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Participation as principle and tool in social reintegration: Young mothers formerly associated with armed groups in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Northern Uganda.

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Abstract

Experience of traumatic stressors within armed groups can negatively impact on social cognitions of mastery, self-efficacy and control. This may be compounded by post-return conditions of stigma, little access to education and limited means of livelihood. We explore an intervention that placed girls' participation as a central organizing principle. Based on study reports and ethnographic fieldwork, we examine how young mothers transformed their identity and membership within communities of return through drama, songs and poetry, and engagement in social actions. Meaningful participation offers a culturally grounded intervention in which the impacts of traumatic stressors on individual functioning and the social relational world are directly targeted, resulting in a positive modification of developmental trajectories for young women and ultimately, their children.

Keywords: War, child soldiers, female, mothers, reintegration, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Northern Uganda.

Participation as Principle and Tool in Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers

Recent research has examined the gendered experiences of children associated with armed forces or armed groups (CAAFAG). Girls returning from armed forces or groups, particularly if they are young mothers, face many challenges to social reintegration. They return to communities where livelihood opportunities for women are limited or marginal (Annan, Blattman, Carlson & Mazurana, 2008; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In addition, many formerly associated young mothers have low status in communities of return, have a poor chance of or may be disinterested in marriage, experience the cultural stigma of an often absent or unknown father, and their children may be referred to as a rebel baby or wild child (Coulter, 2009; Denov, 2010; McKay, Veale, Worthen & Wessells, 2011; Robinson & McKay, 2005; Wessells, 2006).

Girls experience many of the same traumatic stressors as those experienced by boys and also face gender-specific experiences. Vindevogel et al. (2011), in a study of 654 formerly abducted girls in northern Uganda found that that 95% suffered hunger or thirst, 90% experienced beatings/torture, 88% were forced to carry heavy loads, 41% had been forced to participate in killings and 56% had been subjected to sexual abuse (compared to 98%, 93%, 89% 51% and 0% of boys). Annan et al. (2008) found that a quarter of girls in northern Uganda were given to commanders of the Lord's Resistance Army as forced wives and half of these young women gave birth to children while in captivity. Similarly, in Sierra Leone, Betancourt, Agnew-Blais, Gilman & Ellis (2011) found that while boys and girls had comparable levels of exposure to traumatic stressors, girls' experienced significantly higher rates of rape (44% compared to 5%). Girls had lower levels of confidence and self-esteem and higher levels of depression, anxiety and hostility compared to boys.

On return to civilian life, post-reintegration factors impact on physical and psychological wellbeing. Stigma and discrimination have a negative impact on health (Betancourt et al., 2010; Denov, 2010) while conversely, community acceptance is associated with reduced depression and increased confidence (Betancourt et al., 2010). In addition, returned young mothers face significant structural barriers in social and economic reintegration. Annan et al. (2008) found that young women returned with children had a third less education than other returnees and were either severely restricted from returning to education or were unwilling to return.

Never-associated girls and women in war-affected communities often experience high levels of poverty and gender-based violence. In Uganda, 57% of 204 women in displacement camps were found to have suffered domestic violence, 41% marital rape, and 5% rape by a stranger (Stark, Roberts, Acham, Boothby & Ager, 2010). Community leaders in northern Uganda have argued that a focus on formerly abducted girls by the international community has rendered unacknowledged the victimhood of never-abducted girls who have been raped or forced into marriage with Uganda People's Defence Force soldiers, many of whom also become young mothers as a result (Shanahan & Veale, 2010). A privileged targeting of CAAFAG youth in social reintegration programs often results in creating community jealousies (Wessells, 2006) and categories of 'visible' and 'invisible' victims (Veale & Dona, 2002).

We describe a community-based participatory action research (PAR) study in three sub-Saharan African countries that aimed to work with CAAFAG young mothers and other vulnerable young mothers in their communities to support social (re)integration, a process of entering meaningful and socioeconomically sustainable roles in civilian society (UNICEF, 2007). Participatory action research is a process whereby participants are active as decision-makers and share in the power, decision-making and the work of the project (Minkler &

