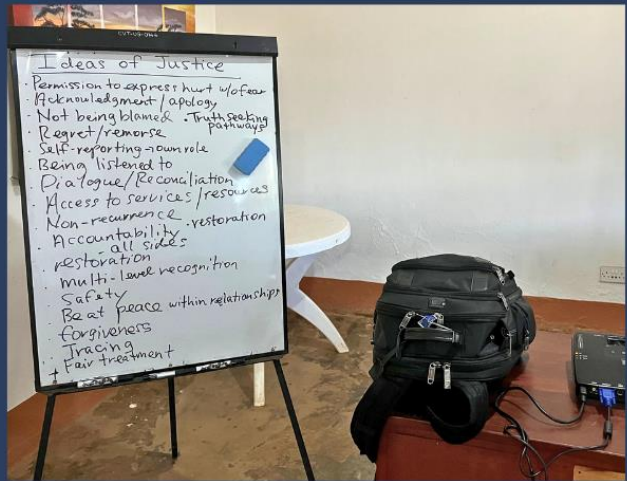




The
CENTER for
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TORTURE



Repairing the Wrongs in Northern Uganda: Survivor-Defined Justice for Mothers and their Children Born of War

Authors

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Executive Summary

This assessment was conducted to better understand perspectives of children born of war (CBOW) and their mothers, particularly their views on justice, healing, community, and documentation. The perspectives shared in this report can inform survivor-centered transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives.

Methods and Respondents

Respondents were engaged through survivor networks and invited to participate in interviews or focus group discussions. The final purposive sample was 82 participants.

The interview team had expertise in counseling, training to provide psychological first aid, established referral processes, and protocols to assess and respond to risk and distress.

The study team used a conceptual translation of “justice” as “repairing the wrong” in Acholi (*yubu gin ma obale ni*), to elicit survivors’ holistic ideas about justice, beyond legal processes.

Justice

Survivors most commonly defined justice in economic terms. In order to have repair for the wrongs they suffered, they want to be able to live well and support their children. They also frequently said that justice is to have supportive relationships and “live normally” within community. For many, justice is having a place that is “home,” physically, economically, and socially. For mothers, justice is overwhelmingly about family well-being.

For a minority of respondents, justice is primarily punitive, achieved through holding perpetrators to account, or justice is about truth and acknowledgment, particularly from the government.

Ideas about justice were varied, reinforcing that efforts to repair past harms must be deeply personalized.

Healing

Survivors said they find healing when they are able to accept or forget the past. Their healing process is facilitated when they receive supportive counsel or advice from others, but social rejection and economic instability hinder their healing, serving as a constant reminder of their life during the war.

Working towards healing and justice is an intertwined process. If there are tangible efforts within a community or a country to repair past harms, an individual can experience transformation of the wounded area in their life, and simultaneously, individual healing moves a society towards justice.

Respondents articulated that both are necessary, yet, for most, there has been insufficient progress towards either.

Community

Consistent with previous research about CBOWs and their mothers, respondents recurrently reported deeply-rooted stigma, resulting in survivors facing pervasive discrimination, marginalization, and ostracization. This intergenerational social isolation in their communities is a major barrier to healing and justice for these survivors.

Documentation

In the transitional period, many survivors have been asked to record their stories. The stakeholders making such requests and the purpose for which the stories were used has varied. Respondents shared mixed experiences with such documentation, with most reporting that the documentation was driven by others, and they did not have input on what was recorded or how it was used.

Nearly all respondents expressed a desire to record their stories in the future, on their own terms. However, they have fears and concerns related to social and physical risks of disclosing some past events. They emphasized the importance of retaining control over how their documentation is used. They would like to document in order to improve their lives, to share their story with their loved ones, to combat stigma, and to prevent future abuses.

Implications

The perspectives of survivors highlighted in this report should be used to guide the work of local, national, and global civil society and government actors to design and implement transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives that will be meaningful to the people who have been most directly harmed by human rights violations.

Introduction

This section contextually situates this needs assessment, providing an overview of violent conflict in northern Uganda, the types of abuses that people suffered, and the transitional justice (TJ) landscape. We introduce the Center for Victims of Torture™ (CVT) and the objectives of this assessment.

Armed Conflict and Seeking Justice in Northern Uganda

Uganda's post-independence struggles can be traced back to British colonial rule that polarized the country along ethnic, political, and religious lines. Uganda suffered several military coups, dictatorships, and armed rebellions following independence. Although after 1986, many parts of the country witnessed relative peace, stability, and economic growth, regional and ethnic cleavages continued to divide. For the north, the overthrow of Tito Okello marked the beginning of a protracted situation of violent conflict and mass displacement.¹ Various armed groups, including the Holy Spirit Movement, which evolved into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), waged these conflicts. This conflict devastated large parts of northern Uganda for over two decades and has had a lasting impact on the region.²

During this period, the population in northern Uganda suffered war crimes and serious violations of human rights, including forced displacement, looting and destruction of property, abduction and forced recruitment, slavery and forced marriage, sexual violence, psychological harms, land seizure, mutilation, killings, torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.³

One of the most enduring and debilitating features of the conflict between the LRA and the government of Uganda (GoU) was the long-term mass displacement of the population of northern Uganda into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. At the height of the conflict in 2005, over 90 percent of the Acholi population was living in camps that were characterized by a widespread lack of basic services, severe deprivations, high insecurity and risk of violence, and rates of morbidity and mortality above United Nations' emergency threshold levels.⁴

¹ Refugee Law Project. 2014. *Compendium of Conflicts in Uganda: Findings of the National Reconciliation and Transitional Justice Audit*. Kampala, Uganda: Makerere University, School of Law.

² The armed conflict in northern Uganda as well as the subsequent transitional justice efforts have been written about extensively; a complete history is beyond the scope of this report.

³ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and Ugandan Human Rights Commission (UHRC). 2011. *"The Dust Has Not Yet Settled": Victims' Views on the Right to Remedy and Reparation: A Report from the Greater North of Uganda*. Kampala, Uganda. Available at: <https://reparations.qub.ac.uk/assets/uploads/DustHasNotYetSettled.pdf>.

⁴ World Health Organization, Ministry of Health of Uganda, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 2005. *Health and Mortality Survey among Internally Displaced Persons in Gulu, Kitgum and Pader Districts, Northern Uganda*. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/health-and-mortality-survey-among-internally-displaced-persons-gulu-kitgum-and-pader>.

Pre-pubescent and adolescent boys and girls were systematically abducted by the LRA. While both were exposed to high levels of violence, including being forced to perpetrate violence against fellow abductees, community members, and their family members, boys were more likely to have primary roles as combatants. Girls often performed forced labor, with about a quarter of all those abducted being subjected to slavery and sexual and physical violence through forced marriages, often resulting in forced impregnation and childbearing.⁵

The effects of this period of atrocities have been deep, broad, and multi-layered.⁶ The region had the complete interruption of economic development and destruction of infrastructure. There was the erosion of trust within families and communities, as well as between citizens and the state. The protracted displacement and mass return, combined with the significant economic and social value of land, led to high levels of tension and emergent conflict over land. Returnees have faced significant stigma and other reintegration challenges. Survivors are coping with ongoing effects of psychological and physical violence. The influx of post-war programming and its associated funding influenced social organization, corruption, and competition over limited resources.

Efforts to facilitate a transition from armed conflict to peace and to bring justice for human rights violations have come in waves of activity and attention and with periods of significant discourse and debate about appropriate courses of action. The transitional period has attracted significant global attention, and has seen the development of a robust national and local civil society committed to peace, healing, and justice. Despite this, many survivors are still waiting for meaningful efforts at redress and formal transitional justice mechanisms have been limited and inadequate for the scale of violations that occurred.

Early efforts included: a blanket amnesty for returnees and reintegration efforts to support their return to communities; a proliferation of service delivery programs by NGOs; civil society-led documentation and memorialization efforts; some attempts to use traditional cultural cleansing and reconciliation rituals; the ICC's investigations and subsequent arrest warrants against five LRA top commanders; and the launch of one domestic trial in Uganda's High Court.

The most significant development in recent years was the Government of Uganda's approval of the 2019 National Transitional Justice Policy (NTJP). This policy articulates a commitment to reconciliation, justice, peace, and development and raised survivors'

⁵ Annan, Jeannie, Christopher Blattman, Dyan Mazurana, and Khristopher Carlson. 2009. "Women and Girls at War: 'Wives', Mothers, and Fighters in the Lord's Resistance Army." Unpublished manuscript. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237426348_Women_and_Girls_at_War_Wives_Mothers_and_Fighters_in_the_Lord's_Resistance_Army.

⁶ Shabdita, Shilpi and Okwir Isaac Odiya. 2015. "Mapping Regional Reconciliation in Northern Uganda: A Case Study of the Acholi and Lango Sub-Regions." Justice and Reconciliation Project, Gulu, Uganda. Available at: <http://justiceandreconciliation.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Mapping-Regional-Reconciliation-in-Northern-Uganda.pdf>.

hopes that there will be a comprehensive attempt to come to terms with past abuses. However, the next step is the passage of a bill that would allocate the resources and develop a specific plan to implement the commitments established in the NTJP. Even with significant national advocacy efforts, progress has been slow. In 2024, with leadership from survivor groups, civil society stakeholders petitioned parliament to develop an expeditious process to move forward the enactment of this law.⁷

There have also recently been long-awaited developments in the only two criminal trials related to the armed conflict. After years of starts and stops, two former LRA commanders have been convicted and sentenced for war crimes and crimes against humanity: Dominic Ongwen and Thomas Kwoyello at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the High Court of Uganda's International Crimes Division (ICD), respectively. Both of these cases have resulted in reparations orders, in which the GoU⁸ and the ICC's Trust Fund for Victims⁹ are expected to provide compensation to victims.¹⁰ However, implementation will be challenging, in terms of both financing the reparations¹¹ and considering how to navigate work with survivors.¹²

Given this, there are renewed calls to focus holistically on the needs of survivors, beyond the confines of legal judgments, holding duty-bearers accountable for providing justice.¹³ This assessment is one contribution to the ongoing effort to understand what survivors want, in order to come to terms with the past and build a hopeful future.

⁷ Ocungi, Julius. 23 September 2024. "War Victims Petition Gov't to Enact Transitional Justice Law." *Uganda Radio Network*. Available at: <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/war-victims-petition-govt-over-enactment-of-transitional-justice-law->.

⁸ Athumani, Halima. 17 December 2024. "Ugandan Court Asks Government to Pay LRA War Crimes' Victims." *allAfrica and Voice of America*. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/ugandan-court-asks-government-to-pay-lra-war-crimes-victims-/7904267.html>.

⁹ International Criminal Court. 28 February 2024. "Ongwen Case: ICC Trial Chamber IX Orders Reparations for Victims." Press Release. Available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/ongwen-case-icc-trial-chamber-ix-orders-reparations-victims>.

¹⁰ At the time of writing, the attorney general in the Kwoyello case has appealed the reparation order, worrying victims concerned about potential delays. In the Ongwen case, the ICC's Victims Participation and Reparations Section has begun registering victims to create a provisional list of those who may qualify for reparations.

¹¹ Kimeu, Caroline. 1 November 2024. "Not One Government has Paid into Fund for Victims of Uganda Warlord, Says ICC." *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/nov/01/not-one-government-has-paid-into-uganda-warlord-dominic-ongwen-victim-reparations-icc-says>.

¹² Acan, Sylvia. 11 April 2024. "Symposium on Dominic Ongwen Case: Prepare Victims to Receive Reparations." *OpinioJuris*. Available at: <http://opiniojuris.org/2024/04/11/symposium-on-dominic-ongwen-case-prepare-victims-to-receive-reparations/>.

¹³ Odokonyero, Joel Innocent. 3 November 2024. "How Long Do Survivors Have to Wait?" *Monitor*. Available at: <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/letters/how-long-do-survivors-have-to-wait--4810070>.

The Center for Victims of Torture

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) is a global non-governmental organization, founded in the United States in 1985, with a mission to heal the wounds of torture and to work towards the end of torture globally. CVT was established in Uganda in 2009, with much of its work centered in northern Uganda. CVT has focused on developing trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches to supporting survivors of the armed conflicts in northern Uganda. To work towards healing and resilience, CVT has offered specialized rehabilitation services for individuals affected by torture and other human rights violations, including women who were abducted and children born of war.

In 2022, CVT launched the *Strengthening Transitional Justice Efforts* project, known as the *Jingo Project*, with support from the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) and in cooperation with four local implementing partners.

As described above, the first wave of response following the cessation of active war in northern Uganda brought an influx of resources, combined with global and local expertise, that generally resulted in coexistence in recently resettled communities. However, there have been ongoing challenges to the development of a positive, durable peace that is characterized by more than the absence of war. Emergent post-war conflicts have been a barrier; land disputes, gang and youth crime, domestic violence, and other forms of conflict have perpetuated cycles of violence. Some of the underlying factors that have contributed to emergent conflicts include widespread unaddressed trauma, the uneven distribution of transitional justice efforts, TJ that has not aligned with survivors' needs and demands, and social divisions that developed or deepened as a result of the war or the post-war period.

This project has aimed to support northern Uganda's development of durable peace by addressing post-war conflicts and empowering survivors to participate actively in justice, healing, and reconciliation processes. To do this, the project has specifically engaged with women who were abducted as adolescents and became mothers while in captivity and with the young people who were born as a result of this. This project has developed a Therapeutic Documentation (TD) model that advances survivor-centered recording and utilization of stories of harm and resilience.

The success of these efforts has relied on the project's strong partnerships with local civil society organizations, which have provided essential leadership in program implementation and survivor engagement. Together, they have led initiatives focused on reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion, creating opportunities for survivors to have a meaningful role in the region's healing process. Additionally, CVT has collaborated closely with government community-based services and human rights defenders to promote social cohesion and engage communities in peacebuilding efforts. This collaboration has extended to regional and national levels, amplifying survivors' voices and ensuring their needs are addressed across multiple layers of society.

Assessment Objectives

Several goals guided this assessment:

1. To collect meaningful perspectives from survivors that will directly program strategy (for CVT or other organizations), as well as shape particular approaches to design and implementation of clinical services, documentation and justice work, and peacebuilding or community reconciliation activities. It directly informs the Therapeutic Documentation options that are offered to survivors to record and use their own stories to help seek their own healing and justice.
2. To build upon what we have learned from stakeholder consultations and previous clinical work, to contribute more depth in our understanding of how survivors conceptualize meaningful healing, justice, and community.
3. To contribute knowledge to the field of TJ in northern Uganda and beyond, to help survivors' priorities to be integrated into TJ approaches, mechanisms, and projects.
4. To share knowledge with other TJ stakeholders interested in similar questions, so that they don't need to replicate similar interviews (thus, being mindful of data collection fatigue for survivors).

The foundational research question was:

*For survivors of specific human rights abuses in northern Uganda,
what are their priorities to help address past harms
and have a positive future?*

Others have addressed this question, and we build upon their work. Notably, a team at the University of California-Berkeley's Human Rights Center conducted three population-based surveys in the final years of the war and as people began to return to home communities. These surveys were innovative and invaluable in seeking to understand perspectives on justice and peace from people directly affected by armed conflict. Due to the representative sampling methodology, the researchers were able to identify patterns of experiences during the war and displacement as well as patterns of how affected populations understood justice, accountability, and peace, and what their priorities were for their own lives and for transitional justice mechanisms.

At each time point, for example, they asked survey respondents what they believed justice meant. In 2005, respondents saw justice as trials (31 percent), as reconciliation (18 percent), or as truth or fairness (11 percent); notably, at that time, there were a range of other responses, as well as 19 percent who said they did not know what justice

meant.¹⁴ In 2007, respondents were most likely to define justice as being fair (41 percent), and others saw it as coming from trials (29 percent), as holding perpetrators accountable (26 percent), as reconciliation (17 percent), or as compensation (8 percent).¹⁵ In 2010, survey respondents defined justice as holding wrongdoers accountable (29 percent), as trials (25 percent), as fairness (18 percent), or as reconciling (9 percent). When asked to select one preferred transitional justice mechanism, they favored peace with amnesty (45 percent), over peace with a truth-seeking mechanism (32 percent), peace with trials (15 percent) or peace with traditional ceremonies (8 percent).¹⁶

While this population-level view of patterns of opinions provides a broad framework, our assessment takes a qualitative approach to more deeply understand survivor perspectives. We also focus on a particular group of survivors, providing a contextualized link between their experiences and their views on justice. Additionally, the last of these surveys were conducted nearly 15 years ago, and justice-related needs and priorities shift over time.

Philipp Schulz focuses specifically on a marginalized group of survivors—male survivors of sexual violence—exploring how their ideas about justice are linked to their unique experiences and identities.¹⁷ He finds their justice priorities often focus on recognition and acknowledgement of their suffering and on (gender-sensitive) reparations through physical rehabilitation and material compensation. Their overall goal was reducing stigma, being able to fulfill their social (gendered) roles, and generally to return to how their life was or should have been prior to the harms.

