

GIRL SOLDIERS: DENIAL OF RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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The Cape Town Principles and Best Practices² define a child soldier as “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.” This definition was drafted with the best of intentions: to exclude all children from involvement or association with armed forces or armed groups, and in particular to ensure that “the girls” were not left out. The negative corollary has been the tendency to assume that all girls fall within the sentence referring to sexual purposes and forced marriage, and as such are not “soldiers” in the sense of being front-line, weapon wielding troops. This article challenges many of the assumptions about girls and their participation in conflict, and explores the implications these with particular reference to the demobilisation and reintegration of girls.

Writing in 1997, Carolyn Nordstrom³ found girls “were largely, dangerously, invisible. Outside of families, they disappeared from sight; they had no agency to direct their lives”. She found herself looking for girls in war zones but finding “silences and empty spaces”. There has been little change since then although the existence of girl soldiers has become more recognised. They are perceived, and sensationalised, as “abductees”, “sex

¹The views in this article do not necessarily represent the views of the Quaker UN Office. The author was responsible for the research on child soldiers for the UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (Machel Study), and co-author (with Margaret McCallin) of the book based on this research, *Children: the Invisible Soldiers* (Rädda Barnen, Stockholm, 1996, 2nd edition 1998). She was one of the initiators in 1998, and is still on the Steering Committee, of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. She was part of a joint research project of the Quaker UN Offices in New York and Geneva on “The Lived Experience of Girl Child Soldiers”. She has recently completed a joint research project with the International Labour Organisation examining why adolescents volunteer for armed forces and armed groups, the results of which will appear in Rachel Brett & Irma Specht: *Voices of Young Soldiers: Why do they fight?* (Forthcoming, 2003). She has also written numerous articles on child soldiers.

²“Cape Town Principles and Best Practices” adopted at the Symposium on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa (27-30 April, 1997, Cape Town, South Africa)

³Carolyn Nordstrom: “Girls and War zones: Troubling” Questions (Life & Peace Institute, Uppsala, May 1997), p 4

slaves", "concubines", and treated as "dependents" and "camp followers". They are thus still named and treated as passive objects, with no "agency" to act or speak for themselves. Furthermore, their experience is presented as one-dimensional: that of sexual objects, sometimes associated with other domestic activities.

The dearth of information and research about girl soldiers⁴ is now beginning to be addressed.⁵ The picture that emerges is much more complex and challenging than the general categorisation, but perhaps even more intransigent.

Numbers

One of the reasons for less consideration of girls has been the relatively small number of girl soldiers compared to boys. In all situations where child soldiers are involved, most are boys. However, girls participate in armed conflicts to a far greater degree than is generally recognised. The proportions vary, but reports indicate that in some situations up to one-third of the child soldiers are girls.⁶ The problem of recognition of girl soldiers is compounded by the tendency for the number of child soldiers to be calculated retrospectively at the time of demobilisation, whereas a very small number of girls come through demobilisation processes.⁷ Their "failure" to go through demobilisation processes is partly because they are not recognised as soldiers because of the roles they do, or are assumed to, play: thus the process of non-identification and recognition is circular.

⁴S. McKay & D. Mazurana: "Girls in militaries, paramilitaries and armed opposition groups: a preliminary review for 1990-2000" (2002; available at www.waraffectedchildren.gc.ca/girls-e.asp)

⁵See in particular the results of the research on "The lived experience of girl child soldiers" by the two Quaker UN Offices (New York and Geneva) published as: Dr Yvonne E Keairns: "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary" (October 2002); "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia" (January 2003); "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Philippines" (January 2003); and "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Sri Lanka" (January 2003); also L. Alfredson, "Sexual Exploitation of Child Soldiers", Child Soldiers Newsletter 12/2001 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, London); R. Cagoco-Guam: *Child Soldiers in Central and Western Mindanao: A Rapid Assessment* (ILO, Geneva, 2002); C. Clark, "Girls in War: Public Health and Social and Economic Reintegration", address at the International Conference on Children and War, Brussels, October 2002; E. Paez: *Girls in the Colombian Armed Forces: A diagnosis* (Terre des Hommes, Germany, Osnabruck, 2001); UNICEF/EAPRO: *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (October 2002)

⁶In the ILO Rapid Assessment of Child Soldiers in the Philippines, 20 percent of the respondents were girls.

