The Political Economy of Violence against Women During Armed Conflict in Uganda

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I couldn't run because I have two children. I stayed in the house with them. After a while someone pushed the door open and flashed a torch at me. I realized he was a soldier. He threatened me with death if I made an alarm or noise. He then dragged me aside from the sleeping children and raped me inside my own house. I was gang-raped by four soldiers who took their turn, one after another. In all I was raped eight times that same night so I almost became unconscious without ability or energy to walk.

A. B., 28 years old, Pawel Angany, Bungatira, Uganda, December 25, 1997 (Amnesty International, 1999)

The soldiers were looking for rebels. One saw me. He left the others. He caught hold of me and began to strangle me. Then he raped me...I told my mother-in-law. My husband wanted [me] to stay with [him] but his other wives refused [to allow] him to have sex with me. I went with my children to Gulu.


Rape is the most common act of violence against women in wartime. Frequently reported as social or interpersonal violence, rape is also an act of political violence because communities reject women who have been raped and strip them of their social stand-
ing. Their tarnished reputation has economic consequences in societies that base women’s access to such resources as land on their relationships with fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons. Customary and statutory laws regulate those relationships and severely limit women’s political power in much of Africa. Rape affects women’s eligibility (to marry or remain married) and, ultimately, their ability to provide for themselves and their children. The families, both natal and by marriage, of women known to have been raped and sexually abused in civil conflicts, may reject their daughters and any children born of rape. Women cast out in this way lose their access to an agricultural livelihood in rural societies. These consequences are common knowledge and, in the context of civil war, combatants make deliberate use of this social information.

Rape is also an act of economic violence.\(^1\) Civil conflicts are in part about the transfer of economic assets from the weak to the strong, and can include large assets such as mines and plantations or personal assets such as labor power and possessions. Rapists commit economic violence against a woman when they steal her material possessions and seize control of her labor. In the context of civil war, combatants use rape strategically in order to acquire women’s assets, some of which are needed for the prosecution of the war or are among the reasons for it. Thus women are central to civil war strategies and rape is more than an act of individual violence.

Urgent concerns for women who are victimized and impoverished by conflict have overshadowed analysis of women’s value to men in civil wars. Women’s value resides in their productive and reproductive labor power and in their possessions and access to valuable assets, such as land and livestock. While attempting to put rape during wartime on the international agenda, women’s rights activists found it important to emphasize the massive scope of the problem by compiling all the evidence and presenting it together. Hopefully we have progressed to the point where it is possible to differentiate the many circumstances of rape and to present a more nuanced analysis of violence against women.
This article, the second in a series, focuses on economic and political violence against women during civil war (Turshen, forthcoming). I argue that in Uganda, as in many other civil wars, both government and rebel forces used violence systematically to strip women of their economic and political assets. My purpose is to advance our thinking about gender violence during armed conflict. An expanded definition of violence as economic, political and social allows us to disaggregate information about rape and sexual abuse during conflict and to reach for a more refined analysis (Moser and Shrader, 1999, 4). The article opens with a brief overview of the conflicts in Uganda, the case study that grounds the theoretical arguments and provides detailed descriptions of the role of violence in the extortion of women’s assets. The next section explores two themes: the construction of women as property, in which the assets available for transfer are women’s productive and reproductive labor, and the connections between women and property, in which women’s possessions are the primary assets coveted. (Of course, armies also want livestock and land but until recently, women could neither own nor inherit in most areas of Uganda.) The focus is on systematic violence and assumes that rape during armed conflict is a socially constructed experience, that it is produced by a series of deliberate policy decisions, and that it is therefore neither inevitable nor unchangeable. After locating systematic violence against women during armed conflict in specific, historical, social, political, and economic contexts, the final section tries to identify the kinds of policies likely to protect women or mitigate some experiences of violence.

