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Transformative Spaces in the Social Reintegration of Former Child Soldier Young Mothers in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Northern Uganda.

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Abstract

A significant but insufficiently considered category of female former child soldiers' is those that become mothers as a result of rape or through relationships with 'bush husbands'. This article reflects on learning from a participatory action research (PAR) study which aimed to facilitate the social reintegration of formerly associated young mothers and other war-affected vulnerable young mothers in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Northern Uganda. We argue it is useful to delineate three nodes of individual-community relations which we identify as possible transformative spaces in psychosocial programming for social reintegration: the intersection between individual emotional experience and the emotional climate; between individual agency and public engagement; and between individual and community resilience. The PAR study involved 658 young war-affected mothers across 20 communities in the three countries. The results demonstrate how the PAR mobilized positive emotions and aligned the activities of the young mothers' groups with individuals with power to facilitate change (community leaders) and contributed to limited transformative change. Further research is needed on engaging men and on tackling structural factors in interventions with war-affected young mothers.

Keywords: child soldiers, females, community resilience, social reintegration

Transformative spaces in the social reintegration of former child soldier young

mothers in Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda

Formal processes of post-conflict peace-building tend to be hierarchical and top-down in which women are overlooked (McWilliams & Kilmurry, 2015; O'Rourke, 2013; Worthen, McKay, Veale & Wessells, 2011). Yet much of the work of peace-building happens through everyday relating in local communities in which women are key participants (De la Rey & McKay, 2006). Women and girls returning from armed forces and groups present a challenge to local peace-building. As a result of being overlooked in formal Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) processes which offer skills training or further education, they have few livelihood options, leading to high levels of economic marginalization (Burman & McKay, 2007; Wessells, 2006). Within armed groups, women were more likely to have experienced rape compared to males (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, & Ellis, 2010). After return, for each act of violence experienced in armed groups, either as a victim or a perpetrator, female former combatants reported significantly more distress than males (Annan, Green, & Brier, 2013).

Six years post-war, female former child soldiers who experienced rape demonstrated poorer mental health outcomes evidenced by higher internalizing and externalizing symptoms relative to male former child soldiers who experienced rape, which potentially hampered interpersonal relationships, educational and vocational opportunities (Betancourt, McBain, Newnham, & Brennan, 2014). Formerly associated females showed higher levels of hostility, poorer prosocial attitudes and less confidence when compared to formerly associated males (Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman, & Ellis, 2010). In Northern Uganda, Annan, Blattman, Carlson and

Mazurana (2011) found that the majority of female former abductees demonstrated significant resilience although they experienced more persistent psychological and relational challenges when compared to male abductees and never-abducted peers. They found that the economic status of formerly abducted girls and women was similar to that of female community peers but they attributed this to the significant structural barriers to economic participation for women in war-affected communities.

A significant but insufficiently considered category of female former child soldiers' is those that become mothers as a result of rape or through relationships with 'bush husbands' (Coulter, 2006; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Formerly associated young mothers and in particular their babies are often poorly accepted by civilian communities (Annan et al., 2011; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). While many formerly associated young mothers were welcomed back by their families (Annan et al., 2011), they or their children were sometimes regarded as spiritually polluted which hindered community acceptance (Honwana, 2006; Shanahan & Veale, 2010; Wessells, 2006). In northern Uganda, Apio (2008) found that only 28% of sixty-nine former child soldier mothers experienced a positive reception by their communities. Two thirds of mothers experienced motherhood as negative due to the challenges of raising a child in circumstances of extreme privation. She found that the rejection of their children by their families and communities negatively impacted on returned mothers' own social reintegration.

Community acceptance has emerged as a key resource mediating more positive psychosocial adjustment amongst former child soldiers (Betancourt et al., 2010b; Honwana, 2006; Wessells, 2006). Community acceptance is not something that can be simply claimed as a right by returning young mothers' and their children

nor is it freely given but has to be negotiated in everyday relating. Derluyn, Vindevogel and De Haene (2013) argue that psychosocial interventions need to act in relational spaces at the intersection of individual and collective experiences. They offer reconciliation as an example of an intervention that operates in this individual/collective space. Such 'in-between' or relational spaces are underexplored in the social reintegration literature.

