

**REPORT ON THE EXCHANGE VISIT FOR FORMERLY ABDUCTED WOMEN & GIRLS  
IN NORTHERN UGANDA.**

**Venue: Garden Inn Hotel, Lira**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Lira Women Peace Initiatives (LIWEPI) currently known as Women Peace Initiatives - Uganda (WOPI –U) has continued to collaborate with other development partners with similar thematic areas in an effort to attain their vision of having a peaceful and prosperous society in their area of operation. One of such collaboration is the exchange visit which was an initiative of the Justice and Reconciliation Project (JRP). It steamed out of the meeting organized by JRP in Gulu where LIWEPI had a panel discussion of its activities, achievements, best practices, challenges and way forward. The meeting had Women Advocacy Network (WAN) officially made public. WAN is network of formerly abducted girls and women who have come together to advocate for their rights. During this session, LIWEPI brought to the attention of the public (JRP) that there are formerly abducted girls /women all over the Northern Uganda that need to be reached and brought on board. It was agreed during the meeting in Gulu that the women/girls who were in captivity be brought together to share experiences and hence the Lira meeting.

## **ACTIVITIES**

The following are the activities implemented during this particular event:

- Radio talk show
- Experience sharing meeting

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To share experience for the formerly abducted women /girls.
- To identify and discuss the successes, challenges faced by formerly abducted women/girls and how to address them.
- To introduce Women Advocacy Network to Lango Sub region.
- To form lasting linkages with advocacy networks.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

The meeting took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2012 at Garden Inn Hotel. It brought together a total of 22 participants (only females) who are group leaders from nine groups of formerly abducted women and girls (war victims) hailing from Gulu, Lira, Kitgum, Amuru, Amolatar, Lamuo and Alebtong District.



**Picture 1: Participants pose for a group photo after the meeting.**

## **PROGRAM**

The program started on Monday evening with arrival and registration of participants followed by a brief meeting and dinner. The second day started with a radio talk show on Unity FM “Yab Wangi” “Open Your Eyes” program from 7:00am to 9:00am. The experience sharing meeting started with introduction, presentations, discussions, way forward and closure.

## **DISCUSSION**

**(Sexual Abuse, Rejection, Stigma, HIV/AIDS, Reproductive health complications, )**

**Sexual and gender Based violence:** The formerly abducted women and girls were sexually abused and impregnated by the Lord’s Resistance Army. They were abducted when they were young. They were forcefully used by men who impregnated them and left them with children. ***“The men who abducted, raped / used and produced with us against our will are being supported by the government but women are not being supported.”*** they said.

**Failed marriages:** Formerly abducted women/girls are facing a lot of challenges in marriage. A number of them echoed that nobody wants to marry them. Their biological needs are not met. In the quest to meet this, they end up with men who use and abandon them. A participant from Lira was quoted saying, ***“I came back with two children from the bush, I got another man that I am currently staying with, and he hates my children and abuses me with all sorts of dirty words. He said he won’t sleep with a woman who was fucked up by the rebels. The woman he is in love with came and abused me. I got so angry, cried and transferred my aggression to my child, I caned him badly that I parted with 25,000 /= for his treatment.”*** At the end of the session, she left convinced that she is not the only one suffering and never to transfer her aggression to the children again.

**High HIV/AIDS prevalence among the formerly abducted women and girls:** Most of the formerly abducted women returned with HIV/AIDS infection, and during the conflict people were displaced from their homes to internally Displaced persons camps, families/spouses separated and ended up

contracting HIV/AIDS from the bush. A participant from Amolatar brought to the attention of the house that there are a number of war affected women hailing from all over Northern Uganda who fled to Namasale. They are suffering from HIV/AIDS, displacement, and landlessness.

**Stigma:** There is a lot of stigma associated with abduction. Some of the formerly abducted girls and women prefer to suffer quietly with fear of being identified with their past experience. Some people call us rebels. However some of the formerly abducted girls and women also invite stigma on themselves by using bad words like; Don't joke with me, I will slaughter you like I did in the bush, Don't let me bring out the rebel in me etc

**Trauma:** Formerly abducted women/girls are still traumatized. They reported that they are still being haunted for and disturbed by evil spirits hailing from what they went through during captivity. They said, ***"Whenever our children fall sick, it's attributed to the spirits even when it's malaria. When we have problems and we complain, people say you are demon possessed. Whatever we say is rubbish because of our past."***

**Rejection:** Formerly abducted women/girls are facing rejection from their own communities. A participant from Ayami Women Peace Club shared her sad story while tears rolled from her eyes through the face to the chest, ***"I was abducted with my uncle and five other girls from the same area. The rebels ordered us to chew my uncle to death, one of the girls I was captured with managed to escape and she came and reported to my relatives that I was the one who killed my Uncle. When I came back, I was rejected. All my relatives especially the children of my late uncle are so bitter up to now. My mother died and all was blamed on me. I don't have peace, I was forced to leave my home and settle with a man in Ayami."*** This was a moment of tears as almost the whole house broke into tears.



