

**EUROPEAN MASTERS' DEGREE ON HUMAN
RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION**



**GIRL CHILD SOLDIERS:
LIFE AFTER COMBAT?**

SIMONA DANIELA MOROIANU

**SUPERVISOR:
Dr. HANS-JOACHIM HEINTZE
RUHR-UNIVERSITY BOCHUM**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction	1
Modern wars and the phenomenon of child soldiers	2
The global use of girl child soldiers	3
Definitions	6
General framework	9
 1. International response to the consequences of involvement of girls in armed conflict	 11
International Humanitarian Law	13
International Human Rights Law	15
<i>i. Universal instruments</i>	15
<i>ii. Regional instruments</i>	18
General International Instruments	20
<i>i. Security Council Resolutions</i>	20
<i>ii. International Criminal Court</i>	23
<i>iii. International customary law</i>	24
<i>iv. The Special Court for Sierra Leone</i>	25
 2. Recruitment and its impact on future reintegration	 28
Voluntary participation	30
<i>i. War</i>	31
<i>ii. Poverty</i>	34

<i>iii. Education</i>	36
<i>iv. Employment</i>	37
<i>v. Family</i>	38
Forced recruitment	40
 3. Roles and life in armed forces and their impact on demobilisation and reintegration programmes	 48
Experiences and activities within armed forces or groups	49
<i>i. Forced labour</i>	49
<i>ii. Training, combat activities and violence</i>	51
<i>iii. Sexual exploitation</i>	54
Consequences of girls' participation in armed conflict on DDR programmes	57
<i>i. Demobilisation</i>	58
<i>ii. Social and economic reintegration</i>	67
 Conclusion	 76
 Bibliography	 87

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INTRODUCTION

"I've seen people get their hands cut off, a ten-year-old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive [...] So many times I just cried inside my heart because I didn't dare to cry out loud." (interview with a fourteen-year-old girl ex-soldier in Sierra Leone¹)

"I am not afraid. We are prepared to fight. We don't do the cooking here, we fight with our friends." (interview with a fourteen-year-old girl fighting with the Kosovo Liberation Army in 1998-1999²)

"I didn't shout out because he is a sergeant and a higher rank. You don't disrespect your boss" (interview with a 17-year-old British army recruit raped by her instructor in 1997³)

To hear their stories is sad. And shocking. How is this possible? What future do these girls have? What future does the world have, if its children grow up like that? These are the questions that first came into my mind when I heard their stories. I wanted to understand...

¹ Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers, *Girls with guns: an agenda on child soldiers for "Beijing plus five"*, available at <<http://www.child-soldiers.org/cs/childsoldiers.nsf/0/30bf3605f103061b80256b210046f85b?OpenDocument>> on 24 April 2004 (here and after cited as CSCS, *Girls with guns*).

² E. Daly, *Kosovo girls want to kill*, The Independent, 25 October 1998.

³ CSCS, *Girls with guns*.

Modern wars and the phenomenon of child soldiers

Since the end of the Cold War, the nature of armed conflicts has changed. Most of today's conflicts can be described as internal, fought within the borders of a state, with the civilian population being among its main targets. More than 90% of the victims are non-combatants - mainly women and children - and communities as a whole are drawn into the conflict. Furthermore, although atrocities have always been committed in wars, the horror carried out in modern wars is accentuated by the fact that very often members of the same community are committing them against their fellow members. Light weapons play an increasingly prominent role in modern conflicts. Because of the length of many conflicts, the blurring of civilian and military targets and the proliferation of small arms, the incorporation of children into war has increased in recent decades⁴.

It is estimated that more than 500.000 children have been recruited into government armed forces, paramilitaries and armed opposition groups in more than 85 countries around the world, and approximately 300.000 children are actively participating as combatants in armed conflicts worldwide⁵. However, the exact number is difficult to assess, since most of them are "invisible" due to the fact that armed groups tend to deny their existence and reliable documentation is insufficient. Approximately

⁴ Graça Machel, *The impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Report of the expert of the UN Secretary General, A/51/306, 26 August 1996, p. 9 (here and after cited as Graça Machel Report).

⁵ Coalition to Stop the use of Child Soldiers, available at <www.child-soldiers.org> on 1 June 2004.

one quarter of them serve in the East Asian region, the rest being involved in conflicts in Africa, South America and Europe⁶.

The global use of girl child soldiers

A further significant change in the nature of contemporary armed conflicts has been the recruitment and inclusion of girls, alongside boys, as soldiers. Although war has traditionally been considered a male realm, there is reliable information about girls used in government forces, paramilitaries and armed opposition groups in 55 countries all over the world, between 1990 and 2003, in significant numbers⁷. For example, in Northern Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army has systematically abducted thousands of children, including many girls, over the years of conflict. In Turkey also, in 1998 more than 10% of the child soldiers used by the PKK were said to be girls. The massive recruitment of girls by the Sri Lankan LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelaam) has been justified by the LTTE as being its way to assist "women's liberation and counteracting the oppressive traditionalism of the present system". In Colombia, girls have been used by both the FARC and the Colombian state security forces for years, both in fighting and auxiliary roles. Moreover, according to official statistics from 1998, there were hundreds of adolescent girls as recruits in the British armed

⁶ Model United Nations of the University of Chicago, *Reintegration of Child Soldiers*, Topic area A, 2003 available at <http://www.munuc.org/2003pdf/UNICEF_A.pdf> on 2 June 2004 (here and after cited as Topic area A, *Reintegration of child soldiers*).

⁷ S. McKay, M. Burman, M. Gonsalves, and M. Worthen, *Known but Invisible: Girl Mothers Returning from Fighting Forces*, Child Soldiers Newsletter, Issue 11, May-June 2004, available at <www.child-soldiers.org> on 21 June 2004 (here and after cited as S. McKay, *Known but invisible*); D. Mazurana, S. McKay, K. Carlson, J. Kasper, *Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilisation and Reintegration*, *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8 (2), 2002, p. 101 (here and after cited as D. Mazurana, *Girls in fighting forces*).

forces, while approximately 20% of the minor soldiers enlisted into active duty in the US armed forces in 1998 were also girls.⁸

However, there is no reliable data on the exact numbers of girls and boys involved in armed conflicts. There are no exact statistics on how many of child soldiers are used, not to speak about disaggregated figures on gender and age⁹. As various authors¹⁰ indicate, there is tremendous difficulty in obtaining information on the number, age, roles, effects, and expectations of the girls used in armed conflicts. However, even if the numbers used are speculative and based on estimates and demobilisation figures (which are not relevant for reasons that will be analysed in this paper), they identify the majority of child soldiers as boys, with girls forming up to 30 per cent.

The above-mentioned examples (which are not exhaustive) are only meant to highlight the global dimension of this phenomenon. Reflecting the increasing awareness of the international community on this widespread problem, the Graça Machel report¹¹ underlined in 1996 the attention that should be paid to the use of girls during the armed conflicts, emphasising the importance of the recruitment, the roles, and the post-conflict difficulties girls have to deal with. Moreover, in its Resolution 1325, adopted in October 2000, the United Nations Security Council recognised the particular needs of girl child soldiers in post

⁸ CSCS, *Girls with guns*.

⁹ E. Páez, *Girls in the Colombian Armed Groups, a diagnosis*, Terre des Hommes Germany, 2001, p.6 (here and after cited as E. Paez, *A diagnosis*).

¹⁰ S. McKay and D. Mazurana, *Girls in Militaries, Paramilitaries, and Armed Opposition Groups*, background paper for the International Conference on War Affected Children, Winnipeg, Canada, 2000, available at <<http://www.waraffectedchildren.gc.ca/girls-en.asp>> (here and after cited as S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*); E. Paez, *A diagnosis*; D. Mazurana and S. McKay, *Child soldiers: What about the girls?*, The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Sept./Oct. 2001, vol. 57, No. 5, pp. 30-35 (here and after cited as D. Mazurana, *What about the girls?*).

¹¹ Graça Machel Report .

conflict situation and the importance of properly designed and “effective institutional arrangements to guarantee their protection and full participation in the peace process”, noting their significant potential for the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security¹².

However, the majority of the international reports and initiatives, academic studies or peace accords use the general term of “child soldiers” or “children”, which almost always means boys. The most part of them ignores the destiny of girls and their particular needs as both children and females. Despite the fact that they are used as soldiers in so many countries worldwide, their participation in armed conflicts has been largely unacknowledged. Therefore, very little is known about the human rights violations that girls have to suffer, the treatment they receive within the armed forces and the impact on both girls and their society.

Apart from particular health impacts on their reproductive function, psychologically girls may be affected in different way than boys by the shock of the loss of their family, home, community, virginity or future. However, the short- and long-term impact on girls’ lives, both during and after conflict, has just begun to be considered by the international humanitarian and defence community and this is obviously reflected in the lack of special demilitarisation, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes to meet the particular needs of those girls. Consequently, in today’s conflicts, we constantly find that girls are hardly ever included in the DDR programmes. Moreover, due to girls’ invisibility in formal demobilisation processes, it is easier to assume that there are only few girl child soldiers, rather than trying to find out the reasons why they do not go through formal demobilisation

¹² United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1325 (2000).

programmes.¹³ It is therefore essential to acknowledge that "the violation of girls' rights do not begin with their recruitment, nor does it end with their separation from conflict"¹⁴. Being aware of this problem, the UN Security Council, in its Resolution 1539 from April 22, 2004, requested to "all parties concerned, including United Nations agencies, funds and programmes as well as financial institutions to continue to ensure that all children associated with armed forces and groups [...] are systematically included in every disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, taking into account the specific needs and capacities of girls."¹⁵

Definitions

The notions of "child", "child soldier", "demobilisation" and "reintegration" and how they will be used in this paper need to be clearly defined. It is difficult to establish a universal definition for the concepts "child" and "childhood". Although the United Nations have tried to do so through the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), this attempt has been strongly criticised. According to the cultural relativist theory (emphasising the differences between peoples and societies that need to be acknowledged and respected), childhood is a relative concept that changes "according to historical time, geographical environment, local culture, and socio-economic conditions"¹⁶. However, the definition used

¹³ R. Brett, *Girl Soldiers: Amazons Appear*, Gulf News, available at <www.gulf-news.com/Articles/opinion.asp?ArticleID=102889> on 23 April 2004 (here and after cited as R. Brett, *Amazons Appear*).

¹⁴ E. Paez, *A diagnosis*.

¹⁵ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1539 (2004).

¹⁶ J. Kuper, *International Law Concerning Child Civilians in Armed Conflict*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, p.13.



in this dissertation will be in concordance with the Article 1 of the CRC, considering the child to be every person under the age of eighteen¹⁷.

Peace negotiations are often hampered and demobilisation and reintegration programmes delayed by the debates on the terminology defining "child soldiers". Definitions of "child soldier" vary based on the country that uses the child in armed conflicts and on the terms of the peace agreements signed by the respective country. For example, in Angola the date when the peace agreement was signed was chosen as the cut-off point for child soldiers, therefore leaving outside the demobilisation programmes the children who turned eighteen between the signing of the peace agreement and the date of demobilisation.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that, under international humanitarian law, indirect participation in conflict as spies, logistical supporters of fighting groups, and so on, is not included in the concept of "combatant". Therefore, many demobilisation actions ignore the children who served in auxiliary roles within armed forces, like porters, sex slaves, or spies¹⁸.

In this paper the notion of "child soldier" is used according to the definition given by the Cape Town Principles and Best Practice and used by all the agencies working in the field; therefore, it refers to "any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only

¹⁷ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, November 1989.

¹⁸ Topic area A, *Reintegration of child soldiers*.

refer to a child who is carrying or has carried a gun"¹⁹. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of "combatant" is also extended to include all the categories mentioned above, not only those actively fighting in the front lines.

Disarmament is a post-conflict process defined as the collection, control and dispersal of various kinds of weapons. It is not the purpose of this paper to go into the details of the military aspect of disarmament, as this process rarely affects the fate of girl child soldiers.

Demobilisation is the process that aims to downsize, or where possible, completely disband armed forces (government and guerrilla). It includes the gathering of soldiers and sometimes their dependants in designated places, registration and distribution of identification documents, medical screening and primary assistance to meet basic needs.

Reintegration is the last step of a DDR programme and refers to the long-term process of re-establishing the civilian life, providing assistance to former soldiers to increase their potential economic and social reinsertion into civil society. It generally includes the provision of a cash package or in-kind compensation, education or skills-developing projects. A successful reintegration is completed when the ex-soldiers are able to ensure their financial independence and when their community has accepted them.²⁰

¹⁹ UNICEF, *Cape Town Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilisation and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa*, UNICEF, New York, 1999.

²⁰ Definitions used by the United Nations in the *Report of the Secretary-General on the Role of the UN Peacekeeping in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration*, S/2000/101, 11 February 2000.

General framework

It is necessary to state from the beginning that this dissertation is addressing the challenges and obstacles that affect girls' sustainable demobilisation and reintegration into their societies. It will focus on the impact the ways they joined the armed forces have on their future reintegration, and thus will emphasise the importance of special and flexible programmes designed to take into account the specific needs of those concerned and the reality of the local community. It will also draw attention to the close link between the girls' role within the armed forces and their special challenges when demobilised, underlining the importance of reliable knowledge of the local norms and values. This kind of knowledge, particularly missing from the present programmes, would allow those working in the field to facilitate girls' reintegration by addressing the requirements that local communities consider to be most important for accepting back the girl ex-soldiers.

In order to attain an acceptable conclusion some questions must be taken into account throughout the paper: is it right to reintegrate these girls into a society that, one way or the other, facilitated their involvement into the armed conflict? What are the main differences between the challenges faced by the boys' demobilisation and reintegration process and those faced by the corresponding processes for girls? Is it worthwhile to rehabilitate the former girl soldiers without analysing the community to which they belong and the issues of gender stereotypes, local economic reality, social acceptance and reconciliation?