Wallersein, 2008; Wessells, 2009). Our study brought together CAAFAG young mothers and other vulnerable war-affected young mothers in a group-based methodology that facilitated them to identify and implement social actions that they felt would best support their social (re)integration. Examples of social actions included community dramas, individual and group businesses, community cleaning and other activities they engaged in to address their priorities of better health, better social relationships and economic self-sufficiency (See McKay et al., 2011). Meaningful participation was a core principle, stated formally as: "To hold girls' decision making within the PAR as critical guides to what happens at all steps of participation". Within study field sites, this became a mantra: "If it doesn't come from the girls, it's not PAR," which became a tool by which academics and psychosocial workers checked their practice.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how, through the PAR, young mothers engaged with the negative impact of traumatic stressors (marginalisation, disempowerment, damaged social relationships) and took greater control of their lives for themselves and their children. To do this, we utilize a sociocultural psychological account of participation as embedded in social activity (Vygotsky, 1997; Lave & Wenger,1991; Rogoff, 2003) to understand how young mothers engaged with the social (personnel), material (money) and symbolic (dialogue, drama) resources within their groups and communities to bring about change in their psychological and social worlds.

Agency, Participation and Reintegration

Hobfoll et al. (2007) identified the essential elements needed in any psychosocial intervention to address trauma, namely to promote safety, calming, individual and collective efficacy, connectedness and hope. They note that trauma impacts on self-efficacy in particular ways, in particular on the perceived ability of individuals to regulate troubling

emotions and to believe in their capacity to address their survival needs of housing, livelihoods and to foster reciprocal and supportive social relationships. Self-efficacy, that is, a "sense of personal efficacy to produce and to regulate events" (Bandura, 1982, p. 122) in one's life. Denov & MacLure, (2006) argue that where girls and young women participate actively as fighters, they often experience power and considerable opportunities to assert their will. However Coulter (2008) points out this is within the severe structural constraints of being within an armed force of group. This points to an important distinction between self-efficacy and agency of which self-efficacy may be an element. Agency, as used here, refers to the interrelationship between an individual acting in the world and the social context, where "agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 33). Klocker (2007), for example, distinguishes between thin and thick agency, whereby thin agency refers to actions carried out within very restrictive contexts with few viable alternatives and little capacity for voluntary or willed action, and thick agency, which is having the capacity to act within a broad range of options. Psychosocial interventions for CAAFAG young women often occupy a position between thick and thin agency. For example, young women often receive livelihood training but within a range of gendered options such as tailoring which are often unsustainable due to market saturation and low demand. Interestingly, Denov (2010) identifies the agentive strategies girls use to negotiate everyday civilian life and act with the means available to them, such as the use of peer support structures, female solidarity or seeking to actively manage the disclosure in order to avoid rejection. These everyday practices are often overlooked in formal programming yet offer interesting insights into how formerly associated girls 'do' social reintegration. Returning to Hobfoll et al. (2007), these are efficacious strategies that promote connection. The other impact of trauma on self-efficacy, to regulate troubling emotions such as managing anger or overcoming shame, is more challenging to understand and conceptualise. The work

of Vygotsky (1997) may offer a useful theoretical lens. Vygotsky was interested in how higher-order psychological functioning such as problem-solving, emotional regulation, thinking and learning is socially acquired, existing first in the external world as social activity and is then internalized as self-dialogue. He argued that behaviour is mediated by the use of cultural tools that can be material (a calculator), social (language) or symbolic (a knot in a handkerchief to remember something). These cultural tools can be externally oriented, leading to changes in objects or in the world, or may be internally oriented, such as internal, self-directed speech aimed at mastering oneself (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 55). In this way, individuals have the capacity to be the agent of influence on objects or activity in the external world, or to produce inner psychological change in subjective experience.

The structure of participation

Wertsch (2008) in particular, was interested in describing the development of self-regulative capacities and the shift from a position of other-directed to self-directed regulation such as is evident in the development of problem-solving skills. He broke down the structure of participation as a child comes to learn a novel skill through participation in the task with a more expert adult. In the first stage, the child has very limited understanding of the workings of the task, which to the adult is coherent and meaningful, so the key task for the adult is to allow the child access to the task demands and create an opportunity for the child to function within the structure of activity, albeit with limited skills or resources. It is not simply carrying out the task with the child, or doing the task for the child, but fundamentally it is about locating the task in the worldview of the child to find a point of participation that facilitates entry by the child, which may simply be to point, to look or to reach-out. According to Wertsch, the adult must provide a specific type of communicative structure composed of "speech and gestures which are tied to *the definition of situation that exists for the child*" (p. 72; italics in original). As the task or activity continues, the novice (child) takes more

responsibility for initiating and leading actions needed for the task until he or she can solve the problem independently, using externally directed tools or internally directed utterances to support self-regulative capacity. In this model, transition from one level of participation to more knowledgeable or mature participation is largely the result of the child's efforts to establish and maintain coherence between his/her own action and the regulatory structure provided by the more experienced practitioner (adult). There is also a developmental momentum as the individual becomes a more expert user of the cultural tools needed to 'function well' in that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1997).

