The reintegration of teenage girls and young women

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Women combatants are not a homogeneous group. The current approach of many Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes is inappropriate for girls between 14 and 25 years of age. In order to provide reintegration assistance that has a significant long-term impact, it is essential first to understand why girls the join armed forces. Before DDR programme plans are finalized and programmes started, time and resources need to be invested firstly to locate the girls and then begin the process of understanding their potentials, vulnerabilities, dreams and ambitions.

Keywords: child soldiers, girl soldiers, reintegration, Liberia

Introduction

Many comments and criticisms can be made over the way women have been dealt with in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes. Certainly, progress has been made in recent years, as shown by the variety of gender guidelines, checklists, interesting articles and books that have appeared on the subject. Also, many lessons have been learned, but a question remains. Is DDR assistance to women combatants on the ground improving and, more importantly, becoming more attractive to the women themselves?

In assessing this, the first step is to accept that women combatants are not a homogeneous group. Within the category of women who may be eligible for DDR assistance we find: wives, widows and female orphans of combatants, women who have experienced rape, amputations and other forms of terror and long-lasting physical impacts at the hands of combatants, women in communities that will receive demobilized soldiers, and woman combatants. Within this last category of female combatants we can distinguish further sub-categories along the same lines as those used for males: combatants with disabilities, sick and elderly combatants, those from minority groups, child soldiers, youth, educated or illiterate combatants, etc. In this paper, we will focus on one specific category of women combatants: girls and young women.

Child soldiers have recently received extensive attention, as have women, but girls, who fall under both categories, have received precious little attention in DDR processes. They hardly ever figure as a target group in their own right in most programmes. Despite this, girls do form a substantial and increasing share of armed groups in many violent armed conflicts. Women are associated with fighting forces in a variety of roles and, from the evidence available, are thought typically to constitute between l0 and 33% of fighting forces (Bouta, Freks & Bannon, 2005). Meanwhile, girls are thought to constitute as much as one third (De Watteville, 2002), or up to 40% (Save the Children, 2005), of all child soldiers. There has been large-scale involvement of girls in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Sierra Leone and the Philippines. Although most girls in the armed forces assume more auxiliary roles rather than fighting on the

frontline, in both Congo- Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) exclusively female units have been in operation. Girls have been involved in the liberation struggles in East Timor and South Africa. They have been recruited into the armed forces of the United Kingdom. In Liberia, girls have armed themselves to avenge rape and protect themselves and others from abuse, and are feared as tough opponents by male soldiers (Brett & Specht, 2004).

Youth

The category of 'youth in conflict' is currently receiving a lot of attention in international discussions and programing, referring to the group of young people between 15 and 24 years of age.[1] Young men and women's direct involvement in war is a widespread phenomenon. This is especially marked when prolonged wars strip societies of their adult generation and therefore, requires armies or fighting forces to resort to younger generations as cheap, effective and obedient fighters. Combined with high rates of youth unemployment and inadequate access to schooling, young people are vulnerable to, and often volunteer for, recruitment.

The approach of many Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes is inappropriate (Brett & Specht, 2004) for both sexes in this age group. Those below the age of 18 are regarded as child soldiers and are often automatically treated as children. By doing this, their ambitions and the extended responsibilities many of them have had as providers (War Child, 2005) are not taken into account. Those just over 18 are treated as adults in programmes with a 'livelihood focus' that neglects age-specific needs such as catch-up education, as well as ignoring their ambitions for career development. In fact, the specific quality of this group is that they are neither children nor adults, but have

distinct characteristics as a result of their in-between status. The period of adolescence is an extremely sensitive and dynamic phase in which people develop their personalities, world views and careers. Young combatants, therefore, require tailored assistance that responds to their specific needs and ambitions. In the following, we will focus on some of the issues concerning girl combatants in DDR processes.

Preconceived ideas about the roles girls and boys each play in conflict often cast the males as the aggressors and the females as the victims. A more careful examination, however, reveals a complex dynamic where war is experienced differently, both between and within, the genders. However, girl combatants do tend to be more vulnerable than their male colleagues in a variety of key ways:

- Before the conflict, which is reflected in their reasons for becoming involved;
- During the conflict in which they tend to be more often exposed to sexual violence and exploitation[2]; and
- By having difficulties in taking advantage of possible benefits both during the conflict, and in post-conflict reconstruction.

