

# Memoirs of women-in-conflict: Ugandan ex-combatants and the production of knowledge on security and peacebuilding

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## Abstract

The limitations of conventional accounts of security and peacebuilding drawing upon the ‘expert’ knowledge of military elites, policymakers and civil society representatives have been widely recognized. This has led security and peacebuilding policymakers, including through the United Nations Women, Peace and Security agenda, to search for alternative forms of knowledge, such as memoirs, photographs or oral histories, that better reflect lived experiences within local communities. Building on existing work on memoirs as knowledge production artefacts and on feminist security studies, this article demystifies experiential security knowledge through an analysis of three memoirs written by women ex-combatants in Uganda. We argue that while the memoirs offer complex and contradictory narratives about women ex-combatants, they are also the products of transnational mediated processes, whereby the interests of power translate complex narratives into consolidated representations and sturdy tropes of the abducted African woman ex-combatant. This means that although the three memoirs provide some hints as to transformative ways of thinking about security and peace, and offer dynamic accounts of personal experiences, they also reflect the politics of dominant representational practices.

## Keywords

Critical security studies, ex-combatants, gender, knowledge production, memoirs, Uganda

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in the number of African women ex-combatants who have written memoirs about their experiences in conflict. Several earlier

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African memoirs have recounted the experiences of elite women,<sup>1</sup> but there are also increasing numbers of memoirs that focus on non-elite combatants, often former child soldiers (Hynd, 2020; Murphy, 2014). This article analyses memoirs written by women ex-combatants in Uganda and assesses their role in knowledge production on security and peacebuilding.<sup>2</sup> Men's military memoirs have played an important role in military history, and they have been critical in shaping our understandings of particular historical periods, such as the Napoleonic Wars (Lynn, 1997), World War I (Harari, 2005: 43–48) and many wars in the mid-to-late 20th century (Huxford et al., 2019). Contemporary memoirs written by women in African conflicts have not received similar levels of scholarly attention.

As a source of knowledge, memoirs by ex-combatants have been broadly viewed in three ways. First, they have been viewed as unscientific and heavily biased, recounting personal and lived experiences in a specific setting (Hynes, 1998; Vernon, 2005). While they may provide interesting anecdotes in a sort of 'action-adventure story' and may be a cathartic exercise for the author (Jenkins and Woodward, 2014), it has been argued that they cannot serve as a basis for expert knowledge for policy, owing to their partial and individual nature. Second, a contrary view sees memoirs as repositories for authoritative, legitimate, local knowledge about unscripted daily life experiences of conflict. Ebila (2020), for example, describes Ugandan autobiographies of war as fragmented, situated and raw. The production of memoirs both reflects and creates the demand for accounts of 'what war is really like' and how it is experienced socially, bodily and emotionally by those who are directly affected by it (Sylvester, 2013: 14). For instance, several memoirs from veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the 21st century have become best-sellers and attracted significant media attention (Bosman, 2012; Lawson-Peebles, 2005), thus shaping popular memories and representations of warfare. In this second view, an autobiographical account could be seen as providing an authoritative source of knowledge for security and peacebuilding policy by highlighting combatants' everyday experiences with war. A third view emphasizes the social production of memoirs. Memoirs shed light onto wider sociopolitical issues related to militarism and security (Brown and Lutz, 2007; Duncanson, 2011; Kieran, 2012; Woodward, 2008; Woodward and Jenkins, 2012), and are always implicated in broader political and social relations. Since memoirs reflect power structures, there are important silences and omissions (Harari, 2007: 293; Mirzoeff, 2006: 23), and the telling of the story cannot be separated from present imaginaries (Basham, 2013: 9; Cogley, 1993; Dyvik, 2016; Houghton, 2018). Thus, memoirs are of wider sociological significance, and the production and consumption of memoirs are socially meaningful.

Conventional accounts of security and peacebuilding that are based on 'expert' knowledge of military elites, civil society leaders and policymakers, and that ignore the experiences and voices of women in conflict zones, are heavily flawed. Memoirs can help redress this by headlining additional voices and experiential knowledge that are usually 'kept out of view' (Sylvester, 2013: 14). Yet interpreting memoirs as unmediated, unscripted examples of 'the local woman-in-conflict' also fails to capture how some memoirs are conceived and produced.

Our article builds on the third view that sees memoirs as social products. All memoirs are socially mediated, but in this article we are especially interested in memoirs written by women ex-combatants in the Global South because they illustrate particular forms of transnational social mediation.<sup>3</sup> The article analyses three selected autobiographical accounts published between 2004 and 2015 by Ugandan women ex-combatants: Grace Akallo, Evelyn Amony and China Keitetsi.<sup>4</sup> The first two books were written about the women's experiences in the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which fought the Ugandan government throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The book by Keitetsi recalls her experiences in the Ugandan National Resistance Army (NRA) in the 1980s.

There have been personal written accounts by other women ex-combatants in Uganda,<sup>5</sup> but we chose to study Akallo, Amony and Keitetsi because they have received considerable international attention. The three authors have represented Ugandan women ex-combatants at international fora and have been featured in international media such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. Their memoirs were published at the time that the international Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda was gaining increased attention.<sup>6</sup> As part of the WPS agenda, there were efforts to find situated, local knowledge about peace and security produced by women (Cook, 2016) that could help improve the implementation of the agenda in local contexts. We therefore examine the kinds of knowledges made available in the memoirs, and how they were produced and received by the WPS policy community.

