

# Female Clan Leaders and Women's Empowerment in Lango



## 1. Introduction

In Lango, Northern Uganda, 20 years of war, cattle rustling and HIV/AIDS have resulted in widespread loss of life, population displacement, and loss of property. In spite of this turmoil, some traditional cultural practices, such as widow inheritance, early child marriage, and widow cleansing continued, although they were increasingly seen to conflict with 'modern' development thinking, especially when infringing women and children's rights.

External development actors first tried to address this situation by 'sensitising' communities, but with limited success. It however soon became evident that clan leaders were instrumental in perpetuating cultural practices: in the early 2000's, they became increasingly identified as key actors to address harmful traditions and to resolve conflicts.

With the many trials faced by local communities, women's roles in supporting the family institution and upholding cultural values had however expanded too. Several development organisations were established to address the challenges related

to these changes and one was the Lango Female Clan Leaders' Association, with a focus on promoting girls' education and access to justice for women.

This case study examines the role that these female clan leaders have successfully played in tackling current gender-related challenges. It explores the interface between traditional and modern gender concepts and the value of working with cultural resource persons to address cultural challenges. The study involved desk research, field based semi-structure interviews, focus group discussions with 30 respondents and key informants, and a validation write-shop, all held in the course of 2008.

## 2. The changing context of women's rights in Lango

**Traditional perspectives on gender** Ancestral division of labour dictated that men were primarily responsible for hunting, herding, clearing bushes, and constructing huts. They were also responsible for the family's security and for grooming boys to become leaders. Women's roles revolved around reproduction, how to manage a home and children, and grooming girls for motherhood. Older women were also responsible for inculcating cultural values such as decency, hospitality, chastity, and responsibility in younger women. They also prepared traditional medicine, resolved family conflicts and provided spiritual divination. With the exception Apio Tooke, a heroine whose ability to command men was legendary, women were nevertheless groomed to be submissive to men and rarely held positions of authority outside the domestic domain.

While women and girls were traditionally the collective responsibility of the clan, early marriages were the norm and the highest expectation for a girl was to get married. Marriages, arranged across clans, had much to do with increasing the power of the clan in terms of numbers, status and wealth. The rules to control women before and after marriage were strict. In the event of frequent miscarriages or sickly children, for instance, a woman would be held responsible and required to undergo a cleansing ceremony, the *Tyeyo Lao*. This required her to dance nude in front of clansmen and to walk naked to fetch water from a source in full public view.

Clan elders to a great extent determined collective community rights. The tendency was towards the benefit of the community, clan or family, accompanied by community responsibility for the individual. Thus, land was communally owned, with men and

### Traditional gender norms: a reminiscence

Esther Akello is 108 years old. In her youth, a woman was taught by her paternal grandmother to look after her husband – prepare food, clean, and be humble before him. Esther was advised not to be sharp-tongued, or to answer back when spoken to in any argument.

She was not expected to eat her father-in-law or husband's left-overs, which would often be delicacies, but to keep them for them later. Delicacies such as dried meat were left untended to tempt her or she was requested to prepare white ants or simsim after which her mother-in-law would pretend she had a speck in her eye and ask the girl to blow it out so that she could smell her breath. If she had tasted these food items, she would be considered undisciplined and sent back to her parents' home. Songs were created about greedy in-laws.

This was taught throughout the girl's youth so that by the time of marriage, she would be fully prepared.



Esther Akello

women alike allocated plots to farm or to establish a homestead, but boys alone would inherit family property since girls were expected to leave home to marry. Widow inheritance and bride price were common practices that perpetuated the perception of women as men's property and a source of wealth.

**Insecurity and evolving gender roles** For the past 20 years, Lango has suffered insecurity from rebel activities, resulting in numerous deaths and abductions, displacement and camp life. Large-scale cattle raiding has also led to loss of property, financial insecurity and dislocation.

These devastating blows have had diverse effects on the position of women. First, with the breakdown of social structures, once rather sheltered women and children became more vulnerable to abuse. If spaces to learn about culture values, such as the luxury of a fire place, were no longer available, men would still mistreat women in different ways, such as forcing women to have sex at any time when drunk, often in cramped camp conditions, witnessed by their children. Children then started to disrespect parents and to engage in sex themselves, fostering defilement and low self-esteem. With lower production, there was also less money from cash crops, leading to more early marriages and to girls having to engage in heavy labour outside the home. Girls were also traded for sex to soldiers (for as little as UGS.500/=!), as the men often looked on helplessly, fearing beatings or having armed protection withdrawn if they complained. At such times, all rights were surrendered; anything could happen; elders were resigned and no one was blamed for the consequences. Meanwhile, in the camps, women took the lead in seeking food, risking their lives as they ventured outside the protected areas. Development organisations often preferred to give women ration cards and men had to wait for them to provide. Polygamous men were frequently unable to meet the demands of many wives and children. At times, women and men abandoned the responsibility for their families, which contributed to the appearance of street children.