This model provides a lens to understand one element of the PAR, which is to examine how participants structured their participation so that there was a developmental shift from other-regulation to self-regulation (this includes girls' use of each other in their groups, their use of psychosocial workers and skills-training opportunities). A limitation of this model for our purposes is that it assumes a unidirectional power relationship from novice to expert. Most of the models of this form of situated learning assume an expert and a novice and fail to recognize the complexity of relations that may occur when different participants have different forms of 'expert' knowledge, all of which have a contribution to make to the task in hand (in this case, young mothers' knowledge of how to effectively socially reintegrate).

Lave & Wenger (1991) offer a model of communities of practice that recognizes dynamics of power, conflict and challenge that may exist between different participants in a field of practice as interests converge and diverge. In this model, 'participation' is socially negotiated. If movement is to occur towards a position of full participation—one definition of social reintegration—it is important that the individuals are included in what matters to the community; exclusion from such opportunities leads to marginalisation and disempowerment

and engagement—results in shifts in learning, role and identity in the communit(ies) of practice.

In communities of return therefore, there are multiple pathways available to girls; some of which lead to on-going marginalisation such as engagement in transactional sex; others are pathways towards greater inclusiveness if girls have an opportunity to engage in activities that are recognized as being valued and appropriate activities within that community. Stigma, discrimination, and lack of community acceptance of their children can prevent or dis-allow girls access to opportunities to be included in what matters. This is not to privilege structural power nor is it to argue that agency lies in the individual girl or their group- but to explore the negotiated and relational elements of how girls mobilized their group and their own efforts within their group, and with the NGO staff, advisors and communities.

The general research question is: Did participation in the PAR facilitate young mothers' social (re)integration? Specifically, how did psychological functions (managing anger, overcoming shame, regulating emotional change and communication) and social relationships evolve and change through participation in the activities of the group? We analyse processes of participation to explore if young mothers' engagement as decision-makers in activities instigated by them would lead to improved integration and decreased stigma.

Method

The PAR involved 658 young mothers with over 1200 children from rural and urban communities across twenty study sites in Sierra Leone, Liberia and northern Uganda. Community members along with agency personnel identified young mothers who were formerly associated or particularly vulnerable. Young mothers also invited their peers to

participate. An informed consent form was translated into the indigenous languages spoken at each site and back-translated into English to ensure accuracy. This said that the young mother was being asked to be part of a research study that wanted to learn about young mothers' needs and situations and it wanted her to be central to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the project to help the researchers understand the information gathered. The procedure would involve spending time with other young mothers, with community members as well as the NGO agency staff and researchers. Confidentiality was assured. Because of low literacy rates at the onset of the study, the consent form was read out and was followed by the participant signing her consent form with an 'X', often in the presence of a witness. In the case of minors, who were living with parents or guardians, these adults also signed the form. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board. All participants had conceived or gave birth while under the age of 18. At the start of the study, 22% of young mothers had one child, 44% had two children, 25% had three children and 9% had four children or more. Overall 66% of young mother participants were formerly associated with armed forces or groups and 33% were other vulnerable young mothers. The proportion of young mothers who lived in communities where they had lived previously varied across contexts (65% in Liberia, 56% in Sierra Leone, 79% in northern Uganda). Eighty per cent of young mothers were aged 16-24 years. Average ages in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda were 20 years, 22 years and 18 years of age respectively.

The study was developed and implemented over three years through a network of international and national academics and ten nongovernmental organisation (NGO) partners. Each NGO had two field sites of approximately 30 young mothers per site. All sites were in war-affected areas although some sites had a preponderance of formerly associated young mothers and others had a larger percentage of vulnerable young mothers, reflecting local contexts. Young mothers were formed into groups of approximately 30 participants. They

