

"I am free from the conflict now, but I do not feel free": The experiences of child soldiers in Northern Uganda

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This comic documents the voices of 27 former child soldiers living in Gulu district, Northern Uganda, who were forcibly recruited into the Ugandan conflict, serving under the Lord's Resistance Army. These voices comprise of 19 women, and 8 men. This gender balance has been chosen to provide greater attention to the lived experiences of girls and women, whose realities are often missing within narratives of child soldiery. The war officially ended in the region in 2006, but for many of those who participated in the conflict the memories of captivity are still very vivid, and post-conflict life remains to be a struggle, even today.

Each panel in this comic presents direct quotes from former child soldiers, reflecting on an aspect of their experience. The purpose of this project is to provide a new narrative which is inclusive of the voices of former child soldiers in a way which humanises them and their experiences, to allow for the deconstruction of many of the existing negative stereotypes which surround them. It will be widely distributed, both within and outside of Uganda, and we hope it will be utilised by academics, researchers, journalists, NGO workers and others who write about child soldiers to highlight the importance of including the voices of survivors in your work but also to reflect on how the language used in discourse can affect the realities of former child soldiers.

- Jassi K. Sandhar & Geoffrey Omony



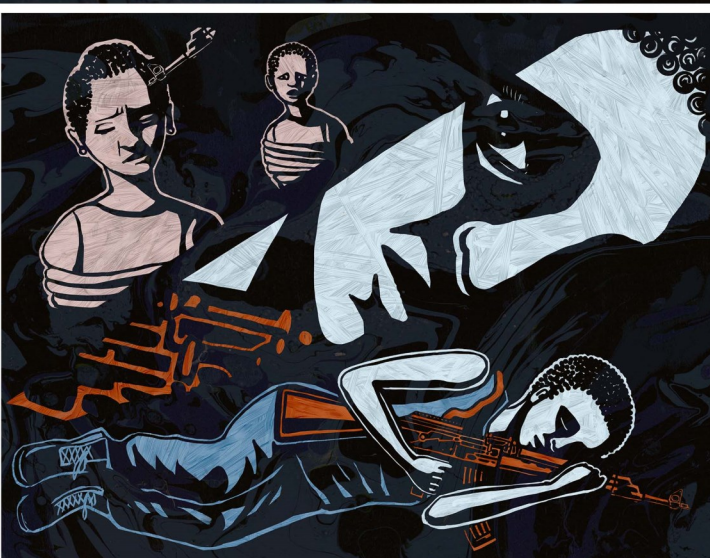
I was nine years old when the rebel soldiers came for us, in our home in Gulu District. They came at night. I didn't know who the Lord's Resistance Army were, but I found myself tied up in ropes. They gathered all the children and put us into one hut. My stepmother said 'this girl is young, you cannot go with her, and she is sick, she cannot walk'. Those guys said 'yes, it's the young one we want to go with. The old ones can remain to help you with work'.



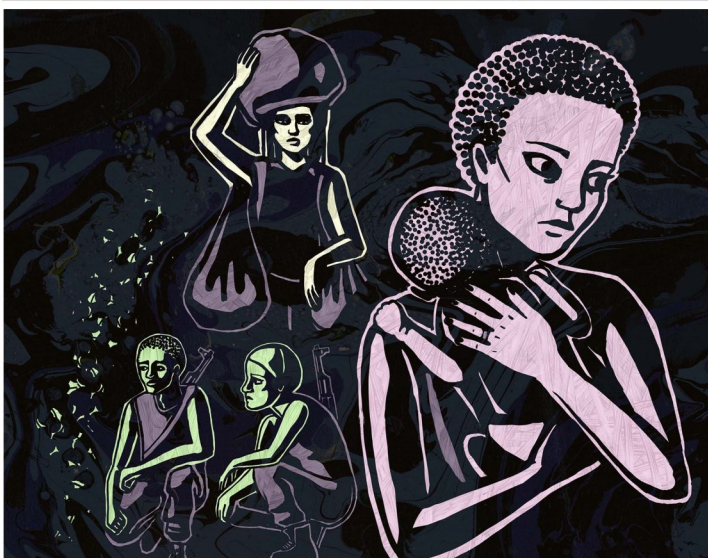
My life before the war was good. I was in school and I really enjoyed learning and education. I wanted to be an engineer or a doctor and go to university. There was nothing pressing in my life except that my father was not available because he had died, but my mother was around. My mother loved me so much.



When abducted I didn't know what was happening. I thought I was only helping with directions. I thought I would come back to my home. I didn't know why I was abducted. We were told we were doing God's work and to obey the orders of the commanders.



I was forcefully abducted. No one decides to join if they have a stable life. It becomes something that you didn't plan to do, and now you are being forced to do, doing what the commanders tell you. You're told 'the gun is your mother, your father, your sister and brother'.