In order to address these questions, Chapter 1 will analyse the international response to the challenges brought by the phenomenon of girl child soldiers, that requires the international community and non-

governmental organisations to react, identifying the double obligation of States and non-state actors in supporting girls' reintegration into society, in their capacity as both children and females. Chapter 2 will discuss the ways girls are recruited and will highlight their impact on future challenges that the demobilisation and reintegration programmes face, while emphasising the main differences between boys' and girls' recruitment and the roots of these differences. Chapter 3 focuses on the obstacles that local communities have to overcome when accepting the former female child soldiers, envisaging the fact that girls' experiences within the fighting forces oppose the traditional gender stereotypes in many countries.

Therefore, while discussing the particular treatment and experiences of girl child soldiers that distinguish them from their male peers before, during, and after armed conflict, the paper will show the importance of both girls-centred and community-centred approaches of any reintegration process and will reveal the necessity for special programmes to address girl child soldiers' particular needs during demobilisation and reintegration process. In order to analyse the factors that influence girls' demobilisation and social and economic reintegration, this dissertation will use as examples well-known conflicts around the world, without giving a description of their nature and roots, since the conflicts' nature do not affect girls' reintegration differently than that of boys'.

CHAPTER 1

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CONSEQUENCES OF INVOLVEMENT OF GIRLS IN ARMED CONFLICT

"If victory or survival are at stake, then rebel leaders are likely to add one more grave breach to their list of war crimes rather than to honour an obligation they have under international law."²¹

The protection and well being of girls and children in general, both in times of peace and war, as vulnerable members of the society and future pillars of civilisation, is the object of important international instruments whose scope has been strengthened and expanded over the years. Despite that, it is estimated that approximately 2 million children have been killed in conflict situations over the last decade, over 6 million have been seriously injured or disabled and more than 20 million have been displaced by war²².

It is important to notice, however, that children are affected in different ways in every conflict. As an example, recruitment and the active participation of girls in hostilities is a severe problem in countries like Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka or Colombia, but was not that widespread

²¹ R. Harvey, *Child Soldiers - The beginning of the end?*, Child Right, March 2000, Children's Legal Centre, University of Essex, p. 163.

²² Graça Machel Report.

(although existing) in Yugoslavia²³. It is also acknowledged that children are affected by war differently from adults, boys differently than girls.

While the awareness on the existing law instruments is important to prevent the use of children as soldiers and to advocate the ban of their recruitment, the legal provisions dealing with child soldiers are an essential basis for demobilisation and reintegration programmes. Moreover, the recognition of girls' special vulnerability and their potential contribution to the countries' social and economic stability, through their future economic and reproductive roles in their society, led to their special protection, due to their double capacity as both children and females.

The most important legal documents on the involvement of children in armed conflicts are the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflicts of 2000.²⁴ As it can be easily noted, the legal protection of children affected by armed conflicts is mainly contained in two bodies of international law: International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law.²⁵

²³ R. Harvey, *Children and Armed Conflicts. A guide to international humanitarian and human rights law*, International Bureau for Children's Rights, Montreal, 2003, p. 6 (here and after cited as R. Harvey, *A guide to international law*).

²⁴ B. Verhey, *Child Soldiers: Preventing, Demobilising and Reintegrating*, Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23, November 2001, pp. 25-28 (here and after cited as B. Verhey, *Preventing, demobilising and reintegrating*).

²⁵ R. Harvey, *A guide to international law*.

International Humanitarian Law

Indeed, it can be argued that the Fourth Geneva Convention contains numerous provisions aimed to protect children, "both as civilians and in their own rights". In this sense, Article 3, common to the all four conventions, provides for a minimum protection for "persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms and those placed *hors de combat* by sickness, wounds, detention, or any other cause". Thus, the children who laid down their weapons, and those who are *hors de combat* for one of the reasons enumerated above, qualify for the protection provided to non-participants and benefit from the basic distinction between civilians and combatants²⁶.

In addition, the Article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention entitles the children to receive special protection, by obliging the high contracting parties to allow the free passage of aid needed by "children under fifteen, expectant mothers and maternity cases". Furthermore, Article 24 places on the parties of the conflict the responsibility to "take the necessary measures to ensure that children under fifteen, who are orphaned or are separated from their families as a result of the war, are not left to their own resources, and that their maintenance, the exercise of their religion and their education are facilitated in all circumstances. Their education shall, as far as possible, be entrusted to persons of a similar cultural tradition." This provision is paving the road to reintegration programmes of former child soldiers.²⁷

²⁶ G. Goodwin-Gill and I. Cohn, *Child soldiers - The role of children in armed conflicts*, A Study for the Henry Dunant Institute Geneva, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, p.121.

²⁷ Ibidem, pp 121-125.

Added to that, Article 77 of Additional Protocol I becomes the first binding international document addressing the issue of child soldiers and sets the age of fifteen years as the minimum age for recruitment and direct participation of children in armed conflicts²⁸. It also provides for protection of the children and underlines the importance of encampment of children separately from adults. Moreover, it requires the parties of the conflict to provide children "with the care and aid they require, whether because of their age or any other reasons", a formulation that can be interpreted as to include all the consequences of participation of both boys' and girls' in conflict. Furthermore, Article 77 corroborated with Article 76 of the same Additional Protocol - which refers to the special protection due to women against any attack to their honour, in particular against humiliating and degrading treatment, enforced prostitution or any other form of indecent assault - leads to the first instrument that addresses the special needs of girls involved in armed conflicts, taking into account their reproductive role in society.

Next, the Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions is the first binding international document that addresses the conduct of parties in non-international conflicts. In addition, in its Article 4, paragraph 3, Protocol II urges the states to take action in order to facilitate the reunification of children with their families, and refers particularly to the obligation to provide the needed education and to abstain from children's recruitment and use in hostilities. Furthermore, the interdiction of children's involvement in hostilities is absolute, including both direct and indirect participation.²⁹

²⁸ R. Harvey, *A guide to international law*, p. 9.

²⁹ "The principle of non-recruitment includes the interdiction to accept volunteering. Not only that the child shall not be recruited, nor enrolled, but even more, he is not 'authorised to take part in hostilities', meaning to participate in military operations

In conclusion, both the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, while forbidding children's participation in armed conflicts, repeatedly underline the importance of the family for the development of the child and indirectly recognise the special attention due to girls affected by war in both their capacities as children and females.



International Human Rights Law

i. Universal instruments

However, one could argue that the reintegration of children affected by armed conflicts is based particularly on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, since it has been almost universally signed and ratified. The obligation of the States towards these processes resides in Article 39 of the Convention, which provides: "State Parties shall take appropriate measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of [...] armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child". However, not all children are protected by the Convention in times of conflict, since it maintains the minimum age for recruitment and direct involvement in hostilities at the level established by the International Humanitarian Law, meaning fifteen years of age.

such as information gathering, carrying of ammunition or persons, or carrying out acts of sabotage". Y. Sandoz, C. Swinarski and B. Zimmermann, Comments on the Additional Protocols of 8 June 1977 of the Geneva Convention, International Committee of the Red Cross, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Geneva, 1986, p. 923, quoted in N. Arzoumanian and F. Pizzutelli, *Victimes et bourreaux: questions de responsabilité liées à la problématique des enfants-soldats en Afrique*, International Review of the Red Cross, December 2003, vol. 85, No. 852, p. 834 (here and after cited as N. Arzoumanian, *Victimes et bourreaux*).

The strongest instrument to date prohibiting the use of children as soldiers is provided by the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts. The Protocol replaces Article 38, paragraph 3, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, increasing the minimum age for direct participation in hostilities to eighteen years from fifteen years and therefore improving the special protection due to persons under the age of eighteen under the Convention. However, there is a distinction between the compulsory recruitment and the volunteering of children aged between fifteen and eighteen years, although the distinction is only applicable for the armed forces and it does not concern the armed groups.³⁰

The importance of the Optional Protocol resides in the fact that it has changed the international legal basis existing prior to 2000 for allowing recruitment and direct participation in conflicts at younger ages. Historically, the two Additional Protocols of the Geneva Conventions had set up the minimum age at fifteen, the age that was subsequently incorporated into the above-mentioned article of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Thus, although the Optional Protocol leaves space for the governments to allow voluntary recruitment at fifteen years, the legal age for compulsory and voluntary recruitment and deployment becomes eighteen, to be applicable for both State and non-state forces.³¹

In addition, through its Article 6, paragraph 3, the Protocol becomes the first binding international agreement that specifically obliges States to demobilise and reintegrate former child soldiers and to provide the

³⁰ N. Arzoumanian, *Victimes et bourreaux*, pp. 834-835.

³¹ B. Verhey, *Preventing, demobilising and reintegrating*, pp. 27-28.

necessary assistance for the success of those processes³². Furthermore, in order to address the lack of resources needed for these actions, Article 7 urges States to cooperate through technical and financial assistance. It, therefore, points out the responsibility of both the concerned States and the international community for the rehabilitation and social reintegration of the children affected by the armed conflicts, envisaging the importance of the latter's response.³³

Another important instrument addressing the problems of girls is the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which emphasises the fact that "the role of women in procreation should not be a basis for discrimination". Furthermore, it calls on State Parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate "any stereotyped concept of the roles of men and women at all levels and in all forms of education", and to organise "programmes for girls and women who have left school prematurely". The Convention also urges the States to ensure women's "access to health care services" and to guarantee them the right "to obtain all types of training and education, formal and non-formal, including that relating to functional literacy, as well as, inter alia, the benefit of all community and extension services, in order to increase their technical proficiency"³⁴.

Thus, although not specifically mentioning the problem of girl soldiers, the Convention becomes a tool to oblige State Parties to undertake the necessary steps to assist and facilitate the reintegration of girls, by

³² Although it can be expended and applied for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers by considering them as victims of the armed conflicts, the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not specifically refer to the children who have been recruited and used in hostilities.

³³ R. Harvey, *A guide to international law*, p. 32.

ensuring that society's stereotypes of traditional roles of men and women in the community would not affect the process and by providing health care services and educational programmes for the girls who prematurely interrupted school because of their involvement in the conflict.

ii. Regional instruments

Regional instruments are also very important. It is, therefore, necessary to mention the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Children of 1990, which represents the strongest protection instrument against child recruitment binding the countries members of the Organisation for African Unity. The Charter also declares the age of eighteen as the minimum age for recruitment (both compulsory and volunteer)³⁵. In this sense, it states that:

"Art. 2: For the purpose of this Charter, a child means every human being below the age of 18 years.

Art. 22: [...] States Parties to the present Charter shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from refraining any child."

Moreover, the African Charter also constitutes an instrument to bind State Parties to take the appropriate measures, in accordance with their means and national conditions, to provide children in need with "material assistance and support programmes particularly with regard to nutrition, health, education, clothing and housing" (Article 20.2) and "to

³⁴ The mentioned provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women to be found in the Preamble, Article 10 paragraphs (c) and (f), and Article 14.2, paragraph (d).

³⁵ UNHCR, Action for the Rights of Children, *Critical Issues - Child Soldiers*, September 2002 (here and after cited as UNHCR, *Critical Issues - Child soldiers*).

trace and re-unite children with parents or relatives where separation is caused by internal and external displacement arising from armed conflicts [...]” (Article 25.2).

Another important instrument, which has not entered into force to date but proves the awareness on the seriousness of the problem of girl child soldiers, is the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, adopted on 11 July 2003. In its’ article related to the protection of women in armed conflicts, the Protocol is directly addressing the widespread phenomenon of the use of girls in many armed conflicts around the African Continent. Therefore, it calls for the States members of the Organisation for African Unity to “take all necessary measures to ensure that no child, especially girls under 18 years of age, take a direct part in hostilities and that no child is recruited as a soldier”³⁶ and to “prohibit, combat and punish all forms of exploitation of children, especially the girl-child”³⁷. Moreover, the Protocol is also providing space for including girls’ needs in demobilisation and reintegration programmes, by binding States to combat all forms of discrimination against women and to “integrate a gender perspective in their policy decisions, legislation, development plans, programmes and activities in all other spheres of life”³⁸.

³⁶ The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, Article 11.4.

³⁷ Ibidem, Article 13, paragraph g).

³⁸ Ibidem, Article 2, paragraph c).

General International Instruments

i. Security Council Resolutions

The protection of children affected by armed conflicts has also been addressed by many of the Security Council's resolutions. Although not legally binding, these resolutions do provide a framework of standards for the protection of children in armed conflict and open the way to further concrete action. Thus, Resolution 1261³⁹ "strongly condemns recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in violation of international law", while highlighting the long-term consequences that the impact of war on children has for durable peace, security and development.

Resolution 1314⁴⁰, adopted in the following year, "requests the inclusion of provisions for the protection of children, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of child combatants in peace agreements". In addition, it states that situations where the International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law are violated, may constitute a threat to international peace and security, therefore leaving room, at least in theory, to the Security Council for further adopt appropriate measures under Article 41 of the Charter of the United Nations.

Following the Graça Machel Report in 1996 and realising the lack of data on the impact of armed conflicts on women and girls, the Security Council adopted, in October 2000, the Resolution 1325⁴¹. The Security Council expresses its concern regarding the fact that particularly women

³⁹ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1261 (1999).

⁴⁰ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1314 (2000).

⁴¹ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1325 (2000).

and children are the most affected by armed conflicts and targeted by the armed elements and calls on all the actors involved to include the special needs of women and girls affected by conflict during “[...] rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction” in the negotiation and implementation of peace accords.

Moreover, Resolution 1379⁴² adopted in 2001 emphasised the link between HIV/AIDS and armed conflict. Following the previous calls for action to stop the use of children in hostilities, the Security Council asked the Secretary-General to draw up a list of all parties that recruit and use children in violation of international law, in order to elaborate a strategy to address the problem.

