Young Female Fighters in African Wars

Conflict and Its Consequences

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Introduction

Young women are combatants in contemporary African wars. They also participate in a whole array of different roles. However, by and large, they remain invisible to us. In fact, our hackneyed 'Northern' views on women's innate non-participation in war prevent us from seeing the specific needs of young women during and in the aftermath of wars. For instance, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes often fail to address the appropriate needs of young women and in a variety of ways 'prevent' them from participating. Issues of stigma, safe demobilization, and individual concerns about post-war marriage, health and education need to be addressed both in a more gendered way, and with an appropriate understanding of young women's agency in both peace and war. In this Policy Dialogue it is argued that to improve policy and programming efforts it is necessary to broaden the understanding of young women's roles and participation in armed conflict in Africa historically and today.

The intention in this text is to provide policy makers and aid practitioners with a state-of-the-art overview of the situation for young women in African war and post-war situations. In chapter one, after a brief introduction on women and war in general, we provide an overview of women's participation in armed forces in conflicts in Africa (section 1.1). Here the importance of historical and political contexts for women's participation in armed conflict is emphasized, and the notion of gender roles in African countries is discussed. We proceed to discuss girls and women in armed forces and rebel groups, and pay attention to various modes of conscription (section 1.2). What were the circumstances of their conscription, was it voluntary or by abduction? Were they politically motivated or did they join to survive? We also inquire into the various status positions of women in fighting forces (1.3), the role of women in providing labour for fighting forces (1.4), and the issues of rape and sexual exploitation (1.5).

In chapter two we discuss the post-war realities of young female ex-fighters and more specifically issues of demobilization within DDR programmes. Here we will scrutinize some of the programmes and policies that underlie the implementation of demobilization in African countries.

We will discuss to what level these programmes have been 'gender sensitive' and why female ex-fighters have often been excluded from the programmes (2.1), or at times have chosen to exclude themselves (2.2).

In chapter three we look at how young female ex-fighters navigate post-war settings. Female ex-fighters are by definition those who have survived war and armed conflict; many female combatants do not survive. Therefore we also aim to identify skills and strengths acquired by these women and girls through their experiences of war and in armed forces. When recognized and supported these skills and strengths can be used in to empower the female ex-fighters. In this chapter we examine whether and how war shapes and changes gender roles and discuss whether new social and political spaces for young women are opened and maintained in post-war settings (3.1). We locate specific strengths and skills that young female ex-fighters have, and in part have obtained because of war (3.2), the importance of both formal and informal education (3.3) and status and health consequences (3.4). We devote a special section to related questions of experiences of shame and social stigma that have direct consequences for successful reintegration (3.5), and also acknowledge the frequent security hazards that young women experience in many post-war settings (3.6). Wrapping up this chapter is an overview of livelihood options for young female ex-fighters (3.7) and, on a more sinister note, we acknowledge the importance of prostitution as a post-conflict survival strategy (3.8). After a concluding discussion we end by giving a number of recommendations for both policy makers and field-workers.

1. Women and War

Even today, in mainstream thinking on war and violent conflict, women and men are still often positioned at opposite ends of a moral continuum, where women are considered peaceful and men aggressive, women passive and men active. As war is so often associated with these generalized images of masculinity and femininity, women have become associated with life-giving and men with life-taking (Elshtain 1987, Ferris 1993, and Lindestam de Vries 2005). Although this polarization of men and women as analogous with war and peace is common it is not unproblematic. Not only is the image of the aggressive male a stereotype, but more importantly, the representation of a propensity for conflict and aggression as something inherently male is also an effective way to conceal how women are affected by and more importantly actively participate in violent conflicts and war. From this perspective, war remains an exclusively male concern, and women are seen only as victims and are therefore denied agency. Unlike men they are not perceived as actors in social, economic and political structures. Therefore, viewing women as more nurturing and peaceful both supports and reproduces patriarchal values, in war as in peace.

Unfortunately, the term 'gender' is all too often conflated with women and girls. Simply put, 'gender' refers to perceptions of appropriate behaviour, appearance and attitude for women and men arising from social and cultural expectations. The empirical facts, however, indicate that gender is a powerful shaper of individual experiences of war, and the evidence is overwhelming that war does affect men and women differently. But analytically, in trying to understand the complexities of these experiences, the male–female opposition seems an unnecessary limitation, one which hinders more than it helps. Granted, stereotypes about men and women cannot easily be disregarded as they are powerful and ultimately help to reproduce inequalities. Therefore, it is essential that any analysis into the plight of female fighters in Africa is sensitive to local contexts, including in particular local understandings of gender.

In modern African wars and violent conflicts women have shown themselves as capable as men of performing violent acts. Local populations have often testified that female fighters are even more brutal and cruel than male

fighters. As soldiering has been included in the moral universe of men in ways that it has not for women, fighting women are frequently considered by their very existence to be transgressing accepted female behaviour, and the very act of fighting by definition makes women and girls less feminine and by extension 'unnatural'. Women who oppose or transgress female stereotypes in war will thus often be regarded as deviant (Barth 2002, Byrne 1996:35, and Farr 2002).[1]

Statistically speaking, men, not women, are still overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence, and both men and women are victims. But by focusing on women only as victims we conceal their full range as political and social actors. (El Jack 2003:6ff). However, with the presence of so many female fighters in Africa and elsewhere today it has become necessary to expand the inquiries into what women 'really do' in war and critically to analyse women's roles as perpetrators and perpetuators of war and armed conflict, while acknowledging that even in situations where one can talk about the violence of women, as in the example of female fighters, one often finds violence against women as well. To comprehend fully what women really do in war-torn societies, it has to be acknowledged that women not only have their own agenda but that 'women' constitute a highly differentiated social category (Sørensen 1998).