Background to the Conflicts in Uganda

Recent Ugandan history is exceedingly complex and strife-ridden, and bears the legacy of colonial policies of divide and rule that developed the country unevenly and encouraged regional rivalries. Since independence from Great Britain in 1962, Uganda
has experienced a series of civil conflicts. The most important of these are: the 1966 Buganda crisis, in which Milton Obote deposed the Kabaka in a coup d’état; the brutal military regime of General Idi Amin Dada (1971-1979), which massacred up to 500,000 civilians; the bloody conflicts during the second regime of Milton Obote (1980-1985); and the brief reign of General Tito Okello Lutwa (1985-1986), from which Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Army (NRA) (now the Uganda People’s Defence Force [UPDF]) emerged victorious (Ngoga, 1998). In the midst of this intense civil war, the International Monetary Fund imposed a structural adjustment program, which devalued the currency, drastically reduced government expenditures on social services, and pressed for the privatization of government services (Khiddu-Makubuya, 1994, 152-153).

Since 1986, the year Museveni took power, the UPDF has faced several challenges (Allen, 1996). Alice Lakwena created the army of the Holy Spirit Movement in northern Uganda in 1986 with Acholi soldiers of the defeated Obote and Okello regimes (both Okello and Obote were northerners). After her defeat in late 1987, her father, Severino Lukoya, picked up the leadership, while her cousin, Joseph Kony, created the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which is still harassing northerners from its base in southern Sudan (Behrend, 1998). Other challenges emerged in western Uganda from the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF), (Idi Amin’s home region) (Gersony, 1997), and from the Allied Democratic Forces operating mainly in the district of Bundibugyo on the Congo border, displacing some 85,000 people there.

In these wars, soldiers hold civilian populations responsible for the abuses of previous regimes or hold them accountable for the movements and actions of the enemy; this explains in some measure their extreme brutality. For women, it means being vulnerable to both sides. Rose, a northerner separated from her husband, said,

the NRA started questioning how those [Holy Spirit] rebels could move through the villages to come and attack them.
In retaliation, most civilians in the villages were victimised. The [NRA] started burning houses, robbing properties and killing indiscriminately. Even the very old, blind and disabled, who could not run, were killed. The government was convinced that the rebels were our sons, so all of us were assumed to be rebels (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995, 107-108).

The Ugandan government, dominated by southerners who fought Obote, Okello and the Acholi, is said by Amnesty International (1999) to abuse the civilian population. Sabina, a 36-year-old kidnapping victim of the Holy Spirit Movement, reported:

The DA [District Administrator] said that the Gulu people were encouraging the rebellion; but I felt that such remarks were unfair because how can anyone expect a grown-up rebel son to listen to his parents' advice? [The DA] said that the villagers were the ones encouraging the killing, because they won't [raise] alarms when the rebels are raping women or when they have killed. Even if one [sounded the] alarm, the NRA soldiers never responded! (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995, 99)

Bironika, now in her late fifties, said the moment one was found, whether by the rebels or the government,

they would either kill you or force you to take them to the Aloop (hiding places). If you led them to where they wanted, they would set you free but do a lot of damage to the people in hiding. [After] you would be haunted by the deeds of the armed forces you led. Where lives were lost, you would be hated by most of the people in the community. So people took a lot of care not to be found [by either side] (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995, 109).

The current war in northern Uganda pits government forces allied with the rebellious Sudanese People's Liberation Army
against the Lord’s Resistance Army, which receives military and material aid from the Sudanese government. The Acholi are caught in a war of proxies, a war between Uganda and Sudan. The paradox of this civil war is that Kony is fighting in Acholiland on home territory and his people bear the brunt of the destructive raids and abductions. Stella, a 15-year-old abducted by the LRA, described it this way: “One day I asked our commander, ‘Why are you killing mostly your own people, people from the North?’ He said, ‘We do not kill them because they are from the North, but because they are misbehaving.’”

The northern war has displaced some 400,000 people in Gulu and Kitgum, the most affected districts. According to the United Nations (2000), many of the internally displaced seek protection in camps; according to Human Rights Watch (1997, 55), it is government policy to “encourage” civilians to leave rural areas and move to camps near military installations of the Uganda People’s Defense Force. But for some women, the camps afford no escape from rape (Mooney and Mugumya, 1998).

