

UNIVERSITY OF PADUA

**European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation  
A.Y. 2023/2024**

## **FROM COMBAT TO COMMUNITY**

**RECLAIMING IDENTITY: A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF INTERNATIONAL REINTEGRATION  
EFFORTS IN THE REHABILITATION OF FORMER FEMALE CHILD SOLDIERS**

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Word Count Declaration: 20, 095

## BIOGRAPHY

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## ABSTRACT

In the past 25 years since child soldiers became an issue of transnational justice, there is still an urgent need for a gendered approach to reintegration efforts. This thesis contextualizes the crisis using key frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the annual reports of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC). A critical analysis highlights both the historical and evolution of international child protection mechanisms and the gaps between the CRC's intentions and its practical implications for child soldiers. Emphasizing a gender-sensitive approach, this thesis sheds light on the unique challenges girls face in armed conflict, exemplified through a case study of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A detailed case study thoroughly explores the specific vulnerabilities of girls within this context and examines the effectiveness and shortcomings of current reintegration efforts in the DRC. By advocating for a nuanced understanding of gender concerning child soldiering, this thesis seeks to contribute to more effective policy and practice aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of former child soldiers, especially girls, and facilitating their successful reintegration into society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my family, who have been the rock that has held me steady throughout this arduous, life-changing journey. Your unwavering support and encouragement were fundamental in keeping me driven and focused, even in the most challenging moments. From late-night conversations and endless espresso shots to words of wisdom and reassurance, you have all been a constant source of inspiration and motivation. Your continuous love, patience, and understanding have been a lifeline, allowing me to navigate the ins and outs of this process with confidence and clarity. You are the threads that weave together the tapestry of my success, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

I would also like to extend my sincerest appreciation to Professor De Stefani, my thesis supervisor, who has been an invaluable source of guidance and expertise throughout my research. Professor, your academic vigour and proficiency are unmatched, and your perennial assistance has helped me stay on track and overcome obstacles. Your willingness to answer endless questions, offer constructive feedback, and provide sage advice has been a significant factor in the success of my thesis. I am truly thankful for your mentorship and friendship.

## TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAAC	Children and Armed Conflict
CONADER	Commission Nationale pour la Démobilisation et la Réinsertion
CRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DCR	Disarmament and Community Reintegration
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FAPC	Forces Armées du Peuple Congolais
FARDC	Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo
FDLR	Forces Démocratique de Libération du Rwanda
FRPI	Force de Résistance Patriotique de l'Ituri
GCRCs	Global Coalition for the Reintegration of Child Soldiers
ILO	International Labour Organization
MRM	Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of children in armed conflict
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SRSg	Special Representative to the Secretary-General
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This section offers a comprehensive introduction to the study, contextualizing the perennial problem of the recruitment and reintegration of child soldiers. With particular attention to the gendered dynamics shaping victims' experiences, the present section illustrates the complexities surrounding the issue. Lastly, this section outlines the approach and methodology employed throughout my investigation, detailing the procedures used to collect and analyze data.

### 1.1 The Global Crisis of Child Soldier Recruitment and Reintegration: Contextualizing the Problem

The phenomenon of child soldiering is a global crisis, plaguing children around the world for centuries. The term infantry dates to medieval times, evolving from the Italian word 'infante' which referred to child combatants that accompanied knights into battle (Honwana, 2008, p. 139). However, the plight of child soldiers is exacerbated by contemporary conflicts, where a multitude of children are involved in military activities. For instance, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that over 105,000 children were verified between 2005 and 2022 as being affiliated with armed groups. While exact numbers are unknown, it is widely understood that the true number of cases is significantly underreported; consequently, the actual number of children affected is much higher than statistics suggest (UNICEF, 2021, paragraph 2). Children either voluntarily or involuntarily join armed groups for numerous reasons. Some children enlist in armed ranks as a means of survival, seeking to escape poverty and secure a better future for themselves and their families, while others are coerced or abducted into exploitative activities within conflict settings. This tragic phenomenon is further compounded by the psychological manipulation employed by armed groups, instilling in them the belief that joining these forces offers a sense of belonging and identity amidst chaos (Valder, 2014, p. 39). Additionally, the lack of educational and economic opportunities in conflict-affected areas amplifies the appeal of armed groups, making child soldiering a desperate choice for many. This idea will be further explored in the case study of the DRC. The long-term consequences of child soldiering, including physical and mental trauma, and the disruption of education create a cycle of violence that can perpetuate instability in communities even after conflicts have subsided.

The idea of childhood varies across different communities and cultures globally. In many cases, children are forced to grow up at an alarming rate, whether taking on domestic responsibilities or paid work. Environmental circumstances, social expectations and economic challenges further influence children's susceptibility to vulnerabilities and exploitation (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 13). Moreover, their rights are further violated when living in conflict settings, exacerbating suffering and impeding a future of flourishing opportunities. An astonishing number of children are living in areas of armed conflict, as Save the Children estimates that 468 million children were living in conflict areas in 2022 (STC, 2023, p. 14). Children living in these environments are more prone to becoming part of the crisis, and many are recruited and used throughout various stages of war. While some feel compelled to join voluntarily, children are typically recruited involuntarily and exploited against their will by way of abduction, coercion or manipulation (Valder, 2014, p. 37). For example, according to the 2019 report of the SRSG for CAAC, children abducted in 2017 by the Bana Mura rebel group in the DRC remained in captivity and forced into sexual slavery (2SRSG CAAC, 2018, p. 7, paragraph 32). By any means, children associated with armed actors are subjected to extreme levels of abuse and violence, significantly impacting their well-being and future development. The trauma they endure can lead to profound psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is imperative to address the broader systemic issues that contribute to the vulnerability of children in

conflict zones, ensuring that protective measures and reintegration programs are in place to support their recovery and reestablishment in civilian life.

Child soldiering is one of the worst forms of child labour, where children are used as cooks, maids, messengers, guards, combatants and more (UNICEF, 2021, paragraph 2). While the word soldier holds a connotation of active combatant and the image of a child wielding a weapon comes to mind, children are recruited and used as pawns in all aspects of war. It is necessary to recognize the gender dimensions in the recruitment and use of children, recognizing the unique vulnerabilities of girls. Girls are especially susceptible to sexual violence and social stigma, and in turn excluded from their family and community (1SRSR CAAC, 2022, p. 16). Prior to the early 2000s, it was commonly assumed that child soldiers were exclusively boys; however, by 2004, girls accounted for one-third of child soldiers globally (Fox, 2004, p. 465). The tactics employed by armed groups often involve gender-specific roles, with girls being not only forced into combat but also systematically subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, further complicating their reintegration into society. Additionally, the psychological scars left by such experiences are often deep and lasting, resulting in significant mental health challenges that impact their ability to reintegrate into their communities successfully (Freeman, 2020, p. 6). With abductions at an all-time high by the end of the 1990s combined with increased international awareness, eradicating child soldiering became a major area for humanitarian and political efforts. Global mobilization to prevent and protect children from forced recruitment and use in armed conflict is highlighted by the United Nation's (UN) commitment and the dedicated work of numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in advocating for children affected by war. Yet, despite the proliferation of international instruments and mechanisms aimed at eradicating child soldiering, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Paris Principles, and other treaties, the aftermath of these efforts has seen limited success in establishing sustainable reintegration programs and safe environments for affected children. Moreover, these initiatives often struggle with inadequate funding, lack of political will, and insufficient collaboration among stakeholders which ultimately hinders sustainable impacts on the lives of former child soldiers (1Secretary-General, 2020, p. 4, paragraph 67).

The 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child enshrines the contemporary understanding of child protection and support (Tobin, 2019, paragraph 7). However, there remained a lack of specific strategies for the protection of child rights. Twenty years later marked the International Year of the Child by the UN General Assembly, igniting the development of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child over the next ten years. The Convention will be discussed at length in section 2.1. UNICEF, the ILO, Save the Children and other international institutions work to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers, provide aid to children affected by conflict, and work to advocate for their rights. These institutions are key actors in collaborating to prevent child soldiering and protect those affected, while simultaneously promoting their rights. Releasing children from an armed force or group is the first step in tackling the issue, and providing long-term sustainable reintegration is critical for a child's future development. As over 10,000 children were discharged from armed factions in 2017 alone, they must be given the proper services to support their physical and mental well-being as a means of overcoming the effects of war (8SRSR CAAC, 2018, p. 2). Children released from military ranks require access to education to learn life skills to be fully immersed civilians within their community. This raises the question, what is reintegration and how can it be accomplished? Reintegration encompasses re-establishing children previously involved with an armed force or group back into civilian life in a harmonious and lasting way. These children carry trauma and the scars of war with them for the remainder of their lives, and reintegration is aimed at combating these long-term consequences of war. Children once associated with armed conflict are robbed of their childhood and forced to grow up too quickly. Children should be wielding balls and baseball bats, not weapons. Effective reintegration programs should include extended psychosocial support, professional coaching, access to education, medical assistance and other areas where support is needed (8SRSR CAAC, 2018, p. 1). As reintegration

is not just a quick fix requiring consistent attention and cultivation, effective programs need backing through sustained, prolonged funding sources. Reintegrating former child soldiers is not only essential in repairing their livelihood but also as a means of breaking the chain of violence and in turn securing peace and security.

### 1.1.1 Establishing the Gender Dimensions of Reintegrating Former Child Soldiers

While the international community has made significant progress in highlighting the consequences of armed conflict on children, there remains a critical gap in understanding the unique experiences of girls. Among the estimated 300,000 children involved in direct hostilities, roughly 40% are girls (Valder, 2014, p.35). It is of note that obtaining accurate figures is particularly challenging, as many unverified cases often go uninvestigated, resulting in a substantial number of missing and unaccounted-for children, primarily girls. Despite these alarming statistics, the specific experiences of girls are frequently overlooked, and their vulnerabilities remain largely unaddressed during reintegration processes. This oversight can be attributed to the nature of the violation's girls endure and the prevailing belief that, given that they are not consistently wielding weapons on the battlefield, they are not considered victims of grave human rights violations (Brett, 2004, p. 30). For example, the 2019 Representative to the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) report explicitly mentions boys concerning recruitment in the Central African Republic, yet fails to comment on the experiences of girls (SRSG CAAC, 2019, p. 5, paragraph 18). This is a common theme throughout reports as the experiences of girls remain widely invisible. This gap exemplifies one of the many ways that girls' experiences and voices are systematically silenced or ignored. A gendered analysis plays a crucial role in addressing the tendency to minimize specific violations that are systematically underreported due to entrenched gender disparities (SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 11). Gender norms and cultural practices shape the distinct ways children are affected by armed conflict, particularly regarding the unique challenges faced by girls. Throughout various SRSG CAAC reports, girls are frequently referenced in the context of sexual violence, while boys are predominantly discussed concerning combat roles. Regardless of their respective roles, every child involved with an armed group is exposed to danger, with diverse effects on their psychological and emotional well-being. It is imperative to consider the gendered dimensions of exploitative actions taken against child soldiers. Female soldiers face heightened risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in combat settings and are particularly vulnerable to rape, sexual violence, forced marriages, and prostitution, resulting in profound emotional trauma and social isolation (Valder, 2014, p. 43). For instance, young girls' sole purpose in armed ranks in Angola is to become pregnant (ibid, p. 41).