Researchers from the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) focused on the needs of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, asking about their priorities related to reparations for the harms they suffered. They found that survivors of CRSV most often call for individual compensation as reparation, explaining that they endured individual harms and thus should have individual payment. Some conceptualized this payment as a bride-price, to be paid to them by the government, because it failed to protect them from forced marriage and rape. Survivors also prioritized specialized rehabilitation support, government

¹⁴ Pham, Phuong, Patrick Vinck, Marieke Wierda, Eric Stover, and Adrian di Giovanni. 2005. *Forgotten Voices: A Population-Based Survey of Attitudes about Peace and Justice in Northern Uganda*. International Center for Transitional Justice and the Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁵ Pham, Phuong, Patrick Vinck, Eric Stover, Andrew Moss, Marieke Wierda, and Richard Bailey. 2007. *When the War Ends. A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes about Peace, Justice and Social Reconstruction in Northern Uganda*. Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley; Payson Center for International Development, Tulane University; International Center for Transitional Justice, New York.

¹⁶ Pham, Phuong and Patrick Vinck. 2010. *Transitioning to Peace: A Population-Based Survey on Attitudes About Social Reconstruction and Justice in Northern Uganda*. Human Rights Center, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁷ Schulz, Philipp. 2021. *Male Survivors of Wartime Sexual Violence: Perspectives from Northern Uganda*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

acknowledgement and apology, tracing of missing persons, and educational support for themselves and their children.¹⁸

Many of these findings are aligned with the justice priorities of the survivors included in this assessment.

Others have specifically sought to understand the experiences both during and after the war of survivors who were abducted by the LRA or born in captivity, which are the groups included in our assessment. For example, Atim and colleagues found that these survivors are seen by the communities as transgressing social norms, given that they were born of sexual violence, to largely unknown fathers, physically removed from community. Thus, their challenges and priorities are related to restoring their social identities and cultivating belonging.¹⁹ Denov and colleagues explored the importance of land and place for children born in LRA captivity as they pursue social acceptance.²⁰ Schiltz and colleagues also explored the perspectives of formerly abducted people as they navigate social challenges, including dealing with stigma and resentment.²¹ The Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP) is initiating a project to identify all children born in captivity, and thus far have found low rates of education, rare support from government or civil society, and that two-thirds of these young people lack a national identity registration.²² Studies like these are essential to understand the experiences of the mothers and young people who participated in this needs assessment, in their own words.

Our work builds on this to specifically understand their views about how to repair the harms they endured in the past and the challenges they continue to face. This assessment was structured around four areas of inquiry:

Justice: How do survivors define “justice” for what happened in the past? What does it mean to them? What are their priorities for justice? What has helped them in the past? What do they think would help them experience some form of justice in the future?

¹⁸ Akumu, Marianne, Sarah Kihika Kasande, Grace Acan, and Evelyn Amony. 2022. *Uganda Study on Opportunities for Reparations for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: We Cannot Survive on Hope and Promises Alone*. International Center for Transitional Justice; Women’s Advocacy Network; Global Survivors Fund, Uganda.

¹⁹ Atim, Teddy, Dyan Mazurana, and Anastasia Marshak. 2018. “Women Survivors and their Children Born of Wartime Sexual Violence in Northern Uganda.” *Disasters* 42(S1): S61-S78.

²⁰ Denov, Myriam, Anaïs Cadieux Van Vliet, Nathaniel Mosseau, and Atim Angela Lakor. 2022. “The Meaning of Land and Place for Children Born of War in Northern Uganda.” *Children’s Geographies* 21(4): 693-707.

²¹ Schiltz, Julie, Sofie Vindevogel, Eric Broekaert, and Ilse Derluyn. 2015. “Dealing with Relational and Social Challenges After Child Soldiering: Perspectives of Formerly Recruited Youth and Their Communities in Northern Uganda.” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 26(4).

²² Justice and Reconciliation Project. 2024. *Invisible Victims: Mapping and Understanding Children Born in Captivity in Northern Uganda*. Gulu, Uganda.

Healing: How do survivors define “healing”? What does it mean to them? What are their priorities for healing? What has helped them in the past? What do they think would help them with their healing process, or what do they still need?

Community: How do they define “social support” or “community”? Where do they get social support currently? Where do they want to get social support? What are the barriers they face in relationships? What types of conflicts do they face within the community?

Documentation or Storytelling: Have they done any documentation or storytelling before? How was the experience? What types of documentation or storytelling would they be interested in?

Gathering Perspectives

Methodology

This needs assessment was a qualitative exploration of the experiences and perspectives of survivors in northern Uganda. Our inquiry focused on specific populations of interest, linked to the overall theory of change underlying the project design described above.

Throughout this report, the term “survivors” applies specifically to these groups, not generalizing to other survivors in northern Uganda. While we recognize there are many more survivors and survivor groups in this region, for this needs assessment, the population of survivors includes:

- 1) *Children born of war:* CBOW in this report are people who were born as a result of forced relationships and/or rape while their mothers were in captivity with the LRA, who are now adolescents or young adults, living in northern Uganda;²³ and
- 2) *Mothers of children born of war:* Mothers of CBOW are women who were abducted by the LRA, typically as girls or adolescents, who became pregnant and/or gave birth to children as a result of this captivity, and are now living in northern Uganda.

²³ Children born in captivity (CBC) and children born of war (CBOW) are both used to describe the group of survivors that were included in this study. CBOW is the larger category, with CBC being a more specific group within CBOW. Most of the young people who participated in this assessment were born while their mothers were in captivity, but not all. As described by JRP in their 2024 report: “Children born in captivity are part of a broader group of victims referred to as children born of war, who are children with one parent in an army or peacekeeping force and another parent that is a citizen. In the Ugandan context, this includes children born of CRSV perpetrated by LRA soldiers, government soldiers, humanitarian aid workers, and other actors in the context of war.” Ibid, 1.

The research team conducted 55 in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions (FGDs) with these survivors in 2023. For the purposive sample of interview participants, the research team first selected communities based on feasibility and presence of survivors, as assessed by the CVT team's local knowledge after providing services in the region for nearly a decade and through consultations with other stakeholders. Within selected communities, we identified potential individual participants through local survivor groups or networks and through the population of former CVT counseling clients. At the conclusion of the interview process, we had 16 CBOWs in the sample (29 percent of those interviewed),²⁴ and through consultations with survivor groups, we decided that group discussions may help to more fully engage the CBOW population. We completed four FGDs with 26 CBOWs, with potential participants identified through community groups that work with this population. In total, 42 CBOWs and 40 mothers of CBOWs shared their perspectives on justice, healing, social relationships, and documentation with the assessment team.

The full interview guide is included in [Appendix 1](#), the consent form is in [Appendix 2](#), and additional description of the methodology is in [Appendix 3](#).

Translation of Key Concepts

A key step in preparing for interviews was to discuss key concepts with the assessment team, so that the translations reflected the broad conceptual meanings intended and would avoid guiding respondents to answer in a narrow way. As a result of these discussions, the team collaboratively agreed on translations of terms, added explanatory text to the interview guide, and helped interviewers strategize how to guide discussions. Translation decisions related to the key concepts are summarized below.

Justice: This term was challenging because the common translation (*ngolo*) is strongly linked to the idea of courts or other processes where there is a decision about right/wrong or guilty/innocent. This is the common translation of justice used in the TJ sector in northern Uganda. However, we felt it was too narrow and would lead respondents to one type of thinking about justice, rather than inviting their broader reflections. We considered other phrases: one that referred to decision making and particularly court processes, literally translated as making the correct judgment or decision (*ngol ma atir*); another that was about “making right” or “renewing the truth” (*roco adaa*). The latter was promising, but ultimately the team determined it was not well-known enough to be understood as the primary translation. The primary translation we decided to use was *yubu gin ma obale ni*, or “repairing the wrong.” In introducing the question about justice, however, the interview guide describes the concept using *yubu gin ma obale ni*, *roco adaa*, and *ngolo*.

²⁴ We completed 56 interviews; 55 were individual interviews, but one interview included two participants, a CBOW and their mother. One respondent also did not fit either survivor group of interest, thus is not included in this analysis. See Appendices for further information on the participants and methodology.

Healing: It was important to ensure the term used for healing was holistic. A literal translation of healing would connote physical health. We also discussed a term referring to the heart or emotional healing (*kweyo cwiny*), but similarly decided this would be one-dimensional. We decided to use a more process-oriented term that is holistic, not only referring to one component of healing, referring to getting some healing or having a healing process or path (*nicango*).

Community: In translating the concept of community, the challenge was to not use a term that referred to geographic community. We wanted to be asking about relationships, social support, and so on, from a “community” that may involve people who lived elsewhere. We used a term to refer to relationships more broadly (*wat*).

Documentation: This was an extremely challenging concept to decide how to translate, as well as how to ask respondents about. The interview guide has substantial introductory material for the interviewer to use to explain this idea to the respondent. Even determining the phrasing to use in English was challenging. Saying “documentation” was too formal. We tried “shared your story with others,” but that was too informal. We decided on the English version to be “recorded the story of your past.” We considered a common translation (*keto l coc*), but it refers generally to writing something down, and we wanted modalities to be more open. We agreed on the phrase “keep the record” or “keep what has happened” (*gwoko gin ma otime*).

Characteristics of Respondents

The 40 mothers of children born of war who participated in interviews are survivors of torture. In 2023, they were 30 to 54 years old. These women had been abducted by the LRA as children or adolescents, were victims of forced marriage and rape by older men, and gave birth to children while in captivity or returned while pregnant. They also were victims of many other abuses, including forced labor, beating, walking and carrying heavy loads over long distances, being forced to kill or harm others, and witnessing atrocities, including the killing of their loved ones.²⁵

The mothers we interviewed explained that their return to civilian communities was usually without the men who fathered their children. They often were unsure of the identities of the fathers of their children, as some men never disclosed their places of origin and/or did not use their real names; thus, they returned without connections to the family of their children’s fathers. Additionally, the types of atrocities they were subjected to—sexual violence and forced to harm others—led to significant social stigma and judgment. Women-led families already face alienation and discrimination in patriarchal

²⁵ These experiences have been described by several authors, such as: Amony, Evelyn. 2015. *I Am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord’s Resistance Army*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. Acan, Grace, Evelyn Amony, John Harris, and Maria del Guadalupe Davidson. 2019. “How Formerly Abducted Women in Post-Conflict Situations Are Reasserting Their Humanity in a Hostile Environment: Photovoice Evidence from Northern Uganda.” *Gender & Development* 27 (2): 273–94. Kiconco, Allen. 2021. *Gender, Conflict and Reintegration in Uganda: Abducted Girls, Returning Women*. London: Routledge.

communities, but these mothers have often been shunned from their home communities due to these experiences. Some have gotten married, but this can create new problems for their children who are not likely to be supported by the new husband.

In addition, many reported experiencing persistent negative psychological and physical effects of their experiences, which have also been documented in other research and observed by CVT while providing counseling services. Some women still struggle with post-traumatic symptoms, such as hallucinations (e.g. seeing people who died), not being able to be in noisy places, or having sudden noises trigger their flight-fight responses. They also still struggle with physiological effects of the torture they underwent, such as having physical disabilities, having bullets still in their bodies, or dealing with reproductive issues from having given birth at a very young age. As a result of these challenges, many of these women face functional difficulties in their daily life that affect their economic, social, and emotional well-being.

The children who were born as a result of their mothers' captivity are now young adults (youth). The 16 young people (nine men and seven women) who participated in interviews ranged from 19 to 28 years old; the 26 focus group participants (13 men and 13 women) ranged from 15 to 28 years old.²⁶ Some CBOWs directly experienced traumatic events as children while they were still living with the LRA, but others did not have the direct exposure to atrocities that their mothers did or may have been exposed but were too young to remember. In post-war communities, these young people are often seen as "children of the LRA," frequently struggling with claims to paternal lineage and land access. They face stigma and other barriers to economic self-sufficiency and social belonging. Survivor groups and others have been raising awareness that many CBOWs are officially stateless persons, as they cannot prove their lineage or place of birth; there have been efforts recently to develop alternative options to establish official identity and register CBOWs for national identification cards. There has also been renewed attention and efforts to understand the unique needs of these survivors, recognizing that as they become adults, they want to speak for themselves directly.²⁷ As they navigate extremely challenging life circumstances, many CBOWs demonstrate deep resilience, identifying creative strategies and resources to adapt to their social circumstances and other adversities.²⁸

The survivors who participated in this needs assessment shared some characteristics, including patterns in the human rights violations they endured. However, the respondents were a diverse group of people. The specific harms committed against them and the effects on their lives varied from individual to individual. Our aim is to narrate patterns that emerge in this assessment, as well as explaining those who may have alternative viewpoints.

²⁶ This is in line with the age ranges documented in Justice and Reconciliation Project 2024, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Issa, Korir. 16 May 2024. "Forgotten Voices: Uganda's Children Born of War Want to Belong." *Journalists for Justice*. Available at: <https://jfjustice.net/ugandas-children-born-of-war-want-to-belong/>.

²⁸ Apio, Eunice Otuko. 2022. "Resilience among Children Born of War in Northern Uganda." *Frontiers in Political Science* 4.

A list of basic characteristics of each respondent is included in [Appendix 4](#).

Justice

In this section, we explore survivors' views about what would bring them a sense of justice for the human rights violations that they experienced. We briefly describe the wrongs for which survivors are seeking repair, and then go in depth about how survivors define justice and how they see formal transitional justice mechanisms. The section concludes by discussing survivors' levels of hope and skepticism about justice.

Findings

Harms that Need Repair

When asked about justice, or “repairing the wrongs,” mothers described a range of harms that they need justice to address. Most referred to abduction at young ages, recounting rape and forced pregnancy, as well as forced labor, beatings, physical injuries, and witnessing violence. Several mentioned loved ones being killed, and many described being forced to commit crimes or harm others, including killing others. Some mentioned harm from specific deprivations, most notably from not having access to education. A few described these harms in more qualitative or holistic terms, saying that they need justice for “wasted periods” of life, for the brainwashing or clouded judgment from life in captivity, loss of their dreams, loss of self, or persistent self-blame for harms. Finally, several mothers described justice in relation to harms they experienced since returning, as they face life without social support or from experiencing ill-treatment in their communities:

When you are out of sight, they will start saying, ‘These abductees finished [killed] people and you see them back alive. They have returned with their children.’ So they keep on finger pointing. ...people start instigating that... ‘That’s a killer who has returned from the bush and possessed with vengeful spirits.’
(Interview 11)

The young people were less likely to have experienced or to be able to remember some of the direct violations their mothers underwent while in captivity, but they were looking for justice because of how the captivity affected their lives. They often linked repair to the wrongs of stigma and hatred in their communities and sometimes within their families, to not having a paternal home or land, and to the negative psychological and pragmatic effects they are experiencing from this.

Conceptualizations of Justice

By far the most common conceptualization of justice was in economic terms; 34 of 40 mothers (85 percent) described repairing the wrongs as receiving support in order to

become economically self-sufficient. This view was overwhelmingly common²⁹ among the CBOWs as well. Specific suggestions, often repeated, were that justice involves education, land, skills training, cash payments, business support, housing, animals, or agricultural support. For most of the women, they did not describe this only in terms of support for them, but immediately called for support for their children as an essential form of justice.

For repairing the wrongs to me, since I got abducted and my education was disrupted and if am to be taken back to school today it cannot work out any more, reason being I am already too old ... The only thing they can do for me is at least get me a place where I can live with my children or even paying my children in school. (Interview 50)

Several CBOWs described wanting to have a “happy life,” and linked this to economic stability and self-sufficiency, as one young woman described simply:

For instance, if you are working or doing skilled work and you are making money, you are eating well, your children are going to school and you are healthy, so these are the things that when you have them will help you repair the past harms. (Interview 13)

Many of the women framed this economic support as helping them to “get a new life,” to repair direct damage they experienced, to try to return to how life was before their abduction (or how their life could have been if they were not abducted), to empower them and their children, or to help forget their suffering. A few mothers said that this type of support is valuable and important to helping address challenges they face, but clarified that this type of support was not able to fully repair the wrongs.

Just over half of the mothers interviewed (53 percent) defined justice as positive and supportive relationships for survivors. This was also a very common view of the CBOW respondents, several of whom said that this was more important to them than economic or livelihood support. Many of the mothers and young people described this in negative (absence of) terms. They said that justice would be not facing stigma, not having community or family members threaten them, not being isolated from others, or not being labeled as killers. One CBOW explained a desire to live in the community like others do, “for what has gone wrong to be repaired, stigmatization and discrimination shouldn’t be there and my voice should be heard as a human just like the others” (Interview 48). Many also described the positive component, explaining that the presence of supportive people in their lives would be justice. They would experience a sense of repair through social integration and supportive relationships. One participant in a young women’s focus group explained the negative effects on her life when community members continually label them as “rebels,” saying,

²⁹ Since there were four focus group discussions with CBOWs, it is more difficult to quantify the prevalence of individual views for CBOWs. It is easier to report prevalence of particular viewpoints among the mothers of CBOWs because we conducted only individual interviews.