⁷According to Susan Shepler, "Les filles-soldats: trajectoires d'après-guerre en Sierra Leone", *Politique Africaine* 88, 49-62, 53; despite the high number of girls reportedly abducted by the RUF in Sierra Leone, no more than five percent of demobilised children were girls.

Abductees

Many girls *are* abducted, *are* subjected to sexual exploitation and abuse, and also required to carry out domestic tasks for armed forces and armed groups. In fact, situations characterised by abduction of girls are also those where sexual exploitation of girls is prevalent. However, even when abducted, many girls are not passive: they resist sexual advances, and suffer from beatings, torture, rape and even death as a consequence. Many seek to escape, also at peril of ill-treatment or death. Some succeed in escaping; some are captured in the attempt; some re-abducted. In Angola⁸ many girls lost track of time, the sequence of events, and the sense of their own identity because of repeated abductions, exhaustion from being expected to stay awake or awoken at irregular times to cook, dance, sing or provide sexual services. At the same time, their captors discouraged them from retaining their name and identity. Equally, some quickly learned that if they wanted to escape, it was better to conceal their identity and home location in order to make capture or re-abduction harder.⁹

Volunteers

However, by no means all girls are abducted into armed forces or armed groups. Many identify themselves as volunteers. There is ground for considerable discussion about the concept of "voluntary recruitment" in relation to minors,¹⁰ but the important point here is that the girls consider themselves as having volunteered. As such, they are actors seeking to take control of their lives and not passive objects being acted upon by others. Even in situations where there is widespread abduction, some girls are self-identified as volunteers.¹¹ This has many implications.

Why do they volunteer?

Many girls are running away from what they perceive as an impossible domestic situation. They are subjected to physical or sexual abuse, and/or to domestic exploitation. This may be in their own home or extended family, or because they have been sent into other domestic situations. Sometimes it is not direct abuse or exploitation but their frustration at

⁸Dr Yvonne E Keairns: "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary" (October 2002)

⁹Some of these girls expressed appreciation during the in-depth interviews for "The Lived Experience of Girl Child Soldiers" research that this enabled them to start getting events in order and to make some sense of this experience.

¹⁰See Brett & Specht: *Voices of Young Soldiers* (2003 forthcoming)

¹¹For example, in Sierra Leone: Brett & Specht

their inability to have their views heard and taken into account, for example, in relation to marriage.¹² These findings need to be treated with caution because of the small numbers of girls interviewed and the limited geographic scope of the research to date. However, the logic of the findings is compelling. The high correlation found of girls citing domestic exploitation or abuse as their reason for joining armed forces or groups has to be put in the context of the high incidence of such situations for the girls. For example, in Colombia, according to the Office of the Ombudsman, of the nearly 35,000 reported cases of familial violence, 65 percent were perpetrated against children under 18. And no less than 85 percent of all reported cases of sexual abuse concern under-18s.¹³ Although some boy soldiers - in particular adolescents - are also running away from home, the correlation for girl soldiers is higher because girls are more frequently trapped in domestic situations, have even less likelihood of having their views heard, are more likely to be sexually abused and have fewer other choices. To put it simply, if you are a Tamil girl in Sri Lanka who is running away from home, where is the obvious place to go and how many other realistic options are there?¹⁴

Some girls, in particular where there is widespread rape, ill-treatment and abductions of girls in the armed conflict, choose to volunteer because they are likely to be safer if they have a gun. Some seek to protect themselves directly by being armed. Others choose to which commander they will surrender, knowing that this will entail a sexual relationship but that in this way they at least have some measure of choice about their sexual partner, and that they are likely to be treated better if they "volunteer" than wait to be abducted.¹⁵

Other girls join in search of equality. The girl from a military family may be asserting her right to equality with her brothers. Some armed groups appeal to girls precisely on the grounds that they will be treated as equals, given skills-training and enabled to take on leadership roles.

Does military life fulfil their expectations?

Some girls *do* receive a measure of protection and fulfilment by joining the armed force or group. The individual choice to team up with a commander may serve them reasonably well. They are able to protect themselves against sexual and physical abuse because they carry a gun. Some girls report positively on their treatment and opportunities in some armed

¹²Keairns: "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary" (October 2002)

¹³Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Colombia (E/CN.4/2003/13 of 24 February 2003), Annex, para.24

¹⁴As Nordstrom comments: "Girls the world over do not have the options to flee in the same way boys do."

