Social Inclusion
2024 • Volume 12 • Article 8422
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.8422

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Exploring the Lives of Children Born of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Through Art

Myriam Denov

McGill University, Canada

Correspondence: Myriam Denov (myriam.denov@mcgill.ca)

Submitted: 9 April 2024 **Accepted:** 24 June 2024 **Published:** 20 August 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Perceptions, Reflections, and Conceptualizations of War and Peace in Children's Drawings" edited by Lisa Blasch (University of Innsbruck), Phil C. Langer (International Psychoanalytic University Berlin), and Nadja Thoma (University of Innsbruck), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i407

Abstract

Although the realities of children born of conflict-related sexual violence have gained increased attention, limited research has explored the issue from the perspectives of the children themselves. Drawing upon a sample of 79 children born of sexual violence in Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) captivity, and using arts-based methods, this study explored the wartime and post-conflict experiences directly from children born of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. The study illustrates how the arts-based methods of mask-making, drawing, and life maps—developed in consultation with local researchers and youth born in LRA captivity—helped to capture the complex wartime and post-war realities of this unique population of children and youth, as well as enabled young people to choose what to share and what to withhold during the research process. More easily distributed, accessed, and consumed than traditional academic publications, the medium of art can have a widespread, immediate, and powerful impact. The article concludes with the strengths, limitations, and ethical implications of arts-based methods, as well as the importance of considering culture and context for future research.

Keywords

arts-based research; children; conflict-related sexual violence; Lord's Resistance Army; wartime sexual violence; northern Uganda; youth; war

1. The War on Children: Children Born in Lord's Resistance Army Captivity

War and armed conflict continue to devastate the lives of children and families worldwide. During war, children are killed, injured, orphaned, and separated from family. Vast numbers of children are also recruited

into armed groups and forces. Exposed to brutal forms of violence as witnesses, victims, and participants—most often simultaneously—children associated with armed forces and groups take on a multiplicity of roles as fighters, porters, messengers, spies, medics, caregivers to younger children, domestic workers, and are frequently sexually exploited. According to the Paris Principles (UNICEF, 2007, p. 7), children associated with armed forces and groups refer to:

> Any person below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) provides a powerful example of an armed group that strategically targeted and recruited children. Joseph Kony—the leader of the LRA—formed the armed group to counter the exclusion and oppression that the Acholi people of the north experienced at the hands of the Ugandan government. However, while seeking to overthrow the Ugandan government, the LRA became well-known for committing atrocities against the very civilians it was claiming to liberate (Dolan, 2009). A war that spanned over two decades in northern Uganda (1986–2007), it left families torn apart, communities demolished, education disrupted, and traditional family and cultural practices weakened. The war killed tens of thousands and forcibly displaced millions (Annan et al., 2003). As a critical part of his military operations, Kony strategically targeted both boys and girls to swell LRA ranks, abducting an estimated 60,000–80,000 children over the course of the long war (Shanahan & Veale, 2016). Kony sought to create what he conceptualized as a "new nation" through abduction, forced marriage, and procreation. Kony organized and implemented a forced wife system, whereby girls were abducted and later "given" to LRA commander "husbands." The majority of these abducted girls became mothers, and their pregnancies were the result of repeated sexual violence. From Kony's perspective, forced marriage became a way of literally giving birth to a "new nation," and these children were to be raised as Kony's next generation of fighters (Denov & Lakor, 2017, 2018). Thousands of children were born of sexual violence in the LRA, although the precise numbers of children remain unknown. While not all children born in LRA captivity survived the war, thousands are currently living in post-war northern Uganda (Watye Ki Gen, 2014). In the aftermath of the war, these children are referred to locally (and refer to themselves) as "children born in captivity" or using the shorter acronym CBC.

The experiences and realities of children born in LRA captivity have been receiving increased research and policy attention (Denov, 2022; Oliveira & Baines, 2022; UK Government, 2023). Born into the harrowing conditions of war and deprivation, these young people spent their early and formative years under constant threat of government ambush, violence, injury, displacement, starvation, and illness. "Growing up" in the LRA meant that they were witnesses to and victims of severe forms of violence. Most of these children eventually left the LRA with their mothers by means of escape and/or rescue. Alongside their mothers, children typically transitioned between physical spaces, moving from the "bush" to rehabilitation centres, where they may have stayed for several months, eventually moving to civilian communities. While young people's wartime experiences were steeped in unimaginable violence and upheaval, their post-conflict experiences have also been challenging. Research has uncovered that in the post-war period, because of their former LRA affiliation, family and community members have rejected, stigmatized, and brutalized these young people and their mothers (Akello, 2024). Given the marginality of this group of children and youth and

the importance of eliciting their unique voices and perspectives, this study sought to explore their conflict and post-conflict realities and experiences.