If you get to know that someone has returned from captivity with the suffering that they have undergone, it doesn't mean that if something bad happens you have to remind them how they are behaving like rebels. So when they keep telling you some of those things, even as a human being, you will not forget about some of the things you are being told, and instead forget to do the good things you are meant to be doing for yourself. (FGD 57)

A handful of mothers and many CBOWs framed this as “having a place that is home.” While this overlaps with calls for land in the economic conceptualization of justice, it is distinct because land is a primary symbol of social belonging in Acholi culture. Only people who belong as part of a community have rights to use or own land. These mothers defined justice as social belonging, which would be expressed through having land for their children and a place for them to be buried. One woman described her children questioning her about their home:

Then later they begin to ask “Where is our home?” and even you would not be able to tell the child. And so, you have to keep quiet because there is nothing you are able to do. But then if they are paid in school, and some land where they would go and stay as their home is got, at least they will forget and if they forget and are living freely, at least even your life will change because there wouldn't be so much that you have to worry about. Because your greatest worry is for the children. (Interview 2)

This fear was reflected in the CBOWs' own views, as many expressed significant concern about not having a physical or social home, because they do not have land.

I think what can be done to repair the harms is first of all the issue of land because right now we don't have any place to stay in with my mother. I know children will eventually come in and they won't have any place to stay in because if I wasn't born in captivity then at least I would have a home and I would at least have authority over one plot of land. (Interview 41)

Some mothers interviewed (28 percent) said that survivors receiving counseling or advice was justice.³⁰ This allowed survivors to be empowered and happy, despite external circumstances that were difficult and outside of their control. These women talked about justice as “repairing the mind,” having their nightmares stop, feeling healed, not worrying about their future, and getting advice on how to move on. Relatedly, a few respondents (10 percent) talked specifically about justice as dignity or feeling human, as being able to feel joyful, to live with their “head held high,” and experiencing self-acceptance. One mother described justice as this sense of internal confidence:

³⁰ Surprisingly, this view was not more prevalent among mothers who had previously received mental health support from CVT or elsewhere.

It is important to make right what has gone wrong because when you make right, at least it builds people's trust and they would also see that at least they are cared for and will at least empower you to live with people. Even when they stigmatize you, at least you have a future. (Interview 1)

Many CBOWs shared this view, seeing repair as getting support from counseling and advice of others. For some, similarly to the mothers, this was about helping them to cope with their emotional suffering. One young woman explained why she felt receiving emotional support was justice:

I feel like I don't coordinate with the things that go on in life and my personal life, because these things are expected to be done by someone who is normal and has always been in this setting. My mind tells me other things too, apart from the daily things. So it is like I am mixed up in it. I am just stuck in that. (FGD 57)

However, there was also a unique component to the CBOWs' call for advice and counseling. Several mentioned that they would like counselors to bring support and learning to those around them. They want their families and communities to understand more about the CBOWs' situations, and to know how to respond to them more effectively; for several, this was specifically related to not having others continually remind CBOWs of the past.

Another relatively common view of justice (25 percent of mothers of CBOWs and several CBOWs) was that forgiveness is a way to repair wrongs. A few explained that this is part of the "Acholi way," saying this is part of cultural practices of apologizing, discussing, forgiving, cleansing, and ultimately reconciling.

The reason as to why am saying it can be repaired for instance if you wrong your brother, you will go to him and ask for forgiveness for what that you did to him. It is the same as when someone kills your relative; you will go to such a person and talk to them and there is also the Acholi justice system which always bring a person who has wronged you and you sit down with them through mato oput, the Acholi justice system, and you reconcile with the perpetrator or the one you have wronged then you can become one again. (Interview 5)

For some, but not all, part of forgiveness is for the perpetrator to apologize and accept fault, as one respondent explained, "...if someone cannot apologize, what has gone wrong can never be made right...Someone asking for forgiveness draws something little from your heart. If someone apologized to you, you will calm down a bit" (Interview 4). About half of the mothers who talked about forgiveness said that forgiveness needed to be extended to them, that the survivors who committed harms should receive forgiveness, and that this is justice. One woman typified this view:

Repairing what has gone wrong... for it to become good is asking for forgiveness for the bad things that we did. Now we are asking for forgiveness and when you are forgiven, then you can live freely. (Interview 34)

Several mothers (20 percent) and CBOWs defined repairing the wrongs as dialogue and reconciliation. For these survivors, this is the way to address past conflicts, resolve issues, and find ways together to make things right again. The act of dialoguing itself is justice, as one young man said, "Making right what has gone wrong requires you to sit down and then you dialogue amongst yourself and then come to an agreement between the two of you" (Interview 10).

Seven mothers interviewed (18 percent) explicitly said that repair would come if they were able to forget the past. In some cases, this is linked to other ideas about justice, such as seeing economic support as justice, but ultimately because it would facilitate their ability to forget the ways they were harmed in the past. Forgetting the past was a relatively common way that CBOWs defined justice. Several of these young people emphasized that it was harmful to them to continue to be reminded of the past, and repair would come from not being continually reminded of it.

There were some mothers (15 percent) who defined justice as related to non-reoccurrence or prevention; this was rare among the CBOWs. One woman explained, "If what has gone wrong isn't repaired, crimes will continue to be committed because people will not realize that it is a crime. But if it is repaired, people won't repeat the same mistake" (Interview 25). For her, repairing the wrongs comes when she is sure that the same violations will not happen to others in the future, particularly that their children will not have to endure these experiences. Another expressed the view that non-reoccurrence is the type of justice available to them, given the inaccessibility of punishment for past harms:

The way I look at it, I feel like that there is nothing that can be done to the perpetrators because they are not here and getting them might be a very difficult task. What they have done has passed already and I don't know how it can be repaired because it has happened. They left people with a lot of suffering for example, the children born in captivity. So to me, I feel if there were some people who could stop such acts, so that the new generation does not pass through what we experienced and not live the way we are living now. (Interview 54)

There were several less commonly reported views of repairing wrongs. Some mothers (13 percent) had a punitive view of justice. They particularly mentioned that top commanders should be investigated and held accountable. One woman mentioned that this type of investigation would help clarify who was most responsible, and thus establish that the people who were abducted and killed others did so because they were forced, and were also victims themselves, thus could help reduce the stigma they are experiencing. Very few CBOWs mentioned punitive justice. One explained that justice may include some punitive element, but that is less central than a focus on repairing the survivors' lives.

Justice is repairing me. To a very low extent, it is taking someone to court, maybe to answer for their crimes. But I see that has little impact on me; repairing me is justice because it has a greater impact on me, it will change my life. I will not have to worry about everything that happened to me, or think about the perpetrator or anything because my life will be better off and I will be happier. If I am repaired now...I don't have to look at what happened I will just look forward...

I think it is most important to focus on repairing the lives, the human repair ...I think that is the most important thing to me because ...even when the perpetrators are prosecuted, the survivors and the victims stay in their same states. (Interview 28)

Relatedly, a handful of respondents (13 percent of mothers and several CBOWs) said that justice is about truth and acknowledgment. For them, this means not being labeled as “rebels” by the government, having recognition that both sides of the armed conflict committed abuses, and the government acknowledging that they failed to protect civilians.

Both sides were fighting but it was the civilians who were most affected by the war and so there are certain atrocities that were committed by government soldiers and other atrocities committed by the LRA soldiers but then you will hear only one group that is being mentioned of having committed atrocities yet the other group also committed atrocities as well. That is why I said earlier that there is need to have truth telling so that there is justice at the end of it all. (Interview 31)

A CBOW focus group participant said that justice requires investigation of the past: “To make it right, they do look for witnesses to find out what exactly happened and who are the people who did it. It is basically getting to know how something occurred so that it can be repaired” (FGD 60). Another said that the truth about past abuses is a prerequisite for apology and forgiveness:

This is where there is truth-telling that, yes this and this has happened and there is forgiveness, where if the government believes that they also did some part, were also perpetrators. They should say they are sorry. And to me, [making] right for the victims means, I think, truthfulness and then some constitutional reforms that will favor everyone, not considering who they were or where they were born. (Interview 29)

There were also five mothers of CBOW (13 percent) that described justice as medical care for physical injuries, pain, diseases, or generally poor health as a result of the harms they experienced. For example, women reported still having bullets in their bodies, having pain remaining from beatings, or dealing with the effects of HIV/AIDS that they contracted while in captivity.

Three interviewed mothers said that justice was peace, emphasizing that simply being home again now or having the LRA out of Uganda was repair to them. Two mothers defined justice as their children having a better life than they did. One said justice is her being able to teach the next generation about what is good and right in life, because when she lived “in the bush” this was something that was taken from her—she lost the ability to tell right and wrong at that time. One said that the CBOWs having identity documentation would be justice, as many of the young people are currently living as stateless persons. Finally, one woman said justice for her is having cleansing of spirits related to past harms.

Transitional Justice Mechanisms

Respondents were not asked directly for their views about existing justice-related institutions, but some survivors spoke about particular transitional justice mechanisms that have been utilized in northern Uganda, or may be in the future. They highlighted positive elements of these mechanisms where they resonated with their views on justice, as well as noting normative or pragmatic concerns. The mothers were more likely to mention these institutional mechanisms, while CBOWs rarely discussed these in the context of justice.

Given the respondents’ ideas about justice were so closely tied to living a good economic life and being self-sufficient, and given the timing of the Ongwen trial at the ICC and Kwoyello at the ICD at the time of data collection, it was not surprising that reparations were the most frequently mentioned formal transitional justice mechanism. Reparations that provide monetary or other material support would be directly in line with many survivors’ conception of justice. Mothers interviewed explained how reparations would help restore survivors’ strength and dignity, forgetting the past and moving towards a productive future. As one woman explained, simply, “My life ought to be repaired so that I can be able to look after myself and my children as well” (Interview 40).

At the same time that they strongly advocated reparations, some mothers also expressed significant concerns. A few said that for the types of wrongs they experienced, no payment would be able to repair the harm, so reparations are not an appropriate form of justice. Others had skepticism that reparations would be implemented. They observe that NGOs delivering services can be a form of reparations, but see the government as responsible and should have a bigger role, though they ultimately think the government is unlikely to accept that they had a responsibility to protect and thus are responsible for a reparations program. One said that support for reparations for survivors cannot come only from Uganda, other countries need to support this.

Another particularly prevalent critique of reparations is related to potential conflict coming from the design and implementation of a reparations program. One survivor was concerned that people who were not abducted may claim payments. Another explained that reparations will be selectively applied, with decisions not made based on

considerations of all the areas where survivors are living. Another cautioned that there is potential for exploitation, so reparations should be administered directly to survivors, not through any third party. Several said that reparations may spark community animosity directed at recipients, as people may see them as being compensated for killing people, and thus survivors may face repercussions. Receiving reparations may lead to the community talking negatively about survivors, or even attacking reparation recipients. One woman was fearful of her neighbors' actions if she received reparations, saying,

...let's say the formerly abducted people have been paid reparations then people in the community will also complain that they also suffered as well so they would also want to be paid. If I am paid then maybe I build myself a house or even buy cows, you will hear people say that you are the one who used to kill people, so now why are you being given cows. So the negative result might be in a sense that my house might be torched or my cows might be killed. (Interview 27)

Half a dozen mothers mentioned trials. Those who saw them positively mentioned that courts can help set an example for other perpetrators and can establish who was most responsible for the serious harms, including the abduction of young people, thus potentially reducing stigma survivors face. One woman explained that legal investigations can help navigate these challenging questions around guilt:

I was listening to the radio about one of our colleagues who was taken ...and investigations were done. That was justice and justice from my perspective is to first look at the person who has perpetrated the harms. Who is the perpetrator? And for you who was abducted while still a minor, are you also a perpetrator? If people have asked for forgiveness, they can be forgiven ...making right what has gone wrong can be there when people weigh up and see whether or not it is a crime. If it was a crime, where did it start from and where did it reach? And when a crime has been perpetrated on him, what should then be done for him to get healing from that crime? And was he the one who started the crime or it is an inherited crime? (Interview 17)

For others, there were concerns that courts may not be able to adequately account for victim-perpetrator identities or concerns that courts are limited in their ability to find individuals guilty, even if they truly are guilty.

A handful of mothers mentioned the amnesty, linking it to forgiveness for what they were forced to do, feeling that it positively indicated the government was welcoming them even after committing harmful acts. However, one woman had a more critical view and said that they had not understood amnesty well at the time, and that it implied that the returnees were rebels, rather than victims themselves:

When we came back home, they gave us amnesty and the amnesty card that we were given, we didn't understand it very well. Yet the amnesty card was saying we were rebels who were fighting the government that was not true because I

didn't decide one day that I should go to the bush. I was abducted by the rebels. (Interview 26)

A few mothers and a few CBOWs discussed the culturally-based cleansing rituals that were done. To them, this transitional justice mechanism resonated with their ideas about justice because it linked to forgiveness for what the survivor did, it could make survivors feel supported, and it draws on local leadership to help survivors integrate into communities. A challenge noted was that doing these rituals requires elders and resources, and also that these types of rituals would not be appropriate for “serious harms.”

Hope for Justice

The survivors interviewed had mixed levels of hope or optimism about if justice – in whichever way they defined it – was possible. About half had the opinion that justice was unlikely, though this pessimism seemed stronger among the mothers compared to the young people. They said that they had not yet experienced anything that fit their definition of justice, they were still facing stigma, they do not feel free, and they have not been able to rebuild their lives. A few talked about the empty promises of justice from the government or organizations, as one CBOW exclaimed, “The government knows of our existence, they should be our father but they ignore our cries” (FGD 58). Some described barriers to justice, such as the government not listening to them, leaders exploiting their desires for justice, or deep discrimination and lack of support at home, as one woman explained,

It cannot be made right and I can't even waste my time because you can go with me for dialogue at home, and they [the people at her home] will assure you that everything will be fine. But the moment you people leave the place, then the situation changes so it becomes very hard. (Interview 20)

Many women and a few CBOWs also explained that ultimately nothing can fully repair the types of wrongs they experienced, just as you cannot completely remove “a scar on your body.” One woman believes that there will be no justice in her lifetime, and that her children and grandchildren will also continue to suffer. Similarly, another expresses the difficulty of working towards justice:

I: Do you think the harms committed on you can be repaired?

R: It can but it is hard because it has already entered deep into my body. It is like a wound on our backs. (Interview 15)

Others temper these perspectives and feel that while full and complete repair may not be possible, there are things that can be done to make progress towards justice. Over half of the survivors interviewed did express some hope for justice, even if they did not observe significant progress yet. Some appreciate the support coming from NGOs, and feel this is contributing to justice. Others call on the government to provide help, and

have hope that if they do so, there will be some justice. A few women feel that simply being able to come home has helped them experience justice, saying,

It is like they have now repaired it because right now I am back at home even though I thought I would die in the bush but now I am back home and this is what I am most thankful to God for because I was abducted when I was still very young but now that I have come back home, I know it has been repaired.
(Interview 21)

Many of these survivors have a longer-range view of repair, and are considering how their children may experience justice, such as this mother and a CBOW:

I personally feel right now with my current health conditions ...I feel that I will die with the harms that I suffered. It can never be repaired. Maybe for my children because they are still young but for my case, nothing will be repaired. This is because I feel my body weakness is increasing day by day. (Interview 37)

People died during the war; people were hurt during the war, you cannot take their body parts back. Why not do something to sustain their lives, because the government cannot take back the broken parts. Yes, the missing ears, the legs cannot be brought back ...lives that were lost cannot be repaired, but at least something should be done for the families to keep them pushing on. (Interview 29)

Finally, a half dozen mothers (but no CBOWs) shared that they had experienced some exploitation of their need for justice. They reported a range of experiences. Some said that groups come and ask for survivors' stories or ask for money from survivors, but then there is no follow through and the groups never come back to them. They also shared experiences of local leaders or government officials using survivors' names to attract support, and then skewing that assistance to their own relatives; one explained:

We do not want the support for us, we want it for the children alone. But the government is not treating that as something important. They ask you to fill forms and do other things. You fill the form and when money comes, they fill their bellies with it. In that case, they are not thinking about us. (Interview 46)

Discussion

Throughout the findings above, we note how frequently a perspective was expressed among the 82 survivors who participated in this assessment. While this is helpful, remember that these were responses to broad, open-ended questions, so the prevalence of these views expressed comes from survivors raising these definitions or associations spontaneously. For example, about half of the mothers talked about justice as having positive relationships. It is possible that if all respondents were asked directly if positive relationships would be a form of justice to them, more of the survivors

interviewed may have agreed with this. This should be kept in mind when interpreting these findings.