1.1 Overview of Young Women in Armed Conflicts in Africa[2]

Women have been actively involved as fighters in African countries as diverse as Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.[3] Women have been part of wars of libera-

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1. Also, in their work on girl soldiers, McKay and Mazurana (2004) found that girls in fighting forces have been forced to violate cultural taboos more fully than boys.
2. In this paper we have chosen to include older girls in the category 'young women'. In many African societies a girl becomes a woman at marriage or after child birth, events that frequently take place before they turn 18. Therefore, although we still support and encourage the distinction between child and adult proposed by the UN and ratified by nearly all African countries, we have opted to include local perspectives on adulthood as it is our understanding that the clear-cut distinction between child and adult as defined by 'the straight 18' principle (18 as the minimum age for all forms of military recruitment) in an analysis of female fighters in Africa tends to obscure both their lived realities and their needs in relation to the context within which they are operating.
3. Women and girls are or have been members of government forces, armed opposition forces, and paramilitary or militia forces, in the following countries: Angola, Burundi,

tion against colonial powers as well as in contemporary rebel insurgencies, and in these conflicts women have served in capacities from foot soldiers to high-ranking positions (Bennett et al. 1995, Nzomo 2002:9). It has been estimated that in many armed forces in Africa there is a substantial minority of female fighters, maybe even up to 30 percent (Mazuana 2004). Today, young women in Africa participate in insurgencies and rebel movements, but they are also frequently employed in state-sanctioned violence. In some national armies, the number of women is increasing; for example, women make up around one-fifth of the armed forces in Eritrea (Lindsey 2000).

Female Fighters in Northern Uganda

During the ongoing conflict in Northern Uganda, which started in 1986, women and girls have been present in the rebel movement, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Most of them are abducted and forcefully conscripted (McKay 2007:390). It is estimated that as many as 80 percent of the LRA fighters are child soldiers and of those approximately 30 percent are girls (McKay and Mazurana 2004:29). Female fighters have not always been acknowledged by organizations working in Northern Uganda. From the mid–late 1990s NGOs started acknowledging their presence and roles within the LRA (Fox 2004:472). Still, in most reports on girls and young women within the LRA only their roles as sex slaves and captive 'wives' have been highlighted. However, as in so many other conflicts women and girls' roles are much more diverse and complex than this. It has been stated that nearly all girls abducted by the LRA received military training. In a study 12 percent of the respondents reported that their primary role was as fighters, while 49 percent stated that their secondary role was as fighters (McKay and Mazurana 2004:73f). Abducted girls were also given as 'wives' to LRA commanders. Aside from being fighters in front-line combat, some with command positions, and 'wives' to LRA commanders, girls and young women have also carried out supportive tasks such as preparing food, carrying loot and moving weapons (McKay and Mazurana 2004:75).

The heretofore narrow definition of 'fighters' or 'combatants', where male soldiers are the norm, works to the detriment of women and girls within fighting forces. The fact that young women often perform a variety of roles

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Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe (Mazurana 2004).

Female Fighters in Eritrea

In 1991, 30 years of liberation war for Eritrean independence ended when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) defeated the Ethiopian army forces. Within the EPLF, female fighters had made up at least 25 to 30 percent of the total forces during the war. Women were first allowed to join the EPLF in 1973 and were thereafter encouraged to do so throughout the war (Klingebiel et al. 1995). Many female fighters joined quite young and without their parents' permission. According to the ideology of the EPLF, women's liberation and new alternative roles for women were important factors and part of the overall struggle for a liberated Eritrea (Barth 2002). This ideology of the EPLF, and the opportunity to expand existing gender roles, could have been one of the most important reasons for the decision of these young Eritrean women and girls to join the movement.

within armed forces has limited many multilateral organizations' and government militaries' understanding of the centrality of women and girls roles in armed groups (Mazurana 2004:33). Simultaneously, due to their often precarious situation in post-war society, many female ex-fighters will also only admit to having fought intermittently, in between performing other roles, which makes the definition of who was a 'fighter' more complicated and attempts to trace female fighters more difficult.

1.2 From Abduction to Voluntary Conscription

The mode of conscription of girls and women in armed forces varies, just as it does for boys and men (Brett 2002, MacMullin and Loughry 2004, Mazurana et al. 2002, and Nzomo 2002). Some are abducted and forcefully conscripted, while others join for ideological reasons or as a survival strategy. The distinction between the various forms is complex (MacMullin and Loughry 2004). Even in places such as Sierra Leone, where the majority of female fighters were abducted, far from all were forced to join. However, it has been shown that although the reasons for joining are more or less the same for men and women, there are factors which are more prevalent among young women. According to research on recent post-independence wars, girls in fighting forces quite often stated their reason for joining was to escape domestic violence, abuse, and poverty, while they more rarely gave their mo-

tivation as religion or ethnicity, something that women involved in independence/liberation struggles frequently said compelled them to fight (Brett and Specht 2004:87ff).

Female Fighters in Mozambique

Between 1964 and 1974 the guerrilla army Frente de Libertacāo de Mocambique (FRELIMO) carried out a liberation war against the Portuguese colonial power that resulted in the independence of Mozambique. According to West (2000), FRELIMO systematically recruited girls and young women, and in 1967 the Destacamento Feminino (DF) was formed, composed of girls and young women who were given military training. DF participated in armed combat, gathered intelligence and mobilized civilian support. According to FRELIMO rhetoric, the liberation of women was seen as a fundamental necessity for the revolution; it was argued that it was in the interest of women and girls to contribute to the struggle as FRELIMO would liberate all from oppression and exploitation (West 2000:183f). Women and girls within FRELIMO appear to have been treated well and were respected. One important factor was that sexual relations were forbidden between male and female fighters. To some extent these measures were intended to protect women from abuse by armed men (West 2000:190). It appears that the ideology of FRELIMO contributed to voluntary female conscription.

During the civil war in Mozambique from 1976 to 1992 between the rebel group Resistencia Nacional de Mocambique (RENAMO) and the government forces of FRELIMO, young women and girls were involved in both fighting forces. The recruitment of female fighters appears to have been very different from during the war of liberation. As McKay and Mazurana (2004) note, some joined FRELIMO to get away from the rural areas, to improve their education or career opportunities and to expand gender roles, but others were forced to join. Girls and young women were also abducted by RENAMO; others joined because of discontent with FRELIMO's socialist policies and lack of educational opportunities under their rule. Some female fighters had also been promised educational opportunities abroad by RENAMO, which later never materialized (McKay and Mazurana, 2004:107f). The female fighters in FRELIMO and RENAMO performed a range of different roles such as fighters, trainers of incoming recruits, intelligence officers, spies, recruiters, medics, first aid technicians, weapons experts, forced and domestic labourers, and captive 'wives' of male fighters (McKay and Mazurana, 2004:109).