We argue that although these memoirs offer complex, even contradictory narratives about Ugandan women ex-combatants, they are also the products of transnational mediated processes whereby the interests of power (expressed through international organizations, the media, etc.) translate complex narratives into consolidated representations and sturdy tropes of the abducted African woman ex-combatant. Thus, transnational mediation is embedded within geopolitical power structures that reinforce certain representations of women ex-combatants, as well as their inclusion into peacebuilding-related activities. This means that although the three memoirs provide some hints as to transformative ways of thinking about peace and offer dynamic accounts of personal experiences, they also reflect the politics of dominant representational practices. The production and reception of these memoirs are intersubjective processes. Knowledge is produced through encounters between the complex, multifaceted accounts of local women ex-combatants and international attempts to universalize this knowledge in formats that resonate with the expectations of international audiences. The memoirs link the global and the local,<sup>7</sup> the expert and the experiential, in complex multi-directional ways. Our analysis suggests that there may be an underlying paradox: as internationals look to memoirs as the embodiment of the authentic experiences of local women, this ends up erasing the specificity and contradictory dynamics of their stories. As such, dominant WPS narratives, representations and imaginaries are progressively established and legitimized over time, through 'systematic power relationships that privilege certain ways of knowing, being and acting and that give voice to only certain people's experiences and agendas' (Nayak and Suchland, 2006: 470).

The article proceeds as follows. We first discuss the Women, Peace and Security agenda and its search for knowledge that might be 'locally relevant' for security and peace. This search opened up spaces for the articulation of women's voices, including through memoir writing. We then draw upon the literature on life writing as well as postcolonial critiques to introduce the concept of transnational social mediation. Next, we turn to our analysis of the three Ugandan memoirs. We explore their production and writing process, their content, and their reception and consumption. We highlight aspects of the memoirs that destabilize binaries and that complexify the picture of war and peace. At the same time, the framing and reception of the memoirs are part of an 'entangled global coloniality' (Madsen and Hudson, 2020: 554). These framings, along with the ways in which the memoirs have been received, reflect hierarchies that persist within the WPS agenda.

## **The WPS agenda, memoir writing and the search for the local woman-in-conflict**

The UN Security Council's Women, Peace and Security agenda emerged out of an attempt spearheaded by transnational feminist activists around the world to put women at the centre of thinking

about international, national and local security efforts (Basu, 2010; Cohn et al., 2004). In contrast to previous ways of understanding security that privileged state-centric ideas, the WPS agenda recognized the everyday gendered nature of security and the need for equal participation of women in peace and security decision-making. This meant paying attention to sources of insecurity faced by women, as well as to how women could and should participate in peacebuilding.

As part of the implementation strategies for the WPS agenda, there were increased efforts to find knowledge produced by and about women-in-conflict (Cook, 2016). For Gibbings (2011), a focus on the value of women's knowledge emerged from UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), the first out of the ten resolutions composing the WPS agenda. This coincided with a search for 'local' peacebuilding knowledge and local approaches to peace (Autesserre, 2010; Hirblinger and Simons, 2015; Julian et al., 2019; Pouligny, 2006).

There is some debate as to whether the WPS agenda achieved its aim of transforming the norms and practices of international peace and security. According to the UN and regional bodies, a set of norms related to women's protection and gender equality in international peace and security has been institutionalized, diffused and accepted globally, although there is still room for progress (Olsson and Gizelis, 2015; UN Women, 2015).

Others, however, believe that the WPS agenda is limited because it lacks critical reflection on how the feminist roots of the agenda are translated in practice. A number of postcolonial scholars believe that the agenda reflects the geopolitics of the liberal order and does not sufficiently include voices of women (Jahuola, 2016; Martin de Almagro, 2018; Parashar, 2018; Pratt, 2013). For instance, although the WPS agenda seeks to bring in the voices of 'Third World' women-in-conflict, these women are only listened to if they uphold the universal principles of peace and security, not if they express other kinds of concerns from particular communities (Gibbings, 2011: 529). In this way, liberal democracies can impose moral authority on the entire global security system that perpetuates 'white saviour' narratives around peace and security interventions and determines who represents a woman-in-conflict (Motoyama, 2018; Parashar, 2018). Ultimately, the WPS agenda is embedded in racialized hierarchies, and its practices are situated within larger historical processes of juxtaposing the Global North to the Global South (Haastrup and Hagen, 2020), co-opting local feminist knowledge and stripping it from its critical content (Reeves, 2012). It is therefore important to understand who gets to speak about their knowledge and experiences of WPS in international high-level spaces, such as at the United Nations.

The use of memoirs written by women ex-combatants in the Global South as a source of knowledge reflects both the promise and the limitations of the WPS agenda. Memoirs are just one of many ways in which it is thought that 'local' experiential knowledge can be accessed and incorporated into conflict analysis and peacebuilding initiatives. Other attempts to access women's experiential knowledge include surveys (Karim, 2019); ethnographic methods and interviews (Baaz and Stern, 2009); discourse analysis in combination with field research (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015; Zarkov, 2007); feminist oral history research, which may involve feminist biographer interviews (Hale, 1991); informal storytelling (Baines and Stewart, 2011); and arts-based methods such as narrative feature film-making (Harman, 2018) and co-designed drawing workshops (Julian et al., 2019; Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2015).

