GIRLS IN FIGHTING FORCES: MOVING BEYOND VICTIMHOOD

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A Summary of the Research Findings on Girls and Armed Conflict
from CIDA's Child Protection Research Fund.

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A NOTE ON CIDA's CHILD PROTECTION RESEARCH FUND

In June 2001, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) launched its Action Plan on Child Protection. The Action Plan established a $2 million Child Protection Research Fund (CPRF) to explore the area of children's rights and protection and to influence policy. The CPRF, which supported 13 projects in 14 developing countries, has been unique in several important ways.

First, it has been the first research fund in CIDA's history devoted explicitly to children rights and protection. Given that the rights of boys and girls in circumstances of dire poverty, abuse, violence, and exploitation have frequently been neglected by scholars and policy makers alike, the CPRF has represented a significant step in drawing attention to the realities of marginalized children in diverse contexts.

Second, rather than focusing solely on the vulnerabilities and victimization experiences of children, and reflecting the tenets of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the CPRF has aimed to support projects that emphasized child *participation* and *empowerment*. To this end, researchers were encouraged to employ novel methodologies and approaches, new data collection and data analysis techniques, and methods of dissemination that ensured that children's experiences, voices, and participation were actively sought out, listened to and promoted. In keeping with this rights-based approach, children involved in the 13 research projects were not merely research 'subjects', but in some cases were also involved in the overall design of the projects, collected data alongside the adult researchers, and in some instances were involved in the dissemination of the study findings through film production, dance, theatre, puppetry, musical recordings, and conference presentations.

Third, the multiplicity of topics covered in the CPRF projects has been notable, including the themes of children and armed conflict, children in institutional care, child labour, violence and sexual exploitation, and alternative approaches to children's rights and protection. Within these four main thematic areas, the lives of diverse groups of children have been explored including child miners, children affected by HIV/AIDS, child soldiers, marginalized girls, children in conflict with the law, and child victims of sexual abuse, to name a few.

Finally, the findings of the 13 research projects have had a critical impact on national and international policy and programming with examples ranging from the creation of new national and international policies and programs of protection, greater youth participation in decision-making, and increased awareness and advocacy in relation to the populations under study. Importantly, some of the young people involved in the projects had the opportunity to meet to discuss the issues affecting them. In June 2006, CIDA, in partnership with the University of Ottawa, hosted an international conference entitled *Children's Rights and International Development: Research, Challenges and Change* to disseminate the findings of the 13 projects. Youth from several of the projects traveled to Ottawa to participate in the conference, acting as presenters, and facilitators.

The 13 projects have contributed to multiple areas of learning. One of those areas has been the experiences and situations of girls in fighting forces. As part of the CPRF dissemination process, this paper highlights the main findings of the three research projects that explored the unique realities of girls affected by armed conflict in Angola (Stavrou, 2004), Sierra Leone (Denov & Maclure, 2005), and Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The issue of child soldiers has become an issue of global concern. More than 250 000 soldiers under the age of 18 are fighting in conflicts in over 40 countries around the world. While there is ample descriptive evidence of the conditions and factors underlying the rise of child soldiery in the developing world, most of the literature has portrayed this as a uniquely male phenomenon, ultimately neglecting the experiences and perspectives of girls within fighting forces. Drawing upon the findings of three studies funded by CIDA's Child Protection Research Fund, this paper traces the perspectives and experiences of girls as victims, participants, and resisters of violence and armed conflict in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Northern Uganda.

The three studies collectively reveal four salient themes. First, whether in the heat of conflict or within post-war programming, girls are, for the most part, rendered *invisible and marginalized*. During conflict, the roles that they play are frequently deemed peripheral and insignificant by governments, national and international NGOs, policy makers, and program developers. In the aftermath of war, girls continue to be marginalized within the realms of education, economics, and are frequently discriminated against within formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, as well as within the context of their families and communities.

Second, in spite of this profound invisibility and marginalization, girls are *fundamental to the war machine* – their operational contributions are integral and critical to the overall functioning of armed groups.

Third, girls in fighting forces contend with overwhelming experiences of *victimization, perpetration, and insecurity*. During conflict, girls are subjected to grave violations of their human rights through forced recruitment, killing, maiming, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, abduction, forced marriage, and increased exposure to HIV/AIDS. Many are also forced to participate in brutal acts of violence. In the aftermath of conflict, girls arguably bear a form of secondary victimization through socio-economic marginalization and exclusion, as well as the ongoing threats to their health and personal security.

Finally, the three studies demonstrate that girls in fighting forces are not simply silent victims, but *active agents and resisters during armed conflict*. Girls' made remarkable attempts to defend and protect themselves during situations of severe violence and insecurity, as well as efforts to bring about change for themselves and by themselves. Challenging the predominant portrayals of girls as emblematic victims, girls attempted to avoid, minimize, or resist wartime abuses, patriarchal power structures, and the culture of violence that surrounded them.

In light of the research findings, an alternative approach with regard to the ways in which girls in fighting forces are perceived, represented, and conceptualized is essential. Rather than focusing solely on girls' vulnerability and victimization, it is essential to also direct our attention to their self-efficacy, resilience, and skills. Moreover, given their significant presence and multiple roles within fighting forces, girls' experiences and perspectives should be considered as central and indispensable to understandings and analyses of war and political violence, and not regarded as peripheral or unwittingly or wittingly rendered invisible.

Girls' intrinsic capacity as agents of change has important implications for current post-conflict policies and programs that are being developed for girls and indeed for children in general. If, as the

narratives of the research participants consistently indicate, many girls were able to demonstrate a capacity for willfulness and collective agency during and following war (sometimes with tragic consequences) then it would seem imperative that current strategies of social assistance adopt approaches that aim to redress female marginalization and subservience by tapping into girls' agency and resilience. Substantial efforts need to continue in the areas specified by girls in the three studies including the provision of educational and employment opportunities, health care, child care assistance, family reunification, counselling, and community sensitization. There is also a need to make special provisions for females formerly in fighting forces in post-conflict forums of deliberation and decision-making.

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Gender and Invisibility:
Representations of Children in Fighting Forces

*In*attention is a political act (Enloe, 2000: xii).

Violence and armed conflict are commonplace in the everyday lives of many of the world's children[1]. Not only have millions of children been first-hand witnesses of war and the atrocities that invariably accompany armed aggression, but children also continue to be drawn into conflict as active participants. More than 250,000 soldiers under the age of 18 are part of fighting forces in conflicts in 41 countries around the globe (Coalition, 2004). While there is growing descriptive evidence of the conditions and factors underlying the phenomenon of child soldiery[2] in the developing world, much of the scholarly and policy literature have portrayed child soldiery as a uniquely male phenomenon and failed to include gender perspectives on armed conflict. Informed largely by traditional perceptions of armed conflict as a phenomenon occurring between males – perceptions reinforced by popular media images of boys armed with AK47s – girls are frequently deemed peripheral and rendered invisible within fighting forces. Girls' experiences of war have accounted for "the smallest percentage of scholarly and popular work on social and political violence" (Nordstrom, 1997:5) and the diverse roles they play both during and following war have only recently been acknowledged (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Keairns, 2003; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Veale, 2003).

Officials, governments, and international bodies frequently cover up, overlook, or refuse to recognize girls' presence, needs, and rights during and following armed conflict. Despite their relative invisibility, girls are used in fighting forces far more widely than is reported. Between 1990 and 2003, girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries and participated in conflict in 38 countries around the globe (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Girls appear to be most often present in armed opposition groups, paramilitaries and militias, yet they are also present in government forces. While the proportion of females in fighting forces varies according to geographic region, it generally ranges from 10% to 30% of all combatants (Bouta, 2005). In recent conflicts in Africa, girls have comprised 30 to 40% of all child combatants (Mazurana, et al., 2002: 105).

Importantly, when girls within armed groups *are* discussed, whether within the realms of academia, policy or the media, there has been a tendency for them to be portrayed predominantly as silent victims – particularly as 'wives', in tangential supporting roles, and as victims of sexual slavery (Denov, 2007). In contrast, boys in fighting forces have been depicted primarily as fighters, commanders and perpetrators of wartime atrocities – individuals to be feared and dreaded. While these dichotomous and gendered portrayals undoubtedly represent the experiences of some war-affected girls and boys, to characterize girls *solely* as victims of sexual violence and/or 'wives' and boys *solely* as violent perpetrators, presents a skewed picture of children's lived realities. In fact, research has consistently shown that girls and boys play complex and multiple roles in conflict, whereby *both* boys and girls associated with armed groups are severely victimized and involved in domestic and supporting activities, espionage, as well as active combat roles as fighters and commanders (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Maclure & Denov, 2006). Although highlighting girls' victimization is critical to advancing our understanding of girls' experiences of war and the profound

insecurities, human rights abuses, as well as the challenges they face both during and following armed conflict, a danger is that girls become personified as voiceless victims, often devoid of agency, moral conscience, and economic potential.

Given the relative inattention to girls in the context of armed conflict, three research projects supported by CIDA's Child Protection Research Fund aimed to highlight the complexities of girls' experiences both during and following armed conflict[3]. The studies gathered data, largely in the form of in-depth interviews, with cohorts of girls formerly in fighting forces, as well as other knowledgeable key informants[4].

Stavrou's (2004) study entitled *Breaking the Silence: Girls Abducted During Armed Conflict in Angola* sought to hear and document the voices of abducted girls in Angola, and garner their opinions on how the war affected them and how the peace process had begun to impact upon their lives. The project also aimed to generate policy dialogue and suggest best practices for mechanisms in demobilization.

Denov and Maclure's (2005) study entitled *Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Experiences, Implications and Strategies for Reintegration* sought to trace the experiences and psycho-social effects of children's (both boys and girls) involvement in the Sierra Leonean armed conflict as perpetrators, victims, or both. The study aimed to examine children's life histories and the circumstances that led to their involvement in armed conflict, the nature and extent of their involvement in hostilities, and the long-term effects of the experience.

McKay and Mazurana's (2004) study *Where are the girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War* endeavored to inform child protection advocacy at all levels about the presence of girls in fighting forces worldwide, with in-depth examination in the three study countries in order to facilitate the design of more responsive gender-based advocacy and programs.

