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Authors	Worthen, Miranda;McKay, Susan;Veale, Angela;Wessells, Mike
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Gender-based insecurity and opportunities for peace: supporting the reintegration of young war-affected mothers

Miranda Worthen, Susan McKay, Angela Veale and Mike Wessells

In conflicts throughout the world, armed forces and groups recruit children to fight, maintain their camps, perform labor and be used for sexual purposes. The experiences of children associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG) are not uniform, nor can there be a uniform approach to helping them when the conflict is over. This article examines the gendered experiences of girls prior to recruitment, during their time with the fighting forces, through disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, and in their communities after formal DDR has ended. We also present some of the experiences of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) Study with Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda—a study conducted predominantly with former CAAFAG which used a highly participatory methodology to help participants attain community-based reintegration. In the PAR study young mother participants took a central role in the design and implementation of their reintegration process. A mixture of self-help style psychosocial support and livelihood support were critical to their success. As this population had exceptionally low social status, lacked confidence and self-respect, and did not have rudimentary economic skills at the start, social support and community mobilization were critical in laying the groundwork for livelihood activities and facilitating the sustainability of these activities.

The DDR process

According to the United Nations *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (IDDRS), the "objective of the DDR process is to contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin".[1] The emphasis of this process has largely been on the immediate security threat posed by armed ex-combatants—typically adult and male. The priority is removing weapons and providing the individuals with meaningful alternative livelihoods so that they do not return to fighting. Yet the opportunity remains for DDR processes to positively contribute to the creation of environments conducive to development and stability. Indeed, while security narrowly construed means an end to military hostilities, more broadly understood, security is about creating safe, strong communities resistant to renewed fighting.

The earliest efforts to include children in DDR began in the mid-1990s. While governments and the international community recognized that boys with military training returning to communities where there was no work posed a significant threat to peace, this has only just

Miranda Worthen is a doctoral candidate in the Division of Epidemiology, University of California, Berkeley. Susan McKay is Professor of Gender and Women's Studies, University of Wyoming. Angela Veale is a lecturer at the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork. Mike Wessells is Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health in the Program on Forced Migration and Health, Columbia University. Opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the organizations they represent or the United Nations

recently extended to girls associated with armed forces and groups, who earlier had been viewed simply as wives of combatants or camp followers. Indeed, it took several reports examining their situation for policymakers to recognize that girls play multiple roles in conflict, including combat.[2] While the current standards recognize that "young women former combatants are equally capable of returning to violence if other ways of getting ahead after conflict fail",[3] they do not note the potential positive role that girls and young women play in creating environments conducive to development and peace in their communities.

Despite this growing awareness of the presence of children and young women in armed forces and groups and the development of strong policy recommendations about supporting them through DDR, the processes themselves lack gender awareness. These DDR processes are designed without respect to the girls' perspectives and thus have so far failed to meet their needs. In order for DDR processes to support successful reintegration of girls who were former CAAFAG, we need to learn how girls themselves define and experience reintegration. As noted in the IDDRS, girls face greater stigma when they return to their communities than boys.

Girls in armed forces and groups

Within the term CAAFAG there is a hidden diversity. Indeed, the Paris Principles recognize that:

> While there are commonalities between the circumstances and experiences of girls and boys, the situation for girls can be very different in relation to the reasons and manner in which they join the armed forces or armed groups; the potential for their release; the effects that the experience of being in the armed force or armed group has on their physical, social and emotional well being; and the consequences this may have for their ability to successfully adapt to civilian life or reintegrate into family and community life after their release.[4]

Girls, like boys, enter armed forces and groups in a variety of ways. While many girls are abducted, some join voluntarily, often in order to leave abusive situations at home or to follow family members into military service.[5] Girls are in some cases more vulnerable to abduction than boys because their work takes them further away from the centre of a community—such as fetching water or collecting firewood. In the security vacuum caused by war, girls may choose to join an armed force or armed group for protection. Many girls joined the rebels in Liberia in 1999, when war broke out again, after having lived in the community during the first phase of the war. Having seen fighters receive benefits during peace while they were subjected to violence in the community, many thought they might be safer as part of an armed group.