Moreover, girls who are forced into child soldiering often endure additional social stigma upon their reintegration into their communities after being released from armed forces. Most girls experience feelings of guilt and shame instilled by societal perceptions, which portray them as impure and unsuitable for marriage (Freeman, 2020, p. 8). This perception stems from the sexual trauma they have experienced over months or years, leading to further rejection by their communities. The accompanying pressure of social stigmatization, compounded by the lack of community support, exacerbates already high levels of emotional and psychological distress. Additionally, the belief that they are unable to fulfill traditional gender roles, such as becoming wives and mothers, intensifies feelings of shame and self-doubt (ibid, p. 9). Gender-based violence (GBV) significantly influences the unique experiences of girls before, during and after their participation in armed conflict which has detrimental negative consequences on their mental health and emotional well-being in a post-conflict environment. A gender-based analysis of the specific experiences of girls is essential not only for accurate reporting but also for developing effective support strategies for their reintegration (Brett, 2004, p. 31). While annual reports highlight the

recruitment and use of child soldiers, they often lack a focused examination of how girls are specifically targeted. Understanding the root causes behind why girls are recruited is vital in addressing the particular needs and vulnerabilities of girls as they reintegrate into society. Therefore, grasping the gendered dynamics of war is crucial from the outset. Children's participation in armed conflict stunts their personal development and hampers their potential empowerment to realize their potential and become valuable members of their communities (GCRC, 2021, p. 2). Consequently, effective reintegration efforts are a crucial component of rectifying these issues, aiming to rebuild lives sustainably.

Ultimately, the experiences and reintegration trajectories of girls during and after armed conflict reveal distinct differences from those of boys. This divergence necessitates a nuanced understanding of their diverse needs and circumstances. A one-size-fits-all approach to demobilization and reintegration is inadequate, failing to recognize the unique challenges and concerns that girls face. This thesis will delve deeper into the complexities of girls' experiences in armed conflict and reintegration efforts, with a particular focus on how gender roles and expectations shape their exposure to violence and subsequently inform their reintegration outcomes. Through an extensive analysis of the literature and empirical data, I aim to identify best practices for designing inclusive and effective programs that address the needs, concerns and perspectives of girls in armed conflict. My goal is to contribute to future research on effective initiatives and to offer well-informed recommendations in the section leading up to the conclusion. As I examine the destructive impact of armed conflict on girls in armed conflict in great detail in the subsequent sections, I pose a crucial question: How do traditional gender norms and expectations shape the experiences of girls in armed conflict, and how do these factors influence their reintegration outcomes?

## 1.2 APPROACH

This thesis is grounded in a critical feminist approach, acknowledging that gender plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of individuals, particularly in contexts of conflict and post-conflict environments. Further, a feminist framework recognizes that gender is a socially constructed phenomenon that shapes power relations and influences individual agency. Guided by this critical feminist lens, this research seeks to uncover the ways in which traditional gender roles and expectations intersect with the experiences of child soldiers. More specifically, the experiences of girls especially in the reintegration stage. Prior to my research, I held preconceived notions about the lack of adequate support and resources dedicated to long-term and sustainable reintegration. Unfortunately, my initial expectations were confirmed as I delved deeper into the literature and discovered that, despite well-intentioned efforts, there currently remains a blanket approach to reintegration programs which is insufficient in addressing the distinct needs of girls. A gendered lens reveals the distinct challenges and opportunities for girls and boys in conflict zones, and how this, in turn, impacts the different approaches to reintegration. My study relies on a critical review of existing literature, informed by a thematic analysis of UN reports and academic studies. Intending to identify patterns and themes to reveal the complex interplay between gender, power, and violence, I employed a qualitative approach, enabling an in-depth examination of the distinct perspectives of child soldiers, with a concentration on girl victims. Identifying patterns and themes throughout existing research reveals the gaps and challenges faced by former female soldiers as they navigate the transition back into civilian life, which informs future action plans. This thematic analysis allowed me to uncover several key themes that influence the unique experiences of former girl soldiers, specifically that they are mostly targeted by sexual violence and face higher levels

of social exclusion compared to boys in armed conflict. A thematic approach also allowed me to compare how often boys are mentioned compared to girls throughout reports and studies, amplifying the blanket approach in current methods of reintegration of former children associated with war. My research was guided by three primary objectives: (1) investigating the prevalence and impact of child soldiering on girls; (2) examining the effectiveness of current reintegration strategies for girls and (3) identifying best practices and policy recommendations for improving the reintegration process of girls. For my case study, I first researched the country as a whole, and then investigated existing data on reintegration programs, focusing on the specific experiences of girls. By implementing a thematic approach, I aim to shed light on the often overlooked, distinct challenges faced by girls, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their needs during the reintegration stage. Further, exploring the gender dimensions of child soldiering and reintegration processes, I aim to inform evidence-based policy and programmatic interventions to address the unique priorities of girls. Ultimately, my study seeks to contribute to the advancement of a more effective and sustainable approach to reintegration programs, with a specific emphasis on prioritizing the long-term well-being and dignity of young women who have been impacted by armed conflict.

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY

I employed a mixed-methods approach throughout my study, combining a comprehensive analysis of existing data with a case study focusing on a region where armed conflict is particularly prevalent. This design took into account both global and local contexts, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the distinct experiences of girls in armed conflict and during the reintegration stage of their recovery. The study opens with a thorough review of existing literature on child soldiering and reintegration, analyzing key United Nations instruments and mechanisms that shape the discourse surrounding this critical issue. This background knowledge provided a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of the challenges faced by these young women, and it informed the research question that guided my investigation. Specifically, my research question aims to explore the common challenges endured by young women who were once associated with an armed force or group, and how different countries address their reintegration based on prevailing gendered stereotypes. Given the constraints of time, logistical challenges, and ethical considerations, primary data collection through interviews and/or surveys was not feasible. Instead, my research relied heavily on secondary sources, with a detailed analysis of available data. I utilized reports from the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict as well as country-specific reports from the Secretary-General, alongside literature from international organizations and relevant academic sources. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data, I engaged in a thorough reading of these reports three times: the first read-through offered a general sense of the material, while the subsequent reviews focused specifically on sections that delved into the situation of girls and highlighted their unique experiences in armed conflict. The third read involved annotating key terms and phrases that directly pertained to my study, such as "reintegration," "rehabilitation," and "sexual violence." This iterative approach allowed for a thematic analysis that uncovered patterns and trends within the available literature, significantly enhancing my understanding of the complex phenomena surrounding the experiences of former female child soldiers. By organizing keywords and themes into a systematic table during my research and writing processes, I

created a visual representation of my findings that served as a valuable reference throughout my writing journey. Moreover, I deliberately chose the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for my case study, given the country's exceptionally high volume of documented cases of child soldiering, particularly the alarming prevalence of sexual violence committed against girls. Although the case study of the DRC cannot encapsulate the full spectrum of conflict dynamics observed in all affected nations, it is particularly relevant to my thesis due to its status as one of the countries with the highest documented instances of child soldiers serving in various capacities. The DRC's plight is compounded by persistent instability, widespread poverty, and entrenched gender norms that further marginalize the voices and needs of young women. Analyzing the literature produced by UN bodies and other organizations provides essential context and substantiates the arguments presented throughout my paper. Overall, my implementation of a mixed-methods analysis employs a methodology that offers a solid foundation for grasping the multifaceted experiences of girls before, during, and after their time with armed groups. The insights garnered from this study aim to inform future policies and programs designed to support the successful reintegration of former female child soldiers, with an emphasis on highlighting both the common challenges they face and effective strategies that can facilitate their recovery. By addressing the specific needs of these young women, my research aspires to contribute to the broader dialogue around child protection in conflict settings, advocating for systemic change that recognizes girls as vital stakeholders in peacebuilding processes and ensuring that their voices are heard throughout discussions.

## 2. SETTING THE SCENE: THE PHENOMENON OF CHILD SOLDIERS UNDER UNITED NATIONS MECHANISMS

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the international community's response to the plight of child soldiers, emphasizing key initiatives, challenges and developments in the field of children's rights. The chapter contains an analysis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and UN reports, as well as a critique of these instruments.

### 2.1 Historical Context: The Evolution of International Child Protection

This section outlines the historical developments and achievements aimed at protecting and preventing the use of child soldiers. It is important to note that this section does not cover every historical development, as the focus is mainly on the recruitment and use of child soldiers and their subsequent reintegration.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the League of Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, advocating for a welfare approach centred on the belief that the international community must protect children from harm at all costs (Tobin, 2019, paragraph 6). However, this early declaration notably lacked a focus on civil and political rights, failing to recognize children as independent agents deserving of their own rights. It is also essential to acknowledge the Geneva Conventions, which are a set of treaties outlining the rules and limitations of warfare. The Fourth Geneva Convention is particularly significant in the protection of child soldiers, explicitly prohibiting the forced recruitment of anyone under the age of fifteen (Geneva Convention (IV), 1949, Article 24). Beyond this, the Conventions have had a profound impact on shaping international humanitarian law, which aims to safeguard victims in armed conflict. Ten years after the Fourth Geneva Convention, the UN General Assembly adopted a revised Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which introduced the crucial principle of non-discrimination. Nevertheless, the Declaration still fell short of providing substantive rights that empower children as agents in their own lives. A landmark achievement in the evolution of children's rights was the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989, which sought to address the shortcomings of previous frameworks. The CRC is supplemented by two Optional Protocols: the first addressing the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), and the second focusing on the sale of children and child prostitution. The Convention is revolutionary, encompassing civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, while also detailing specific obligations that states must fulfill to ensure children's well-being. It asserts that children possess the same inherent dignity as adults and must be recognized as agents in their own right. The CRC benefits from immense global credibility, being the most widely ratified treaty in history, with nearly every country committing to its implementation. Its comprehensive scope has positioned it as a key international resource for the protection and promotion of children's rights.

The momentum from the CRC carried over into the 1990s, during which the international community became increasingly aware of violations against children's rights, particularly the exploitation of child soldiers, inspired in part by heightened media coverage of the proliferation of civil

wars. In 2002, OPAC was adopted by the UN General Assembly, marking a pivotal moment in the global effort to prohibit the involvement of individuals under the age of fifteen in hostilities. Another significant milestone was the establishment of the mandate for the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG CAAC) in December 1997. This UN body plays a crucial role in the reintegration of former child soldiers, a topic that will be explored in detail in Section 2.2. Additionally, UN Security Council Resolution 1261, passed in 1999, condemned the recruitment and use of child soldiers and set a benchmark for their protection, demanding their immediate release and reintegration into society (UN Security Council, 1999, Article 15). Furthermore, the Paris Principles adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 provide a comprehensive set of guidelines designed to safeguard children associated with armed forces and armed groups, establishing the minimum age for recruitment and military involvement at eighteen years (General Assembly, 2007, Article 1.14). In addition to these pivotal documents, other conventions have played a vital role in fortifying protections for children, particularly in conflict situations. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) explicitly prohibits the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. Moreover, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) reflects regional commitments to child protection, mandating states to ensure the rights and well-being of children and prohibiting their recruitment into armed forces. The UN Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (the Riyadh Guidelines), adopted in 1990, also emphasize the need for preventing children from being drawn into violence, thereby addressing the root causes of child soldiers' recruitment. These historical instruments collectively foster a more comprehensive legal framework that prioritizes children's protection and rights while underscoring the international community's commitment to combat the scourge of child soldiering.

These are just some of the historical milestones that have paved the way for ongoing advancements in protecting children from the horrors of war. However, significant challenges persist. Since 2005, there have been 329,806 violations against children in thirty-two conflict-affected countries. Alarming reports indicate that in Mozambique, the rebel group RENAMO employs over 10,000 children in military operations, some as young as six years old. These statistics highlight that there remains considerable work to be done in promoting children's rights and specifically in protecting child soldiers. Furthermore, the historical failure to hold states and non-state actors accountable for violating the rights of children continues to hinder progress. For instance, in the aftermath of the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, thousands of children were demobilized; however, many of them faced societal stigma and inadequate reintegration support, exacerbated by a lack of cohesive political will to implement existing protections effectively. Thus, it is vital to develop a comprehensive and legally binding framework that holds states accountable for violations of the provisions established in the aforementioned documents. Although the CRC is legally binding, the language ambiguity throughout the treaty leads to perpetrators of violence circumventing its judicial backing. By enhancing clarity and specificity within legal frameworks, along with fostering a collaborative global effort, policymakers can better address the complexities of child soldier reintegration and protection, ultimately contributing to a future where every child can grow up free from the shadows of conflict.