Female Fighters in Sierra Leone

In 1991 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began their armed rebellion against the Sierra Leonean government forces in a civil war that lasted until January 2002. The number of women in the various forces in Sierra Leone has been estimated at 10 to 30 percent; children constituted half of the RUF fighting forces and up to one third of these were girls. Women and girls had numerous roles within the forces but at least half had received military and weapons training (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). Some female fighters joined voluntarily, but a majority were abducted (Coulter 2005, 2008, Mazurana and Carlson 2004, and Persson 2005). Even though female fighters were in commanding positions and thereby had higher status positions, most women and girls were also forced to be 'wives' to male fighters and were repeatedly subjected to sexual violence, rape, and gang rape (Coulter 2008 and forthcoming, McKay and Mazurana 2004, and Persson 2005).

The female fighters in FRELIMO's 'Destacamento Feminino' in the liberation war in Mozambique were ideologically empowered and motivated (West 2000). The same has been said of women participating in the liberation movements in both Zimbabwe (Staunton 1990) and Eritrea (Bennett et al. 1995). These women identified themselves as 'freedom fighters' and were said to be motivated by a sense of freedom and camaraderie, often expressed in terms of a struggle for gender equality or social justice, as in Zimbabwe and Mozambique (Nzomo 2002, Staunton 1990, and West 2000). In many of the African 'independence wars', often with a socialist agenda, women's liberation was seen as an integral part of the overall struggle (Nzomo 2002).

The situation for women fighting in the recent post-independence wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Uganda was very different. While many were abducted, some young women clearly stated that they joined the fighting forces for their own protection or personal gain (Brett 2002), and Utas 2005a and b). Few rebel movements today, despite their various political agendas, seem to integrate women's equal rights into their overall rhetoric.

Nevertheless, there are many reasons why women and girls are welcomed in rebel movements and mobilized in armed conflicts. In guerrilla warfare and liberation movements a strategy of outnumbering the enemy force often results in the movements recruiting as many combatants as possible,

including women and girls. In liberation wars, female combatants may also add legitimacy and symbolic power to the war effort, as they may symbolize a unity in the movement in question (Barth 2002). Certain types of conflicts, like liberation wars, might attract women to a higher degree than others, as women's rights and equality are often emphasized in these struggles.

During internal wars civilians are frequent targets of terror tactics such as killing, torture, looting and burning of property, amputation of limbs, disfigurement of body parts, and acts of rape. By targeting civilians powerful political and psychosocial messages are conveyed which create widespread fear. The purpose of instilling widespread fear in individuals or communities at large can be interpreted as a strategy, deliberately used for coercive purposes (Utas and Jörgel 2008, McKay 2005). When female fighters participate in fighting forces, they, as well as male fighters, commit these acts of terror against civilians. Female fighters in different conflicts have been described by both other fighters and civilians as even fiercer or more cruel and cold-blooded than male combatants (Olonisakin 1995, Utas 2005b). But, as Barth notes, it seems likely that when women act aggressively it comes as a surprise to many people. Such behaviour will therefore stand out as it contradicts traditional gender roles (Barth 2002). When women or girls commit brutal acts of terror against civilians they add important symbolic power to their rebel movement, due to the contrast with the perception of women as peaceful or at least less warlike than men.

1.3 Status Positions and Roles for Young Women in War

Some women and girls in fighting forces in Africa carry out supportive tasks, while others are armed combatants, and yet others alternate between these roles. According to research, women and girls in fighting forces in, for example, Mozambique, Uganda, and Sierra Leone carried out traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning, and serving men, which seemingly replicated tasks that women and girls undertake in wider society (Coulter, forthcoming and McKay and Mazurana 2004). However, it has also been noted that women's and girls' participation in fighting forces could simul-

Female Fighters in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia and the province of Tigray the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded in 1975 as a movement opposed to the Derg military dictatorship. Women and girls were involved in active combat within the TPLF, and composed approximately a third of the fighters. Most female fighters appear to have experienced their recruitment as voluntary. According to Veale, the contribution of female fighters to the liberation struggle is seen as almost legendary in Ethiopia, and within the TPLF women were highly regarded and respected as fighters. The Tigrean movement also had an explicit agenda of addressing women's equality in addition to the overall aim of liberation. Work within the TPLF, such as supportive tasks and fighting, was shared equally between men and women. Women and girls seemed in general not to have been subjected to forced sexual relations and sexual abuse as discipline was tight with respect to sexual relations. Rape was also rare and severely punished (Veale 2003).

taneously result in new opportunities for them, such as achieving positions of power and learning new skills that previously would have been impossible for them. War can thus oppress women and girls and at the same time it may also expand the possibilities open to them (McKay and Mazurana 2004:17).

According to Keairns, girls and young women who volunteer to fight are often girls who possess strength, independence, courage, persistence, and character (Keairns 2002). They want to seek a life of their own and often behave in ways contrary to social expectations. Interestingly, these qualities – strength, independence, courage, persistence, and character – are often not highly valued female characteristics in many traditional African societies, which often promote women's submission, servility, and willingness to endure and accept their subordinate position.

In the majority of fighting forces in Africa men have in general held the leading positions, but a few young women have also been known to hold positions of command and authority (Persson 2005, McKay and Mazurana 2004, and de Watteville 2002). To give some examples from the Liberian civil war, well-known female commanders were Martina Johnson in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), Ruth 'Attila' Milton in Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and 'Black Diamond' in Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) (Ellis 2007:144, Utas 2005b). While

some of the young women in command positions led smaller groups consisting of female fighters, many commanded men and women. These women thereby gained access to influential positions that they probably would not have had but for the war.

Female fighters who did not hold leading positions have also experienced a new sense of freedom, as life with the fighting forces could expand traditional gender roles. According to McKay, female fighters said that by carrying arms they gained power, status, and control, and that they felt pride, self confidence, and a feeling of belonging. Nevertheless, McKay notes that except for the most powerful female fighters who had commander status or were commanders' favourite 'wives', most female fighters were subjected to abuse from men because of their low status in the gender as well as the military hierarchy (McKay 2007). Specht made similar observations about the fighting forces in Liberia. According to her study there was no true gender equality for female fighters as male commanders were above them in the military structure, men who could force them to marry or demand sexual favours (Specht 2006). Research by Utas supports this and although some of the most senior female commanders in Liberia were spared this kind of abuse, before they achieved a command position sexual abuse and gender discrimination were part of their experiences.

