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An Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Child Soldiers within the Lord's Resistance Army Insurgency in Amuru District, 1987-2024

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14 July 2025 Focusing on the heavily impacted region of Amuru District, this research delved into the lived experiences of former child soldiers conscripted by the LRA from 1987 to 2024. The study's specific objectives were to: (i) examine the recruitment and abduction strategies employed by the LRA in Amuru District, (ii) investigate the experiences encountered, and (iii) assess the psychological and social effects of these experiences on child soldiers. Based on a qualitative approach and phenomenological design, the study used in-depth interviews, participant observation and Focus Group Discussions to collect the required data. The LRA leaders used systematic indoctrination and forced recruitment, instilling fear and dismantling social structures. The experiences included forced participation in violent killings often against their own communities, inhuman punishments, physical abuse, starvation and constant threats of death. Despite demonstrating remarkable resilience, many former child soldiers continue to face significant obstacles, including social stigma and economic hardship. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) strategically abducted children, using violent tactics to ensure dependency. The group systematically dismantled their identities through abuse and ritualised violence, inflicting lasting psychological trauma and social stigma. After the conflict, these former child soldiers face a difficult reintegration, with their trauma fueling a cycle of violence and poverty that destabilises entire communities. A multi-pronged mental health approach for addressing the complex trauma experienced by former child soldiers. Combat social stigma and rejection through structured, community-wide sensitisation and reconciliation initiatives, develop accelerated learning programs to build foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and commission and fund longitudinal studies that track the well-being of survivors and their families over time.

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INTRODUCTION

This research examined the lived experiences of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict on children in Northern Uganda, focusing specifically on the experiences of those conscripted as soldiers in Amuru District between 1987 and 2024. Grounded in the context of the LRA's intense human rights violations, particularly the systemic abduction and exploitation of minors, the study involved 3 specific objectives. These included: (i) To examine the recruitment and abduction strategies employed by the LRA in Amuru District, (ii) To investigate the experiences encountered, and (iii) To assess the psychological and social effects of these experiences on child soldiers. By providing a localised and extended analysis, this study aimed to contribute vital understanding for practitioners and policymakers, informing more effective interventions for the rehabilitation, recovery, and reconciliation of this vulnerable population.

Background to the Study

For political, ideological, or religious motives, armed terrorist organisations around the world are increasingly focusing on and using minors under the age of eighteen to carry out acts of severe violence and atrocities (Amone-P'Olak, 2004, p. 213). Children have been recruited, brainwashed, and used as terror agents by organisations including Al-Qaeda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Religious convictions frequently serve as the foundation for these violent and terroristic crimes committed against defenceless individuals in the name of a

perverted political philosophy (Smith, 2022, pp. 67-68). The existing scholarship on radicalisation and indoctrination of children by armed terrorist groups lacks information on the process and strategies deployed by these armed groups. Such arguments have detrimental, long-lasting, and frequently life-altering mental effects.

Child soldiers, often individuals under the age of eighteen, are recruited by armed groups for various roles, including as fighters, spies, porters, cooks, or for sexual exploitation. According to Singer (2006), children are often targeted for recruitment because of their vulnerability and impressionability, which makes them easier to manipulate and control. This exploitation not only strips them of their childhood but also inflicts severe emotional and physical harm (Singer, 2006, p. 19).

Across Africa, the origins of Uganda's political instability are deeply rooted in its colonial legacy. In Uganda, for example, during British rule, economic and political systems created a pronounced divide between the north and south of the country. Northern Uganda was designated primarily as a source of cheap labour for the more developed and industrialised south, which housed key institutions like government offices, schools, and industries (Mamdani, 1996; Finnström, 2008). This imbalance persisted after independence, with the north continuing to lag economically and playing a larger role in military affairs (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1995; Mamdani, 1996). This north-south divide not only shaped economic and political power structures but also influenced national identity. Northerners came to be seen and saw themselves as the nation's

"warriors," while southerners were identified as the educated elite working in civil service roles (Mamdani, 1996; Lapwoch & Amone-P'Olak, 2016). This perception reinforced the military dominance of Northerners during the post-colonial era. However, when the northern-dominated government was overthrown in 1986, the north lost both its political influence and the military advantage it had held since colonial times. The British colonial framework, therefore, laid the groundwork for a socio-economic and political divide, contributing to the marginalisation of the north and fueling the conflicts that followed.