As Scott (1991: 779) explains, however, experience should not be taken as the origin of knowledge ready to be excavated by historians or others, since subjects themselves are constituted through experience. She argues for a historicization of experience and the identities it produces. Thus, subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts and contradictions between discursive systems and multiple meanings for any of the concepts that are deployed (Scott, 1991: 793). Experience is contestable and always political (Scott, 1991: 797). As Alcoff has argued, experiences are 'always experiences *of* as well as *in* the social world' (Alcoff, 2018: 74, emphasis

in original). Similarly, the literature on life writing shows that memoirs are social products, not unscripted accounts. Memoir writers transform their ideas about their experiences into a coherent narrative order that makes sense for them and for their audiences, thereby reproducing broader social imaginaries.

Every account is therefore as much a socially mediated account as it is a recollection of the experiences lived. Basham (2013: 8) explains that ‘the problem is not so much the privileging of direct experience, but its privileging as though it were unmediated by wider relations, institutions and processes’. Thus, the recovery of women’s voices is part of broader assemblages linked with race and class, which can only provide ‘a partial glimpse into ongoing knowledge regimes’ (Khoja-Moolji, 2018: 21). These issues are magnified in cases of international collaboration, co-authorship and biographies.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, the audience for a memoir is one’s family, or community, or country. In the cases of the Ugandan memoirs, the intended audiences are, at least in part, international audiences, and the processes of social mediation are, in part, transnational ones.<sup>9</sup> The international construction of a woman as a representative of ‘local’ conflict translating her experiences internationally takes place through oral performances such as invitations to speak in front of the UN General Assembly or Security Council (Cook, 2016; Gibbings, 2011), through written productions such as interviews in magazines and in humanitarian materials (Kaoma, 2018), and through case studies on official institutional websites such as NATO’s (Wright, 2019). In this process, complexities and contradictions are obscured in favour of familiar tropes and fantasies about Africans (Fadlalla, 2019: 21; Mbembe, 2001), repackaged in acceptable formats. Thus, the transnational social mediation of memoirs is significant because it erases the particularized issues and complexities articulated by the authors, to create an abstract, homogeneous group of ‘African women-in-conflict’ (see also Khoja-Moolji, 2018: 3).

In the following sections, we analyse the production, content and reception of the three Ugandan memoirs. While highlighting the authors’ agency and the richness of their accounts, we show how these memoirs are transnational social products.

## **The three Ugandan memoirs and the transnational mediation of knowledge**

Through an analysis of the content of the memoirs as well as news articles and the websites of international organizations and NGOs, we show how knowledge in the three Ugandan memoirs was produced, transmitted and consumed. Every stage is mediated and embedded in power relationships: from the writing process itself, including the impetus to write and the form of writing, to the content, and finally to the consumption of the knowledge, including the authors’ participation in international debates at UN headquarters and other international fora. Our aim is not to show that the memoirs are inauthentic, internationally manufactured or somehow not genuine.<sup>10</sup> We show that the memoirs can be read in different ways, and that the memoirs’ contents reveal contingencies, complexities and contradictions that do not necessarily fit pre-existing agendas, even though they reflect many of the themes of the WPS agenda. However, notwithstanding different possible readings, the interpretations of the memoirs are narrowed when taken up by international audiences.

### *The writing process: The production of gendered security knowledge*

The three Ugandan memoirs were published with different degrees of involvement from international collaborators, ranging from co-authorship in the case of *Girl Soldier* (McDonnell and Akallo,

2007), to light editing and contextualization in the case of *I Am Evelyn Amony* (Amony, 2015), to encouragement in the case of *Child Soldier* (Keitetsi, 2004). In the first pages of each memoir, the authors discuss why they decided to write. They each point to encounters with international individuals or organizations. Akallo was inspired to write by several foreign journalists, and she was supported by international Christian organizations, including World Vision and Ugandan Partners. In her acknowledgements, Akallo thanks her co-author, Faith McDonnell, 'for the idea of writing this book and finding a publisher for it' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 18). Amony's impetus to write came from her encounter with Erin Baines, a professor at the University of British Columbia. In the preface, Amony explains how she accepted Baines's proposal because she 'think[s] it is important for people to know that there are certain misconceptions about the war' as 'people just talk but do not understand the circumstances we were in [and] it is important for them to know how it was we lived' (Amony, 2015: xii–xiii). For her part, Keitetsi explains that after she resettled in Denmark, the head of the integration office of her Danish commune encouraged her to write her experiences (Keitetsi, 2004: ix). Thus, in each case, the decision to write was a social decision, the confluence of chance encounters and mutual enthusiasm and encouragement.

The form of writing also reflects transnational social mediation. In Akallo's case, each chapter written by Akallo is followed by a chapter by McDonnell, in which the latter contextualizes and gives (religious) meaning to Akallo's experiences. The need for contextualization and translation of a lived experience into lessons learnt by McDonnell constitutes the clearest example of how the privilege of outsider expertise remains largely unchallenged, despite the recognition that Akallo's experiences are central to understanding conflict. The book is directed to an international audience, drawing on existing tropes about child soldiers and Africa that are easily recognized by outsiders. For instance, in the introduction, McDonnell writes that Akallo 'tells her own story of sinking into the abyss of hopelessness as an unwilling soldier' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 22). The reader learns that, in 1910, Winston Churchill called Uganda 'the Pearl of Africa' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 25) and that 'throughout Uganda's history, violent rulers such as Mwanga of Buganda and brutal leaders such as Joseph Kony have emerged. . . . They have "channelled" evil to steal, kill and destroy God's children in Uganda' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 39). Even the subtitle of the book *Girl Soldier: Why It Matters and What You Can Do* is directed to an interventionist audience, and the last chapters are devoted to telling their readers what they can 'do' about the situation in northern Uganda, particularly through Christian organizations.