2. Exploring Young People's Wartime and Post-War Realities Using Art

While children actively resist war and live with the daily consequences, war-affected children and youth are typically de-historicized, universalized, and overwritten as powerless victims, often regarded as passive "objects" of research (Berents, 2020; Clacherty, 2021; Denov & Fennig, 2024). Garnering the unique perspectives of war-affected children and youth is thus vital. However, doing so can be fraught with "ethical minefields" (Denov, 2010), requiring constant ethical reflection, mitigation, and care. Given the sensitive nature of research on and with war-affected young people, researchers have long underscored the importance of questioning *how* we are engaging with children and youth in research, calling for greater attention to ethics (Bilotta & Denov, 2023). How do researchers and practitioners effectively and sensitively explore and examine young people's wartime and post-war realities? Research has begun to uncover that words and narrative alone are often unable to adequately capture the complexities and horrors of war, particularly for children (Denov & Shevell, 2021). As such, researchers have increasingly advocated for, and drawn attention to, the benefits of using arts-based research (ABR) that uses multiple mediums, such as visual and digital arts (photography, drawing, video) and performance arts (theatre, music) "to explore, understand and represent human action and experience" (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 1). ABR enables research participants, particularly children, to convey experiences of war in contexts of reduced stress, providing a means for communicating with the nonverbal mind and safely accessing traumatic memory (Clacherty, 2021; Gantt & Tinnin, 2009). ABR can be used in developmentally and culturally appropriate manners, promoting expression beyond words (McNiff, 1998). Mand (2012) notes that visual and arts-based methods enable children to represent experiences unconfined by language and literacy. Elden (2012) suggests that visual methods, particularly drawing, offer a democratic way of involving children as producers of knowledge. The use of art has also been found to ease children's ability to communicate their realities, in a less threatening and pressurized context (Clacherty & Shahrokh, 2023; D'Amico et al., 2016; Linds et al., 2023). In addition, ABR can help to build critical skills by fostering opportunities for "youth [to] express their voices, connect with communities and increase their civic engagement" (Friesem, 2014, p. 45). Ultimately, the arts have increasingly been used as an instrument for research, practice, and social change. Drawing on the potential benefits of using arts-based methods, this research employed mask-making, drawing, and life maps as methodological tools to trace the wartime and post-war realities of children and youth born in LRA captivity.

3. Methodological and Ethical Realities: Mask-Making, Drawing, and Life Maps

Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, and the Canada Council for the Arts, this study received ethical approval from two research ethics boards: the first from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology/Office of the President of Uganda and the second from McGill University. The research team consisted of northern Uganda researchers, as well as youth researchers who themselves were born in LRA captivity. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as every human being below 18 years; it defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Both terms are used in this article to reflect the varied ages of participants.

The sensitive nature of this research meant that ethical implications were paramount, requiring ongoing consideration and mitigation. Child and youth participants had, for the most part, never shared their personal histories and experiences, and doing so could evoke varying levels of distress. Informed consent and confidentiality were assured. For those under 18, assent forms were signed by child participants and the consent of a parent/guardian was acquired. Consent was also acquired to potentially disseminate and exhibit participants' artwork. Given the profound ethical implications of the research, as a selection criterion, child and youth participants were required to have known about their birth origins and conception. All participants were aware that they had been born in LRA captivity prior to participating in the research, although the depth of information they had about their origins and histories varied. Support in the form of referrals to local organizations was instituted. Moreover, in the years that followed data collection, members of the local research team traveled to remote villages to assess participants' ongoing well-being, offering psycho-social support, visiting child and youth participants in schools, advocating on their behalf, and hosting workshops based on topics and issues of their choosing.

Recognizing young people's rights and their capacity to act in competent and thoughtful ways, researchers are increasingly including young people as co-researchers alongside adults (Denov et al., 2022). To ensure that young people's knowledge and expertise were infused into the research design and data collection, three youths born in LRA captivity—two males and one female between ages 18 and 22—were engaged as co-researchers. Researchers have suggested that using such participatory approaches may not only help to temper power differentials, ethical concerns, and engage children and youth as active citizens, but may also increase the reliability and validity of research (Alderson, 2000). The youth researchers in this project received in-depth research training and were then involved in participant outreach, the development of interview guides, and data collection in the form of leading focus groups with a peer group of youth born in LRA captivity. The youth researchers also helped to facilitate mask-making workshops and participated in preliminary data analysis as a part of the research team. Drawing upon young people's knowledge, experience, and leadership, the goal was to enhance the quality of the research and provide youth with purposeful and skill-building activities.

