'Together at the Heart': Familial Relations and the Social Reintegration of Ex-combatants

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ABSTRACT
Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes will often dismantle the command-and-control structures of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to prevent possible remobilization. Recent studies demonstrate that in some cases ex-combatant networks provide important social and economic support that hasten transitions to civilian life; however, this literature focuses exclusively on networks that emerge among commanders, peers, and foot soldiers. In this article, we broaden existing literature on ex-combatant networks by examining the role that family relations play in combatants' war and post-war trajectory. Drawing on 18 life history interviews with former male combatants from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) we argue that the familial can often be as influential as peer-relations. Specifically, our study shows that, first, familiies can shape the defection, demobilization, and reintegration processes of ex-combatants, and, second, ex-combatant networks can play an important role in facilitating the reunion of families in the aftermath of war. The endurance of familial relations forged within NSAGs pose important considerations to DDR policies.

Introduction

In 2002, Lt Colonel Francis Lapaicho Oyat secretly released his two 'wives'[1] and four children from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed group that institutionalized forced marriage and pregnancy during a more than

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[1]We place the words 'wives' and 'husbands' in quotation marks to recognize that the LRA used a strategy of forced marriage and pregnancy to achieve its political goals. For women's experiences in these con-jugal arrangements, see: Acan, *Not Yet Sunset*; Amony, *I am Evelyn Amony*; Baines, "Buried in the Heart"; Baines, "Forced Marriage as a Political Project." For men's experiences in these conjugal arrangements see: Aijazi and Baines, "Relationality, culpability and consent" and Denov and Drumbl, "The Many Harms of Forced Marriage." As Dubal argues, and we document here, some relationships deepened over time, resulting in lasting unions. See Dubal, *Against Humanity*.

two-decade war against the Government of Uganda (1987–2008). Following his own capture by the Ugandan armed forces, Lapaicho was granted amnesty and settled into a modest home outside of Gulu City. He then proceeded to contact Atim and Laker, his former 'wives', requesting a visitation with their children. Atim and her family opposed the visit; after all, the LRA had abducted and forcibly married their daughter. On the other hand, Laker was agreeable to Lapaicho's request. Like Atim's family, Laker's relatives were initially hesitant, especially her new husband, who worried that Lapaicho would once again forcibly marry Laker. A support network consisting of men and women who previously fought and returned from the LRA[2] stepped in to help both parties reach an agreement. Eventually, the children were granted permission to visit Lapaicho's home. Lapaicho's experience is common among other ex-combatants who released their families when they felt that they could no longer protect them in the battlefield.[3] Many of these men also hoped to reunite with their families upon their return home, a process fraught with tremendous tensions and challenges. In this article, we consider the role that familial relations play in the war and post-war trajectory of former combatants. This is an important area of research given the growing number of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) that fuse familial and military units within their organizational structure.[4]

Drawing on 18 life histories with former male LRA commanders and soldiers, we argue that familial relations are an important consideration in demobilization and reintegration processes in the aftermath of war. We situate this study within broader scholarship that examines the intersections of the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) and ex-combatant networks. Current debates regarding ex-combatant networks primarily focus on whether they serve a destructive or productive purpose in the aftermaths of war.[5] Some scholars suggest that relations between former combatants are dangerous because their military training, experience, and networks would allow them to re-mobilize and re-engage in violent or criminal activities, posing a threat to peace.[6] Other scholars demonstrate how these relations offer social support and economic opportunities to soldiers

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[2]In this paper we use the terms *support network* and *social network* interchangeably to refer to what existing literature terms as ex-combatant network. This refers to social ties between persons within an armed group that endure afterwards that provide social support, and that can include soldiers (abducted and not, male or female), 'wives', or children within the LRA. We are cognizant that many of these individuals continue to be highly stigmatized by this experience and do not want to contribute to this in our academic writing by centering the term 'combatant.'
[3]Our study found that this was not the only reason 'combatants' released their families from captivity. Participants conveyed that some men released wives because it slowed down the units, while others noted that they did so under orders by commanders so the group could move more swiftly.
[4]For example, Boko Haram, Al Shabab, the Islamic State, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad and the Movement for Unity, and Jihad in West Africa.
[5]Themnér, "Wealth in Ex-combatants."
[6]Stedman, "Spoiler Problems"; Walter, "Does Conflict Beget."

who are stigmatized or rejected by their communities.[7] DDR programmes have been influenced by these 'reductive perspectives' which inadvertently 'deny ex-combatants the potential for non-violent association or agency over their own reintegration process'.[8] Collectively, scholarship on ex-combatants tends to limit analysis to homo-social relationships between commander, foot soldiers, or peers. Familial relations, like the ones captured in Lapaicho's story, have received scant attention by scholars and practitioners. While men demobilized as soldiers, many also return as husbands and fathers, and this has important implications for the post-war landscape.