While the other texts are not co-authored, they are still mediated by foreigners. Erin Baines transcribed and helped select passages from Amony's audio-recorded memoirs that would become part of the book. Baines is self-reflective about the writing process, and the book includes an interview with Amony as well as a description of how the book came to be (Amony, 2015: xi–xxiii). Baines writes that 'Evelyn contributes to the making of a historical archive in her country and attends to truths about women and war as only a firsthand witness can' (Amony, 2015: xi). Nonetheless, Baines is also aware of being part of the problematic reproduction of knowledge, where the disjuncture between those who respond to conflict and those who have lived through it 'warps' what is known (Amony, 2015: xvii). Baines worked closely with Amony and other Ugandans to ensure that the book retained Amony's voice, and she did not seek to verify dates or facts (Amony, 2015: xxi). However, the selection, editing and translating of Amony's narratives mean that it remains a mediated account. By providing context, including explanatory notes throughout the text, Baines renders Amony's account intelligible to a wider audience.

Keitetsi wrote her memoir on her own after being granted asylum in Denmark. Nevertheless, even though the book is written in her own idiom, she is writing at least in part for an international audience. She starts her foreword by explaining where Uganda is located (Keitetsi, 2004: ix). She

ends the book by directly addressing Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and signs off 'from your Child Soldier' (Keitetsi, 2004: 274).

Direct transnational involvement is not an inevitable feature of Ugandan memoir writing. For instance, another Ugandan woman, Auma Hellen Akwong (2018a, 2018b), has also written about her experiences with the LRA. The format of Akwong's writing is different from that of Akallo, Amony and Keitetsi in that she has published much shorter pamphlet-style recollections, one on surviving the capture by LRA rebels, the other on living with HIV/AIDS, because people advised her that those were two different stories.<sup>11</sup> Throughout Akwong's texts, the narrative force is a religious one. There are frequent scripture quotations, and Akwong's experiences are interpreted in terms of her religious faith. Thus, Akwong's experiences are mediated through social structures and beliefs, but they are positioned within a Ugandan social space. Unlike in the other three books, the dedications and acknowledgements do not refer to any foreigners.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, in the other three memoirs, the writing process and format underscore efforts to render the accounts legible to a wider and more international audience. In all three cases, this involved some degree of framing, often drawing on ideas that were already circulating internationally at the time, through agendas such as the WPS agenda.

### *The content: Contradictory dynamics and complex agency*

Akallo, Amony and Keitetsi's memoirs reflect many of the themes prevalent in the WPS agenda. First, the resolutions passed during the first decade of the agenda treated women as victims of war. In its resolutions, the Security Council therefore solicited effective protection from violence against women (UN Security Council Resolution 1820 [2008]) and called for leadership to address conflict-related sexual violence and for the appointment of a special representative on sexual violence in conflict (UN Security Council Resolution 1888 [2009]). Second, from 2009 onwards, the Security Council also viewed women as agents of war and peacebuilding. Resolutions condemned violence against women and girls while at the same time requesting member-states to ensure women's participation in all stages of peace processes (UN Security Council Resolution 1889 [2009]). Resolutions encouraged the inclusion of more women in the security sector (UN Security Council Resolution 2106 [2013]) and set out concrete methods for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women in conflict and post-conflict programmes (UN Security Council Resolution 2122 [2013]). Third, the two most recent WPS resolutions, passed after the memoirs were published, concentrate on the possibilities and requirements of women's reintegration in communities after war. UN Security Council Resolution 2467 (2019) ensures the integration of gender analysis and training into national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, and UN Security Council Resolution 2493 (2019) requests the appointment of gender and/or women protection advisers to facilitate women's full and effective participation and protection in DDR.

As discussed below, all three books provide powerful personal examples of gendered victimhood, gendered agency and gendered reintegration into civilian life. As such, they can be read as reinforcing ideas within the WPS agenda and exemplifying current policy preoccupations. However, Akallo, Amony and Keitetsi's memoirs also recount experiences that reflect wider complexities and contradictions and that challenge binaries of victim/perpetrator, saviour/oppressed and progressive/traditional that the WPS agenda has been unable to overcome. Thus, international agendas are not directly superimposed onto the memoirs, and there remains space for the articulation of alternative ideas and experiences. Indeed, scholars have celebrated these memoirs for contributing 'to a more nuanced and detailed understanding of women in conflict and post-conflict

settings more generally' (Schultz, 2016: 312) and highlighting 'the complexity of how people live and act during war' (Donnelly, 2016: 90).

*Sexual violence, victimhood and gendered abuse.* The image of a victimized African woman is a standard international trope, reaching back to colonial lexicons (Baaz and Stern, 2013: 92–93; Tamale, 2020). Concern with gender-based sexual violence is paramount in the WPS agenda, and it continues to garner significant international attention. Episodes of sexual violence and gendered abuse are prevalent in the three memoirs and constitute key defining features of the authors' everyday war experiences: 'The instructors had many ways to make one suffer, but most of their assaults seemed to have been made on female soldiers. The older girls had more problems than any other soldier, because they had to pay with their own bodies' (Keitetsi, 2004: 155). These abuses not only served to humiliate, victimize and punish girl soldiers, but also to strengthen group bonding among the male soldiers and solidify their power: 'Nothing changed, and now I was convinced that the women soldiers of the NRA was nothing but Museveni's treats to the hungry lions in command' (Keitetsi, 2004: 212). Amony recounts how she was forcibly married to Joseph Kony: 'he called me again and said that I had to make the choice between life and death. If I wanted to live, I had to be his wife' (Amony, 2015: 39). Similarly, Akallo describes how Kony distributed the abducted girls among his commanders: 'I was given to a man older than my father. His eyes were so hard that my sweat made a pool' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 110).