Data collection was carried out in four waves. However, only the first and second waves are addressed in this article, as these waves focused on data collection through mask-making, drawing, and life maps. The first wave—involving one-to-one interviews and mask-making—occurred between June and October 2015 with 60 children and youth born in captivity. All participants were recruited through a local partner organization that had ongoing contact with women and children formerly in the LRA as a result of their ongoing work and advocacy for women and children born in LRA captivity. Child and youth participants (33 boys and young men and 27 girls and young women) were between the ages of 12 and 19 at the time of the data collection and were living in Gulu, Pader, and Agago.

The second wave of data collection—involving interviews, life maps, and drawings—occurred between January and August 2017 with a cohort of 19 children and youth born in captivity (11 boys and young men and 8 girls and young women) between the ages of 17 and 22. The districts of Gulu, Nwoya, Pader, and Agago were represented in this second wave. The interviews, drawings, and life maps explored children and youth's perceptions of their fathers, and issues related to lineage and heritage.

Participants in both waves had spent their early years in captivity, ranging from a few months after being born to seven years. Arts-based workshops (involving the mask-making, drawing, and life maps), and

interviews were conducted in Acholi, audio-recorded with permission, and then translated and transcribed into English. Interviews conducted by non-Acholi speakers included Acholi-English translation. While the content of interviews is addressed elsewhere (see Denov & Lakor, 2017, 2018), this article focuses on the themes that emerged from the mask-making, drawings, and life maps.

Developed through extensive discussion and planning with the youth researchers and local Ugandan researchers, mask-making, drawing, and life maps were chosen as methods as they represented locally accepted ways of eliciting participants' wartime and post-war lives, family relations and structures, as well as children and youth's hopes for the future. Children and youth were invited to participate in arts-based workshops, specifically mask-making, drawing, and life maps, which were then used to explore the project themes of identity, citizenship, rights, and belonging.

3.1. Mask-Making

Prior to beginning the mask-making workshop, the group discussed the purpose of mask-making, outlining the goals and objectives of the process and encouraging young people to depict elements of their wartime pasts, present, and futures onto their masks. While the topic was inevitably a difficult one, the actual artistic process of mask-making was meant to be fun and interactive, with children and youth working in small groups to create and build each other's masks (see Figure 1). Messy and tactile, the process elicited a great deal of laughter and camaraderie while the masks were being created. Once the masks were dried, children and youth painted their masks and glued on found objects. Upon completion of their masks (see Figure 2), participants were asked to share the meaning of their masks with a member of the research team. Importantly, attempting to garner a complex understanding of children's experiences, alongside the mask-making process, we conducted in-depth interviews with the 60 children/youth.

Figure 1. Collectively creating the masks.

Figure 2. Completed masks.

3.2. Drawing and Life Maps

Drawing has been shown to be a tool that allows for the inclusion of children's points of view, regardless of their stage of development or linguistic abilities. Drawing may be used as a springboard for children to express themselves freely, enabling them to communicate what they have experienced and, in turn, giving those working with them additional insights into their psychosocial status (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

Paper and markers were provided to participants, and they were invited to draw and/or illustrate scenarios of their choosing. Many participants drew scenes from the bush, as well as their post-conflict lives. In addition to free drawing, Ugandan members of the research team, who had much experience working with war-affected women and children, suggested using the "river of life" technique. In this auto-biographical mapping tool, using a simple pen and paper, participants were invited to draw or map out their histories and life courses, showing the ebbs and flows of their lives (Denov & Shevell, 2021). Using the metaphor of a river, participants identified key moments and/or events, prominent individuals in their lives, and positive moments in their life histories as well as challenges. The benefit of this technique is that children decided what they would draw/map out what they wanted to share and what they wanted to withhold. Once participants created their "life map," they were invited to explain it privately to a member of the research team.

The process of art-making—whether through mask-making, drawing, or life maps—involved a "draw and talk approach" (Mand, 2012), inviting a dialogue with participants about their artwork. Importantly, young people's artwork was never interpreted by the research team, but instead by the young people themselves. Participants' verbal explanations of their artwork were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed, and included in the overall qualitative data analysis (Leavy, 2009). Transcripts of their explanations were read and annotated according to themes that emerged in the data. Clusters of verbatim text were then taken from their original explanations and regrouped thematically. The themes of wartime violence, and post-conflict stigma, rejection, and socio-economic challenges, alongside hope for the future, remained prevalent in participants' narratives. Young people's explanations of their artwork are highlighted below, in their own words.

