Schools Out: Core Strategies for Human Rights Learning during Armed Conflict

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Introduction

At the time of writing there are an estimated thirty-eight active, armed conflicts occurring in the world (Global Security, 2010). The literature concerning children and war suggests that children are one of the most affected, vulnerable groups in these situations (Allwood et al. 2004; Paadekooper et al. 1999; World Vision 1995, 2004). During the last decade, two million children have been killed in conflict situations, more than one million have become orphans, six million have been seriously injured or permanently disabled and more than ten million have been left with psychological trauma, malnourishment, and disease. Another estimated twenty million children have been displaced either outside or within their countries, having been forced to become refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (Allwood et al. 2004; Farmer 2005; Harvey 2002; Paadekooper et al. 1999). In addition, armed conflicts deprive children of the security of their communities, family, education and health systems, exposing them to multiple dangers (Farmer 2005; Harvey 2002).

Started in 1986, the northern Ugandan, twenty-two year old civil war provides the context for the research study¹, on which this article is based. Despite the Ugandan government’s ongoing ratification and commitment to uphold multiple human rights instruments, conventions and treaties all designed to protect children, Uganda appears to lack the ability (as do the governments of many countries) to enforce, act upon or uphold the intent of these documents (Evans 2008; Foundation for Human Rights Initiative 2005). Consequently, Uganda’s war in Acholiland (known as northern Uganda by the Western world) has displaced over 1.6 million people and seen approximately 20,000 children taken and held in the bush by non-state actors (Eichstaedt 2008; World Vision 2004). The study found that during this conflict as many as 7,000 girls have been taken by non-state actors or rebel forces (Eichstaedt 2009; Rachele Rehabilitation Centre 2006). Reports indicate that girls who are taken are denied multiple human rights. They are used as porters, child minders, and domestic servants, are sexually exploited and forced to become commanders’ “wives”, human shields and child soldiers. They are also forced to violate the right of others by killing, maiming,

¹ See footnote 4

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beating and taking other children (Eichstaedt 2008; Finnstrom 2008; Wessells 2006; World Vision 2004).

As well as these documented psychological, physical, emotional, social and economic effects, unending conflicts and insurgencies significantly disrupt and alter the informal and formal education systems and structures in war zones (Tomasevski 2003; Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2005). Schools often become targets for attack during armed conflict. As a result, most schools in conflict areas close because teachers are targeted and children are at risk for stepping on landmines, or are taken on their way to or from school and there are community fears about gathering groups of children, in non-secure settings such as in schools (Boothby et al. 2006; UNESCO 2005; De Temmerman 2001; Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2005).

In Uganda, the Universal Primary Education program (UPE)² through its government produced curriculum, represents the only formal human rights education model³ for girls and therefore the primary opportunity for them to begin to hear about some of their rights and

2 While the UPE is program is free, there are still significant school fees charged for food, uniforms and scholastic materials that often move primary education beyond the reach of some Ugandans.

3 Education
1. Every child shall have the right to education.
2. The education of the child shall be directed to:
   (a) The promotion and development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
   (b) Fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms with particular reference to those set out in the provisions of various African instruments on human and peoples’ rights and international human rights declarations and conventions;
   (c) The preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures;
   (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, tolerance, dialogue, mutual respect and friendship among all peoples ethnic, tribal and religious groups;
   (e) The preservation of national independence and territorial integrity;
   (f) The promotion and achievements of African Unity and solidarity;
   (g) The development of respect for the environment and natural resources;
   (h) The promotion of the child understanding of primary health care.
3. States parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures with a view to achieving the full realization of this right and shall in particular:
   (a) Provide free and compulsory basic education;
   (b) Encourage the development of secondary education in its different forms and to progressively make it free and accessible to all;
   (c) Make the higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity and ability by every appropriate means;
   (d) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of the drop-out rate;
   (e) Take special measures in respect of female, gifted and disadvantaged children, to ensure equal access to education for all sections of the community (Article 11, p.3).

