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Reintegration of young mothers

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Young mothers seeking reintegration after periods of time spent living with fighting forces and armed groups face exclusion and stigma rather than the support they and their children badly need.

In Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda, young women's lives were greatly disrupted by civil war. Part of this disruption was a fracturing in traditionally supportive relationships with family members, elders and peers. This article describes the findings of a three-year community-based participatory action research (PAR) study undertaken in 2006-09 with young women who are mothers in these three countries.[1] Two-thirds of the 658 participants were formerly associated with fighting forces or armed groups, while a third were identified by community members as highly vulnerable for a variety of reasons including being orphaned or disabled. The study also included over 1,200 children of these young mothers.

The purpose of the study – which took place in 20 communities ranging from remote villages to urban centres – was to learn what 'reintegration' meant to these young women. Girls and young women who were formerly associated with fighting forces or armed groups and who had become pregnant or had children during armed conflict have been excluded from the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes developed by the international community. This exclusion is for numerous reasons, including gender discrimination and a perception that girls and young women are not a threat to the durability of peace accords and can thus be ignored.

When formerly recruited young women and girls settle in communities after war, they experience significant psychosocial distress and social isolation, which create a barrier to their reintegration. Many, in particular those who became pregnant or had children during the conflict, feel invisible and disempowered. As pregnancies are often a result of rape or forced marriage with male combatants, these young mothers and their children face additional stigma.

Although programmes are beginning to be developed to work with young mothers, most reintegration or skills training programmes – developed from adult-centric perspectives – have been unable to reach them and their children. The motivation for the PAR study was to learn from young mothers themselves what reintegration meant to them and how they could successfully achieve it for themselves and their children.

Developing relationships

After several months of community consultation and recruitment, the participating young mothers began meeting regularly in groups and researching the common challenges that they faced in their communities. They used a variety of methods to do this, including interviewing each other and their children about what their lives were like and how they felt different from other young mothers and children; talking with community leaders about how they observed the young mothers getting on and how life was different before the conflict; and role-playing about their experiences. The young mothers then discussed what they had discovered, set objectives for how they wanted their lives to change, and brainstormed ways and actions to achieve these improvements.

In most communities, the first actions were targeted at reducing stigma and marginalisation, and typically took the form of dramas or songs that the young mothers developed to teach their families and communities about their experiences, including their time with armed groups and what it was like to return. Through performing these dramas and songs, participants often won the support of formerly unsupportive community members and families. Subsequent actions were primarily livelihood support and education activities, such as learning how to care better for their children or about good hygiene and sanitation.

The backbone of the PAR project was the multiple relationships that participants developed with each other, with community members, with their families, and

with agency and project staff. Nearly all the participants had lost family during the conflicts. While most young mothers had returned to their original communities, 35% of Liberians, 44% of Sierra Leoneans and 21% of Ugandans reported not being from the community they were currently living in. Only a third were living with a parent or guardian, while 41% were living with boyfriends or husbands; 5% were living alone with their children and the remaining participants lived with extended family members or friends. The relationships between the young mothers and their parents were often fraught and many participants reported feeling that their parents did not care for them well or that their parents mistreated their children. Relationships with boyfriends and husbands were also a challenge with more than half of participants reporting that their boyfriends or husbands were unsupportive of their children. In some instances, male partners were unable to provide economically for their children or were abusing alcohol and unable to act responsibly. In other instances, male partners were not the fathers of the young mothers' children and claimed no responsibility for them.

"Now people are caring for us"

When the project began, many participants reported that they sat alone all day and had no friends and only limited livelihood options, such as collecting firewood or doing farmwork on other people's land. Marginalised and lonely, they were made to feel ashamed. Yet even the simple act of bringing the participants together in groups and encouraging them to share their stories with each other brought much hope as participants began to realise they were not alone in their suffering. "I thought that I was the only one that was hated."

For some participants, the project created a shift in their awareness of themselves as worthy of love and support. One young woman put it this way: "We have never seen a project which cares for girl mothers... now we know that people are caring for us." The relationships between the participants grew over the three years of the project. "Our meetings have created a sense of oneness among each other and now we share our burdens. We are each other's sisters." As participants grew closer, they would often meet outside of regular meeting times. Reflecting on how the project developed, one young mother recalled, "Sometimes the … group would cook together, eat together, and it helped us be one, and even helped us solve problems."

Community members were selected to form Community Advisory Committees (CAC) to support and advise the participants. CAC members were role models and mentors to the participants, and also rallied support from other community members. For example, in one community in Liberia, CAC members persuaded village authorities to donate land to participants to cultivate, found day-care centres and schools that were willing to give scholarships to the children of participants, and organised a baking workshop when participants decided to open a bakery.

Relationships with family members also improved during the course of the project. By the end of the project, more than 86% of the participants reported that they and their children felt more liked or loved by their families. In some cases this was because of informal family counselling; for others, the improved relationships with their families went hand-in-hand with their improved ability to contribute to the family. "Since I joined the group, my dish ration has improved. Before the food we received was small. Now I can contribute to household food, so it is different." Nearly three-quarters of participants reported that since the project began they had become able to contribute to their families by buying basic necessities.

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One parent had described her difficulty in supporting her daughter and her daughter's children at the beginning of the project: "We are not here to care for 'bastards' and other people's children." The project helped change these attitudes in many ways – through informal counselling by project staff and peers but also through parents observing their daughters being valued in the community. Then, as the daughters bolstered their economic capacity through the actions they undertook, the parents began to see their daughters as potentially economically valuable, rather than just a drain on limited resources.

Whereas in many cases family relationships had previously been sources of pain for participants, as the participants gained a sense of self-worth through their activities, economic livelihood development, and new relationships with peers and community members, family relationships greatly improved. The changes that the participants were able to achieve in their lives and the lives of their children are likely to be supported by the new, more caring relationships that surround them in their communities.

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1. More information about the study, including the participatory action methodology, is at www.pargirlmothers.com See also S McKay et al, 'Building Meaningful Participation in Reintegration Among War-Affected Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda', *Intervention*, 2011, vol 9, no 2, pp108–24 http://tinyurl.com/Intervention-pargirlmothers Funding for this study was provided by Oak and ProVictimis Foundations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Compton Foundation and UNICEF West Africa. Agency partners in the PAR are: (in Liberia) Save the Children UK in Liberia, Touching Humanity in Need of Kindness (THINK); (in Sierra Leone) ChildFund, Christian Brothers, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, National Network for Psychosocial Care; (in Uganda) Caritas – Gulu Archdiocese, Concerned Parents Association, Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation, World Vision.