4. Uncovering Wartime and Post-War Experiences Through Masks

Explanations of young people's masks revealed the profound violence, struggle, and physical injuries that they witnessed and endured during captivity. Young people also depicted their physical environments, describing the grasses and mountains that surrounded them. Testimonies also highlighted their post-war challenges regarding poverty, hunger, the inability to pay for school fees, and the multiple forms of stigma and rejection that they endured within their families and communities. Participants also projected their futures onto the masks, outlining their hopes and dreams. The history of one participant, "Alice," is addressed below, followed by her explanation of her mask.

4.1. Alice

Alice's mother had been abducted into the LRA at the age of 12 and was held captive for eight years. During that time, Alice's mother gave birth to three children, all of whom had been born of sexual violence. Alice spent the first part of her life in LRA captivity and eventually escaped the LRA with her mother. Alice was 15 years old at the time of the interview and in the post-war period was able to attend school. However, she faced major challenges in her family and community because of her former LRA affiliation. Alice shared the meaning of her mask and the significance of the colours she chose:

> The green colour shows the bush that our mother was living in…[the place] where my mother was taken [abducted]…and where I was born….The problems and difficulties that my mother went through and that I went through also. That is why I remember this green colour.
>
> The black colour represents the difficulties that I started experiencing [when I was in] the bush with my mother, and up to now, the problems and difficulties I'm [going] through. The problem of getting food and having no place to stay. That is the reason why I have shaded my mouth black, [it] is because of the lack of food to eat. And also other difficulties that I experience when I talk. They [the community] stigmatize me [because] I was from the bush. [They say] that I have demons in my eyes. People in the community want us to keep silent. I'm experiencing a lot of insults. Some of these black [colours] are showing the kind of problems I'm still experiencing up to now. I have used these black colours because I think I will continue to encounter problems in the future. This will continue until someone helps [offers support] me from these problems. I cannot get out of these problems alone.
>
> The yellow colour shows the situation…when I leave the problems I'm experiencing. It represents the kind of happiness that I may get [in the future]—not in darkness. It shows that I am going to have a very good living situation—better than that of the past.
>
> The white colours show my dreams, as I think that my future may be as good and bright as the white colour, if I set a goal. If I work on my own life, I respect people, at least people will help me. If we put our hands together, then my future can become bright. That is why I have put the white colour to represent it.
>
> The red colour is showing the blood that was shedding from people [during the war]. Killings and injuries that were done on people from the bush. For example, my brother was shot badly and his leg got paralyzed. Right now, he is [disabled]. So those are the things the red colours are showing.

> This flower shows that, even if people were getting injuries and dying, there were other people who were also saved by God. They are now out of those problems. Others came back home without getting any injuries—that is why I have put these flowers.
>
> This blue colour shows happiness from my side, even though other people do reject me, stigmatize me, because I am from the bush and demons are in my eyes. I am just happy with my life. That is why I have put this flower in the blue colour. I love every person. Even if no one likes me, I love them.
>
> The stars show that even if people see me like someone who is not useful, I need to do something in the future that can show people that they should stop despising people from the bush because they are able to live normally like other people. They can even do things better than other people.
>
> I feel that if my future becomes bright, I should support people in the community…so that they can know that even if you are born in captivity, you can also do things better than other people.

Alice's testimony highlights the painful memories of her wartime past and the violence and deprivation that surrounded her during her time in the LRA. It also underscores the stigma and discrimination that she lives with in the post-war period and the ongoing socio-economic challenges she and her family continue to grapple with. At the same time, however, Alice's testimony underscores her capacity, her resistance, alongside her hopes for the future, which include acceptance, support, belonging, and opportunity.

5. Life in the LRA: Understanding War Through Children's Drawings

Participants survived extreme adversity in the bush. Through their drawings and interviews, they reported being witnesses and victims of severe and unimaginable forms of violence, including the violent death of a parent or sibling. Participants also expressed how they endured starvation, illness, injuries, sleeping under the rain without shelter, walking long distances without rest, and being under the constant threat of violent ambushes led by the Ugandan government forces. These young people explained:

> The hardest thing I cannot forget is when I saw how my father was shot badly dead and we ran and left him there.
>
> My mother had already been shot while carrying me on her shoulders….My mother was shot and fell down, while I also fell lying next to her, so one of the people who were running alongside her carried me away and continued running with me.