In January 2003, Resolution 1460⁴³ was adopted and called for “an era of application” of international standards and instruments for the protection of children affected by armed conflicts. It also calls upon the State Parties to ensure that the children ex-soldiers are involved in all DDR programmes, while also highlighting the importance of addressing the problems of girls.

Furthermore, in its most recent resolution⁴⁴ adopted on 22 April, 2004, the Security Council goes further and asks the Secretary-General to devise urgently “an action plan for a systematic and comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism [...] for consideration in taking appropriate action”. Moreover, it expresses its intention “to take appropriate measures [...] to curb linkages between illicit trade in natural and other resources, illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons, cross-border abduction and recruitment, and armed conflict

⁴² United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1379 (2001).

⁴³ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1460 (2003).

⁴⁴ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1539 (2004).

[...]” and “to consider imposing targeted and graduated measures, through country-specific resolutions, such as, inter alia, a ban on the export or supply of small arms and light weapons and of other military equipment or military assistance” if the parties to conflicts which recruit and use children in hostilities do not develop, within a short and concrete period of time (three months), a concrete time-bound action plan to halt these practices and if they fail to respect the commitments within the presented plan.

In addition to that, the most concrete reference formally made to the demobilisation and reintegration of girls involved in armed conflicts can be found in the same resolution that requests “all parties concerned, including United Nations agencies, funds and programmes as well as financial institutions, to continue to ensure that all children associated with armed forces and groups [...] are systematically included in every disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, taking into account the specific needs and capacities of girls, with a particular emphasis on education, including the monitoring [...] of children demobilised in order to prevent re-recruitment”.

Although not with legal impact, the frequency of those resolutions proves that the problem of children in armed conflict remains high on the agenda of the international community. In addition, the inclusion in the resolutions of the phenomenon of girl soldiering and the need for special programmes to ensure the achievement of their demobilisation and social processes brings legitimacy to further campaigning, fundraising and programming on this aspect.

ii. International Criminal Court

Another important step for the protection of children involved in armed conflicts is the adoption of the Statute of the International Criminal Court that came into force on 1 July, 2002. According to the Statute, the ICC shall have the jurisdiction to prosecute perpetrators of war crimes, genocide, aggression and crimes against humanity. In its Article 8, paragraph 2, the Statute declares as war crimes:

“(xxii) Committing rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy [...] and any other form of sexual violence also constituting a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions; [...] (xxvi) Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities”.⁴⁵

It is important here to underline that the active participation of children is considered a war crime, thus including, according to the *travaux préparatoires*, both direct and indirect roles, such as porters, cooks, spies or messengers.⁴⁶ Although the ICC has jurisdiction only for crimes committed after its Statute came into force (1 July, 2002), the inclusion of these provisions shows the seriousness with which the international community considers the sexual violence and the use of children in armed conflict. It also indicates its commitment to hold both State and non-state actors, and individuals accountable for such practices.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ UNHCR, *Critical Issues - Child soldiers*.

⁴⁶ N. Arzoumanian, *Victimes et bourreaux*, p. 839.

⁴⁷ R. Harvey, *A guide to international law*, pp. 71-73.

iii. International customary law

The above analysis proves that the prohibition of recruitment and direct involvement in hostilities of children less than 15 years is well regulated by the humanitarian and human rights law. Children's use as soldiers is being considered a crime by the international community and, therefore, "has by now acquired a customary international law status"⁴⁸. In principle, adolescents between fifteen and eighteen years should also benefit from that norm. The exceptions provided for by the 1977 Additional Protocols and the Convention on the Rights of the Child must be interpreted considering the general practice of States together with the principle of the best interests of the child. Since the general practice of States uses eighteen as the minimum age for conscription and does not assign volunteers under eighteen into active service, the customary character of the norm is proved.⁴⁹

However, it was less obvious whether it is customarily accepted as a war crime. The customary norm of considering the use of child soldiers and their involvement in hostilities as a war crime, although suggested by the substantial acceptance of the norms that prohibit it, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Children, was only concretised with the adoption of the Statute of International Criminal Court in 1998. The *travaux préparatoires* of the Statute highlighted a significant agreement between States in favour of criminalising an act already forbidden by international law. Moreover, some States, like Canada⁵⁰, explicitly

⁴⁸ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the establishment of a Special Court for Sierra Leone*, S/2000/915, para. 17.

⁴⁹ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, p. 171.

⁵⁰ "[...] crimes described in articles 6 and 7 and paragraph 2 of article 8 of the Rome Statute are, as of July 17, 1998, crimes according to customary international law, and may be crimes according to customary international law before that date". Canada,

recognised the use of child soldiers as being a war crime under customary law.⁵¹

iv. The Special Court for Sierra Leone

The latest important development is the establishment, in 2002, of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which is meant to prosecute "persons who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of humanitarian law and Sierra Leonean law committed in the territory of Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996"⁵². Regarding the atrocities committed against children and women, the Court has jurisdiction for the prosecution of the following crimes whose victims are girls: rape, as crimes against humanity⁵³; the use of children under the age of 15 years into armed forces or groups or using them to participate directly in hostilities, as a serious violation of international humanitarian law⁵⁴; crimes under Sierra Leonean Law, including the abuse of girls or their abduction for immoral purposes (under the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act of 1926).⁵⁵

In addition, the Appeals Chamber of the Court decided that "the prohibition of child recruitment had crystallised as customary international law, as demonstrated by the widespread recognition and acceptance of the norm prohibiting child recruitment in [...] international instruments, reiterated in the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and

Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes Act, 2000, available at <<http://lois.justice.gc.ca/>>, quoted in N. Arzoumanian, *Victimes et bourreaux*, p. 842.

⁵¹ N. Arzoumanian, *Victimes et bourreaux*, p. 841-842.

⁵² Agreement Between the United Nations and the Government of Sierra Leone on the Establishment of a Special Court for Sierra Leone, 2002, Article 1.

⁵³ Ibidem, Article 2(g).

⁵⁴ Ibidem, Article 4(c).

⁵⁵ Ibidem, Article 5(a).

Welfare of the Children”⁵⁶ and therefore leaders of both armed forces and armed opposition groups are prosecuted for it. Furthermore, the latest indictments of former RUF and AFRC commanders refer to new charges of inhumane acts related to force marriage. Thus, acts of forced marriage will be prosecuted for the first time in history at the Special Court of Sierra Leone as crimes against humanity.⁵⁷ By doing this, the Special Court for Sierra Leone sets an important precedent that could have global repercussions, in conflicts from South-East Asia to South America.

One could argue that these developments do not address directly the obstacles of girls’ rehabilitation and reintegration in their society. However, Sierra Leone’s Special Court’s judgements would raise public awareness of the abuses girls endure during the armed conflicts and therefore might facilitate their acceptance by the communities which otherwise tend to stigmatise and reject the girls due to their involvement in armed forces or groups.

Nevertheless, it should be noticed that the varying minimum age provided for in various legal instruments creates space for many armed forces or groups to continue recruiting children, both boys and girls. Furthermore, they have nurtured the debate about the inclusion of child soldiers in demobilisation programmes. These debates over terminology and applicable law point to the urgency of further advocacy to include all children, even those under eighteen years, in demobilisation and reintegration programmes and the need for strategies to reach all the children, especially girls, whose needs are left outside the formal

⁵⁶ Special Court for Sierra Leone, Press Release, 1 June 2004, available at <www.sc-sl.org/pressrelease-060104.html> on 11 June 2004.

⁵⁷ Special Court for Sierra Leone, Press release, 17 May 2004, available at <www.sc-sl.org/prosecutor-051704.html> on 11 June 2004.

demobilisation and reintegration processes.⁵⁸ Moreover, despite the fact that the instruments and developments mentioned above seem to focus mainly on the prevention of child soldiering, they also express clearly obligations of State and/or non-state actors towards the facilitation of social reintegration of former child soldiers.



⁵⁸ B. Verhey, *Preventing, demobilising and reintegrating*.

CHAPTER 2

RECRUITMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON FUTURE REINTEGRATION

The participation of girls in armed conflicts entails an intense process that includes their recruitment, or the ways they join the fighting forces or groups, the training and specific role allocation within those groups. Each of these phases has an impact on the sustainability of the demobilisation and reintegration programmes and therefore they need to be taken into consideration and address when those processes are envisaged.

Any conflict has huge impacts on children, both boys and girls, by leaving them orphaned, displaced, or responsible as the head of the household when parents are killed or separated from them. Their daily activities are affected, since schools are closed or destroyed, fields are inaccessible due to hostilities or mines, and their community is affected by violence and humiliation. Consequently, the children are at risk for recruitment or become receptive to propaganda persuading them to volunteer.⁵⁹

Many of the ways in which boys join the armed forces or groups apply also for girls. However, there are also some particularities that are stronger or more widespread for girls. When talking about the girls' recruitment, the majority of studies and reports tend to consider it as a

result of either coerced enlistment, or abduction. Although it is true that most of the girls are forced into armed groups or abducted, there are, nevertheless, many of them who join the groups voluntarily.⁶⁰

Consequently, demobilisation and reintegration programmes need to take into account both these realities and their reasons, especially if demobilisation is to take place in an on-going conflict environment or in an unstable situation. Even though it can be assumed that the girls who are abducted or forced to join are willing to demobilise and return to their communities if they are given the opportunity, those who design the DDR programmes should assume that in some cases the circumstances have changed since or as a result of the abduction. Moreover, for those who volunteered, it should be expected that they might resist demobilisation or even consider rejoining, if they had been demobilised, unless the reasons why they volunteered are acknowledged and addressed.⁶¹

Therefore, this chapter will analyse the ways children become members of armed forces or groups, while emphasising the factors that are more prevalent for girls. It will consider both scenarios for girls' recruitment, beginning with voluntary participation (meaning that there is no physical coercion for their involvement) and moving to forced recruitment. It will also highlight the challenges the ways girls are recruited to future demobilisation and reintegration processes. The discussion is meant to raise awareness on critical aspects of girls' recruitment in armed conflict

⁵⁹ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, pp.23-24.

⁶⁰ R. Brett: *Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions*, Quaker United Nations Office, 2003, available at <www.quno.org> on 27 April 2004 (here and after cited as R. Brett, *Challenging the assumptions*).

⁶¹ R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering for armed forces or armed groups*, International Review of the Red Cross, December 2003, vol. 85, No. 852, pp. 857-858 (here and after cited as R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*).

and to provide further knowledge intended to improve the existing DDR programmes, based on a better understanding of the factors leading to girls' recruitment.

Voluntary participation

As Rachel Brett put it, "it is a convenient fiction that girls only get involved if they are abducted, and only then to serve in gender-specific roles which are not threatening to others, such as wives, concubines or sex slaves, cooks or nurses"⁶². The reality is different and it proves that the reasons why girls volunteer are connected to their treatment and status in society, as it will be shown in the following analysis.

Children's subjective perception of reality is influenced both by their environment and by developmental process. On the one hand, the members of children's environment, such as their families, friends, schools, religious or ethnic communities, might put pressure and induce children to join the fighting groups. On the other hand, developmental processes, meaning the phases children pass through at different ages, can also pre-determine them to volunteer as a consequence of the objective experiences they go through. Many studies⁶³ support the assumption that many boys and girls decide to voluntarily join the armed forces or groups because of their personal experiences and due to their own judgement on participation to the conflict.⁶⁴

⁶² R. Brett, *Amazons Appear*.

⁶³ Y. Keairns, *Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary*, Quaker United Nations Office, October 2002, available at <www.quno.org> on 14 March 2004 (here and after cited as Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*); R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*.

⁶⁴ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, pp. 30-31.

The research⁶⁵ done over time emphasised five major factors that contribute to the children's decision to volunteer: war, or the militarisation of daily lives; poverty; education; employment; and family.

i. War

The militarisation of daily lives determined by war, being it international or internal armed conflict, has major impacts on some children's decision to join one of the parties in conflict. Sometimes armed groups' propaganda for their cause is very strong. This has been the case in countries such as Sri Lanka, East Timor, Peru or Colombia. In Sri Lanka, for example, the LTTE used to broadcast TV movies of live combat training, conduct military training for soldiers inside the school grounds, organise parades of young soldiers in front of schools and use both male and female soldiers to talk to children about the importance of their cause and their need for soldiers.⁶⁶ The indoctrination of children has an important influence on their emerging identities, as one girl from Sri Lanka revealed:

"One day I removed all my jewellery, left them at home and left home. My mother didn't know - I said I was going to school, but from school I ran away. [...] Those sisters (members of the movement) speak very well. They can convince any one. All I wanted at that time was to join and shoot. For about 10 days I was planning and planning. There were sisters who came and did

⁶⁵ Graça Machel Report; R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*; Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*.

⁶⁶ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, pp.31-32.

propaganda work.” (interview with former girl child soldier in Sri Lanka⁶⁷)

Moreover, indoctrination corroborated with a sense of usefulness sometimes give girls a feeling of empowerment and pride, that they cannot otherwise achieve due to society’s stereotypes:

“Many women joined the clandestine movement because they were searching for the right way to help country and get independence [...] there were more women than there were men. This was because when we called men to join us they were afraid.”
(interview with girl ex-soldier in East Timor⁶⁸)

On the other hand, indoctrination does not affect only those living in conflict areas. Some armed forces and groups, such as the Serb paramilitaries⁶⁹, the Kosovo Liberation Army⁷⁰, or the Kurdistan Workers Party⁷¹, carried out aggressive international recruitment campaigns, engaging many soldiers, including boys and girls. Many children, among the approximately 1.000 that were volunteers from around the world, joined the KLA and were sent to fight the more experienced Serb forces. Their indoctrination was great, as they were persuaded that they had been recruited to help liberate the Albanian ethnics and “to create an ethnically pure Kosovo”. In that sense, the example of a 16-year-old Albanian-American female recruited from New York is relevant:

⁶⁷ Y. Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Sri Lanka*, Quaker United Nations Office, January 2003, p. 39 (here and after cited as Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Sri Lanka*).