Strikingly though, these same sources of gendered insecurity were also described as security providers in some instances. Amony recalls how her marital relationship with Kony saved her from being beaten by other soldiers and offered her protection from mistreatment by Kony's other wives. By acknowledging that Kony saved her life on numerous occasions, Amony's account resists, as Baines's introduction observes, dichotomous distinctions between simplistic concepts of good and evil. The women consciously or unconsciously use the same violence that they are subjected to, to make their everyday life in extreme situations more bearable. This is what Baines (2016: 10) labels as 'complex victimhood'. Similar contradictions are noted in Keitetsi's memoir, where we can see that the same women can be simultaneously perpetrators and victims, challenging the notion that women (or girls) are somehow inherently nonviolent (Leopold, 2005: 692–694).

Reproduction and care duties were common sources of gendered abuse discussed extensively in the memoirs. For the male soldier, the military base was a safe haven where he could rest and enjoy free time, but, for women, domestic spaces were spaces of violence and abuse, not only from male soldiers but also from co-wives. The harshest episodes of violence recounted by Amony were those involving her relationship with her co-wives: 'I suffered so much in the hands of these women' (Amony, 2015: 25). Nevertheless, co-wives were also sources of security and reliability in the aftermath of war. Amony received visits from former co-wives after the war, which provided company, advice and friendship. Ultimately, pushed by her family and other co-wives, she decided to use her status to ask for help from Kony's family to provide for her children, because 'gender-sensitive' reintegration programmes were unable to respond to the everyday needs of these women and their families.

The complexities of the women's identities and relationships can be seen in other areas as well. Being in charge of reproduction and domestic duties in the bush did not prevent girls and women from carrying guns and having to fight. There was no break: in the brief times of peace, women were assigned household tasks, and, during battle, they were expected to fire a gun like everybody else. 'There was no excuse for not going. When it was secure, a woman remained at home with the children, but when things were not fine, nobody cared if you were a woman or not; you had to fight' (Amony, 2015: 67). Akallo recalls how the commanders gave her and her fellow girl soldiers AK-47 assault rifles and taught them how to dismantle, clean and assemble them under shouts of

'hunger will teach you how to shoot' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 110). For Keitetsi, this double burden became so normalized that she 'was convinced that it was a part of nature, for every girl to endure. It actually made me a little stronger when I knew I wasn't alone. The NRA gave us weapons, made us fight their war, made us hate, kill, torture, and made us their girlfriends: we had no choice' (Keitetsi, 2004: 156). 'Too many young mothers had to figure out how to be both mothers and fathers' (Keitetsi, 2004: 210).

Whereas the memoirs can each be read as reproducing and reflecting the WPS agenda's focus on gendered victimhood and sexual abuse, they also provide more nuanced accounts of complex victimhood and contradictory, multifaceted intimate relationships.

*Gendered agency and empowerment.* While some of the earlier WPS resolutions were criticized for their emphasis on women as victims, over time there was a recognition that women were also agents of war and peace. The three memoirs certainly highlight multiple forms of agency. Amony and Keitetsi's experiences strongly refute the stereotypes of women as passive victims of war, thereby recasting the image of women in the LRA and NRA as empowered agents. Amony was clearly forced to marry and have sexual intercourse with Kony, but sometimes she resisted sexual tasks. She writes: 'I stayed for three months without doing anything for Kony. I never made him even a cup of tea when he came to my home. I never greeted him or responded when he talked to me' (Amony, 2015: 52–53). Amony thus refused to comply with her domestic duties as a wife, such as to cook, prepare a bath or 'sleep' with Kony as a way of letting him know that she would not tolerate his mistreatment. On several occasions, Amony also describes how she gave advice to Kony and his second-in-command, Vincent Otti.

To prevent sexual abuse and rape from male soldiers or from their 'husbands', Keitetsi and Amony both lied about having sexually transmitted diseases: 'I told him that it was not that I did not want to be with him but that I had met a man at home and that I had heard rumours that he had AIDS, which meant that I had acquired AIDS. I told him that I did not want to infect him because he is the father of my children' (Amony, 2015: 114).

The women used their sexuality in other ways as well. Aware of the power of military masculinities, Keitetsi sometimes pretended to be a male soldier when she was not on duty. She recounts how she enjoyed dressing up as a man and going out with her fellow male combatants, and she boasts about stealing girls from the boys when going out. This not only disrupts conceptions of women ex-combatants as victims, but also disrupts the dichotomous ways in which gender has been understood to shape conflict. Keitetsi felt that she was a man and a woman at the same time:

I enjoyed being looked at as a boy, so I told my comrades while entering the bar to shut up about my true identity and, amused, they agreed. . . . We were getting drunk, and the women began to touch us. Whenever a woman got too close to the truth, I removed her hand. She laughed at me and assured everybody that I was afraid of women. My comrades busted into laughs, but I noticed that they were getting afraid too. (Keitetsi, 2004: 131–132)

It is through this disruption that Keitetsi finds the freedom and rest accorded to male soldiers, but also manages to subvert power dynamics and feel more powerful than them, even if briefly.