Our study illustrates that becoming a father was a critical moment in combatants' lives, shaping their war and post-war trajectory. The LRA is an exemplary case, one that is least likely to have produced this result given the strategy of forced marriage and pregnancy. Yet, for some combatants, becoming a father and 'husband' influenced defection[9] from the LRA as well as subsequent demobilization and reintegration processes. While it has been over a decade since DDR programmes stopped, we find that ex-combatant support networks are drawn upon to facilitate the reunification of fathers and children. This involves identifying and locating children separated from fathers when they returned home and helping to mediate often hostile objections to men who want to assume care and responsibility of their children. When participants in this study are unable to reunite, they express feelings of social isolation, exacerbating their existing state of social exile, stigmatized by civilian populations. Former combatants, mothers, and children often work together to support each other on return and, as one respondent argued, are the only persons to 'see each other as human beings'.[10]

The article unfolds in four parts. We begin with a review of existing literature on DDR and ex-combatant networks, calling for a consideration of how familial relations forged in war shape these processes. This is followed by a discussion of the methods used in the study and a brief overview of the context. We then turn to our empirical study, first mapping how social bonds formed between family members within the LRA. Second, we examine the endurance of these bonds after they returned home, and the subsequent challenges men face in assuming responsibility for their children. As with other post-conflict settings where former combatants are stigmatized and excluded, their support networks gain relevance to the process of reintegration. However, social networks can also facilitate reunion with families, and we present examples of the ways they are drawn upon to mediate

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[7]Akello, "Reintegration of Amnestied LRA Ex-Combatants."

[8]McMullin, "Integration or Separation," 399.

[9]Our study found that this was not the only reason why participants defected from the LRA. Others did so when they became injured and disabled during war, or when they realized the LRA could not attain victory in the war.

[10]Interview with OM, May 2019.

conflict, or afford dignity to each party. We recognize that the participants in this study are allegedly responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity. We do not wish to minimize the harms participants are accused of by focusing on the social connectiveness of these familial relations. The intention, rather, is to move beyond limiting frameworks often used to study combatants in 'repellent groups',[11] in order to understand how myriad subject positions of men shape their war and post war experiences.

Ex-combatant Networks and DDR

The liberal peacebuilding paradigm is underpinned by the institutionalization, securitization, and marketization of the post-war society. Central to this has been the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants into society. Ex-combatants are often thought of as a 'political problem' that needs to be addressed in the post-war landscape.[12] Since their inception in the late 1980s, DDR programmes have been an integral component of multidimensional peace support operations worldwide. In 2017–2018 alone, six peacekeeping missions included DDR programmes targeting 215,000 beneficiaries.[13] Despite tremendous bilateral and multilateral funding poured into DDR programming, the success of these initiatives has been mixed.[14]

As DDR programmes began to operate in increasingly complex environments, they expanded their mandates and targets, resulting in different generations of these schemes.[15] They have gone from tallying the number of weapons collected and combatants enrolled to providing vocational and educational training, livelihood activities, and psychosocial support, to, more recently, screening for violent extremists.[16] Despite these technocratic changes, DDR programmes continue to adopt dominant discourses and practices that frame ex-combatants as threats to post-war stability.[17] Ex-combatants have technical training, experience, and, more importantly, networks that can facilitate their return to violent activities. DDR programmes are thus designed to 'affect the calculus of ex-combatants',[18] breaking down the chain of command of armed factions by separating combatants from their units. Ex-combatants are typically instructed to remain apart once they reintegrate into their communities and are often monitored to ensure that these 'residual chains' are no longer functional.

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[11]Gallaher, "Researching Repellent Groups." Also see Verweijen, "Coping with the Barbarian Syndrome."
[12]Söderström, *Concept of Political*, 3.
[13]UN, "Peacekeeping Action."
[14]See Gilligan, Mvukiyehe, and Samii, "Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life"; Humphreys and Weinstein, "Demobilization and Reintegration"; Phayal, Khadka, and Thyne, "What Makes an Ex-Combatant Happy?"
[15]Muggah and O'Donnell, "Next Generation."
[16]Richards, "High Risk or Low Risk."
[17]McMullin, "Integration or Separation"; De Vries and Wiegink, "Breaking Up."
[18]Kaplan and Nussio, "Explaining Recidivism," 67.

There is no shortage of evidence demonstrating the 'destabilizing role played by former combatants'[19] where they have been drawn into national and regional webs of violence. Zyck shows how former combatants in Afghanistan were re-mobilized in support of or in opposition to the Taliban-led insurgency.[20] Özerdem and Jacoby illustrate how demobilized soldiers from Sierra Leone were recruited to fight in Liberia, while ex-combatants from Sierra Leone and Liberia were active in the Côte d'Ivoire conflict.[21] More recently, this research has expanded to analyse the involvement of ex-combatants in organized criminal networks.[22]

Further scrutiny of these networks reveals that ex-combatants also continue to fraternize in positive ways. For example, they often live in the same neighbourhoods to help each other, pass along employment opportunities, or provide support when they experience stigma.[23] De Vries and Wiegink show that ex-combatants' networks are particularly useful in overcoming the economic barriers related to high unemployment and poverty rates.[24] Paradoxically, income-generating projects can further brand ex-combatants as a 'separate and identifiable' group in society, as was the case in Liberia.[25] Nussio argues the lack of trust in the government to offer protection is also a reason why ex-combatants continue to rely on each other in Colombia.[26] Kilroy and Basini find that networks of former fighters are important when there is stigma and marginalization in Liberia.[27] Their participants continued to associate with each other mainly for support. Similarly, McMullin observes that ex-combatant networks in Liberia help to diffuse community conflicts, but they continue to be viewed as a threat by international actors. He also found examples of how ex-combatants continue to turn to ex-commanders when they had problems with personal loans, domestic disputes, or public disorder.[28]

A review of existing literature on ex-combatant networks shows it is limited by a focus on male-to-male bonds between former fighters, such as those between commanders and foot soldiers, or peers. The focus of these studies reinforces the assumption that 'brotherhood' relations, often based on hyper notions of masculinity, are the only ones that matter during and after combat. Such an omission obscures the multiple subject positions of men as not only soldiers, but 'husbands' and fathers. In this study we attend to the