In independence struggles, women and girls generally had relatively high status as those movements viewed women's rights and equality as an integral part of the overall struggle for independence, as has been shown by the examples above from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Mozambique. Arnfred, for instance, observed that Mozambique had been strongly patriarchal prior to the outbreak of war, and women and men had led separate lives with a clear division of labour and different rules for gender conduct. Women had also been subordinated to patriarchal family authority. But during the war women's emancipation was an integral aspect of the revolutionary struggle. Therefore men and women came together on equal terms as Mozambicans in the struggle against the Portuguese colonial power, which established a new female identity and created the possibility for new gender relations (Arnfred 1988:5f).

In Eritrea female combatants occupied high status positions within the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Barth noted that the general opinion was that female fighters strengthened the struggle of the EPLF.

Women's dedication to the liberation war was said to have inspired the men to perform their best. The greater aim was a liberated Eritrea and this demanded the very best of all fighters, men and women alike. Whenever men tried to oppress women within the fighting forces due to their sex, women could complain to their leaders, and those men were later criticized for their behaviour in formal sessions. This system strengthened the rights of female combatants in the EPLF (Barth 2002).

Female Fighters in Liberia

The first Liberian civil war started when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor invaded Liberia in December 1989. After eight years the war came to an end in 1997 and Taylor was elected president. However, the security situation was still unstable and in 2000 civil war once again broke out as Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) launched an incursion from Guinea. Women and girls were part of the fighting forces in both fighting and non-fighting roles. There were also some units wholly composed of female fighters commonly known as Women's Artillery Commandos (WAC) (Specht 2006:15). It is hard to estimate how many female fighters joined voluntarily and how many were forced to join the fighting forces, and estimates vary depending on the source of information. In the study conducted by Specht approximately one third of the interviewed female ex-fighters were forcibly recruited. Among those who volunteered to fight most said that they did this to survive and to protect themselves, but other reasons such as economic motives, poverty, and the wish for revenge or for equality with men were also contributing factors (Specht 2006:32). Utas points out that a majority of the young women who fought in the civil war became involved through combatant boyfriends (Utas 2003:208). Most young women in the Liberian war zone were under immense pressure and many had no other choice but to attach themselves to a fighter with enough power to protect them. Without such protection these young women were at immediate risk of, for example, being forced to provide sexual services or of being raped (Utas 2003:176). Meanwhile, Utas also notes that even though most young women were in a fragile position in the war zone some female fighters who gained positions as commanders and high-ranking officers were able to turn war into a successful endeavour. With looted goods some were able, for example, to build up business enterprises after the end of the war (Utas 2003:212).

We can deduce that both the roles and status positions of female combatants vary between different conflicts and fighting forces. In the wars in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Mozambique, women's participation was regarded as strengthening the overall aim of liberation and women thereby gained higher status positions. In later conflicts like those in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Uganda, and during the war between FRELIMO and RENAMO in Mozambique, individual female combatants could be in positions of power and some also enjoyed more agency than prior to the outbreak of war, but their general status position was low as many had been abducted, forced to labour, and were abused. However, even in those cases where female fighters may have had high status positions during the war this was not necessarily maintained in the reality of the aftermath of war.

1.4 Women as a Labour Force in Rebel Movements

Many of the young women who were abducted or forcefully conscripted were exposed to sexual violence. But this was seldom the principal reason for their abduction. We argue that one important aspect has received too little attention in most writing on the abduction of girls and women in many African wars: women's productive labour.

In most African countries, women contribute substantially to their country's agricultural labour force, and agricultural production is often highly gendered. During war and armed conflict fighting forces cannot rely solely on looting or the cooperation of villagers, but the hard work of harvesting and preparing food left by fleeing villagers has to be done by the fighters themselves. It is evident that without the logistics of centralized food distribution, many rebel forces would never survive were it not for the productive labour of women. This seems to be the case in many African insurgencies where armed forces live off the land and where women's agricultural labour is much in demand, as for example in Sierra Leone (Coulter 2005, 2008 and forthcoming). Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Turshen 2001:61). Even during war, the chores of everyday life have to be performed – cooking, cleaning, trading, farming, and doing laundry. The roles young women perform in armed insurgency groups in Africa goes far beyond being simple 'sex slaves' or 'camp followers', rather they are essential to the functioning and maintenance of the war system itself (Lindestam de Vries 2005:45, Mazurana and Carlsson 2004, Thompson 2006:349, and

Turshen 2001). Rebel movements in Africa often need women and children to maintain this system and abduct them for this reason.[1]

1.5 Sexual Exploitation of Women in Rebel Movements and Beyond

It seems clear, judging by the conflicts in Africa in the recent decade, that rape and other acts of sexual violence inflicted on young women, female fighters included, are widespread.[2] In a recent report on sexual violence in armed conflicts profiles of 20 African countries that experienced armed conflict between 1987 and 2007 show that sexual violence occurred in all these cases. Acts of sexual violence were often systematic, and in some case also described as epidemic. In a number of conflicts mutilation and gang-rape were routine; sexual slavery was also widespread. Young children, including babies, as well as elderly women have been affected (Bastick et al. 2007:27). Impunity for acts of sexual violence committed during conflict is commonplace and according to the report this may also perpetuate tolerance of such abuse against women and girls as a long-lasting legacy of conflicts (Bastick et al. 2007:15). For these reasons, any analysis of female fighters in Africa has to inquire into the issue of sexual violence, and more importantly be sensitive to local concepts of rape or sexual stigma and contribute to an understanding of these in order to adequately address these issues on the ground. However, although sexual abuse is tragically commonplace in African wars it should nevertheless not be assumed that all female fighters have been sexually exploited (Brett 2002).

There is an pressing need to recognize that in many post-conflict societies in Africa female ex-fighters are associated with sexual activity, often to the detriment of the young women involved. In certain contexts, in particular where post-conflict support to female fighters has been lacking and where their reintegration into society has been difficult, prostitution is seen as the only remaining alternative for survival (Brett 2002).[3] However, it has to be acknowledged that regardless of their sexual experience, forced or otherwise,

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1. Mazurana and Carlson found that 44 per cent of abducted women were engaged in food production (2004:12).
2. See Lancaster and Khan (1992), Littlewood (1997), Moorehead (1995), Nordstrom (1997), Refugees (1993), Byrne (1996), Card (1996), Physicians for Human Rights (2002), Human Rights Watch (1998), and Save the Children (2005).
3. See also Machel (1996), and Persson (2005).

most female fighters, as noted by Brett, "are engaged in combat whether or not they are also sexual partners: they therefore need their role and experience as fighters also to be taken into account" (Brett 2002).

