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Reweaving relating in social reintegration with war-affected young mothers and their children in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda.

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Abstract

Young mothers formerly associated with armed forces and groups (CAFFAG), and their children constitute an under-researched group within the literature on children affected by armed conflict. This chapter sought to understand what happens in and through relationships in a longitudinal participatory action research study with war-affected young mothers including former CAFFAG young mothers. The chapter takes as a starting point Martín-Baró's (1989) observation that trauma is social and links this with theoretical frameworks within sociocultural psychology on relating and 'relational being' (Gergen, 2010). The study aimed to learn what successful social reintegration meant for young mothers and to help them to achieve it. Participants were 658 young mothers and over 1,200 of their children in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda. Findings show how the PAR created sites of 'joint action' (Gergen, 2010) between young mothers, advisers, community members and local leaders. It acted on the core relational abilities identified by Martín-Baró as impoverished by social trauma with positive outcomes for their own and their children's development and that of their communities.

Key words: child soldiers, war-affected young mothers, psychology, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Northern Uganda

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"Social trauma affects individuals precisely in their social character; that is, as a totality, as a system" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p 124).

Introduction

One of the most profound consequences of prolonged conflict is its impact on the capacity of families and social systems to provide for the survival and protection of children, especially girls. In Sierra Leone, Liberia and Northern Uganda girls were amongst the many children recruited or abducted into armed forces or groups (CAFFAG) where they conceived or gave birth to children. On return to their communities as young mothers, they face many challenges. Their baby is evidence of 'bush' relationships (McKay et al. 2010). As noted by Betancourt et al. in Sierra Leone, they are sometimes regarded as spiritually polluted. They share similar experiences with other war-affected young mothers who become pregnant through unsanctioned relationships whereby the unknown or unacknowledged paternity of the child is a source of stigma (Baldi and MacKenzie, 2007). Many are forced to terminate their schooling or leave home (Sharkey, 2014). For formerly associated girls, Shepler (2014) notes that they grapple with managing a post-return identity within a "moral discourse" that sees them somehow as to blame for their sexual activity even if this is as a result of rape, and they try to "slink home" (p 18) and seek anonymity. This is more difficult for young mothers that return with babies. Although there are accounts of NGO staff trying to get former boys and girls associated with rebel groups to marry each other (Shepler, 2014), research evidence

indicates the majority of returned young mothers do not wish to marry the 'bush' fathers (SWAY, 2008). As such, they refuse to slot back into their conditioned social position. Their presence is a challenge to communities who may be unsure how to relate to them. Their presence is also a symbol of the collective inability of their communities to provide for girls protection and wellbeing. Sexual violence and sexual exploitation of girls in war has a collective impact in communities, including on men who may feel emasculated, even 'useless' as a result of the violence perpetrated on girls and women (Shanahan & Veale, 2010).

Social reintegration interventions struggle to manage this dialectic of individual-community relations. An excessive focus on CAFFAG returnees has frequently resulted in community jealousies (Wessells, 2006). A key question is how can interventions foreground the relational element of 'reintegration' in a way that places girls *central* to the process rather than engaging with 'community' as an external, separate 'add-on' activity such as in 'sensitisation' activities? This chapter discusses an innovative intervention that placed young mothers central in their relational networks and supported them to mobilise those networks for their reintegration thus addressing young mothers-in-communities in an embedded, ecological way.

Martín-Baró (1989, 1994) first drew attention to the socially embedded nature of trauma by introducing the term social trauma to capture the ways in which war directly or indirectly affects all the members of a society through its impact on relationships. Relationships mediate individual wellbeing with the possibility for growth or suffering. Psychic trauma and social trauma are not separate but are two sides of a single coin. This dialectic relationship he defined as psychosocial trauma:

> "(a) the injury that affects people has been produced socially – i.e.., its roots are not found in the individual, but in society; and (b) its very nature is nourished and maintained in the relationship between the individual and society, through various mediations by institutions, groups, and even individuals" (1989, p 14).