met weekly or bi-monthly to share stories about their daily lives, problem-solve and identify their priorities. They conducted family visits to each other's homes to gain the support of families for their activities. Community advisory committees were established. Young mothers' groups, with the support of community advisers and agency staff, began to plan social actions to address their priorities. Many groups initiated community drama, dance, and poetry performances that gave insight into and challenged misconceptions about their lives. Many started small group savings schemes, some with guidance of agency staff. After a time, young mothers individually and in their groups began implementing social actions with community involvement. These included group gardens, petty trading (charcoal, foodstuffs), bakery and restaurant businesses, goat-rearing, community cleaning, help at funerals, home visits, visits to other vulnerable young mothers. Throughout, skills-building initiatives were introduced at key moments on skills such as managing group dynamics, business skills, health and hygiene, and gathering and analysing data (See McKay et al., 2011). National and international academics, country team leaders, representatives of the young mothers, donors and invited UNICEF experts from the three countries met once a year over the three years of study implementation to spend a number of days reflecting on participatory practice. In addition the authors conducted field visits at regular intervals to meet with young mothers' groups, agency staff, local leaders and country team members. Study documentation was extensive and included monthly reports from individual field sites, training workshops for young mothers, transcripts of international team meetings, ethnographic reports from fieldwork visits in three PAR countries and a participatory evaluation survey. The informed consent process assured confidentiality in the following ways; participants 'owned' the data and liaised with agency staff to agree a secure, locked storage space for their meeting minutes. Team members did not have access to this information. Young mothers decided with whom (if anyone) they wanted to share the ideas or words from their group discussions.

National academics brought group representatives together for data analysis workshops where they were trained to organise and present their data. Monthly reports were based on information provided and agreed by young mothers' groups and identities were anonomized. Individual responses to the participatory survey were confidential and anonymous.

The analysis presented in this paper is based on qualitative data from monthly reports, team meetings and ethnographic fieldwork. The data were read and reread with a view to identifying moments of participation, where study team members, agency staff or young mothers talked about implementing or being aware of 'participation' as they engaged with their group and went about their activities. This was a form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is also informed by a form of participatory understanding (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2005) as the authors were experientially involved in the project as it unfolded through responding to monthly reports submitted from team members, sharing solutions generated in one context with other sites, dialoguing and witnessing challenges and change over time. In the analysis that follows, our aim is to understand how change in developmental trajectories towards fuller (re)integration stemmed from shifts in the nature of participation.

Results

From 'Other' Regulation to Self-Regulation

The young mothers' groups functioned as important sites of evolving social reintegration. Late in the study during evaluative meetings participants and community members explained changes they observed over time in all participants but in particular those that were formerly associated. In Sierra Leone, one participant noted:

> The longer in the RUF (Revolutionary United Front) the more you become addicted to so many things. By addiction, I mean that when you become used to things and it

> becomes part of you, doing away with that thing is not easy. Like in RUF you talk harshly to people, it takes time to learn to speak softly to people. (Young mother, Sierra Leone)

Others noted that a number of formerly associated young mothers were angry, aggressive or "like wounded lions" and that through the meetings, their anger was minimized, "those negative things stopped" or "they have learnt to calm down." Others were withdrawn or depressed and one Sierra Leonean young mother observed: "The friends that I was spending time with helped me become more lively."

In the three countries where the study was conducted, ethnographic fieldwork explored the social interaction within groups to understand these dynamics such as experiences of calming and enlivening. Participants talked about how they recognized a common element in all their experiences; "whether you were abducted or not, if you gave birth at a tender age, the community still looks at you as useless, the same stigma and rejection," but also that formerly associated young mothers "had their own problems" and "related differently to the community." During the initial stages of the study, formerly associated young mothers in some groups reported that they found it challenging to be in the groups and thought of leaving as some members were saying "there are Kony's rebels" and feared them. Other participants reported that the discomfort experienced by the formerly associated young mothers manifested itself as either aggression ("they took disagreements in the group to a different level") or as withdrawal and non-participation.

> In the beginning you would really know the difference. Those who were formely abducted would not participate, they would look down, say nothing, and other girls dominated the meeting. Now, you would not know the difference. That stigma is

> almost over. No one points at them, the participation in the group is equal, those formerly abducted speak their minds out. (Young mother, northern Uganda)

> They had trouble trusing each other. They are not used to working together. Many were ashamed to share their experiences. (Team member, Sierra Leone)

At a number of sites in northern Uganda, it seemed there came a crystallising moment when the groups faced choices about how formerly associated and community young mothers related to each other. One young mother group chairperson told how they realized if they were to function well as a group, "we would need to come up with ways to work with these girls to adjust."