⁶⁸ UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers. Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, Bangkok, 2002, p. 27 (here and after cited as UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*).

⁶⁹ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers’ Use 2001-Yugoslavia*, available at <www.child-soldiers.org> on 1 June 2004.

⁷⁰ *Idem*.

⁷¹ D. Mazurana, *What about the girls?*, p.30.

*"Why should I look forward to living when my sisters are being raped and when children are dying in their mothers' arms of starvation?[...] I'll die happy if the first bullet kills me. I will die for the freedom of Kosova"*⁷².

However, the military propaganda and youth's indoctrination is not the only reason for joining. For some adolescents the conflict may also be an opportunity. It is an opportunity for employment, or to escape from a tyrannical family situation, or for adventure. Therefore, the war helps to create or intensifies the other factors that affect children's decision-making process.⁷³

What is more relevant for the girls' volunteering is the change of features of today's conflicts. In conflicts where sexual violence against women and girls have become a weapon of war, with the perpetrators' intention of ratifying their political power "through the exercise of men's power over women"⁷⁴, joining one of the fighting factions sometimes attracts girls trying to avoid these apparently inevitable perils. Girls, especially those orphaned or separated from their families, find themselves in a society torn by violence and war, where the threat of being sexual abused is frightening. Therefore, a realistic assessment of the dangers they have to face as unaccompanied girls, especially when they have witnessed violence, sexual violence or murder of other female members of their community, determines them to make the choice to become soldiers because having a gun is likely to provide greater protection against rape or other forms of abuse, as was the case in the

⁷² I. Hajrizi, *Volunteers Ready to Join the Battle: Some Portraits of the Fighters*, Kosova Crisis Centre News, 14 April 1999, available at <www.alb-net.com/kcc> on 3 June 2004.

⁷³ R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*, p. 859.

⁷⁴ E. Páez, *A diagnosis*, p. 9.

Democratic Republic of Congo.⁷⁵ *"I thought that if I joined the army I would be protected"*, said a 16-year-old girl from the Democratic Republic of Congo⁷⁶.

Furthermore, sometimes girls choose to voluntarily join the fighting forces or groups by surrendering to a particular commander that could bring them some benefits, such as a better position within the group and protection against gang-rape, rather than waiting to be abducted and therefore even more abused.

ii. Poverty

Although there is a tendency to consider poverty as the main cause for children's participation in armed conflicts, the numerous children from war-affected area who do not join the fighting groups prove that this is only an oversimplifying tendency. However, poverty is the only "easily identifiable common characteristic" of child soldiers and it does affect children, being both a direct and indirect reason for volunteering. It is also interconnected with all the other factors, by inducing children's withdrawal from school and being a great threat to sustaining family relationships.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, the economic reality of poor and war-affected families and communities, especially in rural areas where there are fewer opportunities, put excessive burdens on many boys' and girls' shoulders. Sometimes, especially if separated from their parents, they assume the risk of voluntary participation just to get food for the day or to obtain a subsistence wage.

⁷⁵ R. Brett, *Amazons Appear*.

⁷⁶ D. Pratt, *Lost innocence of the world's child soldiers*, Sunday Herald 14 September 2003, available at <<http://www.sundayherald.com/36685>> on 6 June 2004.

⁷⁷ R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*, p. 860.

However, girls are more affected by the economic situation of their family than boys. In some societies, girls are the first ones to be sacrificed and receive less food than men and boys. Moreover, in order to help the family survive, girls are asked to perform difficult domestic tasks or are sent to serve relatives or employers as domestic slaves and therefore find themselves exploited by those they are working for.

"This was the time I was working. [...] I took care of their children, I did the housekeeping and I would have to feed the pigs. [...] That's why I couldn't go to school, because I had so many house chores. I had to wash the clothes and then take care of the child. I would wash the clothes at night, so that when I woke up, there would be less work to do. I would start at six o'clock to cook, then wash and then clean the house. I would wonder how long I could stand for work because I was still a child. When I was already busy with a task, then she would ask me to do something more. I was still small, so when I joined the movement, the people would point out how small I was." (interview with former girl child soldier in Philippines⁷⁸)

The situation is even more difficult for girls who are orphaned or separated from their parents. Joining an armed force or group is sometimes their only chance to get their daily food:

⁷⁸ Y. Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Philippines*, Quaker United Nations Office, January 2003, p. 39 (here and after cited as Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Philippines*).

„I joined the Indonesian army because I was hungry. If I knew I was recruited to do this, I would have refused and stayed hungry.“
(interview with former girl child soldier in Indonesia⁷⁹)

iii. Education

School plays an important role in children's lives, both through the influence that it can have on their development and through the consequences the lack of education has on children's future. Therefore, for children living in war-affected areas, school can, on the one hand, facilitate their indoctrination with religious, nationalistic or political ideology. On the other hand, a lack of education leads to fewer alternatives for employment, and for those neither at school nor employed, the attraction to join the armed forces or groups is considerable. The reason is either that the youth do not have anything else to occupy their time, and therefore they get involved in gangs that later facilitate their recruitment, or that they are seen as being available and thus targeted by the armed groups.⁸⁰

Moreover, even if education is available, both boys and girls tend to withdraw from school if they see it as unlikely to lead to employment, or if they feel denigrated or humiliated by their teachers. In addition, in a conflict situation, girls are more often removed from school to help their families than boys, due to the stereotypes regarding their roles in society and family. They are therefore kept at home, since their family cannot afford to keep them in school anymore, or needs them to stay at home and do the domestic work, or watch after their siblings while

⁷⁹ *The voices of children at war*, available at <http://www.cyberschoolbus.un.org/childsoldiers/webquest/voices3.asp> > on 15.06.2004 (here and after cited as *Voices of children at war*).

⁸⁰ R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*, pp. 860-861.



parents are at work. The case of Indonesia is a relevant example, due to the estimated 2.5 million children, the majority girls, who were withdrawn from school to help with domestic work.⁸¹

The research done by Yvonne Keairns in her study „Voices of Girl Child Soldiers“, carried out in four countries where girls are used as soldiers (Colombia, Sri Lanka, Philippines and Angola), exposed the fact that all the girls interviewed realised the importance of education as provider of a certain degree of self-sufficiency. However, prior to joining the armed forces or groups, the importance of going to school for girls had to be considered against the need to look after younger siblings, or to care for their sick parents or relatives, or to work to provide for the family's survival.⁸²

"I started going to school when I was only eight years old and did not study beyond grade four. We were displaced several times and I had no proper schooling. I always liked to study. I gave up continuing my studies because of all the troubles." (interview with former girl child soldier in Sri Lanka⁸³)

iv. Employment

All adolescents, both girls and boys, are aware of the existing opportunities for employment or of the lack of such opportunities in their areas. They also know the interconnection between education and better opportunities for employment and therefore, if they lack education they find few alternatives to earn their living. It is understandable, then, that

⁸¹ M. Purcell, K. Katzki and R. Bloem, *Girls 2000*, Report produced by the Working Groups on Girls in New York and Geneva, 28 March 2003, available at <<http://www.girlsrights.org/newsletters/>> on 15 June 2004.

⁸² Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*, pp. 11-12.

⁸³ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Sri Lanka*, p. 36.

in areas where the armed forces or groups are perceived as the only employer, many adolescents in need for a way to support their families or to survive will choose this option.

This is even truer for girls, whose opportunities are even fewer than those for boys, due to the gender discrimination existing in many countries. Especially for those who are displaced, homeless, orphaned or fearful, joining a fighting group is considered "the better of the bad alternatives"⁸⁴, since their only alternatives to survive are: sexual exploitation, provide a cheap labour force working in semi-slavery, or join an armed group. As an example, the case of Ethiopia, where "an increasing number of young girls were looking at the armed forces [...] as a means of winning their living in the context of widespread unemployment"⁸⁵, is relevant.

v. Family

Family is the most important factor in the child's life and development. Therefore, the family situation is one of the most significant aspects that determines whether or not the child decides to get involved in the armed conflict.

On one hand, unaccompanied children, whose family was killed or disrupted, are more likely to join the armed forces or groups for their own survival and protection. It is well recognised that the family is supposed to provide children with physical protection or "assistance in strategies for avoiding recruitment"⁸⁶. Therefore, any unaccompanied child is particularly vulnerable to any kind of abuse, especially in a war

⁸⁴ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, pp.33-35.

⁸⁵ R. Brett and M. McCallin, *Children, the Invisible Soldiers*, Radda Barnen, Stockholm, 1998, p. 80 (here and after cited as R. Brett, *The Invisible Soldiers*).

⁸⁶ Idem.

torn society, and, consequently, more susceptible to both forced or voluntary recruitment.⁸⁷

On the other hand, there is a strong connection between domestic exploitation, violence or sexual abuse and children's decision to volunteer. Although it is true that many boys are also determined to volunteer because of domestic violence, this is particularly valid for the girls who join the fighting groups. Apart from the factors discussed above, such as girls' withdrawal from school and their use for domestic labour, whether in their families or elsewhere, the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse is decisive for most of the girls:

"My father seemed to be always mad at me and at all of us. [...] He had a stick that he would use to beat us up; this was a branch of the guava tree. Just one mistake and he would hit us directly. [...] Even when we were bigger, he would still beat us. We didn't even understand what we did wrong." (interview with former girl child soldiers in Philippines⁸⁸)

"One of my mother's men tried to abuse me when I was younger. He tried to abuse me and because I didn't let him he got angry. He used to fight with my mum and he used to fight with me...so I didn't want to live with my mum anymore." (interview with girl ex-soldier in Colombia⁸⁹)

Consequently, many girls try to run away or to create an alternative to the permanent maltreatment, sexual abuse or domestic violence they

⁸⁷ R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*, pp. 861-862.

⁸⁸ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Philippines*, p. 33.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch, *You'll learn not to cry. Child Combatants in Colombia*, 2003, p. 55, available at <www.hrw.org> on 3 May 2004 (here and after cited as Human Rights Watch, *Child combatants in Colombia*).

are facing in their own families or, occasionally, in their communities. Moreover, trying to defeat the exclusion and inferiority they experience in their families, sometimes girls see the armed group as a place where they will be considered and accepted as equals.⁹⁰ As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women found during her mission to Colombia in 2001, "For some girls, the male-oriented culture affects their attraction to uniforms, weapons and the power they represent. Girls often join an armed group thinking that, once they are a part of it, they will be treated as equals and be given the same rights as men. They seek to overcome the exclusion and disregard in their own families, where they can only be associated with domestic roles."⁹¹

Forced recruitment

Forced recruitment, often a response to a shortfall of manpower or class discrimination, entails the threat or use of physical force to make individuals join the armed forces or groups. Abduction, as a form of forced recruitment, means that a person is kidnapped or seized by armed forces or groups. It is used by both government forces and armed opposition groups. The occurrence of abduction of both boys and girls in order to forcibly use them as soldiers has significantly increased

⁹⁰ E. Páez, *A diagnosis*, pp. 12-14.

⁹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women*, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2001/49, E/CN.4/2002/83/Add.3, 11 March 2002, para. 52, available at <www.unhchr.ch> on 21 June 2004 (here and after cited as ECOSOC, *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence against Women*).

over the last two decades⁹². Children are often abducted from their homes at night, markets or fields during the day. Gang press is another method of forced recruitment and it is described as the recruitment by paramilitaries that roam the streets, schools, churches or other public places and round up individuals they come across⁹³.

Despite the fact that many girls join the armed forces or groups, it is nevertheless true that in contemporary conflicts girls are among the primary targets of fighting forces that abduct or gang-press them and force them to become active combatants or/and sexual and domestic slaves. It is well recognised today that in recent years girls have been abducted in many countries worldwide, such as: Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda in Africa; Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala and Peru in Latin America, Cambodia, East Timor, Myanmar, Philippines, and Sri Lanka in Asia; the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in Europe; and Turkey in the Middle East⁹⁴. However, the research⁹⁵ done on that topic found that among the world's continents, Africa has the highest tendency to recruit girls via abduction or gang pressing, followed by Asia, the Americas and Europe.

„I was captured by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council in Sierra Leone when I was 15. I did not want to go; I was forced to go. They killed a lot of women who refused to go with them...when

⁹² United Nations, *Children and armed conflict*, Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, A/58/546-S/2003/1053, 10 November 2003, available at <www.un.org> on 1 June 2004.

⁹³ I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, pp. 24-27.

⁹⁴ D. Mazurana, *What about the girls?*.

⁹⁵ S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*.

they capture young girls, you belong to the soldier who captured you." (interview with former girl child soldier in Sierra Leone⁹⁶)

However, there are many other ways into armed conflict for girls. For example, after the rape of a 13-year-old Kosovo Albanian girl, her father gave her to the KLA explaining his act: "She can do to the Serbs what they have done to us [...] She will probably be killed, but that would be for the best. She would have no future anyway after what they did to her."⁹⁷ Or, just as their male peers, they are sometimes given to the fighting forces by their parents, as a form of tax payment, as is the case in Colombia or Cambodia. Another example is Sri Lanka, where the LTTE established its own orphanages and uses children from those establishments as soldiers for its elite fighting force, the Leopard Brigade.⁹⁸

In order to understand and address this problem, it is very important to know the reasons why girls are recruited. Very often they are recruited for the same reasons as the boys: the uncontrolled proliferation of small and lightweight weapons and the depletion of the number of young men available to fight due to long-lasting conflicts. In addition, some of the armed groups prefer to use children because „adults [...] are not good fighters [...] kids have more stamina, are better at surviving in the bush, do not complain, and follow directions“⁹⁹. However, it is necessary to go deeper and find out what further reasons lead to girls' increased recruitment.