Cattle rustling had some similar consequences: loss of cattle and food scarcity became a concern for both men and women who, unlike in the past, were forced to share roles and work in the fields together. This introduced a degree of equality, though resisted by men who still controlled the use of the income generated. The number of cows paid for dowry reduced, undermining the emphasis placed on dowry and the power of men over women, as they were not necessarily bound to the union by bride price. It also reduced the power that the clan wielded over a widow since they did not have much to claim. A widow was allowed to remarry outside the clan if she chose to.

The HIV epidemic, aggravated by civil strife, displacement and the consequent breakdown in social norms, also affected gender roles. Women have at times become household heads by default and recognised decision makers. Even elderly women started to earn money through petty businesses to survive. Increasingly too, women have returned to their family homes as widows or divorcees.

With insecurity, people were also exposed to life in towns, where they experienced conflicting values, including exposure to social ills, such as drug and

alcohol abuse, idleness, begging, and video shows encouraging violence and immoral behaviour. Men begging alongside women were scorned and referred to as (weak) women. If a man failed in his marital obligations or failed to provide for the family, women would say “we are now the same, we are both women”.

With these changes, restoring traditional values and norms has proved an overwhelming task. The traditional cultural institutions had failed to protect the most vulnerable who were forced to find other ways to survive. Spaces for learning cultural values no longer existed, upholding such values in the face of severe abuse seemed irrelevant and tradition was quickly overtaken by a new culture of individual choice and survival. Positions of authority and leadership increasingly fell onto women’s’ shoulders, but this provided them with an opportunity to prove their capability, enjoy a sense of achievement and guard their hard earned authority.

### **Changing perceptions of women’s and girls’ rights**

Where women were exposed, this empowerment has also been reinforced by national and international trends, including human rights campaigns, as well as the spread of formal education in Lango.

Until recently, girls were not considered ‘worth’ investing in, in terms of education, as they would get “spoilt” and see their marriage prospects reduced. Over time, however, this attitude began to change and girls started going to school in the 1940s. Some became employed and educated parents, including some clan leaders, sent both girls and boys to school. Some teachers changed attitudes, encouraged by education campaigns. Women have also attended events organised by development actors and learnt about rights, HIV/AIDS and positive living; and acquired life skills to survive in the present situation. Seeing other women enterprising and responsible for their families, sometimes single-handedly, has inspired rural women to earn their own income.

Such experiences have made women less tolerant of violence in the home. Men’s inability to provide and protect their families leads to frustration and alcoholism, in turn contributing to domestic violence and eventual divorce. In the past, numerous consultations and appeals for dialogue made it difficult to divorce. Today, the process has been simplified and a divorce certificate may be purchased at the sub-county headquarters for only UGS.20,000/=. Women who are aware of their rights increasingly protect their property and opt for divorce to detach themselves from situations of violence and other social injustice. This often happens among women who are able to

repay the dowry without disrupting the marriages of their brothers or male relatives who have used the same dowry to marry. Rape and defilement cases are increasingly dealt with in courts of law as criminal offences, though this option still poses a challenge in instances where the male family members or clan accept compensation (as was the case traditionally) on behalf of the victim.

Given the cultural context described above, it is not surprising that the introduction of women's and girls' rights is perceived by some men as foreign, undermining both local culture and their authority. Some respondents explained that traditional systems are skewed towards the benefit of the family rather than that of the individual woman. With community responsibility and protection removed, individual empowerment to protect oneself and survive takes over, reinforced by concepts of individuals' human rights. This results in conflict between collective community and individual values. Education for girls is also still seen with some ambivalence: some respondents felt that educated parents are too lenient with their children, contributing to misconduct, and many girls still leave school to get married. As equal opportunity for boys and girls is not a traditional value, it is only when the benefits of educating girls (higher dowry, financial support) becomes apparent that discriminative attitudes change.

### 3. Cultural institutions in Lango

Several institutions informed these changes in cultural values and gender perspectives, including the county, sub-county and parish chiefs (Rwot, Jago, Won Pacu), the clan leaders (Awitong) and persons responsible for family affairs (Adwong Otem).

