LIFE OF A WOMAN ACTIVIST IN NORTHERN UGANDA
Raising awareness about Gender Based Violence (GBV) is one of Action Against Hunger’s strategies to empower women in their households and communities in Northern Uganda. Selected individuals are trained to become activists who can serve as role models for other women and facilitate the process of seeking justice for cases of GBV. Here is further insight into the challenging yet inspiring life of one such remarkable woman activist.
Vulnerability Context

Background

Northern Uganda is characterized by widespread chronic poverty. For two decades, the region was severely affected by a brutal rebellion, led by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) against the present Government of Uganda (GoU). These communities first experienced extreme sexual and physical violence at the hands of the insurgents, through abduction of children as sex slaves or as child soldiers, and indiscriminate mutilation and murders.

Subsequently, nearly 1.7 million people were forced by the GoU to move into Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) camps. In 2007, after multiple attempts at peace negotiations that were inconclusive, the GoU and LRA signed the Agreement of Accountability and Reconciliation. The rebellion was subsequently quelled.

After the war, IDPs, refugees, LRA’s former recruits and abductees returned to their villages and resettled. However, they face challenges of re-establishing their lives in a context where there was a complete breakdown of social structures and livelihoods. The land reclamation process was slow and volatile as a result of widespread chronic food insecurity, weak social cohesion and limited livelihood alternatives to subsistence agriculture.

Gender Based Violence

GoU recognizes that the resettlement process must be based on principles of social justice. Addressing gender inequality is central to achieving these goals. Injustice meted out on the pretext of gender hierarchies, also known as Gender Based Violence (GBV), is defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) as “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed differences between males and females.” This definition ascribes a broad landscape for gender-sensitive programming, as it acknowledges violence is inflicted against both men and women of any age, and allows violence to be understood and addressed in a meaningful manner.

GBV is prevalent across the globe in all societies, but it is more pervasive and hidden in traditional societies. It is often observed that certain kinds of violence against vulnerable groups, such as women and girl children, are often considered acceptable social behavior (e.g. marital rape). GBV generally includes, although is not limited to: sex-selective abortion; differential access to food and services; sexual exploitation and abuse, including trafficking, child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting; sexual harassment; dowry/bride price abuse; honor killing; domestic or intimate partner violence; deprivation of inheritance or property; and elder abuse. Particularly in armed conflict, as witnessed in Northern Uganda during the insurgency, widespread sexual violence was used as a weapon of war to destabilize and control communities.
Programme Overview

In 2009, ACF introduced an unconditional cash transfer (CTP) programme, “Livelihoods and Economic Recovery in Northern Uganda” (LEARN) implemented in two phases and supporting 1,500 beneficiaries in the Otuke district of the Lango sub-region.

In 2011, ACF expanded its CTP to include Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and GBV prevention activities to establish the “Combating Gender Based Violence and Enhancing Economic Empowerment of Women in Northern Uganda” programme in Amuru, Otuke and Nwoya districts in Acholi and Lango sub-regions.

ACF provided cash transfers of approximately USD170 to a total of 16,417 beneficiaries. In the third phase of the programme, 7,330 households were identified, followed by a verification step using the Vulnerability versus Capability assessment.

ACF organized livelihoods and VSLA training of trainers in which 220 groups were formed with a total of 6,600 members over three years.

Gender prevention activities for raising awareness were implemented with the support of ACF’s implementing partners, African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET) and Community Rural Empowerment and Support Organization (CRESO).

Key activities included:
• Development of GBV information, education and communication materials
• Sensitization workshops on gender and provision of referral pathways
• Training of women and men in the community on GBV
• Capacity building of implementing partners’ staff members
• Training women activists

Loss of power
Alcoholism
Negative masculinities
Food security
Resource depletion
Poverty

Gender Based Violence
Amito Margaret, as a victim of GBV, participated in ACF’s programme during the 2011-2012 period. Today, she is the confident chairperson of a group of 30 women activists in Anaka sub-county in Amuru district.

