



# Multiple Deployments, Cross-Border War-Women and Implications for Building Stronger Military Institutions

Grace Akello

**+** Frequent deployment of Ugandan military personnel simultaneously contributes to improved security in the immediate sense in some countries, but when protracted, deployments can have complex social, economic and psychological impacts. This brief explores these impacts and makes recommendations to mitigate these protracted challenges.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uganda's soldiers are frequently deployed across national borders to provide security assistance. In addition, Uganda's soldiers are often engaged in internal missions, usually deployed at short notice to any region experiencing various security threats. Although soldiers are deployed with an understanding that the assignment will only take a few weeks to complete, generally these engagements are protracted in nature. A protracted military engagement does not only lead to loss of life, human rights violations and displacement, but also creates what soldiers call *temporary families* when soldiers form social relationships with cross-border "war-women" – women that soldiers have intimate relationships with during cross-border deployments. Through a 16-month ethnographic study with three categories of people, soldiers, cross-border war-women and soldiers' families, this study found that frequent deployments simultaneously contribute to improved security in the immediate sense in some countries, but when protracted, deployments can have complex social, economic and psychological impacts. In this policy brief, I propose some recommendations for the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) and other military institutions which will mitigate these protracted challenges.

# A Brief Introduction

## CROSS BORDER WARS AND MOVEMENT

In our on-going ethnographic study in northern Uganda, titled *Cross border wars, gender and citizenship among security officers and people associated with the military*, we explore the repercussions of prolonged and multiple deployments within and across national borders. A distinction is made between war-women and soldiers' close kin to show the temporality and precarity of social relationships formed during military deployments. Soldiers' close kin may include their wives, parents and children documented by the institution, but war-women and their children are frequently undocumented, unclaimed<sup>1</sup> and pose many short-term and long-term challenges to civilians, the state and soldiers alike. For instance, many soldiers discussed their attempts to introduce their new families to their relatives, which rarely succeeded due to a shortage of land. Others recounted conflicts with co-wives who would not accept the new family members.



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1. Soldiers use and continue to refer to war-women and children as 'unclaimed' women and children. To them, any social relationship, which started during the deployment and then became unsustainable both financially and emotionally is referred to as such.



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I propose to understand these adult social relations as mediated by male sexuality and as voluntarily formed among many military men with war-women within and across national borders. The phenomenon described in this policy brief does not amount to trafficking and human rights violations during armed conflict. Rather, these are consensual social relationships which soldiers regard as temporary and therefore they have no plans to deal with the long-term outcomes, for instance children and women who willingly leave their country or emigrate to Uganda to join their 'spouses'. War-women must be viewed as people enmeshed in complex social unions and though entangled in them with soldiers, soldiers are not able to mitigate or manage them, in part due to institutional barriers and financial constraints. An added complexity is that war-women argue that they are soldiers' family, whereas soldiers speak about these relationships as temporary relations.

Through sharing this emerging evidence, I aim to suggest amendments in military institutional frameworks and policy guidelines for building stronger security institutions that address and respond to the soldiers' conduct on deployment and the needs and rights of the women with whom they form temporary relations.

# Frequent Military Deployments of Soldiers Within and Across National Borders

**Uganda shares porous borders with war-affected countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Central Africa Republic and Somalia. The instability in these countries affects Uganda's security situation. Although national sovereignty guidelines exist, Uganda deploys its soldiers to neighbouring countries to avoid the spillage of insecurity into Uganda. For example, Uganda contributes to African Union forces like the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) – a peacekeeping mission mandated to mitigate insecurity and civil war in Somalia.**

**Although military deployments within and across national borders are often conceived as short-term missions aimed at improving the security situation in weeks, in the recent past, most missions have been protracted and have often taken years to complete.**

## DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO AND WAR-WOMEN

The UPDF deployment in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2000 is one example of those originally short-term missions that turned into a protracted one. This DRC mission ended up lasting three years from 2000 to 2003 culminating in an estimated 30,000 excess deaths in every month of the conflict<sup>2</sup>, military exposure to virulent disease epidemics like the Congolese strain of Ebola and thousands of cross-border war-women from Congo moving to Uganda. Soldiers interviewed for the *Cross-border War, Gender and Citizenship* study refer to these war-women as “unclaimed