This article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between individuals and their communities in social reintegration. It reflects on learning from a participatory action research (PAR) study which aimed to facilitate the social reintegration of formerly associated young mothers and other war-affected, vulnerable young mothers in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Northern Uganda. Based on our reflections emerging from the PAR, we argue it is useful to delineate three nodes of individual-community relations which we identify as possible transformative spaces in psychosocial programming for social reintegration. These are the intersection between individual emotional experience and the emotional climate; between individual agency and public engagement; and between individual and community resilience. These intersections can be conceptualized as dynamic, fluid and changing spaces that exist on a continuum of weaker or stronger interconnection. They are proposed as transformative spaces in so far as psychosocial interventions can aim to harness both individual and collective resources and in doing so, bring about a shift in social positions at these nodes towards greater reintegration. We now present these three points of intersection.

The Intersection between Individual Emotional Experience and the Collective Emotional Climate

On return to civilian communities, the literature suggests that the emotional experience of returned girls and women includes feelings of shame and stigma (Annan, Brier & Aryemo, 2009; Burman & McKay, 2007). In Columbia, Denov & Marchand (2014) cited a female former child solider who felt embarrassed that people knew she was in an armed group and that she killed and such embarrassment led to social avoidance and concealment resulting in feeling dishonest. In Sierra Leone, Coulter (2009) found former girl soldiers were regarded with enormous distrust. The community was hostile and rejecting and this excluded returned young women from participating fully in community life. Shepler (2014) reported girls tended to "slink home" (p.150) perhaps pregnant or with a baby. She found that while boys used a discourse of abdicated responsibility or "It wasn't my choice" to support their reintegration, girls internalized stigma and blame, particularly relating to their sexual abuse. Young mothers were especially vulnerable to an unsupportive community atmosphere as many families felt ashamed of having babies born of rebels (Coulter, 2009; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Shepler, 2014).

Lykes, Beristain, and Pérez-Armiñan (2007) have called attention to the emotional climate in post-conflict contexts and how this frames collective responses towards individuals. The emotional climate is a collective attitude or mood that determines behavioral responses to individuals, such that a climate of fear manifests as anxiety, inhibited community and social isolation; a climate of hostility as increased tension and polarization; and a climate of solidarity as greater feelings of interdependence (Lykes et al., 2007; De Rivera, 1992). In peace and conflict studies, it is noted that it can be a challenge to turn attitudes into positive behaviors even when

there are favorable underlying attitudes (Snyder & Dwyer, 2011). This is an even greater challenge when the underlying attitudes are negative or even hostile.

A further complicating factor is that formerly associated young mothers may also be reintegrating to communities in which there exists de-facto impunity for the sexual violence they may have experienced in armed forces and groups, often by other former child soldiers. Drumbl (2012) argues that international discourses of non-responsibility and excuse-making for the actions of former child soldiers within armed groups is problematic as it may be seen as "legitimating irresponsibility" (p.40) giving rise to a culture of tacit impunity. In post-conflict communities, impunity becomes part of the emotional climate and creates further inhibition of communication, avoidance and social isolation (Lykes et al., 2007).

At its weakest point, the intersection between individual emotional experience and the collective emotional climate is one whereby the individual feels isolated, marginalized and disconnected and the emotional climate is avoidant or even hostile. We argue psychosocial interventions for social reintegration can act to strengthen the emotional interconnection between the individual and collective through mobilizing both individual and community emotional resources, such as by amplifying positive emotions. This, we argue, has the potential to shift the point of emotional intersection to somewhere along a continuum from isolation/avoidance at one point to engagement/solidarity at the other.

The Intersection between Individual Agency and Public Engagement

Within armed forces and groups, the individual agency of child soldiers, in the sense of the ability to act volitionally to effect change, is recognized as being highly

bounded and confined (Drumbl, 2012), the agency of the weak seeking tactical advantage from positions of vulnerability (Honwana, 2006). At reintegration, Shepler (2014) argues there is a perception that former child soldiers transition from non-agentive to agentive beings, able to take action to better their lives but in reality post-conflict communities of return are structurally constrained by high unemployment and few opportunities. For returning girls and women, Coulter (2009) found agency is linked to status and resources; women with nothing and who could provide nothing for their families were marginalized while women with provisions were more likely to be successful in their livelihood endeavors as they cultivated better relationships. She found that many returned women and mothers had neither moral nor economic standing which constrained their capacity for feeling agentive. Prilleltensky (2014) argues a sense of "mattering" is central to agency, a feeling that one's actions are recognized and matter, have impact and make a difference in the world. This concept of "mattering" may capture an important element of experience at the intersection of individual agency and public engagement. Blattman (2009) found that former child soldiers were less likely than community peers to be involved in community activities and local politics. It is likely they did not believe their voice mattered or they feared they would be ostracized for making their voices heard. Perhaps a necessary and important component of psychosocial programming for social reintegration is to strengthen the intersection between individual agency and supportive public engagement.