⁹⁶ *Voices of children at war.*

⁹⁷ C. Williams, *In Kosovo, Rape Seen as Awful as Death*, Los Angeles Times, 27 May 1999.

⁹⁸ D. Mazurana, *What about the girls?*

⁹⁹ US Defence Intelligence Agency, *Report on RENAMO deserter*, March 1991, quoted in I. Cohn, *The role of children in armed conflict*, p. 26.

Many fighting groups use girls as spies or safe carriers for bombs, considering them less susceptible to enemy security checks. Moreover, girls are valued not only as fighters or spies, but also as „slave labour“ that sustain the war economy. For armed opposition groups in particular, they are a valuable source of unpaid labour, being more likely to work for food, security and status rather than for pay. In some cases, the use of girls is „the key factor in how these forces are being maintained“¹⁰⁰ and it generates high profits for the armed groups. On the other hand, an important dimension to be considered is the recruitment of girls as sexual slaves as a consequence of widespread HIV/AIDS infection. Therefore, men are seeking younger and younger girls to be provided to the armed forces and groups as sexual partners free from HIV infection.¹⁰¹

Concluding upon this chapter, despite the fact that many of the boys' avenues into armed conflict also apply for girls, there are some particular factors that are more relevant for girls. This is valid both for voluntary and for forced recruitment.

Considering the previous discussion on the voluntary recruitment (although it is not a genuine volunteering, since the analysis of the reasons leading to their enlistment negates any presumption of voluntary participation), it is obvious that girls have some particular reasons for joining that are determinant and vary from those of boys'.

¹⁰⁰ J. Wurst, *Returning Girl Soldiers Require Unprecedented Help, Authors Say*, UN Wire, 3 March 2004, available at http://www.unwire.org/UNWire/20040304/449_13709.asp on 2 June 2004.

¹⁰¹ R. Brett, *The Invisible Soldiers*, p. 85.

These include running away from domestic exploitation and abuse, joining in seeking for equality with the boys, or volunteering for their own protection. Obviously, these factors may overlap: girls joining an armed group for protection may already have been exploited or physically abused at home or in their community.

However, a broad generalisation of the main reasons that determine girls' recruitment is difficult and even dangerous. For example, some girls who have been abducted by armed forces or groups might as well have experienced a form of exploitation in their community prior to abduction. Therefore, they - just as some girls who have joined an armed group due to their domestic exploitation and abuse - might not be willing to be reunited with their family, even if that is possible. On the other hand, as Keairns shows, even those who ran away from home show a strong desire to re-establish a relationship with their family, particularly their mother.

„During the first few days with the NPA, I cried because I found the Garand and my pack too heavy.[...] The others encouraged me by telling that what I was feeling was normal. To tell you the truth, I was crying because I was thinking that my life would not be that hard if Mama had been more caring.“ (interview with former girl child soldier in Philippines¹⁰²)

Therefore, all the factors mentioned above that lead to the girls' recruitment, being it voluntary or forced, are providing a framework to be taken into account for the planning of policies and actions to stop the use of girls in armed forces. Hence, any activity that envisages girls' demobilisation and reintegration into society should also imagine

¹⁰² UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*, p. 46.

solutions for the reduction of wars or poverty, equal access to education for all children, improvement of family solidarity and parenting expertise.

Also, it is important to realise that all the reasons presented have a common denominator, which is girls' status and treatment in society. Thus, the violations of girls' rights both prior to the conflict and in wartime should be considered, since „what people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war“¹⁰³. Unless these violations and their implications are seriously taken into consideration, it would not be possible to ensure girls' long lasting reintegration into their communities. For that reason, action to address the problem of equal status of men and women, boys and girls in society, should be included in all demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

Next, it is important to see girls' recruitment into armed forces or groups as a process, not an event, and to tackle all of its' aspects. Furthermore, since the factors that contribute to that process are mutually supporting each other, a programme that addresses them together is more likely to be more effective than if they are addressed separately. At the same time, the most significant dimension should be acknowledged and tackled on a case-by-case basis, according to the specificities of each country, conflict and culture and the nature of each girl's pre-war experience needs to be taken into consideration.

¹⁰³ C. Nordstrom, *Girls and War Zones: Troubling questions*, Life and Peace Institute, Uppsala, May 1997, quoted in Afua Twum-Danso, *Africa's Young Soldiers – The Co-optation of Childhood*, Monograph No. 82, April 2003, available at <<http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No82/Content.html>>, on 22 April 2004 (here and after cited as A. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Soldiers*).

For example, since a DDR programme that addresses girl child soldiers aims to establish some „normality“ in girls' life after they have left the fighting forces, being it following or during a conflict, such attempts should begin with the understanding of girls' role in normal circumstances. While it may not be recommended to recreate the old patterns of living, it is important to know how girls were treated and viewed in their families and communities prior their recruitment, in order to design appropriate, culturally relevant actions. It is also important to know the girls' point of view regarding their problems or their needs that were not addressed prior to their involvement in conflict (e.g. gender stereotypes in their community that lead to their lack of access to education, domestic violence, etc.), to take them into consideration and to address the problems.

Moreover, the demobilisation and reintegration programmes will need to consider and address these factors prior to the reunification of girls with their families or communities, if they are meant to be sustained. Accordingly, reunification with the family as part of the reintegration process, if possible, requires work with the family, the community and the girl concerned, where the nature of their relationship was one of the causes for the girl's recruitment and further assessments to decide whether the girl can or should return to them should be made.

Another important aspect that comes out from many studies¹⁰⁴ is the fact that girls who have taken an active decision to join the armed forces or groups show a strength of character and an independence that should be affirmed. Furthermore, they assume the responsibility for their

¹⁰⁴ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*; R. Brett, *Adolescents volunteering*; J. Lenz, *Armed with resilience. A Dialogue with Girl Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda*, available at <<http://www.iss.nl/devissues/devisscontents/lenz.pdf>> on 15 June 2004 (here and after cited as J. Lenz, *Armed with resilience*).

decision to join, and therefore their views need to be taken into account in planning the demobilisation and reintegration programmes, in order to consider and respect their individuality, encourage those girls to take charge of their lives.

To sum up, although it is true that each situation regarding girls' recruitment varies, knowing why and how they become involved in a conflict is a good starting point for any reintegration programme, especially in the view of avoiding re-recruitment.

CHAPTER 3

ROLES AND LIFE IN ARMED FORCES AND THEIR IMPACT ON DEMOBILISATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMMES

The treatment and experiences of girls once within the armed forces or groups is a common feature among the armed forces and groups that use them. Although in some groups girls feel they achieve the protection and empowerment they were looking for when they volunteered, in the majority of them, on the contrary, they continue to be exploited, sexually abused and discriminated against.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, girls possess some qualities that make them particularly valuable for armed forces and armed opposition groups. Over the last years, studies¹⁰⁵ highlighted multiple roles that girls are forced to play within conflicts, their distinct experiences from boys, and the differences existing between or even within countries and regions regarding their roles. Thus, it is difficult, even impossible to list “standard” roles and duties that are assigned to girls within fighting forces. Nevertheless, in a comprehensive research¹⁰⁶ carried out on the presence of girls in government militaries, paramilitaries, militias and armed opposition groups, McKay and Mazurana compiled a comprehensive database on the use of girls in armed conflicts between 1990 and 2000 and identified eight roles girls are assigned within those

¹⁰⁵ Graça Machel Report; S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*; Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls*.

forces: fighters, suicide missions or mine sweeps, porters, domestic workers and cooks, lootings, sexual services, camp followers, and spies.

However, it is important to highlight that girls are usually carrying out multiple tasks, and it is, therefore, erroneous to make clear distinction between their roles. Added to that, it is also important to acknowledge that girls' roles vary according to the armed forces and groups that use them, to girls' age and their physical strength. Therefore, in order to be able to meet girls' special needs through demobilisation and reintegration programmes, it is crucial to understand their duties and life during their participation in conflict and the impact they have both on girls' physical and psychological development and on their communities. Thus, the discussion below will analyse girls' roles, training and experiences within armed forces or groups, with a special focus on their close links to girls' special needs when demobilised.

Experiences and activities within armed forces or groups

i. Forced labour

For the groups that deliberately target and use girls in the armed conflicts they are involved in, the strategy is based on latter's exploitability and expendability. According to many authors¹⁰⁷ who have revealed female child soldiers' experiences within the armed forces,

¹⁰⁶ S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*.

¹⁰⁷ M. Denov and R. Maclure, *Girls and Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone: Victimisation, Participation, and Resistance*, Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee, April 2004, available at <<<http://www.peacebuild.ca/Girls-armedconflict-SierraLeone-Denov.doc>>> (here and after cited as M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*); Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*; S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*; Human Rights Watch, *How to*

most of the girls, particularly in African armed groups, are being obliged to carry out a wide range of domestic activities that contribute to the functioning of the groups. This includes cooking, fetching water and firewood, washing dishes, laundering and taking care of younger children. These activities are very difficult and exhausting for the young girls.

"I had to do a lot of work for the soldiers, sweeping, washing, cleaning. During this time, I felt really bad [...] Only ten of us would go to the front, the others stayed behind and did chores, collected food and fetched water" (interview with girl ex-soldier in Liberia¹⁰⁸)

Moreover, failing to carry out their tasks in an efficient way often leads to extreme violence, starvation, and even death.

"If you refused or failed to do what you were told, they would put you in a guard room or tie you up. In some cases, one of [the commanders] might pass a command saying: 'Kill that person for not taking orders'" (interview with girl ex-soldier in Sierra Leone¹⁰⁹)

However, it must be acknowledged that there are armed groups where girls are not exploited as domestic servants and are treated as equals to their male comrades, as is some groups in countries like Colombia, El Salvador , or Sri Lanka.

"Man and women do the same jobs. Everyone is equal, to dig the latrines, trenches, to fetch firewood, cook, it's all the same,

Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia, February 2004, vol. 16, No. 2(A) (here and after cited as Human Rights Watch, *How to fight, how to kill*).

¹⁰⁸ Idem.

¹⁰⁹ M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

everyone is equal, they all carry the same things, everything.”(interview with former girl child soldier in Colombia¹¹⁰)

ii. Training, combat activities and violence

Also, once within the armed forces, many girls are trained and engaged in combat activities. Some are actively involved in hostilities, while others are made to carry out suicide missions, lootings, or to serve as human shields, protecting the groups or their leaders. Depending on the group that have recruited them, some of them might receive physical military training, while others are sent in the front lines without any training at all. Some opposition groups in conflicts in Africa, for example, use the method of learning by doing; therefore the girls are only trained on how to use a weapon and sent directly to combat or lootings¹¹¹. In other cases, such as Sri Lanka, Philippines or Colombia, girls receive several months of intense and dangerous training, through which they learn to use and not to be afraid of a wide variety of weapons and their physical strength and endurance are developed¹¹². However, they are all forced to be perpetrators of violence and to kill, no matter what group uses them.

There are also some armed forces or groups that use political indoctrination, together with tight surveillance and severe punishments in case of mistakes or disobedience, to transform the girls into reliable fighters. In the Philippines, Sri Lanka, or Ethiopia for example, girls are first taught why the political system of the country needs to be changed, how the opposition movement would help the people and make their

¹¹⁰ Y. Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia*, Quaker United Nations Office, January 2003, p. 48 (here and after cited as Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Colombia*).

¹¹¹ A. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Soldiers*.

¹¹² Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*, p. 13.



lives better. Only later, when the commanders consider the girls have become trustworthy, they are sent in the front lines.

"It was about guns. Then we had to study about why we were there. To explain why there is a revolution now, things like that. They wanted us to really understand. My comrades were very strict during the period of education." (interview with girl ex-combatant in Philippines¹¹³)

In contrast, some African armed forces and opposition groups exploit the girls' vulnerability, considering that a period of mental terror and physical violence will turn them into particularly fierce fighters. Added to that, some groups force the abducted children, both boys and girls, to commit atrocities against their families or communities, in order to prevent them from any escape attempts.

"One boy tried to escape but he was caught [...] His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with sticks. I felt sick. I knew the boy from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him and they told they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me: 'Why are you doing this?' I said I had no choice. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms." (interview with girl ex-soldier in Northern Uganda¹¹⁴)

Moreover, in some cases, in order to make them fight more effectively or to force them to commit atrocities, they are often given drugs.

¹¹³ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Philippines*, p. 48.

¹¹⁴ Interview available on the website of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, <www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/English/ChildSoldiers.html>.

"Sometimes we were given drugs. When we took those drugs we grew strong at heart. Many of us would never have had the nerve to attempt to kill otherwise [...] The drugs were helpful to accomplish our assignments." (interview with girl ex-soldier in the Eastern Region of Sierra Leone¹¹⁵)

Nevertheless, one factor that affects all the girls participating in armed conflicts is the permanent violence that becomes a routine of their daily life. Armed groups use different methods to desensitise children to violence, and girls are particularly affected.¹¹⁶

"I had a friend, Juanita. [...] We had been friends in civilian life and we shared a tent together. The commander said that it didn't matter that she was my friend. She had committed an error and had to be killed. I closed my eyes and fired the gun, but I didn't hit her. So I shot again [...] I had to bury her and put dirt on top of her. The commander said, 'You did very well. Even though you started to cry, you did well. You'll have to do this again many more times, and you'll have to learn not to cry'." (interview with girl ex-soldier in Colombia¹¹⁷)

Psychologically weakened and constantly terrorised by their commanders, many girls become obedient killers and carry out dangerous and horrifying tasks. In countries like Uganda, Angola, or Honduras, they are used as executioners. In other countries, like Colombia, Peru, or Sierra Leone, they have been forced to perform acts of cannibalism on their victims. In countries such as Sri Lanka, they are often selected for suicide missions, and in Guatemala or Congo they are

¹¹⁵ M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

¹¹⁶ Idem.