Female Fighters in the DRC

During the six year conflict from 1998 to 2004 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) women and girls were actively involved as fighters within the armed forces. Thousands of girls were forcibly recruited by the armed groups throughout the towns and villages of the Eastern Provinces (Verhey 2004). Some also joined by choice and in a few cases girls stated that they participated because of patriotic values. In other cases girls joined because they wanted to escape problematic domestic relations or because joining was seen as the only opportunity to access food and material goods. Within the armed groups of the DRC the great majority of the girls served multiple roles simultaneously. The prevailing assumption that girls in the DRC were only used as 'wives' and did not serve in active combat roles is incorrect (Verhey 2004:10). As in many other conflicts it is hard to estimate how many female fighters were part of the armed forces in the DRC. However, in 2005 Save the Children reported that there were up to 12,500 girls in the armed groups, and that girls are estimated to make up 40 percent of all children in such groups in the DRC (Save the Children 2005). Meanwhile, it has recently been reported that while 130,000 fighters have been disarmed in the ongoing DDR process in the DRC, only 2,610 of them have been women (IRIN 2007), http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=72779).

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2. Female Fighters:
Disarmament and Demobilization

The framework for most disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes for combatants is set and negotiated in official peace agreements.[1] The aims of the projects are basically (1) to collect, register, and destroy all conventional weapons, (2) to demobilize and (3) to reintegrate ex-combatants. Those combatants who are enrolled in DDR programmes are usually provided with some monetary and material assistance and are also frequently given some months of vocational or literacy training.

Women and girls who have registered in DDR programmes in Africa are few and do not accurately represent the number of female fighters. In DDR programmes in Sierra Leone only 6.5 percent of all registered adults were women, and only 7.4 percent of all child soldiers were girls, despite estimates of the number of female fighters being up to 30 percent (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). Few women participated in the 1997 Liberian DDR programme either (Utas 2003:178). On the other hand, in 2004, when gender mainstreaming was specifically incorporated into the United Nations Mission to Liberia, over 17 percent of demobilized ex-combatants were women (UNDP 2004).

In theory, female combatants have been included in African DDR processes but, as Mazurana and Carlson noted, most programmes are more effective in reaching out to male fighters than female fighters who are constantly underserved (Mazurana and Carlson 2004:2). In most DDR processes in African countries with high numbers of women in fighting forces there is a low turnout of girls and women because, it is assumed, most women do not demobilize unless specific measures are made to include them in the process.

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1. DDR programmes are usually funded by a number of national and international actors such as donor governments, the UN, the World Bank, and various NGOs (see McKay and Mazurana 2004:98).

DDR in Sierra Leone

When the Sierra Leone DDR process ended in December 2001, a total of 72,500 combatants had demobilized, of whom 4,751 (6.5 percent) were women and 6,787 were children, of whom 506 (9.4 percent) were girls (Mazurana and Carlson 2004:6). Most agree, however, that those few women and girls who entered the official DDR programme do not accurately represent the actual number of female fighters.[1] Despite the low female turnout, the Sierra Leone DDR was considered a success by the UN, the Sierra Leone government, and many others, and a model for future DDR processes in other countries. However, the low participation of female fighters despite existing knowledge of their presence has led some to question the design, implementation, and success of the DDR in Sierra Leone (Coulter 2005 and forthcoming, Mazurana and Carlsson 2004). Security Council Resolution 1325[2] seemed to have little effect on the design and implementation of the Sierra Leone DDR, which has been described as, if not gender-discriminatory, then definitely 'gender-blind'.

The DDR is also a process aimed at adult combatants, but in Sierra Leone many fighters were under 18, and as such were categorized as child soldiers. With regard to the demobilization of child soldiers, the 'Cape Town Principles'[3] are a strong guiding policy document. But again, as with Resolution 1325, these principles were not fully implemented in the Sierra Leone DDR. In reality, in Sierra Leone, many child soldiers had either to produce weapons or demonstrate experience in using them in order to be registered and sent to Interim Care Centres (ICC).

2.1 Excluded from DDR Programmes

In a study conducted by Mazurana with female fighters from Angola, Burundi, DRC, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, most stated that a majority of the women

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1. Mazurana and Carlson (2004) estimated that in the DDR programme only 6.5 per cent of all registered adults were women and that 7.4 per cent of all children were girls. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2002) estimated that 7.4 per cent of all adults demobilizing were women and 7.7 per cent of all children and adolescents were girls.
2. See page 25.
3. See page 25.

and girls within their fighting forces neither participated nor benefited from DDR programmes. A number of reasons were given for why this pattern seemed to have repeatedly occurred, the primary among them being that they were excluded because they had not been identified as 'combatants' (Mazurana 2005:33).

The reason for not working actively to include girls and women in institutionalized DDR programmes could be that female fighters also perform additional roles – they are labourers, 'wives', girlfriends, domestic workers, farmers – and this can render the notion of who is a fighter and who is not unclear. They are frequently represented, incorrectly, as being only dependants or wives of male fighters, and few efforts are made to determine whether in fact they were also fighters (McCay and Mazurana 2004:120f). Their different roles may prevent the UN, aid organizations, and ordinary civilians from seeing girls and women as 'real' fighters, thereby screening them out of the process of demobilization (Brett and Specht 2004:99). Women and children associated in one way or another with male soldiers are still generally considered 'camp followers' (Enloe 2000:37f). Above, we have argued that those women who are only thought of as abducted women, sex slaves or simply as camp followers, and are excluded from formal demobilization, have actually formed the backbone of many armed forces, and were as such vital to the war enterprise. The question is what happens to auxiliary personnel in DDR programmes? As Enloe notes

> In the late twentieth century, women who have been mobilized to serve the military's needs are still vulnerable to the stereotype of camp follower – dispensable, disreputable – no matter how professional their formal position is in the military (Enloe 2000:40).