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[19]Gilligan, Mvukiyehe, and Samii, "Reintegrating Rebels into Civilian Life," 599.
[20]Zyck, "Former Combatant Reintegration."
[21]Özerdem and Jacoby, *Post-war Recovery*.
[22]See Daly, Paler, and Samii, "Wartime Ties"; Nussio, "Ex-combatants and Violence."
[23]Wiegink, "Former Military Networks a Threat to Peace?"
[24]De Vries and Wiegink. "Breaking Up."
[25]Özerdem and Jacoby, *Post-war Recovery*.
[26]Nussio, "How Ex-combatants Talk."
[27]Kilroy and Basini, "Social Capital Made Explicit."
[28]McMullin, "Integration or Separation."

neglected social bond that forms within NSAGs, and within familial units and consider how these shaped combatants' war and post-war trajectories. We examine this in two ways: first by looking at the familial bonds forged around shared experiences of coercion, violence, and desire to protect children born within NSAGs. As we show below, these familial relationships gave meaning to participants' lives, influencing their decision to defect from the LRA. These wartime decisions continue to influence their demobilization and reintegration experience. Second, we re-consider the composition and purpose of ex-combatant networks in post-war contexts. Due to the precarity of the battlefield, some mothers and fathers within the LRA developed relationships of interdependence to help look after their children. For example, fathers carried – or ordered others to carry – children who could not walk through battles and mothers looked after each other's children communally. It is these same support networks that are now involved in reunifying families after separation during the war. In sum, we argue that family relations could be as significant as peer-relations when seeking to understand demobilization and reintegration processes.

Methodology

The study is informed by more than a decade of research with community-based organizations in northern Uganda, the Women's Advocacy Network and the Justice and Reconciliation Project; the former is composed of women once abducted by the LRA. Between 2009 and 2015, we documented the gender-based experiences of women, focusing on women who had become mothers to the children of former LRA soldiers. During this period, it became increasingly evident that we needed to also engage men in the study of forced unions and parenting to better understand questions of justice, accountability, and social repair. In 2016, we designed a new research project to document the life histories of male ex-combatants. We sought different perspectives from men living in rural or urban areas of northern Uganda, including those who (a) fathered children during the war and were now separated; (b) fathered children and either sought to reunite or were reunited with them; (c) reunited with one or multiple mothers to their children, following the LRA's practice of polygamy. In total, 18 men living in Agago, Gulu, Lamwo, Omoro, and Amuru Districts agreed to participate in the project. These interviews were supplemented with six focus group discussions with men.

The research team adopted a relational approach, emphasizing the importance of building and maintaining trust during the data collection and analysis.[29] Because both national and international legal prosecutions were

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[29]Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science*.

ongoing against former LRA ex-combatants, some respondents were initially reluctant to participate in the study. The men were under intense scrutiny by community members, and their movements monitored by local authorities, including the police. To build trust, the research team made repeated visits to participants' homes or held meetings in our office to explain the project, build rapport, and, when the men felt comfortable, obtain informed consent. To ease the suspicion of the participants, we relented control of the interviews: they chose the time, place, and length of interviews and topic of interviews. We took an open-ended approach to the interview questions, allowing the participants to identify what was important to share about their experiences as soldiers, husbands, and fathers. Interviews typically lasted two to three hours each, involving between two and nine separate meetings to record their stories, depending on the wishes of the participants. The research took more than two years to collect and included a limited number of informants. Participant life stories were documented in Acholi-Luo using a digital recorder and later transcribed into English. All names and identifying information were removed from transcription, and pseudonyms were used throughout the research process, as they are here.

A thematic inductive approach was used to analyse the data collected in this study. This approach aims to 'describe and understand how people feel, think and behave within a particular context relative to a specific research topic and focuses on describing those experiences'.[30] Throughout the two years of research, the team met monthly or bimonthly to review emerging themes and reflect on the research process. Co-authors began by reviewing life transcripts, coding excerpts that referred to experiences and perceptions of forced marriage and parenting, and then developing themes that emerged from these excerpts. We brought together narratives under thematic clusters and identified commonalities and differences across perceptions and experiences, allowing for a spectrum of perspectives and identification of patterns across them. In May 2019, we shared our preliminary findings with eight participants to cross check our analysis on familial relations forged within LRA.

Following other scholars working on highly sensitive and controversial topics in conflict and post-conflict settings, we emphasized the ethical integrity of the research process. This led to some methodological compromises. One was relying primarily on purposive and snowballing sampling techniques, which may result in sample bias. Another limitation is that that participants may have 'minimized, denied, embellished or reframed their involvement in acts of perpetration, coercion and victimization'.[31] While this is a common challenge in interpretative qualitative studies, we were

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[30]Denov and Drumbl, "The Many Harms of Forced Marriage," 355.
[31]Ibid.

less interested in the veracity of the facts as they were presented than the participants' interpretation of them.[32] In this sense, our analysis centres daily experiences as lived and interpreted by participants, revealing rich insights into intimate relations forged in settings of coercion – a subject that does not easily lend itself to quantitative large-scale surveys. Finally, we did not seek a representative study of all men in the LRA but one focused on men who became fathers – for the specific purpose of bettering our comprehension of forced marriage and parenting through their situated knowledge.[33]

Context

The war in northern Uganda (1986–2007)[34] between the LRA and the Government of Uganda was devastating for the Acholi region and included the mass displacement of the population into government camps that were underserviced and unprotected from LRA attacks and abductions. Civilians endured nearly two decades of massacres, extra-judicial killings, rape, looting, and loss of property and loved ones.[35] Between 25,000 and 38,000 children and youth were abducted by the LRA and forced to serve as porters, fighters, and domestic servants.[36] Newly abducted children, referred to as *kuruts* (recruits), were assigned to a military unit to be indoctrinated and trained by their commander. *Kuruts* were often cruelly forced to compete for scarce resources, or to inflict physical violence against one another or the civilian population to prove their loyalty.

