

BRIDE PRICE AND THE VIOLATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, A CASE OF FORCED CHILD MARRIAGE IN KABERAMAIDO

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PREAMBLE

I salute you all ladies and gentlemen, in your respective capacities, all protocol observed.

It is sincerely not often that we meet in such a forum, or even have such distinguished visitors, from a diverse background like you and on such a morning/afternoon. I am therefore, unreservedly honoured by everyone's presence, so that we focus our dear brains on a number of issues on bride price and development that will be raised in this presentation.

Brief Background

The seven-year insurgency in Teso region, eastern Uganda, between 1987 and 1993 left the region stained with difficulties of a socio-economic, political and human rights nature. Teso region is comprised of the four districts of Kumi Soroti, Katakwi and Kaberamaido. Kaberamaido, nonetheless, is used in this case, based on the research findings on early forced child marriages. This study was done in the year 2002.

The women were the worst victims in the insurgency, characterized by loss of life and property, rape and defilement, social strife and displacements, as havoc and mayhem raged over and amongst the beleaguered armed forces of the National Resistance Army (NRA), now the Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF), the thuggery activities of the Karamajong Cattle Rustlers (KCR). The difficulties caused by the insurgency amongst other things, early forced child marriages. The study on early forced child marriages showed that the girl victims, as well as, their parents/guardians were the worst hit. This was essentially due to bride price/wealth. Those who gave it separation of their parties involved in early forced child marriage as a result of the 1987-1993 insurgency in Teso Region.

It is vital to note at this juncture that as the insurgency raged confusion and anarchy on eastern Uganda, domestic animals (especially cows), which for generations were a major source of wealth and livelihood for the Teso region populace, were raided, by both the combatants and the KCR. Animals would be reared and then sold away for household income for children's school fees (especially the boys) and other obligations.

Even though the afore-mentioned study pointed to the existence of the practice of early forced child marriages amongst the communities in Teso region, it was clear that the insurgency catalysed the practice.

Forms of early forced marriages

1. Many girls and women were simply grabbed out of their homestead by the warring factions of UPA, NRA and KCR. These women and girls became wives and companions of these factionalists.
2. Where parents identified a home/homes with food and /or animals (Cows, goats etc.) and approached it with their daughter(s).
3. In some instances, where the parents had no boy children so succumb to the rebels' recruitment and call for support or else risk death, quickly presented their daughters so that risk is waived, or at least reduced. Even then, this waiving was for a while, as the rebel kept 'asking for more, like Oliver Twist', from a number of parents. Little wonder that some of these parents sooner than later met their death/share of insecurity anyway, courtesy of mainly the rebels.
4. These were categories where couples were killed, separated or divorced in their course of the persistence of the seven -year insurgency. A number of men re married, abandoning their previous

wives and children. In such situations, the girl children quickly opted for marriage as to take care of their younger siblings.

5. The study also established one form of early forced child marriages, where parents / guardians gave away their children into marriages, these were particularly the girls that had been defiled by the armed forces and the parents thought, that most likely, no one would speak to such girls for a hand in marriage, given the defilement stigma at the end of the 1987-1993 Teso insurgency.
6. There were girls who were waylaid, defiled and forced away by the warring parties. Such girls ended up into forced marriages, at least for some time. Those who though were lucky to return to their respective homes found their parents already charged and convinced that they (girls) must run into marriages, for bride price before they were again grabbed by the fighters. Bride price/wealth took the form of a cow or two, bicycles(s), goats, food, money and such domestic items as blankets mattresses etc.
7. Young boys were encouraged by the parents to marry before all the cows were lost to the warring groups. Remember that boys being talked about here were mainly in the age of 12-18 years. Likewise, the girls lied in the age of 10 –16 years. In other words, both the boys and girls were children still being looked after by their parents, but soon shouldered the ‘married’ life.

Such instance as above degenerated into social strife, chaos and confusion, even after the insurgency. Probably, without Bride price / wealth taking the centre-stage in the already deplorable situation of early forced child marriage in Teso region between 1987 and 1993, the face of this situation would have looked better than is the case apparently.

Imagine entering a marriage in such circumstances as highlighted above.

- Whose rights were/are being protected?
- Whose respect/dignity is trampled upon more, between the man and the woman?
- What was to be the future, even the present, of such marriage?
- How about risks and cases of sexually Transmitted infections, widowhood etc?