According to Martín-Baró, at its most central core, psychosocial trauma is a process of dehumanization that brings about cognitive and behavioural changes that 'impoverish' four core abilities – the ability to think clearly, to communicate truthfully, to be sensitive to the suffering of others and to hope (1989, p 14). Arguably processes such as these are central to the stigma, discrimination and marginalisation experienced by former CAFFAG and 'community' young mothers. This dehumanisation process could be conceived as encompassing a breakdown in mentalizing capacity, which is a form of "imaginative mental activity about others or oneself, namely perceiving and interpreting human behaviour in terms of intentional mental states - e.g. needs, drives, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes and reasons" (Fonagy, 2014). Community members often fail to stand in the shoes of war-affected young mothers and see the world through their eyes but rather attribute blame and abdicate responsibility. Fundamentally, it is a breakdown of relational processes. Yet oneof the strongest predictors of positive outcomes for former CAFFAG including girls is community acceptance (Betancourt et al. 2010). How can this relational space in social reintegration be best conceptualised and addressed?

Martín-Baró's concept of psychosocial trauma resonates enormously with new paradigms in psychology on the social brain and on relating. Schore (2003, 2012) argues that psychological transition and change occurs through participation in relationships. The mechanism of change lies in right-brain to right-brain

communication which can occur once joint attention or intersubjectivity is established. The right brain plays a key role in experience-dependent learning, emotional communication, self-regulation, empathy and mentalizing. The intersubjective field is a site of action, a contact zone, where behavioural and emotional change occurs. For psychosocial interventions, it makes sense to give attention to how to create such moments of 'being together' (Schore, 2012) as a way of mobilising change both in self and other. Gergen (2010) argues relating occurs in sites of 'joint action' (Gergen, 2010) - minds acting in social spaces. Knowledge, language, emotion, meaning making, social action all comes into being through communal activity and co-action- an action in relation to other actions. In this model, an utterance or action only makes sense in terms of the supplementary action - the other speaker or audience listens, deliberates, affirms, negates, questions. An isolated act of asking does not have consequences, an outcome is only realised through a response from the other. The space of relating has to exist or be created. He notes "if others do not treat one's utterances as communication, if they fail to co-ordinate themselves around the offering, one is reduced to nonsense ..Like a handshake, a kiss or a tango, the actions of the individual alone are empty... like the sound of one hand clapping" (p.). A challenge for psychosocial programming with war-affected young mothers is how to bring them into relational being with others in their communities so that their agentive activities for their wellbeing and that of their children are met and responded to in ways that create 'joint actions'. This directly works at the site of stigma in which young mothers agentive actions are marginalised or left unmet. This chapter presents an intervention that sought to act at such sites or moments.

Context

Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda were selected for this study as girls and young mothers were documented in large numbers as serving in armed groups in these three countries (McKay and Mazurana, 2004). Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes (DDR) were active in all three countries. Organisations were actively engaged in CAFFAG social reintegration programming. At the beginning of the study (2006) conflict was lessening or had ceased in all contexts. Northern Uganda experienced conflict from 1987- 2006 when a ceasefire was negotiated with the LRA in 2006. Girls made up 30% of the LRA fighting forces (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In Liberia, the 2003 peace accord ended 14 years of civil war and brought about the resignation of former President Charles Taylor. Girls represented 10-30% of combatants across the three armed forces in Liberia (Specht, 2006). In Sierra Leone, the conflict that began in 1991, ended in 2002 and the Special Court of Sierra Leone acknowledged the extent of forcible recruitment of girls by all fighting forces (except the Econonic Community of West African States Monitoring Group and UN peacekeeping missions). All three countries continued to be affected by the direct impacts of conflict including massive displacement and resettlement, social reintegration of former combatants, poverty and gender-based violence (ACCS, 2013; Specht, 2006) presenting challenging environments for social reintegration.

Methods

The PAR study evolved over a four year period through a partnership between international academics, local leaders in psychosocial policy and programming in Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda, in-country academics, government personnel, UNICEF officials and donor representatives. The methodology developed over two meetings (October, 2005, October 2006) held at the Rockefeller Conference Centre in Bellagio, Italy to discuss girls returned from fighting forces. At the 2005 meeting, significant reservations were voiced about working with girls as a separate group from boys. Other voices argued that more research was needed on how to support the reintegration of girls, in particular young mothers. Recommendation for further research were brought to a second meeting in October 2006 attended by non-governmental organisation and regional UNICEF partners. A participatory research response to the challenges faced by returned young mothers and their children evolved in the final days of the meeting (Box 1).

Box 1: Summary Notes from the final days of the Bellagio meeting October 2006.

