

TITLE: NO ONE KNOWS US
Women with disabilities in northern Uganda

Photos by Martina Bacigalupo

SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION:

After more than two decades of war, people in northern Uganda are trying to put their lives back together. The conflict took a particularly devastating toll on women with disabilities, who face on-going insecurity and limited access to services.

Some of the women were born with disabilities. Others lost limbs, eyesight or hearing during the war. Some women told stories of being left behind, unable to run when the rebels came.

Due to stigma, discrimination and isolation, women with disabilities are vulnerable to rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence. As northern Ugandans leave the camps to return home or find a new place to live, women with disabilities have trouble getting health care, education or other basic government services that they need.

Human Rights Watch traveled to northern Uganda with photographer Martina Bacigalupo to document these stories of survival.



Video thumbnail description: Filda, who lost her left leg from a landmine accident, walks with crutches down a dirt path amidst the tall grass.

VIDEO INTRODUCTION:

Filda lives in a tiny village in Northern Uganda. She lost her husband, her son and her left leg to Uganda's long conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. She's also HIV positive. Like many women with disabilities in Northern Uganda, she says she feels like the government doesn't even know she exists. Filda tells her story as she tends to her fields and five children.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT:

(Voiceover by Filda Adoch):

My name is Filda Adoch.

In 1996 I was injured by a landmine.

(Text on screen):

Filda is 52 years old.

She's a widow and the mother of five children.

She lost her leg during the conflict
between the Lord's Resistance Army
and the Ugandan government.

(Filda voiceover continued):

I went to weed my sesame fields one morning.

I stepped on the landmine
and there was an explosion.

I screamed, "Mother, I am dead!"

My neighbors heard me.

They took me to the hospital.

When I returned to my in-laws' house,
they rejected me because of my injury.

My oldest son was 12.

He became the head of the family.

My mother had young children of her own.

She couldn't afford to support all of us.

So I had to go to work on other people's farms,
and I had to send my children to work.

Of course my life is different now.

I used to walk on two legs, and now I only have one.

Everything is more difficult.

Nobody knows about women
with disabilities in rural areas like me.

The government really doesn't care about us.

We are deep in the village, we are forgotten.

It is because of the war that I sustained this injury,
so the government should compensate me.

I'd also like to be fitted with an artificial leg,
so I can walk again and wear shoes, like you.



Photo 1 description: A woman sits on her hand-crank tricycle in front of her mud home. Her child sits in her lap, and other members of her family are standing around behind her.

PHOTO 1 CAPTION:

Few women and girls with physical disabilities have functioning mobility devices that can help them to access basic services such as health centers, police stations or schools.

This 35-year old woman has seven children. She uses a hand-crank bicycle to move around her village. But she says she still feels vulnerable to sexual violence and HIV.

“I am concerned about HIV. I fear that since my husband can walk, he can meet someone and then infect me,” she says. “It is quite difficult for women with disabilities to protect ourselves. I also fear that if my husband goes away, other men may come.”



Photo 2 description: A woman sits next to her mother, each holding a bunch of green herbs.

PHOTO 2 CAPTION:

Women with disabilities report that they are more vulnerable to theft and other crimes due to their disabilities. The woman at left says her family helps care for her, but others try to take advantage of her.

“People come and take things from my farm, and they expect me to stay quiet,” she says.



Photo 3 description: A woman sits on the ground outside her home with a broom in her hand. Her head is turned away from the camera towards a herd of goats in the grass.

PHOTO 3 CAPTION:

This woman has communicative and physical disabilities. Her husband also has a physical disability. She told Human Rights Watch that he had beaten her in the past. She was also attacked by a neighbor.

“One night, when I was sleeping alone, a man who was drunk entered my home and started raping me,” she says. “My husband was not around. He had gone to look for food. No one came to rescue me, and the man raped me and beat me. I know the man. He lives in the neighborhood. The man was arrested and was held for only one day.”



Photo 4 description: Two women staring solemnly into the camera.

PHOTO 4 CAPTION:

These sisters both have disabilities. One sister is deaf; the other has a physical disability. The hearing impaired sister has two children but she says she was abandoned by men who didn't want to be publicly associated with her.

“As a deaf person, if I accept a man to live with me, after a while they leave me and go back to their wives who can talk or hear,” she says. “But by the time they leave, I’ve already produced a child. So they leave me and they do not support me. I’ve never gone to the police because I didn’t know the police could help me.”



Photo 5 description: A blind woman sits in the dark, holding her left hand to her head.

PHOTO 5 CAPTION:

Lord's Resistance Army rebels attacked this woman for being unable to reveal the locations of neighbors. They gouged her eyes and she became totally blind. The rebels kicked her, burned her arm and cut her lips. She says she feels she's burdening her family.

"I can hear my family saying that they are fed up with me, including my daughter," she says.



Photo 5 description: Caroline sits in front of a door smiling at the camera. A young boy stands next to her with a purple ball in front of his face.

PHOTO 6 CAPTION:

Caroline, who has polio, advocates for the rights of women with disabilities as a board member of the Gulu Disabled Persons' Union. Caroline says access to education remains a significant obstacle for women and girls with disabilities. Simple measures could be taken to help them attend school -- like accessible bathrooms.

"I tried once to go to a regular school but there was no latrine that I could use and I couldn't crawl all the time, so I stayed home," she says.



Photo 7 description: A woman sits on the ground amidst grass and tall corn stalks.

PHOTO 7 CAPTION:

This woman has a hearing disability. She lives in a camp for internally displaced persons in northern Uganda.

“I accept that I have a disability because I am hard of hearing,” she says. “But people abuse me -- they say ‘that one is deaf’. It is meant in a derogatory way, as a nickname instead of calling me by my given name.”



Photo 8 description: A black-and-white profile of a woman's face. Part of her nose, ears and upper lip have been cut off.

PHOTO 8 CAPTION:

This woman sells vegetables at a local market. She says since the Lord's Resistance Army rebels cut off her nose, ear and upper lip, she has difficulties farming and cannot hear well.

"There's a lot of [government] support for rebels who return. We have been affected [also]. But for those who've done nothing, we get nothing. It's so painful."



Photo 9 description: A woman sits on a mat in her home smiling.

PHOTO 9 CAPTION:

This mother of three cannot walk. After the war, she returned to her ancestral village. But she says there are not enough social services available to her there.

“Life for me was easier in the camps. In the camps, there were children to send to fetch things, services, and now we are far away from everything and no one helps us,” she says.



Photo 10 description: In front of a thatch-roofed home, a white plastic chair sits on top of the wire frame of a wheelchair to form a makeshift mobility device.

PHOTO 10 CAPTION:

Many Ugandans rely on makeshift mobility devices to get around; this one is at a camp for internally displaced persons in Omee. Some women with physical disabilities who left the camps said that they now have to crawl long distances to health clinics or pharmacies. The government of Uganda has the duty to provide affordable and accessible health care, including sexual and reproductive health services, to women with disabilities.

“I don’t go to the hospital because I have no one to look after me. [After I broke my legs] I didn’t go to the hospital; instead, I got treatment locally,” says an elderly woman with visual impairment. “I stayed at home until I healed naturally ... When I’m sick, I try to tell the community, but there is no one to help me or support me.”

PLAIN TEXT QUOTE:

At a community meeting, they didn't allow me to talk. It happens to all persons with disabilities. It is as if we weren't human. On occasions when food is being given, sometimes persons with disabilities are given what others leave behind on their plates.

-- Jennifer, a woman with physical disabilities, Gulu district