In the past 15 years, governments, civil society, and transitional justice institutions have devoted significant resources to transitional justice efforts in northern Uganda, and the region has been at the forefront of many transitional justice debates among practitioners and researchers. As one example, the ICC's investigations in northern Uganda—resulting in the new Court's first arrest warrants—came in the context of an expansive amnesty, perceptions of politicized and one-sided justice, and strong civil society calls for justice rooted in local practices. This placed northern Uganda at the center of conversations about how to balance justice with peace and the global with the local. In this face of this, the ICC Trust Fund for Victims worked to develop innovative approaches to engage with affected communities broadly and with survivors/witnesses. However, despite these substantial efforts (including some that focused specifically on the communities where participants in this assessment live), punitive justice through legal accountability was not the primary way respondents described justice that would be meaningful to them. While formal institutional transitional justice efforts have proliferated, many survivors still define justice through a more intimate lens of their own lived experiences and their family's well-being.

For the mothers interviewed, justice is overwhelmingly about their families, as two-thirds of these women automatically framed their ideas about repair as providing support for a better life for their children. Their children are the direct result of the human rights violations they endured, and thus caring for them can be seen as a transformation of the harm. When atrocities have intergenerational legacies, the method of repair needs a similar lens.

As described above, for many, justice is about economics. We could interpret respondents' calls for financial, livelihood, and material support as typical requests among people who subsist with very few resources.³¹ However, the types of support survivors described were directly connected to the harms they experienced, such as loss of education and other opportunities. When they say that justice comes from economic support, it is directly seeking to remedy particular human rights abuses that have resulted in an extremely limited range of options available for survivors to support themselves or their families. A comprehensive reparations program would be well-placed to fulfill this vision of justice, and the promise of reparations resonates for the survivors interviewed. However, they also expressed significant fears about how reparations would be designed, with concerns not only about lack of effective implementation but also that they may be placed at risk for further harm as a result of receiving reparations. These concerns and fears seem well-founded, given the current confusion and dilemmas surrounding implementation of reparations in the Kwoyello and Ongwen cases, particularly as they are tied only to specific case locations in their respective reparations orders.

³¹ Or, as discussed elsewhere, some calls for economically-based justice may have been linked to hopes for material support as a result of the interview, although the survivor group leaders, CVT staff, and interviewers all explained that this was not the purpose of the assessment.

We note a substantial diversion from the views about justice shared by respondents in the earlier surveys conducted by Pham and her colleagues.³² At that time, the most commonly expressed understandings of justice aligned with trials, fairness, and holding wrongdoers accountable. In the time that passed between their surveys and this assessment, it is not surprising that survivors' priorities may have shifted, particularly as the landscape of formal transitional justice mechanisms has changed. It is also possible that our broader conceptual translation of "justice" prompted participants in our interviews to consider more holistic ideas about repair in their lives.

Respondents' perspectives on justice were of course rooted in beliefs and practices within Acholi culture,³³ and any justice-promoting initiatives, here or elsewhere, must be contextualized within the worldview of the people for whom the repair is intended to support.

Shared collective identity and belonging are relevant within any society. However, the need for belonging is even more pronounced in communally-oriented cultures, such as the Acholi worldview and system of social organization. Identity originates strongly from clan membership, responsibility is linked to communal obligations, and property is governed by collective customary norms. Given this, social isolation and stigma is a particularly devastating effect of human rights violations, and any efforts towards justice should seriously consider possibilities to remedy this. As described by respondents, these survivors face extremely pervasive discrimination. They are seen as carrying a curse because of their involvement in killing or harming others, and thus others perceive that they cannot be trusted as normal, peaceful community members. This has been a persistent barrier to returning home and full integration.

Respondents' discussions of forgiveness and reconciliation are linked to Acholi ideas about unity and order, too. Unity is interrupted by wrongdoing between people, and thus repair and forgiveness restore unity and order. The Acholi cultural system of dispute resolution is built on this idea, and pursuing justice through this system involves admission of fault, forgiveness, and reconciliation, which restores the social and spiritual order. Notably, not many respondents mentioned traditional cleansing or reconciliation rituals in the interviews. CVT's program team does hear that these are meaningful for survivors we work with as clients, some of whom express longing for ritual cleansing as a way to restore their relationships. Such rituals usually require full clan involvement, with the members taking on shared accountability. This may feel like a desire for survivors that is not currently feasible, given the level of stigma and social isolation they experience, which may have been part of the reason these practices were rarely mentioned.

³² Pham et al. 2005; Pham et al. 2007; Pham and Vinck 2010, *op. cit.*

³³ There are excellent resources that provide more in-depth explorations of Acholi culture, especially during the war and post-war periods, such as: Sverker, Finnström. 2008. *Living with Bad Surroundings*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

One overarching theme from these interviews is that respondents frequently described justice as the absence of harm or pain. This “negative” view of justice is quite prevalent among these survivors, who emphasize that repairing the wrongs is simply being able to live normally or freely. For some, they do not mention any additional elements that they believe they need in order to find justice for the atrocities perpetrated against them. Typifying this view, one mother said, “The way I understand justice is that I should be allowed to live like the people who remained at home.” (Interview 44) While this is indisputably something survivors should be entitled to, this may be interpreted as a somewhat limited view of justice, as this does not provide additional components to address or remedy the egregious crimes they experienced. Many of the respondents lacked hope for justice, despite northern Uganda being well over a decade into transitional justice efforts. This may result in survivors holding very simple ideas of justice: just allow me to live as everyone else.

We turn next to the other three thematic areas in the survivor interviews, particularly highlighting where their perspectives on healing, community, and documentation intersect with how they perceive justice.

Healing

This section focuses on survivors’ perspectives on healing, emphasizing holistic healing rather than physical healing. We explore their understanding of healing, what facilitates and hinders their healing processes, and the connections they see between healing and justice.

Findings

One mother typified a viewpoint that healing comes from the interplay of multiple sources, from faith in god, from forgetting their negative experiences, and from having the support of others.

How I understand healing is: for you to heal, then you have to go through prayers ...Then secondly, you get healing through forgetting about something that has affected your life. Still you would get healing because when you don’t do those things then healing will not happen to you. And thirdly, when you are not assisted then you won’t get healing. When you stay by yourself, you are most likely going to die because you need to have people to support you so that you can get healing. (Interview 38)

God as Comfort

Some survivors described how god and their religious belief system facilitates their healing. In the past, god watched over them and today their faith offers consolation, freedom, and support.

Another thing that has helped me get healing is by staying closer to the church. I like listening to the word of God because I don't know how to read but when I am told the word of God, it makes me feel happy and it makes me feel free. (Interview 34)

For most, god and prayers are one component that help their healing. For a few, those with deeply held and highly personal religious beliefs, healing is only possible through god.

Nothing else consoled me apart from my coming back home in which I came back and began to focus on the words of God. That is what I feel consoled me, there was nothing else in which some other people comforted me. Sharing the words of God is what consoled me. (Interview 24)

Accepting or Forgetting the Past

Some respondents explained that accepting what happened is an indicator of healing. As one mother explained, "Even if I cry that my rights were violated, I was abducted...and many things happened to me, what else? When you accept that fact, then your healing will come" (Interview 27). Another explains how letting go of the past allows her to have a calm mind:

In my opinion, for my heart to get healing it means I have let go of everything that has happened to me. I let go of it and even when some is abusing me, I go about my work like someone who has not heard what they are saying. Therefore, you stay with a calm mind. For me I have let go of all the bad things that have happened to me because I felt that if I am to put too much pressure on myself and dwell on the fact that I was abducted and taken into captivity, I would be suffering and hopeless. I had to let go of the bad things. (Interview 44)

Beyond acceptance, many respondents described "forgetting the past" as a foundational part of healing. In some cases, this was a desire to completely block memories of what happened, while for others it was more about not having intrusive negative thoughts about the past in the course of their everyday lives or not being constantly reminded of the past by those around them. Some described specific situations in their lives, such as sitting with their friends, going to church, or being occupied in business, in which they are able to temporarily forget the past, and they feel some progress towards healing in those moments.

Some respondents explained that they are only willing to "remember" the past (that is, talk about, think about, or document) if there will be some justice associated with it. However, in the absence of justice, they felt it is better for the healing process to try to forget what happened.

Roles of Others

Most respondents described having a social support system as crucial for the healing process. Having people who understand and acknowledge their experiences gives them a sense of comfort and belonging in the community, which facilitates their ongoing healing. However, as discussed previously, these survivors often face social isolation, which is a hindrance to their healing. For survivors with a collective view of healing process, it is highly distressing when people do not see them positively or offer support.

One specific way that others offer social support that contributes to healing is through counseling or advice. Some respondents referred to formal counseling, while others described informal counseling or receiving advice from trusted loved ones or community members.

Those who had participated in counseling spoke about their life before and after counseling and how it helped change their lives for the better. They described counseling, particularly in groups, as a platform for sharing ideas and being heard. To them, knowing that there is someone out there who listens, understands, and acknowledges their pain helps with healing. One respondent who had participated in counseling groups explained how the social support in processing past experiences was helpful:

What helped me get consoled was the counselling that I was given, because at that time I was so badly off that I even felt like committing suicide. I was going through a very difficult period and then those people came immediately and began counselling me... When we got into a serious discussion in which we were sharing ideas and experiences, we could cry while thinking about how we lived in the bush because that thing comes and forces itself into your heart and you will feel like narrating everything. Then after all those people we were sharing with began sharing with us various ideas on how to get better and that at least helped us get healing. (Interview 4)

Another described a metaphor she learned in counseling that helps her make progress towards healing by teaching her to look for how her children can bring her a hopeful future:

What has helped me to get healing, first of all I dedicated my life to the creator, I like praying because it consoles me. I also got counselling and it consoled me that a tree can break down or its top part may break, but then the branches will sprout out and come out and become something good. So in all that I got healing and consolation. Also the children that we came back with, I see them every day and am struggling with them... and then reflect that even though I have suffered, I have my children, maybe in the future they will become my pillar. (Interview 5)

Many others described experiencing healing from the informal counsel or advice that they receive from supportive people around them, appreciating when others invest their time and energy in helping them.

Healing is when someone takes their time and comes to you and gives you good advice to relieve the worries that you have in your heart...When you are in too many problems, getting healing becomes very difficult. If nobody comes to give you support and advice as an individual, then getting healing will be very hard for you. (Interview 49)

One woman described how essential getting advice from her friends is to her, explaining that it is literally lifesaving:

What helps me to get healing sometimes when I am hurting—I think it just happened last week, and I asked myself what I should do. So, I went and visited one of my friends. I told her why I am hurting and she counseled me...if you keep it to yourself, it will cause you more hurting and, you never know, you might end up dying. And, you would have destroyed the future of your children and yet it wasn't yet your time to die. So when you visit your friends, it is very helpful. (Interview 45)

Barriers to Healing

According to some survivors, two conditions or factors often interrupt or block their healing processes. First, the ongoing stigma, discrimination, and social rejection, from within the family as well as more broadly in the community, forces them to continue to remember what happened to them and prevents the positive effects of social belonging, support, and counsel. The mothers described how this is also passed down to their children, most of whom may not fully know what happened, but have the identity of being born in captivity. They spoke about being voiceless, excluded from community activities, and constantly reminded of their experiences; all of these hinder the healing process.

It brings up all the bad memories and these things remain held up in our hearts and you find people relapsing, there is no healing. (Interview 29)

When asked about healing, a young man explained how stigma continually brings him pain:

Relating with the community members is very hard every time they look at you, you feel as if they want to kill you, you know, telling a young kid that, "This is the person, his dad murdered your father." It is painful when you were even a child from there [in the bush], you didn't know anything. (Interview 41)

Some of them have learned to live with the stigma, forcing themselves to be unbothered by the things people say about them. They explain that as much as they hurt, they have no control over people's actions.

[Stigma] will never end and it cannot be stopped but rather you will just have to console yourself that you have to stay among the people just like any human being. That is why we live with the people in our communities like human beings who should coexist with one another, we don't quarrel with them and neither do we abuse them. But when you move past them you will hear them say, "That one is a returnee"...stigmatization will never end. (Interview 5)

Secondly, instability in their current living situations is a hindrance to healing. For some of the respondents, healing is difficult or impossible to achieve when they are lacking resources needed to provide for themselves and their children. They said poverty and insecurity reduces their self-confidence and makes it hard to move on with life, again making it difficult to forget the past because they are constantly reminded of its effects (such as lack of education). Being economically self-sufficient can also help mitigate the negative effects of stigma and discrimination, making the respondents less dependent on support of others for survival. Therefore, for these survivors, healing is connected to having access to tangible items, such as land, housing or shelter, money, and educational support. Helping to address their basic needs reduces the strain of economic instability on their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing, making them able to focus more on their healing journey.

Healing and Justice

Most respondents highlighted a strong connection between justice and healing, either when prompted by the interviewer directly or as a natural part of their reflections on the meaning of these two concepts. Many suggested that one cannot fully exist without the other. At the same time, many respondents struggled to articulate a clear difference, describing similar characteristics for each or directly saying that they are similar concepts. One mother explained how they are part of the same process, like removing a bullet and the flesh healing itself:

The difference isn't big; healing is the same as repairing what has gone wrong [justice], because earlier I gave an example that sometimes you might have come back home with an injury or a bullet lodged inside your body. Even if they remove the bullet from your body, the scar will remain because the flesh that was supposed to cover that area has already been removed by the bullet, but they would have removed the bullet, meaning that healing is the same as repairing what has gone wrong so that it can become fine. It might have been damaged but it is still working. Even with weaknesses, it still works. Healing also still makes your heart which was wounded to still think about doing something good. It still says when I do like this and that then it will be good for my life or for my children and even for the clan. So, I find healing and repairing what has gone wrong to be

the same they are not so far, there is a very small gate between the two, so they are the same. (Interview 27)

Others did articulate a greater distinction between healing and justice. Generally, these respondents emphasized that healing is about making you feel better, getting relief from your suffering, finding consolation, and forgetting the past to live your present life. Justice is focused on an action, on doing something to make wrongs become right or to repair harms, to prevent abuses in the future.

Some participants who reflected on the relationship between the concepts believed that justice must precede healing, others felt healing needed to come before justice, and a few participants were unable to determine which should take precedence, emphasizing instead that they are intertwined. Those who felt that healing should come first emphasized that the internal healing process was foundational, saying “before repairing the wrongs you have to heal people’s heart then you can start repairing the wrongs” (Interview 52). Some of these respondents perceive that healing is a part of or makes a contribution to justice. For a few survivors who were really struggling with their own healing—for example, having persistent nightmares—it was difficult for them to imagine how to repair the wrongs, saying that getting justice was not possible for them.

Others felt that the process of working towards justice—whether through reconciliation, forgiveness, reparation, financial support, or relationship building—provides the foundation for psychological healing. This perspective was more commonly expressed. As one participant explained, justice can restore strength and hope, which facilitates the healing process.

When you feel that there is no justice, there is nothing being done about it, not even any relationship building, every other day that comes is the same and there is nothing being done for us, then it is bad. But then when we get some justice, at least we get healing because we will at least have the energy or hope to do something. (Interview 2)

Some survivors perceived that justice contributes to or brings about healing, others explained that justice is a form of healing, but the shared perspective was that justice is a prerequisite to full healing – healing is only possible after justice.

[Healing and repairing the wrongs] move hand in hand, due to the fact that if it is not repaired then you won’t be happy and you won’t get healing. You will remain that way. But if there are other areas that have been repaired then you will have relief as well. (Interview 38)

Repairing the wrong is important because at least it can heal our hearts. And it will make us not worry a lot and think that at least the government care about us to make us be seen like humans among others. It will also make us forget about our past experience. (Interview 15)

For these respondents, justice can help to re-balance right and wrong and restore their sense of humanity. This repair has transformative potential to foster healing at an individual level.

Discussion

Several of the themes that emerged in findings about justice are also prominent in survivors' perspectives on healing. Social relationships and the ability to provide for themselves and their families are important, and so the ongoing challenges in these areas are barriers to both justice and to healing.

Most respondents did offer at least some differentiation between healing and justice. But, in many cases, this was minimal, often murky, and lacked conceptual distinction. Rather than interpreting this as a challenge or limitation—either with the interview method or with the survivors' views themselves—these findings underscore the importance of addressing survivors' needs for both justice and healing simultaneously, as each plays a critical role in restoring dignity, hope, and a sense of belonging to survivors. The pursuits of healing and justice are so inextricably intertwined for these survivors that it is not possible to consider how to heal the flesh without taking the action to remove the bullet that caused the wound.