The armed conflicts in Angola (1975-2002), Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Mozambique (1976-1992) and Northern Uganda (1986-present) have defied 'traditional' warfare between states in which there are clearly defined boundaries between civilians and combatants, between the frontline and the rear. Instead, as internal or civil wars, multiple armed groups and forces within existing state boundaries have fought these conflicts. As outlined in the Paris Principles (2007) an 'armed group' refers to groups distinct from armed forces as defined by Article 4 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict[5]. The wars in each of the above-named countries have been protracted and marked by extreme violence and brutality against civilians including physical, sexual, and psychological torture, disfigurement and mutilation and significant portions of the populations have become either refugees or internally displaced persons. The conflicts have left each country with devastated educational and health systems, stockpiles of weapons, and generations of adults and children, both boys and girls, severely affected by the economic, political, social, psychological and physical health effects of the war.

Although it is without question that *all* children, families, and entire communities are deeply affected by war in diverse ways, as noted earlier, the realities of girls in fighting forces have been largely unexplored. In response, this paper draws together the main findings of the three CIDA-funded studies concerning the realities, perspectives, and implications of girls in fighting forces. The paper

traces the experiences of these girls along a continuum from the time of their initial recruitment into the world of armed conflict, to their experiences in the aftermath of war. Assembling these findings not only consolidates current knowledge, learning, and scholarship on girls in fighting forces within the context of Africa, but may also provide a framework to inform policies and programs designed to address the needs of this unique population[6]. Given that the vast majority of girls in the three studies reported being abducted by an armed group under circumstances of extreme coercion, violence, and fear, the paper focuses primarily on the realities of abducted girls.

The paper begins by outlining girls' experiences with recruitment and initiation into a militarized world of violence and armed conflict. This includes how the majority of girls entered the fighting forces, the training they received, as well as their allotted roles in the armed group. Girls' victimization and insecurity within the fighting forces are then discussed, alongside the diverse ways in which girls' actively negotiated their insecurity through the use of agency, resourcefulness, and modes of resistance. The latter section of the paper addresses the lived realities of girls in the aftermath of war, and the challenges they continue to face during 'peacetime'.

The three studies collectively reveal four salient themes. First, whether in the heat of conflict or within post-war programming, girls are, for the most part, rendered *invisible and marginalized*. During conflict, the roles that they play are frequently deemed peripheral and insignificant by governments, national and international NGOs, policy makers, and program developers. In the aftermath of war, girls continue to be marginalized and discriminated against within formal disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes, as well as within the context of their families and communities.

Second, in spite of this profound invisibility and marginalization, it is clear that girls are *fundamental to the war machine* – their operational contributions are integral and critical to the overall functioning of armed groups. It is no accident that girls tend to be the last members of armed groups to be released by commanders and leaders.

Third, girls in fighting forces contend with overwhelming experiences of *victimization, perpetration, and insecurity*. During conflict, girls are subjected to grave violations of their human rights through forced recruitment, killing, maiming, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, abduction, forced marriage, and increased exposure to HIV/AIDS. Many are also forced to participate in brutal acts of violence. In the aftermath of conflict, girls arguably bear a form of secondary victimization through socio-economic marginalization and exclusion, as well as the ongoing threats to their health and personal security.

Finally, the three studies demonstrate that girls in fighting forces are not simply silent victims, but *active agents and resisters during armed conflict*. The studies reveal girls' remarkable attempts to defend and protect themselves during situations of severe violence and insecurity, as well as their efforts to bring about change for themselves and by themselves. Challenging the predominant portrayals of girls as emblematic victims, the studies underscore the resourceful and ingenious ways in which girls attempted to avoid, minimize, or resist wartime abuses, patriarchal power structures, and the culture of violence that surrounded them.

In light of these findings, the paper concludes with a discussion of the importance of a revised approach to portraying, understanding, and conceptualizing the realities of girls in fighting forces –

one that takes into account girls' presence, importance, active agency, skills, and resilience. Throughout the paper, direct citations from the interviewed girls are used to highlight their unique perspectives and experiences. As Nordstrom (1997:5, 36) has commented: "we need to ask girls to tell their own stories of war…rather than assuming the right to speak for them."

Girls' Initiation into Armed Conflict: Recruitment, Training & Role Allocation

Although girls within armed groups and forces have been typically neglected and rendered invisible by international scholars, governments, and policy-makers, the importance of girls to the war effort is exceedingly visible to armed groups and armed forces. In the case of armed groups, given that they cannot rely on state structures to maintain their forces, they actively recruit girls, whether voluntarily or by force. These armed groups are well aware that girls' labour, whether domestic or military in nature, is critical to the overall functioning of fighting forces, and may also add legitimacy and symbolic power to their war efforts (Bouta, 2005). Given their perceived value and significance, girls have become increasingly present in contemporary conflict. Based on the findings of the three studies, the following section explores how these girls are initiated into the world of armed conflict. More specifically, the section addresses girls' experiences with recruitment by armed groups, military training, and the roles that girls typically take on in the context of war.

Recruitment

Girls may become implicated in armed conflict through voluntary or forced recruitment. With regard to voluntary recruitment, girls appear to join fighting forces for a variety of overlapping reasons, including religious or political beliefs, to obtain food, shelter, medicine, and to seek revenge. McKay and Mazurana (2004: 97) note that girls joined Sierra Leone's Civil Defence Forces (CDF) as fighters often at the request of their CDF husbands or for reasons of survival. Girls may also join armed groups because they may perceive the armed group as providing critical protections from violence, whether from direct violence or violations by state forces and armed groups, or protection from unwanted marriages or sexual abuse at home. In some contexts, girls may choose to join armed groups in search of empowerment and emancipation in societies and cultures that enforce rigid and confining gender roles. As an example, within the context of the war in Mozambique, McKay and Mazurana (2004: 107) note that some of their participants reported joining Frente de Libertaçao Nacional (FRELIMO – the government forces) because of the appealing rhetoric and propaganda that promised new and emancipatory roles for women and young girls. One girl in Mozambique explained why she joined RENAMO (the opposition forces):

People were living in harsh conditions, no food. They have to fetch for everything, even [if] food in store nobody has money…The RENAMO say that all this would be over, okay. People would be free. People would have everything they need and they would handle the socialists and the country would be changed. So that is why I went with RENAMO…I wanted to find something different (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 108 – girl, Mozambique).

Importantly, however, many girls are forcibly abducted into armed groups. McKay and Mazurana (2004: 23) note that abduction occurs when "girls are kidnapped or seized by fighting forces or groups and force to serve in them, as confirmed in 27 countries" around the globe. Children in general and girls in particular are highly valued by armed groups as they are perceived as highly obedient and easily manipulated, they can swell the ranks if there is a shortage of adults, and ensure a constant pool of forced and compliant labour. Furthermore, girls and boys do not require

payment, do not have families to support, and their presence may pose moral challenges to enemy forces

Given the war-torn situations in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Northern Uganda and the upheaval throughout each of these countries, girls inevitably experienced feelings of insecurity and victimization prior to their abduction. However, it was clear that their sense of insecurity heightened – to the extreme – when they were coercively and violently separated from their families and communities and forced to join an armed group. Stavrou (2004) notes that in Angola, when entering and attacking a settlement, older women and women with young children were left behind while men were captured and killed while children aged ten and above were targeted and abducted. Although the girl participants in the three studies were abducted in diverse countries, contexts, and under varied circumstances, their experiences of forced recruitment were remarkably similar, involving surprise attacks, terror, attempts at escape, and ultimately abduction:

During the night, men came into our village and began to fire shots...There were shouts of 'get them, catch them' from all directions. My brother and I ran into a bedroom, locked the door and hid under the bed. But they kicked the door in…they found us and threatened us at gunpoint…They took all of [the family's] valuables and told my brother and I to carry them on our backs. I was carrying a huge load, including a mattress and it was too heavy for me – I couldn't even walk…I was 12 years old when captured and was with the [rebels] for 5 years (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl soldier, Sierra Leone).

Well (…) it was barely dawn when FAA captured us. The rain was falling lightly as we left there and I said, 'Oh mother, it's raining, let's go'. Yet we were already surrounded. I called out; it was utterly dark down there. 'Oh mother the government is coming!' At that time we didn't know the government. 'The government is coming. Yes, the government people. Today we're finished. Let's not run, if we run someone will die. They'll kill us.' We stayed still. We stayed like that for a while, and then suddenly we saw them – all of them saying 'stop there, stop there.' We froze. 'Grab the goats!' We grabbed the goats, and right then they tied them up. We thought they would take us all. Yet in the end they only took the youngest people.' (Stavrou, 2004 – girl Angola).

The girls interviewed spoke of their intense fear when they were forcibly separated from their loved ones:

On that day they separated us from our mothers – the mothers going back and we going forward. We were not allowed to look back. It was just that, to separate and to cry (Stavrou, 2004 – girl Angola).

These experiences of abduction were significant turning points in the girls' lives, necessitating fundamental and transformative changes in their roles, status, self-concepts and identities, ultimately having immediate and long-term effects on their lives. Abduction was essentially a first step in the profound militarization of girls' lives.

Training and Indoctrination

Following their abduction, most girls reported being involved in some form of military and/or ideological training to support the armed group. Angolan girls in Stavrou's (2004:43) study reported being trained in an array of activities to support the everyday functioning of armed groups that included pillaging techniques following an attack, loading and dismounting arms, defense techniques, accompanying male soldiers, sabotage, midwifery, welcoming, rousing, singing and dancing for special events.

Within the context of Northern Uganda, McKay and Mazurana (2004:74) note that 72% of girl respondents reported receiving weapons and military training and 8% received advanced training. Training began upon arrival to a base location in Southern Sudan and, except for girls who were pregnant or had small children, involved all abducted children. Training included forced singing and dancing at a frenzied pace. At noon, in the heat of the day, children were forced to run in wide circles or up and down hills. Any boy or girl who dropped from exhaustion was left to die. Those who survived the initial training were given weapons training and sent to fight Southern Sudanese populations, rebel forces, and/or the United People's Defense Force.

McKay and Mazurana (2004) also refer to training within the context of the armed groups of FRELIMO and RENAMO in Mozambique. One of their participants noted in relation to her training within the context of FRELIMO:

I never forget that during the war we [were] trained how to use guns. I know how to cock the gun. I know everything about guns (McKay & Mazurana, 2004 – girl, Mozambique).