Rape as a Weapon of War

A number of authors (e.g., Rhonda Copelon, Cynthia Enloe, Radhika Coomaraswamy) usefully describe different kinds of rape and men’s motivation to rape. Enloe (2000, 109) describes rape of women held in military prisons by male soldiers serving as guards, rape by a group of invading soldiers to force women of a different ethnicity or race to flee their home regions, and rape of captured women by soldiers of one communal or national group aimed at humiliating the men of an opposing group. I agree with Enloe (2000, 110) that militarized rape is a distinctly different act because it is perpetrated in a context of institutional policies and decisions. Militarized rape is directly related to the functions of a formal institution such as the state’s national security or defense apparatus or an insurgency’s military arm. In this context, what propels individual soldiers to rape (both psychological motivation
and material incentives) is less important than what leads military commanders to promote rape by their forces.

The cultural significance of raping “enemy” women—women of a different race, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation—is prominent in analyses of rape in sectarian conflicts: “ethnic cleansing rape as practiced in Bosnia has some aspects particularly designed to drive women from their homes or destroy their possibility of reproducing within and ‘for’ their community” (Copelon, 1995, 205). Copelon is saying that, implicitly or explicitly, military forces organize rape as a means of both intimidating and dispossessing their enemies. We can take this analysis of cultural significance, which rightly decries the instrumental use of women in the struggle for power, one step further and recognize that combatants mobilize ethnic, national or religious sectarianism as justification for such extra-legal activity as asset transfers. When combatants abduct women in the same way they commandeer non-human objects (regarding both as loot or war booty), their actions go beyond the use of rape to intimidate the enemy. They treat women as assets in part because they can put women to work to create additional resources. Duffield (1994, 52) suggests that the more direct or coercive the transfer of assets, the more likely is sectarianism to be mobilized as justification.

Ugandan women understand rape as a weapon of war. Sabina, the woman mentioned above who was abducted by members of the Holy Spirit movement, said the worst thing about the soldiers of the National Resistance Army was that they forced women to have sex with them one after the other.

The DA [District Administrator] claimed that it was the women who were encouraging the killings, spreading the AIDS virus and encouraging the rebels to reach Gulu town because they knew them all. He felt that all who had taken refuge in the town should be forced to go back home [saying], ‘the rebels are your sons and why should you run away from your bad products?’ He also said that women should avoid getting contaminated with the AIDS virus. This
annoyed me and I asked him, ‘How do we avoid getting infected with the AIDS virus? According to me it is the government which is intentionally spreading the AIDS virus by raping women when they go for firewood. Is raping one of the government weapons to fight the women? All these sufferings are being inflicted upon us because of our children’s misbehaviour... The DA asked me to prove if [the gang rape] was done by government soldiers. And I told him it was true because I saw a helicopter bring them food; the rebels never owned a helicopter! (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995, 99)

The unpredictability of rape serves to terrorize the community and warn all people of the futility of resistance—those targeted as victims as well as those who might wish to protect the intended targets. The LRA considered rape, along with killing and torture, “a tactic of warfare, a means of intimidation and control over the population” (Amnesty International, 1997, 20). Behind the cultural significance of raping “enemy” women lies the institutionalization of attitudes and practices that regard and treat women as property. Consider these customs as examples: some societies require grooms to pay for brides, compensating the wife’s family for the loss of their daughter’s productive and reproductive labor value; some societies recognize only male heads of household and give men exclusive control of the family’s assets, including control of wives’ labor and the products of that labor; and some societies encode (in customary or statutory law) women’s lifelong status as minors under the guardianship of fathers, husbands, brothers or sons.

*Women as Property, Women and Property*

That Ugandan soldiers regard women as property is illustrated by the following report from the Luwero Triangle (an area in the center of the country comprising the districts of Luwero, Mpiagi
and Mubende from which Museveni launched his drive for power, and where the war between Obote’s troops and Museveni’s guerrillas was most intense. An Obote government soldier abducted a 14-year-old girl and took her to his base where he repeatedly raped her. When he was transferred, he sold her for one thousand Ugandan shillings (about one U.S. dollar) to another soldier; this soldier sold her again for the same amount when he was transferred (ISIS-WICCE, 1998, 31). This next incident also occurred during the war in the Luwero Triangle:

G and her twelve-year-old classmate had been taken from their school by two [government] soldiers who, laughing and joking between themselves, had slit open the girls’ vaginas with their pangas [machetes] and had raped them on the open ground outside the school...G survived, and was taken after several weeks, by the soldier who had raped her, to be his ‘wife’, when he was stationed in the north of Uganda. She had stayed there for the remainder of the war and had been forced to act as a wife: preparing food, cleaning, working on the land and having sex when it was demanded (Giller, 1998, 140).