Based on these colonial divides, Uganda's post-independence history has been shaped by a series of violent conflicts affecting both adults and children. These include the failed rebellion against Idi Amin in 1972, the war that eventually removed him from power between 1978 and 1979 (Avirgan & Honey, 1983), and the National Resistance Army (NRA) insurgency that led to President Yoweri Museveni's rise between 1981 and 1986. Following this, Uganda experienced multiple uprisings across various regions, with the most prolonged being the LRA insurgency in Northern Uganda from 1986 to 2006. Both the NRA and the LRA engaged in large-scale child recruitment. It is estimated that children made up around 30% of the NRA's combatants, with about 3,000 minors involved (Silva, 2007).

In the context of Northern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a militant group that emerged in the late 1980s, was notorious for its brutal tactics and heavy reliance on child soldiers. Under the leadership of Joseph Kony, the LRA professed to seek the creation of a theocratic regime based on the Ten Commandments. However, the group became infamous for committing grave human rights violations, including widespread abductions, killings, rape and the forced displacement of communities (Van Acker, 2004, p. 336). Its systematic use of child abductions to maintain its ranks and terrorise local populations has drawn considerable academic and humanitarian attention (Pham et al., 2008, p. 406). Approximately 85% of the Lord's Resistance

Army (LRA) combatants, estimated to number between 25,000 and 38,000, were children, with girls making up about 30% of that group (Pham et al., 2008, p. 85). Some of these children were as young as eight years old (Ehrenreich, 1998). Research shows that female abductees aged 19 to 30 tended to spend more time in captivity than their male peers, while among older abductees, men aged 31 to 45 were held longer than women in the same age group (P'Olak, 2020, p. 244). The LRA's use of child soldiers surpassed that of all previous conflicts in Uganda's history, with forced recruitment of children serving as a key strategy to grow its ranks and enhance operational efficiency. Against this background, this study sought to make an inquiry into the experiences of Child Soldiers within the Lord's Resistance Army insurgency in Amuru District, considering the time scope of 1987-2024.

Problem Statement

The prolonged conflict waged by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), under the leadership of Joseph Kony, left a lasting impact on Northern Uganda, with children among the most affected, many of whom were forcibly conscripted into armed service (Pham et al., 2008, p. 85). In Amuru District, numerous former child soldiers continue to endure profound psychological, social, and economic challenges stemming from their experiences in captivity. The conflict also deeply disrupted traditional Acholi social structures, replacing long-standing systems of generational interdependence with fear, guilt, and mistrust. Traditionally, Acholi society, like many African communities, relied on elders to oversee conflict, guide youth, and provide post-war spiritual cleansing (Finnström, 2020). However, these roles were destabilised by colonial practices that drew young Acholi into military roles, a trend later exacerbated by movements like the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and the LRA. Through spiritual manipulation and violence, figures like Alice Lakwena and Joseph Kony further eroded the authority of elders, reshaping Acholi identity and weakening community cohesion.

While there is significant research on the broader issue of child soldiering globally (e.g., Bainomugisha 2011; Blattman and Annan, 2011), there remains a gap in understanding the specific, lived realities of former child soldiers from Amuru. The unique cultural and historical dynamics of the region have received limited attention, particularly regarding how survivors reintegrate into their families and communities. This study aims to address that gap by focusing on the personal narratives and reintegration challenges of these individuals. By exploring their experiences in depth, the research seeks to offer practical, context-sensitive insights that can guide policymakers, social workers, and humanitarian actors in supporting more effective and culturally grounded rehabilitation and reintegration processes.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore the psychological, emotional, and social effects of child soldiering and the long-term reintegration of former child soldiers, enabling the researchers to gather detailed and contextually grounded insights into these experiences as supported by Creswell and Creswell (2017). A phenomenological design was employed to understand participants' lived experiences, complemented by narrative inquiry to capture the emotional and cultural dimensions of their stories.