### 2.1.1 Child Protection on the Map: Introducing the Convention on the Rights of the Child

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a pivotal document for the protection and promotion of children's rights' and well-being. Evidently, major international actors placed children's rights high on the agenda, as the Convention is the most universally ratified human rights treaty in history. Further, it is considered the most comprehensive human rights treaty, including fifty-four articles which guarantee forty substantive rights for children. The provisions encompassed in the Convention cover the physical, emotional, social and educational well-being of children, complemented by two Optional Protocols. Before the adoption of the treaty, children were seen as an extension of their parents or guardians, whereas the rights-based approach of the Convention affirmed that children are rights holders in their own regard. The CRC covers three main areas of rights: survival and development rights, protection rights, and participation rights. Article 1 sets the tone for the provisions which follow, defining the child as an individual under the age of eighteen (CRC, 1989, Article 1). This definition establishes a universal standard for identifying who is considered a child and thus protected under the Convention.

The primary duty bearers in ensuring the promotion and protection of the rights set out in the Convention are State and government officials, however parents, caretakers, civil society and others are also tasked with the responsibility. By signing and ratifying the CRC, State Parties are legally bound to enforce the rights outlined throughout the document. State Parties are responsible for protecting children to their fullest extent, treating all children as equals with indivisible rights, free from discrimination (CRC, 1989, Article 2.2). The principle of non-discrimination is a cornerstone of the CRC, recognizing that all children have inherent rights, regardless of their sex, religion, background and so on. This is the foundation in achieving the goals of the Convention, namely, to ensure that all children have access to a safe and fulfilled life. Further, Article 2 is built upon in Article 6, which highlights "that every child has the inherent right to life" and that "State Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" (CRC, 1989, Article 6). A high standard is set for governments to create an environment in which children have access to the basic necessities required for growth and viability, even in the most extenuating circumstances.

Another key component of the CRC is that the best interest of the child should always be considered a primary objective in all actions (CRC, 1989, Article 3.1). This principle ensures that children's needs are fundamentally recognized in all matters which affect them. Further, it guides actions that promote their well-being, safety and development while simultaneously fostering their voice and agency. It also meant to shield children from practices and policies which could be harmful to children, setting a global standard for prioritizing children's rights in all decisions. The child-centred nature of the Convention also places special importance on children's participation in decision-making which affects them. Article 12 emphasizes the significance of providing children with opportunities to express their opinions and be listened to. Empowering children and cultivating respect for their views ultimately nurtures their overall development and future well-being. For the purpose of this thesis, the remaining provisions I will discuss are in accordance with protecting children from armed conflict.

Protection provisions provide a clear and concise framework that reinforces the Convention's vital role in safeguarding children's rights and shielding them from the worst forms of abuse. Article 19.1 focuses on the state's responsibility to "take all appropriate...measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect...exploitation, including sexual abuse" from any individual who is responsible for the child (CRC, 1989, Article 19.1). This again exemplifies the duty-bound obligation of States to enact laws and regulations, implement educational awareness campaigns and provide social services to child victims of violence and abuse (CRC, 1989, Article 19.2). A practical illustration of this provision in action is reflected in the Central African Republic in 2019.

The Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Families and the Protection of Children proposed a new law which would criminalize leaders of armed conflicts for recruiting children (2SRSG CAAC, 2019, p. 8, paragraph 36). This practical application reflects government officials' compliance with the obligations under the CRC to prevent violence and create a proactive environment for all children.

Ensuring a child's development is crucial for maximizing their future opportunities, and it is the responsibility of states to provide social security as an essential component of this development. In this regard, State Parties must guarantee adequate standards of living in accordance with every "child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" (CRC, 1989, Article 27.1). Children growing up in an environment where armed conflict is prevalent leads to elevated levels of anxiety which in turn stunts their social and mental well-being (5SRSG CAAC, 2021, p. 7, paragraph 27). While Article 27 focuses on the general welfare of all children, it has significant implications for the protection of children in armed conflict. Article 32 is also of importance in this regard in that it explicitly prohibits putting children in harm's way by exploiting them for economic benefits. Further, the Article articulates explicit measures States must adopt to ensure children are not exploited, such as a minimum age requirement for employment and regulated working hours (CRC, 1989, Article 32.2, paragraphs a & b). This sets a foundation for protecting children from all forms of exploitation, including harm associated with military conflict.

Article 37 lays the groundwork for the protection of children in times of armed conflict, setting the tone for the Articles that follow. Specifically, an emphasis is placed that under no circumstance should any child be tortured or subject to inhumane treatment (CRC, 1989, Art 37, paragraph a). It further emphasizes that should a child be put in such a predicament, they are owed legal assistance (CRC, 1989, Art 37, paragraph d). This is mimicked in the 2019 SRSG CAAC report, which asserts that any child connected to an armed group shall first be regarded and treated as a victim (2SRSG CAAC, 2019, p. 6, paragraph 22). This also considers the best interest of the child as a primary objective, and exemplifies the interconnectivity of the Convention. This leads us to Article 38, which is the principal Article for this thesis as it focuses specifically on children in armed conflicts. Article 38 affirms the duty of States to safeguard children in armed conflict, explicitly forbidding the recruitment of anyone who has not yet attained the age of fifteen (CRC, 1989, Article 38.3). Moreover, in cases of a child being exploited by an armed force or group, State Parties must provide "physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim" under Article 39 (CRC, 1989, Article 39). A special focus on children in armed conflict in the 1989 Convention proves a strong international commitment to combat child soldiering. Article 39 establishes that children have the right to recovery and reintegration, creating a legal and moral responsibility to provide them with the support needed to heal from their time in conflict settings. Reintegration is vital in promoting sustainable healing and social solidarity, which is essential for a conducive environment for children to thrive. Article 39 is also complimented by Article 6 of the OPAC, reiterating government officials' duty to support demobilized children's full reintegration into society (OP-CRC, 2000, Article 6.3). Evidently, the reintegration of child soldiers is a fundamental human right articulated under the CRC and should be prioritized by State Parties.

As the CRC is the most universally ratified human rights treaty in history, signatories vow to protect children at all costs. Moreover, particular attention to children affected by armed conflict reinforces a strong international commitment to combat child soldiering through a comprehensive legal framework which also promotes rehabilitation. The CRC stresses the urgent need to provide support for affected individuals and ultimately achieve a state where children are no longer exploited in armed conflict. Overall, the Convention takes on a child-centred approach in which children are finally seen as individual rights bearers. The Convention paves the way for governments to enact laws and policies that protect children and create an environment where growth and development are prioritized and possible. While the Convention is a comprehensive, well-intentioned legal document, limitations still arise in the scope of protection provisions. Specifically, the language ambiguity used throughout the CRC leaves

room for child caretakers or guardians to circumnavigate the duties laid out throughout the Convention. This idea will be explored in the following section.

### 2.1.2 The Gap Between Intentions and Reality: A Critique of the CRC's Child Soldiers Provisions in Context

Although the CRC is a milestone document in the protection of children and aims to give them a voice, the language ambiguity throughout the Convention creates inconsistencies with the implementation of the provisions by different State Parties. The definition of the child under Article 1 allows for a universal standard for identifying who is considered a child, however, with an added stipulation. As the latter part of the Article emphasizes that States may establish a lower age of majority in their own legislation, the boundaries are blurred between childhood and adulthood, leaving confusion on when a child is considered a child under the law (CRC, 1989, Article 1). There is no explicit explanation of when or why States may lower the age of majority, which can have detrimental consequences for young children. For instance, in Syria, the minimum age of marriage is set at eighteen years old, however, girls as young as 10 years old are often married off with little to no legal repercussions (UNFPA, 2017, p. 5). This flexible interpretation thus raises questions surrounding the consistency and effectiveness of the definition in practice. While a child is defined as an individual under eighteen years of age under Article 1, a clear contradiction is evident under Article 38. The provision outlines that while no child should be used in armed conflicts, children should not be recruited into national armies under the age of fifteen (CRC, 1989, Article 38.3). This raises questions on the legitimacy of legal repercussions for armed forces and groups who use children between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. This inconsistency illuminates the need for a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a child, prioritizing children's protection and well-being. Thus the CRC's definition of a child must be understood in a way that ensures the universal protection of all children under the age of eighteen, without exception. Further, the specific mention of direct hostilities in part two of article 38 alludes to the idea that individuals participating in indirect hostilities under the age of fifteen are not protected (CRC, 1989, Article 38.2).

As girls often do not take part in direct hostilities and are more often used as a source of entertainment for actors of armed groups and forces, they would not be protected under Article 38 (Valder, 2014, p. 47). Moreover, the ambiguity of "feasible measures" of State Parties to prohibit the use of anyone under the age of fifteen leaves excessive room for interpretation, rendering recruitment authority at commanders' discretion. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo from April 2020 to March 2022, 42% of the 3,901 children were under the age of fifteen when recruited (Secretary-General, 2022, p. 7, paragraph 25). Clearly, the ambiguity throughout Article 38 creates room for State officials to circumnavigate minimum age requirements for recruitment in armed conflict and implement national practices that result in the exploitation of children. The CRC is also limited in its scope as it lacks reference to other forms of child exploitation, such as forced labor, forced marriage or sexual exploitation. The lack of clarity throughout Article 38 is also evident in part three of the Article, referring to children connected to "armed forces" (CRC, 1989, Article 38.3). This raises questions of other armed groups such as non-state actors and militias. For instance, between 1990 and 2018, the UN Security Council estimates that thirty-eight countries reported using female children in State forced and/or non-state groups (Freeman, 2020, p. 1). This also symbolizes a lack of protection for girls specifically, as most female child soldiers take part in indirect hostilities in non-state armed groups. The last Article I will dissect is Article 39. This article is especially important in rectifying violations of children's rights

in settings of armed conflict, placing the responsibility on State Parties to take “appropriate measures” in fostering bodily and mental rehabilitation as well as reintegration back into civilian life (CRC, 1989, Article 39). However, questions come up such as what constitutes appropriate measures? Is it solely the release of children or does it constitute a nuanced action plan?

The CRC lacks a clear and comprehensive definition of what reintegration should look like, leaving room for State Parties to take varying approaches. To address these ambiguities, clear definitions must be established for terms such as direct participation, armed forces and reintegration. Creating a clear action plan with guidelines on how Article 38 should be implemented is essential, namely laying out specific steps for the prevention of child recruitment and use as well as reintegration for victims. The Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) was adopted to address these very concerns. Whereas Article 1 still only refers to individuals taking part in direct hostilities, Article 2 explicitly affirms that anyone under the age of eighteen should not be recruited into the armed forces (OPAC, 2000, Article 2). Similarly, Article 4 rectifies the issue of the original Convention’s reference to State armed forces, emphasizing that any armed group, regardless of State or non-State, in all cases should refrain from recruiting anyone under eighteen years old. The OPAC aims to provide a more concise framework for States to prevent and take active measures in the prohibition of child recruitment in armed conflicts, with a special emphasis on the rehabilitation of child victims (OPAC, 2000, Article 7). Regardless of these efforts to rectify the ongoing use of children in armed conflict and the subsequent violation of their rights, armed groups and militias still use children in all aspects of war to the present day. Governments must develop educated plans to implement the provisions in both the CRC and OPAC and come up with better strategies in preventing child recruitment, demobilizing child soldiers, and providing reparations for victims.

## 2.2 Reports of the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict

This section introduces the mandate of the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, and the progress they’ve made thus far with regard to reintegrating former children associated with war. I will begin by providing an overview of the SRSG CAAC’s mandate and duties, followed by a comparison of reports from 2019 to 2023. I will close this section with a focus on the unique experiences of girls, drawing attention to their representation in the reports.