Reasons to join

It is of key importance to understand the reasons why girls join the armed forces in order to be able to provide reintegration assistance that will have a significant long-term impact. Too often, neglecting root-causes has led to a type of self-limiting reintegration assistance adhering to superficial aims such as 'putting families back together under the same roof' and 'keeping young people off the streets'. Effective reintegration would have to involve a more serious attempt to help these young people to find their way in civilian life. Instead, young people often find themselves consigned to environments of

abuse, poverty and rejection that are devoid of aspirations. Far too often, the most attractive option for escaping this situation is re-recruitment. The vast complexity of reasons why young people become associated with fighting forces cannot be underestimated, and certainly extends far beyond poverty alone.

While some girls are forcefully recruited, many join without physical force and for reasons that may, or may not be, connected to a war situation. It appears that girls who join fighting forces have often previously been victims of physical, verbal and/or psychological harassment, violence and abuse. In many societies, girls are more often restricted to the home and required to do more domestic chores than boys. Therefore, they are not only at higher risk of abuse, but also have fewer possibilities to escape from it. During a study of young soldiers in 10 different countries (Brett & Specht, 2004), it was found that escape from domestic violence is one of the main reasons for many young girls joining up. This was found to be the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Colombia. A girl soldier in the DRC said;

> *'I left without saying a word to my family. I joined because I suffered already, I didn't want to keep on suffering. I left because I wanted to leave . . . because home life was difficult. My father was a heavy drinker and he didn't work. He drank, and then he struck us all. When he drank much, he treated me as if I was his wife . . . I left because he beat us, he drank and then he took me as his wife. I preferred to die in the war rather than stay at home and keep on suffering.'*

Additionally, violent armed conflict tends to aggravate sexual abuse where gender-based violence is all too often used as a weapon. Both boys and girls are targeted, but girls carry the additional burden of undesirable pregnancies, and are more often sexually abused. In order to protect themselves from violence, some girls decide to take up arms, as having a gun might actually reduce their vulnerability.[3]

Also, some girls pointed out that they were given few possibilities to voice their opinion in public or to participate in decision-making processes in their communities. Faced with gender discrimination, some girls join fighting forces to assert their equality or to 'do what a man can'.

A recent anthropological study with girl combatants aged 15 – 24, carried out shortly after the end of the Liberian civil war (Specht, Buskens, Kemper & Attree, to be published), presents further evidence that the existing legal distinction between 'voluntary' and 'forced' recruitment is based on the misconception that children can make a free choice to resist mobilization efforts. The line between forced and voluntary recruitment is extremely thin, given the lack of security and viable alternatives for girls who grew up in Liberia. The reasons given by girls for entering fighting forces are summarized in Box 1.

Girls' experiences in war

The study in Liberia also suggests that distinctions in the experiences faced by girls during conflict should be made according to the following factors: the girl's age and maturity; whether she was an armed fighter or non-fighter; whether she was lower- or higher-ranked; whether she was part of a women's or a mixed unit; whether she had a female or a male commander; whether her association with the armed group forced her to leave her home; and the length of her association with the armed group. These factors affected girls' reasons for joining fighting forces, the degree to which they were exposed to sexual and other forms of violence, their relations with men, their self-confidence,

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Box 1: Reasons for girls to enlist with an armed group in Liberia

Most significant reasons: *abduction or forced recruitment, to gain protection from the unit for themselves or their family, to acquire material possessions, to protect themselves from rape, to protect other women from rape, to avenge human rights violations, to avenge the killing of a relative, collapse of the family support network, growing up amidst war, 'marriage' to a male combatant, peer pressure, becoming familiar with armed groups through friends, attraction to soldiers, to react against strict parental discipline, lack of education, targeting of their ethnic/religious group, to attain gender equality, to attain status, power, or equality through gun possession or by 'marrying' a male combatant.*

Less common factors: *lack of alternative means to get food, displacement and resentment among refugees/Internally Displaced Persons, to accompany relatives, need to take care of siblings (when relatives are dead), violence in media/films.*

(Based on research document: Red Shoes, Girl-Combatants in Liberia, by Irma Specht of Transition international, for ILO, UNDP and UNICEF, to be published in Geneva, 2006).

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their level of gender equality, the nature of their relation to their commander, the welcome they encountered within receiving communities, and their reintegration back into civilian life.