> We talked to them [the formerly associated girls] slowly. We realized we needed to be polite, not to bark. If someone is rude, we realized someone will not work with you. After a while we saw that if you don't point fingers, don't call names, were polite, they [formerly associated young mothers] support them. Also the formerely abducted girls felt that since all these things are not happening here, why can't we adjust. So they started adjusting slowly, slowly, and caught up with rest. For example, the formerly abducted girl says 'I am not going to the group garden' and she would not go and other girls would say slowly in a polite voice, 'this is to support us all'. So then they started to come to the group and to be active in group. (Young mother, group chairperson, northern Uganda)

Through communicative action and with growing awareness in this particular group, community young mothers modulated their tone of voice, their non-verbal behaviour, their words ('this is to support us all') to create a participation structure that opened up a respectful

space in which formerly abducted and other vulnerable young mothers could act together. In a similar process to that defined by Wertsch (2008), that "the adult must use speech and gestures *which are tied to the definition of situation that exists for the child*" (p. 72, italics in original), they strategically created a communicative context in which they intrepreted the situation from the perspective of the formerly abducted girl (I will not engage with people who are rude, who point, who call names) and a task situation that was within the power and resources of all group members to engage (contributing their labour to a group garden).

Dynamics within the groups quickly shifted as all participants shared their stories and recognized commonalities of experience of stigmatisation. A sense of solidarity quickly emerged and they began to appreciate each others' strengths, to find a common voice of support, affirmation and action and to reject the negative and disparaging identities foisted upon them. Gillespie (2007) emphasizes the importance of others' perspective on self, and how this engenders self-reflection through "internal dialogue between internalized perspectives" (p. 682). External (group) supportive dialogue is internalized as self-dialogue and impacts on constructions of 'self' as a tool or resource in self-evaluation and self-regulation. In this example, group members developed confidence and they began a series of home visits to meet with parents, husbands, and siblings to support a member having problems in their families. Across the different contexts, evidence of changes in self-concept and self-efficacy emerged that had its origins in such group processes. Group members began undertaking a variety of social actions such as literacy classes, hair braiding, petty trading and group businesses.

> The benefit of being in the group is firstly, to learn how to take care of myself and my child and how to stay in the group and build friendships. Because of this group—at first we were traumatized and isolated—but as a group we share our experiences and we appreciate each other's struggles. (Young mother, Liberia)

> One way I have noticed is that I now have confidence to talk publically among my friends. (Young mother, Sierra Leone)
>
> One of the benefits is people in the community used to tell us you're good for nothing...they are seeing we are *not* good for nothing. (Young mother, Liberia)
>
> Now we can boast of being useful (Young mother, Sierra Leone)

In Wertsch's (2008) terms, there is a shift from other-regulation (perspective on self and skills derived from other group members) to self-regulation and taking over responsibility for tasks, accompanied by a sense of ownership and mastery. An outcome of this shift from other- to self-regulation was that young mothers became more confident in challenging stigma directed at them, leading to new social experiences.

One of the social action tools young mothers in all three contexts choose to engage with was community dramas. Their dramas often had a redemptive narrative. A typical drama was about a baby boy whose grandfather rejects him as his mother was formerly-abducted, group members visit him, he changes his attitude and the family live reconciled; or a girl who was abducted and comes back, her parents, friends and community do not talk to her, she becomes part of the young mothers' group where she is welcomed 'though shy and not easily talked to', and she becomes confident, able to participate in many activities and is accepted by her parents (northern Uganda); or the story of a girl that is captured by rebels, taken to the bush, taken as a wife where she has a child, was redeemed from the bush, and is befriended by a pastor's wife who helps her and her children (Sierra Leone); or a school-going girl who was "fooled" by a boy, becomes pregnant and drops out of school (northern Uganda). These dramas were very motivating to participants. As one young mother explained "What kept motivating us—we had drama; at home there were problems and misunderstandings and stress, and you knew that when you came to the group, you would get advice and get less

stress". They enjoyed performing their dramas, and adults and children gathered around in a large circle to watch the performance which tended to be lengthy with several acts. They evoked laughter and entertainment and also somber observation of unpleasant scenarios such as abduction or alcoholism and child abuse. Community advisors and agency staff came to recognize the dramas as a key cultural tool that mediated participation and transformed relationships within the group. The following is a discussion with community advisers in northern Uganda:

> In the beginning we could see the two groups [never abducted and formerly abducted young mothers] separating. Through the songs and drama, this really made a difference. As roles in the drama would be given to someone, it was a way to get people to participate. So through this, the singing and the drama they became all the same. (northern Uganda, community adviser)

