

# Children in Armed Conflict

The purpose of this paper is to educate the public about the prevalence of girl soldiers in armed conflicts throughout the world and the consideration of uniquely female issues concerning disarmament and social reintegration.

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## How Girl Soldiers are Punished by Their Past

by Ami Chitalia and Michael Odeh

The United Nations and the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers report that there are approximately 300,000 children under the age of 18 serving as soldiers in national and guerilla armies in armed conflicts around the world, including Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, Liberia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip are major recruiters of child soldiers. Children are ideal recruits to rebel factions and terrorist groups as they are relatively easy to manipulate, unlikely to question the group's motives, and arouse little suspicion (Brett, 2004; Brett, 2002; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003).

While war has traditionally been considered a male domain, women and girls participate in warfare to a far greater extent than is generally known and recognized. The purpose of this paper is to highlight issues related specifically to the roles of female child soldiers and consequent challenges of their rehabilitation. It seeks to identify the challenges of social reintegration that beget unique programmatic issues, which are generally overlooked by traditional peace programs (Heyzer, 2003).

Girl soldiers have been used to augment the number of rebel fighters in supplementary roles, such as cooks, domestics, and porters, and are sometimes given positions of power as spies or commanders (McKay, Burman, Gonsalves, & Worthen, 2004). Some groups force adolescent girls into sexual slavery as 'wives' or give them away as rewards to successful commanders (Amnesty International, 2004). In this capacity, girl soldiers are subjected to rape, unwanted pregnancies, forced maternity, and

the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS (Twum-Danso, 2003). And while all child soldiers suffer from social reintegration problems, such as a lack of education, flashbacks of traumatic violence, and disabilities due to injuries, the social status of girls presents a further obstacle to reintroduction into society. The deep-rooted stigma associated with the abuses that women and girls suffered during war makes it difficult to formulate programs targeting this vulnerable group. Whether the girls joined armed groups by free will, coercion, or abduction, almost all girl soldiers are neglected during the reintegration process (Brett & Specht, 2004).

### **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs**

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) activities are designed to facilitate the disbanding of military fighters while easing their transition back into society. Planning for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process includes coordination from all actors – international governments, the United Nations, armed group representatives, NGO’s, social organizations, families of child soldiers, and local community leaders (Fusato, 2003). The reintegration of girl soldiers is three-pronged: social integration, to feel accepted by the community; political integration, to participate in the decision-making process by incorporating their combat experiences of victimization and resiliency; and economic reintegration, to gain a respectable livelihood (Veale, 2003). DDR activities intended to empower and stimulate financial independence include the financing of self-help projects, while other important DDR services consist of psychological treatment for traumatic violence and medical attention for injuries, maternal health, and sexually transmitted diseases (Amnesty International, 2004; Twum-Danso, 2003).

According to the World Bank, DDR programs overwhelmingly focus on “young men with guns” (UNIFEM, 2004), and have a tendency to overlook or ignore the distinct needs of girl soldiers. The one-man, one-gun model of DDR, in which former soldiers can trade in their weapon for money and job training,

often exclude girls because they never possessed weapons or have already had them taken away, thus disqualifying them from DDR participation (Preston, 2004). According to one female ex-combatant in Sierra Leone, “Unless you were a fighter with a weapon to lay down, you are not eligible to join the program” (Rehn & Sirleaf, 2002). Furthermore, the DDR program in Mozambique only issued resettlement grants to men and only provided men’s clothing, despite a significant number of female combatants (No War Zone, 2004). The Mozambican girl soldiers were left limited options; some girls were held by their abductors, while others fled to cities and established communities for ex-soldiers. Still, however, many girls lacked the skills and education necessary to fully reintegrate into society (McKay and Mazurana, 2003). One expert notes that “negotiating the release of girls is a lot harder than boys,” since males performed largely combatant roles and are of

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little use in the post-war period. But armed groups are reluctant to release girls, despite the termination of fighting, where, for example, in Sierra Leone, the rebel force Revolutionary United Front (RUF) continues to use abducted girls as domestic workers and concubines (Twum-Danso, 2003).

### **Sexual Exploitation and Social Stigmatization**

The perceived sexual involvement of girl soldiers (whether as raped, pregnant, or otherwise sexually active) stigmatizes them within society and further limits their future opportunities (Brett, 2002). Consequences of social stigmatization of sexually victimized girl soldiers can be extreme (Lenz, 2003), and since many girls are excluded from DDR programs, they must exclusively rely on supportive groups for assistance. Because many girl soldiers experienced sexual exploitation, they experience “second-rate reintegration” when society misperceives their situation. Girl soldiers are sometimes seen by the larger society as the wives of rebels or merely as camp followers, notably in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone. When some girls return to their communities without formal assistance, many are unwelcome because of their sexual status (McKay & Mazurana, 2003).

## Child Rights Spotlight: Girl Soldier in Sri Lanka

*The story of this child soldier, a girl who entered the independence movement at age 13, was documented in a study by Yvonne E. Keairns, PhD, entitled "The Voice of Girl Child Soldiers: Sri Lanka." It shows the particular nature of the girl soldier experience, and underscores the need for special services for this unique group.*

"I left home to join the movement...Four days before school closed for vacation, nine of us school children planned to leave together and we did it...I was young and it was thrilling and adventurous to handle a gun, I liked it very much.