In general, older girls found themselves less exposed to sexual violence and exploitation, as did the girls who were as fighters and therefore able to defend themselves. In general, these girls in attained a higher rank and a greater degree of independence. Girls in female units under female command, although subject to tough discipline, were less often exposed to sexual violence within the fighting unit. On the other hand, younger girls in non-fighting roles were much more frequently exposed to sexual exploitation, and often lived in dependence on others with very low self-esteem.

DDR programmes

Despite their specific needs and capacities, girl combatants tend to be neglected in Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration programmes, primarily because they are not regarded as a security threat. This issue relates to the different definitions of the objectives of DDR. There are those (military) actors who see DDR primarily as a security issue. To this group, only young males, who are seen as potential spoilers in the fragile period immediately following the cessation of hostilities, warrant attention from DDR programmes.

Yet, girls associated with fighting forces are likely to be among the most adversely affected of the conflict-affected population. If they continue to remain outside DDR processes in disproportionate numbers, they will continue to be exposed to serious hardships. They will remain, as during conflict, at risk from violence and other threats. They, and their households, will face great economic difficulties, and remain at a disadvantage in gaining income compared to male peers. They will typically be left with no alternatives but unacceptable coping strategies (crime, sex work, dependence on abusive partners). They will likewise continue to confront terrible trauma, health problems and stigmatiza-

tion, which victims of abduction and violence in the West would never be expected to face in isolation, without the support of families and communities, and beyond the reach of (international) assistance. Without health education, medical treatment and access to condoms, female ex-combatants, like their male counterparts, may bring sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV/AIDS into their receiving communities. Ultimately, if not included in DDR programmes, girls, like boys, are a potential source of crime, civil unrest and/or recruits for other armed groups. Thus, from both a humanitarian and a strategic perspective, ways must be found to reach these girls with DDR assistance. The United Nations Security Council accepted this principle in Resolution 1325.

As a result of the lack of coherence and coordination in DDR programming, women do not always do not get the assistance they need. Initial disarmament and demobilization phases are more concerned with military and security-related priorities. Reintegration work lends itself more to the overall development of the society, aiming at the economic and social reintegration of former combatants into communities. Within the process, by the time the reintegration stage is reached, the eligibility criteria, the communication strategy and the provision for women in the disarmament and demobilization phases of the programme have usually resulted in the registration of a disproportionate number of males and earmarked them for reintegration assistance. Ways need to be found to deliver assistance to the hidden numbers of girls who have, by this stage, already slipped through the assistance net. They have therefore had to begin the reintegration process by themselves, before the official process begins to work on the reintegration of their more directly targeted male counterparts. In many cases, it is already too late to attempt to mainstream the concerns of women and girls associated with fighting forces at this stage of the DDR process (Bouta, Frerks & Bannon, 2005).

Disarming and demobilizing girls

It is often said that girls seem to have difficulties in taking advantages of demobilization benefits. The question arises as to why girls are not exercising their right to demobilize and benefit from the assistance associated with the process. Earlier programmes did not take women's special needs into account. Nowadays, specific provision is made for women, but many of them still do not present themselves at the assembly points for demobilization.

A key measure that could help to reduce the exclusion of girls would be to avoid requiring girls to hand-in weapons. Such a requirement carries the risk of excluding those who have served in supporting roles, self-demobilized, or been disarmed by their superiors. In some cases, such as Liberia, commanders ordered their girls to leave their weapons behind in the bush in order not to be seen as combatants. In other cases, commanders have been asked to list combatants but have frequently excluded girls and women whom they consider dependents of male combatants (De Watteville, 2003). When cash has been offered as an incentive to disarm, it has also created an incentive for commanders, and others, to take away the weapons or act in ways to either exclude genuine female ex-combatants from the process, or to steal the girls' benefits in order to profit from the money available. Cash incentives have even created an incentive for the renewed abduction of women who are allocated benefits, which the commanders then steal before abandoning the women.

Some further reasons for the non-demobilization of women are listed below.