**The clans** These survived the abolition of traditional cultural institutions in the 1960's but the calamities

#### Educated clan leaders

Some educated clan leaders have actively encouraged girl child education. As a clan leader, Mzee Otim's role has been to encourage equal opportunities for education of both girls and boys. He leads by example and his two daughters and four sons are graduates. He also encourages the Won Nyaci to support girl child education and discourage those who resist it. But, he says, about 50% of the clan leaders are not convinced of the value of educating girls, which he attributes to lack of education and exposure on their part. Mzee Otim says such leaders are often rebuked, shunned and isolated by the other clan leaders.

that befell Lango in the past 25 years affected clan leaders and their roles. In 1963, clan leaders had elected a "chairman of all clan heads" or Won Nyaci, with a status similar to that of kings in other parts of the country. This institution was restored in 1995, exclusive of its former political and administrative authority, in part to revive an appreciation of tradition. In spite of the recent upheavals, clan leaders retained a strong influence within family and local community, especially with regard to cultural practices and, up to now, they continue to be consulted on a wide range of issues. The 126 recognised clans in Lango are still influential in conflict resolution and in arranging marriages. Each clan leader is headed by an elderly person, knowledgeable about the Lango culture, and well established – educated with his own home and wealth. In each clan, a woman representative is also elected to promote traditions, traditional food, dress code, respect of self and elders, carrying water on the head, grinding and mingling millet bread.

**The traditional government structure** In the 1930s, powerful county chiefs (Rwots), assisted by sub-county chiefs (Jagos) were established by the colonial authorities. The clan leaders, who fell under their administrative authority, handled issues of domestic violence, compensation after death, accidents, rape or defilement. The Jago was responsible for organising homes and wives for the Rwot in the various villages and looking after them. The Rwot's wives and their families acquired a privileged, but dependent status, without political power.

**The Lango Cultural Foundation (LCF)** The executive arm of the Lango traditional institution is headed by the Won Nyaci and aims at overseeing the welfare of the people and upholding their traditional values. Foundation members work on a voluntary basis. The LCF has taken on the responsibility of uniting clans, dealing with compensation issues (as in the case of murder); and maintaining order in families. The institution passes by-laws in this regard, although enforcement depends on the good will of politicians and clan heads. Some respondents said the LCF tends to be 'conservatively traditional', attempting to preserve traditional cultural practices and norms, despite changes in the current context. It tends to appeal to past traditions in its struggle for identity, recognition and allegiance from local communities.

The Foundation is male dominated, but there are two women on the Executive Committee who deal with women's and, at times, cultural issues. There are no women Ministers, as a minister has to be the head of a clan, by definition a man. The Foundation is however in the process of developing a new constitution and plans to have more women in positions of leadership.

The LCF women leaders are involved in preserving and reviving the Lango culture, for instance by teaching children how to perform traditional dances, which they have done in some schools. They also host radio talk shows during which they discuss various cultural and gender issues. The LCF addresses dropping out of school and early marriages during its talk shows and at public gatherings. It has also taken the initiative to return street children to their homes, but with limited success to date.

*we are able to analyse and influence change in traditional practices that affect women and girls.”* Their position in the clans therefore provides them with a means to achieve their objectives, but they have expanded beyond the traditional role of escorting male clan leaders on village tours to teach young women cultural norms, to actively and independently engage in promoting girls’ education and women’s rights.

An international NGO, ActionAid Uganda (AAU), contributed to the founding of the LFCLA. AAU had started working with traditional institutions in the