### 2.2.1 Establishing a Voice for the Children: The Creation and Mandate of the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict

Following the 1996 report of Mozambique politician Graça Mache on the effects of war on children, the mandate of the Special Representative was established. Mache’s report outlined an in-depth overview of child soldiers while emphasizing that children are the main sufferers in armed conflict. The Secretary-General thus appointed the first Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict less than a year later, in an effort to strengthen the safeguarding of children impacted by armed conflict and promote global collaboration to achieve this goal (SRSG CAAC, 2018, p. 2). The SRSG is also committed to increasing awareness of the struggles encountered by children affected by war, especially child soldiers. One of the major achievements of this body is their duty to adhere to the monitoring and reporting mechanism (MRM), established by Security Council Resolution 1612 in 2005. This key framework encourages the documentation and assessment of violations committed against children caught in the crossfire of armed conflict. The MRM is an especially crucial aspect of the SRSG’s mandate to ensure that the welfare of children in armed conflict is prioritized and that violations are documented

and addressed effectively. It is set up in a way to deliver prompt, precise and dependable data on the violations committed against children in war (3SRSR CAAC, 2018, p. 5). Moreover, by facilitating discussions and collaborative strategies among actors involved in conflict, action plans are used to eliminate and deter violations against children. Composing up-to-date and consistent data is also essential in informing reintegration programs and best practices. For instance, “the country task force on monitoring and reporting in Somalia negotiated the release of nine boys allegedly associated with Al-Shabaab and transferred...to a reintegration centre” (4SRSR CAAC, 2020, paragraph 15).

As portrayed in the example above, the MRM fosters negotiation and advocacy, promotes accountability, facilitates reintegration and raises awareness. The successful negotiation for the release of the nine boys stresses the mechanism’s role in advocating for the rights and protection of children associated with militia groups. The negotiation process highlights how the SRSR CAAC’s MRM can lead to concrete actions. Further, by documenting cases of child soldiering, the MRM promotes accountability among armed groups, creating an environment where the consequences of recruiting children do not go unpunished. This also raises awareness which further encourages efforts to protect children in conflict zones. Most important for the purpose of this thesis, the Somalia example demonstrates the MRM’s commitment to providing demobilized children with the necessary support for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. As reintegration is crucial for the child’s long-term well-being and development, this is arguably the most important aspect of the SRSR CAAC’s mandate.

Another crucial aspect of the mandate of the SRSR CAAC is their coordination efforts. This task involves fostering collaboration among various stakeholders, including UN agencies, NGOs, civil society, and national governments, to create a unified approach towards addressing the complex challenges imposed on children in situations of armed conflict. The SRSR works closely with different UN entities, such as UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and others, to ensure that child protection issues are integrated into broader humanitarian and peacekeeping responses. Their collaborative effort helps in streamlining resources and expertise, enabling effective reintegration interventions. As many NGOs and local organizations play a vital role in child protection, often having a deeper understanding of community dynamics and children’s needs. Moreover, the SRSR supports the working groups in conflict-affected areas. These groups bring together various stakeholders to share information, coordinate response actions, and develop comprehensive strategies addressing the specific needs of children. For instance, the special working groups in the DRC have improved the effectiveness of response efforts, however there is still a long way to go. The office also promotes the sharing of data, research, and best practices among partners to enhance collective understanding of the challenges faced by children in different contexts of armed conflict. This information sharing helps refine future strategies and ensure that all stakeholders are operating with an up-to-date understanding of the situation on the ground.

The SRSR CAAC is tasked with conducting an annual report on the progress made, bringing attention to the challenges children in war underwent, and fostering urgent calls to action with influential stakeholders (2SRSR CAAC, 2019, p. 3, paragraph 7). With a significant focus on advocating for the reintegration of child victims, the mandate of the SRSR CAAC supports the comprehensive fulfillment of children’s rights. Special focus on the reintegration efforts tasked by national governments reiterates Article 39 of the CRC which binds States to take the necessary steps in encouraging physical, psychological and social rehabilitation of children associated with armed forces and/or groups. Whereas children are immersed in high-stress environments throughout their time in combat communities, their psychological health is severely damaged once demobilized. Specifically, studies show that child victims of war experience substantial levels of PTSD, anxiety and depression for prolonged periods (Garbarino, et al., 2020, p. 4). Evidently, the mental distress of the war on children is a recurring issue, requiring mass support for reintegration programs. The mandate of the SRSR CAAC is multifaceted with regard to reintegration efforts, bolstered through advocacy, coordination, promotion of unique programs, the

establishment of international norms, and so on. Each strategy contributes to the execution of a supportive environment in every realm for the rehabilitation and reintegration of vulnerable children in armed conflict.

### 2.2.2 From Combatants to Civilians: The SRSB's Efforts to Support Child Soldier Reintegration

The SRSB CAAC is responsible for submitting annual reports which track the situation of children in armed conflict, one of the main areas of focus being reintegration efforts undertaken by States throughout the reporting period. Reports from 2019 to 2023 were met with both achievements and obstacles concerning reintegration efforts, with reintegration remaining as a key area of concern. While each report outlines various initiatives geared towards supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of affected children into their communities, increased emphasis is put on community involvement. The saying 'It takes a village' comes to mind, as rehabilitation relies heavily on the international community's support, as well as the individuals' community's support. In turn, the protection of children is essential for a thriving and sustainable community (4SRSB CAAC, 2020, p. 11, paragraph 50). Community-based interventions are highlighted in the 2019 report of the SRSB CAAC, emphasizing the importance of society's acceptance of children once they are released from the armed forces. When analyzing the reports over a five-year period, beginning in 2019 and ending in 2023, the mention of reintegration is on a downward spike. In the 2019 report, reintegration is referenced thirty-three times, whereas in the 2023 report, it is merely mentioned sixteen times. All the more troubling, rehabilitation is only mentioned nine times across all five reports combined. The report reiterates the obligations under Article 39 of the CRC and Article 6 of the OPAC, recognizing that sustainable reintegration plans are fundamental for children's recovery and their communities. However, a large portion of released children remained deprived of these programs in 2019 (2SRSB CAAC, 2019, p. 5, paragraph 19). Conversely, a constructive advancement throughout the 2019 report is the multiple meetings led by the Global Coalition for the reintegration of Child Soldiers (GCRCS). An especially positive outcome of these meetings is the involvement of survivors voicing their personal concerns and being a part of the solution. For instance, a meeting took place in June which included victims of child soldiering and other children impacted by war (2SRSB CAAC, 2019, p. 13, paragraph 70). This is a perfect example of children being heard, as per article 12.2 of the CRC, where children are to be heard in administrative processes.

When a child's voice is heard, it not only fosters their future development but also contributes to more inclusive practices which affect various areas of their lives. Article 12.2 also reinforces the idea that children are not passive recipients of care, but active participants in society. Another achievement in 2019 is noted in Somalia, where the Special Representative teamed up with the Ministry of Defence. Together, they initiated a conflict resolution project to support community-based reintegration for children previously affiliated with armed services (2SRSB CAAC, 2019, p. 11, paragraph 56). The Philippines also engaged in a conference on the best practices for reintegration in which former child soldiers participated as well (2SRSB CAAC, 2019, p. 13, paragraph 68). There's a clear theme of child participation throughout reintegration efforts in 2019, reiterating the importance of the involvement of victims in creating more effective and supportive programs. What's lacking throughout the 2019 report are concrete numbers associated with reintegration efforts throughout the year. This challenges verifiable progress made from 2018, creating ambiguity on whether reintegration efforts have been successful or not. On the contrary, the 2020 report provides a more palpable understanding of reintegration programs on the ground, delivering actual numbers of those benefiting from the action plans. For example, over

1,000 Somali children gained from reintegration programs supported by UNICEF which included educational training, family reconciliation, and other benefits (4SRSG CAAC, 2020, p. 5, paragraph 15). Another positive development in 2020 was the recognition that a successful part of reintegrating child victims of war is a gender-sensitive approach to programs (4SRSG CAAC, 2020, p. 8, paragraph 28). A gendered perspective not only contributes to a more nuanced, tailored program for girls and boys but is also integral in understanding possible trends in the violations committed against girls specifically (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 5). Another area of success in 2020 can be seen in the Philippines, where the UN persisted in its assistance with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to reintegrate former child soldiers through social programs and practical skills programs (4SRSG CAAC, 2020, p. 5, paragraph 14). This exemplifies the commitment of military actors in healing and reconciling affected children in a post-conflict society. Although reintegration is referenced eight times less compared to 2019, the 2020 report emphasizes achievements of reintegration efforts with real examples throughout the year.

Although the word reintegration is mentioned eight times less compared to the prior annual report, more emphasis is put on the achievements of reintegration efforts between 2019 and 2020. However, midway through 2020, reintegration programs and global efforts were disrupted as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there was a decline in the number of demobilized children able to access assistance programs as a direct result of restrictive measures imposed by COVID-19 (4SRSG CAAC, 2020, p. 6, paragraph 21). Despite constraints, the SRSG CAAC was still able to carry out the MRM throughout the pandemic and collaborate with other representatives remotely. Another consequence of the pandemic was the closure of schools, which intensified children's vulnerability to being recruited by an armed group as well as higher levels of psychosocial pain. Heightened levels of emotional distress combined with decreased access to social services further hinder proper reintegration. While 2020 started out promising with reintegration action plans coming to fruition, the pandemic impeded the implementation of established strategies. Disappointingly, the ramifications of the pandemic carried over into 2021 and children's exposure to violence continued to increase (5SRSG CAAC, 2021, p. 2 paragraph 2). COVID-19 also delayed long-term sustainable action plans for the psychosocial reintegration of former child soldiers, as collaborating with other involved actors was more challenging.

Despite challenges brought on and exacerbated by the pandemic, reintegration is mentioned four more times compared to the 2020 report. Somalia continued to show positive contributions for rehabilitation, as 600 demobilized children received consistent support for reintegration programs in 2021 (5SRSG CAAC, 2021, p. 4 paragraph 14). It is important to mention the 2015 Security Council Resolution 2225 as well as the 2018 Security Council Resolution 2427. While the former acknowledges the necessity of offering psychosocial support as a vital component of reintegration for former child soldiers, the latter emphasizes the necessity of long-term and sustainable funding for psychosocial programming (2UN Security Council, 2015, Res 2225 & 3UN Security Council, 2018 Res 2427). These formal decisions stress that child soldier's reintegration is essential for international peace and security. However, reintegration support in 2021 remained short-term (5SRSG CAAC, 2021, p. 7, paragraph 27). An emphasis on long-term sustained reintegration efforts is also echoed by the GCRCs in their working papers published in 2020. The report also finds that successful reintegration is currently hindered due to resource constraints and unpredictable financial backing of programs (GCRCs, 2021, p. 3). We see this theory in action in Amone-P'Olak et al.'s study on child soldier victims in Northern Uganda. The researchers found that survivors of conflict-related exposure had direct links with depression and anxiety over five years after being released (Garbarino, et al. 2020, p. 4).

Long-term sustainable reintegration support is also essential to combat the re-recruitment of demobilized children (6SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 7, paragraph 27). Another study done by Boothby et al. reveals that even sixteen years after being released, all of the surveyed survivor soldiers reported feelings of repeated recollections of abuse (Garbarino, et al. 2020, p. 4). There is a clear shift in the right direction

in the 2022 report, as a forum of experts was set up to explore new ways of investing in sufficient, long-term and uninterrupted child reintegration aid. With every report, there is evidence to support that reintegration support is an ever-increasing area of concern for the SRSR CAAC. For instance, research was done during the reporting period to grasp the main themes, and spatial, and demographic considerations relating to reintegration best practices (6SRSR CAAC, 2022, p. 12, paragraph 52). This represents a positive advancement towards achieving more nuanced and endurable programs and support for reintegration. In the recommendations section of the 2022 report, the SRSR CAAC reaffirms States and other relevant actors' duty to deliver "sustainable political, technical and financial support for [reintegration] efforts" (6SRSR CAAC, 2022, p. 17, paragraph 83). However, financial instability due to the pandemic hampered reintegration success as countries with economic challenges were limited in their funding capacity for such programs (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 6). For instance, in the DRC, rehabilitation measures were paused due to restrictions put in place. Additionally, the pandemic impeded the United Nations from properly engaging in its activities.

