clear our enemies who are spoiling our land because we wish to rehabilitate the Acholi land and therefore we pray that our going should create a change and because of this we wish that all of us must perish for our land we must fight and we must all die for our land. This was the continuous prayer we would make as we walked bare-chested when we came to Uganda.

*Interviewer:* What else happened?

*Harriet:* I was still very young and did not know what was happening. I was given herbs to chew and anointed with oils we call 'Pala.' It is very soft and red and we had to put it on our bodies whenever we were going to fight. The purpose was to make us very strong, courageous and concentrate on the rebel's instructions. After I came out of captivity I saw my colleagues from school were highly educated and able to speak English. For me I do not know English. I am poor compared to those who were at school. Even at home people have deserted me...

friends who are educated have rejected me... they don't like me and I feel so bad and depressed. It is as if I am not a human being and I am wondering why I should live because my people have rejected me, so what is my use? I thought the rebels were very good in the bush but that experience wasted my time... I have nothing, no home to live in because I am being chased away. The time in captivity has ruined me completely.

*Interviewer:* I am sorry. How is your child now?

*Harriet:* My child is with me but he is not in a good environment. We are always travelling from place to place and because of the mistreatment by the community towards him he has nightmares. I have tried to pray but it has not helped. The community remarks and interactions with the child are very bad. Most people say, 'You take care... these rebel children are dangerous because whatever they have got in their hands is deadly and they can throw it at you and hurt you.' The community say rebel children don't understand what they are doing and you need to take precautions. My child is rejected by his peers and feels out of place and complains, 'Why am I called the rebels child and other children are not?' This kind of treatment is defeating me.

*Interviewer:* How has your life been since you returned?

*Harriet:* I went to a reception centre where I was counselled then reunited with my parents. When we came back the package given did not include the children. Now my challenge is the little package I received got finished and I am facing challenges. What can be done to support me, especially the education of the child? Those I went to school with are now big people in the community but for me I remain stooping low. If there is any opportunity for my child to be educated then maybe the consolation will come after this, as he will be the one changing my life. Even my grandmother and the people who should have helped have changed towards me. We have to move from place to place as we don't have shelter. I need to plan in case my child falls sick and needs treatment. People do not know exactly who his father is, so I

cannot take him home because they might not accept him. So that is the strange position I am in and it is very difficult.

*Interviewer:* Are you married?

*Harriet:* When I came back, life was very difficult. I got one of the formerly abducted men and we stayed together. I had a child with him but anytime he could ask me to pick a panga to kill him<sup>ii</sup>. He kept on disturbing me saying that I should do it to show that I was still very courageous and strong. All the killing remained stuck in his mind and urged him to ask me to kill him. Due to this, my parents took me back home to be safe and I separated from him. However, my parents would not support me and life was very difficult. I came to look for work as a housemaid and now I am looking after the baby of a family who are taking care of me and my child. I cook, wash clothes and do the housework and this is how I am earning a living.

### **Summary of the research**

The research resulting from this data examined health and justice together because sexual violence was experienced simultaneously as a violation of the survivor's body and rights (Liebling and Baker, 2010; Liebling-Kalifani and Baker, 2010). It left the survivor in need of both a health and a justice response as the two were connected in the experience of the survivor so they went hand in hand in terms of service responses required. We therefore argued that there was real value in promoting increased collaboration between local health and justice services in the Kitgum district. This concurred with participants' comments, which also described the need for increased collaboration between health and justice services. They suggested that this could involve combined training on supporting survivors of sexual violence as well as joint meetings and discussions. Likewise it was suggested that the judge, police and medical superintendent would benefit from a meeting to agree other health personnel who would be acceptable as expert witnesses, e.g. senior clinical officers. It was hoped that this would expand the number of expert witnesses and therefore assist the court in prosecutions. It was also suggested that improvements to the quality of data collection and its dissemination between justice and health providers would offer real gains in the long term. Ideally there could be the establishment of a combined health-justice sector data collection and analysis.



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<sup>i</sup> The Uganda People's Defence Force was previously the National Resistance Army, and the armed forces of Uganda.

<sup>ii</sup> Here the speaker is referring to her husband, not her child.