Soldiers of the Lord’s Resistance Army also treat women as chattel, and men have the power to transfer “their” women to other “husbands”; these “imposed relationships are precarious...women may pass through several men” (Amnesty International, 1997, 18). Human Rights Watch (1997, 24) reports frequent, though unconfirmed, allegations that during the rebellions of the Holy Spirit Movement and Lord’s Resistance Army, some Ugandan girls and boys were sold as slaves to the Sudanese in exchange for guns and food.

The abduction of women and girls to serve as porters, nurses, cooks, farmers, cleaners, launderers, tailors, and sex workers is perhaps the crudest form of asset transfer in civil war; in this case, the assets are women’s productive labor.
Girls and women [abducted by the LRA] are forced to carry out the range of domestic duties that in rural Acholi society might be expected of a wife. These include cooking, cleaning, and fetching water and food. If the LRA rules are not followed, the head of the [military] family has the power to punish, often carried out by caning, the number of strokes reflecting the severity of the offence...Forced marriage means that girls are also forced to provide sexual services to their “husbands”. They are effectively held as sexual slaves (Amnesty International, 1997, 17).

Susan was sixteen years old:

I spent three months in Uganda and three months in Sudan with the rebels. In Uganda, we were made to do a lot of hard work—getting rice, pounding rice, hulling rice, stealing food, and gathering wild leaves and preparing food (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 23).

The LRA abducted 15-year-old P. in 1996 and kept him for seven months:

In the morning, after waking up, we will move until mid-day. Then we will cook. Then we will move again until sunset. Sometimes we will move all day without having food. They made you carry heavy luggage. If you could not carry the luggage, they’ll kill you (Amnesty International, 1997, 24).

In general, the LRA observed traditional gender roles: they trained most boys to use weapons and fight, most girls to serve as domestics. But some boys also worked as farmers and porters and some girls became soldiers.

In guerrilla warfare soldiers live off the land, and women’s agricultural labor is a critical asset. All farmwork is manual in the absence of mechanization, and people must transport everything
on their heads. Ugandan women do 80% of the farmwork; it is their labor that raises the taxes (in money or kind) regularly collected by armed forces in areas they control.

M was forty-two when the soldiers entered her village [in the Luwero Triangle]... Despite her and her husband's plea for mercy, several soldiers raped M and her fifteen-year-old daughter on the mud floor of the room while her husband and the rest of the family were forced to watch and clap....M and her daughter had to work for the soldiers, gathering all the food from the shambas [farm plots]. The soldiers stole everything (Giller, 1998, 139-140).

When the Lord's Resistance Army needed food, it obtained rations by enforcing contributions from villagers terrorized into acquiescence, or by looting.

Soldiers can also alienate women's productive labor by denying the enemy the benefit of women's work. They can accomplish this by amputating limbs. Fifteen-year-old Patricia said, "They would make us cut people's legs off" (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 23). A 15-year-old student from St. Mary's College⁵ wrote that in her Kitgum village she had seen people whose mouth and ears were cut and people whose hands and legs were cut off by the rebels (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 94).

Combatants may use violence to alienate women's reproductive as well as productive labor in civil war. There are two aspects of reproductive labor to consider: rape to impregnate, making women bear children for the "enemy" community, and rape to prevent women from becoming mothers in their own community, by making them unacceptable to their community or by injuring them physically so that they are unable to bear children. Under customary law in many societies, the inability to bear sons jeopardizes a woman's land rights. Because rape deprives women (and their kin groups) of control over their bodies, it is by nature a property crime.
The relationship between the theft of property and violence against women is complex because most African women do not own property outright. During the second regime of Milton Obote (1980-1985), government forces punished the population in the Luwero Triangle that supported Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). In a study of women's experiences in armed conflict in this period, ISIS-WICCE (1998, 26), an international non-governmental organization based in Uganda, found that 97% of respondents reported having their household property looted and/or destroyed:

iron sheets were removed from the roofs of houses...household property was looted as well as animals such as cows, goats, chicken and pigs. Harvested coffee, maize and other crops were taken or burnt.