A central component of the LRA's political objective was to create a new Acholi by institutionalizing forced marriage, which was only permitted with the approval of higher commanders.[37] Rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based harms were strictly forbidden as a way to maintain the integrity of its units. When boys or young men proved themselves on the battlefield, they moved up the military hierarchy and were often rewarded with a 'wife' to help maintain and expand their units. The men oversaw the military utility of their units, ensuring that they had sufficient number of trained *kuruts* who could be deployed for combat, while the women were responsible for the daily functioning of these units, including domestic labour such as retrieving water, cooking, tending gardens, storing and distributing food, and caring for the children.[38] When the LRA had expansive bases in Southern Sudan, its military-familial units resembled villages.

[32]For other scholars adopting this approach see: Fujii, "Shades of Truth;" Sylvester, "War as Experience;" Suarez, "Living between two lions."
[33]Haraway, "Situated Knowledges."
[34]See Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits*, for a comprehensive study of the beginning of the war.
[35]Dolan, *Social Torture*; Okello and Hovil, "Confronting the Reality of Gender-Based Violence."
[36]Pham, Vinck and Stover, "The Lord's Resistance Army." p. 404.
[37]Baines, "Forced Marriage as a Political Project."
[38]Acan, *Not Yet Sunset*.

The Government of Uganda pursued a two-pronged strategy to end the war. It launched a series of peace negotiations and talks, and when this approach came to a deadlock it increased its military operations. In 2000, following pressure from civil society and the international community, the Amnesty Law was passed, with the promise that combatants who surrendered to the UPDF would not face prosecution.[39] This information was broadcasted through the Mega FM radio program *Dwong cen Paco* ('come back home'), which encouraged defection among combatants within the LRA. A large number of abducted children and youth who escaped or were released by their commanders benefitted from this program. In 2002, the Government of Uganda changed strategies, launching Operation Iron Fist, which targeted and dislodged the LRA's bases in Southern Sudan. After enduring tremendous loss, Joseph Kony entered peace talks, which eventually collapsed due to the investigations and prosecutions by the International Criminal Court. Following the peace process (2006–2008), the LRA shifted its operations to Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they continue to operate to date.

Given the various strategies to end the war, the number and timing of LRA combatants returning to northern Uganda fluctuated throughout the war. Although these figures are difficult to assess, one study estimates that on an annual basis around 1000 people returned from 1994 to 2001, a figure which increased to roughly 6000 people after 2002, and reduced to a few hundred in 2005 when the LRA began operating in new areas.[40] Upon their return home, former combatants were usually debriefed and processed by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) before they were presented with options that depended on their military rank. A large portion of mid-to-senior-level commanders[41] were recruited and integrated into the UPDF,[42] whereas low-level fighters were usually sent to reception centres to be reintegrated into society. In total, ten reception centres[43] were established throughout the region to facilitate with the reintegration of former combatants by providing reunification with families of origin. With the financial support of the international community, these centres provided health services and psycho-social counselling, and facilitated reunion with their families.[44] Following DDR protocols, combatants were separated

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[39]Apuuli, "Amnesty and International Law."
[40]Allen et al., "What Happened to the Children Who Returned."
[41]Historically, the Ugandan state under the leadership of Museveni has favoured an unconditional amalgamation of all forces into a unified military force, a trend which appears to continue, see: Mutengesa, "Facile Acronyms."
[42]According to Allen and colleagues (2019), an entire UPDF battalion (the 105) was made up former LRA recruits, although the number of soldiers is unknown.
[43]The terms rehabilitation and reception centres are used interchangeably throughout Allen and colleagues' 2019 article. Ibid.
[44]Borzello, "The Challenge of DDR."

according to sex, an administrative process that had important implications to the familial units forged within the LRA. Upon their departure, combatants were provided with a modest financial package to help ease their reintegration into their villages. While some of the former combatants were accepted home, many were rejected for their involvement in the LRA's atrocities inflicted on the civilian population, despite the government's anti-stigma campaigns.[45] Most men did not know the location of their children, some were unaware of the real name or origin of their 'wives'. Reception centres did not record a child's paternal identity if they were born in the LRA, and many were subsequently raised without knowledge of their father's identity.[46]

'You Start Seeing Each Other as One': The Formation of Social Bonds Within the Familial Unit of the LRA

Respondents framed their experiences of war in relation to their abduction by the LRA, speaking at length of the hardship of war: fighting, hunger, thirst, and walking to the point of exhaustion. They also described the capriciousness of war: at any moment a bullet could injure or kill someone, a carefully tended garden could be burned to the ground, or one could fall sick and die due to the lack of medical supplies. In the context of hardship, meaningful relationships were formed. As OM explains, 'you know, what is called soldiering is not an easy thing. People who stayed in the bush stay knowing there is no other life apart from what you have at that time. [This is when] you start seeing each other as one'.[47] As previously shown in studies of ex-combatant networks that focus on male-to-male relations, such comradery between male fighters is common.[48] But participants in the study expand on this, referencing the importance of family, even when created under coercive circumstances. CO describes how social bonds form over time:

> You know, we were all taken to the bush [forcefully], [we] were abducted against [our] wishes, but [we] start[ed] getting used [to each other] slowly … whether a woman was forcefully given to a man or not, so long as you have stayed together for a long time, you will start loving one another. It's like something which happens automatically in people's hearts … . No one will say that 'you, I was given to you forcefully' you will not hear that. They will love one another so much. And most of [the women] given forcefully to someone (a man), and they have returned home and have come back to that person [man] and are living together.[49]

[45]Finnegan, "Forging Forgiveness."
[46]Stewart, "Place-making and the Everyday."
[47]Interview with OM, May 2019.
[48]Wiegink, "Former Military Networks a Threat to Peace."
[49]Interview with CO, November 2017.