- *Resistance to confrontation of their past as combatants.* Many girls do not want to encounter their former colleagues. They may also have very justifiable fears about being reunited with families and returning to their former lives.
- *The fear of social exclusion.* As with the above point, many girls and women want to hide their history as combatants to avoid social exclusion in general, even if this eliminates them from assistance programmes (Barth, 2002).
- *The opposition of male soldiers and commanders to the demobilization of girls.* Male combatants sometimes wish to keep girls to compensate for their loss of power after war, and/or use them for household and family tasks (Brett & Specht, 2004).
- *Abuse of the ID card system.* Genuine ex-combatants' cards are sometimes stolen and sold to eligible persons.
- *Following the example of a commander.* The powerful influence of former commanders is often the basis for a girl's decision whether or not to participate in DDR programmes.
- *Unwillingness to be in a camp.* Girls in Liberia expressed unwillingness to be encamped because of harrowing experiences while camping during the conflict (Specht et al., to be published).
- *Reluctance to bring children to camps.* Even where adequate childcare facilities are provided, girls may be unwilling to bring their children with them.
- *Unwillingness to await transport to camps alongside males.* Even in cases where camps are properly separated and full provision is made for safety of girls and women from assault in the disarmament and demobilization facilities, transport pick-up points crowded with males may present a very clear deterrent for girls who wish to reach DDR.
- *Fear of separation.* Girls may not want to be separated from partners or husbands during the disarmament and demobilization process, and thus decide not to register.
- *Distrust in the DDR process.* Such distrust can range from political fears over the peace process, to more specific distrust of the programme (especially when previous programmes have failed, or broken promises), to fears for personal safety, and over the confidentiality of personal information.

If girls do not enter the demobilization process for any of the above reasons, the negative repercussions for them can be manifold and long-term. For example, in Sierra Leone, demobilized child soldiers were relieved from paying school fees and schools that accepted them received a package of materials for all students. Former girl soldiers who did not formally demobilize did not receive the school fee waiver, nor brought added benefits to the school (Brett & Specht, 2004).

Socio-economic reintegration of girls

Gender-specific reintegration has often only meant the provision of (some) special measures for women, such as vocational training courses in traditionally 'women's skills'. However, the range of difficulties girls face in reintegrating compared to other ex-combatants warrants a much more coherent and detailed consideration of their specific requirements.

Girls who actively participated in conflicts are confronted with additional difficulties during their reintegration process, as they are often faced with the community's

negative perception of their involvement. In many conservative and patriarchal societies, military activities are considered 'unsuitable' for women (Aw-Ndiaye, 2001). As a result, many women face rejection by their families and in-laws upon return from the conflict. This means that they risk being excluded from traditional community based social-support systems. Perceived sexual impurity, even in cases where girls have been forced into sex, can have the same effect. Likewise, children or young people returning as dependants can simply be viewed as an extra economic burden in a context where it is already difficult to survive. Discrimination against girls and women as job seekers or starting entrepreneurs is also an issue, and some opt to settle in areas where their personal history is unknown.

Additional difficulties result from the fact that the education level of most girl ex-combatants is generally lower than that of their male counterparts at the time of recruitment. This puts them at a disadvantage in the struggle for the few training and employment possibilities that are available in the immediate post-conflict period. As well as their disadvantages in terms of education, other factors such as: their relative lack of skills, gender-biased norms governing labour, property, movement and access to financial services makes their struggle to support themselves greater than that of male ex-combatants. While girl combatants may have been equals as comrades in armed groups, many occupational paths are denied to them as girls during peace times. Therefore, they find themselves confined to a narrow range of industries and occupations that are in general lower skilled and lower-paid (Date-Bah, 2003). The lack of employment opportunities for women has contributed to the increasing feminization of poverty in many developing countries. Young women

face even greater discrimination than adult women in the labour market, as it is believed that they will soon get married and leave their employment, or become less productive.

Also, depending on their age of entry into armed forces, reintegration assistance often has little to build on in terms of the ex-combatants' experience of normal, peaceful social relations. Instead, the programmes will have to work hard to overcome influences and behaviours that are often deeply embedded as they have been internalized at a significant time in young people's development (Kemper, 2005).

Another complication is the fact that many girls have family obligations. Motherhood may obstruct the social acceptance and economic integration of girl ex-combatants. Many girls also face the health and psychological problems associated with forced sexual activity, childbirth and abortion (Brett & Specht, 2004). The obligations of motherhood also make it difficult for girls to compensate for their lack of basic education. They simply lack the time or the financial means to attend the educational or training courses that could ameliorate their living conditions. These obligations can be particularly arduous when former partners or 'bush husbands' have abandoned the girls. Girl ex-combatants also typically face other health problems, such as anaemia and abdominal and back pains as a result of carrying heavy burdens.