At times, the women's agency appears to diverge from forms of empowerment promoted in the WPS agenda. The three authors navigate Ugandan patriarchal structures and at times reinforce them. For instance, Amony celebrated Women's Day by doing all the household chores required of a 'good Acholi woman'. She says: 'This is because if you are a mother, you have to do things like cook. On such a day like Women's Day you have to do what you do best to show that you are a woman and you do not just pretend to be one' (Amony, 2015: 156). Thus,

although the memoirs can be seen to reflect and reinforce the kinds of women's agency recognized in the WPS resolutions, the authors also reveal more complicated social relationships and dynamics that escape gender binaries and linear temporal understandings of war victim and postwar peace agent.

*Gendered reintegration into civilian life.* Another theme in the WPS agenda when addressing women ex-combatants is gender-sensitive reintegration into civilian life and the integration of gender analysis into national DDR processes. Gendered insecurities do not end with the return to civilian life, and gendered experiences of violence during war correspond to high levels of personal and private violence in its aftermath (Annan and Brier, 2010; Swaine, 2015). This is demonstrated in the memoirs in different ways, as the authors convey a sense of loneliness and sadness as family members, friends and the community violently use the authors' past experiences of gender and sexual-based violence to undermine them:

if you are to narrate such stories to someone from here at home, it can become a source of tension between you. For instance, you might tell of your experiences to your sister, and when there is a quarrel, she uses those stories to hurt you. She might say to you in anger, 'Who was raped in the bush?' It is difficult to live with those who did not go to the bush. We live well together for the most part, but there are limits. (Amony, 2015: 169)

There were striking differences on the type of support the three women received during their reintegration, and this support depended in part on whether they were perceived to be mainly a victim or an agent. Akallo recounts how she was directly sent back to school after her escape from the LRA, and shortly afterwards she was invited to give multiple talks in the USA (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 192). Akallo was an 'Aboke girl', and the resounding international media attention on the abducted Aboke girls brought them victimhood status and resources that other women ex-combatants could not access. In contrast, Amony and Kony's other wives had to care for their children, provide for their families and reintegrate into a community that saw them as 'Kony's wife, Kony's wife, Kony's wife', no matter what they did (Amony, 2015: 124). The books show that all three women had complicated identities, including aspects of victimhood, perpetrator and agent held simultaneously.

In civilian life, the authors responded to gender roles in different ways. While for Amony it was precisely through the accomplishment of her domestic duties that she reclaimed her role in her community after she returned from the bush – 'as a woman I woke up and did what I was supposed to do' (Amony, 2015: 136) because 'as an Acholi woman, my things have to be cleaned' (Amony, 2015: 155) – for Keitetsi it was her unwillingness to be assigned 'women's tasks' in civilian life that made her want to go back to the bush:

I wanted to stay, but people failed to recognise me as the one I wanted them to see. I believed that I was above any civilian, making me to have the final say, but no one seemed willing to let me. Since my gun was lost, I could not return, and my past had to remain a secret. (Keitetsi, 2004: 146)

After a short stint in the Ugandan army, Keitetsi ultimately left for Denmark as a refugee.

While the WPS agenda has highlighted the importance of recognizing the different experiences of women and men ex-combatants in postwar reintegration processes, women ex-combatants tend to be understood as a homogeneous group. However, the three authors experience reintegration in very different ways, with variation in resources, social expectations and aspirations. These different experiences underscore the limitations of a singular African woman-in-conflict imaginary.

### *The aftermath: The consumption of gender security knowledge*

The three memoirs therefore discuss and narrate key themes at the centre of policy discourses on women ex-combatants. In doing so, however, they highlight the messiness and complexities of women's lives, the blurriness of boundaries, and the multiple contradictory roles, positions and agency of women-in-conflict that sometimes deviate from the WPS agenda. Nonetheless, through the international receptions of their memoirs, certain experiences were emphasized over others. The books by Akallo, Keitetsi and Amony received widespread international attention, and the authors were given international platforms to tell and re-tell their stories and experiences. As shown below, the knowledge produced in all three books was used by international organizations to support their programming. Certain aspects of the books were emphasized, but these tended to be those experiences that corresponded to existing imaginaries about women and warfare in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while the memoirs can be read as pointing to competing and contradictory ideas and experiences of women ex-combatants, the international reception of the books tended to reproduce the internationally recognized figure of the 'African woman-in-conflict'.

Before writing her book, Akallo had been approached by a South African journalist, Henk Rossouw. She says:

Henk wrote a story about me and some of my friends who had managed to escape. It appeared on the front page of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Someone with Amnesty International USA read it, and they invited me to speak at their annual meeting in New York City. (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 191)

Akallo went to New York and then 'flew to Chicago to be on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on television. . . . My new journey to represent the children of war had begun' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 192). She was then given a scholarship to study at a college in Massachusetts, and in 2006 she was invited by World Vision to testify before the International Relations Committee of the US House of Representatives.