- Approaches and methodology
  - Highly interactive
  - Include other vulnerable children but with focus on Young Mothers
  - How it'll work
    - Team worker go into community and reach out to families
      - In a family there will be a Young Mother
      - Include all people in the household in the discussion
        - Elicit interest (win trust, build security and confidence)
        - Get the Young Mother, parents, to participate
          - Discussion forums with parents and guardians and talk about issues affecting them but also other parents as well.
    - Research becomes action oriented
      - Life skills as a point for action
      - Have interactive meetings, not a structured, formal meeting
        - Informal, in the community
        - Young mothers will be beneficiaries as well as participants
      - Young mothers can become researchers
        - If (example) the question is about parenting, they can ask other people in the community about how it used to be. We will capture their perceptions of well being.
    - Young mothers or parents might come up with something and we'll develop that into something tangible to feed into the process

    - The young mothers take us into the community
- Title of the project is: Community based participatory action research to empower girl mothers and their supportive networks towards effective reintegration.
- Bravo! great stuff! What about young mother's children?
    - The young mothers and their supportive networks implies the child. Also, reintegration impacts the children. Dialogue approach will bring out children
- Supportive networks that already exist or will you build new networks?
    - Existing networks as identified by young mothers through participation with others. Through dialogue we hope the supportive networks will be expanded. For example, family would likely be a first supportive network.
    - Are there peace-building women who can participate in support?
        - *If the young mothers come out and identify these women*, but we wouldn't want to impose them. *So it'll come from the young mothers.*
        - These structures used to exist, but aren't apparently helpful to the young mothers. They have their own network they've created to support themselves.
        - Outputs *could empower others in the community as well*
        - Imagine a participatory process for outputs relying on young mothers' ingenuity- documents, a story
    - The expertise is local: *the young mothers themselves will tell us things.*

This excerpt conveys the sense of excitement felt by participants about this participative approach to support war-affected young mothers. Rather than begin with a focus on appropriate training, livelihoods, skills-building or other forms of top down interventions, the study defined itself through one core concept, strengthening meaningful participation by young mothers in social relationships and in decision-making. Existing structures that "weren't apparently helpful to the girls" would be supplemented by supporting girls to create and strengthen their own networks from those close to them initially and motivated for their wellbeing. In time, it was hoped and envisaged that these networks would widen and strengthen, for example to draw in 'peacebuilding women' and others that might be well disposed in their favour. There was also a vision that the outputs could help others in the community as well such as women.

Stated formally, PAR is a methodology in which "communities of inquiry and action evolve and address questions and issues that are significant for those who

participate as co-researchers" (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). Participatory methodology recognises the unique strengths of community participants and is well suited to promoting self-efficacy and empowerment following exposure to overwhelming events (Hobfoll et al., 2007). The PAR involved 658 young mothers and 1200 of their children living in three sub-Saharan countries- Liberia (n=111), Sierra Leone (n=226) and northern Uganda (n=281). The term 'young mother' refers to youth between 14 and 30 years of age who are mothers, including former CAAFAG and other vulnerable young mothers in the community. In Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda, 88%, 80% and 34% of participants were formerly associated. Average age of participants at the beginning of the project was 20 years, 22 years and 18 years in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda respectively; 80% of participants were between 16 and 24 years of age. Two-thirds of the participants in the PAR were formerly associated and became pregnant or had children during their association. At the start of the PAR, 22% had one child, 44% had 2 children, 25% had 3 children and 9% had 4 children or more. A third of participants were young mothers deemed vulnerable by their communities but had not been associated. Most of these participants had been displaced due to the conflict, many had been orphaned, and others had physical disabilities. A criterion of participation was that all participants had become pregnant while themselves a minor.

Approximately 30 young mothers were enrolled in 20 sites across the three participating countries. Sites were identified by project partners as those with significant numbers of formerly associated young mothers. In many cases, project partners had established links with the communities. Sixty percent were rural sites and forty percent were urban or semi-urban sites. The proportion of young mothers who lived in communities where they had previously lived was highest in northern

Uganda (79%) followed by Liberia (65%) and Sierra Leone (56%). Percentage of formerly associated participants varied per site and was higher in Liberia and Sierra Leone (range 71%-100%) compared to northern Uganda (range 15%-66%).

Ethical approval was granted through the University of Wyoming's Institutional Review Board. The informed consent procedure included that the project would not share any information participants regarded as sensitive. There would be collaborative development of educational messages from the project. Because only a minority of the young mothers could read, and many were unable to write their names at the onset of the study, the consent form was read in the language of the participant, and was followed by the participant signing their consent form with an 'X'. In the case of minors, who were living with parents or guardians, these adults also signed the form. As a research team, we reviewed ethical concerns and checked our 'Do no harm' as well as participatory principles at each yearly meeting as well as when we met within country-specific teams.

