

## Background

It is widely accepted that while women are not the instigators of war they bear disproportionate, different and unrecognized burdens of conflict. The case of Northern Uganda is no exception. For twenty years a brutal conflict has continued to wreak havoc on the districts of Northern Uganda. According to a recent study, the “cost of the war in Uganda annually over 20 years is \$85 million.” “The equivalent amount of money could provide clean, safe drinking water to 3.5 million people per year – or the total population of Liberia.”<sup>1</sup> The devastation in Northern Uganda has a human face, and it is most often that of a woman's.

Although invisible in the inventory of most peace processes, women find themselves holding together the fabric of communities affected by conflict. They are the ones primarily responsible for the reintegration of former fighters, the rehabilitation of the injured and psychologically scarred. They become heads of household, builders, traders, and leaders despite conventional social paradigms. In spite of these critical roles during conflict and in the rebuilding of communities, women and their priorities are left out of peace processes.

Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security made important strides in calling for the recognition of women's multiple roles in peacebuilding. Despite the mandate of inclusion and representation outlined in SCR 1325, women are still largely absent at the Northern Uganda peace table. The efforts made by the parties in Juba to secure peace for Uganda are commendable, but silent with regard to women's perspectives and priorities.

<sup>1</sup> Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda. “Counting the Cost: Twenty Years of War in Northern Uganda,” March 2006. [http://www.oxfam.org/en/files/report\\_CSOPNU\\_nuganda\\_060330/download](http://www.oxfam.org/en/files/report_CSOPNU_nuganda_060330/download)

It is under the guidance of SCR 1325 and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004), that five women's organizations<sup>2</sup> with the support of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and under the leadership of the Uganda Women's Network (UWONET) came together as a Civil Society Women's Peace Coalition to jointly advocate for increased visibility and voice for women in Juba.

For years the women's movement in Uganda has grown in strength, yet attention to the situation faced by women of the North has remained peripheral. At this critical moment in Uganda's history, there is an opportunity for women from all over Uganda to stand together to demand their right of participation and insist that their views are directly reflected in the ongoing peace negotiations and future reconstruction.

Drawing on each organization's comparative advantage, the Civil Society Women's Peace Coalition engaged in consultations from 10 – 14 October in Northern Uganda. These consultations were undertaken to demonstrate solidarity with the women of Northern Uganda and gather the views of women most acutely affected by the 20-year conflict on the current ongoing peace process in Juba.



Over the course of five days, over 200 women from five districts (Gulu, Pader, Amuru, Kitgum and Lira), representing over 25 organizations and constituencies uniformly called for enduring peace in Uganda.

<sup>2</sup> Uganda Women's Network (UWONET), Center for Conflict Resolution (CECORE), Uganda Media Women's Association (UMWA), Isis-WICCE, and UNIFEM.

Representatives of district leadership, Muslim, Catholic, Anglican and lay communities, civil society and IDP camps all appealed for the parties in Juba to remain fully committed to sitting together at the peace table to build a comprehensive and peaceful future for all of Uganda.

The consultations focused on two groups of women in each district. First the consultation team met with district leaders to inform them of the programme and to solicit their views and gauge whether steps had already been taken via official channels to include women in the peace process. These courtesy calls were followed in each district by a consultation with a group of 20 women from grassroots organizations and community leadership<sup>3</sup>, then a consultative meeting in a pre-identified IDP camp. Each meeting began with an introduction of the Coalition and the legal framework driving the consultation process, then progressed to asking the women for their views on a range of topics. The sets of issues that emerged from these conversations were nearly uniform across districts. The women were primarily concerned with physical security, land tenure, psychosocial rehabilitation, reconciliation and justice, and sustainable peace.

### Physical Security

The desire to return home for IDPs has been tempered by the reality of physical insecurity. Despite an increase in general safety, women are skeptical that their security can be guaranteed without a final peace agreement. This strong desire to return home, combined with years of violence has left most women feeling trapped and paralyzed in the IDP camps. The women consulted in towns expressed similar uncertainty regarding their physical safety and that of their sisters in the camps. The lack of security has left

<sup>3</sup> This included clergy and leaders from the Christian and Muslim communities, local peacebuilding organizations, and community-based organizations.

many women traumatized, perpetually fearful, and reticent to take the risk of traveling.

### Land Tenure

Land tenure featured prominently among the concerns raised by women. Many women expressed concern that they would not have the right to return to their land. Knowledge of the Uganda Land Act and inheritance



rights is thin, and many women are concerned that over time new occupants on their land will have gained the right to live there permanently in their absence. The local legal system lacks the capacity to both sensitize returnees as well as provide the legal services that they will need. Women consulted also expressed concern over inheritance rights. With the devastation of families and the protracted nature of the conflict, the composition of households has shifted. Women have remarried and formed new families, leaving the inheritance or right to previous property uncertain. They are concerned that when they return home, they will have nowhere to build a house or to harvest crops.