Akallo is presented using familiar tropes, which she reinforces through her own speeches. The article by Rossouw that catapulted Akallo into the international limelight was entitled 'An African Tale: First Hell, Then College'. The article says that Akallo's 'odyssey epitomizes the persistence and courage of [African] women who matriculate despite the challenges' (Rossouw, 2003). Similar themes are taken up by other journalists; for instance, a *Washington Post* article is called 'A Child's Hell in the Lord's Resistance Army' (Brown, 2006). Akallo herself titles her testimony at the US House of Representatives 'The Endangered Children of Northern Uganda'. Following the publication of her book, Akallo became a spokesperson for children affected by armed conflict, appearing before the US House of Representatives in 2008 and the UN Security Council in 2009. In her testimony at the UN Security Council's 2009 open debate on children and armed conflict, Akallo (2009) said that she spoke on behalf of all children in armed conflict. Her speech focused on sexual violence, a prominent concern of the UN at the time. In 2013, Akallo told UNICEF that 'education provides children affected by war and conflict a solid shield from their torturous past' (Pruthi, 2013). Yet although Akallo is constructed as a representative of all girl combatants, there are many other children who were with Akallo who never received the same 'shield' because they did not have the chance to have their stories told internationally.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, Keitetsi's book generated extensive international interest and resonated with several existing international campaigns on children in armed conflict. She comments on meeting then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Whoopi Goldberg and Graça Machel, among others (Keitetsi, 2004: x). International media stories picked up on what they saw as the most salient details of her book: 'I got my first Uzi when I was nine' was the *Telegraph*

headline (Woods, 2004). Like Akallo, Keitetsi was given a platform by international organizations. For instance, she spoke at the launch of Amnesty International's Stop Violence Against Women Campaign on 5 March 2004, and at a conference for the Spanish Coalition to End the Use of Child Soldiers on 12 February 2008, to stress the special vulnerability of girl soldiers and their continued invisibility. In their campaign to end the use of child soldiers, UNICEF showcased Keitetsi, along with Akallo, for promotional purposes.

Amony now leads the Women's Advocacy Network (WAN) in Uganda, a forum for war-affected women and men to advocate for justice and accountability for sexual and gender-based violations inflicted during conflict.<sup>15</sup> She has been a frequent speaker and contributor at international events. Amony won the Women for Peace prize in 2013, and her story has received attention from journalists, governments and international organizations. There is an exhibition about Amony and Grace Acan, another Ugandan who was abducted by the LRA, at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. The exhibit focuses on the 'Voices of Women and Girls in War: Speaking Out on Sexual Violence in Conflict',<sup>16</sup> and was developed in close collaboration with a project on conjugal slavery in war.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while the message of the exhibit is one of strength, rights, voice and empowerment, along with 'survivor-centred storytelling', the parts of Amony's book that are emphasized are the parts about overcoming sexual violence. Amony is now a frequent commentator and advocate on this theme – for instance, speaking on 'Protecting Children Born of Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones' to UN Security Council members on 26 October 2018.

Thus, the knowledge articulated by Amony has been deployed to advance particular policy agendas. UN Women (2014) highlighted the fact that, with the support of several international initiatives, WAN presented a petition to the Ugandan government that led to a landmark resolution by the Ugandan Parliament calling for reparations for war-affected women and other victims of the LRA in 2014. UN Women also sponsored a workshop using Amony's book as a starting point for a discussion on 'learning from lived experiences to develop better policy responses', with the rationale that 'engaging with survivors forces outsiders to move past their own preconceived notions, to really listen to the priorities and greatest challenges identified by these women and their suggestions for possible solutions' (UN Women, 2016a). The workshop aimed to explore how 'everyday life can shed new insights into policy or programme needs' (UN Women, 2016b).

While this event shows that everyday experiences of women are being taken seriously in policy circles, we also see that these experiences – even when expressed through the voices of affected women – are mediated by others and implicated in international power relations. The workshop focused on three themes from Amony's book: (1) transitional justice and social repair; (2) children born of wartime sexual violence; and (3) comparative historical and contemporary perspectives and lessons learned in countering violent extremism (UN Women, 2016b). While Amony's book does offer insights on the first two themes, it only offers a passing mention of the third, and countless other themes from Amony's book could have been chosen. Nevertheless, the workshop came at a time when the UN Security Council was looking to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015) on the linkages between the WPS agenda and the countering violent extremism and terrorism agenda. The selection of these three topics sheds light on the interplay between different social forces in decisions on which topics are drawn from the books and deemed significant and worthy of policy attention at a particular moment.

Hearing the authors' voices is a powerful vehicle for the advancement of important international policy agendas, particularly those that seek 'local' input. These are not unscripted accounts that direct international policy; rather, they are expressions of lived experiences refracted through different power structures and lenses. Certain aspects of these women's stories are amplified, while others are not. For instance, religion is a central part of all three books. This dimension is strongly emphasized

by Christian NGOs and social movements, but it is not discussed in UN policy circles.<sup>18</sup> It is thus through internationalized processes that competing figures of the woman-in-conflict and her experiences are produced and deployed, each of which corresponds to a version of 'truth' in the texts.

## Conclusions

Building on existing feminist work on war memoirs as sites of experiential knowledge (Duncanson, 2009; Dyvik, 2016), this article has offered an analysis of the transnational social production and consumption of the memoirs of three Ugandan women ex-combatants. We have shown how the production of these memoirs coincided with the international search for first-hand knowledge and experiences of the woman-in-conflict. Listening to women's voices and to their accounts of everyday experiences of conflict provides a powerful corrective to previous security and peacebuilding policy approaches that disregarded these forms of knowledge. The memoirs certainly offer important experiential knowledge on gendered experiences of war, and such voices are compelling and may have the potential to disrupt existing structures of authority and hierarchies in security knowledge production. For instance, the Ugandan government launched a campaign to discredit Keitetsi and her memoir, saying that much of it had been fabricated and that her former commanders do not remember her fighting with them (Lacey, 2003). The battle over the 'truth' shows that recording and amplifying women's perspectives can be a subversive act.