The PAR methodology in our project consisted of four steps. Step one involved community outreach, in particular outreach to and by young mothers, inviting participation. A significant focus of the first year was on supporting the participants to get their group meetings established at which they gathered information about their situation and needs. Community advisory committees (CACs) were established at each site and played a critical role in involving the community.

In step two, young mother's identified, prioritised and began implementing their livelihood activities and social action plans with community support. A key element of the project was a dedicated budget line for such social action activities devised and implemented by the participants and over which they were the primary

decision-makers, supported by partner agency psychosocial workers and CACs. Priorities across all sites included livelihoods, health of young mother and health of her children, education, the challenge of being accused of "*not being useful in the community*", caring for their children, overwork of young mothers at home, mental disturbance of girls and limited knowledge of family planning; "*Many of us have small babies and are also pregnant. This means additional burdens are coming soon*". (Kampala Team meeting notes, 2007). Step three involved girls learning to analyse their information, supported by local academics, which they could then share with their communities while they also developed and consolidated their social actions. Step four involved working with participants to document and learn from their activities. A participatory survey was developed which consisted of 20 indicators of social reintegration. A total of 434 participants who had registered in the project at its onset, completed the survey. Outcomes included better health for young mothers and their children, economic empowerment, reduced stigma and improved family and community relations (McKay et al, 2010, 2011; Veale et al, 2013; Worthen et al. 2010).

The analysis presented here is based on monthly reports compiled by the young mothers' groups, ethnographic fieldnotes including interviews and focus group discussions based in regular site visits by the authors, the participative survey and yearly international team meetings bringing together agency partners, national and international academics and young mothers' representatives. Qualitative data were read and re-read to identify how the PAR acted within relational spaces to create sites of 'joint action' thus transforming the relational space occupied by young mothers-in-communities. This was a form of thematic analysis (Braum and Clarke, 2006), an inductive approach where the themes identified emerged from the data.

Findings and Discussion

'The sound of one hand clapping' While some young mother's and their children were welcomed back by family members, extreme poverty often meant that it was their responsibility to provide for themselves and their children. Lack of education, lack of childcare, few income generation opportunities meant that becoming a young mother was not a 'one-off' event but set up a developmental trajectory in which poverty and discrimination led to even greater poverty, stigma and marginalisation. Gergen (2010) notes that current relationships are shaped by experiences in previous relationships and as time moves forward, these will be supplemented and transformed through other relationships (Gergen, 2010). For many young mothers at the start of our study, this developmental trajectory was leading them towards greater vulnerability. In northern Uganda, a local leader explained how teenage girls became young mothers in his community.

> "This sub-county was entirely affected by the Karanojo from 1979 when the Karamojo began using firearms. There were lots of human rights abuses and extreme poverty. Then the LRA came. The UPDF mobilised the local militia to encounter the LRA. The life of girls and young women became very vulnerable. Some girls fell in love with soldiers. People were so vulnerable that they couldn't do the right thing at the right time for themselves. It introduced short-term survival, commercial sex. There were three UPDF battalions here. They had money. They sent for girls or their parents sent girls

> to them. It resulted in a number of young girls getting pregnant, and then they realised there was no further support for them".

'No further support' for themselves and their child was a common experience amongst study participants. As one Liberian young mother expressed it, '*they see us as wasted, expired, useless*". This captures Martín-Baró's concept of social trauma, sustained in an ongoing way by powerful, collective community dynamics. It sets up a developmental trajectory that increasingly placed the young mother outside of the circle of care they experienced within their communities when identified as a child (not-mother). This placed them in situations of increased vulnerability making it more likely that they would once again become mothers.

> I had my first child in the bush. When I first came to Freetown my parents said they would not accept my child because it was from the bush. I pleaded with my mother to accept me because it was not my fault, so my mother accepted me and the child. I met a boyfriend and he assisted me. I was in love with the boyfriend but when I became pregnant he stopped supporting me. He gave me no reason for stopping support. (Sierra Leone young mother)

> The first child is from the rape in the bush, second is from a boyfriend who I am no longer with, and the third is from my current boyfriend. I live with my family now, not the boyfriend. My friends said I should go stand where men could see me. I also would go to the beach and begged some small fish and sold them. (Sierra Leone young mother)

Across our interviews, young mothers recounted all their different efforts initially to support themselves and their children; washing clothes, selling some small fish, prostitution. However their efforts were often not met by supplementary action by

others. Rather, as Gergen (2010) describes 'the sound of one hand clapping', they experienced a failure by others to engage with their efforts to care for themselves and their children. In a sense, they did not lack 'individual' agency if this is defined as goal-directed, intentional action or the capacity to act in the world. However often this activity was ineffective. Arguably what they lacked was *relational* agency, actions on their part which was then supplemented and supported by further action on the part of others.