Drawings (like Figure 3), and their accompanying explanations, helped to elucidate children's daily lives during the war. This boy explained his drawing:

> What I remember is, by this time I was old enough and still in the bush. My father…loved me so much. This picture here shows where they were cooking from under a tree at the foot of a hill, which I did not know the name of. These are the people cooking, and this other person was instructed to climb and keep watch from the tree. Here is a picture of people carrying guns, and one who was escorted came and sat down where he always sat. This person is always guarded. As you see, some people are holding

Figure 3. Depiction of life in the bush.

guns and standing outside here. This is the hill which I don't know the name of and the people cooking are here.

6. Mapping Tools: The River of Life

Similar to masks and drawings, life maps provided vivid illustrations of young people's lives both during and following the armed conflict. This young person used his life map to describe his seemingly contradictory life while in LRA captivity. On the one hand, he remembers his life as a child playing in the bush. On the other hand, he describes the fear, deception, and violence that surrounded him:

> I drew the picture of children playing indicating the time when we were still in the bush. Life was easy while we were in the bush; we would play all the time. I was also in the company of both my parents. The arrow pointing up shows the period around 2004, when we were captured while in the bush. On that day we were captured, I thought our captors were part of my father's group. But they deceived us that they were part of my father's group. But instead, we were taken to the army barracks. I was not feeling comfortable because I was no longer in the presence of my mother. I did not know the people who captured us, but they kept promising us that they were taking us to where our mother was.

As seen in Figure 4, using her life map, this girl described the challenges of poverty, death, and hunger in the bush. She also described how losing her father and living with a single mother affected her life after the war. She eloquently describes the realities of discrimination and finger-pointing, particularly by her stepfather:

> First and foremost, I was born from the bush and never knew anyone, not even my relatives. I saw no hope for the future except life in the bush only. However, as I grew up knowing that my father was there, I saw greater hope for the future since my father was mindful of us and took care of us [while in the bush]. Life went on as normal and I never expected anything bad to happen in my life. However, when battles started and my father had to respond by going to battle, we were left alone with our mother. At this point, life became very hard with poverty, death, and hunger as a major hurdle among other challenges faced by people in the bush. I continued experiencing a lot of hills and steep slope in

my life until my mother escaped with us, and we came back home. After our return, I saw little hope, since our father was not there. We experienced a hard life being raised by a single mother. When my mother married another man, life became marred by discrimination and finger-pointing. Our stepfather discriminated against us, and our mother took us to live [without her] with her relatives who never welcomed us wholeheartedly. Then she picked [us up from there] and brought us back to live with her…though our stepfather still discriminates against us. There is a big difference between how our stepfather treats us and how our biological father treated us.

