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*Original Article*

# Parliaments and Post-Conflict Justice: Amplifying the Voices of Children Born in LRA Captivity in Northern Uganda

*Patrick Ochen*[1*], *Agatha Alidri*[1] *& Okello Simon*[1]

[1] Gulu University, P. O. Box 166, Gulu, Uganda
[*] Author for Correspondence Email: patrickochen92@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction**: This paper explores the intersection of parliamentary action and post-conflict justice in Northern Uganda, with a specific focus on children born in captivity during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency. **Methodology:** The qualitative, participatory research design was employed, with the use of In-depth oral interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews, Document Review and Participatory Tools to collect the necessary data. **Findings:** Key emerging themes include existential crisis of identity, stigma and social exclusion, structural marginalisation and legal invisibility, psychological and intergenerational trauma, aspirations and the power of voice. **Conclusions:** The stories shared by children born in captivity, their mothers, and various community stakeholders reveal persistent exclusion and neglect. At the policy level, the voices of one of the policy makers confirm that the issue of children born in captivity remains an overlooked category in national development plans and post-conflict frameworks. Amplifying these voices is a moral and historical obligation, requiring a collective reimagining of community, policy, and tradition, one where inclusion is not conditional on lineage or legitimacy, but anchored in shared humanity. **Recommendations:** This paper argues that Parliament has both a moral and constitutional obligation to address the structural barriers confronting these children, targeted legislative interventions, and culturally sensitive integration programs. It further recommends psychological healing and mental health interventions, educational support and livelihood empowerment, religious engagement and faith-based support, and inclusive national dialogues that centre these children as rightful stakeholders in Uganda's post-conflict future.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of armed conflict, societies worldwide confront not only physical devastation but also deep social and moral ruptures (Machel Report, 1996). This is starkly evident in Northern Uganda, where over two decades of violence by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) dismantled communities and traditional kinship systems. Among the most marginalised are children born in captivity, offspring of abducted women, subjected to sexual violence and reproductive coercion. Now, adolescents or young adults, many face legal invisibility, cultural exclusion, and institutional neglect (Off et al., 2022). Despite Uganda's adoption of the National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) in 2019 and legislative efforts like the 2024 Transitional Justice Bill, the specific needs of these children remain largely overlooked. Lacking birth certificates and national IDs, they are effectively stateless, denied access to education, land, and citizenship rights, similar to what Panelius (2025) observed in Ukraine. In patrilineal societies like the Acholi and Lango, lacking paternal ties or being linked to "rebel" fathers further excludes them from land, inheritance, and social belonging (Off et al., 2022).

While Parliament has initiated important policy steps, such as mandating cultural reintegration mechanisms and proposing legal reforms, these often subsume children born in captivity into broader categories, such as "victims of sexual violence" or "formerly abducted persons" (Cambridge ILJ, 2020). This obscures their distinct challenges around identity, lineage, and psychosocial wellbeing (ICTJ, 2023). Hence, recognising and addressing their needs is not only a moral obligation but a legal and democratic one. Tailored legislation is required to ensure birth registration, citizenship, education, psychosocial care, and land rights. By doing so, Parliament can move beyond symbolism to uphold restorative justice and build a more inclusive, peaceful Uganda.

### Background to the Study

#### *Conceptualising the Voices of Children Born in Captivity in Northern Uganda*

The notion of "voice" in post-conflict scholarship transcends mere verbal expression; it encapsulates identity, agency, visibility, and political recognition. For children born in captivity during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in Northern Uganda, voice is not simply about being heard. It is about being seen, known, and acknowledged as rightful members of society. These children are born of silenced histories: products of violence, forced marriage, and rape, often relegated to the margins of post-war reconstruction narratives (Denov & Lakor, 2017, p. 155; Apio, 2016, p. 178). Conceptualising their voices requires moving beyond traditional child-rights discourse and engaging with intersectional frameworks of trauma, identity, and belonging.

In much of Acholi society, social identity is constructed patrilineally through the father's lineage, clan, and name. For children born of rebel fathers, many of whom are absent, dead, or unnamed, their voice is interrupted at birth. They exist without clan recognition, legal identity, or the symbolic belonging that grants one place in the social order (Justice and Reconciliation Project [JRP], 2015, p. 3). Their silence is not always voluntary but structurally enforced

 

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through stigma, rejection, and legal erasure. As such, "voice lessness" becomes both a political and social condition (Lamony, 2022, p. 1).