The most commonly mentioned idea about healing is that it involves some type of “forgetting” the past. However, it seems as though there is considerable variation in what this implies, and also where it may fall on a continuum of positive or healthy responses to trauma to more problematic responses. “Forgetting” may mean that a survivor has found ways to process what happened to them, that they have come to terms with the past, and that it is not continually interrupting their daily lives anymore with flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and so on. However, others may not have had these opportunities, and may find that the only way to continue with their daily lives is to repress any memories or thoughts of the past. Without healthy coping mechanisms and supportive resources, for these survivors, forgetting may be more about denying, forcing oneself not to give any space in their mind or emotions to the past. Given the lack of options or resources available to support deeper healing, this may be the only viable way they have to deal with the past and maintain functioning in their current lives, but it may not be an indicator of durable, holistic healing. For all survivors, even those who have processed their traumatic memories through counseling, living in a context with stigma and discrimination may mean they are constantly reminded about the past by other people, making “forgetting” nearly impossible. Survivors' reflections in this area were complex, and also it was challenging to probe more deeply in the context of research interviews, without risking unethically causing distress to respondents.

There are considerable needs and opportunities for counseling services revealed through these interviews. The complexities of coping with trauma and balancing “forgetting” and accepting what happened can be addressed through professional or paraprofessional support. The survivors interviewed expressed not only an openness to receiving counseling and advice, but a strong desire for this type of support. This

suggests that group counseling by trained counselors can be particularly effective; this is also in line with CVT's observations of the efficacy of group-based counseling interventions in this region over the past 15 years. In addition to support through formal counseling services, these survivors also articulated a desire to receive counsel from members of their communities, suggesting a need for informal community-based resources that can support survivors in this way.

Community

This section focuses on how survivors experience belonging, or lack thereof, in their families and communities. While they face stigma that brings a range of negative consequences, survivors also have some sources of support and have cultivated resilience and hope.

Findings

Pervasive Social Isolation

Many respondents described stigma rooted in their identity as “being abducted” or being “rebels,” which leads to discrimination and isolation in their communities. As discussed in previous sections, they often raised this issue when asked about justice and about healing, and they continued to emphasize this during the section of the interviews that focused on life in community. When mothers were distressed during interviews, it was most commonly when talking about their children experiencing stigma, facing segregation, or not being accepted. Children born of war and the mothers of these young people nearly unanimously feel the negative effects of the stigma in their daily lives.

They describe feeling completely isolated in their communities, excluded from events like funerals or village meetings. The respondents described instances of isolation and discrimination coming from their family members, neighbors and other community members, and from community leaders and elected local officials. This exclusion is rooted in stereotypes and beliefs about the experiences, character, and identity of these mothers and their children. Respondents reported the common perception that “people like us who were abducted by the rebels have become useless people, that we have evil spirits in us” (Interview 50). There is animosity linked to the harms that the survivors were forced to participate in perpetrating, or that they were perceived to have been a part of due to living with the LRA. Respondents reported that some community members express a wish that survivors had not returned, especially when others had not. One woman explained:

My own relatives, my paternal uncles, did not like me due to the fact that their daughters did not come back from captivity but I came back with five children. That alone made our relationship very bad...[and there was an idea that] there

was something that I did that made me survive in captivity with the children when all my colleagues died. (Interview 33)

There is also stigma rooted in the nature of the harms, particularly sexual violence, and in living now as single mothers and as “fatherless” children. Finally, respondents also perceived that there are negative feelings about them if they ever receive any additional support, such as school fees or vocational training.

This stigma is often passed down to the children, who are ostracized, belittled, and frequently also referred to as “rebels” or “possessed.” One mother reflects, “When your child commits an offense, then they will say ‘rebel children behave like their mother, no wonder their father perished in the bush’ (Interview 20), a reminder of the generational stigma that impacts both the mother and her children. Acts of discrimination and marginalization have further discouraged the survivors from participating in community events, prompting them to keep a low profile and self-isolate to avoid being identified as “rebels.”

It is like one day we were in a group at the church and there was a young woman who knew about my past life. Then she lamented that, “Rebel children shouldn’t be allowed to live with other people because they can become possessed anytime and she harms us. Let’s remove her from the group.” So I came back and told my mother and she told me not to worry and she told me not to stay in a place where I suspect people know about my story and that I should stay by myself. So, that is how am living my life, and I don’t have good relationship with people. (Interview 39)

While certainly some respondents describe some supportive, positive relationships in their lives, for most, their need for social support is going wholly or largely unmet, even from among their family members. For example, the young people in one FGD recounted very similar experiences within their families, illustrating the betrayal they feel when those who should be closest to them also hold negative views about them because of their past.

We always get problems from home because they know all your history, they use it to abuse or insult you instead.

Some family members want to keep on reminding you about what happened in the past they will say that you are from captivity, you go back.

To me, [the problem] is mainly from home. Because when I returned from captivity, everyone would want to come and ask what I did...they will use it against you to abuse you and call you names saying you killed people while in captivity, so you better go back there. (Three different respondents, FGD 57)

The effects of this isolation are devastating to survivors in many ways, including economically and socially. There is a deep cumulative psychological impact of living

with a stigmatized identity in a deeply collectivist culture, prompting many respondents to express distress. One mother finds strength in her faith in god, but explains that, "...the level of stigma, if you are not strong enough, you might even pick up a rope and go hang yourself" (Interview 33). This level of desperation and hopelessness was expressed by several respondents as they struggled to cope with not only the atrocities they experienced in the past, but with the hostile environment in their current lives.

Belonging and Land

Children born of war have pervasive challenges related to identity and belonging, many of which are deeply tied to the absence of their fathers and, consequently, their father's lineage. Without socially or legally recognized connections to their paternal roots, many of these young people born in captivity are denied access to land, which is an essential social marker of acceptance and stability in their community.

We get conflicts and problems from our relatives at home for instance...in most cases we don't have our fathers so those [maternal] aunties and uncles will tell you to look for your father's home because they don't have enough land for you. Therefore whenever they are talking ill of our mothers, we also get hurt. (FGD 59)

Not having access to land creates additional economic hardships and makes it difficult for survivors to feel a sense of belonging within their community. Many respondents articulated that having land would help them "start a new life," and without it, "The life we are currently living in our home there isn't any good life at all because we don't have any proper piece of land that we can stay on" (Interview 42)"

Similarly, mothers returning from captivity report facing land disputes and being unable to use or to own land in the communities they have returned to. Many are prevented from using land they have a rightful claim to use. The resulting lack of access to land leaves both mothers and children with a feeling of disconnection and in situations of precarity, further marginalizing them from the social fabric of their communities.

Sources of Support

While the majority of respondents described ongoing challenges with social support, there were a few survivors who reported positive relationships with community members. For example, one mother described how the man she married upon her return discriminated against her existing children and would not accept them. She was able to leave him and rent a home in town and establish herself independently. Now, she experiences positive social support:

I don't have anything wrong with how I relate with people, even in my community, I have a very good relationship, even though there are some small conflicts...At least people's attitudes towards us is changing in the community because there is nothing that we do that is different from what other people are doing and we

live with them peacefully as well, so our relationship with the people is very good.
(Interview 23)

Support from families varies widely among survivors. Some feel emotionally and financially backed by their families, while others experience a disconnect due to family conflicts, like land disputes and negative perceptions linked to captivity. Some survivors find that “the people who are not related to you are the ones who can help you more than the ones in your family” (Interview 6), suggesting a greater sense of empathy, understanding, and practical support given by some neighbors, friends, church leaders, NGOs, and community members than their own relatives. While this realization is especially painful for these survivors, it is also a relief to know they identify a network of social support outside their family structure.

Survivor networks have been a crucial source of connection for many respondents. The leaders and members of these groups provide meaningful and substantial support, fostering a sense of community among survivors who had similar histories of abduction. Within these groups, survivors report experiencing a sense of understanding, acceptance, and solidarity that they often do not find elsewhere. “The relationship that is among us who have returned from the bush is that we love each other. We socialize well...we love each other so much” (Interview 15). Membership in these groups is impactful not only for the emotional support it provides but also for the tangible help offered, such as financial assistance or other support. For example, one mother shared that members of the survivor group care for her when she is in the hospital:

When I am admitted at the hospital, it hurts me a lot because I have to nurse myself without anybody, with the exception of my fellow returnees. For them, they always come to see each other when in the hospital. (Interview 20).

Survivors report that this support is profound, especially when compared to the inconsistent aid from family or community members.

Resilience and Longing for Harmony

Despite the stigma and exclusion, many survivors express a desire to live harmoniously and peacefully within their communities. They admire those with stable family relationships and wish for a life free from conflict. Many respondents expressed hope for acceptance and understanding in the future, and they remain dedicated to advocating for their children’s futures. They work to maintain peaceful relationships, hoping that, in times of need, they can rely on the community’s support. One mother shares her commitment to fostering positive connections:

I have to ensure that there is a good relationship between our family members, also with my leaders and my neighbors so that even if someone is trying to tarnish my names, nobody will accept that it is the truth. (Interview 27)

For these survivors, long-term hope and patience sustain their journey towards the goal of social acceptance and the chance for a peaceful life with their children, within their communities. Respondents expressed a willingness to shift and adjust their own attitudes and approaches, and hope that by “living well” with others, community attitudes will shift and survivors will eventually be recognized as equal members of society.

Because once our mindset has been changed, our hearts also changes. The way we feel, the way others feel about us, will also start changing. And the community we stay in will also start looking at us like we are also humans like them.
(Interview 7)

Discussion

We asked direct interview questions about respondents’ experiences of community life because the reintegration of survivors, particularly those from stigmatized groups or who may have participated in armed conflict, is a key component of peacebuilding. In a post-war period, one indicator of durable, positive peace is that these individuals are able to be accepted back into community life and supported by existing, internal social resources and structures. While there were certainly some instances where survivors reported this type of positive experience, the overall findings present a much more concerning picture. Every respondent was able to describe instances where they experienced negative effects of stigma, with some particularly severe instances of marginalization, threats, and violence. In addition to the negative effect that this has on survivors’ well-being, this community-level conflict and division is a threat to local peacebuilding efforts.

There is significant overlap and interplay between justice, healing, and community. Throughout all three discussions, survivors consistently expressed a deep need for belonging and a place that is home. Justice and healing both were defined in social terms by many survivors, and thus a lack of community acceptance hindered both processes. A prevalent conceptualization of justice was as having positive and supportive social relationships and being integrated into a community. Thus, social isolation is a denial of justice. Many survivors said that to have healing, they need others to understand them and to offer them counsel. Thus, social rejection blocks their healing and leads to a continuation of their pain. Justice and healing were both defined, for many, as being able to accept what happened to them and forget the past. Thus, social labeling that continually reminds survivors—and others in the community—of the past is harmful to the pursuit of both healing and justice.

Finally, our findings highlight the important role that survivor-led groups or networks play in cultivating social support.³⁴ Survivor networks are an innovative form of social

³⁴ A caveat to these findings is that we identified potential respondents from survivor networks, and this may introduce a source of bias. Respondents could be more likely to speak positively about groups they are actively participating in. Survivors who are the most isolated may not be connected to these groups, and may even have negative perceptions of such groups.

organization in this context. For people (especially women) who live in dispersed villages, their social world is often confined to the people in their geographic area. However, through these organized networks that transcend geography, these survivors are cultivating an alternative framework for social relationships, given the failure of the traditional model of (geographic) community to provide support to them.

Documentation

The final empirical section outlines survivors' preferences about documentation of their experiences. Survivors who had previously recorded their stories shared about their experiences, and then they discussed their interest in, fears about, and hopes for documentation in the future.

Findings

Previous Documentation

About 45 percent of interview respondents had already documented their stories in some way, such as for academic research or fact-finding and advocacy by NGOs. Most of the time this was through interviews, including audio and written accounts, but a few described singing or drama. At times, the respondents were not clear about who collected their story, and they rarely had a thorough understanding of the purposes of the documentation or how it was used.³⁵

Some survivors reported negative experiences with documentation, such as feeling that they did not have agency in the process or that they had been exploited for their stories. Some respondents had been required to pay for their stories to be recorded, many were frustrated that they did not have any tangible benefits from their documentation, and others were disappointed that they did not get to choose what they would document. Some had their stories taken by agencies, groups, or individuals for external purposes that the survivors did not understand, which respondents sometimes perceived as providing profit to the people who took their stories, such as the following:

That is one of the reasons why I can refuse [to document] because they come and record your story but then the next day they go and make a lot of money from it. They will be building, meanwhile you back here are nearly hit by rain, at times your roof may leaking on you. So, they come and record your story and go to use it for their businesses. (Interview 2)

Every organization comes and goes while asking the same question but there is nothing that has ever been done. They record our voices, go with it and it goes

³⁵ We recognize this as a general dilemma facing any group that may be asking survivors about their stories, including the interviews we have conducted.

silent then another group also comes as well. There have been so many groups and we have always been volunteering, we don't refuse. (Interview 22)

I feel telling my story is useless because first of all it is being used to improve on the life of someone else. (Interview 26)

On the other hand, some had positive experiences telling their stories, even if they did not have the ability to decide when, how, or for which purpose they documented. Some had not seen any meaningful way their story had been used, but they had hope that it may be useful in the future. A few had particularly positive experiences, such as one mother who had her life recorded in a book led by an academic researcher, and through that she had made connections and felt solidarity with other survivors globally. Another described how telling her story in a song brings people together:

When we are singing such songs even the chief and the people there will shed tears because we normally sing songs about what is happening in your life... The advantage is, first of all you will be together with each other, each one of you knows what problem you are going through. (Interview 17)

For these survivors, previous experiences with documentation had been hopeful and brought them healing.

Documentation Challenges

Nearly all respondents (about 90 percent) expressed an interest in and willingness to document their experiences in the future, if certain conditions were met. There were a number of areas of potential concern or caution that would affect their interest in documentation.

First, respondents expressed fear about documentation of the harms or human rights violations that they committed against others or were part of while in captivity. This complex identity as victim/perpetrator has received substantial attention in northern Uganda and respondents here, too, showed that this two-sided experience of violence introduces challenges to thinking about documentation. Some respondents worried about documenting the past, especially for the sake of seeking accountability, because they fear repercussions related to harms they committed in the context of their abduction. Some were afraid of prosecution by the government and others were afraid of retribution from community members. In order to document, they said they would want control over what part of their story they shared and how it would be used.

Second, relatedly, respondents were concerned about potential unknown negative outcomes of documentation. Given the sensitive nature of their stories and their previous experiences with documentation, many respondents are not sure what to expect after sharing their stories. They are unsure of how the community and the world will welcome their stories and how it will affect their lives. Some are afraid that it could deepen negative judgements, discrimination, loss of friends, and exclusion from

community activities. Even though most of the survivors were interested in documenting their stories, because of their current experiences with discrimination, they believe exposure of their experiences brings a lot of uncertainty and potentially further marginalization.

Third, given the history of documentation experiences, some respondents have begun to think of their stories as commodities with material value to them. When asked how and why they might want to record their story, some respondents struggled to identify a way that they would want to document for their own purposes or goals. Instead, these survivors assumed the interviewer was asking if we could “buy” their story (or, if someone could). That is, they saw their story as something with a monetary value, that they could trade in to someone who would give them some material support in exchange for their story. Some respondents found it challenging to imagine how they may want to use their own story for their own purposes.

Finally, several respondents who were willing to document had the precondition that they would know and trust the organization that would be receiving their story. Given their histories with documentation, the level of stigma, and their fears about repercussions, they stressed that they need to trust an organization will be working in their best interest, will communicate with them, and will understand how to keep their information “secret” or confidential.

Documentation Possibilities

Many respondents described how documentation would be in line with their desires for justice, healing, or positive social relationships. Survivors are interested in documentation for many reasons, but the most commonly expressed reason was to improve their life in some way (about half of all those who wanted to document). They were hopeful that having a record of the difficulties that they experienced may help get support from organizations, from people in their community, from reparations programs, or from other sources.

The second most common reason respondents would like to document is in order to share what happened to them with their family, particularly their children. For many, they have not been able to speak about the past with their children, and documenting their story would allow them to open up about what they went through, thus allowing them to process their emotions and gain understanding from their loved ones. These survivors felt that if their experiences were recorded in a book, song, or drama it would convey the difficult story better than if they tried to speak verbally about it. For these respondents, the process of recording their story would bring relief and facilitate healing:

I want them to know my life before I was abducted and how I lived while in captivity then after reading it, I would tell them to keep it well because that is my life. Because people don't go through life in the same way. (Interview 44)

When I was telling my story, I cried the first time and I look at crying as a way of healing and sometimes when telling your story, you cry. But to me, I feel it is okay to cry because it is a healing process and right now, I can tell my story without any problem. (Interview 29)

Once I tell my story it will at least make me feel relieved because when you hold something that is pressing you inside, it won't be good in the long run, and so the story that I will say once it is written down then it will help other people. (Interview 41)

One mother felt strongly that she would like to have a book written about her experiences. She perceived that this would help her recount the past to her children, as well as to raise awareness more generally about the negative effects of war, hopefully working to prevent similar abuses of women and children in the future. She explains,

I have not had it written down yet. I had wanted so much that I should at least have a book written about my life where I would sit down and write about how I grew up, how I was abducted and also to let the world know that war is a bad thing. War where children and women are abducted is not good. I had really wanted to have it written down and I would also write that in the future if two people are fighting each other, then they should not be allowed to abduct women and children... I really wanted the world to know the dangers of war but unfortunately it hasn't happened and if I were to get an opportunity, I would really love to have it written down.