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Child combatants in Colombia*, p. 73.

used as land mine detectors¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, no matter what group recruited them, girls' lives are at great risk and have less value than those of their male comrades or even than an object that is valuable for the group (in some armed groups, such as those in Colombia, girls pay with their lives if they fail to save the radio from the battle fields). In that context, the girls' main desire is to survive. This generally means obeying whatever command is given. However, the transformation girls go through, and the fact that actions that initially were terrorising eventually become means of pleasure and ways to prove skills, should not be overlooked.

"I didn't have the mind to kill someone initially, but later on I enjoyed the wicked acts. [...] I was responsible for killing anybody that was assigned to die. I was so happy and vigilant in carrying out this command" (interview with girl ex-soldier in Sierra Leone¹¹⁹)

iii. Sexual exploitation

Another aspect that was revealed in the recent years by the increased focus on the girls' roles within fighting forces is the escalation of sexual violence. The type of recruiting group and method of recruitment is clearly linked to the existence of girls' sexual exploitation. Perpetrators include officers and other recruits within the same armed force as the victim, including government forces, paramilitaries, and armed opposition groups. However, there are more confirmed cases within opposition armed groups, followed by paramilitaries, and lastly by

¹¹⁸ M. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, vol. 53, No. 6, Chicago, Nov./Dec. 1997, pp. 32-39.

¹¹⁹ M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

government forces¹²⁰. This is particularly true for many armed groups in Africa, where examples of abduction and compulsory recruitment of girls as sexual slaves are very widespread. There have been reported many cases in countries like Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Uganda¹²¹.

Many girls within the armed groups in those countries are constantly raped or sexually abused. Moreover, there is a significant connection between the abduction of girls and the magnitude of sexual abuse of them. Some girls are forced to "marry" commanders or soldiers, while others are considered sexual slaves for the whole group. In Angola, for example, the groups' leaders considered that as soon as the girls' breasts began to form, the girls could be impregnated and the men did not have any responsibility towards the girl or her child.¹²²

"He sent two men to tie me to a tree and they beat me with sticks. I was there for an hour; later they untied me. These are the punishments they inflict when a woman does not accept."(interview with girl ex-soldier in Angola¹²³)

However, although in most of the armed groups sexual abuses are common, there are also some groups whose reasons for girls' recruitment do not formally include sexual services. In Colombia, for example, despite the claimed equality between all the guerrilla's

¹²⁰ L. Alfredson, *Sexual Exploitation of Child Soldiers: An Exploration and Analysis of Global Dimensions and Trends*, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, available at <<http://www.child-soldiers.org>> on 28 May 2004.

¹²¹ Amnesty International, *Burundi: Child Soldiers - the Challenge of Demobilisation*, AFR 16/011/2004, pp. 14-16 (here and after cited as Amnesty International, AFR 16/011/2004); S. McKay, *Girls in Militaries*.

¹²² Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Girls: Summary*, p. 7.

¹²³ Idem.

members and the prohibition of rape or sexual abuse, girls within those groups still face sexual harassment.

All the girls within the guerrilla are forced to use contraception, often as intrauterine devices or injections, and, if they get pregnant, they are made, almost invariably, to have abortions. The sexual relationships are not forced, but the commanders use their position by offering the girls they like protection and privileges in exchange for their sexual services.

"When girls join the FARC, the commanders choose among them. There's pressure. The women have the final say, but they want to be with a commander to be protected. The commanders buy them. They give a girl money and presents. When you're with a commander, you don't have to do the hard work. So most of the prettiest girls are with commanders"(interview with former girl child soldier in Colombia¹²⁴)

Moreover, in countries like Philippines and Sri Lanka, sexual relationships between men and girls were forbidden and severely punished if happened, even if it was mutually consented to by the partners.¹²⁵

Nevertheless, even when intimate relationships are forbidden within the armed group, some girls are used to provide intelligence about enemy's position, strategy and strength. Therefore, those girls are used as providers of sexual services for the enemy and their body as a strategic weapon against the enemy. They face, thus, a double risk: to be sexually abused and to be discovered by the enemy and killed.

¹²⁴ Human Rights Watch, *Child combatants in Colombia*, p. 57.

¹²⁵ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Philippines*; Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Sri Lanka*.

This analysis proves that it is not correct and is even hazardous to assume that all girl soldiers have been used as providers of sexual services, because it would further stigmatise them and would reduce their future chances and their status in society. Furthermore, most of the girls are involved in conflicts, whether or not they are used for sexual purposes, and their experiences as a whole have to be considered during demobilisation and reintegration processes¹²⁶.

Consequences of girls' participation in armed conflict on DDR programmes

All the experiences discussed above have a huge impact on girls and profoundly affect them physically and psychologically. Moreover, while the roles of female child soldiers can vary widely, those girls share a common characteristic: they have very limited access to benefits when they are demobilised, much less than boys.

It is surprising the girls' lack of visibility in peace agreements, despite their widespread presence in military units. They form, therefore, a vulnerable group whose needs are ignored during the demobilisation phase and in the process of reintegration that follows it. In order to stop neglecting them and their special needs and to be able to tackle the consequences of girls' participation in armed conflict and its' effects on the local communities, understanding female child soldiers' experiences within the armed forces or groups should be the first step in planning the DDR programmes.

¹²⁶ R. Brett, *Challenging the assumptions*.

i. Demobilisation

Equally important is to recognise girls' absence from formal demobilisation programmes, to acknowledge the reasons why so few girls participate in them, and to address the difficulties that make negotiations for girls' demobilisation and reintegration in society more complicated than those for boys.

The statistics issued after the completion of DDR programmes revealed that, without exception, the percentage of girls who are officially demobilised is negligible compared to boys, despite the high number of child soldiers who have been demobilised over the years. Therefore, little is known of what happens to girls who served in various armed groups. For example, in Rwanda, statistics show that between 2001 and 2003 the demobilisation commission handled only one girl out of 450 child soldiers it worked with¹²⁷. In El Salvador, during the formal demobilisation process, no girl was demobilised. It is true, however, that in El Salvador the needs and rights of all child soldiers were ignored. In Liberia, also, from about 5000 estimated girl combatants, hardly any girl demobilised through the official programme¹²⁸. Another example is Sierra Leone, whose DDR process has been considered a big success by the international community and a model upon which other DDR programmes could be based. However, according to the demobilisation data, between 1998 and February 2002, from approximately 6.900

¹²⁷ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *RWANDA: Focus on Helping Former Child Soldiers*, IRIN News, 22 January 2004, available at <<http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/2a8ff4fd4948b91c49256e2300275ee0?OpenDocument>> on 21 April 2004.

¹²⁸ Save the Children UK, *When Children Affected by War Go Back. Lessons Learned from Liberia*, The Save the Children Fund, 2003, available at <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/temp/scuk/cache/cmsattach/1309_Childrenaffect edbywarLiberia.pdf> on 15 April 2004.

children formally demobilised, only 529 were girls¹²⁹, despite the fact that recent research¹³⁰ concluded that approximately 12.000 girls were used by the fighting forces as soldiers.

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge and address the reasons why the girls are not taken into account in the formal programmes. There are varied reasons for that. From the point of view of DDR programmes, the use of strict categorisation of groups' members into "combatants" and "non-combatants" and the reluctance of local authorities to admit that girls are active participants in the conflict is often the cause of the devaluation of the multiple roles girls play¹³¹. Ironically, that approach is denying the girls, once again, the respect of their individuality and control of their lives.

On the other hand, local governments might be unwilling to admit the use of girls by the armed forces or groups due to their political expediency and their interest to avoid this kind of negative "publicity" and to minimise support obligations.¹³² Most surprisingly, in some cases, even national NGOs, whose duties include the protection and advocating of human rights, might deny children's, in general, and girls', in particular, participation in the armed conflict, as it is the case Kosovo¹³³.

¹²⁹ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, *Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*, 31 October 2002, available at <www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/1c2201b2a0ae673849256c6a0009c5cc?OpenDocument> on 21 April 2004.

¹³⁰ D. Mazurana and K. Carlson, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone*, Hunt Alternatives Fund 2004, p. 12 (here and after cited as D. Mazurana, *From Combat to Community*).

¹³¹ Ibidem, pp. 13-15.

¹³² B. Verhey, *The demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: El Salvador case study*, Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 23, November 2001, pp. 28-30.

¹³³ During a meeting with Save the Children Kosovo in January 2004, the staff of the organisation denied the use of child soldiers in the Kosovo conflict, although reliable reports, such as the Survey of the Programmes on the Reintegration of Former Child

Added to that, many military commanders might try to limit the demobilisation of girls, due to the fact that they do not consider girls working behind the fields as soldiers, and do not allow them to obtain the status of ex-combatants - a status that in post-conflict times gives access to benefits. Moreover, girls' participation in armed conflict is not official; hence girls have to rely on their commanders for confirmation when they present themselves at the reception centres¹³⁴. That was the case in Nicaragua, where many girls could not find a commander to confirm that they were ex-combatants, and thus they were turned away.

Equally important, many leaders are reluctant to release the girls for the same reasons they recruited them: unlike most of the boys, who are not useful after the fighting is finished, girls are still valuable as unpaid labour force that supports the group's or commander's economy, domestic workers and sexual partners¹³⁵, despite the fact that the conflict has ended.

Sometimes, the commanders have formed strong "attachments" to their captives and they claim they want to marry them or even consider them as their "wives". Even when abducted girls represent the target population of a DDR, it is difficult for those who do not want to resettle with their captors, to prove that they have been abducted.¹³⁶

Soldiers carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, available at <www.mofa.go.jp/policy/human/child/survey>, and the country report (Yugoslavia) of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSCS), available at <www.child-soldiers.org> documented the participation of children, both boys and girls, in the country. According to the report of CSCS, 10% of the KLA soldiers were children, with many girls recruited to do mainly, but not exclusively, domestic work.

¹³⁴ N. de Watteville, *Addressing Gender Issues in Demobilisation and Reintegration Programs*, Africa Region Working Paper Series No. 33, June 2002, pp. 3-4 (here and after cited as N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*).

¹³⁵ A. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Soldiers*.

¹³⁶ N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*, pp. 3-4.

In turn, there might be girls who claim they are in love with their commanders and do not want to be removed from them. There are also cases when girls who have children with soldiers or rebels feel they have no other option but to stay with them as their only way to survive. In other cases, as for example in African countries or throughout the Balkans, many girls who have been sexually abused may fear stigmatisation or rejection from their community because they have experienced sex without being married (even if it is via rape), and therefore they do not want to demobilise¹³⁷.

It should also not be neglected the fact that girls have less access to information than their male peers, especially men. Consequently, they may be aware neither of the official programmes that are carried out nor of the conditions required for qualification for the programmes and the measures they need to take in order to obtain ex-combatant status.

On the other hand, in some armed forces or groups girls do find the protection they were looking for when they joined and they develop feelings of loyalty and attachment towards their comrades. Girls who participated in Keairns's study¹³⁸ in Colombia and Philippines considered that the armed movement provided them with improved skills that they could use in their life. Their basic needs were met, the groups substituted the family and somehow protected them, and they were given the opportunity to have their voices heard through discussion sessions, confrontations and negotiations with others. That kind of experiences and the sense of power and authority they get in some

¹³⁷ D. Mazurana, *What about the girls?*; A. Bennett, *The Reintegration of Child Ex-combatants in Sierra Leone with Particular Focus on the Needs of Females*, University of East London, September 2002, available at www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/story_id/000025.doc on 9 April 2004 (here an after cited as A. Bennett, *Reintegration in Sierra Leone*).

¹³⁸ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Philippines*; Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Colombia*.



cases make them enjoy being in the fighting groups and therefore might make them reluctant to any demobilisation attempts, especially if they have to return to an abusive family or they are orphaned.

A further obstacle is represented by the situation of an on-going conflict, in which demobilisation and reintegration programmes, especially for child soldiers, are carried out, as is the case of Colombia. Since, despite the advocacy and pressure put on the fighting groups to release the children who fill their ranks, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries refuse to do so, and the only children, both boys and girls, who are formally demobilised are those captured by the governmental forces, those who have voluntarily surrendered or those whom the parties to the conflict have handed over to State agencies.

Thus, the discussion above proves that one of the first steps in a DDR programme for child soldiers should be to negotiate and mobilise the political will at national level for the demobilisation of girls. Equally important is to target, identify and persuade the girls within the armed groups to participate in the programme. As seen above, the critical limitation is brought by the fact that, on one hand, many of the girls are hidden for different reasons. On the other hand, many female ex-soldiers tend to melt into the communities for fear of social stigmatisation.

In order to prevent these difficulties, a strategy to inform as many girls as possible about the demobilisation programmes should be enhanced. In addition to the official channels for communication and radio campaigns, the use of other communication channels, such as advocacy through the local community (women groups, health centres, schools,

churches and other public places), or even the distribution of air letter drops, advertising the programmes, should be undertaken.

It should also be acknowledged that, especially where abduction has been the mode of recruitment, the consequences of forced cohabitation and sexual abuse and violence have worked together to weigh against girls' ability to recognise and participate in many DDR processes¹³⁹. Furthermore, for those who are not officially demobilised, there should be provided safe and accessible places that are easily identifiable, where the girls could go and feel protected.

