

# ChildReach Africa: November Newsletter

## **'Child Mothers'**

'Child Mothers'. This seeming oxymoron is an all too common reality in the land of Northern Uganda. How did this happen? The answer is simple; the effects of war.

The Acholi people of Northern Uganda have suffered the devastating effects of a twenty-one year civil war. Almost the entire population has been forced into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps; family structures have broken down; immorality and disease are prevalent.

### ***[A picture of Unyama IDP Camp]***



War always affects children and women disproportionately, especially the girl child. In the case of Northern Uganda, they have been used by the Lords' Resistance Army (LRA) as political tools and sex slaves. Throughout the course of the war, thousands of young girls have been abducted, some as young as eleven years old. What's more, their abduction often leads to the murder of their families. This senseless killing is supposed to act as a deterrent from the child escaping. These

young girls then become captive wives of the rebel soldiers. As a result, despite their young age and lack of experience, they are forced into early motherhood when some are as young as thirteen years! If any of these girls manage to escape from rebel captivity, they return to the camps as single mothers. According to Acholi culture, when a girl leaves her fathers' home and marries, she now belongs to her husband's people. Yet for these girls, they have neither husbands nor parents to belong to. These girls are therefore left alone, with no family or husbands for support. How does a young teenage girl living in an IDP camp with no parents or family take care of herself and her children? What are her chances of survival? Who protects her in a refugee camp, a place where society's rules have disintegrated? She is used, abused and desperate.

Young girls who have not been abducted are also at high risk. Life for them in the IDP camps is in many ways animalistic. Sex has been turned into a commodity used to get food and a little money. Furthermore, the majority of young girls do not complete their education. In most primary schools, the ratio of girls to boys declines as the class level increases. This is largely because the majority of girls become pregnant at an early age, as the men around them are seen as their only source of support. They too become Child Mothers. They have no mothers themselves to tell them any better.

The plight of these girls, especially those who are formerly abducted, has been a burden on my heart ever since I first heard of their situation. Whose children are they? Who supports, loves and nurtures them? How do they cope? How do they take care of their children? I think that the biggest support they can be offered is encouragement, to be shown that they are not alone, and that if they try and make a life for themselves it is not in vain. They need mothers; female role-models to teach them and for them to look up to. They need grandmothers for their children. As an older woman this is what I strive to be for them and their children, someone to stand with them through their struggles.

During my visits to Gulu I talk with the girls, counsel them and pray with them. I also teach them some skills that could help them to earn an income. This is intended to protect them from being so desperate that they would consent to be used for as little as 100 sh (6 cents) to buy a piece of washing soap or their next meal. They learn hand embroidery and how to use a sewing machine, in order to make various material crafts such as napkins, tea-towels and table runners. ChildReach Africa has also set up a literacy skills teaching program so that the women can learn to read and write, and in turn help to educate their children.



**Unyama IDP camp child-mothers  
making tea-towels  
making embroidery cards**



**Layibi child mothers**

Their finished products are marketed by ChildReach, and the material that they use is also provided. In this way the girls have the opportunity to earn as much as 3,000sh (\$2) a day. This type of work also allows them to be at home with their children, giving them a more stable upbringing.

**[A child-mother in Layibi, embroidering a tea towel]**



We document the story of each child mother, and make the profile available to the buyer. This means that each embroidered piece comes

with a personal insight into the life of the maker. I also see this as a way of helping to tell the girls' stories. They must be told so that the world gets to know about the atrocities taking place at the expense of the young girls and boys in Northern Uganda.

I pray that the silence will then be broken and these girls will one day raise their children in a peaceful and functional society. I believe that God has placed the Child Mothers on my heart for a reason: to speak out and to act.

May God bless you,

Catherine Piwang  
( Executive Director/ Founder—ChildReach Africa)



Child-mothers groups have also received sewing machines and they are learning how to make clothes for their children and to make items out of African print materials for sale. Items they are making include bags, cushion covers, aprons and napkins.

***Below is an excerpt that is a constant inspiration to me and I pray it will also be to you.***

“A Franciscan Blessing”

May God bless you with Discomfort,  
At easy answers, half-truths, ‘glossed over’ explanations and  
superficial relationships,  
So that truth may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with Anger,  
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,  
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with Tears,  
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, torture, starvation  
and war,  
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and turn their  
pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness  
To believe that you can make a difference in their world,  
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

Anon

If you would like to know more, or to join me in this work with a contribution,  
please contact me at:

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