Wagoner (2014) argued that core to social transformation is public engagement, that is, a need to act in the space of ideas and ideals and to create links between the social practices of an individual or group and the ideals which may guide

the actions of the collective. This can be done through various strategies including dialogue and engagement in discursive struggles over ideas; the mobilization of more powerful others to align the priorities of the individual or group with ascendant ideas of the broader community; and engagement in the public sphere in order to win support and demand accountability from those in positions of leadership or power.

A weak intersection between individual agency and public engagement is one in which the individual exerts significant effort to better her life but this effort is minimally supported or unmet by the collective. At the other end of the continuum, a strong intersection is where through engaging in meaningful dialogue and social mobilization, the individual gains the support of more powerful others and thus gains positive visibility and voice in a public sphere. In this way, the intersection of individual agency and public engagement is strengthened. This we argue is a second potential transformative space in social reintegration.

The Intersection between Individual and Community Resilience

Empirical evidence shows that over the medium to long term, many former child soldiers are resilient and integrate effectively into families and communities (Annan, Blattman, Mazurana & Carlson, 2011; Boothby, Crawford, and Halperin, 2006; Wessells, 2006). Annan et al. (2011) found that amongst returned girls and women, significant and ongoing distress was confined to a minority rather than being broad-based. Returned mothers were worse off with respect to education as they had less schooling compared to other abducted and never abducted peers. Yet in spite of this they concluded the majority of female returnees demonstrated significant resilience. Recently, a developmental dynamic systems model of resilience has gained prominence which emphasizes the interconnected resilience of individuals, families,

communities and economics (Masten, 2015). Yet individual and community resilience, although linked, are not reducible to each other. Individual resilience is the capacity for individual positive adaptation following adversity (Masten & Obradovic, 2008). Community resilience is a process linking a network of informational, social and economic capacities to support adaptation following adversity (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche & Pfefferbaum, 2008). Kulig (2000) describes how community resilience builds starting with people 'getting along' so that interactions are experienced as a collective unit, which in turn creates a sense of community and this then forms the basis for community problem solving and positive change. Yet an individual may be resilient in spite of not getting along and being networked in to the collective resources, and similarly a resilient community network can function while overlooking or excluding resilient individuals. However, the greater the intersection between individual and community resilience, the greater the likelihood that both individual and community resilience will be strengthened.

Bandura (2000) recognized the link between individual and collective efficacy in which collective efficacy refers to people's shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results. Perceived collective efficacy is not simply the result of individual efficacy but also the *"interactive, coordinated, synergistic dynamics of transactions"* (p 75) emergent in group processes. The creation of enabling environments to support both individual and group/collective wellbeing needs a profoundly socially mobilizing model of intervention. With respect to social reintegration of war-affected young mothers, we ask: can resilience be mobilized in both individuals and the community for transformative change for both? This we argue is a third potential transformative space in social reintegration.

Method

The method used in this research, participatory action research (PAR), has several key features. A core principle is meaningful participation of those affected by the problem in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives (Jennings, 2000). Participants are a primary source of knowledge about the conditions that affect their lives and play an active role in analyzing and developing solutions to their problems (Loewenson et al., 2014). In this way, they can increase control over their lives (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011).

The study was developed through two meetings (May 2005, October 2006) that were held at the Rockefeller Conference Centre in Bellagio, Italy and a third meeting held in Freetown, Sierra Leone (December 2006) attended by academics, NGO psychosocial experts and regional UNICEF representatives . The study has been described in detail elsewhere (McKay, Veale, Worthen & Wessells, 2011). A set of principles emerged which identified 'meaningful participation' as the core methodological tool. Meaningful participation became operationalized at study sites as a mantra: "*If it doesn't come from the girls, it is not PAR.*" This placed young mothers as central actors in project needs analysis, decision-making, and reflective practice. This included decisions about the use of money for social actions they implemented to support their social reintegration. The principles stated that we understood PAR "as research with an intent of community mobilization as distinctly separate from programmatic implementation" and the goal of the PAR was "to empower young mothers within their communities in order to *inspire* their communities to engage in social change which can impact authoritative bodies to

positively influence their lives and ultimately their communities" (PAR Guiding

Principles, 2006; p.1, italics in original).

