

Violence against women in Northern Uganda

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"When we were given to our husbands we were expected to have sex with them. I was only 10 years old when I was handed over. For days after I was sexually abused. The first time I felt a lot of pain because he was too big. He told me he was nearly forty years old. I felt so bad because I was still young, but I had to accept to sleep with him. I was afraid that if I refused he would carry out his threat to kill me. I had no love for that man."

Filda Ayet was ten years old when the Lord's Resistance Army abducted her from her home in Pabbo's Camp for internally displaced people, 24 kilometres from the town of Gulu in northern Uganda. She spent over four years in captivity before finally escaping in February 2005.

In Uganda's north, Philda's story is all too familiar. The LRA has abducted thousands of women and girls over the course of a nineteen-year conflict that has brutalized the country's Acholi and Lango communities.

Girls as young as 8 years old have been taken into the bush where they are indoctrinated into the ways of Joseph Kony – the LRA's leader and self-proclaimed prophet. Girls are used as domestic slaves, raped and assigned as "wives". They can be allocated from line-ups, selected by commanders or given the chance to choose their own "husband" by picking out his shirt from a pile on the ground.

Sexual violence against women and girls is rife in the bush. They live in fear, fall victim to frequent beatings and face the risk of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. At least 85% of girls who arrived at the Gulu trauma center for former LRA abductees contracted sexually transmitted diseases during their captivity, according to the United Nations.

The only way to avoid violence is to follow orders. Philda can not forget the day her commander told her he had a special job for her to complete:

"The first time I killed was when I was sent to Lira District. I was told to put a baby in a large pounding mortar and kill it. My commander handed me a large wooden pestle used for pounding grain. I felt so bad when he gave me the order. I was terrified because I knew, if I did not follow the order, I would be killed. So I did as I was told. Killing at the start was difficult, but it became easy when I got used to it. I still have nightmares about the bad things I did in the bush."

Allegations of sexual abuse in northern Uganda are not confined to within the LRA. Uganda's army -- the Ugandan People's Defence Force -- has been accused of serious human rights abuses against women.

"Susan" [not her real name] spoke softly; her eyes fixed on her feet as she recalled the moment six UPDF soldiers seized her from the Awere Trading Centre in Pader district on 2 May 2005. She says she was taken to the 5th Infantry Battalion's barracks in Awere. One of the soldiers told her she was to become his wife.

"There were other young girls at the barracks whilst I was there. Sometimes three or four soldiers would sexually abuse a girl together. I never had that because the soldier wanted me to be his wife. He said he would shoot my mother and I dead if I didn't agree. The soldiers beat me terribly when they caught me trying to escape. I feel very bitter about it all. He should be jailed... but, instead, they are trying to fabricate a case against me for stealing an army uniform."

"Susan" now faces an anxious three-month wait before she can take a blood test to reveal whether she's been infected with HIV.

The conflict in the north of Uganda has forced 80% of the region's population to flee their villages and seek security in camps for internally displaced people. Families have been stripped of their wealth. Men have lost their livelihoods and with them their dignity. With the rhythms of traditional village life broken, Acholi and Langi elders complain of a surge in alcoholism, sexual promiscuity and rape.

Hunger and sheer desperation leave women vulnerable to exploitation. An increasing numbers of young girls are turning to prostitution -- comparatively wealthy mobile army units are their best paying customers. Impoverished parents now marry off their daughters as soon as they reach their early teens, desperate to raise money to buy food and pay school fees.

Archbishop John Baptist Odama, head of the Catholic diocese in Gulu, calls it "loose living". Women, he says, in their state of hopelessness are falling prey to sexual immorality. An estimated 12% of the north's population is HIV positive -- twice the national average -- but many suspect the true figure to be far higher.

In 2003, a Human Rights Watch report stated that a growing number of Ugandan women were dying from AIDS related deaths because "the (Ugandan) state is failing to protect them from domestic violence." For many women, domestic violence is not an isolated act. Sister Margaret, who heads Caritas' trauma counseling service, says that wives are especially vulnerable because husbands regard them as "property".

"Women, especially in rural areas, think it is acceptable for a man to be violent against her. Some even feel that if their husbands do not beat them then it means they no longer want them. They think beating is a sign of love. Because there is normally a dowry, husbands believe they own their wives. But you can not buy a human being. You can not compare her to a piece of cloth."

Survivors of domestic violence often do not come forward and their suffering goes unnoticed. Uganda lacks specific laws that provide women with any meaningful protection from domestic violence.

The Ugandan government is currently considering a draft Domestic Relations Bill. As it stands, the new legislation would outlaw polygamy and payment of a "bride-price". Human rights groups believe that this would go some way to rectifying the imbalance.

Editor's Note: Since this article was written, parliament has asked for more work on the Bill and it is not expected to be passed before elections in March 2006.

This article was written by an outside contributor and does not necessarily reflect Amnesty International policy.