Political reintegration
Some girl combatants have occupied leadership roles in military structures, but are rarely included in peace negotiations. While political positions are bestowed on their male colleagues, female military leaders are generally neglected, and security-related matters such as DDR are often left to the men (Farr, 2003). Gender-based power relationships are thereby reinforced. At the same time,

the opportunity is missed to reassess gender relations and find ways to make them more conductive to a more peaceful society. In fact, many revolutionary movements have listed gender equality as one of their initial goals to mobilize women, but have subsequently abandoned this rhetoric when it comes to peace negotiations.

Perceptions of male and female roles before, during, and after conflict play a crucial role in the DDR process. War tends to strengthen prevailing notions in society that portray men as 'either warriors and/or protectors' (Myrtinnen, 2003), leading to an increase in domestic violence in the aftermath of war. It is important that women be supported in drawing a line under the sexual violence of the war. These important steps towards establishing norms of conduct which allow women a sense of security can be accomplished by organizations who gather evidence of violations of women's rights, and efforts to demonstrate that law and justice systems are able to provide safety and justice. Governments frequently need encouragement to take the issue of domestic violence seriously, and initiatives to offer women social protection within communities can be an important measure for establishing women's safety.

In contrast to the stereotype of the war-like male, girl combatants challenge the common image of peaceable, passive, and domestically oriented women. In post-conflict reconstruction, it is crucial to be sensitive to these changing gender notions and relations, and account for them in DDR programmes and policies. For example, non-fighting or civilian women normally receive greater attention than female combatants during post-conflict reconstruction because they correspond to the image of peace-loving women. Girl combatants may challenge this image, but their suffering and their potential for viable civilian lives should not be overlooked as a consequence.

The same process appears to function in reverse on some issues. For example, men's mental health and trauma do not tend to receive the attention they deserve in comparison to women's. This is again due to embedded stereotypes and taboos. The development of ways to encourage non-violent expressions of masculine identity is also crucial in war-to-peace transition periods. External actors, however, have to grapple with the question of whether, and how much, they can and should interfere in feminine and masculine roles, and gender relations.

Conclusion

The motives of girls for joining up, their various roles in armed forces, the factors which encourage and discourage their demobilization and their needs in terms of socio-economic reintegration all need to be explored in more detail in DDR operations. At the national level, before DDR programme plans are finalized and programmes started, time and resources need to be invested to find the girls and start understanding their potentials, vulnerabilities, dreams and ambitions. From the starting point of increasing their participation in DDR, ways need to be found to support ex-combatant girls in becoming valuable social, political and economic actors in the new society. One cannot overstate the importance of increasing the numbers of females among DDR personnel who are trained and motivated to reach out to girls and identify what they really want and need.

Reintegration approaches must involve entire communities, taking into account shifting social, political, economic and gender contexts. This dynamic process entails not only young people adapting to often "disjointed, displaced, reconfigured" communities, but also communities recognizing and accepting how girls and

boys have changed because of their experiences.

The United Nations (UN) is currently finalizing the integrated guidelines for DDR programmes (IDDRS) that do address some of these issues. Also, in those countries where there is an integrated mission DDR tends to be planned more comprehensively. An 'integrated mission' is the new style of peacekeeping missions in which military and civilian UN organizations work jointly in one mission setting, towards joint goals and objectives. These are positive developments, yet their actual positive impacts on the lives of ex-combatant girls will require constructive scrutiny over the coming months and years. (UNIFEM, UN Development Fund for Women, 2003)

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[1] The UN defines youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24 years. However, the perceptions of who youth are differs considerably from one context to another. Social, economic and cultural systems define the age limits and roles and responsibilities of children, adults and the 'in between' group called youth. Conflicts and violence often forces youth to assume adult roles such as being parents, breadwinners, or fighters.

[2] Boys associated with fighting forces are also often exposed to sexual abuse – a phenomenon which receives less recognition than it warrants. It is also commonly the case that in times of war culturally determined roles of boys and men place pressure on boys to become violent actors.

[3] Many boys were motivated to enlist with fighting groups to protect the female members of their family from sexual abuse. In contrast to girls, boys also referred to the attraction of the military in general or of the fictional images presented by Rambo-style films or soldiers and militants as role models.

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