**Picture: 2. Lamwaka a formerly abducted member of Ayami Women Peace club narrates her touching story while tears rolled from her eyes to her chest then to the table during the exchange visit.**



**Picture: 3: Moment of cold as Lamwaka narrates her sad story.**

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

Story telling comforts the broken hearted, when people share their experiences. They realize that they are not the only ones with bad experiences.



**Picture 4: The chairperson for WAN comforts the broken hearted, “I am a formerly abducted lady and am taking care of the children I came back with from the bush together with step children whose mother died during the war but no one can tell by mere looking at me, recollect your selves and move forward. If we all cry who will comfort the other?” she advised**

Participants who were so broken hearted and cried during the session testified that they won’t cry again at the end of the session, **“I have learnt a lot today, other people even have worst experience compared to mine, I will never cry over my sufferings again”** Lamwaka said.



**Picture: 5: After the session smiles returned to the faces. They vowed never to cry and transfer aggression to their children.**

There is need for net working of the women peace clubs. When they meet they tend to forget about the past. The peace clubs need to stick to the purpose for which they exist i.e. promote peaceful coexistence in everything they do. As they venture in other fields peace promotion / trauma management should remain the backbone of their initiatives.

There is High level of sexual and gender based violence as reported by most of the participants. Many were sexually abused in the bush and many are facing domestic violence back home.

Women and girls are facing a lot of challenges / problems quietly in their communities. It's a high time they stood up on their own and voice their concerns to the responsible authorities.

Women Peace Club members are practicing and promoting peaceful coexistence at grass root level. Lamwaka from Aromo shared a story where a formerly abducted lady who returned with HIV/AIDS was rejected by the relatives and was languishing in the outskirts of the Puranga i.e. the neighboring District of Pader. After a tip off, they took up the case, verified with the lady and went to her relatives, pleaded for a portion of land to be allocated to her and they were offered a garden. Lamwaka and her husband made blocks while some of the peace club members contributed other building materials. They collectively erected a house, went and picked her for Puranga and brought her back home. She is now happily leaving with her children and so grateful for what the peace club members have done for her. There is need for net working of the women peace clubs. The peace clubs need to stick to the purpose for which they exist i.e. promote peaceful coexistence in everything they do. As they venture into other fields peace promotion/ trauma management should remain the backbone of their initiatives.

## Recommendations:

There is need to apologise to the formerly abducted girls and women they feel ignored and unattended to. They know and see some of the perpetrators who equally need to apologise to them.

The formerly abducted women and girls should put what they went through at their back and focus on their development. However this can be done through catch up initiatives.



**Picture: 6: One of the participants assured her friends never to bank their hope on free services / relief support. "I was abducted, returned with 2 children but I did not get any free service right from relief that people got when we were at the camps. I use my brain and hands to feed myself and children. Think about what you can do to sustain yourself than sit and only cry for free things. I stopped in p.2, I don't even know how to write my name but my children are in school and have never tested free food. Forget about free things." She advised her friends.**

There is need for JRP and WOPI-U together with other partners working with formerly abducted girls and women to continue collaborating and linking the groups for various services.

There is need for the peace clubs to borrow the idea of storytelling from WAN and integrate it in their activities. The formerly abducted women and girls in Lango should also form a net work.

The peace clubs should continue providing ongoing one to one psychosocial support for its members aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence.

The peace clubs still need to be supported in order for gender equality to be realized. They missed formal education. One of them said, "**LIWEPI identified, trained and supported us with the little they could afford and we are so sad that the organization lacks funds to support us comprehensively. Besides, our number is big, not all of us benefited. Don't get tired of us, continue looking for funds and support us because your effort touches the real wounds in us.**"



***Picture: 7: Secretary for Barlonyo women peace club expressed concern that they are not yet empowered and therefore LIWEPI and other partners should continue supporting them.***

Conclusively, there is great need for psychosocial support since the formerly abducted women/girls have remained in trauma. Peace clubs need to continue promoting peaceful coexistence by providing one to one psychosocial support / counseling for its members and help whoever is in problem within their localities. CSOs should equally support these groups and ensure that they benefit from government programs.