

Northern Uganda

Accord 11 (2002) 'Protracted conflict, elusive peace: initiatives to end the violence in northern Uganda'

Abstract

Conflict has had a profound impact on the cultural, social and economic fabric of northern Ugandan society. Reflecting on how women were impacted by and responded to violence, this case study traces the approaches women employed to promote peace and reconciliation. It shows that their efforts had more impact through community-based activities and advocacy campaigns than in formal political processes. Women marched

to demand an end to violence, lobbied government officials and reported abuses by the Ugandan army, drawing international attention to the conflict. They also supported the restoration of cultural institutions for community reconciliation and the reintegration of ex-combatants. The author argues that women's efforts show the importance of dealing with the effects of conflict at all levels to ensure sustainable peace.

Background

After the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) overthrew Uganda's military government and took power in 1986, armed conflict broke out in the area of northern Uganda known as Acholiland and soon spread across large parts of the region.

Rooted in long-standing political power struggles, the conflict in Acholiland was triggered by gross human rights violations perpetrated by army units. As violence against civilians escalated, many turned to armed struggle. In 1989 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an Acholi-based insurgency headed by Joseph Kony, emerged. The LRA directed actions against the Acholi civilian population as much as government targets. Lacking in popular support, it resorted to forcibly recruiting thousands of young people through extensive raids and abductions. At the same time, civilians experienced crimes committed by the state army, the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF).

By 2002, when the Accord article was published, the war had resulted in countless deaths, the abduction of almost 10,000 children, widespread human rights violations, and displacement of over half the population. Women and young girls were particularly affected through subjection to forced labour and sexual violence, including being given to LRA combatants as 'bush wives'.

Although it relied heavily on a military strategy, the Ugandan government did attempt to engage in talks with the LRA, notably in 1994. A number of unofficial peacemaking efforts emerged in 1997 – first by the Acholi diaspora, then by international NGOs. LRA infighting quickly led to the closure of these avenues of contact. In 1999 US-based NGO the Carter Center brokered the Nairobi Agreement between Uganda and the Sudan, which had supported the LRA since 1994. However, implementation proved difficult, and at the time the Accord article was written in 2002, Sudan had not yet withdrawn its support for the LRA.

In response to advocacy from Acholi elders, the Ugandan government approved an Amnesty Act in 2000. This led to the creation of an Amnesty Commission and a Demobilisation and Resettlement Team to encourage combatants and abductees to return to their communities. To further encourage return, traditional Acholi systems of restorative justice, which had fallen into disuse after the establishment of the Ugandan state, were also partially re-instituted.

As of 2002 there was still no peace in Acholiland, despite the Nairobi process placing enormous political and military pressure on the LRA. Key players remained committed to a 'military option', making the building of sustainable peace a difficult task.

Women's contribution to peacebuilding in northern Uganda

Rosalba Oywa

Rosalba Oywa is a pioneer of community-based conflict resolution in the Acholi region of northern Uganda. In 1989 she mobilised women in Gulu to participate in a public demonstration demanding an end to the war. In 1995 she formed a women's peace group, People's Voice for Peace, which supports community reintegration of formerly abducted children and advocates for the inclusion of grass-roots

perspectives and women in peace processes. Rosalba Oywa has been Programme Director for the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development in Gulu, and Regional Coordinator for the Coalition for Peace in Africa, overseeing its activities in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Sudan. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

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 Lord's Resistance Army. 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 National Resistance Army. 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.

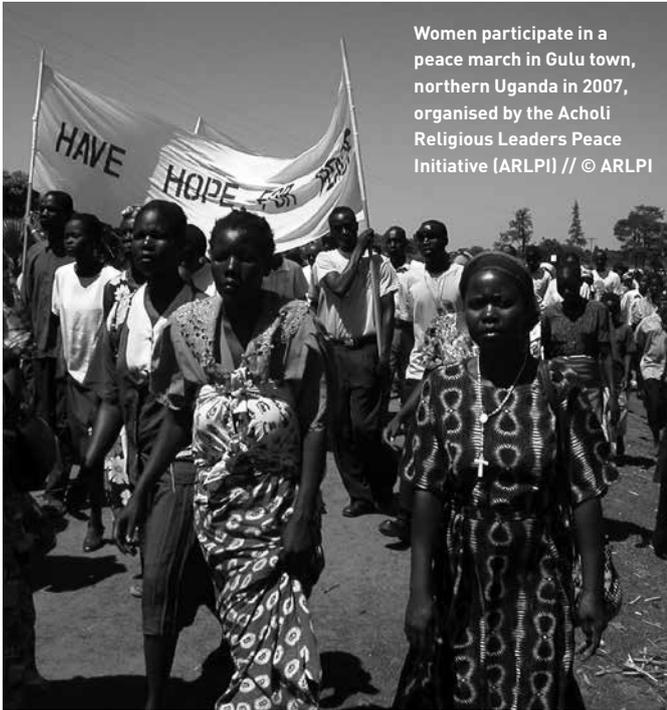
Most women, however, have tried to remain with their families and used their roles as carer to support peace in their homes and communities. Over time many have joined efforts to promote peace. One approach has been to appeal to the fighting forces to use peaceful means to resolve their differences and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

“ Since its beginning, Acholi women have been armed combatants in the conflict”

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 Uganda People's Defence Force (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, 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 Local Council 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.



Women participate in a peace march in Gulu town, northern Uganda in 2007, organised by the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) // © ARLPI

With the school's Deputy Headmistress, Sister Rachele Fassera, they initiated a high profile advocacy campaign that received attention worldwide 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.

“ Women’s groups are working with others to revive cultural institutions and to prepare the community for reconciliation and reintegration ”

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 grass-roots 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 storytelling, 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.