When we asked whether he had a 'good relationship', he responded: 'I love them so much, that is how a family was'.[50] CO's reflection and responses reveal his perception that the brutal force of abduction, marriage, and abduction in the LRA could be infused with love. There were, at times, 'good relationships', without any problems and with love, 'how a family is'. Like Bolten's study of wartime relations among combatants, 'what was extraordinary about wartime practices was the emphasis people placed on their will to transform relationships initiated out of fear – fear of being killed, of not getting enough food, of being alone in the world – into love'.[51] While conjugal arrangements may have been designed initially to 'motivate' or 'reward' soldiers within the LRA, forging a family also brought new meaning and purpose to their lives. OL describes this as hope:

> In the case of a rebel solider, when he has children, they would become a source of happiness and it makes you forget the situation you are confronted with. By forgetting I mean, that there are times when you go to the battle and when you come back your children welcome you and that gives you hope in life. Instead of thinking so much about the hardship of war, you tend to forget about it and concentrate on your family. You see there is hope in life. But when you don't have a wife or a child, you will think about war all the time. And that means that life will be difficult for you.[52]

Like CO, assuming responsibility for a 'wife' and children are critical moments in OL's life; they were not merely instrumental or replaceable relationships. Some spoke of the arduous conditions of forced unions they themselves were unprepared for – nor had they desired. OSA explains: 'While in the bush, they tried to force me to have a wife but I refused. I believe you know the mentality of [my commander], he really tried to persuade me to have a wife. But with the kind of force and pressure he applied, I eventually accepted. She then conceived and gave birth to a child'.[53] One of the reasons that OSA initially refused is that he felt ill-prepared to take on these new familial responsibilities, a common finding in our study. Nearly all participants recounted the anguish and desperation they felt as they tried to provide for and take care of their families. They were often forced to make decisions that violated the LRA's code of conduct, which had been instilled on them during their training and indoctrination. Participants described conflicting demands of being a 'good solider' or a 'good father'.[54] OL highlights these dilemmas by recalling the different actions a soldier takes during military operations and how these might change when a child is born: 'A young person complies with the

[50]Interview with CO, November 2017.
[51]Bolten, *I Did It*, 5.
[52]Interview with OL, May 2019.
[53]Focus group discussion, May 2017.
[54]Matarazzo and Baines. "Becoming Family."

[LRA's] rules to avoid being disciplined. For example, if there is a rule that soldiers should not enter [and loot from] houses during military operations, a young person will comply. But an adult [someone married] will disobey the orders and try to loot so that he can provide for his wife'.[55]

While looting was a common practice within the LRA, soldiers were expected to hand over collected items to senior commanders who would distribute the items according to the hierarchy and needs of the movement. Yet, looting was one of the only ways soldiers could provide for their families, and so they would often risk the consequences of violent punishment, or being stripped of their rank. OG explains how he began looting when he found out that his wife was pregnant. As he recalls, 'In [the bush] there was no buying things. One had to be hard working, that is, when I go for work [a military operation] I made sure that I get clothes for my child and soap [looting from civilians], so I gathered all those things … I buried them in the soil [to hide them from his commanders]. When my wife gave birth in November of 2008, I was very happy. I went and unburied those [items for the child and mother]'.[56] Arguably, interdependency increased within the LRA after the birth of children, where peers supported their colleagues by sharing rationed food or supplies.

In addition to providing necessities for their families, participants also spoke of the challenges they faced trying to keep them physically safe. Respondents described how their loved ones died at the hands of the enemy during an attack, while others had to watch as their loved ones were killed in front of them by a higher-ranking commander. When individuals committed an infraction, they were commonly punished in public to instil fear in others. Some participants found themselves in excruciating circumstances, where they were ultimately forced to observe or participate in the killing of one their loved ones. OL remembers how one of his wives tried to escape when their unit crossed into South Sudan. His wife did not make it very far before she was spotted and re-captured. When OL realized what had happened, he tried to plead with his commander, RL: 'I told them people make mistake, why don't you punish her and bring her back [to the rest of the group]? Flog her with a stick [and] perhaps she will learn [her lesson]'. RL ignored his pleas, asking him, 'what is the use [purpose] of the gun?'[57] When OL realized that he would not be able to persuade RL, he convinced other fighters in the unit to intervene on his behalf, but they were unsuccessful. She was then murdered as an example of what would happen to others who might think of escape. 'I really shed tears!' he recalls. Throughout our conversations, men also noted how their colleagues

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[55]Interview with OL, May 2019.
[56]Interview with OG, May 2017.
[57]Interview with OL, February 2017.

would risk their lives to protect each other's families, for instance, by keeping secrets regarding infractions from their commanders, or intervening to advocate to the high command as OL's colleagues did with RL.