#### 4. The Lango Female Clan Leaders Association - LFCLA

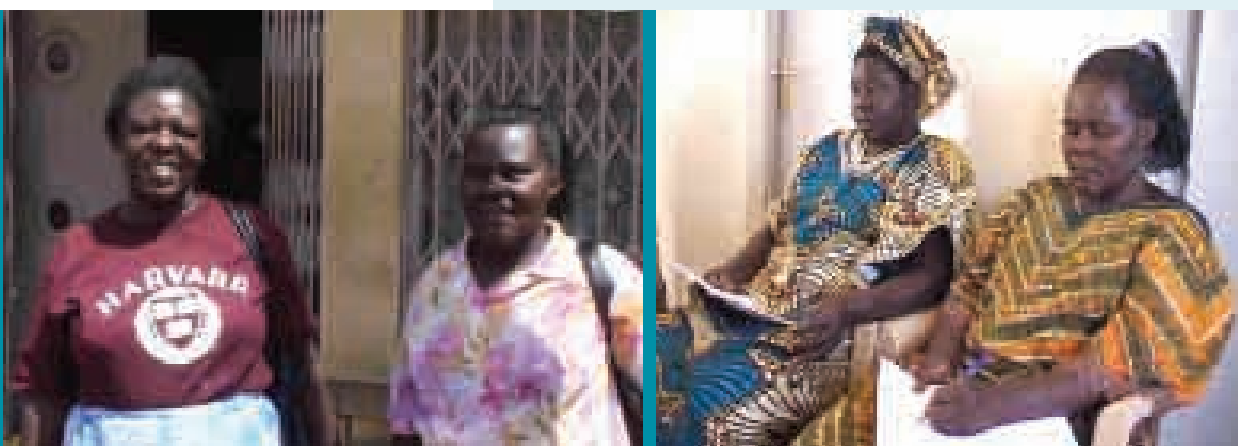
**Female clan leaders?** The Association was formed to help girls and women in Lango enhance their rights, using gender, culture and education for development. It promotes positive cultural practices that do not impinge on the rights of women, while denouncing those that oppress and humiliate them. The LFCLA is a recognised Community-based Organisation and is seeking registration as a Non-Governmental Organisation. It is entirely female led, with an Executive Committee of 15 female clan leaders and 100 ordinary members. Each member pays a membership fee of UGS.5,000 and an annual subscription of UGS.5,000.

We have noted that clan leaders are men, although elderly women often play the role of custodians of traditional knowledge and skills and work alongside them. They are referred as female clan leaders (being representatives of women within the council of male clan leaders). The LFCLA chose to use the term ‘female clan leaders’ because their cultural identity is at the core of the Association: *“culture is our anchor, and cannot be dismissed. We are custodians of culture. We are familiar with the negative and positive aspects of culture and, with accumulated knowledge,*

#### Who are female clan leaders?

- **Imat Rabiya Buwa** went to school in 1962 but dropped out of Aboke High School in Senior 2 because of lack of school fees. Although not highly educated, Rubiya is called to settle domestic disputes because she is a responsible person, senior (in age), outspoken and objective. She was appointed Discipline Manager amongst the women in her village, then promoted to Jago and is now *Atek Okwero Wee* (female clan leader).
- **Joyce Otiti** says that, to become a female clan leader, one is elected on merit – having demonstrated hard work, entrepreneurship, being pro-development, respectful of self and others, educated and able to analyse and discuss issues objectively. As a clan leader, Joyce has been involved in resolving domestic conflicts in her village and beyond. Her advice is sought and respected because of her experience and objectivity.
- **Margaret Akullo Elem**, the Chairperson of LFCLA and a teacher by profession, is involved in the on-going peace process in the region and uses her experience to enrich the work of the Association. She raises gender issues in the peace process – especially the issue of compensation after rape or defilement of girls.
- **Joyce Acanya**, a farmer and politician, is a clan leader and member of LFCLA. She speaks out for women to break the silence of being oppressed. She is a district councillor and uses this position to advocate for girl child education.

Margaret Elem and other clan leaders



region to address practices that hinder development. Appreciating the cultural dimension of the gender issues that emerged, AAU identified the Lango Cultural Foundation as a partner of choice and held a series of engagements to mainstream gender within the LCF. Gender workshops with LFC revealed the disparities between men and women, so an effort was made to ensure that the latter participated equally in the training. The trained women in the LCF proved promising and AAU chose to channel their support through them to implement activities related to women's rights, access to justice and girls' education. AAU aimed at supporting a movement of women fighting the violation of their rights and humiliating cultural practices, such as the *Tyeyo La*, still being practiced in parts of the district. Administrative and legal requirements for funding these activities contributed to the formation and registration of the LFCLA and AAU currently is the Association's main funder.

**LFCLA's perception of gender issues** The Association attributes gender imbalances in Lango to low levels of education, especially amongst girls. An important defining feature of the LFCLA's analysis concerns dowry, which it perceives as contributing to early marriages (and therefore girls dropping out of school), to conflicts within the home and eventual divorce. Dowry obtained from a daughter's marriage is used to pay for a son's education and, in some families, a brother is allocated a sister from whom he will get resources for his education and dowry. Dowry disempowers women because it binds them to often abusive relationships, usually because their families are too poor to repay the dowry, the man is the sole bread winner and women feel the need to remain in the home to maintain and protect their children. Most women who are victims of domestic violence thus tolerate it because of the fear that their families will be forced to repay the dowry which has often been used by brothers or male relatives for dowry. The Association supports and protects the marriage institution and cherishes unity in families, but not at the expense of women's and girls' rights.