The requirement of a weapon in order to be defined as a combatant poses an obstacle for many women's and girls' demobilization. In Sierra Leone, Coulter found that half of the interviewed female ex-fighters claimed that they had actually wanted to disarm, but only a handful did. Out of those 22 percent stated that the reason for this was that they did not have access to a weapon (Coulter 2004). Mazurana and Carlson reached an even higher figure: in their study, 46 percent of the female ex-fighters who did not go through DDR in Sierra Leone stated that the reason for this was their lack of a weapon, and the authors state that one of the reasons female ex-fighters

often lacked access to weapons at the time of disarmament and demobilization was that their commander had already collected their weapons (Mazurana and Carlsson 2004:20).[1] When weapons are used as a condition to get access to a DDR programme, and when access to the programmes also means access to money, women and junior soldiers are often tricked out of their weapons by senior, predominantly male, commanders (Mazurana 2005:33).

Similar observations have also been made by Specht with regard to the demobilization of ex-combatants in Liberia. Here the first criterion for entering the DDR programme was the possession of a weapon or ammunition. For female fighters under the age of 18 this was not a problem as child soldiers could demobilize without handing in a weapon.[2] However, the adult programme was much stricter as fighters over 18 were denied access if they did not hand in a weapon, which few were able to do. Another reason for the exclusion of female fighters in the DDR programmes that Specht noted in Liberia was the use of lists made by commanders of all members within a unit. Access to the DDR and any cash payment therefore depended on being on the list. This method has been used in many DDR programmes around the world and may be effective in conflicts where it is more or less clear who the combatants are. However, in contexts such as in Liberia where the fighting forces are more fluid and the distinction between civilians and combatants is difficult to determine, commanders have an opportunity to abuse their power. Female fighters in Liberia were in general discriminated against under this system as they were often omitted from the lists in favour of friends and relatives of their commander. A commander was therefore able to take advantage of the availability of cash offered to ex-fighters in the Liberian DDR programmes (Specht 2006:92f, Solheim 2003). Many female fighters who should have been entitled to DDR benefits were therefore denied access instead.

It is evident that there is an over-classification of girls and young women as 'bush wives', camp followers, and sex slaves, which has prevented the es-

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1. This was often the case for male private soldiers as well (Hoffman 2005 and Solheim 2003).
2. In certain DDR programmes children have actually had to prove that they had been combatants by showing that they could assemble and handle a weapon (McKay and Mazurana 2004). However, this is not a UN-sanctioned practice.

DDR in Liberia

After the war an official DDR programme was launched in Liberia that lasted until late November 2004. By that time 22,020 (22 percent) women and 2,517 (2 percent) girls had gone through the process. Still, according to Specht, there could be as many as 14,000 young women or more who participated in the armed conflict and who for various reasons did not formally demobilize (Specht 2006). Some lessons had probably been learned from earlier DDR programmes, such as the one in Sierra Leone. The UN Secretary-General in a report to the Security Council on the situation in Liberia stated that special measures should be taken to address the gender-specific needs of female combatants, as well as wives and widows of former combatants in the DDR programmes. Still, UNIFEM found several shortcomings in the Liberian DDR. For instance, an initial target of only 2,000 women combatants to be demobilized was set, which proved to be a major underestimate. The Sierra Leone experience had shown that women were associated with fighting forces to a far greater degree than was originally estimated, an insight that could and should have been incorporated when planning DDR in Liberia. Another issue that UNIFEM has pointed out is that even though women supporters and dependants and not just female fighters were to be incorporated into the DDR process no preparations were made to accommodate them (UNIFEM 2004). Other reasons why female fighters stayed away from DDR were, for example, that they did not trust the process to help them, or that they were afraid of repercussions and social stigma if they were identified as ex-fighters.

tablishment of DDR programmes to address these girls' and women's actual lived experiences (Mazurana and Carlsson 2004:21). It is also clear that both disarmament and reintegration are explicitly gendered processes, a factor that has not been addressed in many DDR processes in Africa. The focus of most DDRs is on disarming male fighters, and as girls and women had in part played other roles in the war the narrow classification of them as dependants effectively excluded them from the process.

Practitioners and policy makers in the field of DDR often take as a point of departure the narrow and conventional way of defining combatants as young men over the age of 18 in possession of weapons. As a result, women and girls are excluded from this category (McKay and Mazurana 2004:114, UNIFEM 2004:4). Lately there have been some attempts to broaden the

Resolution 1325 and the Cape Town Principles

UN Security Council Resolution 1325. "Women, Peace and Security", was passed on 31 October 2000.[1] Point 13 of the resolution specifically addresses DDR processes and states that the UN "encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants". The resolution also stresses "the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security, and the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution". However, in the eight years since its inception the criticism has been that although the resolution in itself is an important document it is rarely implemented and there are no built-in mechanisms of accountability or follow-up procedures.

The Cape Town Principles address the fact that many of the young women fighting in African wars have been recruited below the age of 18 and therefore fall within the official category of children since the UN works according to the 'straight 18' definition. In 1997 Unicef and the NGO working group on the Convention of the Rights of the Child held a symposium in South Africa, of which the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices were a result.[2] The document specifically addresses the prevention of recruitment of children into the armed forces, as well as the demobilization and social reintegration of child soldiers in Africa. One of the recommendations is that the definition of child soldier should mean "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 those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms".

definition of combatants, but although both UN Resolution 1325 and the Cape Town Principles (CTP) address this issue, and include in the category of combatant not only those carrying guns, this has not improved the situation for female fighters who continue to be excluded from DDR efforts. If the intention is to reach all fighters, including women and girls,

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1. See the full resolution here: http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf
2. See the Cape Town Principles in full here: http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principles(1).pdf

it is essential to understand the mechanisms behind female fighters' lack of access to official DDR programmes and the reasons why they sometimes choose not to participate.

Reintegration Efforts in Northern Uganda

Women and girls who escaped from the LRA often face stigmatization when they return to their home communities. They are perceived to have been willing wives of rebel commanders and face negative attitudes due to their loss of virginity (McKay and Mazurana 2004:36f). Spontaneous reintegration is the prevalent pattern for returning female fighters in Northern Uganda, resulting in their not having access to any social reintegration assistance (McKay and Mazurana 2004:34).