Other respondents recall the moment when they decided to abandon the rebellion. OG explains:

> When I got a child, it became challenging because that was a time the war was intense, and sometimes when we are close to our enemies, children are not even allowed to cry. Looking at the condition that my child was going through, led me to ask, 'why I am suffering and my child is also suffering? … Why don't I take them [home]?' … That is what came into my mind because it became painful seeing my wife and child suffer. That is why I [risked] my life and decided to send my wife home, I only told her and she never revealed the secret. I just told her 'go back home, this war is unbearable'.[58]

Similarly, OM was motivated to escape after releasing his wives and children to the care of his parents, and learning they were rejected. He explained the reasons for this,

> Even if you have sent your wife and children to your own parents, they may reject your wife and children and this rejection comes for two reasons. One is that they tend to develop a negative feeling about such individuals for the conditions that they are living in due to the LRA. The second reason why they are rejected is that they fear that they would face problems with the government. As we were returning our parents were being disturbed by the government.[59]

The release of wives and children without permission of a senior commander, often Kony himself, would be regarded as an act of betrayal.[60] Each participant had painfully witnessed the punishments others who attempted and failed to escape from the LRA; at times, they were forced to partake in the execution of the punishment. The public displays of punishments were largely effective in preventing defection within the LRA; thus, a release had to be planned carefully and clandestinely to ensure survival. The decision to escape required trust and secrecy between husband and wife. All of this shows a different picture of the demands on male combatants and how conflicting commitments and soldiers' different identities came into consideration when the decision to defect was made.

'We are Together at the Heart': The Endurance of Familial Social Bonds

Participants explained how, after releasing their families, they anxiously waited to hear of their arrival back home. This information was usually

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[58]Interview with OG, May 2017.
[59]Interview with OM, May 2019.
[60]Oloya, *Child to Soldier.*

shared on Mega FM, the regional radio, and if the respective fighter was not present to receive the news, others would pass along the information. OG explained how his colleagues informed him when they heard the news: '"OG, your wife has reached home." I was happy, I got up and raised my hands saying God is great, if she had died, that was going to be very bad'.[61] OG then prepared for his own defection. Other participants decided to defect because the mother to their children had died, and there was no one to care for them, or, because they wanted to ensure their children were raised in their home in Uganda. For instance, when WO's wife was shot and killed in battle a few months after the birth of their first child, the UPDF took the baby to a reception centre in Kitgum. When WO learned of this, he immediately began to plan for defection to find and raise his son, not wanting anyone to raise him but his own family. Eventually, he and his toddler were reunited and they settled home. WO spoke of his desire to one day meet with the late mother's family, to introduce them to their grand-child and to explain what happened to their daughter. 'I know that those who returned from the area could have sent the information that [their daughter] is no longer there but they don't know that she had a child who is alive'. [62] At the same time, WO expresses some hesitation, 'I am afraid that they may misjudge and blame me for what happened to their daughter as people already have a perception that male victims are the ones responsible for the sufferings their children went through and yet that is not true'.[63]

As discussed in the DDR literature, former combatants often lack the education and experience to find sustainable employment.[64] Respondents noted how they went from a position of stature in the LRA to someone who was looked down upon. OSA captures the shame and frustration many felt: 'I didn't get enough education because I was abducted when I was young. I often think that if I had continued with my studies, I would have become someone and I would have a place to work. This would help me take care of my family. I would also have respect from the community, because they always know who in the household has been educated'.[65] Further, participants returned to communities that had been greatly victimized by the LRA, and they were often scapegoated and ostracized. During our interviews, they relayed that they were the first to be suspected of disturbances or crimes, as has been documented in other post-war contexts.[66] As LK reveals: 'Life in the community is very hard for us. It's like a scar that cannot heal; we continue to be stigmatized as those people from the 'bush'. Even when you are

[61]Interview with OG, May 2017.
[62]Interview with WO, August 2016.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Akello, "Reintegration of Amnestied LRA."
[65]Focus Group Discussion, May 2017.
[66]Bøås and Hatløy, "Getting In"; McMullin, "Integration or Separation."

seated with community members sharing stories, if anyone comes to join us, they will be the first to say that you are from the bush. Making a life in the community is hard'.[67] While some attempted to integrate into the community by concealing their identity, others reported this was difficult to do. Respondents frequently pointed out how 'there are a lot of differences between us who returned from the bush with the people who have been home',[68] including disabilities from combat. AR explains the implications of disability on his social status as a father: 'Being a father is very challenging for us who came back but with injuries … Some of these injuries we have are visible, which call for questions like "what happened?" Whether you like or not, you must explain what happened and you cannot avoid mentioning that I was shot by a gun. The next question will be "from where?" and there is no way you can run away from that explanation, which also disqualify us from being good parents'.[69]

Policies put in place in reception centres affected reintegration processes, and women were advised to take their children to their maternal homes, staff at the centres persuading them that they were married by force and so held no obligation to remain with men who had returned. Some mothers concealed their child's paternal identity to protect them from the difficult truth about the circumstances of their birth.[70] In other cases, men were told to stay away by the mother or her relatives, sometimes under threat. A handful of the participants in this study hold reception centres responsible for the breakup of their families. As OM explains: 'None of the reception centres had a positive view about men who reproduced with these women. They were told that their husbands forced them into the relationship … They also look at most of us like perpetrators. [They would say] "you cannot marry a killer, you need to get someone who is your age and able to take care of you."'[71]