However, these children are not merely passive victims of history. They possess experiential knowledge and emotional narratives that speak to loss, resilience, and the desire for inclusion. Studies show that many long to connect with their paternal roots, not to glorify war, but to resolve identity crises and secure access to land and belonging (Denov, Akello, & Atim, 2021, p. 9). Their quest to be named, documented, and heard is deeply tied to their sense of self-worth and future aspirations (Children's Geographies, 2022, p. 6).

Conceptually, their voice must be understood within frameworks of intergenerational justice and transitional justice. Intergenerational justice recognises the inherited effects of violence across generations, particularly where institutional neglect has compounded trauma and exclusion (Ahranjani, 2020, p. 413). Transitional justice, when inclusive, demands that post-conflict processes centre the experiences of all victims, especially those who were children during war and who now bear its social consequences (ICTJ, 2023, p. 2).

Amplifying the voices of children born in captivity, therefore, involves legal recognition, narrative inclusion, and social reintegration. It means creating spaces both institutional and communal, where their testimonies, needs, and aspirations are heard and responded to. It also requires legislative action, particularly by Parliament, to address legal invisibility, remove barriers to documentation, and challenge the normative assumptions that render these children "illegitimate" (Cambridge International Law Journal, 2020, p. 2).

In summary, conceptualising the voices of children born in captivity means recognising that their silence has been enforced, their agency undermined, and their stories untold. Restoring their voice is central to achieving holistic post-war justice and rebuilding a society that affirms the dignity of all its children.

### *Philosophical Lenses and Theoretical Frameworks*

Understanding and amplifying the voices of children born in captivity in Northern Uganda demands a multidisciplinary and ethically grounded theoretical approach. These children's lives are shaped by complex histories of violence, structural injustice, cultural rejection, and institutional silence. As such, this study draws from three primary philosophical and theoretical lenses: Critical Realism, Narrative Identity Theory, and Postcolonial Feminist Theory, each offering unique insights into their lived realities and the strategies necessary for justice and recognition.

#### 1. Critical Realism

Critical realism, as developed by Roy Bhaskar (1975), asserts that social reality exists independently of our perceptions but must be understood through the interplay of structures, mechanisms, and human agency. In the context of children born in captivity, this lens allows us to uncover the *deep structures,* such as patrilineal cultural norms, legal systems, and post-conflict state frameworks that perpetuate exclusion and silence. While surface-level narratives may depict these children as voiceless or deviant, critical realism urges us to interrogate the underlying generative mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1978, p. 34) that produce their marginalisation.

For instance, the rejection of these children is not merely cultural but is rooted in structural inequalities embedded in post-war systems such as identity laws, land tenure regimes, and clan-based citizenship. By applying a critical realist approach, the study exposes how these mechanisms continue to reproduce injustice even after the end of active conflict.

#### 2. Narrative Identity Theory

Narrative Identity Theory, developed by Paul Ricoeur and expanded by McAdams (1993), emphasises that individuals construct their

 

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identities through the stories they tell about themselves and the stories others tell about them. Children born in captivity in Northern Uganda frequently inhabit disrupted or contested narratives: their origins are stigmatised, their fathers demonised, and their mothers silenced (Denov & Lakor, 2017, p. 155). Their identities are narrated by society in ways that negate personhood, calling them *"children of the bush," "rebel blood,"* or *"Ogwang"* (wild cats).

By adopting this lens, the study explores how these children are denied narrative agency and how regaining the ability to define themselves through testimony, memory, and community acknowledgement is essential to post-conflict healing. Restoring their narrative identity involves creating platforms for storytelling, policy dialogue, and public truth-telling that centres their experiences (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 32).

**3. Postcolonial Feminist Theory**

Postcolonial feminist theory, building on thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, and Nira Yuval-Davis, provides a critical lens through which to interrogate how power, gender, and colonial legacies intersect in the lives of children born of war. This lens is particularly relevant because the mothers of these children, abducted girls and women, were doubly violated: first by the LRA and later by communities and state institutions that failed to reintegrate or recognise their suffering (Apio, 2016, p. 175; Baines, 2014, p. 406).