Relational reintegration At a fundamental level, the PAR created sites of 'joint action' (Gergen, 2010) – minds acting in social spaces. Representatives of the young mothers participated at an international team meeting in Kampala in 2007 and talked about their activities. One participant reported their group played netball "*It relieves me and is relaxing*". They visited each other's houses. "*If one has a problem, then others go to visit and support here…we fetch water, or cook food and take it to that person's home, or fetch firewood*". They met regularly in their groups, started small savings groups and planned social actions (see McKay et al, 2010).

In their communities with the support of their community advisers they began identifying and mobilising social networks close to them.

> It is of interest to note the zeal of a lady who has been identified by girls as their support network. According to her testimony to the girls and one member of advisory committee, she is HIV positive. Here is a lady who is always available to the girls at short notice and offers advice according to her capacity as a mother and also a victim of HIV/AIDS. She gives very supportive advice on sexual and reproductive health with wonderful

understanding and a sense of humour. The girls are identifying similar people in the community. (Fieldnotes, Parabongo June 2008).

In all three countries, the young mothers performed poems and dramas. In Sierra Leone, they were even successful in obtaining a radio slot to broadcast their performances. This gained the attention of the community. A community leader in Northern Uganda reflected; "*Most of the families did not receive their daughters in a polite way as shown in the drama*". An advisory committee member in Sierra Leone reflected on how "*The community themselves got guilty, they started coming to the girls*." They began to give their custom to their small businesses. Their meetings, dramas, their collective activities in their groups positively enhanced their visibility and with the support of advisers, became sites of joint activity where social and income generation projects slowly developed.

At the end of the first year of the project, representatives of the young mothers groups came to the international team meeting in Kampala. Some voiced frustrations. Although groups had begun to receive small funds to begin their social actions, some felt the progress was too slow and their demands were not being met as they wished and expected. This created a tension and they communicated a sense of 'not being met'. The agenda of the meeting was halted to create space to discuss their frustrations. What emerged was a set of demands for "t-shirts, drums and uniforms", common status symbols of being linked to an organisation and greater funding to develop their activities:

Young mother representative: *We volunteered to train ourselves and we have participated. We need t-shirts, drums and uniforms. This encourages people and so it is important. We have reached a level where the project needs to*

assist us and to give us hope. I have nothing to come home with. I don't know what do to, what will we tell the people back home. We are going to lobby, to lobby- what is this? What has this project stated? What is the purpose of this project? (Kampala International Team Meeting notes, 2007)

This was followed by sustained engagement and communication between the team academics and NGO partners and the young mothers representatives. This involved a number of joint discussions over the following days and necessitated significant changes to the meeting schedule. The point was not to meet their demands to provide drums and uniforms but to seek to create a relational space where a shared understanding of the goals and objectives of the project and the principles underpinning it could be arrived at. Each party (study team, young mothers representatives) had to try and see through the eyes of the other, a process of reflective functioning (Fonagy, 2014). An NGO partner shared of the reality of the uncertainty of programme development that exists in all projects that have initial funding and are seeking further funding:

Country team member: *The goal of this project is to work with your groups in your communities, to avoid a situation where you have food in your stomachs for the next two years but then at the end of two years it is gone. The international system works in such a way that we write proposals to attain funding. Some little funding is available based on your needs, but we are not sure of getting funds to continue in the future. This PAR project is different- you have been made part of it- you know the ins and outs of it. It is to empower you so that you will have the boldness and the ability to out into the community- so that you can claim access to services and know your rights.* (Kampala International Team Meeting notes, 2007)

This was a pivotal time in the project and the outcome was one of greater trust and respect between all parties and there was an authentic experience of communication and 'meeting' so that young mother's went back to their communities and reported back to their groups in a way that seemed to bring renewed commitment in them to work for their reintegration. Towards the end of the second year there seemed to be a quantum leap evident at sites across the project as the scale and impact of their activities seemed to take off.