Participants were adults who had been recruited into the LRA as children (1986–2006) and now live in Amuru District or nearby areas. Using purposive sampling, 35 individuals, men and women who had served in various roles (such as fighters, porters, etc) within the LRA, were selected based on their direct experiences. Those affected by the war in other ways but not directly involved with the LRA were excluded. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observation. Topics included abduction, life in the LRA, trauma, reintegration, stigma, justice, and forgiveness. Secondary data from academic and NGO sources provided additional context.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to code and identify key themes, enabling the synthesis of personal narratives into broader patterns related to trauma and reintegration. Ethical protocols included informed consent, confidentiality, trauma-sensitive interviewing, and referrals to mental health support. Efforts were made to ensure participants' emotional safety, reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and increase the reliability of the information collected.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Recruitment Tactics: A Multi-pronged Approach to Child Abduction and Detainment

The LRA developed sophisticated recruitment and detainment strategies that combined brute force with psychological manipulation.

Violent abductions were the primary method, with children being snatched during village raids, on roads, or even from schools. Interviewees described a preference by the LRA to take children (8-14 years) and youth, rather than adults, similar to findings from a study conducted by Pham et al. (2008). They also noted that both boys and girls were vulnerable to being taken. A survivor recounted: "Children are abducted by force into the LRA. They don't have a choice to accept or not accept. If you agree to go, you live. If you don't accept, they kill you. Children never volunteer, they are kidnapped on the road, on the field, even in the village, and then they are trained in a military way and become the LRA." Participants expressed how the LRA preferred to abduct children, who could more easily be indoctrinated into the group's practices, compared to adults. "For men, it is terrible because when the LRA finds you, you are killed directly, no discussion. Children will be kidnapped." – "We started looting people and killing people, abducting children from the village and bringing them to the [LRA] camp. Those who were older, we would kill them." – A 27-year-old male abductee narrated. This study believes that this preference for children over adults, who were often killed outright, emphasises a strategic

choice to cultivate a force that could be moulded from a young age, ensuring long-term loyalty born of terror and isolation.

Social network exploitation proved particularly insidious. The LRA coerced abducted children into betraying their friends, as one survivor described being forced to lead rebels to his friends' homes at night. There was consensus among the participants that boys and girls were equally vulnerable to being abducted by the LRA. An 18-year-old female abductee asserted that this tactic not only expanded their recruitment pool but also destroyed community trust bonds. This finding corroborates related studies by Alava (2022), who observed that children in the region were coerced into joining the LRA through peer influence.

Surprise attacks further consistently described the LRA's preference for swift, surprise attacks, often targeting villages during periods of low security or perceived vulnerability. A child soldier remorsefully narrated that, "When I was going back home from school at 6 pm in the evening and moving alone, I reached a spot with a big mango tree. Surprisingly, I heard a voice from behind saying 'don't move' and immediately, I was abducted and I was told to carry beans. We moved up to Kilak hill, where we found other members under Commander Odhiambo Ocan." Clearly, this tactic meant that Rebels would climb trees or hills to observe villages before striking at vulnerable moments - early mornings, late evenings, or during bad weather when community vigilance was low. The abduction of a child walking home from school at dusk highlights how the LRA weaponised the routine, transforming everyday life into a landscape of constant fear and vulnerability. This finding is supported by earlier studies by Wessells (2006), emphasised that the rapid assault tactics usually used by such rebel groups not only increase the number of successful abductions but also maximise psychological trauma among the community.

Psychological manipulation and intimidation. The LRA demonstrated a profound understanding of psychological manipulation. Fear-based control was maintained through public executions

of escapees brutally carried out with clubs in front of other children, which served as a permanent, terrifying lesson in obedience. This constant threat of death effectively paralysed an individual's will and deterred future escape attempts. As one survivor recounted, "If a child attempted to escape...they would be caught and killed using clubs in front of other children." This created a constant atmosphere of terror. Most importantly, systematic dehumanisation involved forcing children to commit atrocities, often against their own family members. One 15-year-old was made to "hit people using a motor and drink their blood as a ritual." Such acts severed children's ties to their past and forge a new identity as a loyal soldier or servant. The foundation of this control was fear; by forcing children to commit an unforgivable act, the LRA created an almost unbridgeable psychological gap between the child and their home, making them believe they could never return. Furthermore, 'ideological indoctrination' framed the violence in spiritual terms, with commanders claiming to be "demons sent by God." Clearly, this replaced the victims' moral compass and support system with its own twisted logic, making the group the sole arbiter of safety and truth.