Security measures and travel restrictions interfered with country-specific MRM which in turn limits the understanding of verifiable cases of children affected by armed conflict. For example, the recording of conflict-related sexual abuse was confined in the DRC due to measures taken to control the pandemic (2Secretary General DRC, 2022, p. 2, paragraph 3). Thus, the pandemic only exacerbated existing obstacles to reintegration programs for former child soldiers in most, if not all, places that use children as combatants. Unfortunately, there is only one report by the SRSR CAAC since 2022, therefore the analysis of progress in reintegration programs since the shocks of Covid is limited. The 2023 report only references reintegration a mere sixteen times, however, the comparison between the 2019 and 2020 reports underscores that the substance of reintegration is more important than the frequency with which it is mentioned. The 2023 report highlights that while the pandemic has impeded on MRM, reintegration support and other action plans, climate considerations stressed sustainable reintegration further (7SRSR CAAC, 2023, p. 8, paragraph 31). A comprehensive study must be done on the intersectionality of multiple stressors which impact children in armed conflict and in turn their reintegration back into society. While significant progress remains to be made, 2023 still saw some advancements for reintegration programs.

In 2023, the SRSR CAAC held conferences with civil society organizations which included child survivors of war. These meetings led to the release of a recommendations report to better advise future reintegration policies and programs (7SRSR CAAC, 2023, p. 11, paragraph 49). Reintegration programs are most successful when consulting former child soldiers when creating action plans, as victims know firsthand what they require for successful reintegration. Another positive advancement of 2023 was the institution of a reintegration research group, to gather best practices for future programs and policies. While COVID-19 places more obstacles on the successful reintegration of former child soldiers, the two efforts of 2023 signify a glimmer of hope. Focusing on a more comprehensive, individualized programming scheme while using the experiences of impacted children to cultivate support within families and the community enhances successful reintegration (Freeman, 2020, p. 9). Exemplified by the SRSR CAAC's collaboration with the All-Survivors Project, boys previously linked to armed actors were involved in reintegration programs in response to their experiences. Evidently, the 2023 report is marked with continued challenges surrounding reintegration, exacerbated by the pandemic. However, there is also a clear increase in attention to the need for more effective reintegration programs and policies.

The reports of the SRSR CAAC outline the progress achieved in former child soldiers' reintegration once released from combat. While there is still much progress to be made, the MRM is the cornerstone in identifying exploitations committed against children in conflict settings and is foundational in assessing the needs for future reintegration programs and policies. Gender plays a crucial role in the creation and success of reintegration programs, as seen throughout the reports from 2019 to 2023 there is increased recognition of the gendered dynamics of war. Not only does gender factor into

the motivations behind why specific individuals are targeted for recruitment and use, but it also plays a critical role in how survivors are treated once returned to their communities (Freeman, 2020, p. 8). While all children are considered and treated as equal under the CRC, it must be recognized that girls and boys have different experiences throughout their association with an armed force or group. As such, reintegration programs must be tailored to the specific needs of both girls and boys, rather than a blanket approach to programs and policies.

### 2.2.3 A Gendered Analysis: The Unique Challenges Faced by Girls in Armed Conflict

In contexts of armed conflict, it is crucial to comprehend the ways in which gender impacts different risks, vulnerabilities and agencies to deliver protection and recovery support that are responsive to gender considerations. Girls are abducted, abused and released in distinct ways, and although some experiences may be similar to their male counterparts, girls require a different type of support compared to boys (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p.5). Research suggests that women and girls suffer more due to gender-based violence in armed conflict settings, with sexual violence being used as a tool for control, shame, or to evoke terror (2SRSG CAAC, 2019, p. 7, paragraph 27). While boys are primarily recruited and used in combat roles, girls are used for different reasons. Understanding the ways in which children are targeted is critical for a gender analysis to address the complexities of girls' experiences in order to develop appropriate responses to empower their reintegration. The idea that girls require a more individualized approach to reintegration is reiterated in the 2020 SRSG CAAC report. An initiative was put in place to study the distinct needs of girls in the reintegration process; however, this initiative was later put on hold due to Covid-19 (4SRSG CAAC, 2020, p. 13, paragraph 61). Cultural norms and barriers in areas with higher levels of conflict position girls as more susceptible to being targeted by armed forces (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p.16). Data shows that girls receive less education due to harmful gender norms, as they're responsible for carrying out the duties of the home. From a young age, girls' obligations consist of caring for siblings, cooking, cleaning and other tasks. This becomes a perpetual cycle as the lack of educational opportunities for girls leaves them with little life skills and they are essentially stuck. Moreover, little educational training leaves girls more vulnerable to recruitment and abuse by armed forces or groups.

Girls must feel empowered post-conflict and educational programs are essential to reintegration. Historically, girls face more barriers to education than boys, due to cultural norms and violence from actors of armed conflict. A gender analysis of the perpetuated roles girls play in society can have implications on the ways in which they are then used in conflict settings and treated once reunited with their families. Demobilized children crave a proper education, however, access to quality institutions is lacking due to insufficient funding combined with spikes in conflict (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 18). Even in instances where girls do have access to education, they are targeted while walking to or from their institution and taken to be exploited by an armed group (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 19). It is important to refer to the CRC here, as access to education is reiterated throughout the Convention. Especially Article 28, which identifies equitable access to education as a fundamental right of all children (CRC, 1989, Article 28). Without these opportunities, girls are at higher risk of becoming associated with an armed force or group, especially when coming from an abusive family. Girls may fear that the only option to escape a violent environment is to enter a new one, which is the situation in Liberia. Studies show there is a strong connection between domestic and sexual abuse and young girls' choice to leave their community to join an armed force (1SRSG CAAC, 2022, p. 14). Other stereotypes surrounding girls affected by armed conflict in non-western nations is the idea that because most of them are not in active combatant roles, they are not considered as soldiers, and thus do not receive the same support as boys.

Regardless of a child's association with armed actors, they are still considered child soldiers whether they wield weapons and should be supported as such. However, girls remain invisible and are often not recognized as child soldiers and in turn are not supported in their reintegration. Consequently, girls are left more vulnerable to other exploitations and re-recruitment once released from an armed force or group. For instance, in Sierra Leone girls reportedly represented a significant sum of abductions associated with conflict, however, they represented less than 8% of the total children enrolled in demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs (Brett, 2004, p. 35). More effort is needed in how girls are perceived in their association with armed actors, and ultimately must be treated as victims first and foremost. Further, demobilization and reintegration programs must be revamped to include former female child soldiers in the conversation. Societal norms have drastic impacts on the ways in which girls are supported, and they're disproportionately blamed compared to boys in armed conflict.

Girls are often targeted specifically for sexual violence and exploitation, which is used as a tool of war. Exemplified in the 2019 report of the SRSR CAAC, sexual violence continued to be used throughout armed forces and groups in Somalia, Nigeria, the DRC and others (2SRSR CAAC, 2019, p. 7, paragraph 27). With victims as young as three years old, more legislation must be put in place to punish perpetrators for this grave violation. Girls are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence and sexual abuse in conflict settings, as seen in the 2020 report of the Secretary-General on CAAC which highlights that 98% of sexual violence cases in that reporting period were committed against girls (1SRSR CAAC, 2022, p.18). Rape and other forms of sexual violence are used as weapons not only to demoralize women and girls but communities as a whole. Gender-specific violations in war must be addressed for successful rehabilitation policies and support once girls are released. Whereas society seems to be more forgiving of boy soldiers, girls are highly stigmatized due to their association with an armed force or group. Particularly, once returned to their communities, girl survivors are often met with judgment and rejection due to notions that they are now impure, unmarriageable and defamed the family name (Freeman, 2020, p. 8). The stigmas girls receive upon being released are one of the main contributors to the success or demise of reintegrating back into society. While girls are grappling with the traumas experienced during their time with the armed actors, they now have an added burden from community members. More specifically, girls experience high levels of social isolation and name-calling which leads to more shame and guilt.

Cultural perceptions often view girls as less valuable than boys, which explains the reason why girls are highly stigmatized. While both girls and boys have expressed feelings of shame and guilt once demobilized, girls experience added shame and feelings of failure because they are unable to execute the gender roles assigned to them. This in turn has detrimental mental health implications, deteriorating their emotional well-being even further. In order for girls to be successfully supported in their reintegration, it is essential to have protective structures set in place (Freeman, 2020, p. 9). While physical scars may heal over time, mental and emotional stressors must be properly tended to by means of community support. Community-based support systems entail psychological counselling as well as peer support networks for girls. As the issue is initiated due to gender norms, the first step in tailoring support to girls is educating the community. Programs must be put in place to educate families and communities on the horrors that their girls underwent while associated with armed actors, bolstering sympathy and support rather than stigmatization (Valder, 2014, p. 54). More funding must be put in place for educational activities for affected children as well as their families. Additionally, reintegration programs must take on a gendered approach, recognizing that girls go through unique experiences and thus require tailored programs.

Ultimately, understanding the distinct challenges faced by girls in armed conflict is essential for creating effective support mechanisms and acknowledging their unique experiences and needs. The prevalence of GBV, couples with ingrained cultural stigmas and barriers to education, leaves girls particularly vulnerable, before, during, and after their time with armed groups. To foster successful

reintegration, it is crucial to shift the narrative and view these girls as survivors deserving of compassion and specialized care, rather than just as victims of war. This necessitates targeted interventions that not only focus on educational access but also address the psychological and emotional scars resulting from their experiences. Community engagement plays a vital role in transforming societal attitudes, fostering empathy, and breaking down harmful stereotypes (Tonheim, 2009, p. 61). Understanding the reasons behind girls' unique experiences is essential in approaching reintegration programs that embody inclusivity.

### 3. THE GENDERED NATURE OF REINTEGRATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS THE DRC

This chapter presents an in-depth case study of the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The first section will provide an overview of the country's history of instability. The second section will go into the specific vulnerabilities that girls face in the DRC and the last section will focus on reintegration efforts within the DRC over the past ten years.

#### 3.1 Contextualizing the Conflict: An Overview of the Political Climate

This section offers a look into the political and military climate of the DRC since the end of the 1990s. With a particular emphasis on the efforts and initiatives undertaken by the National Army, this section sets the tone for understanding the experience of Girlhood and reintegration efforts in the region.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has grappled with political uncertainty and tension for decades. Especially since the mid-1990s, the country has been characterized by instability, corruption, and conflict. With the presence of several armed groups, numerous civil wars and an astonishing number of human rights abuses, including the use of a vast number of child soldiers, the DRC faces serious challenges. In 1996, a rebellion overthrew the government and President Mobutu was removed after thirty years in office. Although this conflict only lasted less than a year, it led to another more gruelling conflict that lasted four years from 1998 until 2002 (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2018, p. 59). As social change was promised to the new generation and many adolescents wanted to protect their country, many individuals under the age of eighteen joined the armed forces. Understanding the conflict is complicated, as periodic conflicts broke out stemming from the 1998 war. Fights between militias, foreign armies and the DRC armed forces render the conflict even more complex as many actors are involved including neighbouring regions.

With the signing of a peace agreement at the end of 2002, the war had come to a standby and the transitional government was established (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 7). While some might see this as a positive development, the power of the government was split into many factions, creating an increase in political strains and conflict crises. Even worse, a year after the transitional government was put in place, officials in office assigned commanders from armed forces into the national army, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC), as generals and colonels (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 22). The FARDC came into force towards the end of 2004, as the war involved a plethora of actors, including from other countries, and a significant restructuring of the Congolese military was underway. Over the coming years, conflict continues, and tensions are high with close to four million civilian deaths by 2006 (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 8). The political situation in the DRC is crippled by political unrest, multiple military factions, and ethnic clashes which are brought on by the ongoing conflict. Moreover, the incorporation of previous armed actors from opposition groups is highly volatile for the country, as those individuals responsible for protecting civilians are the same ones who once committed war crimes (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 22). Individuals who have committed crimes against humanity are not likely to abide by international human rights law, in turn exacerbating an already unstable political environment.