Certainly, before long, when the insurgency subsided (since the KCR activities have remained a thorn in Eastern Uganda) and until recently, the Kony rebels’ atrocities, the numbers of separation and divorce cases shot up. Remember these cases were characterized by verbal artillery, physical and emotional assault, a feeling of superiority and inferiority, cat-rat (slave-master relationship- KARL MARX), harassment from in-laws etc.

So, as the boys (husbands) went back to school they soon get better education, new and English-speaking lovers and later as wives of their choice. Meanwhile, their previous girls (wives) did not marry boys but some girls further felt that it was degrading to study with their spouses. Therefore, socially, economically and in terms of human rights, the previous female partners got more disorganized and vulnerable than their male counterparts.

Meanwhile, those people that had given bride price began, and still continue, to demand it back. The husbands of the girl victims of the early forced child marriage continued to demand ‘their’ dowry to be returned. The parents of the female victims (those still living) are poor and unable to pay back the cow(s) or bicycles or food items they received. Recall that what they received was simply lost to the warring factions or even later to Karamajong Cattle Rustlers (KCR). The food items had been eaten long ago, the blankets and the bicycles had become tired long ago, etc.

Poverty and Bride Wealth

In the context of what concerns us here today due to a condition of biting poverty; the study established that some parents/guardians were encouraging their daughters to remain in the marriage unions, even if harsh and extremely abusive, till such a time when they (parents) would raise the bride price to pay back.

Other parents allowed their daughters to strategize for some men that would take them up and payback previous dowry. In other words, early forced child marriage as to attract bride wealth continued taking root due to post-insurgency poverty, etc.

The parents/guardians are not doing this because they lost love for their children. It is due to the conditions of poverty. Is it, nevertheless, the poverty of the mind, material, loss of human dignity or what?

All the above and such related aspects raise more questions than answers, for example:

- Why don't those homes asking back their bride price intact give back intact the girls they took into marriage?
- Who will compensate for the labour that these girls/women have given away at the husbands' home for that matter?
- Really, are the above demands fair to the girls' parents and the very girls who are now exhausted and hated women by their so-called husbands? Yes, exhausted due to maltreatment and heavy workload, but not too exhausted to reclaim their rights.

All these and such related concerns have made Teso region experience social unrest between and among families. Bride Price/ Wealth in this case has caused social strife. It has also perpetuated the erosion of human Rights of the parties involved in such marriage as above, particularly the girls/women.

AFTERMATH OF 1987-1993 TESO INSURGENCY AND BRIDE PRICE

Today, the aftermath of the 1997 –1993 insurgency continue to prevail in Teso region. Notable of these are pathetic conditions of poverty in its diverse forms. This continues to provide a breeding ground for bride price/wealth, abuse of women and children's human rights.

HOPE AMIDST DESPAIR

Given the scenarios as highlighted upon in this presentation, is all lost? No and No. apparently, there is a ray of hope.

1. There is increasing awareness and appreciation of Human Rights and dignity by both individuals and institutions, Teso region and elsewhere.
2. The existence of a number of coalitions, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs and Community based Organizations (CBOs) like TERREWODE, SOCADIDO, TENEPI, Diru Women's Group, etc have improved the earlier pathetic conditions of the people of Teso region, through development initiatives.

The above are some of the avenues we could use to build on to further examine the issue of bride price/wealth and how it, for example, perpetuates poverty, abuse of women's and children's rights, deprivation and social strife and how these should give way to sustainable development that is human-centred.

TERREWODE continues to believe strongly that for the plight of human Rights to improve in Teso region and elsewhere, amongst other things, the issue of bride price so called wealth, must be squarely addressed. Efforts have been initiated by TERREWODE, like Community Human Rights training and mobilization of self-help groups of former victims of early forced child marriages. Such efforts, albeit, so far are still limited to a few of TERREWODE areas of operation and specifically, in Kaberamaido district. There are hopes to extend to the entire four districts of Teso region, dependant upon networking, availability and improvement of Terrwode's Resource clout.

Conclusion

Lastly but importantly, ways must be devised on how to lessen or modify (in the short-run) and scrap off (in the mid and long –run) the burden of bride price/wealth from the parties involved in a marriage. This will go a long way in as far and wide as protection and promotion of Human rights, specially of the women and girl children are concerned. All this is in the parameters of the quest for development.

I salute you again for your attention this day ladies and gentlemen.