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) study was implemented through an

academic-NGO partnership that brought together a team of 10 non-governmental

organizations, three in-country academics and four Western academics. The study

involved 658 young mothers who had returned from armed groups or been deemed to

be vulnerable across 20 communities in Liberia (4 study sites), Sierra Leone (8 study

sites) and northern Uganda (8 study sites). These young mothers had almost 1200

children among them. In total, 66% participants were formerly associated young

mothers and 33% were community young mothers. Community young mothers were

included in order to avoid privileging former child soldiers and to promote social

reintegration. All had conceived or gave birth prior to 18 years of age. The

participants' average age at the beginning of the project was 21 years, with 80% aged

between 16 and 24 years of age and range was 8 to 36 years (Table 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Participants were selected by NGO personnel through purposive sampling.

They began a process of community consultation to identify vulnerable young

mothers who were formerly associated and other war-affected young mothers.

Judgments about vulnerability were based on factors such as perceived economic

privation, trauma, social isolation and disability. After some young mothers enrolled

in the PAR, they became instrumental in enrolling other young mothers in a snowball

process. Approximately 30 young mothers were enrolled at each site. All participants

went through an informed consent process approved through the University of

Wyoming's Institutional Review Board. The project developed over four phases between 2006-2010 as described in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Data used in this analysis were monthly reports recorded by young mother groups; verbatim transcripts of annual international meetings including young mother representatives, academic and NGO team members, donors, UNICEF and social Ministry representatives held in Kampala and Sierra Leone; and regular ethnographic fieldtrips conducted by the authors working in pairs. These involved interviews with participants, home visits, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and country team meetings. Individual interviews were sometimes taped and transcribed but in general, notes were not electronically recorded. They were simultaneously recorded in written form by one of the researchers and written up in full afterwards. Careful attention was given to the selection of narratives that were broadly representative of different participants (e.g., young mothers or community members, respectively).

A limitation of the method is we did not include a matched sample comparison group, which makes it difficult to categorically attribute the changes noted to the PAR. The study team took a decision that, as the PAR was an emergent process in which young mothers would decide their own activities and desired outcomes, even though this approach made it difficult to establish an appropriate comparison.

Results

Strengthening Individual and Collective Emotional Climate Interconnections

At the start of the project, participants described an emotional climate in which they felt unsupported or unaccepted. In northern Uganda, one former abductee noted "The challenge first was that sometimes the neighbors would not accept us". Many of the babies and children were in very poor health, particularly in northern Uganda. In Liberia, participants reported that community members said "Don't bring Charles Taylor's babies here." Some young mothers said they were sent by family members 'to the bridge' for sex work. Once they organized their groups, the young mothers promoted a positive image of themselves. Three years into the project, one Liberian group recounted how "Before the project, mothers saw their daughters on the streets often doing sex work and making a fuss and were not happy. Now they are proud of us and the families do not send us to the streets looking for men to get money" (Ethnographic field notes, 2010). In Sierra Leone, one of the young mothers explained that they put on a dance with the explicit aim "to bring the community together to forget the past." A psychosocial worker explained "The cost of a dance is expensive. The girls ask community members for donations to help pay for the dances, then the girls organize everything." In the final ethnographic evaluation of the study, a local leader noted "Planned social activities which the young mothers initiated were seen as instrumental in bringing the community together." As ownership for the idea and activities was attributed to the young mothers rather than as is commonly the case for programs facilitated by non-governmental organizations, this generated more positivity towards them. Engaging with negative social representations directly through community dramas and through a socially valued medium, they challenge emotional responses of blaming, finger pointing and degenerative remarks. In many instances, as they set up their livelihood activities,

they did much of the hard physical work themselves. In Sierra Leone, for example, one of the PAR staff told how the group had built a rice mill.

> The last social fund purchased a rice mill. They built the building to install it. They built the structure on their own and roofed it with thatch, and now they want us to help them get cement for the floor so they can install the machine. We've been discussing what to do with the request coming from the group…They have the sand and stones, and have manpower; even yesterday I spoke with the (organisation manager). They asked for cement bags.
>
> In addition to the rice mill, the group have groundnut and rice farming. They still maintain their goats. The groundnut, it is still on a small scale, but they can eat and sell and keep a seed bank for planting next season. Some are still engaged in petty trading. Some have vegetable gardens. They don't just engage in one activity. The first social action went into a vegetable garden; the second went into the mill. They came up with the objectives.