The ritualised performances of terror, involving the use of a club, a primitive and particularly brutal weapon, would have maximised the physical and psychological trauma for both the victim and the unwilling perpetrators. This spectacle transformed the abstract threat of death into a visceral, unforgettable reality, embedding a deep-seated fear that paralysed the will to resist or flee. The memory of such an event would serve as a constant, internal guard against any thoughts of disobedience. The study further confirms that this practice was a systematic method of severing social and psychological ties. The findings explicitly state that these practices were used to "cut off the social ties between the children and their families." By forcing children to murder fellow abductees with whom they shared ethnicity, language, and the common trauma of abduction, the LRA manufactured a profound sense of guilt and complicity. This act of forced

betrayal created an unbridgeable chasm between the child and their former identity. They were no longer just victims but were made into perpetrators, making them believe they were irredeemable and could never return to their communities. As described by the former child soldier, the difficulty in leaving was not just physical but psychological, built on the fear instilled by witnessing such brutality firsthand, as similarly mentioned in a study by Olema et al. (2014). This threat ensured that even if a child found a physical opportunity to escape, the psychological weight of potentially causing themselves, friends and their family annihilation would be a powerful deterrent.

The Scorch Earth Policy. This was purposely done to eradicate refuge and create dependency. The repeated mention of the "Scorch Earth policy," specifically the burning of huts and property in Pogo IDP camp, reveals another layer of the LRA's strategy: the systematic destruction of community support systems, as mentioned in previous studies, for example, Doom and Vlassenroot (1999). By burning camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the LRA was not just destroying physical structures; it was attacking the very concept of sanctuary. IDP camps, however flawed, represented a place of relative safety and a connection to a semblance of community and civilian life. A participant admitted that, *"I was among the abductees who were involved in the arson."* This admission demonstrates how the LRA used its captives to destroy their own potential refuges. This act served a dual purpose, as it punished the civilian population, whom the LRA often accused of collaborating with the government, and it eliminated any viable alternative for its child soldiers.

The study confirms that this policy reinforced the psychological isolation of the abductees. If there is no home to return to, no safe haven, and no community left to accept you, then the LRA, by default, becomes the only viable world. The burning of Pogo IDP camp was a clear and brutal message to both civilians and the LRA's own members: the outside world offers no protection,

and any attempt to reconnect with it will result in its annihilation. This created a state of forced dependency, where survival appeared possible only within the confines of the rebel group. The fear was not only of being killed by the LRA but also of having nowhere else to go.

Promises of leadership and freedom. The LRA's recruitment was a multi-pronged operation that combined the brutal, violent abduction of children preferred for their malleability with insidious psychological deception. In the urban places of Pabbo and Gulu, they preyed on the desperation of youth with misleading promises of leadership and success, while also deploying captive young women as well-dressed decoys in trading centres to lure unsuspecting men into ambushes. Once abducted, a process of systematic dehumanisation began, designed to sever all ties to home and humanity, which is in agreement with related studies by Wessels (2006). This was achieved through a "theatre of terror," where escapees were publicly and brutally clubbed to death by their fellow child soldiers, creating a visceral deterrent and forcing complicity.

This psychological warfare was deepened by forcing children to commit unforgivable acts, sometimes against their own kin, and threatening to annihilate their entire families if they fled, thus weaponising love itself as a chain. This internal trap was reinforced externally by a scorched earth policy of burning villages and IDP camps, strategically eradicating any physical sanctuary or hope of return. This created a closed world of forced dependency, structured by starkly gendered exploitation where boys were moulded into combatants and girls were institutionalised into sexual slavery via a "wife lottery." The devastating result is a multi-layered and intergenerational trauma, leaving survivors with complex PTSD and social stigma, and communities fractured by eroded trust, ensuring the war continues to echo in the minds and lives of its victims long after the fighting has ceased.

Experiences Encountered by Child Soldiers

The findings on the experiences of child soldiers during their LRA captivity do not merely list hardships; they narrate a systematic journey into a living hell, a process designed not just to capture bodies, but to dismantle and erase the very essence of a person. This was a journey that began with the breaking of the body and soul, proceeded to the shattering of the mind, and culminated in the theft of one's name and past, similar to what Smith (2022) observed as an attempt to create the victims' dependence to their captors, the LRA commanders.

