

# The Scars on Women's Minds and Bodies

## Women's Roles in Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Uganda

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*Ce papier est tiré des résultats d'une recherche d'Isis-Echange international interculturel des femmes (Isis-WICCE) et les activités de cet organisme (au niveau national et international) dans le domaine de la violence faite aux femmes durant les conflits armés et la présence des femmes dans le processus de paix. Cet article documente les expériences des femmes pendant la guerre au Uganda et dans 16 autres contrées dans le monde.*

Since 1996, Isis-Women's International Cross-Cultural Exchange (Isis-WICCE) has documented women's experiences in situations of armed conflict in seven districts of Uganda, and in 16 countries globally. Isis-WICCE is an international women's resource centre established in 1974 with the aim of strengthening communicative mechanisms among women's organizations worldwide in order to improve women's status as well as make their views an integral part of the global agenda.

One of Isis-WICCE's objectives in documenting the experiences of women in situations of armed conflict was to determine the nature and extent of the crimes committed against women and girls and the consequences of these crimes to their well-being. It was also crucial to investigate how women and girls coped under these circumstances, both during and after the war. For the past six years, Isis-WICCE International Exchange Program has trained a vanguard of women activists from war-affected areas worldwide to document violations of women's human rights in situations of armed conflict. The training has provided these women with the knowledge and skills necessary to use international, regional and national instruments to advocate for the redress and respect of women's human rights. The information collected by these activists is then packaged in various forms (print, audio and visual) and shared with a wider audience.

Uganda's history of armed conflict can be traced back to the colonial era, when colonialists used guns to gain power and control. As argued by Prof. Mwambutsya, this legacy of using arms to get or maintain power and control has continued, bringing civil unrest, violations of people's rights and anarchy to the country ("A Lingering Pain").

Women are central figures in the expectations of the warring factions as well as those of the affected communities. For example, in the midst of cross-fire, women are expected to protect the children and the disabled as well as to nurse the injured. At the same time, however, the

findings reveal that the bodies of these same women are turned into a battleground. They are raped and tortured by the various warring factions who use women's bodies

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to assert power and control. As has been stated by Stella Mukasa, "the women's bodies become the tool, the channel, the platform and the means through which conflict can be fought" ("A Lingering Pain"). During the data collection we came across many examples of this. In one case, a 17-year-old girl was killed when two government soldiers disagreed over who would take her as their sex slave. They decided their best option was chop the girl in two pieces in front of her mother!

In all the countries where Isis-WICCE has sponsored the documentation of women's experiences of armed conflict, the evidence overwhelming points to the sexual exploitation of women and girls by both civilians and combatants in form of rapes, gang rapes, forced impregnation, forced marriages, incest and sexual slavery. Documentation conducted by Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in Sierra Leone, by the Women's Rights Information and Documentation Centre in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and by the investigation conducted by the Human Rights Watch in Rwanda provide heartrending testimonies of the sexual abuse of women and girls during war:

*I am 25 years old. I was raped after being wrongly accused that I was a sister of the President and thus I could be sending messages to my brother. I explained to them that I was not Mobutu's sister, but they refused and wanted to persuade me to agree. So, they said to me that since I kept refusing they were going to show me that they were pitiless and were not bothered about my life. One of them threw me down and two others spread my legs and they raped me. After raping me one of them drove the muzzle of his rifle into my vagina. I don't remember*

*this situation thereafter ... nobody came to my aid. They also beat me and robbed me of all my belongings. My house was put on fire too. Now I am wondering about my life, which has been damaged. I don't have anything and I do not know that there is someone who may feel like getting married to a raped girl, because many people knew of the incidents. Really, we are so many girls who are suffering in the same situation without any support.*

*When the government forces raided our base we pulled out to another base in Mile 91. One of the men who used to force me to have an affair died during that raid. Another rebel took charge of me, a RUF commando. He*

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## Rape as an act of aggression breaks down the collective spirit of women and of the community. If the woman survives the assault, she is a symbol of her community's defeat.