Instability is also owed to the fact that armed groups have remained active in the DRC for decades and they frequently engage in violent confrontations with each other, as well as the national army (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 21). Unaddressed historical rifts relating to land and power allocation provide grounds for political mobilization that leads to violence (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2018, p. 60). The rampant armed conflict throughout the country has detrimental effects on civilians, displacing millions

and leading hundreds of thousands to seek refuge elsewhere. For instance, between 1.4 and 1.66 million people have been displaced in the DRC since 1998, the majority of which are women and children (2Amnesty International, 2007, p. 8). Armed conflicts also create a more conducive environment for human rights abuses which include the use of children in war, killing of innocent civilians, sexual violence and more. With the 2006 elections came more instability, as army reform programs failed, and new risks arose regarding the military crises that characterized the country. Political unrest leads to escalated violence which means higher recruitment rates. With somewhere between 300,000 to 330,000 recruited during the conflict at the end of the 90s, almost all armed forces and armed groups in the DRC had thousands of children under the age of eighteen in their divisions (2Amnesty International, 2007, p. 11). While the FARDC was established to centralize military ranks and establish a more structured and effective defence system, partially to rectify the previously divided and ineffective military, they have faced numerous challenges since their inception,

The FARDC is not only the target of violence by paramilitary groups but is also plagued with issues of corruption, lack of resources and issues of discipline (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2018, p. 71). These combined considerations lead to chronic problems for the national army, further exacerbating instability in the country, especially in the Eastern regions where conflict persists and multiple armed groups remain active (2Amnesty International, 2007, p. 7). The FARDC was established in June of 2003 as a result of the peace agreement signed in December of 2002, with the objective of establishing peace and integrity, national reconciliation, a unified national army, the arrangement of democratic elections and solidifying structures to maintain a new political order (ibid). These objectives, however, have not been met as a result of the ongoing security threats and conflict with militia groups and foreign fighters. In 2012, new challenges arose for the FARDC as the rebellion group M23 was resurrected (Iñiguez de Heredia, 2018, p. 71). The national army was unable to contain the uprising, in part due to the rebellion backing from neighboring countries. While the FARDC received international support from the UN Intervention Brigade, aiming to stabilize the political and military tensions of the eastern part of the DRC, tensions were still high (ibid). Today, the army continues to be confronted with challenges posed by the country's conflict legacy, issues of governance and ongoing violence. For instance, the FARDC is currently battling with military factions in the Eastern parts of the DRC (4UN Security Council Group of Experts on the DRC, p. 8, paragraph 19). The success of the FARDC is stymied by the DRC's tumultuous political landscape and understanding the dynamics of the national army with the consequences of ongoing conflict is crucial to sustain lasting peace and stability in the DRC.

From 2014 to 2016 the FARDC continued their attempt at military reform, conducting several operations against armed forces. Foreign armed groups pose a serious threat to the political stability in the DRC, primarily the Forces Démocratique de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 7). The FARDC carried out operations against the FDLR, however, the armed group continues to commit grave human rights violations, including the use of children within their operations. The FARDC is continuously undermined by regional armed groups and as well as foreign armed groups as exemplified in the final report of the Security Council Group of Experts on the DRC. Intense combat was reported in January of 2024 between local armed groups and the FARDC, which solidifies that progress in taming armed forces and groups in the territory has not yet been achieved. In an effort to bring political stability and security to the region, the FARDC must refrain from mobilizing previous warlords of opposition groups. As the national army aims to settle armed conflict throughout the region and implement effective DDR policies and programs, individuals who have inflicted war crimes should be prohibited from carrying out activities which are aimed at protecting the civilian population. 2017 and 2018 are met with more political tensions, due to delays in promised elections. Finally, elections were held at the end of 2018 and Felix Antoine Tshilombo Tshiskedi entered office as the new president (1Secretary General, 2020, p. 2, paragraph 3). As the security situation improved in some regions of the country, there was a peak in inter-ethnic conflicts, mostly harming children in the area (ibid).

The political unrest and numerous armed conflicts in the DRC is a complex crisis rooted in historical grievances, ethnic tensions and struggles over territories. With hundreds of thousands of fighters in military ranks, the establishment of the Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion (CONADER) gave a glimmer of hope for the release and rehabilitation of former soldiers, especially child soldiers. CONADER was tasked with reintegrating combatants into civilian life and is the national body in implementing DDR strategies (2Amnesty International, 2007, p. 13). The efforts of the agency were part of a broader peace-building initiative in the DRC to address the challenges of post-conflict recovery. In hopes of bringing about stability in the region, the effectiveness of CONADER has often been hindered by resource limitation, lack of coordination, and the ongoing security situation in the country. Effective DDR programs are essential in a territory with an influx of civilians entering armed groups as seen in the DRC.

### 3.2 Reintegration Initiatives for Child Soldiers Over the Last Two Decades

This section analyzes the reintegration efforts in the DRC over the past twenty years, with a specific emphasis on children. It particularly highlights the DDR policies and the role of CONADER, the agency responsible for their implementation.

Numerous initiatives involving multiple stakeholders have attempted to tackle the reintegration of child soldiers in the eastern DRC, however, the ongoing instability in the region has severely hindered these efforts. Key challenges to the successful reintegration of former child soldiers include issues related to follow-ups on their rehabilitation, the re-recruitment of once-demobilized soldiers, and a lack of long-term sustainable funding. The conflict in the DRC is highly characterized by their use of child soldiers, as all ranks within the region have used children as weapons of war (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 1). Reintegration is a highly complex endeavor which must be considered within a broader socioeconomic, cultural and political environment. The DRC has consistently proven to be a region with one of the highest rates of child soldier recruitment, with estimates revealing that they represent approximately 40% of some ranks (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 1). A program was launched in June 2003, with the establishment of CONADER six months later, to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate armed forces fighters. The program aimed to reach roughly 30,000 children; however, the program was delayed due to the ongoing political strife in the region (ibid). A major area of contention for DDR programs in the DRC is the erratic spending of donor funds, and exhausting budgets with no major achievements to show. Over two years after the DDR plan was introduced at least 11,000 children were either still participating as active child soldiers or not involved in the DDR program (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 2). CONADER was established at the end of 2003 to govern the DDR program and was named the official body in the DRC in charge of the reintegration of ex-child soldiers.

The DDR program is meant to raise awareness of the program and identify fighters for successful integration into the national army or reintegration into their communities. CONADER implemented its first program in the region of Ituri in 2004, one of the regions with the highest levels of violence due to armed conflict (2Amnesty International, 2007, p. 15). The DCR program, Disarmament and Community Reintegration sought to disarm and reintegrate soldiers, in collaboration with five transit facilities for demobilization. However, the program was heavily impeded due to backlash from armed groups and

commanders. As a result, more violence ensued as commanders of armed groups chose to intimidate and threaten individuals within their ranks as a means of deterring them from joining (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 16). For instance, officials of the Forces Armées du Peuple Congolais (FAPC) killed a soldier in 2005 because he was leaving the ranks and going to a demobilization centre (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 17). Nevertheless, other individuals within armed groups had a positive reaction to the DCR program and embodied the community reintegration aspect of the program. This encompassed practical skills-based training for disarmed members, with over 15,000 former fighters voluntarily leaving their ranks for service centres including over 4,000 children (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 18). While this is a positive achievement, the actual implementation was met with challenges.

A year after disarmament, over 10,000 ex-combatants had not yet been properly reintegrated because of delays and lack of financial planning from CONADER. The DCR program was met with extreme challenges arising from weak logistical and financial coordination as well as management from CONADER. Misappropriation of funds was a common theme with CONADER, exhausting the USD 200 million backing to unknown areas (Amnesty International, 2007, p. 13). Their incapacity to properly reintegrate former fighters into civilian life was the most upsetting part of the DCR's underperformance. Unfortunately, the failure of the regional DCR program trickled into the national DDR program which is also managed by CONADER. Limited resources and continuous conflict in the country leave accessing reintegration programs to be a challenge. The agency is tasked with the reintegration of former child soldiers, arguably their most important role. Since 2004, approximately 31,000 children have been disarmed, however many still remain in the ranks of different armed groups (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 6). Social attitudes towards children in the DRC revolve around the idea that children are disposable and capable of doing hard work. Multiple international actors and institutions thus became involved in carrying out different areas of the DDR process, in hopes of rehabilitating child soldiers. However, many of the initiatives were met with challenges. For instance, the International Committee of the Red Cross took on the task of reconnecting children with their families, however, many younger children were unable to recollect their lives prior to joining an armed force (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 12). A positive achievement was implemented by Save the Children, pushing for distinct demobilization centres for children. Before, children were treated at the same facilities as adults which ran the risk of further abuse, but child-centred services bolster positive reintegration efforts (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 14). Reintegration is especially important for children as it sets the tone for a positive path to development.

The DDR program was directed at just over 20,000 children; however, reports show that roughly half benefitted from the reintegration program (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 15). The national DDR program highlights two specific areas of reintegration which are deemed the most important for children: social and economic reintegration. Social reintegration considers the family and community as important actors in a child's rehabilitation after demobilization, while also promoting daily activities to engage children. Education is also an aspect of social reintegration, however, the conflict makes access to education extremely difficult to come by. Further, the high fees associated with education in the DRC make it more difficult for families to send all their children to school. Gender norms come into play here as well, as families prioritize sending boys to school and girls are responsible for domestic work from an early age (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 40). The DRC must reform educational policies and infrastructures to

abide by the CRC in providing free primary education to all citizens (CRC, 1989, Art 28, paragraph a). The country task force, operating under the Security Council Resolution 1612, made positive strides in 2020 with the building and refurbishing of schools. As a result of this initiative, 561, 354 children impacted by conflict had access to education (1Secretary-General, 2020, p. 15, paragraph 70). Economic reintegration is for those individuals who are incapable of attending school. This area of reintegration aims at teaching demobilized children how to financially support themselves, giving them the skills and understanding to enable them (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 17). However, reintegration efforts for children are ineffectively executed due to a deficiency in long-term funding and the volatile security situation in the DRC. There is a downward trend in the reintegration support for children in the DRC, exemplified in the Secretary-General reports on CAAC in the DRC. Children supported in 2019 dropped almost half compared to 2018, from 2,039 assisted to 1,105 assisted (1Secretary-General, 2020, p. 14, paragraph 67). A lack of long-term and predictable funding causes a serious strain on reintegrating former child soldiers and runs the risk of re-recruitment.

Socioeconomic reintegration is hampered by sufficient prolonged funding, hindering the access to activities that the programs provide. Studies show that since 2018, there has been a consistent decrease in the financing of recreational activities and vocational training. In 2019, UNICEF partnered with other stakeholders to develop a more personal approach to reintegration programs, however only 1,105 of the 4,924 children received this support (ibid). However, a positive advancement is seen at the beginning of 2020 with the signing of a peace agreement between the government and the FRPI. This political process led to a decrease in the violations of children's rights as well as a decrease in the amount of children recruited (1Secretary-General, 2020, p. 4, paragraph 12). The Covid-10 pandemic introduced new hardships for reintegration efforts, however, the government was still implementing concrete action plans for community-based activities for DDR. In July 2021, the president created the Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery and Stabilization program and it was officially implemented eight months later in March 2022 (2Secretary-General, 2020, p. 3, paragraph 6). This effort reiterates that a community-based approach is essential for the DDR process, as supporting former fighters, especially children, requires a multifaceted support system. While all children suffer the consequences of armed conflict in the DRC, and the reintegration of all former soldiers is essential, the unique experiences of girls in the region impact their reintegration and the ways in which they are rehabilitated within society.

The reintegration of child soldiers in the DRC over the past two decades represents a deep challenge that reflects the complexities of enduring conflict and its socio-political ramifications. Despite establishing initiatives like the DDR program and CONADER, many obstacles persist, including insufficient funding, ongoing violence, and inadequate logistical support. While some progress has been made through targeted community-based approaches and the involvement of various international organizations, the substantial number of former child soldiers still vulnerable and at risk of re-recruitment remains a reality. For sustainable reintegration efforts to yield positive results, it is essential to adopt a holistic approach that addresses not only the immediate needs of these children but also the long-term socioeconomic and educational challenges faced by their communities. Ultimately, fostering an environment conducive to healing and development is crucial, as reintegration programs are vital for children's future well-being and the stability of the DRC as a whole.

