



COUNTRY BRIEFING

Uganda

About the Gender, Justice and Security Hub

The Gender, Justice and Security Hub brings together researchers, practitioners and activists through a collection of research projects to advance gender justice and inclusive peace in conflict-affected societies. The Hub works across seven countries: Afghanistan, Colombia, Kurdistan-Iraq, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Uganda with projects in 17 additional countries across Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

Spanning from gendered migration, masculinities and sexualities to land rights and transformative justice, each project amplifies the voices of women and marginalised groups. The Hub aims to advance Sustainable Development (SDG) 5 on gender equality; SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions; and the implementation of the UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.



Uganda

This country brief draws on the following projects: Sex, Love and War; Cross-border Wars, Sexuality and Citizenship; Beyond War Compensation; and From Female Combatants to Filmmakers – Expanding Women’s Agency in War and Peace.

Country Context

Decades of War and Conflict: Since gaining independence in 1962, Uganda has endured a string of authoritarian regimes, wars and internal conflicts. The conflict involving the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which began in 1986, was characterised by extreme brutality and violence, including against civilians. The roots of this conflict have been linked to deep-seated historical tensions, particularly relating to the Acholi people in Northern Uganda. The conflict resulted in the displacement of millions of people and significant humanitarian crises.

In 2006, peace talks began between the Ugandan government and the LRA, leading to a ceasefire, but the LRA did not completely disband. Instead, they relocated to neighbouring countries, where they continued to carry out sporadic attacks. The LRA no longer posed a significant threat in Uganda after 2006, and by the early 2020s, relative peace had been restored in many neighbouring countries, including Rwanda, though armed groups are still persistent in Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Uganda has attempted to restore peace and normalcy in the Great Lakes region, which has included frequent deployments of its army to the DRC, South Sudan, Rwanda and other states.

Internally, Uganda is left with many challenges in addressing the legacy of the conflict, including unresolved grievances, and the rehabilitation of former child soldiers, female ex-combatants and “war-women”.

Peace and Progress? While the country has taken steps toward promoting women’s rights and representation, especially in legislative bodies, deep-rooted gender disparities persist. Challenges, such as gender-based violence, limited access to education and healthcare for women and girls, and unequal economic opportunities remain pervasive. The government’s commitment to gender equality has at times been reflected in various policies and initiatives, yet implementation and societal change are slow.

Uganda has also sought to address issues in both formal and customary legal systems, but the judiciary’s capacity to handle issues relating to gender-based violence and women’s rights is often hampered by resource constraints, corruption and a backlog of cases. Additionally, the interplay between formal legal processes and customary law poses unique challenges in delivering justice, especially in rural areas.

Ongoing Security Challenges: While the state’s approach to security has been robust, there are concerns regarding human rights and the impact of security measures on vulnerable populations, including women and children. Northern Uganda, for example, has seen multiple Government programmes focused on reconstruction and compensation since the end of the conflict. These have been accompanied by accountability efforts at both international and domestic levels – including through the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Crimes Division (ICD) – to bring alleged perpetrators to justice. However, despite significant investment in post war recovery, myriad post-conflict conflicts continue to emerge and occur frequently in the whole Acholi sub-region.

The Hub in Uganda

As Uganda navigates these complex issues, understanding the nuanced relationship between gender, justice and security is vital for effective policy formulation and implementation. Across the Gender, Justice and Security Hub, our projects seek to better understand the challenges that have emerged in the aftermath of conflict in Uganda. Collectively, they address the marginalisation of women and children impacted by the conflict and the effects of military deployments, including ongoing disputes in post-conflict Northern Uganda, and the unique experiences of female ex-combatants.



The Challenges

Social, Economic and Psychological Impacts of Military

Deployments: Protracted, multiple deployments by the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) within and across national borders have had complex social, economic and psychological impacts on soldiers. It has also created a generation of so-called "war-women" – women with whom soldiers have intimate relationships during cross-border deployments – and street children, who then face institutional barriers and social stigma. By engaging with soldiers, their families, and the "war-women" we have gained insights into their health experiences and the evolution of their familial and social relations. This research is critical in developing gender-sensitive changes to military institutional frameworks and policy guidelines.

Experiences of Female Ex-Combatants: We are deeply engaged in documenting and understanding the roles and experiences of female ex-combatants. These women share their stories through peer-to-peer interviews and documentary filmmaking. Their narratives reflect on their involvement in armed movements and experiences during conflicts, but they also detail their journeys towards rebuilding their lives in a post-conflict environment.