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responsibilities. This opportunity for human rights learning in a conflict zone is vital, as Koenig (2002, p.1) suggests:

Human rights education is a way of preparing the ground for reclaiming and securing our right to be human. It is learning about justice and empowering people in the process. It is a social and human development strategy that enables women, men and children to become agents of change. It can produce the blend of ethical thinking, action, and participation of people in the decisions, which shape their lives, that is needed to cultivate public policies based on human rights. It opens the possibility of creating a human rights culture for the 21st century.

Yet, often in times of conflict, education—and particularly human rights education—is considered to be superfluous to the more immediate needs of survival, such as food and shelter. In these situations, children’s’ rights appear to become hierarchical, with human rights learning falling far below the right to shelter, food and health. Often the accompanying mentality is that, in enduring armed conflicts, it is enough just to keep children from dying; and post-conflict is the time to consider education and learning (Boothby et al. 2006). The result is that more than a generation of girls has received only limited, sporadic human rights education through the UPE program. There continues to burgeoning support for informal or formal human rights learning in conflict situations, as evidenced by several humanitarian organizations who report the benefits of human rights education during war and try to promote such learning as a “protective factor … as the provision of information that can help children contribute to their own protection” (SIDA, 2002; World Vision 2004, p.24). While these reports indicate and establish the need for human rights education even in times of conflict, few give any indication of how to achieve this objective or indicate suitable methods for doing so. The *African Charter on Human and People’s Rights* (ACHPR 1986, p.25) supports this premise, suggesting that African government signatories support the call for effective human rights education. In doing so, the Charter obliges its fifty-two signatory African states to:

Promote and ensure through teaching, education and publication, the respect for the rights and freedoms contained in the present Charter and to see to it that these freedoms and rights as well as corresponding obligations and duties are understood.

In 2005, international interest and support for human rights education in general was clearly identified in the United Nations General Assembly publication of the *Plan of Action for the First Phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education* (2005). This plan was
specific in its support and objectives for human rights education (United Nations General Assembly resolution 2004, p. 71), stating that:

Human rights education contributes to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and violent conflicts, the promotion of equality and sustainable development and the enhancement of people’s participation in decision-making processes within a democratic system.

Notwithstanding international recognition and the fact that human rights education holds a pivotal place in humanitarian organizations’ principles, as well as in human rights documents, methodologies for distributing human rights education have been less defined. Richard Pierre Claude (1999, p.7) suggests that:

The effectiveness of human rights education should not only be the concern of the Charter signatories, but of everyone who takes human rights education seriously. The standard suggests that those obliged to teach human rights should also ensure that such programs are effective in that people accept and understand their rights and that they are thereby empowered to use them and can benefit by exercising them.


This paper provides a brief overview of my original research design, and then unpacks succinctly the question of how we put human rights education in a war zone into practice and what models might be best suited. Using multiple methods, including a unique art-based method, interviews and a focus group the original study upon which this article is based, began with the experiences of girls in northern Uganda’s war zone and how their ability to achieve basic human rights was affected and what insights they had in developing an appropriate human rights education model. This was achieved through a 2006 field study, centered on the premise that those who do not know their rights and responsibilities are more vulnerable to having them abused. In order to understand the girls’ context a situational field

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4 Unpublished 2010 PhD by this author titled, “Girls at the Front: An Exploration of the Relationship between Human Rights Education Policy and the Experiences of Girls Taken by the Militia in Northern Uganda’s Civil War”.

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analysis (2005) and an extensive fifty-four page socio-historical political literature were also completed, along with an analysis of current tools available and their applicability to the context.

Methodology

Using a transformative feminist methodology that accounted for my positionality as a Caucasian, working class woman, with significant positive life chances such as an education, health care and security, I tried to counteract the inherent power imbalance present when conducting research with women who were black and whom I assumed from my understanding of the context, had experienced significant social, emotional and physical obstacles in their lives. I sought to collect rich data through multiple methods to preserve as much of the participants’ voices and experiences as possible. My research was guided by a strong desire to make sure that the viewpoints of the participants were represented well and shared honestly.