While there has been much attention focused on girls as "sex slaves" in armed forces and groups, girls typically play multiple roles—as fighters, porters, domestic labourers, spies, looters and even abductors of other children. In the study of young mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda who had been former CAAFAG, most participants said that they had been used for sex, but also indicated at least one additional role, most often fighting. They played

a central role in food gathering and community management, and some had leadership positions. A published study of three reports on girls associated with armed forces and groups argues that their operational contributions are critical to the overall functioning of armed groups and that it is "no accident that girls tend to be the last members of armed groups to be released by commanders and leaders".[6]

Reintegration of girls

Girls are much less likely than boys to leave armed forces or groups through formal DDR processes. Historically, these processes required participants to turn in weapons, which clearly discriminated against girls without access to weapons. In addition, girls who carried weapons reported having these weapons confiscated and given to male fighters. When DDR processes do not require weapons, girls report being unaware of DDR or choose not to participate in this highly public process. In many cases girls prefer to return to their home communities or settle in new communities without going through DDR.[7]

According to the IDDRS,

> DDR planners have been unaware of the presence and roles of girls associated with fighting forces, are ill informed about appropriate responses to their needs, and therefore often design programmes that unintentionally prevent girls' entrance to these programmes and damage their chances of long-term recovery.[8]

Girls in DDR programmes face continued insecurity in military camps. In Uganda, for example, girls leaving the Lord's Resistance Army who were taken in by the Ugandan military reported being sexually harassed in the barracks. Girls with children are particularly vulnerable as conflicts can break out between them, their families and their bush husbands over the children. This security threat continues even after girl mothers return to their communities. Among other barriers to rejoining their families, there is the fear that rebel fathers will come to claim the girl and children. While one of the key elements of DDR for CAAFAG is family reunification, this may not be desired by the girl mothers, who may prefer to settle with their children away from their family. Indeed, evidence from the PAR study shows that many girls decide to settle in new communities after leaving armed forces or groups. Thus, "reintegration" refers to reintegrating into civil society, and not necessarily returning to their communities of origin.[9]

For girl mothers there may be a tension between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that take a child rights based approach—focusing on family reunification—and the perspectives of the girls themselves, who may no longer see themselves as children now that they have children of their own. Girls' relationships with their children born during association with armed forces and groups are complex. While some of their children are thought to be killed

deliberately or through neglect and others are left behind when fleeing, most children are well cared for, even when born of sexual violence.

The few NGO-supported reintegration programmes available for girls who were former CAAFAG tend to reinforce gendered lack of opportunities for girls. Training programmes are predominantly offered in gender-specific domains such as tailoring, which is not necessarily a marketable skill in the immediate post-conflict period. Girl mothers experience severe barriers to their participation in NGO- or government-supported vocational training programmes, which typically do not offer childcare.

Gender-based discrimination prior to involvement with armed forces and groups, such as unequal access to primary education, creates a continued lack of opportunity in the post-conflict reintegration period. For example, girls are less likely to return to formal schooling either because they lack the funds or because of rules that prohibit the enrollment of girls with children of their own. Therefore, pre-war gaps in literacy continue in the post-war period.

Girl mothers settling in their home or new communities face stigmatization and marginalization. Some communities see these girls as spiritually polluted because of sexual relations outside traditional norms.[10] Community members also report a feeling of helplessness when supporting girl mothers or their children because of their own precarious economic positions. Even those parents willing to accept their daughters back may reject their daughter's children born during the war, claiming that they cannot support "rebel babies" or children whose paternity is unknown.

The lack of social and economic infrastructure in communities where girls return harms them as well as their children. While entire communities may be economically devastated, girls' particular marginalization means that many end up living dangerously close to starvation. A survey with girls who were former CAAFAG in Uganda found that most only work two days a week and earn approximately 75 cents per day.[11] Girl mothers in Sierra Leone reported going door-to-door begging for food.[12]

Despite this knowledge about girls and young mothers' position when returning from armed forces and armed groups, few models of effective programming have been developed to support them. The IDDRS recommends that work be community-based, with an open time frame, recognizing that reintegration is a long-term social and economic process, and does not occur, for example, through one-off training programmes. The following presents the process and findings of a PAR project with young mothers aimed at learning what reintegration meant to them and helping them develop interventions aimed at achieving this.

The PAR Study of Young Mothers

The PAR study—a three-year, multi-country, community-based project—was developed after two international conferences on the subject of girl mothers formerly associated with armed

forces and groups demonstrated a lack of effective programming aimed at their reintegration.[13] Its purpose was to learn what reintegration meant to this population and to help them develop interventions aimed at achieving reintegration. The study took place between October 2006 and June 2009 in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda and was a partnership between the authors of this article, who served as organizers, three African academics and ten child protection agencies.[14] Each agency conducted field operations in two sites for a total of 20 communities, ranging from rural villages and peri-urban communities to urban slums.