2.2 Avoiding DDR

Many female ex-fighters also choose not to take part in official DDR programmes out of fear, or the feeling that they have nothing to gain. It can, for example, be a question of security with regard to the demobilization camps. The facilities in Sierra Leone, for instance, were perceived to be dangerous for women and girls, because of the large numbers of men and inadequate protection (Coulter 2004, Mazurana and Carlson 2004). De Watteville has also reported that female fighters on several occasions in, for example, Mozambique and Zimbabwe never showed up during encampment for demobilization. According to de Watteville this may have been because they were not informed or were deliberately excluded. In Mozambique the encampment phase lasted several months, and soldiers became increasingly aggressive, stressed by their immobility and inactivity in the poorly equipped camps. Had women been present, de Watteville argues, their security would have been at risk if no measures to protect them had been taken, such as armed guards and fenced female quarters (de Watteville 2002:6)

Female ex-fighters may also not turn up for disarmament and demobilization out of fear of having their identities as former fighters revealed. Based on our own fieldwork and the observation of others, this is a central aspect, which we argue has not been seriously dealt with in the planning and implementing of DDR programmes. There is often a high degree of stigma attached to being a female fighter, and women and girls may feel that regis-

tering at the DDR centres will only result in further social exclusion by the civil community. Given that female fighters are not easily accepted back into civil society and often looked upon with fear and suspicion, there is a real risk that these apprehensions may turn out to be justified. DDR could thus become counterproductive for the reintegration of female ex-fighters. One consequence is that female ex-fighters will self-demobilize and therefore not receive the assistance or benefits they are entitled to as ex-combatants.

Avoiding DDR in the DRC

Many girls in the DRC have refused to go through the official DDR as by doing so they could easily be identified by the community. The alternatives open to them have been to remain in the armed group or to self-demobilize. The civilian community in DRC has tended to react with fear and suspicion towards these women and girls. Females associated with the fighting forces have also been reported to be regarded by their communities as having 'lost their value' and dishonoured their families due to the assumed sexual abuse and involvement with multiple sexual partners they have been subjected to (Save the Children 2005).

There are also other reasons, local, social, and cultural, that make female fighters choose not to disarm. Many female fighters are told by commanders, fellow fighters or relatives that it is not appropriate for women to disarm. There may be local cultural taboos concerning young women and violent practices that must be considered by planners and implementers of DDR. Generally, female fighters do not occupy a position that can be easily reconciled with predominant gender ideologies (Coulter 2008 and forthcoming, Farr 2002:8). Unlike male combatants, they are often excluded from the new army, from new political structures, and are also refused access to retraining or land. Many, as has been pointed out, are also regarded with fear and suspicion when they attempt to return to the lives they lived before war broke out. Gardam and Charlesworth, for example, noted that the treatment of female combatants by the military institution reflects the subordinate position of women in society generally (Gardam and Charlesworth 2000:152). Most girls and women quietly drift back to their families or communities, and while this secrecy protects them, it also conceals their need for support (Coulter, forthcoming, McKay and Mazurana 2004:35).

3. Surviving Peace

During years they spent in fighting forces, often under immense pressure, former women and girl fighters learned survival techniques and made tactical choices, and acquired the skills and strengths that kept them alive (Utas 2005a). But ironically, surviving war does not automatically mean surviving peace. While roles and status positions of female combatants vary widely during war, de Watteville notes that they all seem to share the characteristic of limited access to benefits at the time of peace and demobilization (de Watteville 2002:1). Female ex-combatants are often punished twofold: they are often excluded from DDR programmes due to the failure to implement these programmes in gender-sensitive ways, and they are not easily welcomed back and are often stigmatized by the civil society, often because they have transgressed traditional gender roles.

The rejection by their home communities that women and girls often face when returning to civilian life, and their history of having resorted to 'unwomanly' behaviour like being violent or having been sexually abused, often causes them to feel tremendous shame which can make reintegration even harder. Despite the physical scars from warfare, torture and sexual violence, female ex-combatants also suffer from war traumas which represent additional post-conflict challenges. Many female ex-combatants are reported to have severe difficulties in adapting to civilian life for various reasons. In conflicts such as the liberation wars in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Mozambique female fighters had relatively high status positions within the fighting forces. Women and girls partly joined these movements because women's rights and equality for both men and women were included in the overall aim for liberation, but at the time of peace women's expectations of what their struggle should have resulted in were seldom fulfilled. For Barth, it was striking to hear that many Eritrean female ex-combatants expressed the view that the war years were preferable to the time that came afterwards. They described the war years as a time when they were treated as equals and experienced empowerment. When the war was over all of this was lost as women were expected to return to their traditional gender roles and status positions.

Navigating Peace in Eritrea

Female fighters in Eritrea saw their new-found freedom disappear soon after the end of the war, despite the fact that the Eritrean People's Liberation Front which won the war had particularly stressed that it was also fighting for gender equality. During the war female fighters gained considerable equality with male fighters but when the war ended these young women were again confronted by patriarchal Eritrean society. On the political and legal level women are officially equal but in practice patriarchal traditions are deeply rooted in civilian society (Klingebiel et al. 1995). Barth found that many Eritrean female ex-fighters experienced the years of war as preferable to the time that came afterwards. Within the EPLF they had felt respected, equal and empowered but this was all lost after the war when women were pushed towards traditional gender roles (Barth 2002). When the DDR process started in Eritrea it was initially decided that women were to be treated in the same way as men and that at least one third of the trainees in the programmes should be women. Women were also trained in traditionally female fields such as mat-weaving, basket-making, tailoring, embroidery and typing. However, none of these proved successful as they did not generate sufficient income opportunities, so this support was phased out in 1995. However, training in traditionally male trades did not automatically make them employable (Mehreteab (2002:29). Furthermore, female ex-fighters had a hard time getting married after the war as men usually claimed that these women had lost their femininity during the war. Many male ex-fighters also divorced their fighter wives for this reason and married,civilian women (Mehreteab 2002:34). Thus, female ex-fighters, despite being empowered and treated equally during the war, faced severe challenges afterwards.

Sometimes, even female ex-combatants from fighting forces where the status of women and girls was generally low, or who had been abducted, abused or kept as sex slaves, said they missed being in the armed forces (Persson 2005:42). Bearing in mind how hard life was for most women and girls in armed conflicts, such statements are difficult to understand; at the same time they reveal something about just how challenging surviving peace really is for female ex-fighters. When male and female ex-fighters return to civil society they are received differently; while men are perceived to

have strengthened their gender role through life within the fighting forces, women are instead increasingly marginalized.[1]

3.1 Gender Roles – Changes and Continuities

War often entails a temporary change in gender roles. Although it may not be true for all women and girls, life as a female fighter can bring opportunities of attaining a position of power and gaining agency in a way that would not have been possible prior to the war. Women may also manage to change their status positions after war has ended, but frequently they revert to more traditional or conservative gender roles.