In this example, the idea of using drama to actively engage formerly abducted young mothers was claimed as a contribution by both the young mother chairperson and a number of communiy advisers, giving a sense of the relational, dialogical processes in much of the PAR decision-making. In an interview with Sarah, a young mother and the group's chairperson, she explained that it was her idea to use drama as a means to engage formerely-abducted young mothers. When asked what did she do so that formerly abducted girls could speak in the group, she said:

> As chairperson, I had to make an effort. I empowered all those who were shy through drama. I gave roles. 'When we practice tomorrow, we play in front of the community. When we plan, that role is for no one else but it is yours!' So I gave the shy one's roles, an active part in the role play. (Young mother, northern Uganda)

Drama was used as a tool to engage quiet, shy members and those whose experience was of being silenced within their broader community and bring them into voice. It created a structure for participation that facilitated those on the periphery of the group to move to positions of fuller participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), to have an experience of being active and heard. It also gave group members an experience of different identity positions. They had to take the perspective of another (a grandfather, a baby boy, a community member, a young mother) and experience that position. In this way, drama facilitated a psychological experience of mediated self-reflection or distantiation (Gillespie, 2010). At a fundamental level, dramas mediated young mothers' subjective experience. In ethnographic accounts, young mothers told us that were consciously trying to achieve certain outcomes such as to educate other girls about the hardship of becoming pregnant at a tender age or to create more sympathy for their situation, Through their dramas, they had a heightened experience of efficacy and agency, of taking charge of their own group process and of themselves.

Through drama, young mothers also created a dialogical relationship with their audience that witnessed and then empathized with the characters portrayed, such as the young mother and her baby returning from the bush; the pregnant girl forced to leave school. Many community members remarked that seeing the dramas and also the young mothers' organizing themselves motivated them to be more open towards them. They witnessed their social actions, such as the efforts they made to carry out their businesses, to do community cleaning, to take care of their children and provide for their needs. The drama's created an opening for more positive perceptions of the young mothers and in many cases, they began to give small forms of support; a father gave priority to his daughter take the family bicycle every Wednesday to attend her group meeting; a neighbour minded a young mother's child to allow her to culivate the group garden. This opened up more trust in young mothers about their ability to participate in their communities:

> One thing that I have learned about being reintegrated is the fact that I now have the confidence to leave my children at home, in my community. I had the fear that I would not be able to leave them. My mother is old and cannot really take care of them. I know my community members will help her take care of them. (Young mother, Sierra Leone)

> In my community they include me in decision-making. They allow me to make real decisions. When there is a community meeting and we attend, they accept the contributions we make and we are part of making decisions. Before it was difficult to attend community programs, but now it is easier. (Young mother, Sierra Leone)

In this instance, we see that 'agency' is neither situated in a volitional individual acting with free will, nor in an accepting or rejecting community but rather is dynamic and relational. Through their actions, young mothers mobilized their external world for their support while simultaneously transforming negative external discourses and their internal psychological world. As put by Gillespie & Zittoun (2010), agency is culturally constituted as individuals act through cultural tools which enable distanciation from the environment and thus self-regulation, creative action and planning. With respect to their relationship to the community, there is a difference between speaking and being heard; speaking is an individual act whereas being heard involves both speaker and hearer, each motivated to engage with the other. Community dramas facilitated an expansion of the relational space between young mothers and community members, and this space was further widened as they initiated other social actions. Drama functioned as a cultural tool that mediated a shift within their communities from a position of difference or victimhood to one of greater parity of esteem.

Shifts in identity, role and community membership

As the PAR became established across the three countries, the principle of participation was internalized by young mothers and agency staff. The principle of

'participation' itself began to act as a symbolic tool, mediating how psychosocial workers engaged with young mothers on planning, problem-solving and decision-making. Workshop transcripts show that PAR team members and psychosocial workers began to use participatory principles in their internal self-dialogue, such as using the project mantra to question and check their practice. They used themselves as 'tools' to question and facilitate change in ways they recognized were different to how they acted in the implementation of other reintegration programs.

> [At our sites], we start with the use of the participatory method. At all sites there are three methods. Of course if the girls have any concern or a proposal to make, they do that to the group. One method is the main group is divided into smaller group to allow participation of every girl mother. The second method, these groups come together to report. Every girl mother is allowed to have a say in the meeting by going around the circle. And the last method, the facilitator decides which participant will contribute to the session. Through all these methods the girls participate in decision-making. (Team member, Sierra Leone).