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*used to lock me in a cage naked for the whole day. Any time I refused to honour his request to have an affair, he would leave me in the cage ... but continuously raped me. He kept treating me in this manner until one day I managed to escape in December 1999 together with few other girls. By then, I was five months pregnant. (FAWE)*

*The next day they killed all the men and boys. I was left with my baby and three girls. At the riverside, I was raped by a group of six Interahamwe, one after another. I knew all of them. Some were killed by the RPF and others are now in Gitarama prison. They said they were raping me to see if Tutsi women were like Hutu women. After they finished raping me, they threw me in the river to die along with my children. I floated back to the riverside. One of the Interahamwe said, "Those Tutsi people don't die—we raped her and she survived. We threw her in the river and she still survived." They let me go and I tried to go toward Runda commune (the next commune). On the way, I found another group of Interahamwe who took me with them back to Taba. They also raped me.... I can't remember how many. After the war, I found out that I was pregnant. But I had an abortion ... no, not really an abortion. The baby just came out dead. (Human Rights Watch)*

*The worst thing about the NRA soldiers was having forced sex with women one after the other. Men and women were collected during what was called a "screening exercise" to flush out the rebels from the community. The men and women were then put in separate groups. Then in the evening, the NRA soldiers started sexually abusing the women in the compound. One woman could*

*be forced to have sex with several NRA men and this went on for two days. (Uganda)*

Rape and gang rape are the most gruesome violations committed to women and girls in conflict situations. Claudia Card defines rape during armed conflict as a martial weapon. She further suggests that it is a cross-cultural language of male domination aimed at splitting up families and alliances. Its objective is to weaken the opponent as well as alienate family members and friends from each other in order to make it easier to win the war. Alcinda Honwana looks at rape in armed conflict situations as a conscious process of intimidation by which the warring factions keep women in a state of fear in order to keep the affected society in imbalance. On the other hand, Nordstorm sees rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict situations as an attack on the body politic aimed at controlling an entire socio-political process by crippling the affected society.

Scholars seem to concur that rape during war is not just about the patriarchal control of women's bodies, but that there is a link between women's inner strength and our ability and determination to hold our communities firm, that perpetrators target to destroy in order to win their battles. By violating a woman sexually, perpetrators break women's trust in their ability to protect their families; make them feel unworthy and inferior, and destroy their self-esteem and sense of self-management. As a result, women lose the zeal to mobilize and fight for the protection of their offspring and the community at large. This has resulted in devastating physical, mental and psychological consequences for most survivors of wars.

### The Consequences of Human Rights Abuse of Women

Rape as an act of aggression (Card) breaks down the collective spirit of women and of the community. It is a lasting mark that remains even after the aggressors have left. If the woman survives the assault, she is the evidence of the enemy's brutality and a symbol of her community's defeat. Women who experience this ordeal are regarded as "damaged property" and are usually shunned, divorced or neglected because of the abuse they suffered. In some instances, rape results in unwanted pregnancies and in the birth of unwanted children who are a permanent reminder of the crime.

We came across many men who had separated from their sexually abused wives. Some said that they feared contracting HIV/AIDS, while others said they left because of their feelings of humiliation. As a result, many women who were raped and abandoned by their spouses do not have any support for the care of their children and thus live in abject poverty. As a way of attaining some support for their families, women in North and Northeast Uganda have sometimes opted to follow government

soldiers who have promised them a measure of economic security. These women are commonly known as “camp followers.” This is, however, usually a temporary arrangement. In our findings, survivors testified that as soon as the soldiers were reunited with their legal wives they would be immediately cast out.

In addition to sexual violence, women survivors of war also experienced other forms of torture such as seeing their children and spouses abducted, maimed and/or killed; having their ears, nose and lips cut off; their limbs blown off by land mines; being accused of connections with fighting forces as a way to obtain information about opponents; being forced to provide perpetrators with money, food and other basics. The trauma of this torture, and of the physical pain they have had to endure, has had enormous physical, mental and psychological consequences for these women, the majority of whom live as outcasts, shunned by their communities, with little or no support to help them rebuild their lives.

Furthermore, in all of the studied areas, women and girls who were victims of sexual violation experienced numerous complications ranging from continuous passing of urine; discharge of water and pus; soreness in their genitals; continuous abdominal pains; the uterus peeping out; and sexually transmitted infections among many other health problems.

For those whose husbands remained in the marriage, the burden of shouldering family responsibilities under these circumstances has contributed significantly to the women’s daily stress and anxiety. Findings revealed that the majority of male respondents have resorted to drinking and provide minimal or no support to their families. At the same time, these men want to be seen as the “providers” for their families and hence, rule over the meagre resources that women work hard for and earn to sustain their families. This has resulted in an increase in the incidence of domestic violence, perpetuating the cycle of violence in these women’s lives.