Children born of such violations inherit these layers of gendered and colonial violence. Postcolonial feminist theory challenges the Eurocentric framing of children as mere victims and instead views them as subjects of historical and political forces who can act, speak, and resist. It also calls for decolonising justice frameworks, ensuring that reintegration is not externally imposed but culturally relevant and community-driven (Spivak, 1988, p. 287; Mohanty, 2003, p. 510).

***Synthesis of Frameworks***

Together, these lenses provide a powerful interpretive framework:

- Critical realism helps uncover the structural roots of silence and exclusion.
- Narrative identity theory emphasises the importance of restoring agency through storytelling and self-definition.
- Postcolonial feminism insists on contextual justice, intersectionality, and the acknowledgement of gendered and colonial forms of oppression.

These theories collectively underscore that amplifying the voices of children born in captivity is not merely an act of representation. It is a radical restructuring of power, narrative, and justice in post-conflict societies**.**

**Problem Statement**

Children born in captivity during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) insurgency in Northern Uganda represent one of the most intensely marginalised groups in the country's post-conflict recovery. These children, born of abducted women subjected to forced marriages and sexual violence, suffer grave injustices, including social stigma, identity denial, land issues, marriage issues, lack of scholarship, and legal exclusion. Many lack birth certificates and national identification, effectively rendering them stateless and unable to access essential services such as education, land ownership, or political participation (Uganda Radio Network, 2024; Cambridge International Law Journal, 2020, p. 2).

Within Acholi patriarchal norms, identity and belonging are inherited through paternal lineage. Children fathered by unknown, deceased, or "rebel" LRA commanders are routinely denied clan membership and land inheritance (Lamony, 2022, p. 1). Such exclusion reinforces cycles of poverty and psychological trauma, compounding intergenerational marginalisation. Scholars describe this as cultural "identity denial," noting that some children are deemed bewitched or

 

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dangerous due to their forest birth origins (Lamony, 2022)

Although Uganda's Parliament passed the National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) in 2019 and introduced the Transitional Justice Bill in 2024, the unique vulnerabilities of children born in captivity (CBIC) remain largely ignored (ICTJ, 2023, p. 2). Policy frameworks often consider children born in captivity (CBIC) under broader victim categories, without addressing their specific needs for birth registration, psychosocial support, and clan and family integration (URN, 2022, p. 1; The Conversation, 2022, p. 2). This institutional silence perpetuates their exclusion from national discourse, limiting their political voice and societal participation.

Therefore, this paper is based on an urgent intervention that calls: the Parliament to develop targeted legislative mechanisms to amplify the voices of children born in captivity (CBIC), ensuring their full legal recognition, psychosocial rehabilitation, and social integration. Without such measures, these children are likely to remain invisible in Uganda's transitional justice architecture, undermining both constitutional commitments and international obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Origins and Captivity Experiences

The mass abductions of children during the LRA conflict remain among the most egregious human rights violations in recent African history. Estimates suggest that over 30,000 children were forcibly recruited between 1987 and 2008, subjected to brutal indoctrination, forced participation in violence, and sexual slavery. Female abductees were often assigned "husbands" among the rebel leadership, resulting in births inside captivity (Ochen et al., 2025).

### Forced Marriage, Reproductive Coercion and Childbirth

Forced marriages served multiple functions within LRA structures, control, reproduction, and logistics, with "wives" expected to bear children and perform domestic duties (Baines, 2014, p. 405; Apio, 2016, p. 174). Developed evidence highlights the deeply traumatic effect of such reproductive coercion, which not only stripped women of bodily autonomy but produced a generation of children whose very birth was rooted in violence (Akhavan, 2005, p. 406)

### Stigma, Identity Denial and Social Exclusion

Upon return, these children and their mothers confront profound social rejection. Research documents that mothers with children from captivity experience greater stigma than ex-combatants without children (Apio, 2016, p. 178). Field research in Gulu reveals that many conceal their identities to evade harassment. "They employ strategies to keep their identities secret" (JRP, 2015), and Stepfamily violence is common (*The New Humanitarian, 2015*).