Two Hands Clapping Back at their sites, through 2008 and 2009, participants continued developing their individual and group activities. With their small funds to support individual and group initiatives, young mothers began developing social actions which emphasized livelihoods. Community advisers helped them carry out needs analysis on sustainability. Partner agencies provided relevant training at key points on skills requested by young mother's such as managing group dynamics, bookkeeping, business skills and specific skills relevant to their project such as hygiene skills for running a restaurant or veterinary advice for pig-rearing (Veale et al., 2013). Rural initiatives included individual or group agriculture including farming ground nuts of cassava on land provided by the community and responded to seasonal changes by alternating agricultural work with petty trading. Urban or semi-urban groups started small food-related businesses which often demonstrated small entrepreneurship; seeing an opportunity to sell tomatoes and onions at the entrance to a butcher stall with the goodwill and permission of the butcher, or established small businesses, for example bicycle pump and tool hire. Some young mother's brewed local alcohol. Some groups hired teachers to provide literacy training. One group used part of their funds to pay the school fees of a group member to train as a nursery teacher as they saw she could be a resource to their whole community. A number of

their micro-businesses exhibited amazing dynamism and were responsive to the setting time of year, resources they were able to access, for example, being given land or a building for a restaurant by local leaders) and their own ingenuity.

The extent to which all of this involved mobilising and engaging with different community members is captured in the July monthly report from one Ugandan site.

Box 2: Example from a monthly report from a PAR site, July 2008

- We conducted home visits based on issues discussed in meetings with parents on supporting girls to participate in the project.
- We massively held discussions with parents to lobby for support on agricultural and crop cultivation.
- We held several meetings with local leaders and parents within the villages for capacity building on farming to research marketable crops and good varieties of livestock.
- Advocacy and lobbing was at family level to strengthen increased access to land. It is aimed that when the young mothers get access to small pieces of land for cultivation then the future of their children will be assured with improved living conditions.

In the international team meeting in 2009, a country team member noted that

> "one of things that developed that we hadn't anticipated that girls started inviting their family members to the meetings and in some sites girls started making house visits, and they started taking up this responsibility. In programming terminology it was follow-up. In this project this is something the girls took on. That is probably a key learning for dissemination".

Changes in family and community acceptance was noted at every site. The following is an extended excerpt from a focus group discussion in northern Uganda in 2009 with young mothers and parents, husbands and boyfriends, three years into the project's lifespan. It captures the dynamics of action and supplementary actions that ultimately is social reintegration.

> Sarah's mother (pseudo-name). When she came back, her behaviour was not normal, not co-operative, not making sense. Now I can see the difference in the way she responds to issues, her mind is settled.
>
> Sarah. What I appreciate from my mother is she knew the days I was going to meetings- if I was relaxing- hey are you not going for meeting? She took responsibility for my babies. "They would say "For you to ride bike, you don't need a child on your back. We will mind the child". They really helped me to be in this group.
>
> A parent: We were willing to remind them to come. First thing, we see there was a change in behaviour- hygiene, becoming smart, clean, able to talk about what they taught her- oh today is your day, you seem to be not going- encouraging her one way or another.
>
> Another young mother: I was trained for 5 days in health training. Hygiene, how to care for yourself, your family, family planning methods, I am very happy I can space my children now, I have not had a second child.
>
> Musee (grandfather): We all encouraged her to go and come back. ...She was abducted and people would say 'what will you do with that one, she is

mentally ill, she will not marry'. Now they compare her with their daughters- she serves well, kneels down (before elders)'.

In this interchange it is clear that initially, for Sarah's mother, her daughter seemed incomprehensible and she did not understand her. In different families, action was supplemented by action, setting up a new developmental trajectory of inclusion, acceptance and respect. Advisory committees and local leaders played a central role in advocating for young mothers in public spaces, particularly if they ran into difficulties with other community members and in this way their activities often flourished.

It is interesting that the above quote captures the pressure on girls to conform to gender expected norms; a "good girl" kneels down before elders. In other ways, the young mother's activities engaged actively in areas traditionally considered as 'masculine'. In northern Uganda, a group constructed a piggery but in the act of construction, boys in the community twice stole their sand. The authorities intervened on behalf of the young mothers, and a local leader wondered aloud "*Was it jealousy from the boys, or an attitude problem despising the girls' efforts because this kind of work is usually done by men*?" In Sierra Leone, it was observed that the metalworkers did better than anyone. Their collective actions brought about remarked-upon changes to traditionally gendered areas of income generation.