All of the 40 girl respondents in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study reported some form of physical and technical military training as part of their initiation into Sierra Leone's rebel *Revolutionary United Front* (RUF). Yet the content and quality of the training varied significantly. For some, the training was cursory, especially when the RUF was engaged in protracted conflict and enemy attack was imminent. For other girls, however, training was more intense and lengthy. In all cases, it was designed to harden the girls so that they could fight fearlessly and be immune to killing. As this girl explained:

When we were captured…they took us to their base and trained us. They trained us to shoot guns, to run, escape and to fight….They taught us how to load our magazines, press the trigger, put it in rapid firing. Some forms of physical training [were also involved] like jogging….They also showed us how to set an ambush, how to attack and defend….It was strenuous….After the training with the guns, they would bring someone for us to kill. Each one of us was forced to kill (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Some girls recounted their discomfort with the entire training exercise and their fears of using small arms and weaponry. Several girls in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study reported that to enable them to train and fight more effectively, they were given alcohol and injected with drugs. Rarely did they know what they were being injected with[7]. Invariably, however, the drugs were effective – they engendered feelings of strength and a readiness to pick up their weapons and kill:

When they saw how nervous and uncomfortable we were [during the training], they gave us drugs. . . . Before the injection [in the arm], I was nervous, afraid and unsure of myself. Later, after the injection, I felt more confident (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

In addition to these forms of physical and technical training, the effectiveness of girl fighters was increased through indoctrination. In Angola, Stavrou (2004:51) notes that girls attended political lectures for this purpose. Within the context of Sierra Leone's rebel RUF, it was essential that girls develop a strong belief in, and affiliation with, the RUF cause of overthrowing Sierra Leone's government. Researchers who have explored the hidden world of professional torturers have observed that, as a part of their training, former civilian identities are broken down in an attempt to

build up a new identity based upon an identification with the torturer's group subculture, ideology and worldview (Crelinsten, 1995). Sierra Leonean girls in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study reported examples of similar ideological training by their captors that, in their view, made them more receptive to the cause of the rebels and thus more willing to fight:

When we were recruited there was a meeting held with all the recruits. At the meeting they were preaching that those in power were not giving all people equal access to benefits and that [the rebels] needed to get control….I was convinced by this meeting and it pushed me and motivated me to go to war (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

I did not willingly go and join them, but when I was abducted and my consciousness was raised about the movement, I became willing to fight (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

A factor that facilitated both the weapons training and the indoctrination of girls was that they were constantly exposed to violence, which eventually rendered it routine. Their experiences resonate with Kelman's (1995) observation about the normalization of violence. When individuals perpetrate acts of violence and torture, over time they tend to see themselves as performing a routine, even professional job. This sense of the routinization of violence was expressed by a number of the respondents in Denov & Maclure's (2005) Sierra Leone study. As the war dragged on, many girls came to view participation in killing as simply a normative act, whose senselessness they had learned not to question:

Killing was just part of the normal activities of the RUF…. Overcoming the enemy was part of our job….Once you were part of the fighting force, you should be seen killing someone even without a reason. This shows that you were committed and ready to work with them (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone)

Role Allocation

In the bush it is like being a slave, it's real slavery. Such suffering (Stavrou, 2004 – girl, Angola).

You had to forget everything about your house and your family…it was about survival, it was about living for that moment only (Stavrou, 2004 – girl, Angola).

Girls in all of the studies were required to perform an array of tasks to support the activities of the armed group. Their duties often varied according to their age, physical strength, and the circumstances of the armed group, but tended to involve domestic work, sexual slavery, and combat activities. Importantly, in all of the contexts, girls' roles were multiple and fluid, most often carrying out a variety of roles and tasks simultaneously. In each of the contexts, girls in fighting forces consistently made critical and valuable contributions to the overall operational functioning of the fighting forces. So much so, that they were often regarded by armed groups as prize possessions. McKay and Mazurana (2004: 121) have noted that girls are often the last members to be released by rebel groups, demonstrating their high value and worth.

Domestic & Supporting Work

Domestic work within the context of armed groups is often regarded as peripheral and insignificant (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). It is increasingly being recognized, however, that armed groups cannot function without such labour (Stavrou, 2004). Given an armed group's lack of resources, manpower, their need to keep moving, and their often-limited organizational structure, the domestic

activities and loads carried by girls are invaluable to the very survival and success of a fighting force. Girls associated with fighting forces in the three studies were relegated to a wide variety of domestic activities that contributed to the overall functioning of the armed group. Failing to perform one's domestic duties in a timely or efficient manner often led to harsh punishment, and in some cases death. At all times, girls were subjected to coercive male power and authority. Girls' responsibilities included cooking, washing dishes, fetching water and firewood, laundering, and taking care of younger children. Girls also participated in pillaging villages for food and other goods. Most girls were required to carry heavy loads of small arms, ammunition, food, young children, and looted goods over extremely long distances. The exhausting and seemingly interminable moving and serving others was an abiding image from the study in Angola:

Life was just walking from one place to another, by day and by night...my children were young and should not have been walking like that…At first you were crying, but then you had no more tears left (Stavrou, 2004 – girl, Angola).

The girl must cook, fetch water, sometimes for the aunt and the elder to take bath, she cooks but also must go to the hut to serve the elders, sometimes she doesn't sleep, she sleeps very late. At 7 or 8 pm she must dance [to entertain the soldiers], they must dance through the night. Sometimes from one minute to the other they decide she must go. Then she has to take the bundle. If it is too heavy somebody must help her put it on her head and then she leaves to bring food. It doesn't matter if it is night, time doesn't exist. It is pure suffering (Stavrou, 2004 – boys, Angola).

Girls in fighting forces often deliberately excelled at their domestic and/or supporting roles in order to avoid being sent into combat to shoot and kill.

Sexual Slavery

In all of the studies, sexual violence was reportedly widespread. As McKay and Mazurana (2004:58) note: "nearly all abducted girls are raped and girls associated with fighting forces almost universally report sexual violence." Gang rape and sexual assault by single individuals were reportedly common. As these girls from Sierra Leone remembered:

We were used as sex slaves. Whenever they wanted to have sexual intercourse with us, they took us away forcefully and brought us back when they finished with us. Sometimes, other officers took us up as soon as we were being finished with and subsequent ones were particularly painful…I don't even know who might have been the father of my child (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

One afternoon, two rebels raped me. It was very painful. I cried right through the act. But even when I cried for mercy, they wouldn't listen to me. They tied my hands…After the first man raped me I was helpless. By the time the second guy was on top of me, I didn't even know what was happening. When they had finished, I had blood between my legs and I couldn't walk because of the pain…I was ashamed of sitting among other people, I really felt like just dying (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl Sierra Leone).

Given the predominance of sexual violence, girls were at extremely high risk for sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, as well as an array of reproductive health problems. Moreover, numerous girls in each of the studies reported bearing children as a result of sexual violence. For example, in the context of Northern Uganda, 37% of the girl respondents, including nearly all the girl mothers, were pregnant with children conceived in captivity (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 88).

Alongside repeated sexual violence, many girls were reportedly forced to "marry" individual males within the fighting forces. Euphemistically referred to as "bush marriages" or "AK-47 marriages" in Sierra Leone, this was tantamount to sexual slavery whereby girls were deemed to be the (sexual) "property" of specific males in the armed group. As this girl in Sierra Leone revealed:

At the beginning, I was raped daily. At least one person would come to me for sex….I was every man's wife. But later, one of them, an officer, had a special interest in me. He then protected me against others and never allowed others to use me. He continued to [rape me] alone and less frequently (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

The sexual exploitation of girls also came in the form of sexual labour. For example, in Stavrou's (2004) study in Angola, girls were required to perform sexual acts to male soldiers during military campaigns, and as rewards to celebrate a victorious attack. Sexual labour also came in the form of sexual dances, which were to be performed by girls to maintain male soldiers' morale, and to ensure they remained awake and alert during critical times when enemy attack was imminent. Stavrou (2004) also reports that girls were obliged to provide sex to the elder in the house in which they were living and working as a domestic servant. As this Angolan girl revealed:

Whenever there was work to do it was the children…who had to do it. When they were a bit older the men started following them and they had a war marriage (Stavrou, 2004 – girl Angola).

Combat Activities

There has been a widespread assumption in the contexts of many armed conflicts that girls are not involved in combat activities. However, as the three studies illustrate, combat activities were a significant part of the duties of many of girls associated with fighting forces. McKay and Mazurana (2004) note that in Northern Uganda, many girls participated in front-line combat. As an example, according to their study respondents, children in the Gilva Unit, which contained over 200 boys and 100 girls, were all expected to fight.

In all of the studies some girls reported that when first captured, they initially held only domestic roles. However, later on they became part of the fighting forces. Other girls reported being forced to participate in combat only in situations where there was a lack of military power on the side of the fighting forces. Yet, for many girls, combat activities formed the crux of their involvement in armed conflict. As this girl from Sierra Leone explained:

Our only motive to exist was killing. That is the only thing that we thought about….I burned houses, captured people, I carried looted properties. I was responsible for tying people, and killing. I was not too good at shooting, but I was an expert in burning houses. This was less risky. We could just enter the house after the enemy had left the area and set it on fire with kerosene or petrol (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

In becoming fighters, girls often became perpetrators of severe acts of violence and atrocities. In a minority of cases, a few girls appeared to evolve from being frightened disoriented recruits into fierce combatants, steeped in a sense of collective purpose and power, and perpetuating the culture of militaristic violence:

I didn't have the mind to kill someone initially…but later on I enjoyed the wicked acts…I was responsible for killing anybody that was assigned to die. I was so happy and vigilant in carrying out this command (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

A minority of girls also gained powerful positions as leaders and commanders of other combatants. As an example, McKay and Mazurana (2004: 75) note that girls held command positions within Northern Uganda's Lord's Resistant Army (LRA) as captains, lieutenants and corporals. This respondent in Denov and Maclure's (2005) study was promoted to the rank of a commander:

I became a soldier and later a commander. My job was to mobilize soldiers and lead them to fight…As a commander, I had six [child] bodyguards who protected me…I was a commander not only for children but even for some soldiers (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Aside from direct combat roles, girls in the three studies reported taking on other critical and related military functions. Examples of such functions included trainers for incoming recruits, intelligence officers, spies, recruiters, medics, first aid technicians, and weapons experts.