> The role was not to impose what we wanted on the girls, but to help them to work through the process themselves. (PAR team, Liberia)

> I like the 'we' in PAR, methodology, everyone working together. My leadership style changed. (PAR team member, Sierra Leone)

> Imparting a sense of personal responsibility in solving their problems has helped a lot." (PAR team member, Northern Uganda)

> The difference in PAR is that it will last longer because it started with the girls—the girls will always say 'I'. The changes will stay with them. (PAR team member, Sierra Leone)

While the 'I' of the girl participant is fore-grounded as we see above, a review of the complete study documentation shows that this 'I' was situated within a multi-stranded network of agency staff and community members that evolved and became more connected over time. As one Sierra Leonean team member noted, sometimes husbands, community advisers or the village chief were invited to attend group meetings to problem-solve or to be consulted if young mothers were interested to develop new initiatives, commenting "When girls take decisions, others are part of the decision. This is community business."

A core decision that young mother groups had to make was how to use the limited funding available to undertake activities to address their priority needs. Health, education and income-generation emerged as key priorities across sites in the three countries (McKay et al., 2011). Agency staff struggled with a tension between acting on participatory principles while still giving strategic assistance based upon their expertize. At some sites, this manifested as a challenge to strike a balance between supporting young mothers' decision making and taking charge. In order to allow participation to happen, young mothers and psychosocial staff had to experience and tolerate small failures and then work together to devise strategies to reflect on why the failure occurred, rebuild confidence, and find new starting points, as can be seen in the following example from Liberia:

> After the group business failed, they did individual businesses. Those were successful and they decided to try group business again. The [young mother] group president suggested baking pastries. After doing the budget, some girls decided they didn't want to do it. From that meeting, two groups split and one did pastries and one did soap

> making. The soap was something that could be stored, would not go bad. The pastries group is struggling. Presently, the soap-making group is the stronger one. (Team member, Liberia)

The following example from Northern Uganda also captures the tension of establishing a structure that nurtures shifts in the structure of participation over time as young mothers moved to positions of fuller participation in their communities. At this site, the study recruited 30 participants half of whom were formerly abducted and half of whom were community young mothers. In the first weeks, the group elected a chairperson and a minute-keeper for taking notes of their meetings. An experienced psychosocial worker supported the group. The group started meeting with the support of these community advisers and identified a social action they wished to take:

> An initiative we took was garden work. We went to the community and asked for a plot of land. We were given it and planted beans and got money for it. We felt this was our own initiative. We would meet twice a week, one day to help someone in their garden so today we come to your garden, you give 500 ugandan shillings to all members that came. We had a chairperson and treasurer to keep the money. It is part of 'togetherness'–It's [togetherness] the name of our group.

An initial income-generation idea, knitting, brought young mothers together but failed to make money. They generated other ideas. A psychosocial worker member told this story:

> When we started, we never gave them the idea of doing income-generation but when choosing a project, that is what they wanted to do. We then did a feasibility study looking at goat-rearing. The girls wanted to do this and had come up with the idea, so we looked at it with them and asked– "How long does goat-rearing need to make money?" They decided to go with a restaurant. Usually in our work, all the activities

> come from out[side], they come from the top. This is unique. Nobody pushes things on them. (Agency staff, northern Uganda).

After a while, the group and community advisers noticed the restaurant was making no profits. The advisers sat with the group to discuss the problems. They found the young mothers did not feel they owned the restaurant, rent was too high, the money belonged to the [NGO] organisation, and they were eating the food or giving free food to friends and boyfriends. A few members were stealing funds. The young mother chairperson recounted the story "There was mismanagement in the group, it was we ourselves who identified the problem—lets take it to our responsible people." Once the depth of difficulties became evident, the advisory committee offered to run the restaurant while the young mothers had a series of meetings to address their problems. They had to decide how to deal with the members who had been stealing from the group–they asked them to leave. Agency staff organized book-keeping training. Group members and advisers approached a local leader to elicit his support. He attended a meeting and recounted:

> What I saw, immediately, is these girls began mobilising themselves. It was no longer a hard thing for [the organisation] to do. They totally sacrified their time, not demanding any payment. They maintained their spirit. Some hope was coming somewhere. Then when it came to identifying their priorities they said 'we want a restaurant' because that's what we can do ourselves...I went there–there was an issue with accountibility– one girl was taking money. They handled it and put someone else in charge of money. When I saw that spirit, they now embracing ownership (nothern Uganda, Community leader).