Yet when it came to their reproductive health, young mothers actions were situated within sociocultural constraints. One Sierra Leonian young mother told how, after years of war, there is a sense of obligation to produce more children and there is a taboo surrounding the use of birth control. Many young mothers reported that they sometimes became pregnant even when they did not want to. However another young

mother insisted that "*Some in the PAR have 2 or 3 children…. But girls outside the PAR have more.*"

As their livelihood activities developed and became more visible and successful, community jealousies began to emerge in a number of communities. This was brought by young mother's and their partner agencies to the international team meetings and deeply reflected upon. Inclusion of key actors from the onset was key to addressing this as CACs and local leaders engaged to advocate on their behalf as well as broadening the base of inclusion as the project grew so that boyfriends, parents and those close to girls were often invited to participate in their meetings or young mothers made home visits if a mother reported difficulties at home. An emergent response from young mother's themselves that was shared across countries at the international meeting was to take up 'no cost' social actions such as organizing cleaning in the community, organising community picnics, going to the house of a funeral to help out, disinfecting a well, all of which contributed to community wellbeing and reduced jealousies.

'Being a girl is hard, hard…' Towards the end of the PAR, we made fieldvisits to each of the countries to evaluate the study and its outcomes. One of these fieldvisits was to Palabek Gem in northern Uganda. The young women had been meeting for nearly three years. It was a rural site and their main projects were individual, group cultivation and petty trading. Their group cultivation project had a record harvest and they had sold their groundnuts on the local market for a handsome profit. This was an area significantly affected by conflict. In attendance at the meeting were twenty seven young mother participants over half of whom were former abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army, three advisory committee members, a local government

leader and the organisation psychosocial worker. On the visit, one of the members chose to recite a poem she had composed.

BEING A GIRL

It's easy being a girl...

Its hard being a girl, hard and it is really hard

When you see boys flocking to you like edible items in market

If you hear what they say you feel it's sweet and good

But it's easy being a girl...

Its hard being a girl, hard and it is really hard

Men has sweet lies words, sweet and nice like honey

You feel should accept and you really accept

But it's easy being a girl...

Its hard being a girl, hard and it is really hard my fellow women

You move at night without fear thinking that men are your king, God, everything you need is the man

But it's easy being a girl...

Its hard being a girl, hard and it is really hard

Once, twice your stomach is covered with a big calabash, today satisfied but who is responsible? No one

Being a girl is easy but bearing the pain is hard, hard and hard

When you open your eyes you see the world and when you have pushed out the maggot you hear names Arach (bad), Anywar (Abused), Akwero (Rejected) are the praises given to girls

Being a girl is easy...

Being a girl is hard, hard and it's really hard

Who think you are young, who?

Today you are a young beautiful girl tomorrow a mother, they don't sympathize with you

Being a girl is easy...

Being a girl is hard, hard and it's really hard

(Palabek Gem PAR group, Uganda)

The poem has a call and response structure. It appears as dialogical. This means that the words 'It is hard being a girl!' exists in response to other words that claim being a girl is easy. Their poem is not speaking in a vacuum but is relational and engaged in a

process of *negating* this 'easy' perception and re-describing their reality as they experience it.

This reality is one of becoming pregnant and no-one is responsible. In one moment, you are beautiful but once you become a mother, you lose the sympathy and protection that comes from being thought of as young and beautiful. "You feel you should accept and you really accept" this introjected sense of self that "When you open your eyes you see the world and when you have pushed out the maggot you hear names *Arach* (bad), *Anywar* (Abused), *Akwero* (Rejected) are the praises given to girls."

The social trauma as defined by Martín-Baró is evident; the dehumanising qualities that inhibit communication and being heard, that prevent others being sensitive to their suffering and seeing the world through their eyes. But the words these are the 'praises' given to girls captures that this poem is not offered within a traditional feminine identity of being passive, submissive and accepting but rather is defiant, a refusal to be silenced. There is a sense of reclamation- those of you who call us bad, abused, rejected...there were others involved who took no responsibility. It situates their situation in relation to the men who impregnated them, who came "in sweetness". There is a sense of mixed voices in the poem, both those who were abducted and those who became pregnant "at a tender age" within their communities. Fundamentally, compared to many young girls and mothers who return from armed groups and seek to 'slink back' into communities (Shepler, 2014), they refused to be silenced. They are engaging with those who reject any constructive interaction with them seeing them as useless. This poem is a performative act that engages precisely at the site of dehumanisation; it is reflective and aims to communicate truthfully, to stimulate the listener to think so that "when you open your eyes, you see the world"

and be sensitive to the ways in which their lives are "hard, really hard". Their collective and public performance of the poem brings into a social realm, the space between people, to help their community members see life through their eyes.