Amito Margaret lives with her partner, Gabriel (see photo of Amito Margaret and Gabriel above), and 11 children. Her story is one of deep anguish, trauma and poverty. She endured extreme physical and emotional violence by her partner. Yet they overcame their challenges and now have a peaceful life. What sets her story apart is that both she and Gabriel strived to change for the better and make improvements in their lives, which were transformed as a result of the programme.

Life before the Programme

Before the war, Amito Margaret and Gabriel were subsistence farmers. Gabriel cultivated crops such as sesame and groundnuts which sold for approximately 45,000 Shillings (USD17) every year as their main income source. Supplementary sources of income included selling firewood and alcohol. Their income essentially covered household expenses. As the insurgents took over, it was no longer possible to cultivate their land. Eventually their crops and livestock were destroyed, forcing them to move into camps. Life at the camp was extremely disruptive and difficult for everyone.

Gabriel describes his predicament: “In the camps, we experienced tensions in the family as the children wanted food. Yet there was nothing I could do. So I turned to drinking every day to forget about everything.”

Amito Margaret, Gabriel and their children lived in the camp for 20 years, surviving each day on a “hand to mouth” basis. Rebels attacked villages and camps leading to heavily restricted movement, preventing them from searching for day labor jobs. They barely had access to cultivable land and their children perpetually fell sick due to poor nutrition. The loss of confidence, resources, livelihoods and physical instability traumatized the entire family. According to Gabriel, the multi-faceted poverty became “unbearable,” as he became a habitual drinker. He was abusive to his wife, and his children became afraid of him.

Amito Margaret remembers how Gabriel was a good man, and how that all changed with the war. It initially began with verbal quarrels and emotional violence, but eventually he turned physically violent. He would steal part of the harvests to sell it for alcohol, and would turn violent in front of the children if Amito Margaret dared to question him. She attempted to take the matter to the clan, but they failed to reach out to Gabriel.

“One day he got back home so drunk, saying that he had all the right to beat me and discipline me as his wife. We were still living in the camp; and one night he came back with a ‘panga’ [machete], and hit my back and head. I could barely move from the ground where I had fallen down. I lay there for about an hour and had a blackout. When I woke up, I was in tears and my children were crying and calling out for me. I could barely sit up. All I remember were my neighbors in the camp taking me to Lacor hospital. I could not sit due to back pain, and was hospitalized for a month.”

[Amito Margaret]

Vulnerable to GBV from Amito Margaret’s perspective:

▪ We used to only work together or talk only when he was sober, but he was mostly drunk, violent, and unsupportive. He would not listen to my suggestions or plan with me on how to spend the money, instead spending the money I earned on himself.

▪ I did most of the work on the farm along with the children, and made sure to utilize our scarce earnings well, so that there was some food and I could pay my children’s school fees, as well as ensure that I was active in the VSLA.
Life after the Programme

Gabriel was disinterested when ACF arrived and identified Amito Margaret as a vulnerable woman. When ACF conducted community sensitization on GBV prevention and livelihood skills, Gabriel thought the intervention was a “women’s programme.” However, Amito Margaret was extremely proactive and was already part of a savings group. She attended ACF’s community meetings and was selected as a cash transfer beneficiary. Gabriel’s discontent was further aggravated when Amito Margaret was selected as chairperson of a women’s group. He noticed that she often spent entire days away from the household in order to attend meetings. This meant that she had less time for household chores and childcare, leading to quarrels between Amito Margaret and Gabriel.

Eventually, Amito Margaret asked if the meetings could be held at their homestead. Gabriel agreed as it meant she would remain at home. As the meetings took place, Gabriel started to take interest in the topics of discussion.

“I listened to the trainings and learned about the importance of living in peace, supporting my wife and children, and why we should plan together as a husband and wife because this way we can help develop our household, and the effects of alcohol in destroying families.” [Gabriel]

After listening to the training workshops, he was interested in joining a group. Amito Margaret and the children encouraged him to join the VSLA and stop drinking. The cash transfer and livelihood training were pivotal to changing their circumstances. They bought 3 goats, bought groundnuts for planting from which they harvested 16 sacks, and sold 10 bags each at 80,000 Shillings (USD30). They kept five sacks for household consumption and one sack as seeds for the next season. They found an opportunity to work together to plan for their income and savings, and management of various different household activities.