The Association also sees a close link between dowry and domestic violence: men, having paid dowry, consider women as property that they can abuse as they please. In some cases, especially amongst rural, unexposed women, women expect to be abused, for this has been the traditional norm. When cases of domestic violence are reported to the police, the victims often withdraw them, because of pressure from fellow women, the clan and community urging them to use the cultural system to resolve domestic conflicts and not the court of law. Some women also

argue that the children's father must be respected (and therefore go unpunished) and after all he is the sole breadwinner – so, if imprisoned, how would the family survive? Today, land has also become a sensitive issue as it becomes scarcer and individually owned. Young men who become owners of land also easily sell it to make quick money and even evict widows from their homes. The low status of women also promotes rape and defilement. The Association recommends that this be handled by the clan court or law court, although male relatives often use these fora to claim compensation for themselves, rather than for the victim, as their 'property has been damaged'.

This contrasts with the LFC's view, where dowry is strongly supported, as a sign of appreciation to the girl's parents, an indication of the value a man attaches to the woman he has chosen to marry. According to the LCF women leaders, if no or low dowry is paid, there will be disrespect and domestic conflict. The purchase of a divorce certificate is, according to them, an easy way for the official concerned to make money from people's problems and it exposes children to suffering, rather than resolving conflicts. When there is conflict in the home, all means should be used to resolve it, using mediation from friends, relatives, clan leaders and, if all fails, the courts of law, whose decision should allow a wife to stay in the matrimonial home with her children.

## 5. LFCLA activities and achievements

To promote the recognition women's rights and support girls' education, some of the women at the LFCLA, who are teachers and members of the Mothers' Union, use their position to help women expand their view of their role in society. The Association has registered achievements in raising awareness, providing sponsorships, and especially contributing to fora at different levels and through various mass media. It initially targeted secondary education because most girls drop out at that level, but it has now broadened its advocacy work on the value of collective responsibility towards children to parents and communities, highlighting the role of different stakeholders (government, school teachers), in creating a child friendly environment.

**Work in schools** LFCLA representatives visit schools (including those they have attended) to raise awareness about women's rights, especially in areas where displaced people are returning home. They use local female role models (teachers, doctors, members of parliament) to motivate girls to attend and excel.

## LFCLA scholarships

Collins Akidi (17) received one of LFCLA's scholarships for girls. She had dropped out of school when her father left the home. During one of the LFCLA radio programmes, her mother heard about the scholarships and her application was approved on a cost sharing basis.

Collins is grateful and is determined to complete her education before she gets married. She believes that women who are uneducated are likely to suffer from domestic violence while educated women are respected because they conduct themselves well, they are economically independent, articulate and able to represent women at national level. Collins would like to become a doctor or a lawyer when she completes her studies, because of the prestige attached to these professions. If invited, she would like to participate in the radio talk shows, to discuss relationships across generations and early marriages, which are common in her village.



A school girl sponsored by LFCLA

Being leaders in their own right, LCFA members share their own experiences, their challenges and achievements, highlighting both traditional and contemporary values of integrity, hard work, respect, objectivity, justice, and decency. They also draw

from traditional role models (such as Apio Tooke), to motivate young girls to appreciate the value of engaging in public life. The Association is producing a publication on successful women in Lango. This encourages shared, rather than culturally defined roles for girls and boys, such as fetching water or washing utensils, to correct disparities in perceptions of what girls and boys can do. The Association is currently supporting two girls in secondary school (orphans selected on the basis of need, having been victim of abuse and domestic violence, or threatened with early marriage). It has also identified vocational training and skills development as another way to promote girls' education.

Progress has been registered in raising awareness on the rights of girls to education. Teachers have reported improved attendance and performance: at Lira Army Primary School, one of the visited schools, for instance, girl enrolment, retention and performance has increased and they now compete (and even outperform) boys, all partly attributed to support from parents, exposure, LFCA radio programmes on girls' education and their use of role models. In some schools too, the division of tasks is by age rather than gender, although this is a recent development spearheaded by a few exposed teachers.

**Gender video** The Association has produced a video with support from AAU on the importance of girls' education, the challenges women face and the need to break the silence and other cultural barriers to seek assistance where necessary. This film was shown in many villages and camps for displaced people. While the impact has not been formally assessed, the feedback received from the local communities indicated that it was an eye opener to many on the value of educating girls and especially causing changes in parents' attitudes in this respect. The proceeds from showing and selling this video will be used to finance the bursary scheme.