### **Women’s Efforts Towards Sustainable Peace—Isis-WICCE**

It is very important to mobilize survivors of war to embrace peace and co-existence despite the numerous abuses they suffered during the conflict. We have found, however, that there will be no sustainable peace without providing social justice to the affected survivors of the conflicts. Therefore, it is prudent for peace researchers to consider this aspect when we advocate for peace and co-existence.

Ugandan women groups and organizations, as is the case worldwide, have spearheaded the role of peace-building and post-conflict transformation in their respective communities. Many women peace groups in the sub-region and in Uganda in particular have developed several initiatives geared towards peace-building. In line with a

statement made by Teody Lotto of Sudanese Women’s Voices that “peace comes from talking to your enemies,” many women have risked their lives to go out and talk to the enemy as a means to end the suffering of the population and attain peace in their areas. An example of this is Betty Bigombe, the then Minister of State for Northern Uganda in 1993 who risked her life and took up the challenge of meeting the notorious rebel leader Joseph Kony to talk peace. During the Isis-WICCE documentation in Gulu district, women respondents revealed that Bigombe had made a lot of progress towards the peace-making efforts. They assert that it was the male chauvinists in the region who brought an end to the negotiations and

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## **Women peacemakers in Gulu formed a counselling group of war survivors, especially survivors of rape, and used these survivors to advocate for peace-building in the district.**

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were reported to have said: “How can a woman bring peace to Acholiland?”

Women peacemakers in Gulu, the People’s Voice for Peace (PVP), did not give up after Bigombe’s attempts. PVP formed a counselling group of war survivors, especially survivors of rape, and used these survivors to advocate for peace-building in the district. These survivors have also been provided with psychosocial support and revolving funds to help improve their economic situation. Today many can support themselves. Even those who reported suicidal feelings have been able to come to terms with their experiences and are coping. People’s Voice for Peace has, thus, achieved tremendous success within Gulu district and other districts in northern Uganda (Kitgum and Apac districts).

Women in Arua district negotiated peace with their sons, brothers and husbands who joined the rebel ranks. Arua is Uganda’s success story. A number of rebels and abducted children resigned from rebel activities and returned home after women engaged in dialogue with them.

The Participatory Rural Action for Development (PRAFORD) group in Yumbe district (northern Uganda) has formed a coalition with UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender in order to cross borders to search for their abducted children. To date 135 children have been repatriated from Sudan and are undergoing trauma counselling. Some psychosocial support has been provided to trace the families of the children and to counsel these families to accept their children’s return. These initiatives have made the West Nile region the only region in northern Uganda that can be described as enjoying relative peace. Women in the Teso region (Eastern Uganda) carried out similar initiatives to end the 1992 insurgency.

It should, however, be noted that these initiatives are carried out in specific local areas and therefore do not have wide national impacts. This prompted Isis-WICCE to develop national and regional exchange workshops to bring together different women peace activists and harmonize their peace initiatives for national and regional sustainable peace. The focus is aimed at encouraging women to build peace from the grassroots to parliaments and governments in the region.

Isis-WICCE's main goal in the Great Lakes region has been to support and strengthen women's peace-building groups and initiatives through annual International Exchange Institutes and skill-building training where women activists from war-affected areas undertake training in documentation of human rights violations. Skill-building involves participants making visits to different districts, understanding the causes of the various conflicts in these different communities, and how these are linked to armed conflict. The training workshops emphasize the fact that women have an important role in bringing peace to the region. Participants develop plans of action to be carried out in their respective communities. The best practices adopted by the participants are shared with other interested networks through Isis-WICCE publications and newsletters. These publications are also used as tools to lobby for redress and justice for peace in the region. This initiative has to some extent been successful in breaking a number of barriers that have hindered women from the different ethnic groups to meet with each other and discuss the issues in the conflicts in their respective areas.

To address the injustices inflicted on women, and men, war survivors, Isis-WICCE, in collaboration with medical professionals, has carried out a short-term medical intervention in the various areas being documented by Isis-WICCE in Uganda. We were able to provide medical services to emergency cases of war survivors. This intervention has brought a lot of hope to the affected areas and has encouraged more women survivors to speak out.