In addition, when a DDR programme is designed, it should be recognised that the initial estimation of the numbers of fighters, usually provided by the military forces, may be lower than the reality and it might not include the most vulnerable groups, such as women and girls. From this point of view, the example of Sierra Leone, where the national DDR programme ended in December 2003, is relevant. As described by Mazurana¹⁴⁰, even though at the beginning it was recognised the fact that women and girl soldiers made up a significant part of the forces and the demobilisation programme was meant to include them, eventually girls received little or no support from both national and international programmes. From the outset, the estimated number of combatants was 45.000, of which 12% was expected to be females. At the end, there were demobilised 72.000 combatants, of which 84% were adult men and only 6.5% were females. It seems likely, therefore, that thousands more fighters, mainly girls, were not involved in the official process.

¹³⁹ N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁴⁰ D. Mazurana, *From Combat to Community*.

Another challenge that the demobilisation programmes have to address is their requirement to surrender a weapon in order to qualify for DDR programmes, as it was the case in Angola¹⁴¹ and Sierra Leone¹⁴². This condition made the programme inaccessible for many girls, since those who did not carry out combatant tasks did not have a gun or, even if they had one, they were ordered to hand in their weapons to their commanders prior to demobilisation. As highlighted by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in its letter to the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN on February 2003, this was one of the factors that made the programme in Sierra Leone hopeless for girls: "The initial 'cash for weapons' approach to DDR rendered many young people and women ineligible for formal demobilisation. The young woman who visited your office told how she could not initially formally demobilise without turning in a gun and that weapons had been taken from girls by commanders, who were then left out of the DDR"¹⁴³.

From two surveys conducted among girls in Sierra Leone¹⁴⁴, it became clear that among the reasons for girls not participating in the programmes mentioned above, the main barrier was that of not having a weapon, a common requirement of many demobilisation programmes. Although the official strategy did not require children to surrender a weapon, the eligibility requirement to hand in a weapon was also applied

¹⁴¹ Y. Keairns, *Voices of Girls: Summary*.

¹⁴² M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

¹⁴³ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Letter to Olara Otunnu, 21 February 2003, available at <http://peacewomen.org/news/SierraLeone/newsarchive03/WCRWC.html> on 17 April 2004.

¹⁴⁴ D. Mazurana, *Girls in Fighting Forces*; M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

to children, due to the widespread inconsistency among the UN, government officials and NGO staff¹⁴⁵.

However, the lessons learnt from prior DDR programmes bear fruits and improvements can be noticed in the design of the latest strategies for such processes. As an example, the Strategy and Implementation Framework for the Liberian DDR Programme¹⁴⁶, drafted in October 2003, includes, as eligibility criteria, the followings:

"1. Demonstrate participation as an adult combatant member of one of the above fighting forces at the time of the signature of the Accra Peace agreement;

or

Be an underage combatant, accompanying minor, unaccompanied minor, or any other participant under the age of 18 or female, presenting with any of the above-mentioned groups;

or

Present acceptable proof of participation in the armed conflict as a member of at least one of the above mentioned groups which includes:

A weapon presented by each combatant;

or

A group comprised of up to five combatants with a group weapon."

Therefore, it can be noticed that the surrender of a weapon is included among the acceptable proofs of participation. However, both the second and the third requirements could limit the girl's access to the

¹⁴⁵ D. Mazurana, *Girls in Fighting Forces*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Liberian Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme – Strategy and Implementation Framework*, prepared by The Draft Interim Secretariat, October 2003, p. 13.

programmes, especially through the specified condition to present to the centre "with any of the above mentioned groups". Those criteria do not take into account girls who have escaped or have been abandoned by the armed groups, nor the unwillingness of the armed groups to encourage or help the girls to demobilise formally. Therefore, in order to consider and address girls' difficulties in demobilisation, it would be recommended for the agencies to provide a certain degree of flexibility in implementing the programme.

The discussion above emphasises the importance of the awareness of girls' specific reality that should be taken into account. Hence, the eligibility criteria for the demobilisation programmes should accept girls even when they do not have a weapon or a man to confirm their participation. Other methods, such as special verification units¹⁴⁷, could provide clarification in such cases.

Another obstacle turned out to be the cultural relativist notion of childhood. Examples can be found in African countries, where childhood and adulthood are not defined by the biological age, but by the actions undertaken by a person, such as a girl having a baby. Therefore, girls who have children sometimes enter the demobilisation programmes as women, not knowing that they can and should benefit from the special programmes addressing their needs¹⁴⁸. Furthermore, the definition of child soldiers in legal instruments creates confusion and leaves space to national governments for interpretation. For example, in El Salvador, the international community's representatives in the peace negotiations had to use the expression "under aged" referring to child soldiers (under eighteen years), in order to reach an agreement with the government's

¹⁴⁷ N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*, p. 4.

¹⁴⁸ D. Mazurana, *From Combat to Community*, p. 2.

representatives who considered child soldiers only individuals under fifteen years. A similar strategy should be adopted for the DDR programmes that aim to reach girl ex-soldiers, in order to avoid the confusion generated by a different understanding of “childhood”.

Yet another aspect to be taken into account is the necessity of separate encampment of children and adults, and males and females, following the demobilisation¹⁴⁹. In order to make the programme effective, to avoid further exploitation or re-recruitment, and to facilitate the social reintegration, it is recommended that children, especially those forcibly recruited, be sent to recovery camps, to make a clear break with their prior military life.

ii. Social and economic reintegration

As part of the reintegration process for girl child soldiers, one of the priorities is the reunification with the family, if possible, especially for those who have been forcibly recruited and whose recovery and even survival need families’ support. Although most of the girls’ roles are the same as that of boys, meaning to fight and kill, they all face gender related discrimination and most of them are sexually abused. Thus, reunification with their family and local community is restricted by a number of obstacles that should not be underestimated. On one hand these obstacles are directly linked to the local culture and norms of their communities or to the girls’ experience as perpetrators of violence. On the other hand, their roots are to be found in the economic situation of the war-torn societies.

Many girls who have been sexually abused during their participation in armed conflict are stigmatised and rejected by their community, due to

the patriarchal nature of their society. The problem is most acute in many African countries, but also in several other countries and regions, such as Cambodia, Bosnia or Kosovo. In such cases, girls are considered "dirtied" and it is believed that they have definitely lost all prospects for marriage.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, in a society where patrilineal heritage is central to the culture, such as Sierra Leone, girls who have children born as a consequence of rape may be even more stigmatised, since sometimes they do not even know who is the father of the child¹⁵¹.

In addition to that, girls' personalities may change due to the experience of sexual violence they faced within the armed groups. Before their recruitment, most of the girls had been sexually innocent. When they are demobilised, they are sexually experienced, may have been drugged and could act in a way that contradicts the cultural norms. Moreover, being independent from their parents for so long time, they may find difficult to get used to family's control or authority¹⁵², an unacceptable thing for many communities.

Therefore, a dual approach needs to be imagined by the DDR programmes to overcome that obstacle. On one hand, taking into account that girls' response to abuse is usually related to their own sense of self and to their role and status in society, specially trained personnel in the reception centres for former girl soldiers (if possible, female members of the local community) should help the girls to re-gain their identity, re-consider their experiences and their options for future.

¹⁴⁹ Amnesty International, AFR 16/011/2004, pp. 12-17.

¹⁵⁰ A. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Soldiers*.

¹⁵¹ A. Bennett, *Reintegration in Sierra Leone*, p. 50.

¹⁵² Ibidem, p. 55.

They should also encourage the girls to express themselves and to have a voice in the decisions that will further affect their lives.¹⁵³

On the other hand, implementing agencies have to work with the communities to make them accept, support and help the girls. Thus, they have to organise advocacy and sensitisation campaigns and to explain to the communities the abuses girls have been subjected to, their problems and needs.

Next, the health effects of armed conflicts on girls should be acknowledged and tackled, since they contribute sometimes to both the girls' and societies' reluctance to reintegration. According to the Machel report¹⁵⁴, the most frequent combat-related physical health problems of former child soldiers are the loss of hearing, of sight, or of limbs, reflecting both the greater sensitivity of their bodies and the tasks they are assigned within the fighting forces, such as detecting landmines. They are also likely to suffer from bone deformation, as a consequence of carrying heavy loads (including weapons), respiratory infections, malnutrition and other diseases. Moreover, drugs and alcohol, used to "encourage" children to commit atrocities or kill, create life-long addiction.

Added to that, girls who have also been required to provide sexual services, in addition to their combat tasks, are particularly vulnerable to the high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, as well as to the consequences of childbirth or abortions¹⁵⁵. In Uganda, for example, according to a UNICEF study, about 100% of abducted girls who escaped the Lord's Resistance Army has sexually transmitted

¹⁵³ Y. Keairns, *Voices of girls: Summary*, pp. 18-19.

¹⁵⁴ Graça. Machel Report, pp 22-25.

¹⁵⁵ I. McConnan, *Children, not Soldiers*, pp. 110-122.

diseases (STD)¹⁵⁶. Also, in Colombia, about 70% of the girls ex-soldiers were found to be infected with STDs¹⁵⁷.

These health problems have a double impact on girls. Firstly, depending on the severity of their injuries or illness, they may not be able to work and sometimes are rejected by their families who consider them an extra burden. Secondly, those who have STDs may not be accepted by their families due to the fear of contamination of the whole family or the fear of the community's stigma put on the family.

In addition, the psychological effects of the military training, violence, and humiliation girls are usually subjected to in armed forces or groups are devastating for girls. Following their experiences in the armed conflict, they usually suffer from a permanent fear of death, nightmares, violent behaviour, loss of identity, loss of memory and so on.¹⁵⁸ The mental and emotional problems of girls who have been sexually abused are even greater, and are sometimes amplified by the societal response to their sexual experiences.

Consequently, health care facilities need to be provided for girl child soldiers who have been demobilised or released. Upon arrival at the reception centre, girls should be given a full health check to identify serious illnesses or injuries. Further, their medical problems must be addressed and trained staff should provide them with necessary support and education to help them deal with their illnesses.

¹⁵⁶ UNICEF, *For All the World's Children; Child Soldiers*, UK Committee for UNICEF, 2002, quoted in A. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Soldiers*.

¹⁵⁷ ECOSOC, *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women*.

¹⁵⁸ I. McConnan, *Children, not Soldiers*, pp. 120-122.

Furthermore, work with the girls' community is again required. Sensitisation and education campaigns with the families have proved very helpful in the past, since their families are in the best position to offer the girls long-term care and support. Moreover, recent studies¹⁵⁹ have emphasised the fact that recovery of the war-affected children must be considered and ensured in the context of the revival of their communities. Any attempts to help the girls should therefore be done in the context of local rehabilitation and progress, which implies also economic empowerment of the local communities, to guarantee their capacity to cope with the challenges brought by their past experiences.

The economic situation of local community, which was one of the grounds for girls' recruitment, is even more important for their reintegration. Their reunification with the family, when the family still exists, is sometimes impossible, because the latter has been even more impoverished by the conflict and cannot afford to feed the returning girl, particularly if she has children¹⁶⁰. Therefore, girls fear the rejection they may have to deal with if they return to their communities with children, and hence bringing extra weight to their family. Sometimes, families accept the girls back, but reject their children¹⁶¹.

Consequently, it is very important to work on family reunification at the same time as running activities that would provide the girls with the access to basic formal education and skills training opportunities, since these could increase their chances to be accepted by their communities

¹⁵⁹ N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilization*; I. McConnan, *Children, not Soldiers*.

¹⁶⁰ E. Barth, *Peace as Disappointment : The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies: A Comparative Study from Africa*, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo, August 2002 available at <
<http://www.peacewomen.org/resources/DDR/AfricaBarth.html>> on 20 April 2004 (here and after cited as E. Barth, *Peace as Disappointment*).

¹⁶¹ A. Bennett, *Reintegration in Sierra Leone*, p. 51.

and would help them to be able to care both for themselves and their children. Due to the fact that most of the girl ex-combatants were not able to finish school prior their recruitment, their level of education is low. Moreover, when reunification with the family is not possible, the girls will have to support themselves and their children, if they became mothers during their time within the armed groups. Hence, the skills training should also be mixed with some basic education to make them effective.

However, before starting developing new marketable skills, the reintegration programme should be able to identify the resilient qualities, new social skills and coping abilities that girls have developed through their experience within the armed forces or groups and decide whether those skills are transferable to civilian life and income-generating activities¹⁶². In order to build a bridge between their past and their future, which will also help the girls to regain their sense of self, it is important to encourage the strengths and abilities they acquired and that could positively impact on their situation, rather than deny them and try to build new skills. Added to that, recent developments¹⁶³ proved the valuable role the skills developed by former girl child soldiers in the demanding combat environment could play in peace building efforts, due to girls' strong commitments to find peaceful solutions and reconciliation.

Obstacles to reintegration appear for all the girls, even those who enjoyed some power and respect within the fighting groups. For example, girls who spent more time within the armed groups sometimes experience the transition to the civilian life less as reintegration and

¹⁶² N. Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*, pp. 12-15.

¹⁶³ J. Lenz, *Armed with resilience*.

more as jumping into an unfamiliar way of life. Many girls and young women have the feeling that they have personally gained from their experience within the armed forces. Once they are back in the civilian life, they continue to demand recognition of their qualities as combatants or leaders, and therefore they may represent a challenge for society, especially when, at the end of conflict, most of the population favours a return to patriarchal traditions¹⁶⁴. As a consequence, those girls would prefer to stay alone, instead of returning to their families, obeying their parents and taking up their traditional tasks¹⁶⁵. Thus, their option needs to be acknowledged and respected and reintegration in another community should be facilitated.

Yet another problem appears in the case of both boys and girls who were forced to commit atrocities against their own families and communities. The agencies involved in reintegration programmes should again work with the communities and help them realise the whole context in which girls were used and violence was perpetuated, not only individual drama. Where available, traditional mechanisms of reconciliation and rehabilitation should be taken into account in order to help the girls reunite with their communities. This is the case in some African countries, where traditional cleansing and healing rituals exist but are mostly applied for the former boy soldiers. Therefore, these mechanisms must be encouraged and used also for girls, as they are meant to help both children and adults to reconcile themselves with the mistakes of the past, and also symbolise the social forgiveness and the reacceptance of girls back into their community¹⁶⁶.