Previous studies found that most women followed the advice given to them at reception centres as well as the wishes of their extended families.[72] At the same time, women found many challenges starting a new life as they too were discriminated against and rejected by their communities.[73] New marriages often failed based on prejudicial perceptions of their past and lack of acceptance towards their children born in the LRA.[74] Some mothers found themselves in a double bind, without the support of either the paternal or maternal families of their children, leading some to move

[67]Focus Group Discussion, June 2017.
[68]Focus Group Discussion, May 2017.
[69]Focus Group Discussion, December 2015.
[70]Stewart, 'I Feel Out of Place.'
[71]Interview with OM, May 2019.
[72]Annan, Blattman, Mazurana, and Khristopher Carlson, "Civil War, Reintegration, and Gender."
[73]See: Acan, Not Yet Sunset; Amony, I am Evelyn Amony; Baines. "Buried in the Heart."
[74]Kiconco and Nthakomwa, "Marriage for the 'New Woman'."

into city and town centres to seek informal employment.[75] For men who wished to resume responsibility for their children, being separated from their children caused anxiety over their child's well-being.[76]

In circumstances where men and women wanted to reunite as families they were often held back from doing so by the maternal family and kin.[77] Customary law requires men to either pay fines for failing to observe marriage protocols or to fulfil payment of bride wealth, which can be an unsurmountable sum of money and goods for the underemployed men.[78] In Acholi, culturally, one does not become a man unless formally married and until he becomes a father; as he ages, fathers gain status within the family and, subsequently, respect. Thus, respondents described feeling infantilized. Lucura explained how his brothers frequently chide him for having no family of his own and doubt his claims that he had wives in the LRA. He spoke of the sting of memory each time his brothers' families gathered in their home, reminding him of the wife and children he loved but is unable to bring home until he pays bride wealth to legitimate the marriage.[79] Similarly, CO, whose children perished in the war, was reminded of his great loss when his nephews and nieces – now fully grown with children of their own – came to visit him. 'I should have children their age by now', he reflects.[80] OM, who is forbidden to see his children, explained how he arranged secret meetings with the mother of his children to receive updates.

In the post-war context, when men and women were unaware of each other's whereabouts or place of origin, colleagues who helped take care of the children during the war now helped to identify and trace where their children were living. Persons within the LRA often kept their identity secret for security reasons, but some acted to ensure that should they die or become separated it would be possible to locate one another. For instance, some men named their child after a favourite relative, or would entrust their origins to a close colleague.[81] Others tucked letters into their child's pockets or sewed them into clothing, when they were released, to facilitate reunification.[82] Some seized any opportunity to point out important landmarks should their unit pass close to their homes. In rarer cases, commanders brought their wife and children to meet relatives during the night, or sent messages home imploring them to meet their families in reception centres when they successfully escaped. All of this indicates that they had

[75]Atim, Mazurana, and Marshak, "Women Survivors."
[76]Madhani and Baines, "Fatherhood in the Time."
[77]Oliveira and Baines, "A Role for Fathers?"
[78]Kiconco and Nthakomwa, "Marriage for the 'New Woman'."
[79]Interview with Lucura, June 2018.
[80]Interview with CO, September 2016.
[81]Baines and Oliveira, "Securing the Future."
[82]Mutsonziwa, Anyeko, and Baines, "Child Tracing."

to trust one another greatly, and relied on confidantes to assist in the return of their children to their home in their absence.

It has been over a decade since reception centres closed, and it is these support networks that help mediate conflict with the maternal kin of participants' children. Recall that OG had arranged for his wife and children to return home with the promise to follow. When he escaped, it was to other demobilized men and women he turned to approach his wife's family and ask if he could meet with her. The meetings were difficult, involving mediation between families, and it took some time before they agreed to pay compensation for 'time wasted' when his wife should have been attending school. OG reflected on the frustration he felt through the process, at one point fearing that he might not succeed: 'I faced aggression and if I was not strong, we would not have settled together'.[83] Most participants explained the need for patience and perseverance in seeking reunion with their children, which is why these ex-combatant networks are so critical. For CH, 'this child has created a bond between us, and we should take this opportunity to build our relationship, it is only possible when we communicate with one another, visit each other and all the other things will follow'.[84]

Following his experience, OG told us he now helps other friends and colleagues from the war to locate their children: 'I sacrifice myself wholeheartedly to trace for the homes of these children. … We who lived in captivity had a spirit of solidarity since we had similar problems so it is very painful to see your friend's child getting lost amidst the crowd'.[85] Many children born within the LRA were separated from their parents during the confusion of battle. When they arrived alone in rehabilitation centres, it was often members from their networks who helped identify their parents and trace relatives. OG relayed an example of Lapolo, who returned without any knowledge of his children's whereabouts. OG agreed to help him reconnect with his children, knowing where they had settled after their escape and their mother's death. He approached the grandparents and explained the situation, and they agreed to meet with Lapolo. Following an extended dialogue during which Lapolo described the experiences he and their daughter had lived through, the grandparents accepted that he was the children's father and that they would be best raised at their paternal home. OG tells us each time he visits Lapolo, 'I am loved and highly welcomed'.