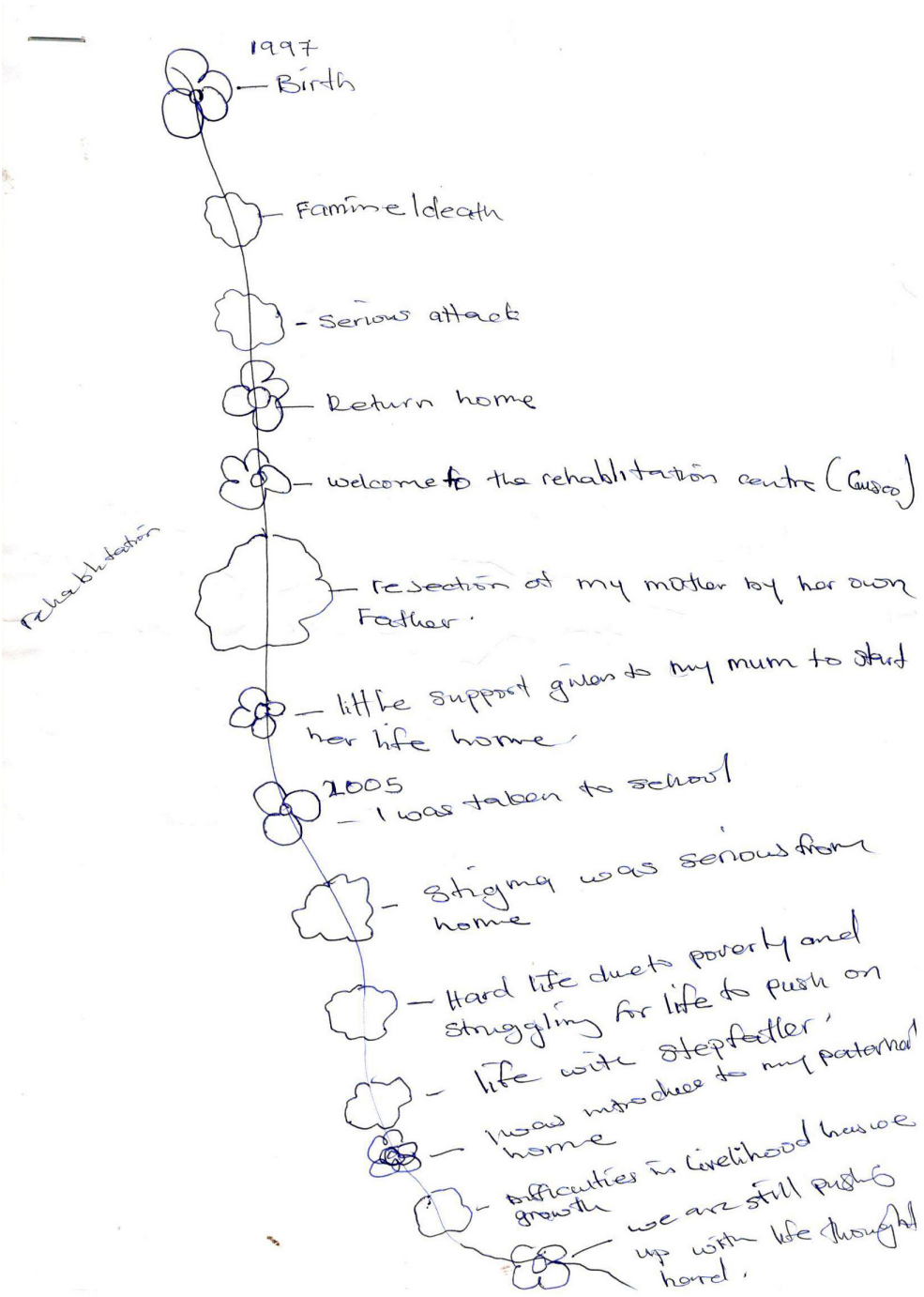

Figure 4. A young woman's life map outlining the major events and circumstances of her life.

Through mask-making, drawings, and life maps, children's experiences and perceptions of life within the LRA, the challenges they faced, their strength, courage, and capacity, as well as their profound vulnerability were uncovered. Their artwork and accompanying explanations also revealed the new and complex challenges in the aftermath of the war. Participants were forced to navigate entry into civilian life and contend with community and family stigma, rejection, poverty, and new family structures, with little accompanying psycho-social and economic support. The masks, drawings, life maps, and accompanying verbal explanations helped to provide an understanding of the realities of armed conflict and its aftermath from the children's own perspectives.

7. Public Dissemination of Children's Perspectives Through Art: (Inter)national Exhibitions

While the data for this study has been published using traditional academic publications, to reach broader audiences, the experiences of children born in LRA captivity were disseminated to the general public via art exhibitions. In 2017, at a national level, a conference was held in Gulu, Uganda, to disseminate the findings of the research and to reach the local population. As part of the conference, masks and drawings were exhibited, and children who were part of the research project were invited, if they desired, to share their experiences with the audience.

At the international level, in 2022, at the invitation of the UK Government, the masks, drawings, and life maps were displayed at a curated art exhibition for the Interministerial Conference on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative in London. The Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative is a UK Government-led initiative that aims to raise awareness of the extent of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and to encourage and rally global action to end it. The two-day international conference was attended by over 800 delegates, government officials, and survivors. As a result of the conference, more than 50 countries signed a UK-led declaration to end the scourge of sexual violence in conflict. Moreover, 40 countries, made national commitments outlining the steps they will take to tackle sexual violence in conflict. Given their young age and the sensitive content of the conference, children were not in attendance. The art exhibition thus sought to share the perspectives of children born of conflict-related sexual violence through their artwork to a broad public and policy audience.

8. Discussion: The Strengths and Limitations of Arts-Based Methods

This study has demonstrated how mask-making, drawing, and life maps can help to elicit the perspectives and experiences of children and youth affected by war, particularly those born of conflict-related sexual violence, who have until very recently been overlooked in research and international policy. The multiple methods of data collection, using mask-making, drawings, and life maps, alongside interviews, helped to offer breadth and depth of children's lives both during and following war. More easily distributed, accessed, and consumed than traditional academic publications, the medium of art can have a widespread, immediate, and powerful impact (Evans & Foster, 2009). Also, methods that put production in the hands of children and youth can project a credibility and authenticity that more polished works of art cannot achieve, provoking social action and potential social transformation (McNiff, 2008). The arts-based approaches enabled participants to choose what to draw, reveal, share, and discuss with the research team, as well as decide what to withhold, facilitating great control over the research process. Finally, the art-based products and completed masks, drawings, and life maps were shared with key audiences, including war-affected

populations, families, communities, policymakers, and government officials, highlighting the need for appropriate support, research, intervention, and action.