### Women's Roles and Concerns in Rehabilitation

In each community, women expressed deep concern at what to expect during the return and rehabilitation processes. They noted the difficulty in coping with the needs of former combatants, abductees, new families, including children born and orphaned in the bush. Women know that they will bear the responsibility of the successful reintegration of all these populations. They expressed their readiness to meet these needs, but appealed for enhanced skills to do so, including psychosocial training and resources.

## Psychosocial Support

The level of trauma experienced by IDPs in particular is well known. Most of the women that were involved in these consultations have experience violence and death or know of someone who has been affected. Beyond the immediate need for psychosocial support, women expressed concern related to the reintegration of returnees into their communities. For years families have hoped that those who have been abducted are not dead, and with increased return rates this hope will either be confirmed or destroyed. A particular set of women in Pader wondered at their ability to cope with the emotional upheavals that they anticipate in their communities. They appealed to civil society and NGOs to building their capacity to deal with these issues as they try to support each other in their communities.

## Reconciliation and Justice

The issue of reconciliation and justice in Northern Uganda is contentious. The intervention of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has added an unanticipated level of complexity to local reconciliation. Most of the women that were consulted favor a withdrawal of the ICC arrest warrants. Their sense is that the warrants have caused the LRA to fear full engagement in the peace process. They expressed willingness to forgive and reconcile for the sake of peace in the North. However, the opinions on justice varied across districts and communities with those most deeply impacted by the conflict calling strongly for the use of traditional justice mechanisms. However, they reiterated the fact that no amount of justice, traditional or otherwise, can undo the pain and suffering that they have endured.

## Sustainable Peace

It is common to essentialize women's roles and perspectives. However, the consultations with women

yielded a broader view of peace that extends beyond the narrow parameters of conventional security rhetoric. Many of the women expressed a desire for the root causes of the conflict to be addressed in the peace process. They frequently referred to women's roles as mothers, natural brokers of peace, and as a calming influence between negotiating parties. Beyond the roles that women play within communities and in their different capacities, many of the women consulted expressed a desire to broaden the terms of the peace process.

The women pointed out that no peace in Uganda can be sustainable unless the issues of marginalization, economic exclusion, power-sharing and disenfranchisement are addressed. They noted the massive educational gap in the North. As one study indicated, "737 schools in northern Uganda (60 percent of the total) are non-functioning because of the war" and "250,000 children in northern Uganda received no education at all."<sup>4</sup> The women also addressed the need for gainful employment opportunities post-conflict, noting the risk of high unemployment to general security.



## Women's Appeal for Peace

The women of Northern Uganda call for peace at all costs, expressing their exhaustion and profound sadness at the suffering of so many in the greater North. They call for all engaged in the negotiations to speak the language of peace, with one voice, to the

<sup>4</sup> Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda. "Counting the Cost: Twenty Years of War in Northern Uganda," March 2006. [http://www.oxfam.org/en/files/report\\_CSOPNU\\_nuganda\\_060330/download](http://www.oxfam.org/en/files/report_CSOPNU_nuganda_060330/download)

people of Uganda and to each other, and to ensure that their actions reaffirm their commitment to peace. The women emphasized that there should be no return home with out peace. They implore the parties to consider the specific impact the conflict has had on women: elderly, young, mothers, sisters and daughters of Uganda. They have borne the burden of conflict and know the sorrow of loss and pain of violence, which no justice mechanism, including the International Criminal Court can repair. They stand ready to nurture peace in their homes and communities and support all parties to do the same. Those that have been displaced and disenfranchised are hungry to go home to their lands, to reap the fruits of Uganda's soil and to build homes for future generations.

### Women's Recommendations

The Civil Society Women's Peace Coalition acknowledges and is encouraged by the important steps taken by the Government of Southern Sudan and the efforts of both parties to the negotiations to come together to bring an end to this conflict. In response to the women of Northern Uganda, taking into account their concerns and messages and in solidarity with them, the Civil Society Women's Peace Coalition recommend the following to those engaged in the Juba process:

- Speak the language of peace, to each other and to the people of Uganda, so that all are encouraged by your commitment to the process;
- That all involved in the peace process hold themselves accountable to the women of Uganda and the Great Lakes region who have borne the burden of this conflict;
- Take into consideration the inclusion of perspectives from communities which have long suffered such as women and girls displaced

internally by the conflict, and women and girls associated with fighting forces;

- Guarantee that the process and its monitoring include the protection of the rights of women and girls, especially with respect to their bodily integrity;
- Ensure that the Office of the Mediator and the parties to the negotiations have sufficient gender and women's rights expertise so that the perspectives and rights of women and girls are fully taken into account;
- Finally, recognize and seek the participation of women in the peace process as called for in UN Security Council Resolution 1325. The voices of women must be heard and represented in Juba so that the perspectives of women in peacebuilding contribute to a full and enduring peace for Uganda.

The members of the Civil Society Women's Peace Coalition, with the support of UNIFEM continue to encourage the inclusion of women's perspectives and voices in the peace talks, call on the international community to express it's commitment to the process, and remain committed to fulfilling the vision of a just and sustainable peace in Uganda.

*-- The Uganda Women's Network, its 17 member organizations, allies and the women of the Greater North<sup>5</sup>*

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