### 3.3 Girlhood Shaped by Political and Military Challenges in the DRC

This section explores the unique experiences of girls associated with armed forces in the DRC and examines the specific reasons they are targeted. Subsequently, the shortcomings of current reintegration efforts for these girls are addressed, outlining the necessary actions to confront the prevalence of girl soldiers and the abuse they endure.

Young girls represent 40% of the estimated 30,000 child soldiers in the DRC. However, despite their large representation of child soldiers, they only constitute a minor percentage of those enrolled in reintegration programs (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 8). This is mostly due to the lack of systems in place to locate these girls or to engage them with information about community reintegration programs (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 35). In turn, most girls affected by armed conflict in the region are unaware of programs to support them once they've been released and demobilized. Moreover, other girls might be unwilling to join DDR programs due to the lack of tailored approaches to their distinct needs. For instance, girls who are pregnant or have given birth as a result of sexual violence at the hands of fighters require individualized professional programs that offer childcare provisions to allow girls full access to reintegration services without distraction (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 49). With no strategic government programs for tailor-made reintegration initiatives, demobilization centres house both women and girls, men and boys. This fosters an environment that increases the susceptibility of girls to further vulnerabilities, such as sexual violence or other abuses. In turn, girls are more reluctant to identify themselves and register for DDR programs due to a lack of specific provisions for their needs and the unfavourable conditions of rehabilitation centres. Evidently, the significant presence of girls is frequently neglected by the government in the development of reintegration programs for children.

Societal perceptions of girls profoundly influence how they are treated during and after their involvement with an armed group. As they are given a low status within their communities, an enormous percentage of girls are sexually abused by other soldiers throughout their time in armed conflict (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 37). Girls are abducted while doing mundane daily tasks, such as walking in the street, or when their community is infiltrated. While some fight on the frontlines of armed conflict, most are taken as sex slaves and continuously abused. For example, a sixteen-year-old girl was recruited when she was just twelve years old when her community was attacked. She detailed the terror that commanders and fighters instilled in the young women ripped from their villages, with repeated sexual abuses committed against them (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 38). She also revealed that she was forced to marry a fighter within the ranks, and threatened with death if she did not comply. The girl became pregnant as a result of the sexual abuse she endured at the hands of her "husband" and was left to fend for herself after giving birth (ibid). This is one of many examples of the consequences of not only war but the inherent gender norms that characterize armed conflict in the DRC. Another devastating example is a seventeen-year-old girl who left her community at just twelve years old as a result of the death of her parents and her other family could not afford to send her to school. She joined the Mayi Mayi military in hopes of better opportunities but was met with terror and humiliation. Her "husband" forced her to take part in active hostilities with a weapon, and when she tried to flee, the military group went to her community and terrorized her relatives (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 39). Commanders and fighters also threaten girls' families as a tactic of war to instil fear as a means of keeping girls under

their authority. Both above examples showcase the lack of regard for international humanitarian law throughout the armed forces in the DRC, as recruiting an individual under the age of fifteen is a war crime, and both girls were recruited at the age of twelve (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 1). It is also important to note that “marry” and “husband” are in quotations as these arrangements were forced onto the girls, not a choice.

The false perception that recruiting children under the age of fifteen will go unpunished is still evident today, as the 2020 report of the Secretary-General on CAAC in the DRC highlights that 37% of the recruits over the reporting period were below the age of fifteen. Also of note, 14% were girls (1Secretary General, 2020, p. 6, paragraph 23). To date, the DRC still struggles with the implementation of robust, gender-sensitive reintegration programs for released children. Another reason behind the limited representation of girls in reintegration programs is that many are classified as “dependents” of adult fighters rather than being acknowledged as individuals involved with an armed group. As such, they are not recognized as child soldiers requiring rehabilitation and, consequently, lack access to the appropriate DDR programs (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 36). The term dependent in this context refers to girls who are classified as being reliant on an adult fighter, rather than being recognized as combatants themselves. This designation downplays their experiences and roles in armed conflicts, portraying them primarily as followers of adult fighters. Being labelled as a dependent thus leads to girls’ exclusion from DDR programs as they are disregarded in needing the same kind of support and reintegration programs that are provided to recognized child combatants. Consequently, this hinders their access to necessary support systems, leaving them more vulnerable and overlooked in post-conflict recovery efforts (ibid). There is an obvious discrepancy in the development and implementation of DDR programs, as only 2,880 of the 18, 524 children released from ranks in 2006 were girls (ibid). These numbers are astonishing considering that girls make up roughly 40% of child soldiers in the region. Current data solidifies this inconsistency, as most former female soldiers remain without the proper support in the DRC (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 8).

Reports from 2005 reveal that countless demobilization hubs had no girls registered, and while this fact is from nearly twenty years ago, the same issues revolving around reintegrating girls persist. Girls must be motivated to participate in DDR programs, and for this to happen, programs need to protect male fighters at every stage, offer suitable gender-responsive health, psychological and social support, and cater to the specific needs of young mothers and survivors of sexual violence (1Amnesty International, 2006, p. 40). To accomplish this tailored approach, the government should implement awareness campaigns that encourage girls’ registration in DDR programs. Awareness-raising projects are currently underway in the region, which include topics of GBV (2Secretary-General, 2022, p. 14, paragraph 71). While this is a positive advancement in the reintegration efforts of the region, socioeconomic reintegration remains an obstacle due to a lack in funding as well as the already unstable socioeconomic status in the country. In 2012, the government of the DRC signed an action plan to combat sexual violence against children in the country. While this is a positive advancement for victims of sexual violence, primarily girls, the ongoing conflict and instability in the country have delayed progress. The most recent report of the Secretary-General on CAAC in the DRC urges the government to accelerate its efforts in implementing the action plan, as sexual violence, especially against children, remains rampant. Furthermore, the FARDC and other state security forces continue to be major offenders of this violation, exacerbating regional instability and violence (2Secretary-General, 2022, p. 15, paragraph 76). While

these agencies are meant to protect civilians, engaging in acts of sexual violence erodes public trust in these institutions which ultimately leads to a decrease in overall public safety.

Overall, the experiences of girls in the DRC, shaped by the overwhelming challenges they face in armed conflict settings, underscore the urgent need for a gender-sensitive approach to demobilization and reintegration programs. Despite comprising a significant percentage of child soldiers, the unique needs and circumstances of these young girls are often overlooked due to their low status in society, resulting in their marginalized status within DDR initiatives. The pervasive impact of societal stereotypes, armed conflict, and institutional neglect not only perpetuate the cycles of violence and vulnerability but also hinder the prospects for meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration. To address these inequalities, the government and relevant stakeholders must implement comprehensive support systems that recognize and address the specific challenges faced by former female child soldiers. By doing so, the DRC can take the proper steps towards healing both individuals and the broader community, fostering a safer and more equitable society for the young girls who have suffered the consequences of conflict.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This section outlines key recommendations on the findings of my research, categorized into three classifications. The first recommendation involves integrating a gender-focused approach to reports of the SRSR CAAC and reintegration strategies. The second recommendation focuses on the proper allocation of funding to build long-term and sustainable programs. Lastly, the third recommendation is centred around community involvement in supporting demobilized children, with a special focus on the importance of access to education.

### 4.1 Integrating Gender Perspectives in Reintegration Practices and Reports

The reintegration of former child soldiers, particularly girls, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics and the unique challenges faced by former female child soldiers. By integrating a gender perspective into reintegration practices and during the reporting cycle of the SRSR CAAC, governments and policymakers can develop effective, context-specific strategies that address the distinct needs of girls. To achieve this, annual reports should include a dedicated section detailing if and how gender norms and roles influence the distinct experiences of boys and girls in specific countries. Incorporating a gendered lens in research will lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive report, which later influences effective reintegration programs (GCRCS, 2021, p. 9). Establishing a specialized segment within these reports that focuses on the unique challenges girls encounter will facilitate the creation of tailored reintegration programs for female ex-combatants. This can be accomplished through collaboration between the SRSR CAAC and NGOs that specialize in gender-specific programming, which often have established ties to local communities and can provide credible, contextually relevant information. This recommendation would be especially beneficial to reintegration efforts in the DRC, as very little is known regarding their involvement in armed conflicts in the region (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 8). For instance, reintegration kits should be specially designed for girls to include female hygiene products, and other essential products (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 21). Additionally, including female facilitators in reintegration programs can serve as positive role models, offering a safe space and support for girls. Former female child soldiers often endure abuse and violence at the hands of men in armed conflict, causing hesitation to present themselves at reintegration centres, such as in the case of the DRC (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 40). Thus, female facilitators can sensitively address critical issues relating to girls' traumatic experiences, primarily sexual violence (STC, 2023, p. 19). A gender-responsive approach fosters trust among female ex-combatants and empowers them to reclaim their identities. Finally, disaggregating data by gender enables policymakers to assess the effectiveness of existing strategies, allowing them to identify best practices that cater specifically to girls. Integrating a gender perspective in reports and reintegration programs is essential for the future development of girls, as it underscores the unique challenges they face and informs the design of tailored approaches to their programming. Ultimately, applying a gendered lens in the reporting and monitoring of child soldiers within SRSR CAAC annual reports will promote more equitable outcomes for reintegration programs, ensuring that the specific needs of former female child soldiers are addressed and prioritized.

## 4.2 Building a Sustainable Funding Strategy

Sustainable and long-term programming is the cornerstone of successful reintegration initiatives, necessitating reliable funding sources. Studies indicate that a significant percentage of children affected by armed conflict do not receive the comprehensive support needed for effective rehabilitation. For instance, in Sierra Leone, despite a high volume of abductions targeting girls, they represented less than 8% of children registered for DDR programs (Brett, 2014, p. 35). Furthermore, those who do not receive assistance typically have access to care for only a few months, far shorter than the three to five years recommended by experts (GCRCS, 2021, preface). Long-term, sustainable programs are crucial for meeting the physical, psychological, and social needs of former child soldiers (2SRSG CAAC, 2018, p. 2, paragraph 4). The principal challenge facing current reintegration efforts is their transient nature due to the absence of long-term funding. What is urgently required is enhanced financial support that fosters lasting change and improves reintegration outcomes, especially for girls. Critical to the success of these programs is comprehensive and consistent financial backing (Tonheim, 2009, p. 62). Sustainable funding strategies should also include gender-specific funding mechanisms that recognize a blanket approach does not work for the unique needs of girls. A gender-sensitive approach to funding acknowledges that girls experience additional stressors and trauma due to discrimination and GBV. Ensuring that resources are allocated to gender-specific programming facilitates a holistic approach to reintegration and mitigates the potential for re-recruitment (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 2).

Assessing how budget allocations impact programs aimed at assisting girls, and identifying which interventions are most effective, will help ensure that funding commitments reflect the gendered realities of reintegration challenges. Moreover, a gender perspective on the funding of reintegration programs enables stakeholders to prioritize initiatives that have demonstrated success, such as vocational training to bolster economic independence and the establishment of safe spaces for counselling and peer support (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 65). Sustainable funding strategies for the gendered dimensions of war would include different facilities for DDR programs for girls and boy, and specialized kits for girls upon being released from an armed group containing the proper feminine hygiene products. In collaborating with local and international NGOs, a more effective funding strategy can be produced, as these organizations often have established networks and credibility within local settings. This collaboration not only enhances the likelihood of attracting donor support but also fosters a collective initiative to develop robust, long-term reintegration processes geared toward the needs of children. Furthermore, ensuring adequate funding for children's access to education is vital, as education is a key component of the reintegration pathway (Nduwimana, 2013, p. 16). Demobilized children are eager for education; however, many countries report inadequate funding to maintain classrooms. Other countries impose high fees for education making families less inclined to send all children to school. For instance, in the DRC, funding for children's education remains severely constrained due to corruption and the ongoing conflict, and as a result, reformed child soldiers often receive only two years of education (ibid, p. 18). Strengthening financial commitments to education not only enhances the immediate reintegration process but also lays the groundwork for future stability and resilience in post-conflict societies. Ultimately, a well-rounded approach to reintegration strategies, including sustained funding across various support systems, will help ensure that former child soldiers, particularly girls, can reintegrate successfully into society and lead fulfilling lives.