The three studies reveal the coercion and fear surrounding girls' initiation into the world of armed conflict. Girls' experiences underscore that through forced recruitment and abduction, and brutal forms of training and indoctrination, sometimes involving forced drug use, girls had little choice but to submit to the dictates and authority of the armed group. The three studies also reveal that girls associated with fighting forces undertook multiple tasks and roles during armed conflict. Girls tended to be relegated to activities that reflected traditional gender roles including cooking, cleaning, looking after younger children and serving men, thus in many ways replicating the tasks that women and girls undertook in the broader society. However, many of the girls also reported engaging in non-traditional roles as active combatants and in some instances, military leaders and commanders. Participation in fighting forces thus at times provided opportunities for girls to achieve positions of power and authority and in some cases, learn new sets of skills that were not previously possible. What also becomes clear is the multiplicity of roles that girls took on simultaneously. McKay and Mazurana (2004:92) point out that 'wives' and 'fighters' should not be viewed as exclusive categories, as some of their respondents indicated that although their primary role was as a fighter, they were also forced to be 'wives'. In each of the contexts, regardless of their multiple roles and duties, the militarization of girls' lives, through abduction, training, indoctrination and role allocation inevitably fuelled and supported the conflicts because girls' productive and reproductive labour was critical to the overall functioning of fighting forces. As McKay and Mazurana (2004: 120-1) note: "women's and girls' labour in the fighting forces…was not incidental, but in most cases the foundation upon which the fighting force relied".

Negotiating Insecurity & Victimization: Girls' Agency and Resistance in Cultures of Violence

There has been mounting evidence suggesting that women and girls experience armed conflict differently than men and boys (Machel, 1996; McKay, 1998), with females usually being the most insecure, disadvantaged and marginalized (SAP Canada, 2003). This occurs because armed conflict often exacerbates the gender inequalities that exist in different forms and to varying degrees in all societies, and that make women and girls particularly vulnerable when conflict erupts. The direct effects of armed conflict on females include victimization through acts of murder, terrorism, torture, and rape, while the indirect effects include displacement, loss of home or property, family separation and disintegration, poverty, and illness (Ashford & Huet-Vaughn, 1997). For girls in fighting forces, the chronic quest for safety and security, regardless of the nature of their roles, is particularly challenging due to the vulnerability exacerbated by their gender, age and physical disadvantage (Fox, 2004; Denov, 2006). That girls within the context of armed conflict are frequently victims of harsh

violence, often under the threat of a gun, is evident. Yet a singular focus on situations of female victimization tends to oversimplify the layers of complexity that surround girls' experiences. It is critical to also recognize that girls may participate in violence, as well as actively resist and attempt to subvert structures of violence. To address such complexities, this section explores girls' experiences of victimization and insecurity within the armed groups. It also examines girls' agency and resistance – particularly the ways in which girls attempted to avoid, minimize or resist abuses and insecurities during their time amidst the fighting forces.

Victimization, the Culture of Violence, and Insecurity

The three studies collectively reveal the extreme forms of violence that appeared to pervade both the formal and informal cultures of the armed groups in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Northern Uganda. At the formal level, the command structures of the armed groups, as well as the ways in which the armed groups formally organized and carried out their missions were forged and conducted within a framework of threats, fear, brutality, and violence. At the informal level, the daily routines, informal values, and interactions within the armed groups, which were steeped in hierarchical and patriarchal power relations, threats, and fear, were similarly propagated and sustained through extraordinary violence. Both the formal structures and the informal practices of the armed groups ultimately point to a pervasive and overarching *culture of violence* whereby violence and the threat of violence appeared to permeate every aspect of girls' daily lives. As these girls from Sierra Leone and Angola explained:

There wasn't a single day in RUF territory that was trouble and violence free. People were always maltreated and any wicked act you can think of in this world was perpetrated by the rebels (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

I was so afraid I used to cry, but it didn't matter if you cried – it was still the bush (Stavrou, 2004, 2004 – girl Angola).

The violence and victimization experienced by girls ranged along a continuum from verbal abuse to outrageous acts of cruelty and reflected the patriarchal power relations and gendered oppression inherent in the armed group. Girls, who were ultimately subservient to male authority, suffered severe physical abuse at the hands of those who commanded them. They were also witnesses to brutal forms of violence against men, women and children, both combatants and civilians, which were clearly intended as public displays of horror. An aura of terror, repeatedly articulated, was a key factor in ensuring cohesion and obedience within the group. Such terror was reflected in a statement by a Sierra Leonean girl who was branded with the letters "RUF" and "AFRC" on her breast to prevent her from fleeing the group:

[People] cried while they were waiting to be branded. I didn't cry openly but I cried in my heart. If you cried openly they would ask you: 'Do you want us to wash you or to brand you?' 'Washing' us meant killing. After they branded me I just cried and cried (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Moreover, children were intimidated with terrifying warnings that any attempts to escape their captors would be met with death. This Angolan girl explained:

There in the base where I was, they caught a girl who had left a one year old baby behind when she tried to escape. They went after her and caught her and killed her when they brought her back. Everybody had to assist. They put a

red bank across her eyes and then they killed her. They did it to make the others afraid so that they would not try to escape (Stavrou, 2004 – girl Angola).

Girls' experiences of violence brought forth a profound sense of *insecurity* on a multitude of levels. As has been demonstrated in recent academic and policy literature on security studies, the concept of 'security' no longer refers solely to the security of territory or of states. Instead, with the increasing recognition of 'human security', individuals and communities are seen as the key point of reference and it is argued that security policies must be more highly integrated with strategies for promoting human rights, democracy and development (Weissberg, 2003). The United Nations notes:

Human security means…protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations…it means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity (United Nations, 2003: 4).

The security of girls in fighting forces was constantly at risk within a multitude of domains. Girls lacked access to adequate food and nutrition, health care, and lived in contexts of dire poverty. For those who were forcibly separated from their families and communities, the security and survival of traditional communities, cultures and values were put severely at risk. Moreover, girls' personal and physical security was constantly threatened through acts of torture, violence and abuse.

In all three studies, the girls' testimonies revealed the extent of their daily victimization in the forms of sexual violence, physical and psychological abuse, threats, forced marriages, childbearing and child rearing, domestic chores and supportive tasks that girls were subjected to during the conflict. These tasks were in addition to their duties as fighters, and in some cases commanders. Such constraining and vulnerable circumstances may seemingly limit girls' capacity to protect and assert themselves and may perpetuate a conceptualization of girls as mere victims of conflict. However, as the studies in Sierra Leone and Angola reveal, girls nevertheless attempted to actively negotiate these victimization experiences and gendered insecurities with agency, resistance and resourcefulness.

Girls' Agency and Resistance[8]

Given the frequent focus on the wartime victimization of girls, relatively few studies have attempted to articulate or understand the ways in which war-affected girls actively seek to ensure their own security within the highly insecure context of armed conflict, as well as their roles as active agents[9]. Girls in fighting forces made conscious attempts to protect themselves and negotiate their security during their time with the armed group. This was accomplished by developing strategies to navigate, traverse and cope with insecure situations. Such attempts to negotiate their safety were done through a variety of means including the use of small arms, through 'marriages' to powerful commanders, through the perpetration of severe acts of violence, through subtle and bold acts of resistance. These mechanisms, which carried varying degrees of success, challenge the common view of girls as mere victims of conflict and instead demonstrate girls' unique capacity for agency, as well as their resourcefulness, and resilience.

Importantly, highlighting the complexity of girls' experiences, it appears that girls were *simultaneously* victims and perpetrators and continually drifted between committing acts of violence and being victims of violence perpetrated by others. This section will explore girls' acts of agency and

resistance in greater detail. As a result of their particular focus on issues of female agency and resistance, the data collected in Sierra Leone by Denov and Maclure (2005) will be relied upon extensively.

Agency: Power and Small Arms

For the Sierra Leonean girls in Denov and Maclure's (2005) study, when initially drawn into the conflict, the forced use of small arms and light weapons was described by girls as an acute source of insecurity and brought about extreme fear, anxiety, and bitterness. As these girls from Sierra Leone explained:

I wasn't very good at [using weapons]. They took us to a base to learn how to use the weapons. I didn't learn very well. At one point my gun misfired and I was nearly killed…I really had fear in my heart (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

It was not the place for a little girl to hold a gun. I was so bitter…I wanted an education, not to know how to fire a gun (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

However, as the conflict dragged on, and through ongoing observations and relations with their commanders and other child soldiers, girls reported becoming increasingly aware that carrying a gun often increased their protection within the ranks of the RUF and, in some cases, decreased their chances of victimization. In light of this, girls came to perceive small arms as a way to increase their safety and security and, reflecting both their agency and resourcefulness, over time, became eager to possess their own weapon:

I was eager to become a soldier and have my own gun so that I would be able to resist threats and harassment from other soldiers (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

The gun became my bodyguard and protector. The gun was power and that's why I was anxious to have one (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Moreover, ownership and use of a gun often brought girls a sense of power, authority and supremacy, particularly over civilians:

I felt powerful when I had a gun. As long as you are holding a gun, you have power over those who don't. It gave me more status and power (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Girls' feelings of power and confidence in relation to handling weaponry must, however, be seen within the context of gender dependency and subservience. Girls appear to have experienced a sense of release from previous relations of victimization and submission. More specifically, some girls were able to reframe and transform their original fear and insecurities of small arms into instances of supremacy and power.

Agency: 'Marriage' to a Powerful Commander

Marriage and sexual relations are often referred to as necessary exchanges for the survival and protection of girls associated with fighting forces (Dinan, 2002). In what have been called 'sex for soap' exchanges, some females may try to negotiate their hygienic and food securities "by using their

positions as women (being [sexually] available to men)" (Lyons, 2004:191, 271). Others may seek protection from physical and sexual abuse through sex or marriage (Ibañez, 2004). Depending on the severity of the power dynamics, marriage and sexual relations may be perceived as either active or passive on the part of the girls.