Women were forced to carry the loot to the government military bases. A woman in a discussion group in Mukulubita that met ten years later to discuss the war said,

The moment [the government forces] entered one's house, they could do thorough checking. Those who had interest in women could do the raping while their husbands and fathers would be looking on. The government soldiers were mostly fond of women, chicken, cows and other material things like clothes and mattresses. The girls would be taken as wives (ISIS-WICCE, 1998, 24).

Rape is sometimes the violent accompaniment to the forcible extortion of resources. D. described her experience in a 1996 LRA attack:

I was sitting in my home with my six-month-old baby. The rebels arrived. They picked the baby from me and threw him on the ground. He survived. My husband is a civil servant. He was there along with a man who had come to buy
groundnuts. The rebels started beating them. They killed my husband. They did not kill the buyer, but he is now mentally deranged. Then they started raping me. My daughter was seven years old. They burnt her with fire, tortured her and asked her where my husband had put government property. I was also beaten on the head and lost my teeth (Amnesty International, 1997, 26).

Protecting Women in Conflict and the Aftermath

The examples of women treated as property illustrate the underlying gender biases that make women vulnerable during conflict and in the aftermath. Rape exacerbates women’s vulnerability because of the many social and cultural issues related to women’s “cleanliness” and “good behavior.” Ugandans regard non-marital sex as abhorrent; families and future husbands reject women and girls who have been sexual slaves to soldiers. On returning to their communities the women experienced shame and humiliation; some were taunted by men who said they were “used products that have lost their taste” (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 46). A study conducted in early 1997 of 36 married women raped by LRA or government soldiers found that 30 had been rejected by their husbands or husbands’ relatives; three had not been chased away but their husbands no longer supported them and expressed fear that they carried the HIV virus (Amnesty International, 1997, 32). The AIDS epidemic has made women in polygamous households equally rejecting of co-wives who have been raped, as in the report by M. L. from Omel Kuru, cited at the beginning of this article.

When marriage and motherhood define women’s lives, divorce leads to economic deprivation. Many Ugandan customary laws discriminate against women in the areas of divorce and devolution of property on death. In most areas in the country, women
may not own or inherit property, nor may they have custody of their children under local customary law. Ugandan society stigmatizes single women with children as prostitutes. In extreme situations, this accusation becomes reality because many destitute, socially ostracized women do turn to commercial sex work to feed themselves and their children. In this context, the economic and political consequences of violence are dramatic: surviving rape and bearing the rapist's child means loss of family, community and livelihood. Women have strong incentives to mask or hide their experiences of sexual assault, if they can. A student from St. Mary's College wrote,

When our school closed for a while after the abduction, the majority of the students, including me, tried [to attend] various schools country-wide, but the life and the atmosphere in these schools was not conducive. We were nick-named by our fellow students as "Kony Rebels" and many teachers and school administrators suspected us [of being] HIV+, and wherever we were, we were afraid of identifying ourselves as students of St. Mary's College, Aboke, or else they would try to isolate us. Teachers in these schools asked us to be tested for venereal disease. We did not know why such was suspected of us...It was recently that we found out why were being suspected as AIDS victims. It was following the abduction, when rumors spread that all the students of the school were raped by the rebels. I am kindly appealing to you, the members of Human Rights Watch, that the information [that all of the] students [were] raped was false. None of us [was] raped except two girls, and those who did it were killed by their commanders (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 95).

Concepts of virtue and family honor objectify women, as does the need to protect a woman's chastity or virginity for the reputation of her family in a community and for the successful arrangement of a girl's marriage. The premise that women have property
in themselves, an interpretation of human rights promoted by women's rights activists, is an idea alien to most customary and colonial legal codes in Africa. Those codes do not acknowledge women's individual rights as their inalienable property or recognize that such rights provide structure to women's interpersonal interactions in communal life. This discrimination is changing: in recent years, South African courts, for example, have interpreted individual rights to include, among other things, women's control of their own body, which includes the right not to be bartered, traded, or sold like chattel, as well as the right to have one's bodily integrity respected, free from unwanted battery and rape.