Project initiation

The PAR study involved over 650 young mothers and 1,200 of their children. Two-thirds of the participants had been associated with armed forces and groups and had become pregnant or had had children during their association. The other participants were young mothers who were 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 some had physical disabilities. While participants were under the age of 18 when they had children, their average age when included in the study was 18 in Uganda, 20 in Liberia and 22 in Sierra Leone. For this reason they are referred as "young mothers" and not "girl mothers".

The Paris Principles recommend that:

> Programmes to prevent recruitment of children and to protect, release and reintegrate them should be jointly and constantly monitored and evaluated with communities. Children, particularly girls, who have been associated with armed forces or armed groups, should be involved in the monitoring and evaluation of initiatives aimed at supporting them.[15]

The methodology of PAR was used to maximize young mothers' participation, recognizing that the young mothers know best about their own needs and, with proper support, can develop appropriate programmes to address them. PAR enables high levels of participation, fully engages community members, builds local capacities and is explicitly aimed at empowerment.[16]

Agency staff members selected communities that had been heavily impacted by the conflict and were likely to be home to a large number of potential participants. Agency representatives met with male and female community leaders and district level officials to assess the community's interest in PAR. Multiple engagements with the community were held before participant recruitment began. Once community leaders had agreed, agency staff members worked with traditional birth attendants and elder women to identify potential participants, who were then informed about PAR. Agency staff members met the young mothers multiple times—often in the presence of family or boyfriend—to answer questions and help the participant decide whether to participate. Once participants had agreed to join the PAR study,

they went through an informed consent process approved by the University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board.

In many communities participants were invited to recruit other young mothers until a full cohort of approximately 30 girls was reached. Young mothers began to meet with one another in groups, with an agency staff member or research assistant acting as a facilitator. In the initial meetings group participants identified community members whom they wanted to serve as advisors to the group. These trusted men and women would sometimes attend meetings or help members work through conflicts that emerged within the group or between them and their families. In these early meetings participants provided peer support and became friends, learning that they were not alone in their suffering. Fostering these relationships among participants and between them and agency staff and the community was critical, as these relationships formed the bedrock upon which all other actions took place.

Project management

Young mothers were then trained by the facilitator in interviewing, role-playing and leading group discussions. Using these methods they began to examine systematically their own life and identify common problems. In every community young mothers identified stigmatization by their families and communities, a lack of access to education and medical care, and poor livelihood opportunities as the major challenges. Participants wanted to be accepted and respected, have their children treated like other children in the community, and have fulfilling roles in their community.

Based on discussions among themselves, with the community advisors and agency support staff, participants identified social actions to address their problems. Each group had a lump sum of money, which they could decide how to use. The funds were small and so participants engaged in lengthy discussions about how best to spend it, recognizing that they shared responsibility for whether the projects succeeded or failed. In some communities young mothers first decided to work on community relations. One participant described the impact of performing a drama about her experience returning from the bush:

> We did a drama about what it was like when we came back from the bush and people shied away from us. The drama also reflected the alienation that we felt when we came back. ... We did our play to the community and they said that they wanted to join us and join in our activities. Before, others were shy of us, and now, they talk upright to us. We used the drama to bring those who were shy of us closer again.[17]

Some groups decided to do community service activities such as cleaning the village well or sweeping the streets. These activities were aimed at demonstrating to community members that the participants were serious and committed to improving not only their own lives but also the lives of those in the community.

In other sites young mothers focused on livelihood issues first, believing that if they proved to the community that they were able to support themselves, the community would stop ostracizing them. Some participants engaged in group livelihood activities, such as tending a communal garden (often on land donated by community members), food vending, soap making, goat rearing, or weaving and dyeing cloth. Other participants opted for individual businesses such as petty trading, hairdressing and jewellery making. When businesses faltered, participants and community advisors often helped them recover. In one urban site in Liberia several participants had their goods confiscated by the police for marketing in an area of town designated free from trading. Their group held an emergency meeting and unaffected group members shared their goods with those who had lost theirs so that they could begin building their businesses again. In Uganda, when poor management nearly forced the closure of a group food vending operation, community advisors offered to run the business for the mothers while they resolved the difficulties in their group and learned bookkeeping skills.

Project conclusion

As the project approached its official end, when financial support ceased, participants and agency staff worked together on sustainability plans. Some groups registered as community-based organizations, making them eligible for government or agency grants. Other participants joined other local groups and women's organizations. Encouragingly, many community advisors pledged their continued support.