Importantly, the poem captured an element of 'looking back'. The introduction to the poem was a short speech to say that the PAR:

> has kept us so busy, but we are also forgetting the nasty things that happened in the past. Now we walk in public with pride. There used to be so much name calling and stigmatising- but this project has raised our level. We are able to dress well, take care of our children- we can now afford the salon and to make up our hair, these are the things we look forward to.

This speech was also accompanied by a memorandum that listed the achievements of their group including *skills in leadership* and *highly co-operative in the community* as well as *unfulfilled promises by the office* in which they demanded that they felt that a promise organisation had made to them to be fulfilled which subsequently was.

Their refusal to be quiet and passive in a typically gendered way is wonderfully matched by their pride in their femininity; to dress well, to take care of our children, to afford the hair salon, these are symbols of pride and success. There is simultaneously a claiming of and reworking of being 'a girl'.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to understand *what happens in* and *through* relationships in a longitudinal social reintegration intervention, the PAR. The methodology placed a

principle of young mother's meaningful participation in social relationships and in decision-making central to all activities. The analysis captured how the PAR intervened in contexts of social trauma to engage with young mother's developmental trajectories by intervening at sites of action where dehumanising and alienating processes occurred; such that the four core abilities 'impoverished' by psychosocial trauma- the ability to think clearly, to communicate truthfully, to be sensitive to the suffering of others and to hope (Martín-Baró, 1989) were instead enhanced. It created sites of 'joint action' (Gergen, 2010). The young mother's actions fostered reflective functioning and mentalization (Fonagy, 2014) among community members which better enabled them to see the world through their eyes and to join their efforts to make it communities more hospitable places for themselves and their children.

There were similarities and differences between countries. In all countries, the young mothers quickly understood participatory processes and wanted to be involved in improving their situation. The participative survey found that over 90% of participants reported feeling involved in what their group was doing, 89% reported feeling more supported and respected by community members than before the project, three quarters felt that participation in the PAR resulted in better relationships with the broader community and that they were able to be supportive to their family by buying basic necessities. Livelihoods enabled participants to become more sufficient and gain the respect of communities. There was no significant differences between countries on these indicators.

There were significant differences in outcomes across countries on other indicators. On the indicator "Involvement in the project has made me and my children more liked or loved by my family", participants in Uganda responded less positively (89%, 93% and 80% for Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda

respectively) and "Community members think worse of me now than before I joined the project" (1%, 2% and 30% for Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda respectively). In Sierra Leone and Liberia there may have been a greater emphasis in young mother's groups of "giving back" to communities which may have influenced these findings. Sampling may have played a role as there were more community young mothers in the northern Ugandan sample compared to formerly associated young mothers. They may have experienced less change in their acceptance level or more jealousies as they may have been viewed as less entitled to special intervention. Young mothers in northern Uganda reported that their boyfriend/husband was supportive of their children less often than in the other countries (65%, 67% and 33% for Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda respectively). Participants in northern Uganda were younger and a greater proportion lived with parents compared to the other countries, thus were less likely to live with husbands or boyfriends.

While livelihoods was important across all countries, return to education was a priority for Sierra Leonean participants in a way that was not evidenced to the same extent in Liberia and northern Uganda. Macro-level post-conflict education policy in Sierra Leone advocated for and targeted accelerated literacy education for girls and women and was internalised as an expectation by participants. They were able to establish links with literacy providers. Our findings have implications for how participatory processes can evolve and integrate with child protection policy, national level development agendas and resource allocation. In addition, the PAR highlights the importance to child protection policy and practice of enabling meaningful participation, supporting young mother's to mobilise their community networks to support their reintegration and to take a slow, reflective, flexible approach that is responsive to emergent conditions.

A limitation of the PAR is that the distinctive conditions under which this project was conducted limit the ability to generalise to other contexts. The project was conducted months, and in West African cases, years following the young women's active exposure to armed conflict. There was reasonable levels of security and mobility that allowed young mothers to engage in regular group support and livelihood activities. The methodology is intensive and therefore demanding. Both these factors means is possible that the methodology may be less suited to active conflict zones where security concerns may make it difficult to convene groups of young mothers or where fast responses are needed. Additional research is needed to explore these factors further.

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