**News articles and radio programmes** The Association produces articles in the local Rupiny newspaper on topical issues, relevant to gender and girls' education. The Association's first initiative with AAU was to gather public views on a Domestic Relations Bill and the death penalty, whose findings were submitted to a Constitutional Review Commission. In 2007, the Association started hosting weekly - later bi-monthly - talk shows. Resourceful panellists from the public and prominent women leaders are invited to debate. Some of the issues discussed on air currently include the importance of education for girls, the increased rate of divorce, dowry, domestic violence, land ownership and clan/family conflicts. In the



## Making a change through the radio

- Flora Ateker, married with 6 children, regularly listens to the LFCLA talk shows. This, she says is because they are educative, she has learnt about women's rights, and they make her more assertive. In the past, her husband was fierce quarrelsome. He would beat her, at times forcing their son to intervene to defend her. She had to involve the clan in resolving her domestic problems. After listening to the talk shows she consulted one member of LFCA, Joyce Otiti, for advice and learnt that there are channels to address this problem. Joyce advised her against divorce. She gained courage to report her husband to the clan who gave him 2 strokes of the cane. This failed: she reported him to the police for beating her, not working on the land, and not paying school fees for their children. He was imprisoned for 10 days and when he returned he became calmer and started farming.

Her husband has now gone to work in a neighbouring district. When he is at home he puts in some effort to till the land. He leaves the money earned from their joint efforts for the home but does not share the money he makes on his own. He still does not contribute to the education of the children and three of their children are now out of school. He should have been jailed again for avoiding responsibility, but the clan intervened and requested him to reform.

Flora is glad that she was empowered to take action against her husband. Although he is not at home for much of the time, she is at peace. He no longer beats her, she is healthy and can be productive. She does not believe in the saying that a husband beating his wife is a sign of love: *"that kind of love is for other women not for me!"* She makes sure that her radio has batteries so that she can listen to the LFCLA talk shows on Saturdays.

- Margaret Okello and Lucy Obote, both LFCLA radio show listeners, for instance said that, for a long time, women's voices were not heard. Women, they shared, face many problems with their husbands but have nowhere to express their grievances, especially if they have a problem with the clan leaders who still believe that women should be suppressed. Women are accustomed to remaining silent but, when they hear other women speaking confidently on radio about issues that affect them, they feel able to open up to discuss their problems. Today, women approach men to discuss what they have heard on the radio and to seek advice on action to take.

case of divorce, for instance, dowry is still returned to a man's parents, so women are encouraged to generate their own income, and accumulate their personal property. Important documents should be kept well to avoid misuse or blackmail by husbands who hide them after a misunderstanding. With regard to education, listeners are reminded to send their children (especially the girls, including house helps) to school. The discussions also include provisions for school drop-outs, biological needs and facilities for girls, fair competition between girls and boys and decent language to be used by male teachers when addressing girls. The latter are persuaded to dress decently to avoid unnecessary attention, to respect elders and submit to their parents' authority. They are encouraged to build their confidence, and to steer clear of involvement with boys and men when still at school.

According to respondents, this is an area where the LFCLA has registered most success, although the lack of systematic evaluation makes it difficult to gauge effects on the community. Those we met all said the radio shows stir debates and raise controversial issues. Sometimes they rebuke people who uphold negative cultural practices, but they also promote positive values; they inspire a renewed appreciation of culture, self-esteem and assertiveness which were undermined during the war. Some of the listeners we met found the programmes engaging because the presenters are local but exposed to 'modern realities' and pragmatic in their approach. They illustrate how educated women can respect and promote the local culture, including the cultural leaders who were often seen as oppressive in the past, as in the way they mistreated widows.

Through the talk shows, women realise that channels exist to address their problems, such as the Probation Office; and the police are nowadays quick to respond to cases of domestic violence. Some men feel the programmes provide good guidance on grooming girls and wives. The shows promote self-esteem and value of the girl child. Women also seek the LFCLA's support: as one was reported to have said: *"This man is selling my niece – where are these women on the radio?"* Another woman, being physically abused by her spouse, raised an alarm in the name of LFCLA, calling them for help. In some villages, there is less discrimination against women, after sensitisation on individual and gender rights. As a result, some respondents indicated a desire to join the LFCLA. Rabiya Buwa, an elderly lady and clan leader, said she would like to join the Association to expand her knowledge and become more exposed. Margaret Okello said she would like to join LFCLA because they deal with *"real issues concerning women"*.