### Land Access, Inheritance and Livelihoods

Patrilineal inheritance systems reinforce exclusion. Children whose fathers are unknown or deceased are denied land and clan belonging, key pillars of rural livelihoods (Lamony, 2022, p. 1; URN, 2020, p. 1). Displacement from land exacerbates poverty and dependency, undermining any prospect of stability.

### Policy and Parliamentary Engagement

While the 2019 National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP) outlines reparative frameworks, the literature critiques its failure to specifically address children born in captivity (Cambridge International Law Journal, 2020, p. 2). The Transitional Justice Bill of 2024 has yet to materialise into enforceable laws (Callers for legislation emphasise culturally sensitive integration via clan systems, ID reforms, and community reconciliation (The Conversation, 2022).

### Synthesis and Gaps

While scholarly consensus centres on the structural and cultural exclusion of children born in captivity, manifest in statelessness, stigma, and psychosocial vulnerability, existing policy and legislation are insufficiently responsive.

 

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Parliament has laid the groundwork with national policy and proposed legislation, but has yet to translate these into gendered, child-centred, enforceable frameworks. Integration programs remain under-resourced and narrowly focused, leaving the distinct group of war-born children largely invisible.

### Implications for the Current Study

This study seeks to fill critical gaps by examining parliamentary as well as community-level mechanisms to elevate the voices and rights of children born in captivity. It advocates for specific legal amendments to birth registration, clan Integration, land rights, educational access, and psychosocial care. Crucially, it proposes establishing community-led reconciliation platforms to dismantle stigma and codify rights in law and practice.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, participatory research design aimed at exploring and amplifying the voices of children born in captivity during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict in Northern Uganda. It integrated narrative inquiry with a participatory future-oriented tool known as the Future Workshop (FW) to foreground the voices, agency, and aspirations of these individuals.

### Study Area and Participants

The research was conducted in 6 districts of Northern Uganda: Agago, Pader, Kitgum, Amuru, Lira and Gulu districts that were heavily affected by the LRA insurgency and where many children were born in rebel captivity. Participants included individuals born in captivity between 1987 and 2006 to mothers abducted by the LRA, most of whom are now aged 18 to 32 years. Additional respondents included their mothers, community elders, religious leaders, teachers, local government officials, and civil society representatives.

### Sampling and Recruitment

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify initial participants based on predefined criteria, including being born in captivity, currently residing in the selected districts, and willing to share their narratives. Snowball sampling was then employed to reach additional participants through referrals. Overall, the study engaged:

- 15 in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) with children born in captivity,
- 4 key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders, and
- 2 focus group discussions (FGDs), one in each district of Acholi and Lango

### Data Collection Methods

#### *In-depth Interviews (IDIs):*

Semi-structured interview guides were used to elicit personal narratives focusing on identity, belonging, stigma, access to education and services, and future aspirations. Interviews were conducted in Acholi and Lango and later translated into English.

#### *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):*

FGDs provided space for shared dialogue and collective reflection among children born in captivity. Each group consisted of 6-8 participants. Discussions explored community dynamics, integration challenges, and coping strategies.

#### *Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):*

KIIs offered contextual and policy insights from stakeholders, including local leaders, religious leaders, and NGO staff. These interviews helped bridge micro-level experiences with meso- and macro-level structures.

#### *Document Review:*

To contextualise the field data, a desk review of relevant literature was conducted, including transitional justice policies, NGO reports, and academic texts on children born of war, post-conflict recovery, and social reintegration in Uganda.

 

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**Participatory Tool: Future Workshop Approach**

To deepen engagement and promote co-creation, a Future Workshop method (Jungk & Müllert, 1987) was integrated into the data collection. The workshop was structured into three phases:

- **Critique Phase:** Participants were invited to express grievances and reflect on social injustices, stigma, and exclusions they faced. This phase offered a therapeutic and collective space to articulate pain and marginalisation.
- **Fantasy Phase**: Participants envisioned an ideal world where they were fully accepted, supported, and empowered. Creative modalities such as drawing, storytelling, and group role-plays were used to unlock imaginative thinking and unearth suppressed aspirations.
- **Implementation Phase**: Participants collaboratively developed ideas and proposed community-based interventions to support identity recognition, psychosocial healing, and policy inclusion. The resulting ideas were locally grounded and future-oriented, reflecting the agency of participants.