Nevertheless, this article has highlighted how memoirs are part of society and how they are embedded within international power structures. Paradoxically, through the attempt to add 'authentic' experiences of the local, what end up being co-produced are authors whose personal experiences are taken as representing the collectivity: 'I have not been able to do a lot directly for the people of northern Uganda. I am frequently invited to speak, and I tell my story and the story of the Acholi and of the need for peace whenever I can' (McDonnell and Akallo, 2007: 193). Even though the memoirs themselves can be read as narrating complex identities and ambiguous dynamics, the policy discussions on and about them are largely spaces of construction and normalization of what it is to be an African woman-in-conflict. The experiences that are highlighted and reproduced are the ones that are easily integrated into existing policies, such as the recognition of women as victims of war and as potential peace ambassadors. Accordingly, the memoirs end up being deployed in policy circles to reinforce existing transnational social imaginaries, rather than opening spaces for a greater variety of experiences of and about conflict, or for recognizing complex narratives suggesting more radical alternatives.

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## Notes

1. For example, Ruth First (1965) wrote about her experience of apartheid South Africa; Nawal El Sadaawi (1999) wrote about her life under the Sadat regime in Egypt; Wangari Maathai (2006) wrote about her political activism in Kenya; Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2009) wrote about being the first democratically elected woman president of Liberia. See also Coullie et al. (2006); Ebila (2011); Hunsu (2013).
2. Following United Nations definitions, we take a broad view of the term 'ex-combatants' to include those involved in active combat and in support roles; see United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre (n.d.).
3. As discussed below, this is partly due to unequal power relations and unequal access to material resources and international discursive space. Uganda is not unique, and one might expect similar processes in other places in the Global South that are the targets of international security and peace interventions.
4. *Girl Soldier: A Story of Hope for Northern Uganda's Children* (2007) was co-written by Grace Akallo, who was abducted as a child into the LRA, and an American missionary, Faith McDonnell. *I Am Evelyn Amony: Reclaiming My Life from the Lord's Resistance Army* (2015) was written by a woman who spent nearly 11 years in the LRA after having been abducted at the age of 11. In *Child Soldier: Fighting for My Life* (2004), China Keitetsi writes about being recruited into the NRA in 1984 at the age of nine and her experiences in the Ugandan People's Defence Forces (UPDF) after Museveni's victory in 1986.
5. For instance, Akwong (2018a, 2018b); Apiyo (2013).
6. Seven out of the ten resolutions forming the Women, Peace and Security agenda were passed in the period between 2004 to 2015, when the memoirs were published. These were UN Security Council Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013) and 2242 (2015).
7. It is not our intention to reify the categories of local and global or to claim that we *see* and *know* the local. We use the term 'local' here to refer to those who have directly experienced the war.
8. In her research with Sudanese activist Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim, Sondra Hale (1991: 133), a Western feminist, asks: 'can any biographer avoid imposing what we have become? If we are committed to a particular theory and methodology, and are engaged in the praxis, is it authentic to be or do otherwise? If . . . we try to act as more than conduits of the narrator's story, e.g., as interpreters, dialogists, or even collaborators, do we become cultural imperialists?'
9. Our own reading of the memoirs constitutes another process of transnational mediation. First, we selected books that were widely and internationally available. Second, our own patterns of thought are influenced by the concepts and themes considered relevant in our fields of study and by the fact that we have an international academic audience in mind. Third, as three authors coming from three different continents and academic disciplines, we had to agree on our own interpretations of the texts.
10. As the controversy over Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography has shown, texts can be read at multiple levels, and interpretations depend in part on political and social positions and commitments (see Arias, 2001).
11. Author interview with Auma Akwong, Kampala, Uganda, 9 April 2020.
12. Akwong confirmed that nobody encouraged her to write her memoirs. Author interview with Auma Akwong, Kampala, Uganda, 9 April 2020.
13. Baaz and Stern (2013) discuss a similar process, where the discourse of 'rape as a weapon of war' is constructed through the emphasis on certain stories and voices over others.
14. In her book, Amony (2015: 132) explains how the girls abducted from Aboke, such as Grace Akallo, received better care after their liberation, notably because of the international publicity that their case attracted. Akallo was also conscious of the 'special' status of Aboke girls. She recounts how she tried to hide being one of them during her period with the LRA because troops were sent to try to rescue them, leading to the loss of LRA combatants in the ensuing battles.
15. The Network was created in 2011 by a group of war-affected women who were involved in a storytelling project at the Justice and Reconciliation Project. They proposed the establishment of a group to serve as a platform through which female leaders would be empowered to engage in advocacy for justice and peace (Justice and Reconciliation Project, 2012). This is supported by UN Women and two transnational

- NGOs: the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Women's Initiatives for Gender Justice.
16. More information on the exhibit can be found at <https://humanrights.ca/story/voices-of-women-and-girls-in-war> (accessed 7 April 2020).
  17. This was funded by a Canadian federal research-funding agency. More information on the project can be found at <http://csiw-ectg.org/> (accessed 7 April 2020)
  18. There are interesting parallels with scholarly research that is – or is not – taken up by policymakers (Berry and Lake, 2021).

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