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2. See IRC (2003) Conflict in DR Congo deadliest since World War II, accessed. 17th Sept 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/conflict-dr-congo-deadliest-world-war-ii-says-irc>

war-women and their children". Soldiers further concede that the state made a mistake in allowing the women to return with the soldiers who only intended to engage in short-term relationships during their deployment abroad. According to the soldiers interviewed, this is seen as a mistake because the war-women, particularly from DRC, expected to live as if the war was still on-going, with soldiers earning higher salaries and thus able to provide for them<sup>3</sup>. This narrative has been confirmed by the war-women from DRC, CAR and Somalia. A substantial proportion of returnee soldiers already had wives and children in their family homes, thereby making it difficult to support additional members of the family. By observation, a substantial proportion of soldiers live in precarious conditions within the barracks and military detachments, mostly in small huts<sup>4</sup>.

Hundreds of children were born as a result of these short-term relationships over the course of three years. The state's approach in the beginning was to settle cross-border war-women and their children in gazetted villages<sup>5</sup> close to the UPDF barracks. However, many war-women with older children frequently relocated from gazetted villages to urban and peri-urban centres to make a living. In Gulu municipality, this has led to an increase in *Agwuu* (street children), which can cause conflict with soldiers, traders and civilians. Many of the children know their fathers are Afande (a soldier), and many even know their title within the military, none of which however is sufficient evidence for them to receive support from their fathers as an additional family member.

## CROSS BORDER MISSIONS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Uganda's army has an important role in peacekeeping missions in the Great Lakes region and beyond. Some of their military interventions took place in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Rwanda, Somalia and Liberia. Uganda has also deployed its military in Somalia since 1996. One important characteristic underpinning this mission is its monetary rewards for the military. At any given time, one can find an average of circa 7,000 UPDF soldiers in Somalia. Each UPDF soldier is paid 1028 USD per month by the African Union, a huge proportion of which is contributed by the UN.

3. Major variations exist for soldiers' wages when they engage in cross border wars and when they are repatriated. In Uganda, soldiers are among the lowest paid employees (with an average of 100-230 USD per month depending on seniority), yet sometimes soldiers spend months without remuneration. A drastic decline in wages is one of the reasons why many soldiers were unable to support their additional families, thereby leaving them in destitution.

4. In the tiny huts, which soldiers code-named *mama yingia pole* (lady, take care while entering), are an epitome of temporality, lack of basic sanitation and lighting. At most, it is a tent-like space for one person.

5. A gazetted village is like a barrack for war-women who have just returned as the state-tries to find a solution for their statelessness and lack of support but at the same time acknowledging their link to the military. The empty space near the barracks is cordoned off, makeshift shelters are erected, and people are expected to live here until they are resettled or "claimed" by the soldiers, which only rarely happens.

7,000  
UPDF SOLDIERS  
IN SOMALIA



## EACH UPDF SOLDIER IS PAID

US\$ 1,028  
PER MONTH

...a huge  
proportion  
of which is  
contributed  
by the UN



The act of constantly deploying the military seems to be driven by financial motives. Uganda must desist from deploying the military whether to Somalia or any other country affected by armed conflict where financial gain is the driving reason.

This fund is managed by the Uganda Defence Ministry and it deducts 200 USD from each soldier on a monthly basis<sup>6</sup>. It is for this reason that Uganda responds with agitation each time AMISOM recommends that all foreign troops must withdraw from Somalia<sup>7</sup>. Soldiers interviewed are ambivalent about deployments across borders in regard to the dangers associated with these missions, acknowledging that some top officers earn a maximum of USD 230 without deployment and are therefore willing to risk their lives

6. The source of this money is not immediately clear to the soldiers interviewed. But what was frequently mentioned is that in some countries, equally dangerous missions are not remunerated. Likewise, soldiers deployed for internal missions are not paid as well, therefore causing confusion and disgruntlement among the military personnel. Soldiers are also ambivalent about these cross-border missions where they are informed about the likelihood of no return, but because of the financial rewards, there is even competition among themselves to be deployed there if only to improve their income.

7. "Uganda threatens to quit AMISOM over funding cuts". TRT World, 2019, accessed on 22 September 2020 <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/uganda-threatens-to-quit-amisom-over-funding-cuts-24853>

in order to improve their economic status. Many seasoned soldiers were awarded hefty sums by the US government to train new recruits who were deployed to Iraq between 2004 to 2009<sup>8</sup>. The last batch of recruits returned to Uganda after the United States of America largely withdrew its troops. Uganda is therefore known to have earned a great deal through deploying numerous young recruits subsequently employed to pacify Iraq.