As noted earlier, the reality of sexual violence was a devastating feature of everyday life for girls associated with fighting forces in each of the studies. Amidst a powerful patriarchal structure, girls became mere 'property' of males, with their bodies being used as resources to be exploited, and even as gifts and rewards. Girls in each of the contexts were thus constantly aware of the potential threat and danger of sexual violence by their adult commanders, as well as other males within the armed group.
Within the context of forced marriage, girls therefore realized the importance of actively aligning themselves with a high-ranking male:

It was more advisable to have a husband than to be single. Women and girls were seeking [the attention of] men – especially strong ones for protection from sexual harassment (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Although these 'marriages' to individual male commanders were often highly repressive, violent and abusive, they were preferable to the alternative of being ongoing victims of gang and individual rape by countless members of the fighting forces[10]. As this girl from Sierra explained:

When one of the commanders proposed love to you, sometimes you had to accept even if you really were not willing to co-operate. This was preferable to being gang-raped (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

'Marriage' to a powerful commander not only protected girls from daily sexual violence and physical abuse of other males in their group, but also elevated their overall status within the armed group. McKay and Mazurana (2004) note that in Sierra Leone, 'wives' of commanders held considerable power and influence within RUF compounds. For example, when a commander was in the field or on a mission, his captive 'wife' or 'wives' often controlled the compound. These 'wives' were sometimes in charge of small boys units (SBUs) and small girl units (SGUs) and could order punishment of child soldiers for disruptive behaviour (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 94). Sierra Leonean girls from Denov and Maclure's (2005) study reiterate this power and protection sometimes available to girls through 'marriage':

The girls who were serving as wives were treated better, and according to the rank and status of their husbands…[My husband] gave me protection [against sexual assault] from the other men (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).
Girls who were wives of senior officers were treated according to the status of their husbands, so it was good for any girl to have a senior officer as a lover. They had more power and status (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Moreover, as the study in Angola revealed, girls attempted to enter into such strategic unions because, with time, they learned that pregnancy and bearing children offered protection from bullying and harassment, and importantly, allowed these girls to remain at the camp instead of being constantly out on marches or involved in combat. As this Angolan girl revealed:

Being pregnant liberated the person from work even if there was work to do…the suffering reduced [if you had children] because there were places that children could not go (Stavrou, 2004 – girl, Angola).

'Marriages' to a powerful male in the fighting force can thus be seen as a clever strategy to actively seek out protection, power, status, and survival. Moreover, these strategies serve as significant examples of girls' abilities to negotiate and, in some cases, thwart or limit their own potential victimization through the use of conventional gender roles.

Agency: Perpetrating Acts of Violence

Being forced to live within an overarching culture of violence, as time went on, girls, through a combination of indoctrination, terror, de-sensitization, and militaristic training, often became active participants in conflict (Maclure & Denov, 2006; Denov & Maclure, 2007). Actions that were initially alien and frightening eventually became synonymous with expressing their new group identity, and perversely, were seen as a source of recreation, excitement, and skill. As noted by Denov & Maclure (2005) in the context of Sierra Leone, the more aggressive girls were seen to be and the more destruction and looting they undertook, the more valued they were within the ranks of the RUF. Girls became increasingly conscious of the fact that the more violent they were, the safer they became within the armed group:

I committed a lot of violence…We were cherished by the senior officers for our wicked deeds (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Denov and Maclure (2005) note that engaging in extreme forms of violence also brought privileges within Sierra Leone's RUF, such as better access to food and looted goods, and in some cases led to promotion within the ranks. Promotion to the rank of 'commander' was deemed to be the peak of success within the RUF:

Very violent and obedient soldiers were given positions as commanders. You needed to show enthusiasm, be very active during combat and terrorize and abduct civilians… I was very active in combat and also captured a lot of people, including children. This contributed to my elevation to the status of a commander (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Although a minority of respondents in Denov and Maclure's study reported being promoted to a commander, those who did recalled this event with nostalgia and even pride. The promotion elevated their status and allowed them to lead their own units of child combatants and contributed to their protection through their entourage of child bodyguards:

I was a commander not only for children but also for soldiers older than myself. Commanders were generally treated better regardless of their age or sex. I had six bodyguards...They were very loyal and they did everything I ordered without questioning…As commanders we needed bodyguards to boost our morale and to show other people our status. [This was important] because we didn't have badges, uniforms, or crowns to depict our status…I was given a lot more status and protection as a commander (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

It is entirely possible that some girls came to embrace the power of being a perpetrator and the rewards stemming from their violent actions. However, extreme acts of violence appeared to ensure girls' survival, frequently reduced their own victimization, and at times assured them higher status in the military ranks.

Resistance

Strategies of resistance by women in conflict situations have been documented across several continents (Jacobs, 2000). Research has found that females may in engage in acts of resistance that include among others, refusal to act, refusal to assent to violence, silence, escape, and termination of pregnancy in the cases of rape and ethnic cleansing tactics (Jacobs et al., 2000). For girls living among fighting forces where obedience to authority and conformity to the values of the armed group were imperative to their very survival, there was little room for defiance or opposition. Nonetheless, despite the potential consequences of injury and even death for non-compliance, many girls engaged in acts of resistance. Four forms of resistance will be discussed namely resistance to sexual violence, the establishment of close and sometimes secret friendships with other girls and women, refusal to kill during battle, and forms of escape.

In response to ongoing sexual violence, participants in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study in Sierra Leone were found to use ingenious and resourceful forms of resistance that protected them from sexual violence. For example, one girl would pretend that she was menstruating which thwarted any potential sexual victimization:

[To avoid being raped] I would fix a pad as if I was observing menstruation (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Other girls reported using violent forms of resistance to retaliate against male perpetrators of sexual assault:

I stabbed one guy to death – he was always harassing me for sex. On that day he wanted to rape me and I told him that if he tried, I would stab him. He underestimated me and he never knew I had a dagger. He met me alone in the bush on my way to town after using the bush toilet. I knew that he and others were observing my movements…and I took the dagger along [to protect me from] rapists. As he attempted to rape me, I stabbed him twice…I was tired of the sexual harassment. He later died [from the stabbing] (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Denov and Maclure (2005) and Stavrou (2004) found that girls resisted the culture of violence through the establishment of close friendships and (sometimes secret) solidarity among other girls and women. Although some would argue that the creation of strong female relationships can be considered a common survival strategy used by war-affected females historically, one must consider the unique context in which the girls were living. Within the context of the armed groups in Sierra Leone and Angola, any form of socializing or sharing of their current thoughts, feelings, or information about their former civilian lives was strictly forbidden and highly punishable, even by death. As this girl explained:

If we came from the same place and we knew each other, we would share a few jokes or sit together and share thoughts and memories of home. This would go on until perhaps one of commanders came and said, 'What are you sitting here for? What are you doing?' We would then pretend we were doing something else so that they would not learn of what we were actually engaged in. Because at those times, if you were caught in acts like that you [could be killed] (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Under these circumstances, girls took considerable risk in fostering supportive female relationships and defied the rules of the armed group. These relationships not only brought a degree of solace, comfort and solidarity, but also created a unique physical and emotional 'space' where males were

inherently excluded. These girls implicitly underscore the importance of sharing their experiences with other girls:

One day a girl was brutally raped and she bled so badly she died…I had heard about it and was so affected by it, but I was afraid to discuss it…Two girls began discussing it and I overheard them. We all sat down and started sharing our stories [of rape]…I felt much better after this because I thought that I was the only one to have this happen to (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

[Smile] My friends were really good. There all of us abducted girls lived like sister, yes…we used to tell our stories…sometimes we just sang church songs…they didn't let us stay together very often, everybody stays in her house because if we are together they think that we are talking about escaping (Stavrou, 2004: girl Angola).

It became apparent that girls also resisted military authority, command structure and participation in violence. For example, some girls in Denov and Maclure's (2005) study deliberately refused to kill. During combat they fired their weapons in such a way that human targets were able to escape without being hurt. As these former combatants from Sierra Leone explained:

While on patrol if we came across [unknown] people they would order us to kill them. But I was not really interested in killing people…[I] would normally fire, intentionally not aiming well. [I] would then report that the mission was completed without really killing the people (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

My first time in combat I was just firing sporadically. I was not really aiming at anything at all. I wasn't interested in harming anyone (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Girls in Angola, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda also recounted collective efforts at resistance by attempting to escape the armed group, all the while being fully aware of the consequences of violence or death if they were discovered. McKay and Mazurana (2004) note that although normally exempt from fighting, in some cases pregnant girls or girls with small children volunteered to participate in combat as a means of attempting to escape. As this girl from Northern Uganda reported:

I fought with my baby on my back. I asked to go. I asked for a weapon. It was the only way [to] escape and I did. I escape (McKay & Mazurana, 2004 – girl, Northern Uganda).

Other girls reported being unsuccessful at their attempts to escape. This girl from Angola revealed:

The second time they caught me was when we went to Pomba. When we were going into Pomba, we ran away. When we were running we got confused and thought that we were going to a place where the other people were. But in the end, we ran back to a place where they caught us…Since then we suffered. They took us with ropes, saying that we ran away to betray them (Stavrou, 2004: Girl – Angola).

Although numerous respondents reported being unsuccessful in their attempts to escape and to protect themselves and others from violence and victimization, these efforts at resistance nonetheless reveal examples of girls' remarkable courage and ingenuity, as well as the ability to calculate and cope. However, as McKay and Mazurana (2004: 120) maintain, it is essential that the coping strategies and resilience demonstrated by girls not be mistaken for empowerment.

The three studies reveal the culture of violence and profound insecurities that girls were forced to contend with on a daily basis within armed groups. However, in spite of their experiences of physical, psychological and sexual victimization, girls' capacity to act as agents and to attempt to bring about change for themselves, by themselves, is evident. Girls found creative and subversive ways to avoid, minimize and/or resist abuses and insecurities. Following girls' coercive introduction to the war system, girls began to understand the intricacies and internal workings of the system and subsequently created different ways to master it. These attempts at mastery were invariably shaped by the unique individual (psychological, personality, maturity, physical and mental strength, health), and contextual (structural, spatial, relational, geographic) opportunities and circumstances of each girl and were inevitably both formed and constrained by the dynamics of the conflict zone. The experiences of the girls ultimately reveal that girls were neither purely emblematic victims, nor were they hardened perpetrators. Instead, it would appear that girl combatants continually drifted between committing acts of violence, and simultaneously being victims of violence by others (Denov & Maclure, in press).

Continued Invisibility: Post-Conflict Marginalization and Survival

With the end of conflict came critical transitions for girls. In most cases, girls were suddenly removed from their militarized surroundings and, in a relatively short period of time, were compelled to reintegrate into a civilian existence. When exploring the post-conflict realities of girls formerly in fighting forces, what once again stands out is that in spite of the critical roles they played during the conflict period, girls in the three studies were largely invisible in the post-conflict context. Girls' invisibility was evidenced in their exclusion from formal DDR programming, as well as their marginalization within the health, social, educational, and economic realms. Girls were also subjected to profound community stigmatization and rejection as a result of their former affiliation with armed groups. In this sense, the marginalization and discrimination that so many girls experienced during conflict often continued in the war's aftermath. This section discusses these challenges.