¹⁵Brett & Specht

groups.¹⁶ The indications, however, are that these are the minority. Many girls find themselves still being required to do domestic chores, and/or to provide sexual services, as well as to fight and with little likelihood of taking on leadership roles. For example, according to the Office of the Colombian Ombudsman, out of a group of 65 under-age former FARC girls investigated in 2001, all "wore intrauterine devices, some inserted against their will, with no information of any kind, merely because it was an order on which their continued enrolment in the group depended."¹⁷ It is important to recall in this context that many of these girls volunteered rather than being abducted because they were already being subjected to domestic abuse or exploitation.

Demobilisation: the missing girls

In so far as records of demobilisation activities are kept, it would be instructive if research were undertaken to document what proportion of demobilised adult soldiers were female, and what proportion of demobilised children were female. It would be useful to go further, and see what provision/demobilisation package is offered, and whether it is differentiated on the grounds of sex; who designs the demobilisation process and package; and who is entitled to go through the demobilisation process - in theory and the practical consequences of these decisions.¹⁸

This may sound like special pleading, or a feminist agenda, but in the course of her work, Nordstrom became convinced that "Shaping knowledge, and lack of knowledge, is one of the most basic elements of power". This suggests a deliberate policy, which may be the case. However, sometimes it is simply that the cultural and intellectual assumptions are so ingrained, that it takes a "revolutionary" viewpoint to see what is not being reported and considered. For example, in Mozambique women soldiers were demobilised in the same process and were issued with the same demobilisation package as the men. One result was that they were issued

¹⁶The New People's Army in the Philippines comes out well in this respect in "The Lived Experience of Girl Child Soldiers" research: see Kearns: "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Philippines" (January 2003)

¹⁷Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Colombia (E/CN.4/2003/13 of 24 February 2003), Annex, para. 48. Incidentally, the Report also documents the very direct link between the threat of recruitment and displacement, "In August, an announcement by the FARC-EP that all youths over 12 years old would have to join up led to the displacement of 60 families in the municipality of Cunday (Tolima). It also states "Increasing forced recruitment by illegal armed groups of minors who had taken refuge in the border areas of Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela was reported."

¹⁸UNICEF has undertaken a series of "Lessons Learned" papers, seeking to address some of these issues in relation to child soldiers in general.

with male clothing.¹⁹ Clearly, there was an assumption by the planners that soldiers were male.

The reality of deliberate or unconscious discrimination against girl soldiers in demobilisation and reintegration processes is beginning to be considered. The Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Sierra Leone²⁰, notes that "child protection agencies have expressed concerns that the disarmament and demobilisation process may have bypassed many child ex-combatants.... particular attention should be given to girls because despite the large number of reported abductions of girls during the conflict, the number of girls registered in the disarmament process constitutes less than 8 per cent of the total number of disarmed children. This appears to suggest that the majority of the girls remained with their abductors or avoided the disarmament process. "The word "avoided" used here suggests a decision of the girls - it is equally likely that they were unrecognised by others. In fact, in the earlier demobilisation in Sierra Leone, girls were being classified as "dependents" and thus screened out of the demobilisation process. When this was challenged by UNICEF, they were reclassified as "camp followers". In neither case is it clear why they were treated in this way, and whether any consideration was given to the possibility that they actually fought (which many did) and that at least those who did should have been classified and treated as demobilised soldiers. Thus the likelihood is that many girl *soldiers* were in fact excluded, as well as that many girls failed to make it to the demobilisation centres at all.

Unfortunately, any lessons learned from Sierra Leone were either not in time, not transferred, or deliberately ignored in the case of the most recent major African demobilisation. In Angola demobilisation benefits were paid to adult male soldiers only.²¹ Girls (and women) were, therefore, left with the choice of staying with men, who in many cases had abducted them, or of fending for themselves (and often their babies/children) without any assistance.

The Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Sierra Leone had noted this problem, "Girls who were abducted and forced to live with their abductors have, in some cases, been rejected by their families, while others continue to live with these ex-combatants against their will."²² While this is undoubtedly true, it also needs to be noted that some girls chose with whom to live and have children, only to find that at the end of the conflict, the man deserted them on the ground that this was "only a war-time marriage".

This illustrates the underlying problem.

¹⁹Interview of Mozambican female veteran by the author.

²⁰E/CN.4/2003/35, para 15

²¹Human Rights Watch: *Forgotten Fighters: Child Soldiers in Angola* (April 2003)

²²para. 17

Reintegration into what?