Across the different study sites in the three countries, similar dynamics were noted. Observing the changing response to the young mother's activities in northern Uganda where the participants constructed a piggery, a PAR staff supporting the group attributed changing community relationships to the fact that "You provoke a smile with a smile, you provoke a positive attitude with a positive attitude." The young mothers generated respect and a more positive and supportive emotional climate through their strong group cohesion. A core mobilizing emotion was an emergent pride in their own individual and collective action and growing respect in

those that directly witnessed their efforts. Throughout, there was a sense of the fragility of this hard won respect as one PAR staff noted "All said they are continuing with their businesses as they do not want to be laughed at for losing what has been given to them." Emotional mobilization had a strong intentional and action component. One young mother explained how "In the dry season, water was difficult to get as all the pumps were faulty and the PAR girls put their money together and paid to have the community pump repaired. We decided on that - funding the well repair - it was our idea." Positive emotional mobilization was central to economic mobilization; an indicator of a changed emotional climate was that community members were willing to buy their goods, come to their stalls, hire them for community events such as traditional dance and in some sites, help them establish their groups as official local associations.

Strengthening Individual Agency and Public Engagement
Interconnections

According to Wagoner (2014), an important element of public engagement is bringing the agenda of the group into line with the dominant agenda in order to garner support and to link the group and wider collective agendas. One local leader in northern Uganda said that one of the things that bothered him most about the years of conflict was the impact on adolescent girls and young women in his area and the rise of "child mothers" as a result of defilement and sexual exploitation. When he witnessed the PAR young mothers becoming organized he said it "made me realize that things can change". If this was in one context only, it could be attributed to a particularly reflective and committed leader, but this dynamic was witnessed across the project sites in three countries. Groups were able to align their activities with the

motivations and interests of local leaders. In Sierra Leone, PAR staff told how the girls got the chiefs involved:

> The authorities were able to witness it, to see how the young
> mothers were organizing. I saw this as a great shift. I learnt from
> these girls. They organized a picnic and the chiefs came to the
> picnic.

Across the different countries, local leaders responded to their efforts. In northern Uganda, one local leader explained "we put effort where there is seriousness" and provided the group with a building to begin a restaurant. In Sierra Leone, the deputy chief at one site explained:

> We work here as a group (community) for the children. Whenever
> the PAR needs a piece of land, I provide it (as the deputy
> paramount chief). I am advising them to manage the money and
> their activities so it will not be wasted. I always encourage them for
> self-reliance. The girls decide for themselves, decide what is good
> for them.

Similarly, at another site in Sierra Leone, "Notably at this site, community members have been very active in supporting girl mothers' livelihoods such as contributing labor, farm land, storage of harvests and helping with businesses. Community members were very personally invested in the PAR and some said that they had contributed more than the girls." Some examples of joint action observed by one community member in Sierra Leone, was that when the young mothers prepared a picnic, they would provide the labor to brush the ground.

Notably, this alignment often did not present at the initiation of the study. It took diligent efforts on the part of young mothers and their community allies for this alignment to manifest. For example, one community advisor in a rural site in Liberia noted that had the girls had a community garden in the early phase of the project, even if the garden had not failed right away, as people were predicting it would, someone would ruin the garden by pulling out the vegetables or stomping on the seeds because there was not full community support for the project. However, since the girls demonstrated that they were serious through engaging in their small individual businesses, the community advisory person was able to get the community to donate some land for a communal garden for the young mothers' group.

As more powerful people aligned themselves with the efforts of the young mothers, they became powerful advocates on their behalf and often in the public sphere. In some instances, these allies were negotiators of conflict between young mothers and groups who felt their interests were invisible or ignored compared to those of young mothers, including former child soldier male youth. Through the mobilization of those in leadership positions, young mothers were better able to access community resources and to withstand external threats in a way that would not have been possible if they were loosely organized or as individuals.