Ethnographic evaluation and results from the survey we conducted at the close of the project indicated that young mothers substantially improved their lives and the lives of their children. Young mothers felt like full, respected community members and felt better equipped to care for their children. As participants grew closer with project staff, many confided that they were engaged in sex work. Such work had seemed like the only way to earn money and support their families. As they developed new economic capacities, some proudly told how they were able to reduce or end their involvement in transactional sex. Reflecting on the impact of PAR, community members pronounced this a key accomplishment and that they were more eager to support the young mothers now that they were no longer involved in sex work.

Young mothers were also proud to share that they were now comfortable attending and speaking at community meetings. Prior to participation in the PAR study, the young mothers had isolated themselves because of hostility from community members. Over 80% of young mothers reported that they were now able to speak in public more easily. Acceptance by family was also a critical area of growth for young mothers in the PAR study and their children—with 87% of young mothers reporting that their involvement in PAR had made them and their children more liked or loved by their family.[18]

Implications for practice

While DDR is often thought of as a process that individuals go through, one of the key findings of the study is how critical the group dynamic was in supporting young mothers' reintegration. PAR emphasized a "self-help" approach, with participants responsible for research, programme design, implementation and evaluation, yet the participants' peer support for one another was the backbone of the project. The supportive relationships that the participants developed through the group with community members—including male and female leaders—were also critical. Thus, in some contexts reintegration should not just be considered a process where an individual is given skill training and reinserted into a community, but rather as a process that involves an entire community learning to live peacefully.

Across the three African states the priorities for participants reflected core, common aspirations: an end to their stigmatization; improvements in their livelihoods; and access to education and medical care. Most participants identified suitable livelihood opportunities and often chose to work together, in addition to establishing their own small businesses. While traditional DDR programmes for girls emphasize a narrow range of vocational opportunities, participants identified a wide variety of context-specific livelihood initiatives. Contrary to DDR programmes which often provide one form of vocational training or a single one-off payment, our participants found that they often needed a "second chance", as early businesses failed or health crises meant business capital was used for medical care. In addition, young mothers who did the best often combined school or training with livelihood activities. Importantly, participants decided independently to use their incomes for their children's education, suggesting that programmes like conditional cash transfers that predicate development support on donor-determined conditions may be unnecessary to meet desired goals. Similarly, cash transfers without support in achieving community acceptance, business skills and confidence would not have worked, as young mothers needed these softer inputs before financial assistance could be sustainable.

Young mothers' improved economic conditions opened the way for improved social relations with family and the community. One participant reported that her mother had abused her and blamed her for her children, but now that she made soap the community buys, her mother regarded her better. A community member in Liberia said:

> There's been a big change in the young mothers' acceptance. Initially, the community saw them as fighters' wives, and even their families rejected them. Now they earn money and support their families, and communities respect them.[19]

Participants had been perceived as drains on their families and communities. As they demonstrated that they could support themselves, family and community members grew to perceive the young mothers as productive, serious contributors. Thus, while community-based DDR programmes should be multifaceted, addressing social as well as economic problems,

improvements young mothers are able to make to their economic well-being are likely to translate into improvements in social well-being.

While girls who were former CAAFAG used to be viewed as a threat to the security of the family and community, they can contribute positively to the social fabric of their society when they are able to attain successful economic reintegration. Indeed, young mothers themselves define successful reintegration as being able to fulfil their roles as productive family members, including being able to support their children.

The PAR study provided an opportunity to learn about reintegration across three states whose conflicts had different dynamics and which were at three different stages of post-conflict transition. In Sierra Leone—at a much later post-conflict stage—community members seemed more willing to support participants from early in the PAR study. In Liberia, however, it took participants longer to establish good relations with the communities. Whilst chiefs in Sierra Leone donated land to the groups early in the project, the community advisor in Liberia said that community members would stomp on the seeds to ensure that a garden would not succeed. It took many months of outreach to the community before land was given and relations had improved sufficiently so that gardens were protected. Thus, programmes to support reintegration should be developed for the particular transition context of the state, and variability during implementation should be expected.

Among the distinct attributes of PAR was a focus on inter-agency partnerships. Agencies that often compete for funding collaborated with one another, exchanging lessons learned throughout the process, and worked with local academics to increase the opportunities for participants to share information with one another and with organizers. The local academics also facilitated systematic evaluation of PAR. Perhaps most importantly, the partnership fostered with our donors was critical to the study's success. Our donors were highly engaged, receiving process updates regularly and asking questions as the study progressed. Donors attended annual meetings of all partners, including representatives of the young mothers from each country and visited several field sites to learn directly about the impact of PAR. This process of continued engagement emerged as a way of managing expectations given that anticipated outcomes of PAR could not be declared up front because of the participatory nature of the project. Indeed, as participants themselves were responsible for determining the critical indicators for the study, donors had to be open to funding a project knowing it was a work in progress. This openness is in sharp contrast to how child protection programmes are typically funded. In traditional programming, agencies describe and budget for all inputs and state their output measures in the initial programme proposal. This makes flexibility and responsiveness to participants' needs more difficult.