In some situations where significant numbers of girls are known to be involved - for example, in Colombia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uganda - programmes have been established specifically for girls who are captured or otherwise leave the armed opposition groups. What even the best of such programmes cannot do, however, is resolve the problems which such girls face about their future.

Boy soldiers often develop, or have assigned to them, a post-conflict discourse that absolves them from blame.²³ They were drugged, coerced; they had no other choice, and so on. There is a measure of truth to this. However, by contrast even abducted girls who are, or are believed to have been, sexually active, do not appear to exercise such a discourse, nor does society appear to accept their lack of choice and absolve them from blame. The girls are, therefore, caught in a double-bind. To speak out and identify themselves is also to stigmatise themselves (and their children if any). To stay silent plays into the hands of those who deny their role and their status, but may enable them to lead "normal" lives.

If even those abducted are not absolved, those who volunteered have no chance. What then are they to do: to claim retrospectively that they were abducted and thus deny the assertion they were making of some measure of choice in their own lives? To be bold and demand their rights? In the light of their counter-cultural behaviour what does the future hold for them?

In situations where the girl soldiers have not been sexually active, and there is a broader recognition that this is not, or not necessarily, the case, the stigma of involvement is less. What it does not alter is the more general problem of their future prospects.

A Conclusion - or a Beginning?

The irony is, therefore, that the ill-treatment of and discrimination against girls at home, in the conflict, and in society is precisely what leads or drives girls into becoming militarily active. Yet, at the time of demobilisation, whether or not at the end of the conflict, their situation is no better and their prospects in society are probably worse than when they joined.

Both at the time of recruitment and at the time of demobilisation, the biggest problems facing girls are their perceived roles and status in society. As Nordstrom²⁴ comments: "it is both dangerous and unrealistic to look at the abuse of children in war, in another country, in another culture, in a different context as if that were somehow different, more barbaric,

²³Susan Shepler: "Les filles-soldats: trajectoires d'après guerre en Sierra Leone", *Politique Africaine* 88, 49-62

²⁴page 20

than the patterns of abuse that characterize our own everyday cultures, in peace or in war. ...what people tolerate in peace and in the domestic sphere configures what takes place in war."

In societies where girls are routinely kept out of school to look after younger siblings, to do domestic work and are excluded from school if they become pregnant, what real chance does the girl ex-soldier with a baby have of gaining an education and a job? Where girls are the objects of routine domestic sexual and/or physical violence, what prospects do they have of being treated better in time of war and within armed forces or armed groups? Where the preferred future for girls is marriage, and victims of rape are stigmatised as unmarriageable, what prospects are there for girls abducted for sexual purposes, or where this is known or perceived to be part of their war experience, or making the involuntary choice of joining up with a military commander?

The key message is that there needs to be a full discussion of the issues and possibilities, taking account of the views of the girls themselves. Although this is true at all stages, in this context it is particularly true at the time of demobilisation and reintegration. Girls who have made counter-cultural choices to become combatants, may wish counter-cultural careers. Girls who chose or were forced into relationships should be consulted about whether they do or do not wish to stay with their "war-time husbands", rather than assuming that all do or that all do not. Demobilisation and reintegration programmes need to be designed in such a way that they do not exclude girl soldiers either deliberately or accidentally. At the same time, some girls may not wish to be identified because of the stigma and damage to their future prospects in society, thus there must also be programmes for all girls (and women since many of these girl soldiers will in fact be women by the time of demobilisation) which are accessible and address their needs without them having to identify themselves as soldiers/former soldiers.

The best conclusion is that of Keairns²⁵: "These girls exhibited a strong sense of self or they would not have survived. They often felt broken and alone but ultimately not severed from some fundamental sense of who they were or who they could become. Even when stripped of the outward signs of their identity and forced to participate in abusive relationships they were able to maintain some sense of self. They often acted fearless when terrified, and stood up for themselves in the face of brutal treatment and consequences. They lived with contradictions and intense feelings of ambivalence about supporting the movement and being recognised for their accomplishments and at the same time being perpetrators of violence. They wanted to be someone and they longed to be valued. The girls continue to pursue life recognising that once others knew that they had served in armed movements, even when it was against their will, they would be viewed as untrustworthy and generally diminished in the minds of others."

²⁵Keairns: "The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary" (October 2002)