I will come back to this issue in the recommendations, while making an inquiry concerning the extent to which cross-border war missions are the most effective way of stabilising war-affected countries. But suffice to say here, the act of constantly deploying the military seems to be driven by financial motives. Uganda must desist from deploying the military whether to Somalia or any other country affected by armed conflict where financial gain is the driving reason.

In the Central Africa Republic, the UPDF was deployed from 2000 until the end of the armed conflict in 2005. Many of the soldiers interviewed for the study mentioned having formed various short-term relationships with women. Through scrutinising everyday military practices, policy frameworks and the access to health services by soldiers and their temporary wives, it has become clear that in order to build stronger military institutions there is an urgent need to improve existing policy and institutional guidelines. For example, frameworks for prolonged and frequent deployments whether internal or foreign, how to deal with social relations formed during war and mechanisms for dealing with the spoils of war.

## INTERNAL MISSIONS, HEALTH AND THE QUESTION OF STREET CHILDREN

Uganda's military is frequently deployed within the country. For example, between 1986 and early 2007, the UPDF engaged in active combat with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). More than 10,000 people lost their lives in the conflict and over 1.4 million people were displaced from their livelihoods and exposed to deadly epidemics<sup>9</sup>. Within Uganda, the UPDF deploys on short-notice, though expecting soldiers to deal with protracted challenges such as in the Karamoja

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8. Personal communication in an interview in July 2019.

9. Atkinson RR "From Uganda to the Congo and Beyond: Pursuing the Lord's Resistance Army" *International Peace Institute*, 18 September, 2020, <https://www.ipinst.org/2009/11/from-uganda-to-the-congo-and-beyond-pursuing-the-lords-resistance-army>  
Grace Akello, Ria Reis and Annemiek Richters "Silencing distressed children in the context of war: An analysis of its causes and health consequences" *Social Science & Medicine* 71(2) (2010): 213-220;  
Grace Akello and Sung-Joon Park "The oughtness of care: Fear, stress and caregiving during the 2000-2001 Ebola outbreak in Gulu, Uganda" *Social Science and Medicine* 194 (2017): 60-66;  
Tim Allen *Trial Justice: The International Criminal Court and the Lord's Resistance Army* (Zed books: London 2008).



region where the military disarmed ethnic groups which had acquired guns through the porous borders between Kenya and Ethiopia.<sup>10</sup> Since the mid-1990s, the UPDF has also intermittently been deployed to South Western Uganda due to the security threat caused by the Allied Democratic Forces and other rebel groups causing instability in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Children born of war and war-women are entangled in these missions as they are associated with the soldiers. The gendered dynamics of military deployments are broader than usually reported. Gendered dynamics also take place at the level of personal relationships, such as the temporary relationships discussed in this brief, as well as within institutional frameworks that promote gender inequality where women are viewed as disposable and only useful for relieving stress, for short-term fulfilments, and who become the pawns of war, as frequently discussed by soldiers during interviews. In effect, gazetting women and referring to them as war-women is a signifier of gender discrimination and institutionalised gender inequality. Women and their children are treated as *war spoils* or an unwanted side effect of war and by extension dissociated from military activities. By observation, and through many soldiers' narratives, we found that especially frequent individual deployments significantly contribute to this phenomenon.

Soldiers' health has also been affected, with many people in these settings having to deal with both the short-term and long-term effects of war, including injuries and disability. Easily preventable diseases like malaria, diarrhoea and cholera caused a substantial increase in child mortality among war-displaced persons<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, healthcare inequities like access to sexual and reproductive health services affect the uptake of health services by the military and the women they associate with. This results in current higher HIV infections among soldiers of 6.8 per cent when the national prevalence is 5.7 per cent (2018)<sup>12</sup>, as well as more street children and higher fertility rates among war-women due to lack of access to family planning services and contraception. Women in Uganda are disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDs with 8.8 per cent of adult women living with HIV compared to 4.3 per cent of men<sup>13</sup>.