Because if it is written down in a book, then it won't disappear... [My children] don't know what happened to me... This is because some of the things I experienced while in captivity are so horrible that I cannot tell a young child but when I put it in a book, it will become very easy for a child to understand what challenges his mother went through. But telling it one on one to a child is not easy.

And also when I put it in a book, then the whole world will get to know the dangers of war to women and children. So if it is in a book, then it will travel many miles; people will read and see it...

One day they were showing pictures of LRA fighters and one of my children asked me, "Mummy, these are rebels?" I said yes, then I asked him who rebels are and he then told me that "Rebels kill people..." but he didn't know that I am also one of those people who was in rebel captivity. So do you think telling him about my story would be easy? If I could write a book then it would be much easier. (Interview 26)

Many of the respondents believed that sharing their experiences would relay a message across a bigger audience and help gain empathy from different groups of people. They want their story to be part of recording the truth and establishing a record of the past.

They hope that when people understand the difficult situations they went through, they would face less judgment and more appreciation of their points of view. Part of the audience could be those like the government, civil society stakeholders, or international organizations have the capacity to not only offer them support, but to help survivors in other contexts and to help prevent similar abuses.

For the fact that someone out there should get to know about what happened and not make such a mistake in the future and if possible, it should stop with us and history should not repeat itself in Acholi land...if God is listening, the story of eating dead bodies and killing people should stop with us and that is the truth, the children we have produced should not be part of that history, they should be a new breed of people. (Interview 37)

When many people get to hear my story, they will know that such kind of problem happened in Acholi land on the people of Acholi. This means that it will give a lot of thoughts since you said it would be put for the public to read or watch. It means that the whole world would see the problem that I and other people suffered while in captivity. (Interview 35)

By sharing stories of their experiences in captivity, as well as their current challenges since return, the respondents hoped they could build connections with others and encourage other survivors to come out and talk about their experiences.

...the reason why I'm doing so is not because I want assistance but I know that my story can change people's lives so it can inspire someone out there because then they will say that, "If this young man can come and speak about what happened to him, why not me?" (Interview 29)

In spite of their fears about how documentation could entrench stigma, many respondents were also hopeful that the effect on community perceptions could be positive. Telling their stories in their totality could help in changing peoples' prejudice or bias against them. It could raise awareness in the community as people would have an idea of what transpired, that it was never their intention to be abducted or to subsequently harm others, and that things they may have done wrong were against their will. They feel that if people could understand them, there would be a change and they would be able to live freely in communities where they feel safe knowing that people are not assuming that their identity translates to bad people or evil.

We have real potential to create change in our communities and improve or impact other people's lives as well. You know we are not what people think we are...I want people to know who I am, because it is like some people act the way they act because they don't know you better but when you explain to them better who you are, what your vision is and what you think of life as whole it could change someone's perspective, the way they look at you. (Interview 27)

Discussion

Building on the successes and being mindful of the challenges of previous documentation initiatives led by legal institutions, researchers, and CSOs, CVT's Jingo project has developed a model of survivor-led documentation. The views of respondents informed this intervention, helping to ensure that the recording of stories will be in line with survivors' goals for healing, justice, and community. The objective is that helping survivors to document what has happened to them will equip them with agency over their own story and establish pathways for them to use their stories in ways that are meaningful for them.

Given the context of previous documentation efforts, some of these conversations were challenging. The interviewers worked to help survivors reframe the possibilities of documentation and to spark thinking about if the respondents themselves may want to record and use their story, rather than having respondents think only about how others may want to use the story. Some respondents already had ideas about how they would want to use their story, while others initially focused on the commodification of their story (that is, if they could get material gain from providing it) or on how their story could be instrumental to others' goals (that is, not prioritizing how the story could be meaningful for them). The interviewers provided a range of examples of reasons why some survivors might want to document and modalities of how documentation could occur, prompting reflection on potential benefits and the drawbacks of each.

An overarching theme from this section is that there are a wide range of feelings and preferences about documentation. Survivors' viewpoints are not monolithic, and they have specific ideas about how they would like their story to be used and how they would not like it to be used. They have a range of fears and skepticisms, particularly related to their experiences in captivity,³⁶ previous documentation, their current level of precarity, and their goals about healing and justice. Once they understood the range of possibilities that could be included in "recording their story," most respondents had clear and specific ideas about why and how they would be interested in documentation in the future. This feedback has been directly integrated into the therapeutic documentation model offered to survivors as a part of the larger project implemented by CVT.

³⁶ Different groups of survivors, particularly those who may not have the experience of being forced to harm others, are likely to have different concerns than the survivors we interviewed.

Conclusions

Highlights

The survivors who participated in this assessment are individuals with varied histories, challenges, and hopes for the future. And yet, they shared some experiences and perspectives with one another.

Generally, the survivors we spoke with saw justice and healing as deeply interrelated, explaining that the bullet needs to be removed and the flesh also needs to grow back to cover the wound. They need action to repair and then a process to bring relief. Both healing and justice are often expressed in social terms. Relationships matter for these survivors, who expressed a deep desire for belonging.

The most persistent concern is for their families. Their desire is to build a stable home that can provide roots for their children in the future. Justice and healing would come from the freedom to “live normally” and provide for themselves. Repair is seen as a generational endeavor.

Problematically, the mothers and the CBOW reported experiencing stigma, social isolation, and rejection regularly. This is a cross-cutting concern that was raised repeatedly, causing distress for survivors living in close communities in the context of a collectivist culture.

Survivors continue to navigate difficult memories about past violations; some would like recognition and others would like to be free to forget the past. They are interested in telling their stories on their own terms, in ways that address their concerns and needs.

Nearly 15 years after communities of northern Uganda began returning home to rebuild after decades of intense and devastating violence, there are still many survivors who struggle every day to find repair and healing for the past. Researchers and civil society organizations have conducted assessments and recorded stories. This assessment contributes to this collective effort, adding a deep focus on a particularly marginalized group of survivors whose ideas about justice are unique to the wrongs perpetrated against them.

This assessment revealed mixed hope about the future. Survivors report facing many barriers and ongoing harms in their current situations, but are also identifying strategies to build their lives and seek social support, displaying resilience and optimism.

For discussions of findings in each area, see the sections above on [justice](#), [healing](#), [community](#), and [documentation](#).

Limitations

This needs assessment is not representative of all survivor viewpoints; it is not even representative of all children born of war or their mothers. It is possible that other survivors would have different perspectives on justice, healing, community, or documentation. Due to our methodological approach, the survivors who participated were connected to survivor groups or networks and were likely to have previously received mental health services. Individuals who are not connected to survivor groups, living in more remote areas, or who have received no mental health support may have different experiences and views. The goal of this assessment was to understand nuance and complexity in survivors' perspectives, and we do not claim that identified patterns would apply to other survivors.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted by CVT, an organization that is a known service provider in many of the communities where we conducted this needs assessment. Although there were significant benefits of CVT's position (such as established trust with survivors and a team trained in a trauma-informed approach), there were also limitations. Given the fact that so many survivors have urgent basic needs for economic support and mental health care, it is likely that they had expectations of benefits from their participation and this may have affected some findings. For example, the prevalence of economic conceptualizations of justice may have been influenced to some degree by this context. Despite attempts to sensitively, clearly, and repeatedly explain the purposes of the interview, the respondents may have been motivated to join the study in hopes of accessing support. This may have led them to more strongly emphasize their economic need. The assessment team worked closely with leaders of survivor groups and then with potential respondents themselves to help mitigate this, but the findings should be interpreted with this limitation in mind.

Future Areas of Inquiry

This needs assessment was designed to address particular questions, especially to support project design and implementation, and was limited in areas of inquiry that could be addressed. There are several areas that would be promising avenues for future research,³⁷ including:

- How do other types of survivors' views compare to the perspectives of the mothers and young people who participated in this assessment? Recognizing that survivors are not a monolithic group, how are their views about justice, healing, community, and documentation similar, where do they vary, and why? How are views affected by survivors' past experiences, their exposure to transitional justice mechanisms, or previous support they have received? For instance, in northern Uganda, what are the perspectives of: men who were abducted to be combatants; families who were forced from their land into IDP

³⁷ There has already been research focused on some of the questions suggested here, but there is still a need for additional work to explore these areas.

camp; people whose loved ones were killed in massacres; recent returnees from the LRA; or survivors who participated in criminal investigations or trials?

- What types of economic programs are effective in achieving a sense of justice or repair, according to survivors? Which components facilitate or hinder justice-related outcomes of these programs? How can economic support activities be evaluated according to justice-related outcomes?
- What are other transitional contexts that have had cases of extremely difficult reintegration of highly-stigmatized groups into communities? What can be learned from these cases and applied to northern Uganda, and what learnings from northern Uganda apply to other contexts?
- In the collectivist culture of northern Uganda, what are the effects of self-sufficiency? When survivors are able to care for themselves well, what positive effects does this bring, but also what unintended negative effects might there be, such as deepened social isolation?
- What are the mental health challenges faced by children born of war? How do their challenges and needs vary with the developmental stage that they were in at the time of their mother's return from captivity? What are the gaps in our understanding of their experiences of trauma, attachment, identity, stressors, and resilience?
- How are the healing processes of the mothers and their (young adult) children interrelated and dependent? How are they distinct? What can they each learn from one another?
- What alternative social support structures are socially isolated survivors using, especially those established by young people? How do these alternative structures merge with, coexist alongside, or influence and change the existing traditional structures of social organization in northern Uganda?

Programmatic Implications and Recommendations

Guided by perspectives shared by survivors, the following recommendations are provided for national policy-makers, local government and other leaders, CSOs and NGOs, survivor groups or networks, and donors:

Stigma reduction: Across all areas of this assessment, participants emphasized the harmful effects of the stigma they experience. Stakeholders must work to reduce stigma against these particular survivors. This has been recognized as a problem for a long time, but it is still deep and pervasive and causing substantial harm to survivors. Reintegration has not yet occurred successfully for most. Programs should target community leaders (particularly church or faith leaders and local officials) to reduce stigma that leaders may hold and to engage leaders in bringing awareness about the

reality of abduction, trauma, and resilience of survivors, thus helping to build understanding and reduce discrimination. Organizations and the government should undertake campaigns to reduce stigma and conduct evaluations to understand if and how these campaigns are meaningfully reducing stigma.

See findings about positive relationships as justice (pages 18-19), the roles of others in healing processes (pages 31-32), and barriers to healing (pages 32-33). Findings on social isolation (pages 36-38) are central. See also findings about how documentation could address stigma (pages 44-45).

Translating justice: Stakeholders working to advance justice that is meaningful for survivors should carefully consider the conceptual translation of the term. In Luo, using a term such as *yubu gin ma obale ni*, or “repairing the wrong,” can open up a broader conception of justice and create space for examples of justice that are inclusive of more than legal processes.

See section on translation of key concepts (page 14), as well as findings about conceptualizations of justice (pages 17-23) and hope for justice (pages 25-26).

CBOW viewpoints: The children who were born from their mothers’ captivity are now young adults. They have some similar experiences and perspectives to their mothers, but also perceive some issues differently. They explicitly ask to have opportunities to speak for themselves. Stakeholders seeking to better understand their experiences should not make assumptions about CBOWs, or rely exclusively on the perspectives of their mothers, but should instead directly engage these young people to learn about their views.

See particularly findings about varied conceptualizations of justice (pages 17-23), social isolation and stigma facing CBOW (page 37), and identity and land access (page 38).

Survivor groups: Groups or networks led by survivors have provided essential social support to survivors, helped mitigate some effects of social isolation, and been a vehicle for advocacy and elevating survivor perspectives. Donors, the government, and civil society should expand support for these groups, many of which are currently informally organized and without reliable resources. Financial support is needed, but many these groups also need support around financial management and accountability, training about trauma and mental health, group governance and planning, and cultivating meaningful missions, values, or approaches. Survivor groups should also make efforts to increase the range of viewpoints and identities represented and establish mechanisms to strengthen access, accountability, and transparency.

See findings about survivor networks as a source of support (pages 38-39).

Land access: The protection and realization of land rights should be strengthened. Survivors need support to access the land that they have rights to use or own. While some progress is being made, more is needed, given the scope and complexity of the issue and its significance for survivors individually and collectively. A multipronged approach requires family tracing, legal processes, engagement of cultural leadership, local community dialogues and education, and more. Individuals not able to secure land access will likely require additional ongoing support from the government.

See findings about having a home as justice (pages 18-19) and land access as a part of belonging (page 38).

Economic reparations: There is a need for economic reparation programs for survivors. This is distinct from general economic development programming (which survivors should benefit from as citizens) because it is providing redress for human rights abuses that have led to current economic vulnerabilities. Economic support should be provided to survivors via comprehensive reparations programs that are implemented more broadly than reparations that are connected to specific legal judgements. Survivors' groups should be consulted to develop support programs that would be viable and desired. Strengthening the capacity of survivor groups or networks to engage in advocacy or lobbying could also help meet long term economic needs, through enhancing their abilities to connect to government development programs or other types of support.

See findings about economic stability as justice (pages 17-18) and views about reparations (pages 23-24). See also findings about how economic stability reduces barriers to healing (page 33).

Conflict-sensitive reparations: Survivors have significant fears about animosity and violence that they may face if they receive reparations. Any reparations program, but especially those providing material reparations, must be designed and implemented using a conflict-prevention lens and integrating protection protocols for recipients. A conflict analysis should be conducted by peacebuilding experts, integrating survivor consultation, while planning reparations and updated regularly throughout implementation.

See concerns about reparation programs (pages 23-24). See also findings about fears of documentation of their experiences (pages 42-43).

Non-recurrence: Prevention of future violent conflict and human rights violations is an essential form of justice for some survivors. Multi-level peacebuilding should be a focus of diverse stakeholders. Prevention work should focus on northern Uganda, but also could link survivors into peacebuilding work globally, particularly efforts focused on reducing violence against women and children. Some survivors would like their stories used to help prevent similar violations. Additionally, if survivors are able to share their stories intergenerationally within Uganda, it may contribute to violence prevention among future generations.

See findings about prevention as justice (pages 21-22) and how documentation could contribute to prevention (pages 43-45).

MHPSS services: Counseling services are needed and wanted by survivors. There should be expanded availability of mental health and psychosocial support services, from both professionals with expertise in trauma and from lay and community-based lay counselors who are able to offer advice and counsel to survivors and to the people in their lives. The latter should be provided with training and support.

Organizations providing services to survivors across any sector should have mental health screening tools and protocols and strong referral networks to ensure services are prioritized appropriately. Counselors should be equipped to understand and navigate desires to “forget” the past and ensure this is within the context of healthy coping.

Group modalities or peer-support approaches that focus on building relationships and strengthening existing social support are particularly needed. Couples and family counseling are needed to promote understanding, build healthy functioning and support, directly address stigma, and reduce abuse.

See findings about counseling and advice as justice (pages 19-20) and the roles of others in healing processes (pages 31-32). See also findings about stigma within families (pages 36-38) and how documentation could facilitate dialogue within families (pages 43-44).

Suicide prevention: There is an urgent need to raise awareness about suicide and develop strong prevention strategies. Several respondents expressed deep hopelessness and pain. There is a need for training on risk assessment and support, development and dissemination of protocols, and identification of resources. Service providers and diverse types of community leaders who are in contact with survivors need this support to respond to the suicidal ideation expressed by survivors.

See findings about the roles of others and social isolation in healing processes (pages 31-32).

Legal accountability: In the upcoming stages of the legal accountability processes at the ICC and the High Court of Uganda’s International Crimes Division, the courts need to continue to find ways to connect their work directly to survivors. There is still a substantial gap between survivors’ experiences and views on justice and the activities and goals of the legal institutions. Legal professionals should continue to work to develop strategies to raise awareness and connect with survivors and to provide support for any survivors who engage with the courts, especially as witnesses. Dissemination of accurate and understandable information about court decisions and processes should be prioritized as a part of justice for survivors. Researchers should collect data to identify how survivors and other affected community members

experience the stages of the legal process. Media professionals should develop conflict-sensitive and evidence-informed messaging about legal processes.

See section on transitional justice mechanisms (pages 23-25).

Truth-telling: For any truth-telling initiatives to be seen as legitimate and meaningful to survivors, they need to address the full range of abuses that survivors experienced, including those caused by any parties to the armed conflict. Locally rooted truth-telling may be helpful in specific areas or communities as a way to directly combat stigma that survivors are experiencing, but must integrate considerations of survivors' preferences for privacy or needs for protection.

See findings about truth and acknowledgement as justice (page 22) and about survivors' willingness to participate in documentation (pages 42-45).