The brutal physical crucible. The moment of abduction was a violent severing from everything known, plunging children into a world of constant motion and deprivation. A survivor's account of being snatched from Atiak and forced to march for five days to Lamwo, surviving only on wild mangoes, paints a desperate picture. This was not just a journey; it was a campaign of attrition. The constant threat of attack from the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) meant they were perpetually "on the run," with no rest, no shelter, and no solace. As they were forced-marched through forests and swamps, the breeding grounds for malaria, their bodies, already weakened by malnutrition, succumbed to disease. The horror was compounded by the gross negligence of their captors; a single syringe used for injections on countless children, irrespective of their health status, turned rudimentary medical aid into a potential death sentence. This initial phase was a calculated strategy to weaken, disorient, and isolate the new captives, making them more pliable for the psychological conditioning to come, which, to Brown (2020), was a grave violation of human rights.

Assault on the soul. The findings reveal a landscape of unimaginable violence, where cruelty was both a tool of control and a form of ritualistic indoctrination. For one 15-year-old survivor, initiation was immediate and absolute: on his first day, he was forced to kill four people with a heavy motor pestle and drink their blood. This was not random violence; it was a calculated

act of psychological severance, a horrific rite of passage designed to make the child irredeemable in their own eyes, convincing them that the path back to their former life was forever closed. This exposure to violence was constant and often theatrical in its sadism, as supported by a related study by Lennon et al. (2024). The abduction of 70 girls from Lwala Girls' Secondary in Soroti, followed by the commander's cold selection of the "60 beautiful girls" and rejection of the other 10, illustrates the frightening commodification of human life. The captives were not people; they were objects to be assessed, selected, or discarded based on their perceived utility. The account of the massacre at Ceri River reveals the depths of this depravity. Abductees, already exhausted and terrified, were lined up and offered a ridiculous choice: "What kind of shirt do you want, long or short sleeves?" Those who chose "short sleeves" had their arms chopped off; those who chose "long sleeves" lost their hands. This act, described as vengeance for the actions of a local commander, was a terrifying display of absolute power, teaching the captives that logic, pleading, and hope were meaningless in this new world. Only the arbitrary and cruel whims of the commanders held sway.

Gender-specific exploitation patterns. Within this maelstrom of violence, experiences were sharply divided by gender. The findings show that while boys were instrumentalised for their military capacity as spies, combatants, and guards, girls were subjected to a different, though equally horrific, form of exploitation. The notion that the female gender was "favoured and protected" is a bitter irony. This "protection" was ownership, valuing them for their capacity to "co-create a new generation" through systematic rape and for their domestic labour. The institutionalisation of this sexual slavery is laid bare in the description of the "wife lottery." The repeatedly mentioned scene of teenage girls, lined up and forced to randomly pick a commander's shirt from a line, is a stark portrait of their complete loss of agency and a gendered abuse, as stated by Pavelich (2013). For example, a 15-year-old girl's fate, her "husband," was sealed by the

random choice of a piece of cloth. She became the property of Commander Oti Lagony, an arrangement that could be dissolved and reassigned at any moment, reinforcing her status as a possession.

The erasure of identity itself. After enduring the brutal journey, witnessing unspeakable massacres, and being forced to kill, the captive was stripped of their last possession: their name. A former abductee recounts being forced to change his name, his birthplace, and his family details. *"I changed my name... when I am in the bush, people call me wod Atiak [son of Atiak], yet I am from Paboo,"* he explains. This was a survival tactic, meant to protect his family from retaliation, but it was also the final act of LRA indoctrination, which is in agreement with findings by Peel (2015), who termed it the disruption of the victims' mental and psychological well-being. By erasing a name, the LRA erased a history, a lineage, and a connection to a specific place and people. The child from Paboo became the "son of Atiak," an anonymous entity belonging only to the bush. Captivity was complete not when the body was captured, but when the person within, with their unique story and identity, had been replaced by a hollowed-out shell, remade in the image of the LRA.

The Psychological and Social Effects of These Experiences on Child Soldiers

The Devastating Aftermath: Complex Trauma and Social Rejection.