Participants

Research participants were restricted to those girls who had been taken and held and had escaped or been rescued, and who were now within reasonable travel distance from either Lira or Gulu towns. With the assistance of local translators, who spoke mutually intelligible languages, twenty-four young girls from these areas were recruited to participate in the study. No specific age groupings were sought. Participants were recruited based solely on the research team’s ability to safely access them and their willingness to participate. Girls from both of the major northern tribal groups, the Acholi and the Langi, were invited to participate in this study.

Measures

A semi-structured, open-ended, 33-item questionnaire was used as a guide for a focus group and the fifteen interviews. The purpose was to gather information about three primary areas: demographic information, information about the girls’ experiences of captivity in the bush, and information about human rights learning. During the focus groups and interviews, the participants were invited to describe: their experiences of being taken, held, and escaping

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5 See footnote 3
from captivity in the bush; how they were treated; and what they drew upon that gave them the strength to survive. Participants were also encouraged to talk about the gender-specific roles that they performed while being held. In addition, they were invited to give their thoughts and opinions about their experiences related to human rights learning. The northern Ugandan questionnaire was designed to solicit dialogue about each girl’s current knowledge of human rights documents, their opinions with regards to the strengths and weaknesses of current human rights learning models, and what they thought could improve the implementation of human rights learning during unending armed conflict.

All of the proposed guiding questions on the tool were further discussed with a Ugandan informant team to ensure cultural appropriateness and relevance of the questions, given the political and social nature of some of the questions and the questionnaire was translated from English into Acholi/Luo by one of the northern Ugandan research translators assistance from a Luo-speaking professor from Makerere University in Kampala.

Data was also collected through the use of non-directive art, through the creation of a quilt square by participants. This facilitated participants’ greater scope to be descriptive about their experiences and to match their communicative abilities with their particular realities. The art aspect of this study allowed the data to become fuller and to regain some of its robustness that may have been lost in the verbal and mediated through text. In particular, conversing with girls through art about their traumatic experiences provided an additional mechanism to express that which was neither textual nor verbal. In addition, it alleviated and bridged some of the cultural gulf in a way that the interviews were not able to. The completed quilt is included in Appendix A.

An example of a participant’s profile and sample quilt square follows to give an illustration.

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6 These latter questions were loosely based on a 2002 United Nations Children’s Fund study titled, “Adult wars, child soldiers: Voices of children involved in armed conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region” (used with permission).
Sue’s (pseudonym) interview occurred in Lira in the compound of the Caritas Rehabilitation Centre. The interview was conducted in Luo and translated. Sue is a fifteen-year-old girl from Otwal, trading centre B in the Lira area of northern Uganda. She was taken by “the rebels” in March, 2003 from an Internally Displaced Person’s (IDP) camp on her way to school. At the time she was thirteen years old. Sue has three sisters and four brothers. She has now “returned back” to living in the IDP camp after being held in the bush by the “rebels” for three months. Prior to this she was at the Caritas Rehabilitation Centre in Teboke for several months. While being held, Sue told me she was:

> Given a husband, I refused; they hit my neck with a gumboot and threatened to kill me. So, I made a sign of the cross and told them to kill me. But later the boss came and asked them to leave me that I was not going to escape. Then I started babysitting for Hilda Lukwiya (female LRA Commander).

Sue said in her time in the bush she was never shown any kindness and described how the “rebels” treated her, “very badly, even the food we ate was very bad—we would grind beans on rocks and boil, and then eat with greens and wild yams. We were also asked to kill other people with pangas.” She portrayed her experience by describing one incident:

> They asked me to kill a girl who was thought to have tried to escape with a panga [machete]. I first refused, and then later hit her once, but she did not die.
Sue was also threatened; they said, “They were going to be killing me with a knife/panga.” She believes this did not happen because, “One of the captured teachers, who had rank, kept telling them not to kill me.” In order to survive she says she drew upon her strengths of being “tough and outspoken”. When asked about gender differences in the way girls were treated, Sue told how:

Girls would be stripped naked to see their breasts and asked if they know gonorrhea, if they said yes they are killed. If a boy sleeps with a girl he is killed.