Survivor-centered documentation: Future documentation initiatives should be driven by survivors' preferences and needs. Survivors need full information about the documentation and the organization or initiative that is collecting it. They need to be given choices about if and how they would like to record their stories. Prior to documentation, the organization or institution should do front-end work to help survivors recognize their agency in setting the terms and the goals of documentation and combat the lack of agency that some survivors had previously experienced. Survivors should have control over outcomes or uses of their story, or to clearly understand where this is not possible and why. As documentation or stories are used for any purpose, the survivor should receive follow-up information and be empowered with decision-making throughout the utilization process, including the option to withdraw their consent for use of their story.

See documentation findings section (pages 41-45), including challenges and opportunities.

Respect the desire to forget: Community leaders, government officials, legal professionals, researchers, service providers, and any others should be very discerning about asking survivors to remember the past. Do not continue to ask survivors about their previous difficult experiences, unless it is directly connected to an action that the survivor perceives to be valuable to their own healing or justice processes.

See findings about forgetting the past as justice (page 21) and as healing (page 30).

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

The individual interview guide is included in full below. The FGD facilitation guide had a similar format and content, with some adjustments, including: opening exercises, group introductions, and setting group norms; customizing questions to ask about the participant or their “loved ones” (because not all these participants felt they had wrongs committed against them personally); and removing the section on documentation.

Survivor Priorities Interview Guide

Interview #: _____ Start time: _____
Date: _____ Interviewer: _____

Please start the audio recording, and say the interview number and the date. Please take notes throughout the interview. You do not need to ask all follow-up questions; these are guides to help prompt rich responses.

Warm Up (5 minutes)

Goal: Get them comfortable talking in this setting and spark thinking about their own personal journey in dealing with the past. Don't take too much time on this question.

What are some things you are enjoying in life?

Kit jami ang'o mabecu ma inongo tiye katime i kwo ni mayomo ii?

Topic 1: Dignity and Healing (10-15 minutes)

Goal: To understand the next steps in dealing with their trauma from the human rights violations they experienced. To see if they think of justice-related needs as part of their healing process. If they do, to understand how much emphasis or priority they place on justice.

After experiencing difficult moments in life, people can find many ways to heal and cope with the past. Healing includes many things, such as psychological healing and physical healing. [For CVT clients: We learned about many of these during the groups with CVT.] However, you may still personally deal with negative effects because of what you have experienced. Healing from the past is a process and journey.

lyonge wok ki ikare matek ikwo, dano nongo yoo ma pat pat me nongo nicango ki kit me cobo peko ma gin owok/ okato ki iyie ikare ma okato. Nicango romo bedo ikit me dul kumi, kit me wic onyo ikit me kweyo cwiny [For CVT clients: Wa niang ikom pol jemi man ikare ma wabedo ki dul mapat pat] Ento in bene pwod itwero bedo ki kero me cobo peko mogo ma diyo in ma racu ma iwok ki iyie. Nongo nicango ki ican malit/peko obedo gin ma tero kare dok woto kore ki kore.

For your life personally, what does healing (nicango) mean? What is most important to help your healing from what happened in the past?

Ki boti, lok me nicango tyen loke ningo? Gin ang'o ma pire tek dong loyo ma twero konyi me nongo nicango ikom peko ma ikato ki iyie ikare ma okato anged?

Follow up:

- a) What has helped your healing so far? / Gin angoma okonyi me nongo kwe cwiny/ nicango?
- b) How do you think you could take more steps in your healing process? Who would help? Where would it come from? / Yoo angoma itamo ni itwero kwanyo wek imede ki nongo nicango/ kwe cwiny? Anga ma twero konyi iyie? Kony eno ni twero bino ki kwene?
- c) Are there barriers that prevent healing? If so, please tell me about them. / Gin angoma twero gengo nongo nicango? Ka moo tiye, ci waca.

Topic 2: Justice (15-20 minutes)

Goal: To have a nuanced and thorough picture of how they understand justice. To discuss their specific ideas of what would make them feel they had been given some justice for the past violations.

You have experienced wrongs against you in the past. You may still feel that the wrongs are not resolved or addressed. This may relate to your understanding of “repairing the wrong” (*yubu gin ma obale*), “making right” (*roco adaa*), or of “justice” (*ngolo*) or of fairness. We would like to understand what “making right” means for you.

In iwok ki ipeko ma lit ma gitimo ikumi ikare ma okato . Twero bedo ni pwod itye ka winyo ni peko man pwod pe gi timo gin mo me cobo ne. Man lubu kit ma in iniang kwede lok man me “yubu wek odok maber”, “roco ada” “ngol ma atir onyo”, “ngolo kop iyoo ma opore.” Wa mito niang kit ma in iniang kwede tyen lok man ni “yubu gin ma obale wek odok maber”

In your opinion, what does “repairing the wrongs” (*yubu gin ma obale ni*) mean?

Itami, tyen lok man me “yubu gin ma obale ni” tere ni ngo?

(Be very careful not to guide them in this. Even if they struggle a bit at first, try not to suggest a direction.)

For what you experienced personally in the past, what would help make it right or help repair the harms, if anything?

Pi peko ma in iwok ki iyie in ki komi ikare ma okato anged, kit kony angoma ka gi timo twero konyo me roco kwo ni, ka mo tye?

Follow up:

- a) Do you think it is possible for the harm to ever be repaired or made right? / Itamo ni bal ma gitimo ikomi ni twero yube?
- b) Where can this come from? / Eni twero nonge ki kwene?
- c) Is “making right” for the past important to you? Why or why not? / Itamo ni yubu gin ma obale pire tek boti? Pingo onyo pingo ku?
- d) What concerns do you have about the idea of “making right”? Are there negative aspects of this? Gwok itye ki peko mo malube ki lok man me yubu gin ma obale ni? Itamo ni race mo gwok tye?
- e) Is there anything you have already experienced that has helped you to repair the harm or to feel some justice? / Gwok tye gin mo ma dong itimo ma okonyi me yubu bal man onyo ma oweko iwinyo ni ngol matir otime olo?
- f) How do you think healing and “making right” are related? / Itamo ni nicango/kwe cwiny kacel ki yubu gin ma obale kin gi cok cok?

Topic 3: Social Cohesion (10-15 minutes)

Goal: To understand what positive social support is or would be for them. To get specific examples of the types of conflicts or challenges they face when living in communities.

There are many types of relationships and social systems that can give us support, but also cause problems for us. This includes within our families, our neighbors, community leaders, voluntary organizations, churches, schools, and other parts of your community (wat).

Wat/ kube tye ki kwaye ne ma pat pat ki bene kit ma dano kube kwede ma twero konyo wa, ento bene twero kelo peko bot wa. En tye iyie dano ma igang acel, dano ma bedo cok cok kwed wa/jirani, lutela me kin gang, dul mapat pat, odi lega, gangi kwan ki but kabedo ma pat pat.

Please tell me about relationships (wat) in your life. Where do you find support and unity?

Itwero tita lok kom wat ma ikwo ni? Kakwene ma in inongo yie kony ki ribe?

Where do you find conflicts and problems?

Kakwene ma in inongo yie peko/aruba ruba?

Follow up:

- When you observe other people who have strong social support and positive relationships, what do you see in their lives? / Ka ineno kit ma dano mukene ma tye ki wat maber ikin gi, ineno kwo gi tye nining?
- How do you feel supported by people or groups around you? What forms of support do you get from them? / Itamo ni dano onyo dul macok kwedi tyelo kori? Kit kony ango ma in inongo ki bot gi?
- Where do you wish you would be able to get support? / Kakwene ma itamo ni itwero nongo kony ki iyie?
- What do you think causes the conflicts or problems you face? What are the roots of the problems? / Gin ango ma itamo ni kelo peko ma in inongo? Peko eni cake onyo tye ka aa ki kwene?
- What are the impacts of these conflicts or relationship problems on your life? / Adwogi pa peko man ikwo ni onyo ikit ma ikwo kwede ki wadi ni aye ngo?

Topic 4: Documentation (15-20 minutes)

Goal: To understand their level of interest in different types of documentation, including what they see as the value of this (to themselves, and in a broader sense) and the risks of this. If they have done documentation before, to learn from what was positive and what was not.

Some people feel they would like to share with others about what they experienced, or to document what has happened to them in the past. Other people are not interested in doing this.

Dano mukene tamo ni omyero gi nywak gin ma gi kato ki iyie onyo gi co piny gin ma otime ikom gi ikare ma okato angec. Ento dano mukene gi peke ki miti me timo man.

There are many ways that people might record their experiences. Some might be in detail, others might be general. Some might be for personal or family use, or for the community, for advocacy, for research, for accountability, or for many other reasons. Documenting or recording your story could happen through individual documentation, group documentation, personal oral history, using creative arts like songs or drama, legal interviews for court cases, media or journalism stories, or many other ways. Documentation of past difficult events can be used in many ways, like for court cases to hold perpetrators accountable, memorials, museums, community archives, sharing with family members, media to raise awareness, advocacy for policies to help survivors, actions to help fight for an individual's rights, or other uses.

Yoo tye ma pol ma dano twero cono gin ma gin okato ki iyie. Mukene gi coyo kore ki kore ki mukene coyo coc ma gudu dano weng. Dano mukene coyo me akwana pi gi keken onyo me akwana pa dano ma idog ot gi onyo me tic pa dano ma ikin gang, me dongo oduru, kwed, me wek obed calo caden ikom gin ma otime, onyo bene pi tyen lok mapol ma pat pat. Cono onyo keto piny icoc ododo ni onyo gin ma otime

ikomi twero time irwom ma ngat acel acel coyo lok kome onyo idul, onyo tito lok komi cake ki itidi ni ma nongo itiyo ki diro ma pat pat calo wer onyo tuku goga, lapeny mogo ma gi miyo iot kot, odi poko lok angeya onyo coc mogo ma luco lok angeya gi coyo, ki yoo mogo mapol ma pat pat. Coc ikom jemi ma lit ma otime ikare ma okato angec gi twero tic kwede iyoo mapol mapat pat macalo me tero lutim bal ikot, me nipo, ikabedo ma gi gwoko iyie jemi macon me nipo, gi nywako bene ki dano ma idog ot acel, gi tiyo kwede bene iodi poko lok anyeya me poko ngec, dano ma peko opoto ikom gi bene tiyo kwede me dongo oduru pi cik ma konyo gi, obedo yoo acel acel ma dano acel acel twero tic kwede me lweny ikom lok me twero ne, ki tice mukene mapat pat.

Have you ever recorded the story of your past? If so, tell me about it.

Manaka ni igwoko gin ma otime? Ka otime, nywak kweda ki ma otime kwede.

Follow up:

- What was the method of documentation or storytelling used? Was this through an organization? If so, which one? / Yo anga ma itiyo kwede me cono piny gin ma otime onyo yoo anga ma gitiyo kwede me nywako lok ikom gin ma otime? Eni otime kun wok ki idul mo? Ka kumeno ci dul mene?
- What was the purpose or goal? Do you feel it accomplished this? / Tyen lok me cono lok man obed ngo? Itamo ni eni ocobe?
- What was your personal experience like? What was positive? Negative? / Iwinyo nining? Kong itita kit ma iwinyo kwede? Iwinyo nining? Obedo maber onyo marac?
- If given the opportunity, would you do it again? Why or why not? / Ka gwok gi mini kare, dok itwero timo ne? Pingo onyo pingo ku?

If ever there were a documentation project, would you personally feel you would like to record or share your story in any way? Why or why not?

Ket ni nongo yub mo tiye me gwoko gin ma otime, itamo ni i kikomi ibimito coyo ping onyo nywako lok kumi iyo mo keken? Pingo onyo pingo ku?

(If necessary, please manage expectations that we have a documentation service that they will be offered, because we do not know if they will be selected for the project.)

IF NO, follow up:

- What do you feel would be the negative effects? / Itamo ni adwogi ne twero bedo marac iyoo ma nining?
- Do you feel strongly that you would never want to do this? Or do you feel that you might in the future, but it is not a priority, possibility, or interest right now? / Iwinyo gwok ki icwinyi ni eni obedo gin ma onongo pe imito timo ne olu? Onyo itamo ni itwero timo ne ii anyim ento bene pe obedo gin ma pire tek, pe obedo gin ma twero time, onyo pe obedo gin ma miti ni tye iyie pi kombedi ni?

IF YES, follow up:

- Who do you wish would know about what happened to you? Why? / Anga ma itamo ni myero onge gin ma otime ikomi? Pingo?
- What would be one way that you would like to document your story? Please explain the details. (Who, what, when, where, why?) / Itwero tita yoo mo acel ma itamo ni itwero cono ki gin ma otime ikomi? Kong itita matut. (Anga, ngo, awene, kwene, pingo?)
- What do you think would be the benefits? To you? To your family? To your community? To society more generally? / Itamo ni ber ne twero bedo tye? Boti onyo bot lugangi onyo bot dano ma ikin gang kama in ibedo iyie onyo ki bot dano ma ikin gangi mapadi padi?
- Is there any way that you would NOT want to record your story? What is it? Why? / Gwok tye yoo mo ma PE imito ni gi ket icoc gin ma ikato ki iyie? Eno ni aye yoo mene? Pingo?

- e) What would be your concerns about recording your story? Is there anything you would be afraid of or nervous about? / Gin angoma itamo ni twero bedo peko iyo me coyo lok ma otime ikomi? Gwok tye gin mo ma mini lwooro?

Wrap Up

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about these topics we have been discussing?

Gwok tye gin mo ma pat ma imito tita malube ki gin ma bedo ka lok iyie ni?

Participant Information

Name: _____

Gender: ☐ Man ☐ Woman

Age: _____ years

Location: _____

What services has the participant received? *Select all that apply:*

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Mental health | ☐ Medical rehabilitation |
| ☐ Livelihoods/vocational | ☐ Educational support |
| ☐ Legal support | ☐ Other: _____ |

Select one:

- ☐ Child born in captivity
☐ Mother of child born in captivity
☐ None of above (explain: _____)

Select all that apply:

- ☐ Former CVT client
☐ Connected through WAN, WVCN, FJDI
☐ Not connected through any group

Notes: _____

End time: _____

Field Notes

- Did the participant tell you why they were interested in doing this interview?
- How would you describe the participant's level of comfort during the interview?
- Did the participant experience any emotional distress? If so, please explain briefly the cause and how it was addressed.
- Did they talk easily? Which topics were they most passionate about?
- In what areas did they struggle to answer the questions?
- Did you have any conversations before or after the taped interview that are important for us to remember?
- How would you summarize the participant's perspective?
- Based on this interview, are there any changes you recommend to the interview guide or other procedures?

Appendix 2: Consent Form

The form that was completed as part of the informed consent process for interviews is included below; the informed consent form for FGDs had minor adjustments to language. The information was discussed with the potential participants via an in-depth conversation with an assessment team member, asking questions to check comprehension of each component.

Consent for Interview Participation & Information Use

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) is an international, humanitarian, non-profit organization with a mission to heal the wounds of torture worldwide. This interview is being conducted as part of our program in Gulu, Uganda.



Purpose of interview: In order to design and carry out programs to help people who have experienced human rights violations, CVT is gathering perspectives from survivors. We want to understand more about what you think is important for survivors of torture, war violence, or other human rights violations. This interview is to understand the experiences of northern Ugandans.

Pi ngo wat ye ka timo Interview ni: Me kati ki yup onyo Progam me konyo dano ma okato ki I tim me gero, CVT tye ka gamo tam ki bot jo ma ku kato ki I tim gero. Pien wa mito nyang ma tut ngo me pyere tek bot jo ma gukato ki I tim gero in kare me Lweny onyo tim gero mukene ma turu twero pa dano. Interview eni tye me nyang jami ma pol ma dano okato ki iye in kare me Lweny I kumalo me Uganda.

Why you were selected: You were invited to participate because you were either born while in captivity by an armed group or because you gave birth to children while in captivity by an armed group.

Pi ngo gi yero iin: Gi yero in me bedo I interview ma pien gi nywali I Lum I kare ma adwii omaki onyo I nywalo latini I kare ma adwii omaki

What participation involves: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to do one interview that will last from one to one and a half hour. This interview will focus on what you think and what your opinions are, rather than specific details about what has happened to you. We will ask you about what you think about healing, justice, social support, and sharing or documenting what has happened.

Ka cee I moko tam mi me gamo lapeny in interview man, ci wa be miti I gam lapeny ikin wang cawa acel me oo I acel I nucu, dok interview man obe penyi ngo ma itamo onyo tami malupe ki ngo ma otime I komi, bene wa be penyi tami I lok kom Nicagngo ki Nyol matir ki kony ma pat pat onyo coyo lok kom jami ma otime.

Voluntary participation: You do not have to participate in this interview. Whether or not you participate will not affect your current or any future relationship with CVT. Even if you received CVT services in the past, you are **not** required to participate. You can feel free to not answer any question in the interview. You can also leave the interview at any time, with no penalty.