### 4.3 Empowering Communities through Collaborative Strategies

My final recommendation is to establish programs within affected communities aimed at increasing awareness of the atrocities committed against girls, thereby reducing stigmatization and mitigating the mental stresses they experience upon returning. Community engagement is essential for creating a supportive environment for all children, with particular emphasis on girls, who face heightened risks of social rejection and ostracism due to their previous associations with armed actors. Initiatives that involve community members in welcoming and supporting these girls upon their return are crucial. The responsibility for reintegrating former child soldiers rests not only with the international community but also with local communities (GCRCS, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, a collaborative approach fosters community support, which is vital in mitigating stigma that can lead to further mental health challenges and hinder successful reintegration. Key components for building a supportive community include developing educational programs that discuss the diverse experiences of girls affected by conflict, focusing on common themes. This can be implemented through training workshops, information campaigns, and the distribution of literature designed to equip community members with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support girls during their reintegration (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 65). Educational programs should address the psychological impact of armed conflict on girls, explore the consequences of stigma, and provide strategies for countering it, as well as outline the specific needs of girls reentering society. Fostering a better understanding of these issues will help cultivate an environment that prioritizes empathy rather than stigma. Stigmatization and rejection by community members also leads to girls being identified with armed groups, reducing their chances of registering for reintegration programs (Tonheim, 2009, p. 62). Collaborative strategies should also promote ongoing dialogue between key stakeholders, including community members, to address misconceptions about war and promote healing. Engaging community leaders is crucial, as their advocacy can set a positive example for community practices and inclusivity. Education officials should focus on educating affected children, as access to education is a fundamental aspect of the reintegration process for all children. Reports consistently show that when communities invest in educational opportunities, it can significantly impact the likelihood of girls being exploited at a young age (ISRSR CAAC, 2022, p. 14). Moreover, as girls gain access to proper education, they can challenge and change existing gender norms that limit their futures. Overall, inclusive educational systems are pivotal in healing communities fractured by conflict. They foster a deeper understanding of the unique traumas girls face and reduce the potential for further mental stress resulting from societal stigmas. By prioritizing education and awareness within communities, we can create lasting change that supports the successful reintegration of former girl soldiers and cultivates a more inclusive, empathetic society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

How do traditional gender norms and expectations shape the experiences of girls in armed conflict, and how do these factors influence their reintegration outcomes? In order to fully explore this question, the research began with dissecting international mechanisms such as the CRC. While the rights protected under the Convention embody principles of universality, non-discrimination and the best interests of the child, the ambiguity of certain provisions creates excessive room for interpretation. Exemplified with the best interest principles, some may argue that a violation of one's right was done in the best interest of the child. While OPAC aims at rectifying issues regarding the recruitment and use of children in war, children under the age of eighteen remain to be recruited and used in armed conflicts throughout multiple regions. There is clear evidence from armed conflicts globally that child soldiers far below the age of eighteen are still being used today. Whereas the CRC is the cornerstone document in protecting children from abuses, and the State is responsible for ensuring this protection, not enough is being done to combat the use of child soldiers in combat. While States are encouraged to take active measures in the prevention of child soldier recruitment, there often lacks accountability for actors in armed forces and groups who are guilty of these crimes. Failing to prosecute perpetrators for violations committed against children in war generates a faulty perception that these actions go unpunished which perpetuates the cycle of abuse. There needs to be stronger mechanisms and policies put in place to hold perpetrators legally accountable for the exploitation of children in war. While legal mechanisms are in place to impose legal sanctions on warlords, enforcement in conflict areas is oftentimes weak. Perpetrators of violence and abuses against children in conflict are considered non-state actors and act outside of the authority of internationally recognized laws and Conventions, which makes it more difficult to apply the standard of the CRC. In turn, armed groups endanger children further by exploiting the ambiguities of the Convention.

The establishment of the SRSG CAAC was a significant step in addressing the challenges surrounding the use of child soldiers and holding violators of children's rights in war accountable. The mandate was created in response to the growing awareness of the severe impact armed conflict has on children, particularly on children being recruited and used as soldiers. One of the greatest achievements of the Office is the monitoring and reporting of the situation of children in armed conflict worldwide. The collection of data on violations of children's rights, including recruitment and use of children, reintegration efforts, and more, serves as a foundation for understanding the scope of the issue and advocating for action. By systematically monitoring violations, generating advocacy, engaging stakeholders, and coordinating supportive services, the MRM of the SRSG CAAC works towards achieving long-term and sustainable reintegration programs for children once associated with an armed force. While reports provide country-specific updates and insights into the challenges faced by children in armed conflict, their effectiveness in proposing prolonged reintegration strategies for released child soldiers remains limited. Due to gaps in data, inadequate focus on community engagement, resource limitation and the need for more tailored approaches render current reintegration strategies as unsustainable. What's needed is in-depth, durable data collection to track programs currently in place as a means of grasping best practices, and applying that to other regions with similar situations. While reports provide data on the release of children, a deficiency in data on how well children are reintegrating into their communities remains. By following up with children currently involved in reintegration programs, officials in charge of implementing support services can construct programs based on success stories.

The SRSG CAAC takes a one-size-fits-all approach to recommendations on reintegration, not taking into account specific cultural, social and economic contexts in which reintegration programs take

place. Further, it has been proven that girls experience distinct abuses and exploitation during their time in an armed group, which requires distinct approaches to their reintegration. Current practices often stem from narratives centred around male experiences, which overshadow or minimize the experiences and needs of girls. Whether deliberate or accidental, current DDR programs exclude girls from the conversation. Reintegration efforts thus need to adopt a gender-sensitive framework that acknowledges and responds to the multifaceted experiences of girls, ensuring that their specific needs and the societal context surrounding their reintegration are adequately addressed. For instance, numbers reveal that girls have a higher risk of sexual violence, leading to societal stigmas being imposed on them. A gendered approach to programs would take these considerations into account and implement the proper service to educate community members on the impact of GBV on girls and bolster community-based programs which support girls' reintegration. In this way, a more tailored approach to reintegration practices that consider differences in recruitment, trauma, social integration and community acceptance will significantly enhance the effectiveness of reintegrating former female child soldiers. While boys are also subject to sexual violence and abuse like girls, systemic discrimination against women and girls in high-conflict areas creates further hardships and trauma for girls. There is an overwhelming effect of sexual violence during armed conflict and in the aftermath which disproportionately affects girls. The 2020 report of the Secretary-General on CAAC reiterates this point, detailing that 98% of sexual violence committed during the reporting period was committed against girls (ISRSR CAAC, 2022, p. 18).

In light of the evolving landscape of armed conflicts, it is imperative to reassess and strengthen the MRM. This will ensure that the MRM remains responsive to contemporary challenges, including the necessity for effective cross-border monitoring to address transnational violations against children, such as is the case with the DRC. Furthermore, improvements to the MRM should encompass the gender dimensions of violations and coordinate with other relevant frameworks, such as the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Establishing a unified approach to information gathering will significantly enhance the efficacy of efforts aimed at protecting children in conflict zones. This inequity is further intensified by the lack of representation of women in decision-making processes and leadership positions. Cultural norms and practices that are harmful to girls also contribute significantly to this crisis, perpetrating an environment where girls are particularly vulnerable to violence. For instance, women and girls are viewed as caregivers, wives and mothers therefore aren't given the same access to opportunities as boys. Gender norms also contribute to the added trauma that girls experience upon returning to their communities, as stigmatization is imparted on them. Specifically, name-calling and shaming due to pre-marital sex or having a child out of wedlock as a result of abuse from an armed actor pushes girls further into isolation. Educational training is of the utmost importance for community members where negative gender norms are perpetuated, as a means of reshaping community perceptions and responses to girls to create a more conducive environment for their healing and reintegration. By providing accurate information about girls' experiences and workshops on empathizing with demobilized children, especially girls, children will be met with empathy rather than stigma and prejudice.

The case study of the DRC reveals that human rights in the whole of the country are exceedingly compromised, especially those of children. The ongoing political and military climate in the country poses severe challenges to the protection and promotion of children's rights. Extended conflict in the region is characterized by the spread of armed groups, political instability and weak governance, which further exacerbates vulnerabilities and undermines the rule of law. The historical cycle of violence has plagued the country since the mid-1990s leading to the recruitment of hundreds of thousands of children as combatants, spies, porters etc. Children associated with armed forces in the DRC are highly exposed to situations of extreme violence, exploitation, and trauma. Child recruitment is deeply rooted in societal attitudes, as leaders of armed forces in the DRC believe that children are more obedient, and demand less as compared to adults. Despite the establishment of the FARDC and the CONADER to address the issue of a mass influx in the use of child soldiers, a lack of effective governance combined with failed financial

forecasting foiled meaningful progress. The persistence of armed groups along with the incorporation of individuals with histories of violence into the national army further intensifies the precarious nature of children's rights in the region. With millions displaced and the threat of recruitment continuing to linger, the DRC's political environment not only compromises the immediate safety and well-being of children but also undermines their inherent right to a future free from violence and instability. An urgent and comprehensive action plan that prioritizes the needs and protections within the broader framework of human rights is dire.

The reintegration efforts for child soldiers in the DRC over the past two decades reveal the significant challenges stemming from the ongoing conflict between multiple armed forces and groups and the resulting instability in the region. Although initiatives like the DDR program and the establishment of CONADER instilled a sense of hope, they face substantial hurdles, mainly limited funding. Many former child soldiers remain isolated and vulnerable to violations, despite the many efforts over the years to alleviate them. To ensure the success of reintegration initiatives, it is crucial to address the immediate needs of these children while simultaneously recognizing the underlying socioeconomic and educational challenges within their communities. With 80% of the population living on less than \$1 a day and living below the poverty line, the issue of child recruitment is exacerbated as many individuals join militias for monetary gains and survival (Amnesty International, 2006, p. 4). Adopting a comprehensive approach is essential for safeguarding the well-being of young individuals and fostering lasting stability and peace in the DRC, paving the way for a more promising future for all children in the country. While current reintegration programs have a blanket approach, girls remain invisible in society as they require special protections and support throughout the DDR process.

Despite comprising a third of child soldiers in the DRC, girls remain hidden in rehabilitation efforts due to societal biases and a lack of appropriate support mechanisms. Many girls are unaware of the resources available to them, and even when they are informed, existing programs frequently fail to accommodate their unique needs resulting from their experience, including the challenges posed by motherhood and previous trauma. Furthermore, the perception that these girls are mere dependents of male combatants often excludes them from receiving individualized care which severely limits their access to vital support services. To initiate meaningful change and give women and girls proper attention, the DRC government and relevant organizations need to develop inclusive practices that acknowledge the distinct challenges faced by former female soldiers. By raising awareness and establishing a robust support system which is tailored to the distinct experiences and needs of girls, the DRC can start a new chapter in empowering young women and contribute to creating a healthier, more equitable environment for all children throughout the country.

Ultimately, despite international efforts to address the issue of child combatants, such as the creation of the SRSG CAAC, special task forces, and other bodies, substantially more action is required. Gender roles, norms and stereotypes significantly impact the experiences of girls in armed conflict worldwide. Thus, policymakers and DDR implementers must adopt a gender-sensitive approach to their programs, incorporating special support systems tailored to women and girls to encourage greater female participation in programs. Additionally, organizations responsible for MRM should advocate for a more comprehensive, data-driven strategy to identify best practices. In taking this approach, coordinators of DDR programs can more effectively understand which initiatives are successful and which are not. Lastly, including former child soldiers in the discussion can significantly improve the effectiveness of DDR programs, as their firsthand experiences and insights contribute to more relevant and impactful strategies. This not only enriches program design but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants which ultimately leads to more sustainable outcomes. Overall, a gendered analysis of the reintegration efforts of child soldiers reveals the critical need for inclusive and context-sensitive approaches. Recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by both male and female former combatants paves the way for more effective and equitable post-conflict recovery.



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