Exclusion from Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) Programming

Given the major humanitarian disasters that have engulfed many conflict-ridden countries in Africa, an understandable element of urgency has led national and international efforts to conceptualize and implement post-war development assistance projects and programs, particularly for children. Within post-war contexts, much attention has been directed towards the demobilization of child combatants, the reunification of families, the reconstruction and expansion of national educational systems, and the integration of young people into productive community life. However, there are clear indications that girls formerly associated with fighting forces continue to be marginalized within such initiatives. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs in the contexts of Angola, Mozambique and Sierra Leone provide salient examples of post-conflict gendered exclusion by privileging male combatants at the expense of women and girls in fighting forces.

Disarmament[11], demobilization[12] and reintegration[13] (DDR) are said to be crucial to increasing security, public safety and protection in the aftermath of conflict, as well as promoting peace. The 1998 report by the UN Secretary General on 'The causes of conflict and the promotion of durable

peace and sustainable development in Africa' lists 'the reintegration of ex-combatants and others into productive society' as a priority of post-conflict peacebuilding. Similarly, the Brahimi Report referred to demobilization and reintegration as key to post-war stability and to reducing the likelihood of conflict recurring (United Nations, 2000).

In Angola, Stavrou (2004) explains that formerly abducted girl soldiers, who were considered 'dependents' of soldiers, slipped through the formal DDR process and received little or no support for return or reintegration in the post-conflict period. Stavrou maintains that DDR programming was planned specifically for male combatants; there was no official recognition of girls' military status, girls often had no guns to hand in, and were regarded as too young to be considered as soldiers. Moreover, girls were said to be involved with 'women's work' that did not qualify for demobilization benefits. In order to become secondary beneficiaries of the demobilization process, women and girls in Angola needed an official or 'goodwill' link to a male soldier's family. Interestingly, only one of the 40 girls Stavrou interviewed was formally recognized as a soldier and received a limited, once-off demobilization payment.

In post-conflict Mozambique, McKay and Mazurana (2004) note that UN and government DDR programs privileged male combatants at the expense of women and girls; few former female combatants passed through Mozambique's DDR or received benefits. One reason for this was that the government sought to conceal that fact that girls had been part of their fighting forces. As one of their informants noted:

Basically when we talk about girls and demobilization, we are talking about something that never happened (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 111).

In Sierra Leone, the number of female combatants was grossly underestimated by those responsible for planning and conducting the DDR programme (Denov & Maclure, 2005). According to demobilization figures, between 1998 and December 2003 approximately 6,787 children were formally demobilized – 6,281 boys and a mere 506 girls (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The very small proportion of demobilized girls stems in part from their inability to benefit from the initial "cash for weapons" approach to DDR, which was highly exclusionary[14]. In phases I and II of the programme, the "wives" of male combatants, as well as their dependents, were not eligible for entry. Many girls reported being ordered to hand in their weapons prior to demobilization, and were left behind as their male colleagues were transported to assembly centres. Other girls indicated that their guns were taken away by their commanders and were given to male fighters, or in some cases, sold to civilians who then reaped the financial benefits of the DDR programme. On other occasions, girls used small arms that were provided communally and thus did not possess their "own" weapons and were simply not deemed to be primary fighters. This Sierra Leonean girl noted:

DDR was not organized, unreliable and biased. They slotted their relations who were not combatants, into the program. These were the people that were benefiting so much. DDR would go on the radio and make announcement that ex combatants should go for their allowances the following day, but by the time you get there, they have changed (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

In all of the above-noted contexts, given that girls' salient roles within armed groups were not formally acknowledged or recognized, the vast majority of girls in fighting forces in the three studies were excluded from DDR. As a result, many girls experienced 'spontaneous reintegration' whereby

in the aftermath of the conflict girls were forced to assimilate directly into their communities, return to new communities, or drift to camps for the internally displaced in search of alternative forms of support. Without formal mechanisms of assistance, spontaneous reintegration left most girls to fend for themselves and their children under particularly extremely challenging circumstances. Ultimately, by downplaying the integral roles of female combatants in each of these contexts, the DDR programs had the effect of extending gender-based insecurity and power differentiation into the post-conflict era.

Health Issues

War-affected girls suffer severe physical and psychological health problems post-conflict. Health problems that were noted in the three studies included chronic head and stomach aches, problems from war-related wounds and beatings, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, diarrhea, parasitic infections and malnutrition.

Girls also experienced gender-specific health problems that were directly related to wartime sexual violence. Gynecological problems as a result of rape included genital injury, infections, vesico-vaginal fistula, and complications from self-induced or clandestine abortions. Girls were also at high risk for sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. While many girls may be infected, few are tested. As McKay and Mazurana (2004: 15) note, HIV/AIDS represents a major threat to girls and their children, many of whom will become orphans or die themselves. Many girls in fighting forces also sustained serious harm from childbearing, suffering gynecological problems because of infections or complications in the birthing process. In Sierra Leone, girls associated with the RUF were sometimes subject to extremely dangerous practices: one technique to initiate childbirth involved jumping on a girl's pregnant belly, while to postpone birth, some pregnant girls had their legs bound (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In the aftermath of the war, these practices often left girls with both short and long-term gynecological problems.

There are devastating psychological after-effects of wartime sexual violence. Girls reported experiencing anguish, flashbacks, persistent fears, difficulty re-establishing intimate relationships, a blunting of enjoyment in life, shame, and being unable to have normal sexual or childbearing experiences. Girls forced to carry and bear the children of their aggressors sometimes suffered serious mental, physical and spiritual harm (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In the longer-term, girls reported depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, and anger (Denov & Maclure, 2005):
I feel depressed most of the time. I sometimes feel there is no hope for me…I just think of ending my life (Denov & Maclure, 2005).

Despite these many health problems, services, particularly reproductive health services, are seldom available to girls. The lack of accessible health facilities, and lack of money for transport, medical treatment and drugs has meant that the health status of survivors of sexual violence is often poor. As this Angolan girl explained:

On the days when you have to go to the hospital you do not eat. You need to borrow money to go to the hospital or buy medicines, and you might have to work for the person who lent you money so as to pay it off…When a person is ill the only thing that matters is money, without money you do nothing (Stavrou, 2004 – Girl, Angola).

Even when services are available, they are often not designed for the unique needs of girls (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Moreover, many girls reportedly avoid seeking medical treatment for sexually-related health problems out of fear of being judged and rejected.

Social Exclusion and Community Rejection

Family and/or community support is undeniably critical to war-affected children's long-term well-being and overall successful reintegration. It has been suggested that a trusting relationship with a caring adult, as well as living with parents may be a critical factor in children's recovery from the scourge of war (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). As a result, those children who have family and community support are likely to fare much better than those children who experience post-conflict rejection and social exclusion. Girls formerly associated with fighting forces, particularly those that returned with children, appeared to have higher rates of rejection by community members than their male counterparts (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Girls in Angola, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda reported that their former status as ex-combatants had put them at risk of social stigmatization and community ostracism, and thus had impeded their own efforts and those of supportive civil society institutions, to reintegrate them into their communities.

McKay and Mazurana (2004) maintain that a girl's reintegration into the community post-conflict appears to be impacted by the pattern of how she was taken into a fighting force, the military role she played and the way in which she returned. As an example, they note that a cohort of "girls abducted and who return to the community together will usually be viewed more favorably than girls who return unaccompanied or remain in a force for an extended period and return with one or more children" (p. 34-5). In the context of Angola, Stavrou (2004) notes that community acceptance is largely dependent upon being accepted by a family member in the area of return, or returning with a husband. However, 42% (17) of 'wives' in her study were abandoned by their war 'husbands' on return to his area of origin, leaving the 'wives' to fend for themselves and their children in an often hostile community context. Moreover, Stavrou (2004:91) notes that many Angolan girls refused to return to their home communities because they feared rejection from their families. They were also concerned with being stigmatized and ostracized as a result of their former affiliation with the armed group. The anonymity of spontaneous reintegration thus provided girls with protection from discrimination, yet simultaneously concealed their need for physical or psychosocial support (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

The studies have also revealed that the behaviours girls learned within the armed groups, which ultimately helped them survive the armed conflict, may hinder their reintegration into their communities. For example, behaviours that severely violate accepted gender norms – such as being aggressive, quarrelsome, using abusive language, abusing drugs and smoking – appear to have an impact on a girls' ability to readapt to her community and the community's response to her (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 36).

As a result of verbal abuse, threats, and discrimination, in Angola, Stavrou (2004:60) found that very few of the formerly abducted girl soldiers she interviewed lived with their parents, brothers, sisters or extended family members in the post-conflict context. Girls in Denov and Maclure's (2005) study in Sierra Leone experienced similar post-conflict rejection:

People are rejecting me so this is proving a very difficult aspect in my life. Most of them do not encourage me. They always remind me of joining the rebels. I want them to accept me, to forgive me and allow me to be part of the community (Denov & Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

Since I came back, I have not been one year with my people, but there have just been problems, problems, problems….You know, they don't love me anymore. They don't love me anymore….They despise me now (Denov & Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

Importantly, in the studies in Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda girls appeared to suffer rejection not only as a result of their former affiliation with the armed group, but also because they had been victims of sexual violence[15]. Given the importance placed upon virginity at marriage, girls were often deemed 'unmarriageable' following disclosures of rape. In a society where girls are valued primarily for their future roles as wives and mothers, and where marriage is the best option for obtaining economic security and protection, being 'unmarriageable' often left girls feeling profoundly at risk, both socially and economically.

Despite the social exclusion that many girls faced in the aftermath of conflict, two important factors appeared to contribute to their community reintegration including purification ceremonies and rituals, as well as the development of peer-support structures and solidarity. Community rituals – some of which are gender-specific – may combine prayer, song and dance and may be conducted by religious or traditional leaders, and healers. Alongside welcoming the child back to the community, rituals seek to drive out dead spirits, call upon the protection and assistance of ancestors and protect the community from evil influences. Given that communities and families in traditional societies may experience shame because they failed to protect their girls during the war, spiritual and religious rituals may be important for the community as well as for the girls themselves (McKay & Mazurana, 2004: 50). Rituals can thus facilitate the process of healing, reconnect the child to the community, facilitate social reintegration, and positive psychosocial effects. Former child soldiers in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study noted that community-cleansing rituals helped children to successfully reintegrate into their communities. Rituals were said to provide the children with a feeling of acceptance, importance, and an opportunity to begin fresh following the scourge of war. While cleansing rituals may be successful and important reintegrative tools, they can also be exclusionary. For example, in the Angola study, Stavrou (2004) found that none of the girls she interviewed reported being included in purification rituals, as in the aftermath of war it was assumed that they had not participated in combat, had not killed, and did not represent a threat to the community or national stability. Instead, such purification and reintegration rituals were reserved solely for returning male soldiers. However, she notes that a lack of resources may also explain why girls were not received in any ritualized, traditional or ceremonial manner.