Diverse Methodologies

In Uganda, Hub research combines long-term ethnography, psychometric assessments, community theatre, oral narratives, and participatory art-based and innovative approaches, such as participatory filmmaking and "love life history" interviews. These varied methods are instrumental in understanding the intricacies of post-conflict settings, particularly gender dynamics, but they also serve as platforms for those affected to voice their experiences. For instance, exploring how intimate relationships have been affected by conflict can facilitate broader community dialogues on culturally sensitive subjects.

Post-Conflict Conflicts: Post-war conflicts, which are often associated with land acquisition, continue to affect livelihoods, particularly for women. This is exacerbated by displacement, persistent hierarchical cultural norms and structural issues that limit women's agency in land rights claims. Through a combination of interviews, observations, group dialogues and participatory arts-based methods, this research helps to understand the gendered realities and experiences that emerge in post-war contexts.

Key Findings



Marginalisation and Stigmatisation

Female ex-combatants, “floating populations”, and women returnees and their children – particularly those born in captivity or conflict zones – continue to face severe marginalisation, leading to stigmatisation, economic struggles, and social challenges, including issues with community integration and accessing opportunities.



Land Ownership and Inheritance Issues

The patrilineal land ownership system in Uganda creates significant challenges for all women, and particularly female ex-combatants and their children, leading to disputes over land rights and insecurity, which exacerbates their economic and social difficulties.



Health and Reintegration Challenges

Female ex-combatants face inadequate long-term health support and neglect in reintegration programmes, impacting their physical and mental well-being, ability to work, and successful reintegration into society.



Economic Motivations in Conflict

Financial incentives for nation states and individual soldiers in conflicts, such as prolonged deployments, result in complex social issues, including the formation of temporary families and subsequent socio-economic problems for these families.



Social and Relational Disruptions

Extended conflicts and displacements have significantly disrupted intimate relationships, kinship systems, and traditional practices, including partner selection and marriage, leading to societal shifts and challenges in maintaining cultural norms.



Intergenerational and Cultural Conflicts

There is a notable generational divide and erosion of community trust due to the commercialisation of land and shifting cultural norms, which exacerbates conflicts and alters traditional community ties and trust.



Policy Gaps in Post-Conflict Scenarios

Current policies inadequately address the needs of children born from rape, conflict relationships and those repatriated, leading to issues with citizenship, documentation and social inclusion.



Persistence of Hierarchical Norms and Cultural Practices

Despite the upheavals caused by conflict, certain hierarchical and cultural norms persist, influencing contemporary social structures and practices, including gender roles and community leadership.



Mental Health and Psychosocial Warfare

Victims and survivors of generalised violence, armed conflicts and prolonged displacements suffer severe post-traumatic stress and recurring physical, mental and psychosocial ailments manifested as a “mental insurgency”, which is exemplified by the high levels of suicide in post-conflict contexts.



Recommendations

Government and Policymakers

- **Government Engagement and Support:** Engage continuously and offer robust support to marginalised communities and “floating populations”, including women returnees and children born in conflict, to address issues of stigmatisation, violence and social integration.
- **Simplification of Legal Processes:** Streamline legal documentation processes for people lacking parental or birthplace information, enabling better access to government services and legal rights, particularly for children born in captivity.
- **Land Reform and Community Trust:** Address land conflicts and challenges from land commercialisation by reinforcing community trust, facilitating the adaptation of traditional land and kinship systems, and ensuring fair land access for all, especially women and children affected by conflict.
- **Military Strategy and Deployment Policies:** Redefine military strategies to emphasise peaceful conflict resolution and limit the duration and frequency of deployments to prevent the formation of temporary families and improve soldier wellbeing.

International Organisations and NGOs

- **Role of International Actors:** Actively work with a wide range of actors to combat stigmatisation and discrimination against people formerly associated with armed groups, focusing on the specific needs and contexts of the affected populations.

Communities and Cultural Institutions

- **Prioritise Post-War Social Identity:** Develop programmes to support social connectedness, encourage intergenerational dialogue, and foster collective identity within communities. This cultural heritage and sense of identity in the Acholi community is a core aspect of returning to social cohesion.

Media and Communication Sectors

- **Effective Community Outreach:** Make use of radio and other media as tools for community outreach and public debate, especially in rural, war-impacted areas, to bridge divides and to amplify marginalised voices across various demographic lines.

Healthcare and Social Services

- **Long-term Health and Reintegration Programmes:** Develop and implement comprehensive and intentional reintegration programmes that address the long-term physical, mental and social impacts of conflict on ex-combatants, ensuring their successful reintegration and improved quality of life.



To learn more about Hub research in Uganda visit:
<https://thegenderhub.com/publications/country-briefing-uganda/>

This Country Briefing was first published in the Hub's final report, *Gender, Justice and Security: Structural Challenges, Feminist Innovations and Radical Futures*. Go to www.TheGenderHub.com to read the full report and to learn more about all 38 research projects in the Hub.



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