## The LFCLA in the press

**Laro will otany ikom mon too**

**ICC ogyego aranyi - Focare Clu**

**LFCL mito anyira ikwan**

**LFCLA oryeo iwita i Lango**

**The Comprehensive Peace Agreement**

1. Wrangles over wills have escalated against women
2. ICC stops atrocities – say LFCLA
3. FCLA want girls to study
4. LFCLA has taken root in Lango

**Working beyond Lango** Women leaders' authority was traditionally village-bound but, by virtue of the Association's advocacy work, they currently work well beyond and have been requested to support similar associations in Acholi and Teso, hence the move towards national NGO registration.

For LFCLA, building alliances with like-minded organisations is a key strategy and partnerships with a cross-section of development actors that support women's and girls' rights are therefore welcomed. LFCLA collaborates with AAU for capacity-building support and gender knowledge, it is represented on the Education Sector Working Group to promote girls' education, it invites the National Women's Organisation (NAWOU) to events and vice versa, it works with the district department of Gender, and it involves cultural and religious leaders in its activities.

The clan leaders prepare and present papers to declare their position at national events, advocating for equal opportunity to education and access to resources for men and women at community and national levels. Their contribution to debates on gender is recognised and, as a result, a LFCLA representative joined the consultative delegation at the Juba Peace Talks. The Association chairs the Greater North Women's Voices for Peace Network which has been

actively participating in the Talks; members developed an issue paper on compensation for the victims of rape and defilement and presented this during the negotiations. The LFCLA, alongside the Acholi traditional institution, has also influenced the gender perspective in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

## 6. Challenges

The work of Association has not been without challenges. By virtue of being female leaders, taking on the title of clan leaders as well, the women have been the subject of much criticism. It has also had to face demands for services it has been ill-equipped to deliver.

**Ambivalent perceptions of culture and gender** The LFCLA has placed itself at the crossroads of competing perceptions and has suffered from a degree of ambivalence. One perception dictates that cultural issues should be handled by men and elderly people only, thus excluding the contribution of women and youth. On the other hand, the younger generation perceives culture as something for the poor and uneducated.

## Statement by Women from the Greater North to the Parties: Juba Peace Talks, January 30, 2008

“...we represent each sub-region in the Greater North, we are women from Acholi, Lango, Teso and West Nile. We speak as one voice and we speak on behalf of our sisters and communities who are not able to be here.”

“Women and children have suffered in this conflict. Over 1 million of us have been displaced from our homes, much violence and brutality has occurred, we have not been able to farm our land, grow our crops, we have not been able to educate our children, we have not seen development and progress in the Greater North because of this conflict. There has been much violence committed against women by both parties, and many others, as our communities have disintegrated. It is time for this to stop, not just for now but forever.”

“...First, we want peace – peace with reconciliation; peace with truth telling; peace with justice; peace to harmonise and restore communities. Secondly, we want those with the LRA, the women and children, non-combatants, to be returned to us as quickly as possible, and for them to be fully assisted to reintegrate, with medical and psychological support and other practical assistance.”

Some men and women, eager to sustain traditional values, thus perceive the LFCLA as confusing agents, disrupting the status quo, and making women ‘rebellious’. It was noted by LFCLA members that the concept of gender equity is still considered foreign and at times accepted superficially, as when women are still considered as inferior or there is ambivalence about stopping dowry. Some men do not like the radio programmes because they feel they are losing control: they requested the LFCLA to ‘reduce this empowerment’: *“Now when a man abuses a woman and she keeps quiet, he fears that she has ulterior motives and is planning to have him arrested.”* Some cultural practices, such as early marriages, are thus still practiced and hinder girls’ education despite constant sensitisation. Preference is still given to boys, especially in rural areas where the benefits of education have not been much felt.

Another challenge relates to the perception of LFCLA, especially in ‘cultural circles’. When it was formed as an independent entity, the LCF refused to recognise the Association as it had ‘broken away’ from the main institution. The relationship between the two organisations is still strained, with the LCF accused of using the media to disseminate negative

propaganda about the Association. Conflicts have led to missed funding opportunities and, within the Foundation, women leaders do not work with the LFCLA because of differences in gender perceptions: more ‘conservative’ within the LCF, while the LFCLA take a more ‘liberal’ approach. Initially, the Won Nyaci did not fully support the formation of the Association either, although after witnessing the benefits of their work, his office has begun to appreciate their contribution to development. With such negative sentiments, some perceive the LFCLA as hybrid impersonators using the term ‘female clan leaders’ to compete with male clan heads.