Sue was able to escape when “a plane was passing they told us to keep down, then the government army came they started shooting, we rolled toward them and they captured us”. Sue had completed a primary 4 level of education prior to her being taken and has plans to become a nurse some day. To date Sue indicated that she has heard about human rights from Caritas, “I heard that parents should send children to school”. Sue had not heard about the Geneva Convention. She had heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child, again from Caritas. Primarily her knowledge revolved around “sending children to school by parents”. However, when asked she said that “talking about human rights can make a difference because it can add knowledge” and “children can ask to be treated rightly”.

Joy’s (pseudonym) interview occurred in Lira in the compound of Caritas Rehabilitation Centre. The interview was conducted in Acholi and translated by a local translator. Joy is a fourteen year old girl from Otwal, in the Lira area of northern Uganda, who was taken by “the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army” from her home in May, when she was thirteen years old.
Joy does not know why they took her. She has seven sisters and one brother and her father is still living. She is at the Caritas Rehabilitation Centre in Teboke after being held captive for two weeks. While held, Joy says she was “shown no kindness”, “beaten” and “threatened with a panga” and made to “carry heavy loads”. When asked about gender differences in the way girls were treated, Joy said that, “girls were treated differently than boys” but she did not elaborate. Joy was able to escape when “there was fire exchange with the Ugandan People’s Defense Force”. When asked what helped her survive in the bush she replied “God and prayers”. Joy did not answer the questions about human rights learning. Her plans for the future are, “to go back to school”.

Ethics and limitations

Throughout the research study two fundamental aspects were always at the forefront: safety for participants, translators and myself and ensuring that the act of conducting research with the girls offered the opportunity for the participants to “be heard” and to “give voice” to their experience. The participants were considered to be subjects rather than objects of research. The purpose was to facilitate a mutual understanding of their world as agents of change, not as victims. In the findings from the original study a whole chapter is dedicated to the ethical and methodological issues of conducting research in a war.

This study focuses on northern Uganda, as an example of the human rights learning experience in a war or conflict zone. It must be stated that each war/conflict has its own set of peculiarities, politics, and social culture. While aspects of this study may provide a helpful framework or guidelines to consider in other situations, it would be problematic to attempt to extrapolate findings to other conflicts without consideration of a thorough situational analysis of that particular context.

Findings

The key findings from my study suggest that human rights learning is essential in a war zone and ought not to be confined only to a formal method of delivery. Human rights learning needs to move beyond a school-based, rote learned appreciation of rights, reliant on the formal school system. In addition, an alternate, contextualized and empowering human rights learning framework which enhances a girl’s capacity to communicate and exercise her rights is required. Such a framework needs to explore contextual values and attitudes, be
responsive to participants’ experiences, and provide an opportunity to critically examine both rights and responsibilities. This study indicates that the key elements in the formation of such a framework are:

- gender sensitivity;
- awareness of social relationships and roles;
- anchored in the local culture;
- acknowledging the differing needs for knowledge and life skills of the participants;
- focusing on responsibility rather than breaches of rights; and
- incorporating and/or acknowledging indigenous practices.

Such a framework may be more liberating for girls if they have an opportunity to critically examine both their rights and responsibilities and if they are afforded the opportunity to create, direct, and re-create human rights learning. In this way they may recognize and develop their own capabilities and come to see school not as the sole source of a pre-defined body of human rights knowledge that exists outside of them. They may instead; taken ownership of human rights learning and this may further facilitate their post-traumatic growth. Human rights learning then becomes a tool of empowerment, recognizing that the acquisition of human rights knowledge is everyone’s right and concern, the essence of which is a respect for human dignity.
Appendix A

Figure 4: Completed quilt


References


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Elaine Halsall – Schools Out: Core Strategies for Human Rights Learning during Armed Conflict