By the conclusion of the study, the PAR team leader noted "they have savings and are lending out this money to other people and getting interest. They enrolled other vulnerable

girl mothers; they have been going out to the community to support other young mothers, especially those who have been victims of sexual violence and encouraging them to go back to school."

This case example traces the developmental trajectory of one group and we see two processes at work; firstly, the development of individual and group level self-regulative capacities; and secondly, shifts in learning and forms of membership in the broader community, changing from a position of marginality to fuller participation in 'what matters' in the community. This transition involved shifts in relations of power as the position of group members changed with respect to others; participants talked positively about identity shifts in their roles as daughters, mothers and girlfriends or wives. As Lave & Wenger (1991) note, changing roles and forms of participation in communities of pratice accompanies shifts in power and ways of relating. However while a participant may have became more valued as a mother who is able to look after her child's needs, she may simultanously have moved into conflictual relations with others who saw her or her group members as becoming "inflated", "over-active" or "too big". There was a lot of reflection on managing community jealousies in instances where these emerged and strategies were identified by young mothers and their advisers at all study levels to address these (see McKay et al., 2011) .

In conclusion, participatory principles and practice mobilized participants and others in their communities for their suport. In Liberia, an example was given of how young mothers formely associated with armed groups were not allowed to cook at a community event and "they were excluded from belonging" but by the study end, they were allowed to join in. One Northern Ugandan team member noted "What is evolving is the general community support. From the beginning to now, what has developed is that the people in the community the girls have identified are supporting them. This is traditional (awakened traditional coping)".

Discussion

This paper sought to examine how 'participation' functioned both as a principle and tool in a social reintegration study with young mothers formely associated with armed forces and groups and community young mothers. At a local level, young mothers' agency and social reintegation occured in a relational context, mediated by material, social and symbolic tools involving multiple actors; young mothers, their families, community advisers, psychosocial workers, PAR team members, and academics. As a principle, 'participation' functioned as a symbolic tool internalized by all actors to ask questions of themselves, check their practice and mediate behaviour. There were evident shifts from 'other-regulation' to 'self-regulation' in multiple directions; from young mothers to other young mothers, agency staff to young mothers and young mothers to staff and advisers, resulting in a changing and more complex web of relationships, central to social reintegration.

With reference to the elements identified by Hobfoll et al. (2007) to address trauma in psychosocial interventions, the participatory principles and practices implemented in this study promoted individual and collective efficacy and social connectedness. It enhanced the capacity of the majority of participants to address their priority survival needs, defined as health, education and/or livelihoods and reduced stigma. Areas of young women's lives where they still faced challenges to self-efficiacy included reproductive health, such as getting pregnant when they did not wish to. This has practical policy and practice implications as it highlights the limits of individual agency and the need for a model that conceptualises interdependent individual(s)-acting-in-the-world such as that advocated in social ecological approaches to psychosocial intervention (Boothby, Strang & Wessells, 2006).

Dynamic feedback loops became evidence over time. We saw that in some contexts, CAAFAG young mothers learnt to modulate their communication style and behaviour to better fit into civilian society whilst non-CAAFAG young mothers gained confidence in their ability to survive, to have the capacity and endurance to do what needed to be done, arguably strenghts that CAAFAG young mothers brought to their groups. This diversity of experiences supported emergent leadership as group members developed the capability to speak out and to be effective on some of the issues that affected their lives.

As a participant-led process, the PAR methodology is applicable to diverse contexts and groups who identify some commonality of experience and who are interested to move out of marginal status to empowerment. In war-affected contexts, a limiting factor is that when active conflict is underway, it could be inadvisable to have group meetings, which could be seen as political organizing and cause unintended harm. In non-conflict contexts, this PAR method was used sucessfully with adolescent girls in contact with the law in Ireland who reported enhanced self- efficacy (Veale, 2011). Further research is needed to see how this approach works with males or mixed gender groups, given the importance in the young mothers' meetings of group-based talk, experience sharing and problem-solving.

A limitation of the study was that we choose not to utlise a pre- and post-intervention evaluation methodology. However at the initiation of the study, we made a decision that pre-determined, standardised evaluation indicators might interact in unknown ways with the project process so we instead adopted an ongoing participatory evaluation process (see McKay et al. (2011). However in spite of this, there is evidence to support the conclusion that participatory principles and practice in psychosocial intervention offer tools to address the impact of trauma on the emotional, agentive and relational world's of war-affected young mothers.

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