People believe only boys are child soldiers. Many girls were there too. Some fighting; many were used as wives to the commanders but then boys and men were also forced into marriage. If girls and women bear children, then it becomes their responsibility to look after them. Many returned from the conflict as child-mothers.



I made some good friends whilst in captivity. It made me feel somehow better to know I was not so alone. Some of these friends are still my friends today, and we share a bond which is unique because of our shared experiences. It was sometimes hard to trust people, but we 3 friends always looked out for each other. You realise no one from home can come to help you, so you love your friends like your family. They protect and care for you. You laugh and joke with your friends, but sometimes you have to hide these friendships as the commanders begin thinking you're planning an escape, with them.



Being in captivity was hard, but I survived because I was very sharp. I would be up first and dressed quickly. When they started firing I would be long gone. So that is why I survived all that while. Sometimes I can't believe I survived but it was also my belief in God. God was and still is my saviour. God wanted me to survive.



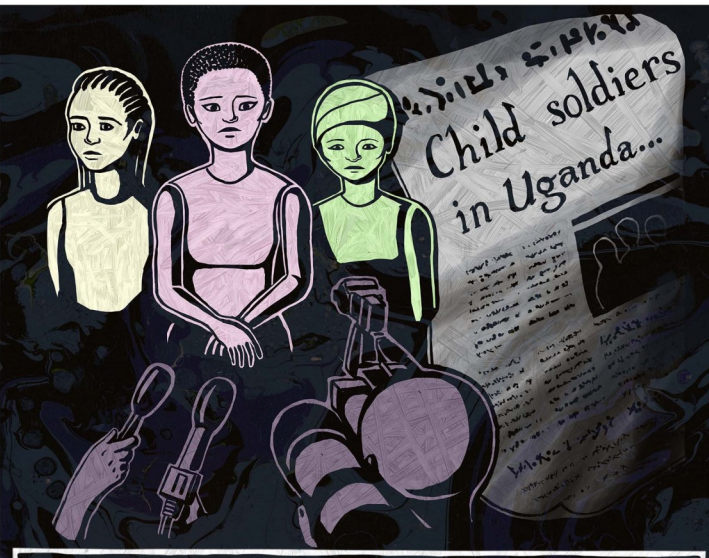
When you're in captivity, trying to escape and leave the conflict is scary. You dream about it often. I tried to escape three times but was captured and punished each time. My friend was killed after trying to escape, after that I vowed not to try it again. I didn't escape. I was shot in my leg and captured by government soldiers. Many left the fighting when they were captured by government soldiers, some managed to escape, some died.



When captured and removed from the conflict, I was put into a rehabilitation centre. The rehabilitation centre was confusing, and you feel lost and vulnerable. I received counselling which trained me on how to live with society again, but it focused on being obedient, more than dealing with the trauma. I left with a mattress, 2 saucepans, and a bag of rice. This didn't last very long. When you've survived captivity and slept on the earth, how important is a mattress?



Returning home was difficult. I was welcomed by my immediate family but not so much by other community members. Especially those whose children did not return. I realised I couldn't stay with my community anymore as I didn't belong, and they no longer wanted me. I was stigmatised because of the actions of the Lord's Resistance Army. Those were not my actions.



Healing after the conflict is hard. People still talk badly about you, including international journalists and researchers, their words demoralise you. They tell the world the stuff you were involved in thinking they're helping. To heal, you have to build internal strength and believe in God. Sometimes I can go a whole year without any nightmares, but this year I have been having a lot of dreams about the war, and it doesn't make me feel good.



You're a former child soldier, that's why you behave this way! Our emotions are different; if you get angry or upset, others believe it is because of your past and they say 'it's because you were a child soldier that you're now aggressive!'. So instead you suppress your emotions and feelings. This is how you're able to live with the community, by keeping your head down and not getting involved in trivial matters.



Life is very hard now. I use my farm produce to support my children's education, but it is not a stable job. It is also difficult living with society who marginalize you and think you're a bad person. I believe in God. I love all people. I am not a bad person. I am free from the conflict now, but I don't believe I'm free. I do not feel free.



Former child abductees require three things post-conflict. Firstly, our children need to study. I have seen the importance of studies because if you have not studied life is very hard. Education is important, and we want the best for our children, to make sure they don't suffer like us.



Secondly, we need to have our own land where we can be with our children, safe. I have been moving from house to house renting and sometimes you fall upon a bad landlord who insults and abuses you. If you are in your own home you don't experience this. Safety, shelter and a sense of belonging - all three things we have lost.



Thirdly, we require economic empowerment. Many places offer skills training but if you have no resources to carry out income generating activities then you are again stuck. We can work. I am very hard working but I have no opportunity to work and so you end up relying on others which is not what I want. I want to become something with my job. I want to truly feel free.

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This project is a collaboration between Jassi K. Sandhar (University of Bristol), Geoffrey Omony (YOLRED), and the Goldin Institute.

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