Girls also ensured their post-conflict reintegration through the creation of informal support structures and peer-support networks. Both Denov and Maclure (2005) and Stavrou (2004) found that girls had formed critical bonds with other former girl soldiers and often lived with them following their release from the fighting force. More specifically, 20% of the formerly abducted girls in Stavrou's study were living together with other formerly abducted girls and provided each other with mutual social, economic, and emotional support. Moreover, the emotional and practical support from women relatives and friends was deemed by Angolan girls as crucial to their healing and problem solving.

Educational Issues

In the aftermath of conflict, thousands of girls and boys have no skills beyond those they had acquired in fighting or in surviving the conflict. There is now widespread acknowledgment that when peace is brokered among warring parties, the re-construction of education systems must be a top priority. In a statement to the UN Special Session on Children in 2002, the director of FAWE stated that peace is a phenomenon that needs to be taught and to be learned: 'Sustainable peace must be built on a bedrock of quality basic education for all children' (Thorpe, 2002:3). However, girls continue to be the least educated sector of the population in most developing countries (UNICEF, 2005). For girls formerly in fighting forces, McKay and Mazurana (2004) note that 38% of their study population in Northern Uganda had received some schooling prior to, during, or after the war. Of those, 84% had been in school prior to entry into the fighting forces. Yet, only 11% of them had been able to return to school after the war and only two new students enrolled. In the study in Angola, Stavrou (2004) reports that only five (12%) of girls had family or friends who could subsidize their education and were able to attend school.
From a child rights perspective, education is regarded as essential for instilling stability and normalcy in the lives of children who have experienced the trauma of civil war (Kuterovac & Kontac, 2002). By affording space for children to learn and play together, and to receive psychosocial support in environments that are familiar and safe, the swift re-establishment of schools and other forms of education is widely seen as a significant 'life-affirming activity' (Machel, 1996: 92) that can restore hope and purpose among children who have been emotionally and often physically overcome by the scourge of war. As these girls from Sierra Leone noted:

This war has made progress impossible for me. I want to go to school. So I am appealing to the government to support me, and children like me, to return to school. That is what I really want for myself. We are ready to learn (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

It is the educational opportunities that I want...You see, having lost both parents in the war, an education would serve as my mother and my father (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

Economic Marginalization

Community rejection, the loss of educational and marketable job skills due to time in fighting forces and little or no government assistance for female ex-combatants appeared to contribute to long-term, post-conflict cycles of poverty. With few structural supports, girls formerly associated with armed groups, and particularly girl mothers, continued to live in poverty with no educational, financial prospects or familial assistance. For their livelihoods, most girl respondents were engaged in petty trading, agricultural labour, and odd jobs at very low pay. Denov and Maclure (2005) note that in response to continued social and economic marginalization, some girls had turned to prostitution, petty crime and drug use in order to cope and survive in the post-war period:

I now live on prostitution….I live in the street exposed to all kinds of danger and I am tired of living in the street. To cope, I take drugs; either cocaine or brown-brown [crack]. [When I take the drugs] I feel relieved and I don't think of any problems, no bad memories of the war, and no sadness (Denov and Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

It appeared that virtually none of the girls in any of the studies were employed in the formal sector. Stavrou (2004) notes that unless young women received monetary support from their family of origin or from their husband, it was almost impossible to generate income or to access education

and shelter. It also appeared that young women had a greater possibility for work prospects, as well as family and community integration if they were younger, single, and had no children. As Stavrou (2004) writes: "while the formerly abducted girl soldiers are proving to be tireless micro traders, the sustainability of their enterprises are constrained by the lack of capital and marketing skills, not to mention the fact that the informal sector itself is highly insecure" (p. 95). Stavrou (2004: 82) asserts that most of the girls in her study reported being starving and not having the bare necessities to meet their needs and the needs of their children. This Angolan girl noted:

Here there is no one to help me…And so I go to sleep without eating…I have no one to go to ask, because people do not give anything…I go to church but just like this (in her one set of clothes). I go because I want to be buried; I don't want to be buried like a dog (Stavrou, 2004 – Girl, Angola).

Post-Conflict Disillusionment

In the aftermath of conflict, there is often an expectation that with the end of protracted violence and war, people's lives and circumstances will inevitably improve. However, girls' post-conflict reality was quite different. Aside from receiving minimal support and assistance, in a rapid time span, girls were confronted with the reality of having to establish new 'civilian' identities that depended not on skills of military prowess and courage under fire, but on extraneous factors such as access to health care, family and community support, education, and remunerative work – factors that were sorely lacking for many girls when the wars ended. Also, girls faced the need to be reintegrated into norms and institutions from which they had been isolated, often for years. In attempting to forge new social relationships, caution was critical given the potential for reprisals as a result of their former ties with the armed groups.
For some girls, the conflict may, in some instances, have provided opportunities, limited power, and rewards. When the guns fell silent many girls found themselves in a grim world of boredom, poverty, and disillusionment (Denov & Maclure, 2007). Within these circumstances, there was a natural inclination among some girls to regard 'peace' as disappointing, in many ways more dispiriting than the period of war. With unmet expectations, girls' sense of frustration deepened:

We return home, but to what? (McKay & Mazurana, 2004 – girl, Northern Uganda).

With the rebels, we ate the best food, we had access to money, and any other property within our controlled territory. Civilians were working for us – we were highly respected. Now I have nothing. I live on the street. I have no family and no future (Denov & Maclure, 2005).

Stavrou (2004: 82) notes that "the fact that most girls interviewed in Luanda have no plans for the future paints a disturbing psychological portrait of creeping apathy, deepening social marginalization, and loss of hope."

In response to mounting frustration and disillusionment, some girls in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study reported engaging in violent behaviour:

Sometimes, I just feel so angry and I want to beat my two children (Denov & Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

Yes, I am angry and I often grow angrier. I [find myself] getting into trouble with my family (Denov & Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

However, the violence was not only directed at those close to them. One girl in Denov & Maclure's (2005) study explained how a group of girls planned a violent attack against the DDR programmers when they failed to receive their benefits on time:

The ex-combatants in the [demobilization] camp would get together and plan…We would take drugs and then go as a group to physically attack the DDR programmers for not giving us our money. We were very angry about not getting our money (Denov & Maclure, 2005, girl – Sierra Leone).

While it is often former boy combatants who are typically viewed as 'security risks' in post-conflict situations, the reality of female anger and violence cannot be ignored. Although girls have not traditionally been perceived as presenting the same potential threat as disaffected young men, Denov and Maclure's (2005) highlight girls' growing dissatisfaction and frustration, as well as their potential for continued aggression in the private and public spheres in the aftermath of civil war. Within the climate of uncertainty and continued economic stagnation in many post-war contexts, many girls formerly in fighting forces are raising a new generation of children whose experiences are likely to inure them to violence. As a response to ongoing marginalization, outbursts of aggression reveal girls' capacity for agency and resistance. However, when expressed in violent form it likely exacerbates their alienation from the communities into which they must be successfully reintegrated if the prospect of long-term peacebuilding is ever to be realized. Failing to provide for the needs of these girls and their children after the war is not only shortsighted, but potentially dangerous.

For all of the post-conflict issues raised thus far, it is critical to note that the challenges may be even more pronounced for girl mothers, who return to communities with children who were conceived through sexual violence. Particularly apparent in the contexts of Northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone, these girls and their children are evidence of violated community norms, including the importance of maintaining virginity until marriage, knowing a child's paternity, and community-sanctioned notions of marriage (McKay & Mazurana, 2004), and thus they often faced profound community rejection and insecurity. Girl mothers were also confronted with significant obstacles in providing for themselves and their children and they often lack basic health care, food, shelter, and clothing (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). McKay and Mazurana note that girls with babies are also at great risk of entering the sex trade or becoming part of organized prostitution. Furthermore, family members may push girls into the sex trade to ensure their economic survival. As for the children conceived from rape, in a patrilineal society where one's social identity comes from the father, children of rape are often social outcasts and access to land, which often depends on the father, is impossible for these children thus making their futures potentially bleak.

The challenges faced by girls post-conflict are numerous and appear to affect diverse aspects of their lives. While the physical, sexual and psychological victimization of the girls was undeniably clear during the conflict, in its aftermath these girls are arguably bearing a form of secondary victimization. This post-conflict 're-victimization' is most evident in their socio-economic marginalization and exclusion, as well as the ongoing threats to their health and personal security. Girls appeared to be left to contend with severe and lingering after-effects of sexual violence, and little opportunities for education, employment or support. That former girl combatants in diverse contexts have experienced these conditions is suggestive that the end of civil war and the establishment of DDR and other post-conflict programming have not necessarily meant an end to gender-based violence and insecurity.

Girls as Agents of Change: Moving Beyond Victimhood

Despite the critical and fundamental roles that girls play within fighting forces, the three studies have uncovered the profound invisibility and seemingly unrelenting victimization that girls formerly in fighting forces are forced to contend with both during and following armed conflict. The gendered abuses and severe violations endured by girls were extreme and their efforts to actively negotiate their own security were thus born out of desperate and vital necessity. While the accounts of these girls are highly disturbing, their stories and experiences nonetheless reveal a spirit of volition and a capacity for independence of action that counters a deterministic and commonly held depiction of girls as silent victims with no capacity to resist or to modify the circumstances imposed upon them. In the face of great danger, inevitable harm and unimaginable cruelty, both during and following armed conflict, girls' made complex and compelling choices. The girls' narratives and disclosures have uncovered that despite the horrors of armed conflict, in the midst of state breakdown, and in the absence of legitimate and formal support, girls are able to find creative ways to defend and protect themselves and ultimately attempt to bring about change by themselves and for themselves. While girls' acts of agency and resistance can be perceived as 'small victories' in light of the circumstances of ongoing victimization and terror, the creative ways that the girls coped with the surrounding chaos and insecurity reveal their capacity as successful negotiators and agents in the history of armed conflict.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that girls' abilities to negotiate security during armed conflict cannot be constituted as full female emancipation. Invariably, the oppressive conditions of war as well as the preexisting inferior social status of women and girls shaped the degree of agency and resistance that the girls exhibited. Nevertheless, as Preston and Wong (2004:169) have noted, whether as potential perpetrators or victims, it is possible for females to create new spaces of gender equality through resistance. Jacobs (2000:232) extends this claim by reinforcing that individual instances of resistance, "may not amount to mass insurrection but nevertheless signals change in gender relations in directions which may enhance women's gender status" and by extension their security.