In 2014, Gabriel left the VSLA to devote all of his time to agriculture and household chores such as cooking, washing clothes, and looking after the children. His decision is based on the fact that much of his wife’s time is now taken up as chairperson of the women activist group.

He appreciates the role that she plays within their community and is aware of how other women rely on her. He values her role in sensitizing the community on the importance of peaceful gender relations and in mediating on cases of GBV.

Moreover, with the cash transfer, they have recovered their previous economic stability and Gabriel rarely drinks. They have reclaimed their land and can cultivate cash crops such as groundnuts, own livestock, and no longer struggle to pay their children’s school fees.

Changes of Attitude from Gabriel’s perspective:

- I discuss with my wife and children on matters affecting the family. We do not resolve our problems with quarrels but discuss together to have solutions to every problem. I know that my wife and other women leaders can make a positive difference in the community and reduce GBV-related issues.
- Violence cannot be resolved by fighting back but by talking to each other when you are both calm. A family needs to work together to ensure their households have enough money and food to provide for their basic needs.

Programme Impact

Psychosocial Trauma linked to Alcoholism: A Key Instigator of GBV and Poverty

Since the war, alcohol was used by some men as a coping strategy to deal with the effects of residual wartime psychosocial trauma. Some of the ill effects of alcoholism are:

- Wastage of men’s income generating capacities, restraining the household’s ability to move out of poverty and invest in more productive activities.
- Addiction to alcohol, compelling men to siphon a portion of scarce food materials, livestock and cash, and further accentuating food insecurity.
- Reduced possibilities for compromise between family members, in order to ensure the well-being of all.
- Interactions between alcohol addiction and the perpetual stress of poverty, creating psychological pressures that result in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and violence against children.
- Manifestation of similar characteristics in male leaders, who can no longer serve as the role models able to strengthen social networks, and restore former prosperity through peaceful land dispute resolution and creation of community assets.
Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Absence of psychosocial support and counselling after the war is likely to have propelled negative behavioral changes which persist to this day. Psychosocial trauma and related alcoholism must be addressed in order to reduce GBV within households. Interventions must reach out to both male and female partners to sustainably improve gender relations within households.

GBV trainings can be critical for raising awareness amongst men:
- Importance of women in household production,
- Importance of sharing workload,
- Importance of sending children to school, and
- Importance of having a peaceful home and the effects of GBV on families.

Local activism for gender equality and rights can play a key role in:
- Giving vulnerable women a voice and visibility within their community,
- Gradually and sustainably shifting mindsets, and
- Improving access to referral systems.

VSLAs can act as a neutral platform for:
- Introducing benefits of gender parity and maintaining peaceful relations,
- Encouraging both partners to engage in productive activities, and
- Investing in children’s well-being.

Contact Details and Further Reading

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The full report entitled Understanding the Interaction between Women’s Economic Empowerment and Gender Based Violence: Study on ACF’s Cash Transfer Programme in Northern Uganda is available on the ACF website.

To learn more about ACF programmes in Uganda, please visit our website.

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1 Gender, as defined by the Inter- Agency Standing Committee (2005), is as follows, “Gender refers to the differences between males and females that learned, and though deep – rooted in every culture, are changeable over time, and have wide variations within and between cultures. “Gender” determines the roles, responsibilities, opportunities, privileges, expectations and limitation for males and females in any culture.” (FAO)

2 IASC was established in June 1992 as a response to UN’s Resolution to strengthen humanitarian assistance. It is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. It is a unique forum involving the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners.

3 Perpetrators of such violence can be known or unknown to a GBV survivor; intimate partners, family members, caregivers and friends, influential community members, security forces, peace keeping forces, humanitarian aid workers, institution and the state. (ibid)

4 ACF Uganda Gender Study Report 2014.

5 During LEARN II, 1,877 women received training for crop production, animal traction, livestock breeding and IGA (LEARN II Final Report, 2011).