One of the strongest points of synergy was at sites where the ideas and priorities of the young mothers found traction as a result of linking to ascendant ideas in the public space through public policy. In Sierra Leone, one PAR staff identified the passing of the Gender Act (2007) which contained three 'gender bills', the Domestic Violence Act, the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act and the Devolution of Estates Act and the passing of the Child Rights Act (2007) as tools

to leverage for the alignment of the young mother's rights and that of discourses in the public sphere. She argued "It's not only about the money (the social action funds for implementation of livelihoods). Women are a powerful force. I want the girls to have other skills they can use like the Gender Act. When they have sufficient knowledge, I would want them to have meetings with their colleagues in school; they can talk about what is affecting them. The Child Rights Act has just passed. They can ask for 10 minutes to talk in class with their classmates about this issue." These legislative and political discourses about child and women's rights gave legitimacy and confidence to young mothers that their activities were part of a larger societal agenda for the country's development. Furthermore in Sierra Leone in 2007, the Department of Education developed wide scale adult literacy programs for youth who were over-age for School called Community Education Centres for Literacy and Vocational Skills which had a specifically targeted former child soldiers and had a specific program *Support to Strengthen the Capacity of the Community Education Centers for Literacy and Vocational Skills of Women and Girls*. Young mothers in Sierra Leone identified a return to education as a top priority. One of the implementation team described this as "It's looking at the relationship between the young mothers and where the country is going." In contrast, northern Uganda at the start of the PAR did not have a peace agreement, young mothers returned to Internally Displaced Person camps; very few had a primary education and therefore did not have a path to secondary school. The PAR staff noted "They have identified the ability to support their children as the most important thing. They have all come back to an impoverished community/family that cannot take care of the children. The young mothers believe they are too old to go back to education. There is a feeling that they cannot correct what has happened in the past, so they want to look at dealing with

current issues. So they are not focused on the schooling that they feel they have already missed out on." In Liberia, girls identified health as their key challenge and observed now that the country was no longer an emergency context, the large medical non-governmental organizations had left the country. In this case, their needs were in direct conflict with public policy.

The area of public engagement of particular challenge was what Wagoner (2014) identified as the 'public sphere' through which organized citizens can limit and hold powerful actors accountable. One issue which young mothers found it very challenging to address was dealing with domestic and sexual violence. Although there were examples in monthly reports from different sites where individual young mothers felt empowered with the support of their group and advisors to go to the police following incidents of sexual violence, one Sierra Leonean young mother summed up the view of many when she said she would not take a case to the police because "we do not have strong human rights places and the police station are not taking proper care about rape cases." In Liberia, a young mother talked about a time her boyfriend took money from her cashbox and she took him to the police to get it back. She recounted "Because of bad business, he beats me and I go to the police and put him in jail. After a couple of days, he signs a paper saying he will not beat me, but he still beats me." In a different discussion, a Liberian young mother echoed this observation – "Beating is just a normal thing." In the absence of an ascendant discourse against the beating of wives, there is a weak or no intersection between individual agency and public engagement.

Strengthening Individual and Community Resilience Interconnections

In the first year of the PAR, a significant element of the study was consolidation of the group processes and structures. As individual participants sometimes came from long distances, often their meeting included cooking together and socializing over food. By the third year of the study, many groups were expanding their group to admit new young mother members whom they identified as particularly vulnerable including other former combatants and young mothers with disabilities. In the final ethnographic evaluation (year three), a group of community advisers in Sierra Leone discussed what they witnessed when the established group admitted new, previously non-PAR young mothers.

Adviser 1: They said when PAR came here, the girls were very aggressive, mad. They didn't listen to advice. Then with PAR, we have meetings, socialization, and all those negative things have stopped. They were very rough before.

Adviser 2: Some girls not associated with PAR (who newly joined the group) have at least minimized their anger, they have calmed down. At first they were like wounded lions.

Adviser 1: The non-PAR girls have learnt from the PAR girls to calm down, not to all to talk at the same time.

Adviser 1: The community does not see any sign if someone (in the group) was associated or not. They are all one community now.

For those groups that thrived, the shift from individual to collective efficacy was evidenced in the diversity of activities the groups were engaged in. This is evident in the following report on collective activities from northern Uganda.

> At the moment the girls have various activities. Agriculture involves groundnut, cassava, vegetables, rice. We have some weaving, soap-making; then we have some girls in petty trading, foodstuffs, cosmetics; then we have those going to the farmers group. They also participate in a regular monthly community cleaning...and in workshops on things such as HIV/AIDS. Some sites organize social activities such as picnics and dance. They were involved in sensitization on important health issues such as cholera, water treatment and sanitation. The chiefs are supportive. In some areas they have provided a piece of land for free for their activities. They give them places for their meetings. (Ethnographic data, year three).