Each workshop lasted one full day and was co-facilitated by trained psychosocial support staff and researchers familiar with the local context.

**Data Analysis**

All interviews and group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurrent patterns and meanings. Data coding was both inductive and deductive, with themes emerging from participants' narratives and guided by existing literature. Outputs from the Future Workshops, drawings, maps, and narratives were also analysed as textual and visual data to complement and enrich the thematic findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with additional assent for those below 18 years. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used and data were securely stored. The study applied trauma-informed practices, and participants in need of emotional support were referred to trained counsellors. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the voices of children born in captivity during the LRA insurgency, organized around five major themes that emerged from the data: (1) Crisis of Identity and Belonging; (2) Stigma and Social Exclusion; (3) Structural Marginalization; (4) Psychological and Intergenerational Trauma; and (5) Aspirations and the Power of Voice.

**Crisis of Identity and Belonging**

A dominant theme was the existential crisis of identity, especially among those who lacked knowledge of their paternity or clan affiliation. In Acholi culture, clan identity is central to personhood, belonging, and access to land and marriage. Many respondents expressed being "clanless" or "unrooted," leading to profound social alienation.

> *I have never known my father. My mother said he died while they were still in the bush. But without knowing my clan, I feel like I have no place to belong. When people ask me, 'Who is your father?' I have nothing to say. It feels as though I'm drifting through life without roots. (R001)*

This absence of a paternal identity contributes to emotional disorientation and legal exclusion. Without official documentation, many children born in captivity are not recognised by the state or local cultural structures.

> *After coming back from captivity, I had no official name or identification. I wasn't able to enrol in school because of it. People told me I didn't belong, and even the local council*

 

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*officer declined to endorse my documents." (R002).*

***Cultural Tensions: The Clash Between Tradition and War Realities***

Cultural leaders expressed deep concern about how children born in captivity disrupt customary definitions of identity and belonging, particularly in relation to clan affiliation, inheritance, and lineage.

> *In Acholi tradition, a child is expected to have both a father and a clan. Without these, it's like a tree that has no roots. These children disrupt our customs because they come back without knowing their fathers, and we struggle to find their rightful place, but Acholi People and the Langi are good people, in case a mother comes back with a child without a father, the family of the mother had to take the responsibility to taking care of that child in case a mother got married again to another man and also the portion of the land belonging to the mother would be given to that male child" explained by a cultural leader from Pader district. (R003)*

Another Cultural leader of Kitgum district acknowledged the growing tension between cultural expectations and humanitarian realities.

> *Our customs were not prepared for this kind of war. Some elders still refuse to accept these children into clans, but we must evolve. The war was not their fault. (R004)*

The findings suggest a growing, if slow, willingness among some traditional institutions to reconsider rigid norms, but the inertia of cultural gatekeeping remains a significant barrier to reintegration.

**Stigma and Social Exclusion**

Stigma was a recurring and painful part of participants' narratives. Many respondents reported being mocked, ostracised, or labelled with derogatory terms such as "Ajwaka" (sorcerer), "Ogwang" (wildcat), or "child of Kony."

> *People refer to me as 'Ogwang.' Means "(Wild cat"), They say I was born in the bush and carry a curse with an unknown spirit. Even at school, the other students keep their distance from me. I felt lonely and deserted (R005),* a 19-year-old from the Pader district.

The inherited stigma extends not only to the children but also to their mothers, many of whom are seen as having been "spoiled" or spiritually contaminated. This intergenerational rejection limits access to marriage, inheritance, and even communal rituals. As (R006) male noted:

> "*I fell in love with a girl, but her parents refused the relationship. They said they couldn't let their daughter marry someone born of a rebel, fearing I might bring bad luck to their family".*

Such experiences reveal how war stigma persists beyond physical conflict, operating through social memory and cultural taboos.

***Religious Interpretation: Between Redemption and Silence***

Religious leaders offered both empathetic and critical perspectives. While churches and mosques are often safe spaces for healing, some inadvertently contribute to stigma through silence or moral ambiguity.

A Catholic priest in Gulu City shared:

> *While we teach forgiveness and compassion, the church has fallen short in truly addressing the suffering of these children. Although they are baptised, their struggles are seldom openly acknowledged or discussed." Some of the places of worship have become places of money-making instead of helping people, losing the meaning of Christianity. The church has the capacity to do their part for these children, but some are doing but most of them are not doing the needful for these children, instead, they are more vulnerable - (R007).*

On the other hand, a Muslim leader in Gulu emphasised divine equality:

 

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> "*Allah does not judge a child by the sins of the parent. These children are innocent. They must be protected. We encourage families to welcome them, but some still struggle due to cultural taboos."*

The tension between spiritual acceptance and practical social discrimination reveals the need for faith communities to move beyond abstract teachings toward active inclusion and advocacy.

**Structural Marginalisation and Legal Invisibility:**

The findings also revealed a pattern of structural exclusion from education, health care, and national services due to a lack of official identity.

*"I never got a birth certificate, and worst of all, never registered for a national ID card. Because I had no information concerning my origin and my parent. Without that, I couldn't sit for PLE [Primary Leaving Examinations]. I begged the headmaster, but he said rules are rules,"* recalled Female (R008), 23, who now survives by selling vegetables in Gulu City.

This exclusion from formal systems perpetuates cycles of poverty and invisibility. Respondents also expressed frustration over the lack of targeted government programs: *"The government often speaks about supporting those who were abducted, but they overlook us, the children born in captivity. It's as if we don't even exist in their records.* "Said Male (R009), aged 27.

The bureaucratic denial of their status reflects a deeper failure of transitional justice frameworks to address complex identities shaped by wartime sexual violence and forced unions.

**Psychological and Intergenerational Trauma**

The psychological toll of being born in captivity, combined with daily experiences of discrimination, has left many respondents in a state of internal conflict, depression, or even suicidal ideation. Several described themselves as emotionally withdrawn or fearful of relationships.

> *"There are times I feel something is wrong with me. I become angry easily and tend to isolate myself. I'm even afraid of marriage because I worry that I might transfer this pain to my future children.","* shared by Female (R010), aged 22 - Amuru District

Mothers, too, carry trauma and guilt. In some cases, they concealed the child's identity out of fear and shame:

*"For a long time, I told others he was the son of my deceased husband. I was afraid people would ridicule him if they found out he was born during my time in captivity,"* confessed (R011), a mother from Lapul sub-county-Pader District.

This silencing creates emotional distance and hinders healing within families. The trauma, often unacknowledged, is thus transmitted across generations, forming a silent legacy of war.

***Voices of Mothers: Guilt, Survival, and Protection***

Mothers of children born in captivity offered raw and emotional testimonies. They carry a **double burden**: personal trauma from abduction and stigma surrounding their children.

*"I was compelled to marry a rebel leader. After I managed to escape, I returned with a baby. People labelled me as someone who had brought back a 'wild child.' For many years, I chose to remain silent,"* shared a mother (R012), from the Patongo town council-Agago District

Another mother said she concealed the child's background for safety:

> *I told others he was the son of my deceased husband because I was afraid he might face mistreatment. Even now, some neighbours still refer to him as 'Kony's son,' and it causes me great pain because my son could hear people in the village talking badly about us and he always comes home in the evening and asks me mummy, tell me the truth about what I'm hearing from the community. (R013)*

Yet, some mothers have found strength in advocacy:

 

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> *I became part of a women's group and began sharing my story. Through this, I found peace, and my son realised he wasn't alone. Opening up brought healing to both of us. Now I am very free in the community with my children because both of us have accepted the truth, and we cannot run away from the truth (R014)*

Their narratives reveal the intergenerational nature of stigma and silence, but also the healing power of support networks and voice.

**Aspirations and the Power of Voice (Future Workshop Outcomes)**

Despite the burden of war, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and a hunger to be heard, seen, and recognised. Through the Future Workshops, respondents imagined transformed futures. They envisioned:

- Community dialogues to reduce stigma
- Legal campaigns to obtain national identification
- Peer-led storytelling platforms to share experiences
- Scholarship programs specifically for children born in captivity

*"My dream is to become a lawyer so I can stand up for others like me, those who have been neglected and left behind,"* said a male (R015), aged 20, during a Future Workshop session in Gulu City.

Participants emphasised that amplifying their voices was not merely about being heard. It was about reclaiming space, dignity, and opportunity. The workshops became spaces of release and co-creation, allowing individuals to move from victims of circumstance to agents of transformation.

***Civil Society as the Safety Net***

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have become the **de facto first responders** to the needs of children born in captivity. From legal aid to trauma counselling, their efforts often fill the void left by state institutions.

"*We've assisted more than 100 children in obtaining identity documents and accessing psychosocial care. However, our resources are limited, and it's time for the government to take full responsibility,"* explained a project officer with a Gulu-based CSO. (R016)

Another activist from a youth peacebuilding network stressed the need for platforms that amplify these children's voices:

> *"We must let them speak for themselves. Too many interventions talk about them, not with them. We need safe spaces for expression, storytelling, and leadership." (R017)*

CSOs are not only service providers but also key advocates pushing for legal and cultural recognition of this neglected population.

**Synthesis and Implications**

The findings underscore the multidimensional marginalisation faced by children born in captivity: cultural, legal, psychological, and socio-economic. Their invisibility in state systems, traditional structures, and transitional justice mechanisms reveals critical gaps in post-conflict recovery. Yet, the participatory engagement through Future Workshops illustrates the power of voice in restoring dignity, creating solidarity, and imagining alternative futures.

If these voices remain unheard, the wounds of war will continue to fester across generations. However, when given a platform, these same voices can become pillars of healing, advocacy, and nation-building.

## CONCLUSIONS

The stories shared by children born in captivity, their mothers, and various community stakeholders point to a painful but undeniable truth: these children have long existed in the margins of society, silenced by stigma, cultural rigidity, and policy neglect. As one of the Rwot noted, the absence of paternal identity and clan affiliation leaves these individuals "like trees without roots," challenging the very foundation of Acholi social structure. This sentiment echoes throughout the testimonies from religious leaders

 

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acknowledging the church's failure to openly address this reality, to mothers who carried years of silence and fear to protect their children from being labelled "wild" or "cursed."

At the policy level, the voices of one of the policy makers confirm that the issue of children born in captivity remains an overlooked category in national development plans and post-conflict frameworks. They are excluded not only from bureaucratic systems like civil registration and education access, but also from symbolic recognition within Uganda's transitional justice discourse. As one mother painfully recalled, "I told people he was my late husband's son" just to shield her child from social harm, a statement that encapsulates the emotional labour mothers continue to bear.

Yet amidst the pain and exclusion, this study also uncovered a quiet but powerful resistance. From the resilience of a mother who found peace through sharing in a women's group, to the aspirations of a young man who dreams of becoming a lawyer to "fight for people like me," these narratives reveal that voice is not just about being heard, it is about reclaiming identity, space, and dignity. One of the Civil society actors who has helped hundreds obtain identity papers despite limited resources highlights the importance of partnership and grassroots intervention. However, as she stressed, "the government must take ownership."

Thus, amplifying these voices is not an act of charity; it is a moral and historical obligation. It requires a collective reimagining of community, policy, and tradition, one where inclusion is not conditional on lineage or legitimacy but anchored in shared humanity. If Uganda is to heal the wounds of its past and uphold the promise of justice for all, then the stories of children born in captivity must not only be heard, they must shape the future.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcomes of this study reveal critical shortcomings in how children born in captivity during the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict are acknowledged, protected, and supported within Uganda. Although their suffering originates from the conflict era, its effects persist today, evident in the continued discrimination, absence from legal frameworks, and mental health struggles. The following proposals are intended to guide policymakers, traditional and religious leaders, civil society actors, and development partners toward building a more inclusive and equitable system of care and recognition.

### Access to Legal Identity and Documentation

A significant number of children born during captivity do not possess essential identity documents such as birth certificates or national IDs, which restricts access to services including education, health, land ownership, and employment:

- The Government of Uganda, through the National Identification and Registration Authority (NIRA), should roll out mobile legal aid and documentation outreach programs in former conflict zones to support registration efforts for these children.
- Local authorities should receive both the training and financial capacity to implement customary verification systems, involving affidavits from elders and local council leaders, especially where traditional parental information is unavailable.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs should issue an official policy directive that acknowledges children born in captivity as a vulnerable group entitled to prioritised and simplified documentation procedures.

### Integration into National Policies and Justice Processes.

These children remain largely invisible in national recovery plans and are not formally included in Uganda's transitional justice structure.

- The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, working in tandem with the Uganda Human Rights Commission, should formally incorporate children born of conflict into the

 

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implementation of the National Transitional Justice Policy.

- They must be specifically referenced in compensation programs, truth-telling exercises, and national memorial efforts as direct victims of wartime abuses.
- The Ministry of Gender, Labor and Social Development should recognise them under existing social support mechanisms, such as programs for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs).

**Psychosocial Healing and Mental Health Interventions**

Many children and youth born in captivity suffer from unresolved trauma and inherited shame, which is rarely addressed due to stigma and limited mental health infrastructure.

- Expand community-based mental health services, including trauma counselling and psychosocial support, especially in schools, local clinics, and youth centres.
- Equip social workers and counsellors with culturally responsive training to address conflict-related psychological wounds, particularly those linked to stigma and social exclusion.
- Encourage the formation of survivor-led peer support networks, such as healing circles for mothers and children, where stories can be shared safely and recovery processes supported.

**Educational Support and Livelihood Empowerment**

Due to poverty, lack of documentation, and social barriers, many of these children miss out on formal education and training opportunities.

- Create targeted bursaries and sponsorship schemes to support the education of children born in captivity, to be coordinated by district education offices and non-governmental organisations.
- Introduce flexible learning pathways and vocational skills programs for young people who were excluded from conventional schooling due to conflict-related disruptions.
- Establish clear pathways to youth employment, including access to entrepreneurship grants, apprenticeships, and work-readiness training, enabling long-term independence and social inclusion.

**Cultural Recognition and Traditional Inclusion**

Traditional clan systems often struggle to accept children whose paternal identities are unknown or who are associated with rebel origins.

- Traditional leadership institutions, including Ker Kwaro Acholi, should organise community forums and reintegration rituals that embrace these children as rightful members of society, irrespective of their origins.
- Promote the adaptation and respectful revival of customary ceremonies such as *Nyono tong Gwenno* (stepping on the egg) in ways that heal rather than exclude.
- Support cultural mentorship initiatives where elders pass down heritage, identity, and values in affirming ways that connect youth to their roots.

**Religious Engagement and Faith-Based Support**

Faith institutions have often remained hesitant or vague when addressing the condition of children born in captivity.

- Churches and mosques should actively promote inclusion by addressing the dignity of these children in sermons, teachings, and outreach messages, countering beliefs that associate them with evil or misfortune.
- Set up structured faith-based guidance programs that offer mentorship, spiritual counselling, and identity support, especially for adolescents struggling with belonging.

 

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- Leverage religious spaces as safe havens for storytelling, dialogue, and emotional support, especially for mothers who have lived with silence and fear for years.

**Public Education and Anti-Stigma Campaigns**

Negative perceptions and misinformation continue to fuel discrimination against these children in communities and schools.

- Launch culturally sensitive awareness campaigns using community radio, drama, storytelling, and school-based forums to counteract harmful labels like "Kony's child" or "child of the bush."
- Train journalists, teachers, and local leaders to handle these issues with empathy, language sensitivity, and respect for the dignity of affected persons.
- Promote inclusive values in school systems by integrating peace education and anti-discrimination training into school policies and classroom practice.

**Youth Participation and Leadership Development**

Children born in captivity are rarely given opportunities to represent themselves or shape the decisions that affect their lives.

- Facilitate platforms such as youth-led forums, digital storytelling spaces, Docu-Dance theatre performance, and national dialogues where these individuals can safely share their experiences and aspirations.
- Actively include youth born of war in peacebuilding programs, commemorative events, and policy discussions at both local and national levels.
- Provide long-term leadership mentorship, especially in fields like advocacy, law, education, and media, to support their transformation from survivors to societal change agents.

**Closing Reflection on the Recommendations**

For far too long, children born in captivity have lived in the shadows, excluded from systems that define citizenship, justice, and community. The recommendations presented here offer not only practical solutions but a call for collective responsibility and societal transformation. True healing and reconciliation demand that these children are not just acknowledged but actively included in stories, in systems, and in shaping Uganda's path forward. Their visibility must not be optional, it is essential, grounded in their humanity and enshrined in the promise of justice.

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