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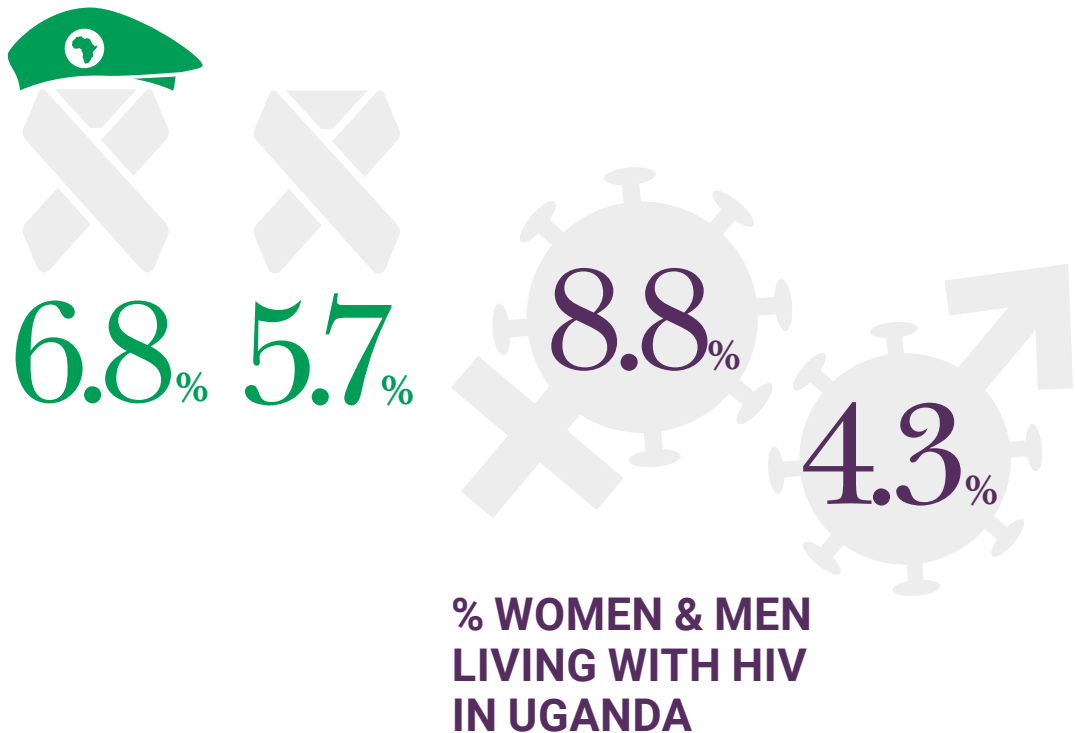
10. Karamoja region is a well-known origin of Kampala's street children. Although the local media quickly blames the poor child-raising skills of the Karamojong pastoralists, a substantial number of these children are linked to many internal deployments of soldiers there. Many soldiers reported having decades of experiences in this region with the mission of disarming pastoralists, but they also formed social relations with war-women and girls there.

11. Grace Akello *Wartime children's suffering and quests for therapy in northern Uganda*. (African Studies Centre: Leiden 2010).

12. Avert. "HIV and AIDS in Uganda", accessed on 20 August 2020, <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/sub-saharan-africa/uganda>

13. WHO/Uganda Ministry of Health (2017) "The Uganda population -based HIV impact assessment 2016-2017", accessed on 22 September 2020, <https://www.afro.who.int/sites/default/files/2017-08/UPHIA%20Uganda%20factsheet.pdf>

## HIV INFECTIONS IN SOLDIERS V'S NATIONAL



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# Policy Recommendations

**Although the basis for this policy brief is ethnographic evidence from Uganda, many military institutions in Africa and beyond face similar experiences due to frequent internal and foreign deployments. It is plausible to argue therefore that the recommendations below will be relevant for both Uganda and other countries engaged in various deployments.**

1

## Restructure military deployments and redistributive ways of peacebuilding

Over the years, Uganda has predominantly relied on a militaristic approach of resolving internal and external wars. This approach is no longer sustainable and even though some countries like Rwanda significantly benefited, the long-term impacts of war is becoming unmanageable. That is why I suggest that Uganda should put more emphasis on peaceful means of conflict resolution with fewer missions and an emphasis on mediation.

Despite changing income in soldiers' households, and despite an increasing national budget for supporting families formed during war, the relevant stakeholders need to draft guidelines that attend to the needs of both soldiers and their social relationships formed due to and during multiple deployments. Frequent soldier deployments must be minimised since soldiers mentioned that it affects their participation in raising their children. Such a consideration will take into account the idea that children's social identity is shaped by the nature of the households in which they are raised. For soldiers, minimising the frequency and length of missions will discourage them from forming multiple social relations.