¹⁶⁴ E. Barth, *Peace as Disappointment*.

¹⁶⁵ N. de Watteville, *Gender in Demobilisation*, p.14.

¹⁶⁶ D. Morrissey, *Restoring Hope for Children of War*, *The Courier ACP-EU*, September - October 2001, pp. 60-62.

Added to that, for the girls who escaped or were captured, their protection against the armed groups they belonged to is another challenge. Often the armed groups see those girls as traitors and try to kill them, both as a punishment and as a method to stop them providing information to the enemy about the group. In Colombia, for example, the People's Ombudsman Office reported that, between 1994 and 1996, 13% of children who were placed in the reception centres for former child soldiers of the "Instituto Colombiano de Benestar Familiar" were killed.¹⁶⁷ A former Colombian girl child soldier described her reality: *"I am marked, and cannot walk out on the streets as there are guerrillas everywhere and they will kill me. I just can't relax, I cannot visit my family because it's so dangerous."*¹⁶⁸

Therefore, due to the security risks faced by those children, the reintegration programmes have to ensure their protection, by keeping secret their location and changing their names. Also, in such cases it is vital to acknowledge that both boys' and girls' reintegration in their own communities is dangerous and thus alternatives should be envisaged.

On the basis of all the above-discussed challenges to the successful reintegration of girls child soldiers, either in post or on-going conflict situations, it is important to acknowledge both the brutal oppression experienced by them within the armed forces and their actions as perpetrators of violence and the power that some of them achieved through violence¹⁶⁹. The awareness of both realities shows the complexity of girls' experiences in the armed conflict. Additionally, it also

¹⁶⁷ CSCS, Child Soldiers Global Report 2001: Colombia, available at <www.child-soldiers.org> on 26 May 2004.

¹⁶⁸ CSCS, Testimonies from Child Soldiers, available at <www.child-soldiers.org> on 1 June 2004.

¹⁶⁹ M. Denov, *Girls in Sierra Leone*.

indicates the domains to be focused on for their subsequent demobilisation, rehabilitation, and community reintegration.



CONCLUSION

Since the early 1990s, the recruitment and use of child soldiers, both boys and girls, has appeared as a new weapon in the arsenal of state and non-state actors. This has been the result of two major changes in the nature of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, armed conflicts between states are rare today and most conflicts now take place within the home country of the children, with the victims being the civilian population, mainly women and children. On the other hand, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has played a significant role, increasing the possibility of using children both as active combatants and in auxiliary roles.¹⁷⁰

Despite the fact that the use of girl child soldiers have been revealed in 55 countries all over the world and their presence in government forces, paramilitaries and armed opposition groups has become a well known reality¹⁷¹, girls are particularly missing from peace agreements, international initiatives and, consequently, demobilisation and reintegration programmes. It has been only recently that the international community have acknowledged the particular needs of girl child soldiers, as both females and children, and their role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security¹⁷².

¹⁷⁰ D. Mazurana, *Girls in fighting forces*.

¹⁷¹ S. McKay, *Known but invisible*.

¹⁷² United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1325 (2000).

To address the global problem of participation of children in armed conflicts, the international community has established a clear set of international norms. The adoption of the four Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflicts, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women as well as other international and regional standards have provided the legal framework for protecting the girls in the midst of armed conflict, in their double capacity as both children and females. These instruments also recognised the special needs of girls in peace or war times, calling on states to address those needs and leaving, therefore, space for future special demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

One of the milestones in the recognition of the importance and need for special demobilisation and reintegration programmes for girl child soldiers is the Security Council Resolution 1314, which underlines "the importance of giving consideration to the special needs and particular vulnerabilities of girls affected by armed conflict, including, inter alia, those leading households, orphaned, sexually exploited and used as combatants, and urges that their human rights, protection and welfare be incorporated in the development of policies and programmes, including those for prevention, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration."¹⁷³

¹⁷³ United Nations, Security Council Resolution, S/RES/1314 (2000).

Moreover, recent developments, such as the adoption of the Statute of International Criminal Court and, latest, of the Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, have paved the road for concrete actions against the perpetrators of such crimes. In addition, the recognition, for the first time, in May 2004, by the Appeals Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone of the use of child soldiers as a war crime under international customary law and of rape and forced marriage as crimes against humanity have brought hope for future reintegration attempts of former girl child soldiers.

Although these developments do not directly address the obstacles faced by demobilisation and reintegration programmes for girl child soldiers, such as the ostracisation and rejection of girls by their communities due to their experiences within the armed forces or groups, they may, nevertheless, ease such programmes, by raising public awareness of the abuses girls endure within those groups. They may, thus, facilitate the acceptance of the concerned girls by their community.

However, the demobilisation and reintegration processes of girl child soldiers face various challenges, many of them related to both the reasons - and ways - of their recruitment and their experiences as members of the fighting groups.

While many girls are forcibly recruited, others are driven into armed forces by poverty, a lack of education, alienation from their community and abuse. For others, joining an armed force can be empowering. However, what differentiates girls' situation from that of boys' is their status in society. In the midst of conflict, an army can represent protection and an opportunity to be treated as an equal to the boys. Voluntary participation, therefore, should be understood rather as

responding to economic and social pressures corroborated with gender discrimination than as girls exercising their own free will.

Hence the demobilisation and reintegration programmes should be combined with initiatives to reduce both these pressures and the gender stereotypes. These include measures for long-term development and eradication of poverty, re-building of the war-destroyed infrastructures, but also the provision, for girl ex-soldiers, of access to the benefits brought by formal demobilisation and reintegration programmes, such as financial and material subsidies, formal education and skills training.

As highlighted by this paper, both girls and boys involved in the violence of armed conflicts suffer from many problems challenging their future lives, such as need of education, the experience of killing and sexual abuse, and psychological and physical effects. After demobilisation, girls' options regarding their future are more limited than those of boys', and this is the result of both the public and personal opinion of girls who have fought and/or have been within armed groups. This is where the theory that girl child soldiers are only used as providers for sexual services supports the stereotypes about girls and the importance of virginity, and is thus likely to limit even further girls' alternatives for reintegration¹⁷⁴.

For this reason, former girl soldiers' education and skills training are vital in order to avoid their re-recruitment, or their orientation towards prostitution and violence as the only options for survival. Moreover, a successful demobilisation and reintegration programme should envisage long-term measures to effectively help the girls to reconstruct their lives. For this to happen, the responsibility of reintegration should be

¹⁷⁴ R. Brett, *Challenging the Assumptions*.

mostly placed on the families and communities to which the girls belong, and thus reconciliation with the family, the village or the community where the girls are going to return should be facilitated.

Furthermore, the implementing agencies should be aware that the experiences of female child soldiers coming back to their communities after years of fighting and sexual abuse have a huge impact on the local community. Thus, sometimes communities themselves need to be assisted to find the ways of helping these girls. An important approach for those involved in these programmes would, therefore, be to work with the entire community to understand girls' special needs, to accept the returning girls and help them heal from their experiences.

Since one of the demobilisation and reintegration programmes' role is to transform the human capital involved in the past conflict into an opportunity for post-conflict development and stability, it must be stressed that, if the weight of girls' and young women's crisis in post-conflict societies is ignored, it is likely to contribute to the country's social, political and economic instability, by making the young females incapable to effectively fulfil their economic and reproductive roles in their society. The DDR programmes, therefore, need to address the psychological, physical and social consequences of the violence experienced by girls in times of war, but also their specific reproductive health needs.

Furthermore, in order to avoid further discrimination of girls, along with the necessity of being culturally-oriented and respecting, as much as possible, the traditional societal patterns, DDR programmes need to consider and address the individual circumstances of girls' recruitment. The kind of assistance provided to demobilised or released girl child

soldiers should depend upon their needs. Ideally, these needs should be tackled within the general DDR agreement, but this may need to be adapted if it becomes clear that there are differences between its provisions and the reality.

However, it is important to recognise that the demobilisation and reintegration programmes cannot solve every potential post-conflict problem. This is why it is vital for international organisations carrying out such programmes to identify the most important needs and resources for each context, design strategies and focus on its mandate, while collaborating with other agencies whose programmes and initiatives could help.

In conclusion, the following aspects are among the factors that should be taken into consideration in DDR programmes targeting former girl child soldiers, during their planning and implementation phases. The list is not exhaustive, but it proves the complexity of the demobilisation and reintegration programmes and the different, long-term challenges that need to be overcome.

a) Negotiations and planning phase:

- understand girls' roles and responsibilities in their families and communities prior the conflict.
- acknowledge cultural attitudes and practices that affect girls' status in society.
- identify the international legal instruments ratified by the respective State that could be used to stop girls' recruitment and

to advocate their release or formal participation in DDR programmes.

- when peace agreements are negotiated, try to include the special needs of girl child soldiers in the official accord.
- make an estimation of the number of combatants to be demobilised and of the girls participating among them.
- when DDR is planned, be prepared to receive a greater number of soldiers than estimated from the outset and do not neglect the girls.
- undertake attempts to target and reach as many girls as possible, even those that are hidden for various reasons. Use all possible means of communication, not only the official ones.
- be aware of the cultural relativist notion of childhood and try to overcome it.
- try to mobilise political will to get as many girl child soldiers as possible officially demobilised and to include them among those who receive ex-combatant status.
- negotiate with the local government the benefits girls would be entitled to, trying to avoid discrimination based on gender or age.
- make sure that all the girls who actively participated in the conflict would benefit from the programme, not only those who fought in the frontlines.
- design and plan all the actions that would be required during demobilisation and reintegration phases and take into consideration the long-term economic and social recovery that would be needed and, accordingly, the economic and social aid required.
- provide flexible qualification criteria for the programme. To allow all the girls within the fighting forces or groups to demobilise, not

only those who hand in a weapon or whose participation is confirmed by a commander. Plan other ways of verification, such as special verification committees that could provide clarification.

b) Implementation phase

- provide separate encampment or reception centres for adults and children, boys and girls.
- make sure the reception centres are easily identifiable and located in accessible areas, so that girls who escaped or have been released could reach them.
- in situation of an on-going conflict, provide also some secret reception centres for girls who have escaped or have been captured, to protect them from the armed group that recruited them.
- where possible, provide local staff for the centres, especially women, who know the culture, societal norms and traditional healing or reconciliation customs.
- give the girls a full health check upon their arrival and address the physical health problems related to girls' experiences within the fighting groups.
- psychological health problems need also to be addressed. Trauma counselling as well as traditional cleansing or healing rituals should be envisaged.
- identification of specific reproductive health problems and STDs, when sexual abuse appeared, needs to be carried out upon arrival to the reception centres. The respect for the girls' privacy, needs or opinion should not be overlooked.

- try to acknowledge each girl's family situation prior her recruitment.
- acknowledge and address the problems faced by girls specifically (e.g. withdrawn from school, domestic exploitation). Obstacles to education also have to be addressed, such as family's opposition to girl's attendance, lack of economic means to support education costs, availability of schools or teachers.
- help the girls to trace their families, or at least some members of the families, if possible.
- where family still exists and it has been traced, work with both the girls and their families to try to reconcile them and address the factors that led the girl to volunteering, such as abusive relationships, poverty or discrimination. Where possible, assist them in establishing close relationship.
- understand the different impacts of the conflict on girls (such as increase of domestic violence and sexual abuse).
- work with the families and local communities to address the social and economic consequences of the conflict (this includes economic empowerment of the local community and rebuilding of the basic infrastructure).
- acknowledge the ways of recruitment used by local fighting forces and the frequency of forced recruitment. If possible, advocacy and negotiations with the leaders of the fighting groups should be envisaged to convince them stop the recruitment and release the girls within their ranks.
- acknowledge and address girls' reasons for voluntary participation. Use some of the measures mentioned above, where appropriate, or consider different approaches, depending upon

the case. For girls who joined due to indoctrination, for example, help them discover other ways to solve the social problems.

- identify and address the impacts of girls' activities and experiences during their participation in the armed conflict.
- take into account the multitude of duties girls might have been required to carry out and do not consider that all the girls have been sexually abused.
- help the girls to regain their identity prior recruitment, their memories.
- along with the organisation of education and skills training, acknowledge and develop the skills girls gained during their participation in the conflict.
- help the girls reconsider their actions as perpetrators of violence and reconcile with themselves.
- assist them in dealing with the memories of the violence that was oriented towards them.
- help the girls regain faith in their decision-making ability and encourage them to take charge of their life.
- work with the family and community to find ways to reconcile with the girls and accept them back.
- when sexual abuse is the cause of girls' rejection by their community, traditional rituals for recovery of dignity and re-acceptance into society should be found.
- for girls who have been captured or have escaped, help them reintegrate into another community than their own and take all the necessary measure to protect the girls.
- provide help and all the necessary facilities for girls who have children, such as child care facilities and nutritional programmes for their children.

- work with girls' family to make them realise the girls' situation and accept and help both the girl and her child.
- be aware that all these interventions take time, so prepare long-term actions.

Many of the above mentioned aspects are to be found within the provisions, concerning child soldiers, of the current general DDR programmes. However, the main obstacles that affect girls' demobilisation and reintegration are related particularly to the treatment they receive as both females and children before, during and after conflict, and both local and international community's lack of gender sensitivity regarding their particular experiences and needs. These challenges have only recently started to be acknowledged and have not been fully taken into account yet. Therefore, in order to efficiently address those challenges and girls' specific needs, special DDR programmes for girl ex-soldiers are essential elements needed for preventing possible social consequences, such as poverty, civil unrest, prostitution, an increase in AIDS and, consequently, for ensuring society's stability.

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