A unique aspect of PAR when compared to other reintegration programmes is the potential it has to be scaled up. Whilst PAR methods are transferable to other contexts and communities, there is a significant initial effort required to train and support agency staff and work with

participants and communities. Unlike traditional programming, which offers beneficiaries a package which may include some psychosocial support and vocational training, PAR encourages participants to develop peer support groups and work within the group to identify needs and ways of meeting those needs. This process is fundamentally slower than traditional programming, but it creates more durable reintegration and is comparatively inexpensive.

Conclusion

The experiences of girls and young women before, during and after war differ sharply from the experiences of boys and men. Girls who become mothers during their time with the armed forces and armed groups face an even greater challenge to their reintegration than young women without children. Evidence from the PAR study indicates that for reintegration to be successful with young mothers, it must be based upon an understanding of the gendered experiences of this group. Reintegration with young mothers should be community-based, and it requires longer-term support than most programmes typically provide. Supporting the development of social cohesion among young mothers and between young mothers and their communities is critical to this process.

The IDDRS and Paris Principles offer excellent policy guidelines for how programming with young mothers can better be accomplished. Donors must demand that agency programmes do more than pay lip service to these guidelines by providing long-term, flexible and inclusive funding for the reintegration of girl CAAFAG. In turn, agencies must do more to enable meaningful participation of young people and build reintegration supports around young mothers' own understandings.

The lessons of this project suggest that girls and young women are eager and active participants with the potential to move from highly marginalized positions within their communities and families to becoming respected community members and valuable contributors to their families.

Notes

1. United Nations, "1.10: Introduction to the IDDRS", *Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, 2006, p. 1.
2. For further information see: S. McKay and D. Mazurana, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War*, 2004; B. Verhey, *Reaching the Girls: Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Save the Children, 2004; V. Stavrou, *Breaking the Silence: Girls Forcibly Involved in the Armed Struggle in Angola*, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), 2006; and M. Denov, *Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood*, CIDA, 2007.
3. United Nations, "5.20: Youth and DDR", *Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, 2006, p. 19.
4. See Section 4.0 of the Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, known as the Paris Principles, adopted in 2007.

5. R. Brett and I. Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight*, 2004.
6. M. Denov, "Girl Soldiers and Human Rights: Lessons from Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2008, pp. 813–36.
7. For further information see: M. Robinson and S. McKay, *Conference Report*, "A Conference on Girl Mothers in Fighting Forces and Their Post-War Reintegration in Southern and Western Africa", Bellagio, 12–18 April 2005; and S. McKay et al., "Known But Invisible: Girl Mothers Returning From Fighting Forces", *Child Soldiers Newsletter*, no. 11, 2004, pp. 10–11. A full list of the *Child Soldiers Newsletter* can be found at <www.child-soldiers.org>.
8. United Nations, "5.30: Children and DDR", *Integrated Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration Standards*, 2006, p. 10.
9. In the PAR study 35% of young mothers in Liberia, 44% in Sierra Leone and 21% in Uganda were in communities where they had not previously lived.
10. For further information see: T. Betancourt, "High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone", *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2008, pp. 565–87; and M. Worthen et al., "'I Stand Like A Woman': Empowerment and Human Rights in the Context of Community-Based Reintegration of Girl Mothers Formerly Associated with Fighting Forces and Armed Groups", *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 49–70.
11. Details of the survey and data can be found at <http://chrisblattman.com/projects/sway/>.
12. S. McKay et al., "Known But Invisible: Girl Mothers Returning From Fighting Forces", *Child Soldiers Newsletter*, no. 11, 2004, pp. 10–11.
13. For further information see S. McKay et al., "Building Meaningful Participation in Reintegration Among War-Affected Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda", *Intervention*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 108–24.
14. See <www.uwyo.edu/girlmotherspar/> for more information on the PAR study and details of partner organizations.
15. See Section 10.0 of the Paris Principles.
16. A full description of PAR can be found in M. Minkler and N. Wallerstein (eds), *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*, 2008.
17. S. McKay et al., *Community-based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers: Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda*, Women's United Nations Report Network, 2010, p. 13.
18. Ibid., p. 43.
19. Ibid., p. 25.