

Makers of a better future: Assisting young men to navigate mental health and socio-economic problems in post-conflict northern Uganda.

Summary

Young men and women in northern Uganda have grown up in a context of war, facing violent events such as displacements and abductions by the Lord's Resistance Army. In my thesis I analyze what mental health consequences these young people face due to their past and present experiences of violence and how they navigate through life. Using different qualitative research methods, such as focus group discussions, interviews and participant observation, I present an emic perspective of youth in secondary schools. The needs these young men express are compared with a range of interventions to understand to what extent their mental health and socio-economic needs match with what interventions have on offer. Taking the programs of a locally initiated intervention as a starting point I analyze this topic according to the following research question: *Are young men in Lira who were affected by violence during the war effectively helped by the ARDI interventions to better cope with possible mental health consequences of exposure to violence?*

Both social science emic research and clinical etic research show mental health consequences of the war and the negative impact of these problems for peace building (Richters 2008, Vinck et al. 2007). Conclusions of clinical research include that 74,3% of the northern Ugandan population met the criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and 44,5 % for depression (Vinck et al. 2007). Internationally, interventions to support war affected populations can be roughly differentiated between 'mental health' and 'psychosocial' focused programs (Silove 2005, Miller et al. 2010). Interventions using a 'mental health model' mostly use the PTSD concept and highlight the individual psychological consequences of exposure to war. Interventions using a 'psychosocial model' are more focused on strengthening social and economic wellbeing (Silove 2005: 39). The effectiveness of each of these types of trauma interventions is being debated. Another issue of the debate is that interventions often have a stereotyped gender perspective. Young men are mostly addressed as perpetrators and 'breakers' vulnerable to commit future violence, while women are mostly portrayed as victims and the

'makers' of peace. This simplified perspective has a negative influence on the effectiveness of post-conflict interventions (Moran 2010).

For the young men and women involved in my research the experience of abduction triggers various mental health problems such as nightmares, re-experiencing traumatic events, high temper, poor concentration and attacks of bad spirits. Using a western psychiatric trauma perspective many of these problems could be diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, the different mental health problems of youth are both related to their violent experiences in the war and current everyday violence. Young people face an uncertain future because of socio-economic struggles to stay in school. An additional reason which reinforces mental health problems is that formerly abducted youth are stigmatized by their fellow students and even by some teachers.

Formerly abducted students use various social navigation strategies to deal with their problems. First of all, they work hard during school holidays to earn money to pay their school fees. Secondly, they alleviate their mental health problems in silence through religion and by joining creative activities. Young men and women would like assistance in the form of school fees support, more creative activities and counseling. Some formerly abducted youth would like a platform to share their past and present struggles without the risk of stigmatization. However, young men are less likely to join mental health interventions compared to young women. Young men are expected to solve their own problems as the strong, future head of the family. Young women on the other hand have to struggle more to convince their family of their need for education as a result of patriarchal marriage norms.

Young men and women in schools in war affected northern Uganda are successful makers in society. They are a select group who made it into secondary education in spite of various mental health problems. However, this youth risks to be 'broken' in a stigmatizing society with limited opportunities. To assist youth, a broad perspective on mental health is needed, with attention for both intrapsychic and psychosocial process. When interventions to improve mental health ignore the broader social and economic context in which mental health problems occur, they may unintentionally reinforce stigma.

This research contributes to both practical and theoretical issues at stake with regards to my topic. Theoretically my research contributes to the academic debates

about the effectiveness and focus of post-conflict interventions. Practically my research contributes to the improvement of the quality of services to war-affected young men and women in northern Uganda, ensuring that they will make it towards a healthy and peaceful future.

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