In the aftermath of war, women are gradually pushed in the direction of a gender role that is considered appropriate in that particular society (Barth 2002). During the independence war in Mozambique a new female identity emerged and some women developed a new concept of themselves as women, with new aspirations and new goals (Arnfred 1988:6). FRELIMO urged and supported such changes in gender roles. However, after the war FRELIMO either failed to provide support for or directly opposed the gender struggle of women, Arnfred argues (1988:10). It appears that women's liberation was promoted and women's new gender roles supported only when women were needed in the overall struggle for independence. But when Mozambique was finally liberated and FRELIMO took power men were not ready to share this power with women, resulting in traditional gender roles being reinforced. As Barth pointed out, if women expand or leave their traditional gender roles this will obviously affect overall gender relations, and ultimately also require changes on the part of men, but alternative male gender roles are not on the agenda of many poor post-conflict states in Africa today (Barth 2002).

Post-conflict settings can bring about windows of opportunity with regard to equality between women and men and the expansion of traditional gender norms (Fuest 2008). However, such changes will not come easily. It is of fundamental importance that these opportunities are acknowledged and seized; otherwise, there is an impending risk that peace will come as a disappointment.

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1. However, we ought not to forget that most male ex-fighters are equally marginalized (see Utas 2005c and Christensen 2007).

Reversing Gender Roles in Post-War Mozambique

According to West, female fighters looked back at their experience in FRELIMO and Destacamento Feminino (DF) with nostalgia as they felt that their participation in the armed struggle had broadened their horizons and expanded and extended their autonomy from their families. During the war, female fighters contested, they were equal with the men but after the war this was no longer true. As Arnfred observes, women felt that after the war men took back what they had lost in the way of patriarchal power and many women expressed anger that they had been forgotten by their one-time supporter Arnfred (1988:7f). Also, according to West's informants, post-independence was the most traumatic experience for female ex-fighters as they said FRELIMO abandoned them. The promises given to DF about empowerment of women were never fulfilled in the aftermath of war. Leadership roles for women were limited and the employment market was bleak. Many female ex-fighters also lacked social networks because they had left their families as girls or young women, and also because they had not married during the war. Many also found it difficult to get married as they said that men – even former guerrillas – did not want equal partners in marriage after the war. Despite what had been said earlier within FRELIMO these men remained sexist and patriarchal and complained that former DFs were too feisty and independent to be married (West 2000:189f).

In the UN and government DDR programmes that followed the end of the war between FRELIMO and RENAMO in 1992 male fighters were prioritized even though girls were thought to constitute up to 40 percent of the minors in the RENAMO bases (McKay and Mazurana 2004:34). Few female ex-fighters participated in Mozambique's DDR and most received no assistance at all from the government. One reason for this was that the FRELIMO government did not want to admit or gather evidence of their use of girls (Ibid.:111). Also, the reason for female ex-fighters not being present for demobilization could have been that they were deliberately excluded or not informed (de Watteville 2002:6).

Gender Reversals in Ethiopia

When the Derg regime was overthrown in 1991 women were formally targeted and included in demobilization programmes. However, in a study conducted by Veale, female fighters in general reported that they had been accepted by civilian community but many still found reintegration to be difficult (Veale 2003). When the war was over female ex-fighters were expected to return to the traditional gender roles of Ethiopian women, which many of them were reluctant to accept. One issue women found particularly difficult was seeing how their earlier equality with men, which they had experienced while they were fighters, suddenly disappeared when they returned home (Veale 2003, chapters 2 and 3). It appears that the equality and liberation of women that the TPLF and many female fighters fought for was forgotten in the aftermath of war.

3.2 Skills and Strengths

It is striking that useful skills acquired during war are often not recognized in peacetime, even if they are very useful. In Eritrea, female fighters learned a number of skills, apart from the actual fighting and shooting. They were, for example, involved in public administration, health, construction, teaching, electronics, and communications on the frontline. Afterwards, these qualifications were not accepted by civil society because they could not be formally confirmed (Barth 2002). Mazurana notes that skills developed by female fighters during conflict could be built upon in post-conflict settings. It is therefore important to identify which activities female fighters undertook during war and conflict and what skills they acquired. Some of the skills that were identified in Mazurana's report were: medical skills, military intelligence work, management skills, decision-making skills, negotiation skills, mediation and conflict resolution skills, searching for common ground and mobilizing women (and men). The female ex-fighters in her report were convinced that such skills could be well utilized in livelihood activities in post-conflict settings (Mazurana 2005:41). Those responsible for planning and implementing programmes for reintegration should therefore be made aware of which skills women and girls may posses so that these skills can be made use of and strengthened. As Mazurana and Carlson note, when women and girls are treated as passive victims or 'de-

pendants', with no acknowledgement of the skills and resources they have attained, female ex-fighters are again stripped of control over their lives and a sense of dignity. DDR programmes thereby also risk losing tremendous social capital that could be of importance for post-conflict reconstruction (Mazurana and Carlson 2004:15).

3.3 Education

Female ex-fighters often express a wish to receive education when they return to civil society. As many young women and girls have lost educational opportunities due to the war they often feel a strong need to access education for themselves and their children once the war is over. According to Mazurana, this wish was especially expressed by women who had been abducted or pressured into the armed force, had been held as forced wives or had given birth to children as result of these unwanted relationships. Mazurana noted that, of those groups that had returned from the fighting forces, young mothers were often most stigmatized (Mazurana 2005:29). These young women probably saw education as their opportunity to regain control over their lives and to offer their children a brighter future (Coulter forthcoming). As Veale reports, former female fighters expressed the view that being educated also meant being independent. With independence they particularly referred to economic independence and/or having political awareness (Veale 2003). This can be interpreted as meaning that former female fighters, and especially those who had given birth to children during their time with the fighting forces, realized that they had to rely on themselves to find the means to support themselves and their children. Education was therefore seen as a window of opportunity through which to achieve this goal. According to Specht's observations, too, female ex-fighters in Liberia valued education highly. However, in practice, many found themselves unable to go to school even when given the opportunity, as they could not earn a living to support themselves and their children or siblings at the same time (Specht 2006:99).

3.4 Health

Most female ex-fighters return from war with physical and psychological health problems. