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Listening to Youth: The Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda

(Report to contributors)

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children



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Mission Statement

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents. We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection. We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced. We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions. We join with refugee women, children and adolescents to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest councils of governments and international organizations. We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children was established in 1989 to address the particular needs of refugee and displaced women and children. The Women's Commission is legally part of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. The Women's Commission receives no direct financial support from the IRC.

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Jenny Perlman Robinson, protection program officer, and Juliet Young, consultant, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. It was edited and designed by Diana Quick, director of communications.

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© Photographs by Juliet Young.

This *Report to Contributors* aims to inform the young people who contributed to this study of the findings and how the Women's Commission is using the information to advocate on behalf of young people in northern Uganda. It is also a tool for young people to advocate on their own behalf. We developed this *Report to Contributors* in response to the suggestion of many contributors, who reminded us of the importance that they know and understand how the information they share in focus groups and interviews is used by those conducting research. We welcome feedback on this report, especially from the young people who supported us by sharing their ideas, perspectives and opinions.

Who are we?

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children is a nongovernmental organization based in the United States. We are an advocacy organization: we work with governments, United Nations (UN) organizations and international relief organizations. We make sure these agencies think about the rights, safety and well-being of women, children and young people when they develop programs. We do not implement or provide funding directly to programs to support women, children or youth. Instead, our work contributes to long-term solutions to the problems facing displaced people.

Why did we come to northern Uganda?

With support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Women's Commission came to northern Uganda to hear directly from young people about their perspectives on the conflict that has affected their lives. We wanted to learn from young people their ideas and opinions on:

- the consequences of the conflict on their lives and well-being;
- how they cope with the challenges they face;
- whether, and how, they participate in programs and decision-making;
- the peace and reconciliation process, and whether and how they are represented; and
- their recommendations for the local, national and international community.

This research contributes to a larger United Nations study on the impact of armed conflict on youth, which UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will present to the UN General Assembly in October 2007. The international community will use this global study to provide better support to young people living in conflict-affected regions.

The Women's Commission will also share what we learned directly with the United States government, the Government of Uganda, donors and other humanitarian and development agencies, so that they can better serve and protect young people in northern Uganda.

This study is part of the Women's Commission's ongoing work to increase attention and support for youth in northern Uganda. In 2001, the Women's Commission conducted a participatory research study in which 54 adolescent researchers in Kitgum, Gulu and Pader interviewed their peers about the challenges they face and their aspirations. The Women's Commission published their findings in a report *Against All Odds: Surviving the War on Adolescents*. After the 2001 study, the Women's Commission continued to partner with four youth groups in the region. Several members of those youth groups participated in this current initiative. This study provided an opportunity to learn more about the long-term impact of participatory research as a method for engaging young people in research, advocacy and decision-making.



What did we do during our visit?

From May 3 to 17, 2007, two representatives from the Women's Commission, Jenny Perlman Robinson and Juliet Young conducted 16 focus group meetings with more than 200 young women and men in and around Kitgum and Gulu. They also interviewed representatives from the Government of Uganda, UN agencies and international and local nongovernmental organizations in Gulu, Kitgum and Kampala.



What did young people tell us about how the conflict has affected their lives?

Consequences of the conflict

Young people shared the following concerns about how the conflict has affected them:



- Education is their priority concern, and the solution to the many challenges they face.
- The lack of opportunities to earn a safe and dignified income to support themselves and their families is also a huge concern. Many identified exploitation and abuse, poor health and hygiene and lack of food as a direct result of their inability to earn any income.
- Sexual abuse and exploitation are widespread.
- Food rations are inadequate.
- Some formerly abducted children experience stigmatization by other community members.
- Traditional cultural norms have been undermined by more than 20 years of conflict and displacement, and young people wish to restore their Acholi culture. In particular, a "culture of dependency" (upon international agencies) has emerged among people in the north, which contrasts with the traditional value of self-sufficiency.

Emerging concerns

Young people stated that while the transition to peace is promising, they are concerned about the following challenges:

- Now that large numbers of people are moving to villages or satellite camps (smaller camps located closer to home villages), children are increasingly being left alone in the original internally displaced persons (IDP) camps to continue accessing services, such as schools, while older family members return home to prepare the land.
- They, and their families, may face challenges or conflicts in acquiring or reclaiming land and reintegrating into their families' villages of origin.
- If a peace treaty is signed, this may lead to a drop in international funding and support from "relief" agencies and organizations. A reduction in this support could leave the people of northern Uganda vulnerable to risks as they begin the uncertain transition from conflict to post-conflict return home.

Recent progress

Young people noted the following improvements in their lives:

- Security in the region has improved significantly. Of particular relevance to the lives of young people is the dramatic reduction in abductions by the rebel forces known as the Lord's Resistance Army.
- Families are exploring the possibility of returning home, although there are associated risks.
- "Night commuting" has all but ceased; previously an estimated 40,000 children and youth were "commuting"

to town centers each night to avoid abduction.

- Young people participating in programs aimed at reintegration appear to be adjusting well.

Interviews with young people and representatives of government, donor agencies and humanitarian organizations indicated that the following positive developments have occurred:

- Sensitization campaigns, for example, those on good health and hygiene practices, appear to have been effective.
- Young men and women are active in addressing community problems.
- NGOs, UN and government agencies appear to recognize and value the importance of youth participation.
- The humanitarian community in northern Uganda is also learning from past experience of "targeting" formerly abducted children or other categories of people for services which contributed to stigmatization. Today, organizations are moving toward more inclusive programming to reduce tension and discrimination in local communities.

Coping strategies

Young people described the following strategies they, and their families, employ to cope with the challenges they face. Some of these strategies are more constructive while others may result in additional risks.

- Forming and belonging to youth groups help them to address multiple needs, including companionship and support, and the opportunity to develop new skills.
- Religion plays an important role in the lives of many. Young people often referenced God and religious institutions as a source of comfort and strength.
- Young people who participated in the Women's Commission's 2001 participatory research on the needs and potential contributions of young people developed critical thinking, research and advocacy skills, and increased confidence and commitment to their communities.
- Young people preserve their cultural heritage by learning and performing traditional music, dance and drama. These activities are also used as vehicles to raise awareness and address challenges such as HIV/AIDS prevention and conflict resolution.
- Parents leave younger family members unattended for extended periods of time, as a strategy for preparing for resettlement in a period when prospects for sustainable peace and land reclamation are uncertain.
- Parents or relatives encourage some young girls to get married for the dowry payment and to reduce the household's responsibilities.
- Transactional sex among girls appears to be widespread and spans the spectrum from prostitution or payment for services to sex for favors, such as material possessions.
- Alcohol abuse is prevalent and drug abuse was also mentioned.
- Some families use the defilement law (which prohibits sexual relations with a girl under 18) as an economic strategy to receive a "bride price" from the families of boys convicted under this law.



Peace and Reconciliation

Young people demonstrated awareness of the peace talks between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Government of Uganda underway in Juba, Southern Sudan at the time of this study. They expressed the following opinions about the peace process:

- They have had little opportunity to participate in the proceedings.
- Displaced and formerly abducted young people felt that they should be represented in the negotiations, as they have been most directly affected by the conflict.



Participation

Interviews with young people and representatives of government, donor agencies and humanitarian organizations indicated that:

- International and local NGOs, UN and government agencies are involving youth in their programs in a variety of ways, not only as beneficiaries of their services, but also in roles such as youth counselors and peer educators.
- What is clear is that young people are participating in activities; what isn't clear is the extent that young people are participating in decision-making.
- There are significant differences in how young people participate, who participates and to what end across agencies, organizations and programs.
- The significant potential of youth organizations to empower young people and include them in community decision-making is not fully realized. Youth organizations appear to represent the most prevalent forms of participation. However, most youth organizations lack adequate funding and capacity for innovative, appropriate planning.

What did young people recommend that the local, national and international community should do to help them improve their lives and communities?

- **Increase and sustain support to their communities**, even and especially if a transition to peace begins.
- **Support them in achieving the highest level of formal education possible**, which will require catch-up classes and bridging programs for young people who have missed years of school.
- **Support them in obtaining safe, dignified and sufficient sources of income**. All economic programs should build on affected populations' existing skills, match local market needs and lead to sustainable income. Careful planning is needed to ensure that young women have access to training and learning opportunities, such as providing child care and flexible hours.
- **Take immediate action to prevent and appropriately respond to sexual exploitation and abuse**. This includes ensuring that women and girls have safe access to water, food, fuel, sanitation and income generation opportunities. Health care workers should be trained to provide comprehensive clinical care to survivors of rape and sexual abuse.
- **Support youth-friendly health services in IDP camps and home villages, which may include flexible hours, recreational activities and peer counselors**, such as the Gulu Youth Center.
- **Provide more financial and technical support to youth organizations**, as the institutions that most effectively and comprehensively address their priority needs. One way is for donors to contribute to the *Fund for War-Affected Children and Youth in Northern Uganda*, which was started by the MacArthur Foundation and provides small, flexible grants for local projects with an emphasis on education and skills building for youth.
- **Provide young people with more opportunities to participate in decision-making about issues that affect their lives**.

What will the Women's Commission do now?

The Women's Commission will share these findings and recommendations with governments, donors, the United Nations and international aid agencies. We will encourage them to use these recommendations as they make decisions about funding and develop programs to support young people in northern Uganda and other conflict-affected areas.

We have already taken the following steps:

- We submitted a report of what we learned from this trip to the United Nations Machel Strategic Review Committee. As a result, the experiences and opinions of youth in northern Uganda are included in the United Nations discussions on how to better serve all young people in conflict-affected areas.
- We presented our research to donors and agencies in Uganda and the United States to promote our recommendations as they allocate their funds and improve their programs for young people in northern Uganda and other conflict-affected areas.
- We have met with individual international aid agencies to discuss how they can use our findings and recommendations to make their education and income generating programs in northern Uganda even more effective.
- We have met with grant-making foundations to encourage them to provide technical and financial support to youth organizations in northern Uganda.
- At a conference in New York on internally displaced persons in peace and reconciliation, we shared our recommendation that youth should be included in peace negotiations. Uganda's ambassador to the United Nations and other political leaders participated in this discussion.

What can you do if you want to learn more, or be involved with our work?

For a copy of the complete report, *Listening to Youth: The Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda*, visit: http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug_machel.pdf.

For a copy of the report of the participatory research study conducted by youth in northern Uganda in 2001, visit: <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/ug.pdf>

If you want to learn more about the Women's Commission's advocacy on behalf of displaced women, children and youth, visit our website at: www.womenscommission.org or contact us at:

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We encourage anyone interested in this research, or in the situation of young people in northern Uganda, to share your thoughts with us. We especially welcome comments, suggestions or feedback on this report from all of the people in northern Uganda who contributed to this study.

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