There are inherent limitations that deserve consideration for future research. The methods chosen for this study were developed with local research partners and youth researchers, and, through discussion and consultation, these methods were deemed culturally acceptable and meaningful activities to engage with children born of conflict-related sexual violence in northern Uganda. However, given the unique historical, geo-political, economic, and cultural realities of war and its aftermath, what is appropriate in one context and culture, may not be in another. This underscores the vital importance of community consultation, trust, and relationship-building during data collection and for researchers to not employ universal forms of arts-based methods. Moreover, intersectional factors such as participants' age, race, gender, ethnicity, mobility, sexuality, cultural/spiritual beliefs, historical realities and local customs, etc., must be considered, and researchers must be prepared to adapt research tools to each unique context.

Arts-based activities can allow participants to create distance from discussions of trauma and create safety with a self-directed locus of control. However, researchers must not assume that all participants will be comfortable with the method. For a group activity, such as mask-making, where each child lies down and others helped apply their plaster masks, a certain level of comfort and safety must first be established and discussed particularly for individuals who may have experienced forms of trauma and adversity.

9. Conclusion

Through the arts-based methods of mask-making, drawing, and life maps, this article has explored the wartime and post-war realities of a unique and important group of war-affected children. Through these arts-based methods, the violence, loss, marginalization, and deprivation that these children endured and continue to endure, were captured. These children were denied socio-economic stability and growth, familial and community affection, and education upon returning to their families and communities after being forced to live within an armed group amidst mass violence and upheaval. Despite these profound challenges, they navigated their post-conflict lives with courage, tenacity, and hope for the future.

A key lesson in the development and implementation of arts-based methods in this study was ensuring that they were relevant, useful, and appropriate to the unique context of children's lives and realities in post-war northern Uganda. Jones (2008) notes that political, social, and cultural literacy is essential and that to help any child in crisis, one needs to understand the child's world and their perspectives upon it—which would include culture and context. "Culture" describes a shared social system of knowledge, beliefs, values, and assumptions, continuously guiding and shaping our behavior and our interrelations (Geertz, 1973). Culture is dynamic and gives meaning, acting as a prism through which we not only perceive but also make sense of the world around us. As such, culture plays a prominent role in how individuals conceptualize and experience illness, trauma, healing, and coping. Arts-based methods, interventions, and services during war and its aftermath must be grounded in the local cultural and social contexts; exploring what children's expressions of distress, coping, and wellness mean within their particular context. As such, the arts-based methods used in this study should not be automatically and unilaterally replicated. Instead, arts-based methods must be tailored to each unique cultural context to galvanize individual and collective resilience, strengths, and capacities.

Funding

This research was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts (through the Killam Research Fellowship), and the Canada Research Chair program.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Akello, G. (2024). Stigma and guilt among the children of amnestied ex-combatants in northern Uganda: Implications for transitional justice. In M. Denov & M. Fennig (Eds.), *Research handbook of children and armed conflict*. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=3810730

Alderson, P. (2000). Children as researchers: The effects of participation rights on research methodology. In P. Christensen & A. James (Eds.), *Research with children: perspectives and practices* (pp. 241–257). Falmer Press.

Annan, J., Amuge, A., & Angwaro, T. (2003). Counseling for peace in the midst of war: Counselors from northern Uganda share their views. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling*, *24*(4), 235–245.

Berents, H. (2020). Politics, policy-making and the presence of images of suffering children. *International Affairs*, *96*(3), 593–608.

Bilotta, N., & Denov, M. (2023). The right to be heard in research: Participatory research ethics in Kakuma Refugee Camp. In M. Denov, C. Mitchell, & M. Rabiau (Eds.), *Global child: Children and families affected by war, displacement & migration* (pp. 133–172). Rutgers University Press.

Clacherty, G. (2021). Artbooks as witness of everyday resistance: Using art with displaced children living in Johannesburg, South Africa. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *11*(1), 7–20. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610621995820

Clacherty, G., & Shahrokh, T. (2023). An arts-based participatory approach to research with migrant young people in South Africa. In M. Denov, C. Mitchell, & M. Rabiau (Eds.), *Global child: Children and families affected by war, displacement & migration* (pp. 173–196). Rutgers University Press

D'Amico, M., Denov, M., Khan, F., Linds, W., & Akesson, B. (2016). Research as intervention? Exploring the health and well-being of children and youth facing global adversity through participatory visual methods. *Global Public Health*, *11*(5/6), 528–545.