The underlying gender biases that existed in society prior to the conflict and are exacerbated by violent conflict have important policy implications. Recognizing the practice of treating women as property makes it possible to explain a widely observed paradoxical phenomenon: on the one hand, communities will fight to protect their women, and families see rape as so awful that in some cases the family's honor can be restored only by killing the woman who was raped; and on the other hand, rape was, until very recently, invisible in national and international courts and the law afforded little legal redress for this crime. In Uganda, apart from a general law on assault, there are no laws to protect battered women, and violence against women, including rape, remains common (U.S. Department of State, 1997,10). Public opinion and law enforcement officials continue to view wife beating as a man's prerogative and rarely intervene in cases of domestic violence. Child abuse remains a serious problem, particularly the rape of young girls (U.S. Department of State, 1997,11).

The political rehabilitation of women in the aftermath of conflict involves reestablishing women's standing in their communities, as community status is the first instance of women's citizenship. This entails the end of discrimination, the promotion of women's rights, and the reform of outdated and discriminatory laws. Ugandan women are working on all of these issues, and Parliament was considering a Domestic Relations Bill and a Domestic Violence Bill in
1999. The UN Secretary-General has called for ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women without reservations, and the equalization of laws for men and women, particularly those relating to property, inheritance and divorce (United Nations, 1998, 21).

Health Care

Some final points may be made about how to alleviate the suffering caused by rape and forcible abduction in wartime. With timely and sensitive medical treatment, including—crucially—the option to abort safely, most women can heal from the social, interpersonal violence of rape. But the collapse of public health services in conflict zones makes it virtually impossible to meet those needs, while the disproportionate allocation of public expenditure to the military practically guarantees that resources for rehabilitation will be inadequate. In the war in the Luwero Triangle in the 1980s, most rural dispensaries were thoroughly looted and rural hospitals were left derelict (Johnston, 1985, 101). In the same period, hospitals in the West Nile were looted first by Amin’s retreating forces, then by guerrillas, and again by the Uganda National Liberation Army (Dodge, 1985, 108). Whereas doctors remarked a rise in sexually transmitted diseases (Bennett, 1985, 49), no one paid particular attention to victims of rape. This is the story of a woman from Kikamulo.

I was 30 years old and married when I was gang raped. I had temporarily separated from my husband amidst fleeing and insecurity when the village was attacked by government soldiers. I, together with a friend and my young sister, ran into the bush where I met my first ordeal. Six soldiers found me hiding and raped me one after another...My relatives discovered me later soaked in blood, urine, faeces and men’s semen.
I was torn everywhere and developed backache. Before I had recovered, I was again gang raped at a military check-point (roadblock). This time I was raped by 15 soldiers. This left me shattered. I was once again torn to an extent that I could not control my biological functions. The cervix was dislocated and the uterus started hanging out. Whenever I am bathing I have to push it back in.

My vaginal part and anus is separated by just a thread of flesh such that when I get diarrhoea, I defecate from both the front and behind. I was oozing water and blood. (ISIS-WICCE, 1998, 28)

This woman eventually obtained some medical treatment but her symptoms continue. Her story illustrates how damaging rape can be in wartime.

In the current war in northern Uganda, frequent rebel attacks have destabilized the countryside, wreaking havoc on healthcare; rebels desperate to get their hands on medicines have raided scores of health clinics.

The health care system in the north, always rudimentary, has almost collapsed. Many of those who are wounded in the fighting receive little or no medical attention; as a result, figures giving the number of dead and wounded are almost certainly too low, since many deaths and injuries never come to the attention of the authorities. Rebel raids on clinics and dispensaries have diminished the store of medicines available, and the instability has caused many health workers to flee. This has disrupted most basic non-emergency services, including immunization campaigns. Officially, there are thirty rural health units in Gulu, but as of May 1997, only fourteen remained in operation (Human Rights Watch, 1997, 55).
In the western Ugandan districts of Bundibugyo and Kabarole where fighting continues between government troops and ADF rebels, women lack access to adequate health care. According to Lillian Nsubuga of the Uganda Media Women’s Association, many pregnant women have stopped going to health centers for fear of encountering rebels on the way. Some pregnant women, who live in the 47 camps for the estimated 100,000 internally displaced people that are scattered all over the district, lost their babies as they struggled to reach the only hospital in the district, and a few died along with their babies. Women who go into labor during the night and need the attention of an obstetrician are particularly vulnerable to attack. Some non-governmental organizations have started to train Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) in an effort to help pregnant mothers who may be unable to reach health centers. Serina Biira, the acting District Health Visitor for Bundibugyo, said the district needed at least 360 more midwives but funds and trainers were lacking. The World Harvest Mission, an international NGO, trained some 170 TBAs in Bundibugyo, but Nsubuga said that rebels had killed some people and others had fled for fear of being attacked; only a handful remain (Amin, 1999).