In Sierra Leone, one group that called themselves 'Girls of Kadwah' said they were identified with the community and were now recognized as being organized and an official group and are being recommended by community leaders for certain projects. A community member noted "Whatever good comes to them spills over and helps others." Another argued   "We have not been talking about the fact that this community is more unified because of this program. People are learning to write, and there are social activities, and all kinds of activates, not just for young mothers. They all come together and the community is very social."

Due to extreme poverty, if individuals or interest groups within communities were not on an upward economic trajectory themselves, then the groups risked experiencing a backlash following their visible successes. One key informant observed "These are already impoverished communities so a little rising of the head above the rest makes you a target." As the study developed, the importance of developing linkages and involving boys and men, other women, other girls emerged as both an opportunity and a threat which if not addressed, had significant risks. One PAR staff argued "We must never slip into a situation where the girls are seen as this is girls only or women's only association because that will exclude them from the community." In the second year of the study, at an international team meeting attended by young mother representatives from the three countries, the need to develop stronger linkages with civil society and government was identified as a priority to address sustainability and to reduce external threats. At each site, young mothers groups supported by PAR staff and community advisers consciously strengthened their social relationships and networks by incorporating new members. They engaging more actively with husbands and boyfriends, doing community work, and in some cases establishing their groups as official community-based organizations networked into local structures. One psychosocial worker in northern Uganda noted "What is evolving is the general community support. From the beginning to now, what has developed is that the people in the community that girls have identified are supporting them. This is tradition."

Individually and collectively, young mothers' relationships with men were complex; they garnered support from men in positions of authority but also had complicated relationships with men in their families and communities. In Liberia, ethnographic field notes (year 3) indicated that men looked downtrodden and

dejected. Most said they had no work because there were no jobs. Some helped their PAR girlfriends and wives in their social actions but these were a minority. Most had the view that men who do "women's work" are stupid and severely ostracized. One man who was supportive of his wife's participation and was happy "for women to be improved and earn so children can go to school" also felt concerned for his own situation as he was a trained mason but there were no jobs and he felt that, as men in their community, "We are dying slowly."

Discussion

This article examined three intersections of individual/community processes within which a participatory action research study with formerly associated young mothers and vulnerable community young mothers worked to facilitate social reintegration. As a result of the PAR, many participants shifted their position along a continuum from lesser to greater interconnectedness between individual emotional experience and the broader emotional climate; between individual agency and public engagement; and individual and community resilience. Social reintegration was situated in these positive liminal, in-between spaces where many participants transitioned from a negative and unvalued social status to being positively regarded and valued. Meaningful participation was the central organizing concept of the PAR operationalized through ensuring participants had decision-making power over the use of group allocated money to develop activities they felt best addressed their priorities. This methodology — whereby young mothers were active decision-makers and agentive in producing change in their circumstances through their individual and group efforts — facilitated a shift in their self-representation and their representation in the eyes of others. Prilleltensky (2014) defines a continuum of psychosocial

interventions from cooption through amelioration to transformative. Rather than being co-opted into project activities decided by others, or given resources to ameliorate their situation such as a distribution program, we argue this approach gave voice and choice to the people who needed it — young mothers themselves and produced results within the socially transformative end of his continuum. This shift seems attributable to the participatory methodology which is our core contribution to policy and psychosocial practice. Further research is needed to explore if this highly participatory methodology brings about different outcomes to interventions such as vocational training that have been found to have poor outcomes for girls and women formerly associated with armed groups (Coulter 2009).

Prilleltensky's (2014) ameliorative-transformation distinction aims to capture the difference between working within the system and transformation as changing the system itself. With respect to policy and practice, our evidence suggests the PAR effected *limited* transformation in war-affected young mother's social reintegration. While young mothers successfully mobilized male leaders to provide material support and advocate for them in public spaces, a lack of an authoritative public discourse on gender-based violence failed to give them a position they could occupy on this issue and demand accountability. In Sierra Leone, young mother groups saw an opportunity to use new human rights instruments for this purpose in the future, but it did not impact social practices in daily relating within the three years of the PAR. Transformation was incomplete as deeper changes in social norms remain needed. At the end, we are still left with the challenging question -what is needed to not just ameliorate odds but transform and change the odds (Prilleltensky, 2014)?

Commented [A1]: I don't know what you mean by this....

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