

# Women's contribution to peacebuilding in northern Uganda

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Source: Father Carlos Rodriguez

**Speaker at the Gulu Peace Walk and Prayer, 30 Dec 2000**

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The conflict in northern Uganda has had diverse effects on women, resulting from mass displacement and the destruction of families, livelihoods, infrastructure and the environment. The conditions have led to cultural fragmentation, abject poverty and vulnerability to preventable diseases, sexual abuse, mutilation and death. Women have learned that any form of war and violence is a gender-differentiated activity in which few women stand a chance to gain regardless of which side is dominant. Women from Acholiland have responded to this challenge by assuming diverse roles, becoming combatants, negotiators and, most frequently, community peacebuilders. Many have turned their suffering into a driving force in the search for peace – even at risk to their lives.

Since its beginning, Acholi women have been armed combatants in the conflict. The most notable was Alice Auma 'Lakwena' who led the armed group that preceded Joseph Kony's LRA. In the LRA, most girls and women were forced to join after being abducted, but nevertheless comprise a significant presence in the movement. The abducted girls are mainly allocated as 'wives' to LRA officers or used as sex slaves by other rebels. Abducted girls who have returned home tend to show acute emotional disturbance, but with adequate care most recover over a period of time. Some women also joined the NRA. Most women combatants testify that they joined out of a need to save themselves or their families. Their experience demonstrates that many Acholi women have had to respond to the pressures of violence in extraordinary ways that are profoundly challenging to traditional social roles.

Most women, however, have tried to remain with their families and used their roles as caregivers to support peace in their homes and communities. Over time many have joined efforts to promote peace. One approach has been to appeal to the fighting forces to use peaceful means to resolve their differences and encourage the rebels to come back home. Many women testify to

having used a variety of means to persuade or prevent their husbands, sons and other male relatives from actively engaging in the war. They have tried to persuade individual fighters to drop their arms and return to their communities while encouraging the government to change its policy to promote peace.

In 1989, the Gulu District Women's Development Committee mobilised other women in a peaceful demonstration at a time when no other groups dared to speak out about the war. Wearing rags and singing funeral songs, the women marched through Gulu town demanding an end to the violence. At the same time, many from the LRA gave up fighting and returned home. Although there are no available statistics to substantiate the outcome of the demonstration, a period of relative calm followed which provided an opportunity for various agencies to resettle displaced populations in Gulu.

In addition to signalling their disapproval of the LRA's behaviour, Acholi women have organised to try to influence government policy and the practices of UPDF troops in the region. Realising that simple moral appeals to the fighting forces could not stop the war, in 1996 a delegation sought an audience with the President of the Republic of Uganda, army commanders and top government officials to articulate their concerns and demand a peaceful solution to the conflict and prevention of further violence. An audience with Museveni was denied but the more positive responses of military authorities, Local Councils (LCs), and the Resident District Commissioner for dialogue and development of joint strategies have greatly improved civil-military working relationships. Women have tried to prevent the excesses of UPDF soldiers by monitoring and reporting violations. Acholi women have also served on the LC committees in an effort to demand that their concerns are taken seriously. These leadership roles have demanded extra courage because of the high risk of reprisals from LRA fighters and, paradoxically, risk of the UPDF claiming that high profile women are LRA collaborators.

Women have also been leaders in efforts to draw international attention to the conflict. When the LRA abducted girls from St. Mary's School in Aboke in October 1996, the Concerned Parents Association was formed to campaign for their release. With the school's Deputy Headmistress, Sister Rachele Fassera, they initiated a high profile advocacy campaign that received attention world-wide and influenced the agenda in negotiations around the conflict. The strategy for the release of the Aboke girls has had some criticism, as the thousands of children abducted before 1997 received no such attention. The strong government support for the campaign has in fact helped to strengthen popular belief in a 'conspiracy of silence' and a lack of political will to end the conflict in northern Uganda.

Local NGOs such as People's Voice for Peace have used participatory research to document people's experiences. This process has helped to empower the participants with a deeper understanding of the nature, pattern and dynamics of the armed conflict – knowledge that the women's peace movement has used to strengthen its capacity. Documentation projects have also generated information for advocacy and lobbying work.

Women have also been active in forming or joining community-based organisations and local NGOs intended to address the consequences of the war by promoting reconciliation, reintegration and regeneration. For example, women worked with elders and traditional leaders to establish a reception centre for ex-combatants between 1989–90. This initiative ended when the government began transferring returning combatants from the camp to Kampala, a move which created so much anxiety that many of those who had previously surrendered disappeared back into the bush to continue fighting. Women have also been active in psycho-social programmes, particularly those focusing on the rehabilitation of returnees and supporting rape victims and amputees.

In addition to peacebuilding at the community level, Acholi women have played a direct role in efforts to find a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Women representatives were among those involved in the 1994 delegation led by the government's Minister for the North, Betty Bigombe – herself an Acholi woman – to negotiate with the LRA. This initiative fostered a cessation of violence for almost six months before it collapsed.

Despite the fact that Acholi women have demonstrated both their motivation and capacity to be involved in peace initiatives, they continue to be marginalised from many of the official initiatives to address the war. They have not had a role in recent negotiation processes and, despite appeals, have not been appointed to such bodies as the Amnesty Commission. There is a general assumption that women MPs are representatives of the wider grassroots women's organisations, but in reality the links are inadequate.

The conflict and particularly the population displacement have undermined many traditions of social support. Women's groups are working with others to revive cultural institutions and to prepare the community for reconciliation and re-integration. Working through local cultural institutions with activities such as prayer meetings, peace education, as well as through songs, proverbs, poetry and story-telling, women's groups have helped to build community support and respect. Generally, women peacebuilding activists have recognised the need to address all the consequences of the conflict to develop a truly sustainable peace, and continue to work towards that end.