Another best practice spearheaded by Isis-WICCE together with the Ugandan women's movement has been the building of a coalition that advocates for women's participation in decision-making as a way of positioning women at the negotiation tables. One of the objectives of this coalition—Coalition for Political Accountability to Women (COPAW)—is building relationships in the Great Lakes region. Women's organizations and groups involved in peace-building in the Great Lakes Region have also formed a sub-regional coalition known as "Women Partners for Peace in Africa" (WOPPA), of which Isis-WICCE is a member, and which shares similar goal.

It is evident that a number of women's groups and organizations in the region have had some success in cultivating peace-building. Most of them relate their success to their ability to maintain confidence and trust among the communities due to the fact that the communities do not hold women responsible for the initiation of

armed conflicts. However, this trust does not seem to be embraced by many government peace negotiators who believe that the issues surrounding the armed conflicts in the sub-region have nothing to do with gender. This can be seen in the decisions they make with respect to who is allowed to sit at the negotiation tables. In most cases women are only given a few seats and therefore do not have much influence on the decisions taken. This has significantly hindered the ability of women's peace initiatives to have concrete impacts in the region.

### **Challenges in Women's Peace-Building Process**

Most of the challenges to women's peace-building initiatives relate to policy formulation and implementation; to ego among the men and the warring factions; and to the rooted patriarchy and stereotypes of the African society. For example:

- women's peace-building initiatives are seen as part of "women's gender roles," and as such are given little or no resources to sustain the initiatives;
- limited coordination between civil society organizations' (CSOs) peace initiatives and those of governments
- lack of women's participation in decision-making positions;
- lack of genuine democracy and good governance among most African governments that has generated or renewed conflicts;
- lack of transparency in embracing the peace initiatives by those in power,

Furthermore, the failure to involve the affected people in the peace process has resulted in the mistrust and the development of inappropriate plans of actions, leading to the collapse of the peace initiatives/efforts. The perpetuation of negative cultural stereotypes, such as the belief that men are responsible for making decisions, is also a major obstacle to the success of women's peace initiatives. The lack of women peace activists in the national negotiating teams developing strategies is another a big blow to women's efforts at peace-building.

Finally, it is important to note that most of the weapons that have destroyed Africa and its people are now being manufactured in Africa. If sustainable peace is to be attained, all those involved in the formulation of policies geared to the control of sale of arms must act immediately to end this lucrative trade. Strict measures must be put in place to address this issue immediately.

### **Conclusion**

The voices of women war survivors reveal the inconsistencies of the social justice system in most African democracies. This has continued to sow seeds of hatred among

the population, perpetuating a cycle of conflict. Women's appeals to those in positions of responsibility to embrace the virtues of accountability, and to plan for effective redress mechanisms that will ensure sustainable peace, have been largely ignored.

Women in the sub-region have nevertheless achieved a lot in terms of initiating peace-building due to their good knowledge of local affairs. These women have been known for their resourceful communication skills as well as effective mediation skills among local communities. It is only logical that governments grasp this opportunity and work with women peacemakers in building peace and conflict resolution in the region. This is the only critical step towards ensuring sustainable peace, prosperity and development for all humanity.

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## LE PLUME DU PHÉNIX

### À ma sœur Afghane

Le monde s'ouvre devant toi, fille de femme,  
née du même ventre que ton frère.  
On t'annonce que tu peux maintenant partager  
avec le monde entier  
ton expérience ancestrale.  
La montagne se dresse devant toi?  
Tu sais que tu n'as qu'à tendre la main pour la  
toucher.  
Enfin, tu laisses tomber le voile.

Tu étais seule à posséder le pouvoir de briser  
les frontières qui t'empêchaient d'évoluer.  
Un pas, un seul pas séparait ton rêve de la  
réalité  
et tu viens de le faire  
car depuis peu, tu sais que ces barrières  
érigées par l'homme  
n'étaient que du vent.  
Il soufflait si fort qu'il transformait les oasis en  
d'infranchissables raz-de-marée,  
le croyais-tu.

Ce matin, comme tous les matins de ta vie, le  
soleil s'est à nouveau levé.  
Comme une révélation tu apprends qu'il brille  
aussi pour toi,  
femme de savoir.  
Tu récoltes enfin le fruit de ton évolution.