"I cannot remember how many fell with my rounds... I have seen many dead bodies — it was not a problem for me. I have used rifles. I have faced so many deaths.

"... the [government] army surrounded us. They took some of my companions and shot and killed them on the spot. I was taken captive so suddenly.

"I was treated like a monkey. The sole of my foot was hit. The sexual assault was the worst I was tied upside down and I was hit. My face was covered with a cellophane bag...I had to swallow 100 small limes, later I suffered of stomach ailment for a long time...That day the torturers used soda bottles and pierced me, I fainted. When I regained [consciousness], I was in a pool of blood. I was treated worse than an animal.

"I will never ever marry a man, they will never ever understand what torture is and how miserable a human being, a girl can be. There is no one who will understand me...I have sinned, my father trusted me and I have sinned against him...After all the suffering I had gone through, I was still not free in this land.

"I cannot trust anybody. I'm confused all the time... My mind is broken. I'm still scared of my life...My mind I feel is frozen."

-Sabitha-Jayanthi, at 20 years old  
5 years out of the conflict

Fathers in Uganda, for example, were reported to have rejected their daughters for being "tainted" and ineligible for a respectable marriage. Without social or familial support in addition to exclusion from DDR activities, former girl soldiers have nowhere to turn for help (Twum-Danso, 2003). Former girl soldiers are often reluctant to reveal their past associations with rebel groups out of fear of discrimination and embarrassment (IRIN, 2003). And furthermore, donor governments of DDR projects seek to expedite implementation, and as a result neglect to seek out former female soldiers who are hesitant and fearful to come forward. Girls who serve in combat demonstrate a resiliency that defies gender stereotypes. In reality, the unique socialization of girl soldiers is ignored in DDR programs which confine females to traditional gender roles (Preston, 2004; McKay and Mazurana, 2003).

When girls are exploited sexually during armed conflict, there is a high risk of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. One alarming report showed almost all abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda to be infected by at least one STD. Many former girl soldiers also experience abdominal pains, cervical tearing, loss of menstruation, and pelvic inflammatory disease resulting from rape and repeated molestation. The sexual exploitation of girl soldiers increases the risk of unsolicited pregnancies, and many former female ex-combatants can be classified as "girl mothers" (i.e., girls affiliated with a fighting force who conceived a child while under 18 years of age). The physical effects of sexual violence experienced by girl soldiers are often passed on to their offspring through childbirth and breastfeeding. Girl mothers are especially stigmatized by society, causing them to feel more marginalized and their children even more vulnerable (McKay, et al., 2004). Psychologically speaking, victims of sexual violence often have amplified feelings of shame, low self-esteem, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Unfit or unwilling to care for their children, some girl mothers abandoned their children, resulting in the observed increase of orphaned street children in places like Kampala, Uganda's capital (Twum-Danso, 2003). The main point is that girl soldiers require unique considerations during DDR implementation – aside from educational and vocational resources, which all former child soldiers need, DDR programs should broaden available opportunities for females

and consider the health needs of their children (Brett, 2002).

### **Girl Soldiers and the Future of DDR**

The United Nations (2000) recommends that special DDR measures be taken to explicitly recognize and respond to the needs of girl soldiers, especially those with children. These measures call for intervention focused on community sensitization, training and employment assistance, and psychological and social support for girl soldiers. The United Nations Development Fund for Women encourages DDR program designs to integrate gender-perspectives that incorporate girl soldiers working in any and all roles (e.g., combatant, sex slave, cook, etc.). Of additional concern are the testing, treatment, and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other STD's (Farr, 2004). Reintegration programs should be results-driven in order to focus resources on positive behavioral change, of both the returning girl soldiers and of the acknowledged communities (Preston, 2004).

There are overlooked aspects of girl soldiers that could prove helpful in forming DDR programs. First, having served as spies and in other positions close to rebel leaders, girl soldiers may be privy to such specialized knowledge as the location of weapons caches, which can help intervening governments in the disarmament process and subsequent peace-building efforts (United Nations, 2000). Girl soldiers also mature rapidly due to the demanding environment they are in, but without the formal education society values (Lenz, 2003). Therefore, many girl soldiers acquire leadership qualities, egos, and knowledge which DDR organizers should recognize and work with in order to best turn former soldiers into productive community participants (Wurst, 2004). International DDR standards have been criticized for not aggressively prosecuting those engaged in the exploitation of children as soldiers, and the United Nations has been asked to take a firmer role in bringing recruiters and rebel forces to justice (Threlfall, 2001).

Girl soldiers, regardless of how they became involved in combat (free will, abduction, or coercion),

require the attention of the international community so that they can fully participate in DDR activities. By not incorporating the needs of girl soldiers in DDR programs, many will continue to suffer with rebel forces, feel like outcasts in their communities, and be unable to actively contribute to the peace-making process.❖

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