In light of the research findings, an alternative approach and vision with regard to the ways in which girls in fighting forces are perceived, represented, and conceptualized is essential. It seems critical to challenge traditional portrayals of girls in fighting forces as merely silent victims. Instead of focusing solely on girls' vulnerability and victimization, it is essential to also direct our attention to their self-efficacy, resilience, and skills. Moreover, given their significant presence and multiple roles within fighting forces, girls' experiences and perspectives should be considered as central and indispensable to understandings and analyses of war and political violence, and not regarded as peripheral or unwittingly or wittingly rendered invisible.

Girls' intrinsic capacity as agents of change has important implications for current post-conflict policies and programs that are being developed for girls and indeed for children in general. If, as the narratives of the research participants consistently indicate, many girls were able to demonstrate a capacity for willfulness and collective agency during and following war (sometimes with tragic consequences) then it would seem imperative that current strategies of social assistance adopt approaches that aim to redress female marginalization and subservience by tapping into girls' agency and resilience. Substantial efforts need to continue in the areas specified by girls in the three studies including the provision of educational and employment opportunities, health care, child care

assistance, family reunification, counselling, and community sensitization. There is also a need to make special provisions for female ex-combatants in post-conflict forums of deliberation and decision-making. As this girl in Sierra Leone noted:

Girls and boys should be involved in developing programs because they know where their interests lie (Denov & Maclure, 2005 – girl, Sierra Leone).

However, prioritizing the rights and needs of girls and involving them in decision-making continues to be a formidably challenging task. Despite the tenets of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which advocate for the active participation of children and youth in decision-making that affects their lives, war-affected children, particularly girls, have largely been rendered voiceless and invisible in the conceptualization and implementation of programs designed to meet their needs (McEvoy-Levy, 2001). Also, giving girls a more powerful societal voice may, in some contexts, counter traditional social norms. In many societies, traditional cultural practices may accord automatic respect, power, and status to (older) males, while simultaneously discriminating against women and girls in both law and in custom, whether in the realms of social life, education, politics, and economics. In contexts where exploitation and outright physical abuse of girls and women have acquired a deep-seated cultural ethic, it is questionable whether new policies and principles aimed at female empowerment can generate a realignment of prevailing power structures. Indeed, planned social change, particularly when it entails a fundamental challenge to relations between men and women, boys and girls at all levels of private and public life, is invariably a slow process that requires comprehensive strategies of mass mobilization and actions that are highly political in nature. Moreover, within contexts of profound poverty and widespread social problems, as is often the reality of post-conflict countries, it is easy to see how the unique needs and circumstances of youth, and particularly girls, can take a back seat to seemingly more pressing and urgent socio-economic priorities. Yet given the turbulent life histories of innumerable war-affected girls, to ignore, undermine, or render invisible their perspectives and needs, and their right to actively participate in post-war societal reconstruction and renewal, is to risk a continuation of disparity, instability and violence.

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APPENDIX
STUDY METHODOLOGIES

BREAKING THE SILENCE:
GIRLS ABDUCTED DURING ARMED CONFLICT IN ANGOLA

By:
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METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork for the research was undertaken from January to August 2004. Of the 157 people interviewed, 40 were in-depth interviews with formerly abducted girl soldiers. Access to participants was facilitated through church groups, community leaders and NGOs. Trusted key informants within these organizations helped to identify formerly abducted girls as well as their older female relatives, who then identified other potential participants. The formerly abducted girl soldiers ranged in age from 13 to 34, with an average of 21 years of age. These girls had returned from the war within the previous three years.

Fieldwork was carried out in two phases. Pilot research was conducted from January to March 2004 in peri-urban Luanda and rural Huambo. This pilot research was used to negotiate access and contact traditional leaders in rural areas, develop research tools, test sampling methods, and to probe the community's and the girls' understanding of the war and its impact on their lives.

The second phase of the research from April to August 2004, took place in the same field locations, with the adapted and refined research tools.

Full report available at:
http://www.crin.org/docs/Angola_CIDA_Full_Report.doc

CHILD SOLDIERS IN SIERRA LEONE:
EXPERIENCES, IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR REINTEGRATION

A Collaborative Project of:

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Momo Turay, Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone
Moses Zombo, Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone

Project report written by Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure

METHODOLOGY

Between May 2003 and February 2004 the research team, consisting of both Canadian and Sierra Leonean researchers, conducted interviews with 80 former child soldiers (40 boys and 40 girls) from four regions of Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leonean researchers at conducted a first round of semi-structured interviews. These interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the lives and family backgrounds of the children prior to the war, the circumstances of their recruitment into an armed group, and their subsequent experiences. Several months later Denov conducted a second round of interviews with the same children to expand on topics covered in the first interviews and to explore other emerging research themes. To ensure a form of active child participation in the research process, the research team consisted of 12 adolescent researchers (6 male and 6 female) who had been part of the RUF fighting forces during the conflict. The adolescent researchers were selected by the adult research team on the basis of the earlier contact between local partners and war-affected children, their interest in the project, and their maturity. The adolescent researchers were actively involved in the design of research instruments, the recruitment of research participants, and led focus groups with child participants on the psycho-social needs of former child soldiers. Focus group leaders and many of the child respondents were involved in the planning and participated fully in a community conference that focused on ways to facilitate their rehabilitation and community reintegration.

Full report available at:

http://www.crin.org/docs/Sierra_Leone_CIDA_Final_Report.doc

WHERE ARE THE GIRLS?
GIRLS IN FIGHTING FORCES IN NORTHERN UGANDA, SIERRA LEONE, AND MOZAMBIQUE: THEIR LIVES DURING AND AFTER WAR

By:
Susan McKay, University of Wyoming
Dyan Mazurana, Tufts University

METHODOLOGY

Prior to fieldwork, the principal researchers synthesized data by drawing upon scholarly, governmental, non-governmental and United Nations documents to obtain background material on the historical, political, economic and social contexts and the impacts of the armed conflict on girls and women in Northern Uganda, southern Sudan, Sierra Leone and Mozambique. Their understanding of these situations was enhanced by discussions with key individuals and contacts who work internationally and as practitioners in these countries.

The researchers conducted 38 audio-taped semi-structured interviews in Uganda between November and December 2001, 37 interviews from May to June 2002 and 26 semi-structured interviews in Sierra Leone from August to September 2002, and 32 semi-structured interviews in Mozambique from September to October, 2001. All transcripts and field notes were read with the main categorical and thematic components identified and analyzed.

Full report available at:

www.dd-rd.ca/site/_PDF/publications/women/girls_whereare.pdf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Myriam Denov obtained her PhD from the University of Cambridge where she was a Commonwealth Scholar and recipient of the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust Award. She is currently an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at McGill University. Her research and teaching interests lie in the areas of war and political violence, war-affected children, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding, and gender and security. She has been the principal investigator on a project funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) that has explored the issue of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. The project has examined the long-term effects of children's (both boys and girls) involvement in armed conflict as victims, perpetrators or both, as well as the rehabilitation needs of child soldiers following demobilization. She has published widely in the areas of children and armed conflict, children's rights, and gender-based violence and has worked with vulnerable populations internationally including former child soldiers, victims of sexual violence, and people living with HIV/AIDS. Her current research, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is exploring the militarization and reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka. Myriam Denov has presented expert evidence on child soldiers, and is currently writing a book on child soldiers that will be published by Cambridge University Press.

ENDNOTES

[1] For this paper, the definition of a child will coincide with the definition set out in the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Accordingly, a child is defined as 'every human being below eighteen years' (Article 1). 'Children' refers equally to both boys and girls.

[2] As noted in the Paris Principles (2007) a 'child associated with an armed force or armed group' refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.

[3] For access to the full reports of each project please see:
(Angola: http://www.crin.org/docs/Angola_CIDA_Full_Report.doc ;
Sierra Leone: http://www.crin.org/docs/Sierra_Leone_CIDA_Final_Report.doc
Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: www.dd-rd.ca/site/_PDF/publications/women/girls_whereare.pdf.

[4] Please see the methodological approach of each of the three projects in Appendix A.

[5]The armed groups referred to in discussions of the conflicts in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Northern Uganda include the *Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola*, the *Frente Nacional de Libertacao de Angola* and *Uniao Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola* (Angola), the *Revolutionary United Front* and the *Civil Defence Forces* (Sierra Leone), *Resistencia Nacional de Mocambique* (Mozambique) and the *Lord's Resistance Army* (Northern Uganda). The government forces relevant to discussion of the conflict in Mozambique include the Frente de Libertacao Nacional.

[6] While the three studies addressed in this paper collectively contribute to our understanding of war-affected girls, given that the data has been derived from an African context, it is important to note that they can in no way be generalized to the experiences of all girls in conflict zones.

[7] Reports indicate that during the conflict children in Sierra Leone were systematically injected with cocaine (Clapham, 2003).

[8] This section has been adapted from Denov & Gervais, 2007.

[9] A few exceptions to this have been the contributions of Nordstrom (1997), Utas (2003, 2005), Richards (1998) and Honwana (2006) who have emphasized the importance of recognizing agency amongst war-affected children, and in particular, the realities of girls and women.

[10] It is important to acknowledge the relativity of 'security' under such repressive circumstances. While 'marriage' may have rendered a girl more secure, the context in which she benefited from a certain level of protection was still very insecure.

[11]Disarmament is defined as the "collection, control and disposal of all weapons including small arms, explosives, light and heavy weapons of both fighters and civilians. It includes the development of responsible arms management programs" (UN 2000, 15). Formal disarmament processes usually occur following formal peace accords and involves the surrender, registration, and destruction of weapons and ammunition. In some cases, material goods or cash payments are provided as an incentive for turning over of weapons.

[12] Demobilization is "the process by which armed forces (government and/or opposition or factional forces) either downsize or completely disband, as part of a broader transformation from war to peace" (United Nations Department of Peacekeeping [UNDPKO] 1999, 15).

[13] Reintegration programs "are assistance measures provided to former fighters that would increase the potential for their and their family's economic and social reintegration into civil society" (UNDPKO 1999, 15).

[14] The one-person, one-weapon approach was later changed and group disarmament was instituted where groups would disarm together and weapons would be turned in jointly.

[15] It is interesting to note that unlike the other contexts, Stavrou's (2004: 73) study in Angola revealed that "there was no overt discrimination or blame directed at the formerly abducted girl soldiers" with regard to sexual violence.