Denov, M. (2010). *Child soldiers: Sierra Leone's revolutionary united front*. Cambridge University Press.

Denov, M. (2022). The intergenerational effects of wartime sexual violence: Children born of wartime rape in northern Uganda. In K. Alexander, A. Burtch, & B. Lorenzkowski (Eds.), *Small stories of war: Children, youth, and conflict, in Canada and beyond* (pp. 206–223). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Denov, M., D'Amico, M., Linds, W., Mitchell, C., & Mosseau, N. (2022). Youth reflections on ethics in research and practice: A case study of youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *26*(9), 1240–1255. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2080540

Denov, M., & Fennig, M. (Eds.). (2024). *Research handbook on children and armed conflict*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Denov, M., & Lakor, A. A. (2017). When war is better than peace: The post-conflict realities of children born of wartime rape in northern Uganda. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *65*, 255–265. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.02.014

Denov, M., & Lakor, A. A. (2018). Post-war stigma, violence and "Kony children": The responsibility to protect children born in Lord's Resistance Army captivity in Northern Uganda. *Global Responsibility to Protect*, *10*(1/2), 217–238. https://doi.org/10.1163/1875984X-01001011

Denov, M., & Shevell, M. (2021). An arts-based approach with youth born of genocidal rape in Rwanda: The river of life as an autobiographical mapping tool. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *11*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106219958

Dolan, C. (2009). *Social torture: The case of northern Uganda, 1986–2006*. Berghahn Books.

Elden, S. (2012). Inviting the messy: Drawing methods and "children's voices." *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*, *20*(1), 66–81.

Evans, M., & Foster, S. (2009). Representation in participatory video: Some considerations from research with Métis in British Columbia. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *43*(1), 87–108. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.43.1.87

Farokhi, M., & Hashemi, M. (2011). The analysis of children's drawings: Social, emotional, physical, and psychological aspects. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *30*, 2219–2224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.433

Friesem, E. (2014). A story of conflict and collaboration: Media literacy, video production and disadvantaged youth. *The Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *6*(1), 44–55. https://doi.org/10.23860/jmle-6-1-4

Gantt, L., & Tinnin, L. W. (2009). Support for a neurobiological view of trauma with implications for art therapy. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, *36*(3), 148–153. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip. 2008.12.005

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

Jones, L. (2008). Responding to the needs of children in crisis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *20*, 291–303. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540260801996081

Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford Press.

Linds, W., D'Amico, M., Denov, M., Mitchell, C., & Shevell, M. (2023). Arts-based research innovations in work with war-affected children and youth: A synthesis. In M. Denov, C. Mitchell, & M. Rabiau (Eds.), *Global child: Children and families affected by war, displacement & migration* (pp. 197–222). Rutgers University Press.

Mand, K. (2012). Giving children a "voice": Arts-based participatory research activities and representation. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *15*(2), 149–160. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2012.649409

McNiff, S. (2008). Arts-based Research. In J. G. Knowles & A. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research* (pp. 29–41). Sage.

Oliveira, C., & Baines, E. (2022). "It's like giving birth to this girl again": Social repair and motherhood after conflict-related sexual violence. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, *29*(2), 750–770. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab033

Savin-Baden, M., & Wimpenny, K. (2014). Arts-related research. In M. Savin-Baden & K. Wimpenny (Eds.), *A practical guide to arts-related research* (pp. 1–14). Sense Publishers.

Shanahan, F., & Veale, A. (2016). How mothers mediate the social integration of their children conceived of forced marriage within the Lord's Resistance Army. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *51*, 72–86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.11.003

UK Government. (2023). *Platform for action promoting the rights and wellbeing of children born of conflict-related sexual violence*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/platform-for-action-promoting-rights-and-wellbeing-of-children-born-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence/platform-for-action-promoting-the-rights-and-wellbeing-of-children-born-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence

UNICEF. (2007). *The Paris Principles: Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces and armed groups*. www.unicef.org/mali/media/1561/file/ParisPrinciples.pdf

Watye Ki Gen. (2014). *Documentation of children born in captivity*. Unpublished document.

About the Author

Myriam Denov (PhD) is a full professor at McGill University and holds the Canada Research Chair in Children, Families and Armed Conflict (Tier 1). Her research interests lie in the areas of children and families affected by war, migration, and its intergenerational impact. A specialist in participatory and arts-based research, she has worked with war-affected children and families in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.