The conclusion of the physical conflict did not end the suffering. The findings powerfully articulate how the LRA's war continues to be fought in the minds of its survivors and within the fabric of their communities. Complex trauma manifests as PTSD (jumping at noises, insomnia), dissociation, with the majority of the participants commonly mentioning *"I feel like I'm watching myself"*, and depression *"I feel worthless...every day"*. Many survivors experience intrusive flashbacks to violent acts they were forced to commit, which is in agreement with the observation by Annan et al. (2011) of survivors tending to remain silent and

in isolation due to severe PRSD. Similarly, social stigma and rejection create profound barriers to reintegration. Former child soldiers report being called "monsters" and facing employment discrimination. As one survivor lamented, *"No one wants to hire me because they think I'm dangerous."* The study observed that the educational disruption has created a lost generation. Many abductees missed critical schooling years and now struggle with basic literacy, perpetuating cycles of poverty through educational and economic exclusion.

Community-wide Impacts and Intergenerational Trauma.

The repercussions extend far beyond individual survivors. Firstly, *erosion of social trust* persists in affected communities. The LRA's tactic of forcing children to betray neighbours has left a lasting suspicion, with one participant noting, *"We don't talk about it. We don't want our children to feel that pain."* Secondly, *normalisation of violence* has created ongoing community instability. Former child soldiers often struggle to adapt to peaceful life, with one admitting, *"We were all used to violence. Returning to a peaceful life is difficult."* Equally, intergenerational trauma emerges as survivors parent their own children. One young mother reported, *"They are afraid of the dark, just like I was when I was their age,"* illustrating how war trauma gets biologically and behaviorally transmitted. Clearly, the war, for these families, is not a memory but a living, daily reality. This finding corroborates related studies by Alava (2022), who described how individuals who participated in LRA activities often experience feelings of guilt and shame that lead to self-isolation and the stigmatisation hinders reintegration, creating a cycle of alienation and social isolation.

CONCLUSION

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) developed a highly calculated and multi-faceted strategy for recruiting and retaining child soldiers, combining violent abductions, psychological manipulation, and systematic dehumanisation. This study

reveals that the LRA deliberately targeted children aged 8-14 due to their susceptibility to indoctrination, while adults were often killed outright to eliminate resistance. The rebels employed surprise attacks, social network exploitation, and scorched-earth policies to maximise fear and dependency, ensuring that abducted children had no refuge or means of escape.

The findings present a harrowing account of the calculated, multi-stage process by which the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) transformed abducted children into instruments of war. This was not merely physical captivity but a systematic dismantling of identity, achieved through physical and psychological breaking, ritualised violence as indoctrination, gender exploitation, and identity erasure. The intergenerational trauma persists today, with survivors grappling with PTSD, stigma, and shattered community ties.

For former LRA child soldiers, the war's end did not bring relief but began a lifelong struggle with psychological trauma (PTSD, depression) and social rejection, creating a "second war" of reintegration. This trauma extends beyond individuals, eroding community trust, normalising violence, and trapping survivors in poverty due to lost education. Most alarmingly, the intergenerational transmission of trauma perpetuates cycles of suffering, making this a multi-generational crisis that threatens long-term peace and development. Without urgent, sustained intervention, these wounds will continue to destabilise communities for decades.

Recommendations

A multi-pronged mental health approach is critical for addressing the complex trauma experienced by former child soldiers. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) should be adapted to help survivors challenge distorted beliefs about their culpability, develop coping strategies for PTSD symptoms like hypervigilance and flashbacks, as well as process survivor's guilt through evidence-based techniques.

Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) should be encouraged to help survivors chronologically reconstruct their life stories, contextualise forced violent acts within the coercive framework of captivity, and gradually reduce the emotional power of traumatic memories. These can be effected through training of local clinicians in trauma-focused modalities, establishing mobile clinics to reach rural survivors, and incorporating group therapy to combat isolation.

Combat social stigma and rejection through structured, community-wide sensitisation and reconciliation initiatives. These programs should actively involve local leaders, elders, and religious figures to champion the acceptance of former child soldiers.

Develop accelerated learning programs to build foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Partner with local businesses and cooperatives to provide apprenticeships and skills training in relevant trades, coupled with entrepreneurship support, to create viable economic futures and reduce the risk of marginalisation.

Commission and fund longitudinal studies that track the well-being of survivors and their families over time. Create platforms for sharing best practices and lessons learned among local, national, and international stakeholders to continually refine and improve support mechanisms.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The researchers affirm that there are no competing interests related to the study's funding, investigation, authorship, or publication.

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