_Economic Rehabilitation_

The economic dimensions of violence against women are harder to address than the health consequences or even the political consequences of loss of status or standing in one’s community. The economic consequences of the loss of current assets and of the ability to generate future assets resonate for a lifetime. For African women whose economic self-sufficiency is tied to their community standing, the political and economic consequences of violence are inextricably intertwined.

Women do most of the agricultural work in Uganda, but own only 7% of the land. A majority of customary laws maintain that
only men can own land and property; consequently, when a husband dies, his family asserts its claim and evicts the widow. In 1998 the Ugandan Parliament adopted a new Land Act, which stipulates that wives and husbands have equal say in family property and in its disposal. For the first time, a widow whose husband dies without leaving a will is entitled to 15% of the property. This critical provision is a major advance in the economic rehabilitation of war widows; the challenge is to enforce it. Too often custom drives legal interpretation, and few women are apprised of their new rights.

Restitution of stolen property is another aspect of economic rehabilitation. The UN Secretary-General wants warring parties in Africa to be held accountable for their actions. He recommends that combatants be held financially liable to their victims under international law when civilians are made the deliberate target of aggression, and that international legal machinery be developed to facilitate efforts to find, attach and seize the assets of transgressing parties and their leaders (United Nations, 1998, 12). In this respect, it would be useful for the special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Commission to document specific losses when recounting stories of sexual violence.

In the case of the Lord's Resistance Army and some of the other rebel bands operating in Uganda that never acquired land, do not control mines or plantations, and consumed most of the property they stole, victims can gain little from the implementation of such laws. Weapons are possibly the most valuable asset that men bring back from war; foreign governments often supplied those guns or rebels stole them from their own government. Sometimes these weapons are the only prize of demobilization, and they contribute to the ongoing terrorization of women in the aftermath of conflict. Ugandan women complain that the government distributes war compensation to men, who have a penchant for liquid consumption of such payments; women would prefer to receive cattle or other tangible property. Edisa, mother of 10 children, a survivor of the war in the Luwero Triangle, said,
my husband...went to town to find out about compensation from the government, but he never told me anything. You know most men never discuss money with women—probably because they think it will spoil their plans. If the compensation were to be given in the form of livestock then maybe we shall see [it], but if it is cash then the money [will] be diverted to other things (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995, 96).

A just compensation that would avoid these gender disputes is free education, including adult literacy classes and vocational training. Education would help to rehabilitate women, especially war widows and their children, and relieve them of the onerous burden of paying school fees. The international community could subsidize education through a tax on arms sales. Debt relief would also enable governments to abolish school fees.

Notes

1Much has been written on the culture of violence, viz. Rupesinghe and Rubio C. 1994, especially Chapter 6, “Violence and Conflict Resolution in Uganda” by Edward Khiddu-Makubuya.

2Uganda is also involved in the current Congo conflict, but the discussion here is limited to civil wars in Uganda.

3I am grateful to Florence Butegwa for sharing this resource and her insights with me.

4Sex work is productive labor; e.g., prostitutes earn money in the commercial sex industry.

5Rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army attacked St. Mary’s College, Aboke, in October 1996 and abducted 139 girls. One of their teachers, Sister Rachele, followed the rebels and pleaded for the release of the girls; 109 were set free, 30 were detained, of which 7 escaped. For an account of the incident, see Rubin, 1998.

6For a discussion of mental health consequences in Uganda, see Giller, 1998; for a more general discussion of mental health and conflict in Africa, see Turshen, 2000.

7For an excellent overview of Ugandan health services, see Macrae, Zwi and Gilson, 1996.
References