## 2

### Provide citizenship for cross-border war-women and their children

Although the state originally subsidised the living costs of thousands of cross-border war-women and their children, Uganda is no longer able to support and to sustain the ever-increasing war-related populations such as cross-border war-women and their children. This is due to budget cuts for the defence ministry and general national economic struggles. War-women and their children live at the social, economic and political margins in Uganda.

One innovative way of dealing with the challenge of cross-border war-women and their children is through granting them citizenship instead of gazetting them and viewing them as a temporary problem which might resolve itself with time. Whereas a substantial proportion of soldiers proposed that the state should revert to its earlier practices of repatriating only soldiers after such deployments, thereby neglecting any relationships that were established, this brief calls for a fair treatment of people enmeshed in these *temporary* social relationships. Cross border war-women and children need to be treated with dignity and as citizens – whether it means acquiring citizenship through their links with the military or as people enmeshed in wars created and perpetuated by the state.



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# 3

## Improve remuneration and soldiers' work conditions

As seen above, the unintended consequence of cross-border war-women and children is growing in magnitude and becoming difficult to manage. One of the factors contributing to this phenomenon is that on return many of the UPDF soldiers dissociate with all war-related social relationships. However, since there is currently substantial evidence that the conditions of deployment encourage forming relationships while on mission, I suggest that existing military frameworks be revised so that they meet soldiers' needs. If low remuneration makes it difficult to take care of their additional war-families, the state needs to carefully examine and design strategies to deal with this challenge. For instance, it could increase soldiers' wages. A few decades ago, up to until mid-1980s, Uganda's military had a policy of deploying and repatriating only their military personnel. But presently, perhaps due to the protracted nature of the deployments, any soldiers who forms social relations during war, are allowed to bring their families with them as they return. If this flexibility exists, is it not possible to deploy soldiers together with their existing families in the first place?

If cross-border war deployments are creating more protracted social, legal and economic challenges as seen above, I suggest that the state should standardise and regulate the frequency and duration of missions. For example, a soldier who recently returned from Congo with another family, cannot be immediately deployed to Somalia. In this regard, soldiers' family composition and size will be considered prior to deployments. For examples, if the soldier has a family of more than five children, the state will not allow him to deploy for foreign missions or somewhere else where he will not travel with his family.

## 4

### Improving access to contraception and family planning services

Most sexually active women of ages 15-49 in Uganda know about family planning, among them 39 per cent use some method of contraception and 31 per cent use a modern or a more effective method<sup>14</sup>. However, family planning coverage is not known about by cross-border war women living in complex emergencies. Although all of Uganda's soldiers' standard war packages includes condoms, the package might not be sufficient during protracted conflicts. Therefore, this policy brief suggests that condoms and indeed more effective and women-specific contraception be integrated into war packages. Doing this will also facilitate war-women's access to modern and effective family planning services.

## 5

### Improving provision and uptake of Pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV/AIDS

Few of Uganda's major hospitals and health centres offer Pre-exposure Prophylaxis for HIV/AIDS due to associated high costs. Nevertheless, mandatory post exposure prophylaxis is recommended for victims of sexual violence and people who have been exposed to high risk behaviour for HIV and AIDS.

As we show in this policy brief, forming many social relationships due to frequent internal and external deployments increases the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Post-Exposure Prophylaxis may not be easily accessible during complex and protracted emergencies. However, one of the ways infections can be minimised particularly among high risk groups is through the highly effective drug Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PreP). Such an intervention is recommended for people who have a higher than average risk of contracting HIV, including sexually active military personnel as a preventive measure. Introducing PreP policy guidelines to enhance access by soldiers and women associated with the military to Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PreP) for HIV/AIDS will not only accelerate the uptake of and access to PreP but also protect many men and women from being infected with HIV/AIDs.

14. Population Reference Bureau "Costs of Induced Abortion and Cost-Effectiveness of Universal Access to Modern Contraceptives in Uganda", accessed 21 August 2020, <https://www.prb.org/poppov-costs-induced-abortion/>

## About the Author

Grace Akello, PhD is currently an Associate Professor in Gulu University's Faculty of Medicine. She studies humanitarianism, health interventions during complex emergencies and health policy. As a way of creating research impact, she promotes dialogue between stakeholders, including junior and senior officers to discuss emerging issues and how to resolve them.

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