**Ability to meet the demand for services** Many of the respondents suggested an expansion of the scope of LFCLA operations, spreading programmes to communities, to more schools and to assist school administrations to stimulate cultural values. Cultural institutions need prodding to support schools in doing this and to increase the number of scholarships. Teachers have requested copies of the radio presentations made by LFCLA which they can use to stimulate further discussions and debates amongst students. Clan leaders still need sensitisation during their general meetings to address issues of girl child education and domestic violence; culture needs reviving through dances, crafts, and traditional cooking.

With regard to the radio programmes, some of the panellists and presenters may have limited exposure and their views at times put the audience off. The programmes need to be better presented and researched, to project a coherent vision of change in the light of the crippling challenges resulting from war and displacement. Nevertheless, radio listeners commended LFCLA and requested that an office to handle domestic cases be opened to allow the audience to consult and follow up their individual concerns. They also suggested an outreach face-to-face programme for rural areas where women have domestic problems and need help to deal with them.

The Association has a Constitution and efforts are being made to meet its basic requirements. A financial audit was recently carried out and an accountant hired but all these require resources, both human and financial. Further resources are also needed to manage day to day work. AAU is currently the LFCLA’s main funder: it needs to seek additional support and to liaise with other institutions to meet the increasing demand for its services. Internally, it requires organisational development to establish appropriate systems to track progress and the impact of its work.

## 7. Conclusions

### Changing gender roles and new opportunities

We have seen that, as a result of the calamities that befell almost all communities in Lango, women were especially affected. Their traditional roles - maintaining the household and upbringing children but also, for some, grooming girls and engaging in spiritual and cultural rituals – were necessarily challenged too. Not only were women thrust into taking even more responsibility than before, but interventions from development organisations also triggered reflection on women's social roles and exposed them to understanding and demanding their rights. With fresh forces influencing their roles and their power relations with men, new doors were opened for women to associate, to learn from others, and to question and consult on decisions made, especially regarding the home and cultural practices. Widowhood, intermarriage and a breakdown in the social fabric (where clan leaders were no longer able to sufficiently provide for, or protect women) also resulted in women gaining control over some assets such as land and agricultural produce.

**Opportunities for LFCLA** These changes also provided a window of opportunity for the LFCLA to emerge and focus on promoting girls' education and access to justice for women. This in turn opened the possibility of identifying aspects of culture that could support development initiatives and address practices that were perceived as harmful. And an opportunity arose too for women to analyse their situation, appreciate their role in development and simultaneously uphold their traditional role as custodians of cultural values and norms.

**Working on gender and culture** Tackling cultural and gender issues has proved difficult. As they are rarely good bedfellows, clear, steadfast objectives are needed to keep the Association on course without shying away from sensitive and controversial issues. The LFCLA has met with significant resistance and the members had to be self-motivated, keep a united front, engage in mutual defence of members, while avoiding rumours and maintaining openness amongst themselves. They deliberately avoided confrontation and sought to illustrate by action and in their presentations their Association's vision.

LFCLA invested in understanding what they wanted to achieve, how to avoid raising false

LFCLA Board meeting – planning for 2008



expectations, identifying allies, building alliances and collaborating with local authorities such as the police to demand and maintain girls' and women's rights. It also realised the need to be well grounded and knowledgeable about the local culture and the rights of those who are affected by cultural practices. Working with others, they gained exposure to knowledge and skills relevant to their cause. They learnt that well-researched radio programmes can be very effective: sometimes mere dissemination of basic information on the laws was sufficient to address challenges that women, especially those in rural areas were facing. They also noted that different outreach strategies, such as community meetings, need to be used in remote areas where women may not have access to radios. With increased demand to join the Association, membership has also been opened to women who are not necessarily clan leaders, unmarried women,

and others who are motivated, share the same views and values to take the agenda forward.

#### **Women, gender issues and traditional institutions: what is needed for change?**

Ultimately, however, what has made a difference in LFCLA's effectiveness? An important conclusion arising from this case study is that the Association managed to bring together three vital ingredients. First, the passion of women truly dedicated to the cause of fellow women's rights and to girls' education. Second, the authority derived from a position within an important and recognised traditional power centre, the clan. And third, the necessary knowledge base, not only on traditional cultural practices but also on current human rights frameworks and values. LFCLA's experience shows that such a combination makes for a potent contribution to enhancing girls' and women's rights.

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The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, 2008  
Tel: +256 (0)312-294-675  
[www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug](http://www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug)

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