Pe obedo do dic boti me bedo i interview man. Doc man pe obibalo bee bedo i kin iin kic dul CVT in yoo mo keken, kit i bed ni dul me CVT okonyo iin i kare ma okato anyech, pe obedo doc dic nii i bedi interview man. Itye agonya pe me gamo lapeny ii interview man onyo iromo aa woko ki interview man labongo acaara mo keken

Risks: Answering these questions may be difficult or might make you remember a time in your life that was difficult for you. It might make you feel sad or upset. If you do feel this way, we will provide an opportunity to talk with a counselor. You can also stop the interview any time.

Gamo lapeny man romo bedo tek onyo o be poyo wiyi I kom kwo matek ma I kato I iye, onyo romo weko lkeco onyo bene iyyi cwee matek, Ka ce iwyino iyy cwee ki wa be ngo boti nagt ma obi lok kede me konyi onyo be itwero weko interview man woko

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you. There are no additional services or no compensation for participating. However, your perspective can help us develop new approaches to help survivors. Some people find it meaningful to do this.

Pe tye m magoba ma i benogo pe lok interview man ento, lagam ma megii obe konyo wa me kati ki yoo ma nyen me kony jo ma odwogo ki ilum ki i cing adwii.

Confidentiality: The information that you provide may be used in a variety of ways. For example, it may be used in reports, media interviews, blog posts, editorials, statements communicated to governments, on CVT's website, in newsletters, or in research reports or articles. It may be distributed in Africa, the United States, Europe, or other areas.

Lok ma I be Waco kany we be tiyo kwede iyo mapol, calo we be tiyo kwede in coyo reports, lok ma gamente romo tic kwede onyo gi romo tic kwede me kwed I yoo ma pat pat, wa romo cwalo bene lok man I kabedo mal in Africa, i America, Europe ki kabedo ma pat pat.

We will protect the confidentiality of all information you provide. In any analysis or report, CVT will give information only in general form (talking only about themes and not about you personally), or with information that would make it possible to identify you removed.

Wa be gwoko lok ma i be Waco ni i mung, ka ce wa mito tic ki lok man i report pe wa be loko lok mo ma gudu kom iin.

We would like to audio record the conversation to help our analysis. After transcribing the audio file, we will delete the audio.

Wa mito legi me yee wa me mako dwani ka ce wa be caka interview man, ma ka wa tyeko coyo lok dogo ci wa be ruju dawni ma wa mako ni woko.

Contacts: You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Joel Odokonyero at JOdokonyero@cvt.org or 0783 932 705. You may also contact Margaret Lapyem at 0783 869 530.

Consent: I understand what is being asked of me. I agree to participate in this interview. I agree that the information from the interview can be used for advocacy, evaluation, and research.

Participant Name

Signature or Mark of Participant

Date

Interviewer Name

Signature of Interviewer

Date

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Appendix 3: Methodology

Assessment Team

The design and implementation of the needs assessment was co-led by two social science researchers (authors J.O. and S.G.), each with over a decade experience conducting community-based research about justice and peace in post-war northern Uganda. The assessment process was also supported by advising from CVT's global team and in-country program leadership.

CVT staff include a team of experienced psychosocial counselors and psychotherapists. The counselors were the primary interviewers, but this team was supplemented with three external interviewers on some data collection days. The CVT counselors have clinical training and experience; the external interviewers were trained on how to identify and provide support in case of distress, using psychological first aid (PFA) principles. All interviewers were trained on the assessment goals and interviewing methods, including reviewing the consent process and interview guide through role plays and clarifying the distinctions between the goals and approaches of counseling as compared to research interviews. Interviewer preparation included an initial day of training as well as ongoing debriefing, support, and problem-solving. Staff psychotherapists advised on psychosocial support procedures and addressed any emergent situations related to well-being or trauma throughout the assessment process, described below.

There were also several external consultants retained to support the translation and transcription process; they were identified because of previous experience handling similar data. CVT's staff evaluation team supported multiple components of the assessment, but particularly the translation, transcription, and data processing tasks, detailed later.

Population and Sampling

The population of focus was children born of war (CBOWs) and mothers of CBOWs. It is difficult to estimate the size of this population. However, a survey by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC-Uganda) estimated conservatively that there are 24,689 individual victims of sexual war crimes in Acholi and Lango;³⁸ the Justice, Law, and Order Sector (JLOS) of the Acholi sub-region carried out a pilot study and estimated that 4,000 to 6,000 children were born in captivity;³⁹ and in 2024 JRP launched a project to systematically document CBOW, adding 693 individuals to their database in the first location, just one constituency (Kilak North, in Amuru District).⁴⁰ Because this is not a defined population, and it is a very difficult population to access,

³⁸ Atim et al. 2018, *op. cit.*

³⁹ Study by Ajok, Margaret. 2019. *Pilot Study on Birth Registration of Children Born of War in the Acholi Region*. Government of Uganda Justice, Law, and Order Sector. As described in: 12 May 2019. "Gov't to Register Children Born During LRA War." *New Vision*. Available at: <https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1500173/govt-register-children-born-lra-war>.

⁴⁰ Justice and Reconciliation Project 2024, *op. cit.*

probability sampling methods are not appropriate. Potential participants were identified through purposive sampling of survivors, and are not representative of the entire population.

Our sampling design and implementation took into consideration the context of data collection. This includes the fact that there has been substantial data collection in northern Uganda, and many individuals and communities experience fatigue in participating in assessments and research. We were also aware of including a diverse range of survivors as participants, as similar exercises often rely on specific individuals who are often called upon to provide their perspectives repeatedly and share experiences on behalf of other survivors.

To identify a sample of participants for individual interviews, the research team first identified communities. This was based on feasibility (able to visit from Gulu within one day), diversity of previous experiences with transitional justice mechanisms (for example, communities that had direct engagement with the ICC and those that did not), concentration of and connections with participants in survivor groups, and places where CVT had previously provided services. Survivors in locations that are particularly remote were not included, which may exclude valuable perspectives.

Within each community, survivors were identified for interviews in two primary ways: as former clients of CVT's counseling services and/or as members of survivor groups for mothers/CBOWs.⁴¹ We identified primarily mothers of CBOWs from among former CVT clients (as previous CVT counseling services had included a limited number of youth). First, we used CVT's electronic dataset to generate a list of potential participants who fit basic criteria: women, captured by the LRA for a year or longer, and in the selected communities. Then, we reviewed the list in consultation with the clinical team to narrow potential participants according to if they had a child born of war and to ensure they did not present high clinical risk. Excluding those who the clinical team determined may experience adverse effects from participation was an important part of considering safety and risk, but may have also lost unique viewpoints. The final sample included 18 former CVT counseling clients.

We also identified survivors for interviews through connections to existing survivor groups or networks, which also had established relationships with CVT, primarily: Women's Advocacy Network (WAN), War Victim and Children Networking (WVCN), and Foundation for Justice and Development Initiatives (FJDI). There were also village- or community-specific survivor groups, such as groups established to support memorial sites. These groups have networks of survivors who are CBOWs and mothers of

⁴¹ In our initial design, we planned to also identify participants who were not former clients and were not connected to any group. We felt it would be valuable to prioritize collecting perspectives from some survivors who were not currently linked to any group or organized network. As anticipated, this was challenging in practice, and did not ultimately become a significant component of our sampling strategy, partly because the survivors' groups are so well connected (especially for the mothers of CBOWs) and partly because those are not connected are less likely to be socially active or accessible. In the final sample of respondents, there were four individuals who were not former clients and did not report connections to a survivor group.

CBOWs. The research team and partners discussed the purpose of the needs assessment and shared criteria for potential participants and details about the interview process. The survivor groups then invited their members or contacts in selected communities to attend a meeting with the research team to understand the assessment and decide if they would like to participate. In many communities, these were overlapping networks. Most interview participants were identified through these groups.

For the four FGDs, participants were identified through purposive sampling. Participants were: members of CSO organizations working with youth living on the streets, including Hashtag within Gulu; former CVT clients in Acet; and those known by community mobilisers in those specific communities. Participants were also those available at the time of assessment in those locations.

Data Collection

Intensive assessment planning was done March 27 to 30, 2023, with interviewer training and preparation on April 3. Interviews were conducted April 4 to 14 and FGDs were conducted on August 23 at Hastag and September 14 in Acet. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured, in-person individual interviews and through focus group discussions with survivors. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Acholi⁴² and audio-recorded, with the interviewer also taking notes. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in locations in each community that were selected by the research team for their privacy, quiet, and overall comfort for the participants. This included rented space in homes (not respondents' homes), memorial sites, schools, churches, or other accessible locations for participants.

All potential respondents participated in an informed consent process, to understand the purpose of the needs assessment, what would be asked of them, the voluntary nature, and the risks and benefits. They had the opportunity to ask questions and the interviewer engaged in conversation to help ensure the potential participant understood all aspects of the consent initially and throughout the data collection process.

Interview respondents were given token gifts (salt, soap, etc.) to express appreciation for their investment of time and energy in the data collection. The interview team included men and women, in line with CVT's service delivery experience that indicates properly trained counselors of either gender can provide support effectively to women, even regarding topics such as SGBV. However, if any participant expressed discomfort or a preference for an interviewer of a particular gender, this was accommodated.

Not unexpectedly, there were some challenges related to identifying interview participants and implementing data collection. For example, because of the mobilization method, working through survivor networks, there was a risk of identifying or "outing" survivors in a community, if their background as a CBOW or a mother of a CBOW was not known. The assessment team relied heavily on the micro-local knowledge of the

⁴² A small number of interviews were conducted wholly or partly in English, based on the respondent's preference.

survivor groups and their recommended approaches to mobilizing, even at an individual level. Another challenge was managing expectations of support, in both the identification of participants, as well as throughout the interview process. There was one community where the team went back two days in a row, and this noticeably raised expectations, including some examples of individuals trying to be interviewed even though they did not fit the criteria. Despite the invitation and consent process explaining this, throughout the interview, particularly when discussing what is needed to “repair the harm,” the interviewers needed to clearly address any emergent expectations that support would come from participation.

After concluding an interview, the interviewer completed their content notes and also fieldnotes. Immediately following most of the interviews, the interviewer and a researcher discussed the interview, including the reaction of the participant and the content of the interview, including identifying areas of particular interest, confusion, or for more in-depth exploration in future interviews. Additionally, the team held group debriefs after each day of data collection, typically the following morning, prior to the next day of interviews. The assessment team would reflect on any challenges from the previous day related to methodology, content, or the experiences of the participants or the interviewers. The team also discussed the emerging themes, identifying areas nearing saturation point and areas of particular interest or curiosity for interviewers to focus on in upcoming interviews.

All potential FGD respondents participated in group informed consent processes, to understand the purpose of the need assessment, what would be asked of them if they decided to participate, the voluntary nature of the discussion, and the risks and benefits. After this, they had individual processes of signing consent forms. Similarly to interview participants, FGD participants received a small appreciation tokens (salt, soap, etc.) to thank them for their involvement in the data collection.

The FGD sessions were facilitated by CVT’s counselors and psychotherapists. FGDs were held with these individuals to learn from their experiences and to generate in-depth understandings of their perspectives on thematic areas of the assessment. The discussions lasted about 90 minutes, giving the young people time to respond to the questions posed and discuss with one another.

Well-being and Psychosocial Support

CVT has expertise in designing and implementing work with vulnerable survivors of human rights violations using a trauma-informed approach, often providing training to other individuals and organizations within and outside of Uganda about the impact of trauma and how to support people who have had traumatic experiences. This assessment considered the role of trauma in establishing procedures to support the well-being of all participants.

First, as noted above, the assessment team included clinical experts and interviewers who were experienced counselors and/or received training on PFA and other

psychosocial protections and support. Throughout all interactions during data collection, including interactions in communities and with survivor groups generally, in addition to interviews or FGDs, the assessment team utilized risk assessment protocols to identify and respond to any potentially high-risk situations. Although participating in interviews or FGDs did not automatically qualify survivors to receive any services, there were referral procedures in place for individuals in urgent need of mental health or protection support.

During the interviews, there were regularly emotional reactions to the conversations. The team regularly discussed how to handle this, particularly to support the external interviewers during these reactions. Emotional reactions can be a positive reaction that there is a safe space to express emotions, so the goal was not to suppress or prevent any expression of sadness, anger, or grief. The interviewers supported the participants in these instances, while also containing the reaction to not move the interaction from a research interview to a counseling session. There were a few cases that were not safe and healthy emotional reactions, and were instead expressions of distress, as assessed by CVT's counselors and/or psychotherapists. This was generally with survivors who had not had previous mental health support. In these cases, the interviews ended, a qualified mental health professional provided support, and the CVT provided follow up as needed.

In the FGDs, the older participants were more active responding to questions posed, providing more in-depth responses, while younger participants were more likely to provide one-word responses once solicited, showing signs of shyness to respond and looking at other participants. The facilitators worked to encourage more active participation from these younger or more shy participants. Facilitators also utilized different approaches to encourage comfort, including having ice breakers within the sessions to ease interactions.

An additional important well-being component was to care for the mental health of the assessment team. Some interviewers, including staff and external interviewers, were from the same population as the survivors participating in the assessment. All interviewers were from northern Uganda and had been affected by the armed conflict. The assessment content prompted reflection and discussion among the team, leading to some emotional reactions. The team debriefed on this as a group and some individual interviewers also received support from the psychotherapists.

Data Processing and Analysis

Translations and transcriptions began simultaneously with data collection, continuing after data collection was completed. Translators / transcribers were provided with the Acholi audio file and interview notes. They completed the transcription directly into English. Next, a different translator / transcriber, or a member of the evaluation team, reviewed each transcript, by listening to the original audio file and making edits to the transcript; this was to correct basic errors, but also to have a second person considering the appropriate Acholi-English translation.

As noted above, preliminary reflections around emerging themes were gathered throughout the data collection process and refined through team discussion sessions. Systematic analysis included multiple steps. The evaluation team reviewed all completed English transcripts and produced summaries of each interview, including summary descriptions of the respondent's perspective, illustrative direct quotations, and relevant analytical notes tied into themes. Analysis then included inductive coding according to each of the primary themes, identifying the range of perspectives expressed. Findings were iteratively discussed among the evaluation team.

Appendix 4: Respondent Characteristics

The tables below provide basic characteristics of the mothers of children born of war (CBOWs) and CBOWs who participated in interviews or focus group discussions, corresponding to the interview/FGD numbers used throughout this report. Whether or not the respondent previously had received mental health services (from CVT or elsewhere) is included as a relevant characteristic that may influence views on healing or other interview topics.

In total, 82 individual participants' views are included in this report, including 40 mothers of CBOWs (49 percent) and 42 CBOWs (51 percent). The assessment included interviews with 56 survivors (68 percent) and FGDs with 26 survivors (32 percent). A majority of the participants were women (59 individuals, 72 percent), and a minority were men (23 individuals, 28 percent).

Number	Gender	Age	Survivor group	Received previous mental health services
Interview 1	Woman	50	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 2	Woman	38	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 3	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 4	Woman	35	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 5	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 6	Woman	30	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 7	Man	27	CBOW	No
Interview 8	Woman	22	CBOW	No
Interview 9	Woman	22	CBOW	No
Interview 10	Man	21	CBOW	No
Interview 11	Woman	38	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 12	Woman	32	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 13	Woman	22	CBOW	No
Interview 14	Man	20	CBOW	No
Interview 15	Woman	39	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 16	Man	19	CBOW	Yes
Interview 17	Woman	37	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 18	Woman	37	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 19	Woman	42	Mother of CBOW	Yes

Interview 20	Woman	38	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 21	Woman	42	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 22	Woman	30	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 23	Woman	39	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 24	Woman	36	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 25	Woman	41	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 26	Woman	45	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 27	Woman	43	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 28	Man	28	CBOW	Yes
Interview 29	Man	23	CBOW	Yes
Interview 30	Man	23	CBOW	Yes
Interview 31	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 32	Woman	34	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 33	Woman	42	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 34	Woman	50	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 35	Woman	41	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 36	Man	19	Neither – excluded from analysis	No
Interview 37	Woman	47	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 38	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 39	Woman	21	CBOW	No
Interview 40	Woman	37	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 41	Man	25	CBOW	No
Interview 42	Woman	19	CBOW	No
Interview 43	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 44	Woman	34	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 45	Woman	35	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 46	Woman	40	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 47	Woman	33	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 48	Man	19	CBOW	No

Interview 49	Woman	30	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 50	Woman	41	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 51	Woman	50	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 52	Woman	41	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 53	Woman	53	Mother of CBOW	No
Interview 54	Women	45 and 20	Mother and CBOW	No
Interview 55	Woman	54	Mother of CBOW	Yes
Interview 56	Woman	25	CBOW	Yes

Number	Number of participants	Gender	Age group
FGD 57	7	Women	18-28
FGD 58	8	Men	18-28
FGD 59	6	Women	15-27
FGD 60	5	Men	15-27