The search for relatives of children born in the LRA is fraught with many challenges. Participants talked of hopes raised then dashed after spending months trying to track someone down, sometimes travelling hours to reach homes only to discover it was the wrong family, or to have the

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[83]Interview with OG, May 2017.
[84]Interview with CH, May 2017.
[85]Interview with OG, May 2017.

family deny the children were the ones they were seeking. In cases where families were reached, some outright refused to meet the fathers, accusing them of abduction and violation of their daughters. Sometimes mothers also told them they want nothing more to do with them, and sent them away. Others were unable to raise the bride wealth, and so left without their children. Even when efforts failed, the process itself reveals the importance and value men assigned to their children, and the extent to which they relied on each other for information and support.[86]

As much as support networks came together to reunite families, they also came together as family in times of need. Lapaicho, whose story we featured at the beginning of the article, died while we were researching for this project. His funeral was well attended by former LRA commanders and abductees, many who had served under his command, as well as his former wives and children. Although they each lived some distance from one another, people mobilized to ensure that Lapaicho would have the dignity of a proper burial: raising funds, cooking and serving the food at his funeral, and organizing the prayers. 'The majority of those who contributed to Lapaicho's funeral were from the bush', OM, recalled. 'You know, coming together as brother and sister to stand by you when you have problems, it means a lot. We stood with the family of Lapaicho and buried him … . We knew each other as human beings, we were in that struggle together'.[87] Noticeably absent from the funeral were many of Lapaicho's relatives and neighbours, as well as local government and military officials who would normally attend as per protocol. RA, another former LRA commander, explained: 'The people from Lapaicho's village continue to view him as someone who caused most of the atrocities in that area … . His death was joy to them. But, for those of who lived with Lapaicho in captivity … we grieved his death. We went to pay our last respects to our brother'. Pausing to reflect further, RA described the relationships forged in the LRA – abducted or not – as *wat obeno*, an Acholi saying that refers to a bond that never breaks.[88] As OG puts it: 'We are together at the heart, I will not forget them because they think about me, I also think about them, that is why separating us is difficult'.[89]

Conclusion

In this article, we draw on life history interviews with former LRA commanders and fighters to consider how familial relations shaped their demobilization and reintegration processes. The robust literature on ex-combatant

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[86]See also Oliveira and Baines, "A Role for Fathers?"
[87]Interview with OM, May 2019.
[88]Interview with RA, May 2019.
[89]Interview with OG, May 2017.

networks demonstrates the ways former peers and colleagues offer support to one another often by sharing socio-economic opportunities within their networks.[90] These efforts provide support to ex-combatants who are commonly stigmatized or rejected by their communities in the shadows of war. These studies problematize the perception that former combatants mainly pose a threat to post-war stability, requiring that their social networks be swiftly dismantled, often through DDR practices.[91] One of the limitations of this literature is that it predominantly focuses on brotherhood relations among commanders, foot soldiers, and peers. In so doing, it inadvertently suggests that these are the main relations that shape combatant's decision-making during and after combat. The inductive approach underpinning our study permitted us to consider how becoming a father and 'husband' are also important factors that shaped the trajectory of combatants. As we argue in this article, familial relations forged in the folds of violence and precarity can be as influential as peer relations in demobilization and reintegration processes.

We show how, even during war, some bonds between 'wife' and 'husband' deepened when a child was born. Mutual concern, admiration, and care for their children were unifying factors. Given the precarity of war, father and mother had to develop relations of trust not only with each other but with others within the LRA who could help look after their children when they were sent on a mission or caught in an attack. In the post-war setting, we illustrated how these familial bonds endure. Participants who tried to assume responsibility for their children often struggled to do so due to (a) opposition to reunion from the maternal clan; (b) inability to pay bride wealth or fines due to lack of employment; (c) the inability to locate where their family had settled, and (d) the encouragement of reception centres for women to break relations with the men and not recording the father's identity. Participants who did not have custody of their children expressed the desire to gain it, or to be in a position to do so. As with other studies of former combatants' post-war experiences,[92] participants in this study are commonly stigmatized and excluded from society. Feelings of isolation and rejection intensified when participants were unable to see their children, who they named as a source of hope for the future. Further, the support networks forged by former combatants within the LRA have evolved in their activities to help facilitate reunion among families. Many of those involved in the reunification processes were previously helping the same parents protect their children during war. Specifically, the social network helps to identify the location of the family members, facilitate discussions among maternal and paternal kin to reach an agreement regarding visitation, and afford dignity to one another. We note that mothers and children

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[90]Bolten, *I Did It*; Wiegink, "Former Military Networks a Threat to Peace." Kilroy and Basini, "Social Capital Made Explicit"; De Vries and Wiegink, "Breaking up."

[91]McMullin, "Integration or Separation."

[92]Bøås and Hatløy, "Getting In." Akello, "Reintegration of Amnestied LRA."

also draw on such support networks in their own efforts to unify, suggesting the value placed on familial relations is multi-directional and not merely at the behest of fathers.

The insights generated by this study are important as they challenge the (re)production of ex-combatants as a monolithic group.[93] In so doing, we point to some of the blind spots in DDR practices, illuminating that although male combatants demobilized as soldiers, they continue to be fathers. We suggest that a broader lens of familial relations may also apply to other cases where fathers are separated from their families when they are mobilized to fight but continue to care for and attend to the wellbeing of family members. The findings in this study also raise questions about the different ways familial relations shape combatants' trajectories. In other cases where NSAGs fuse family and military units, similar to the LRA, do these familial relations also impact combatants' commitment to the faction or their defection? Are familial reunification processes also occurring in these contexts? What about cases where the NSAG does not permit combatants to reside with their families. How do fathers arrange visits, deliver messages, and provide for their families in these circumstances? Our study provides an initial entry point into these broader questions that have been largely overlooked in studies of NSAGs and have important implications for post-war landscapes.

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Notes on contributors

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[93]McMullin, "Integration or Separation."

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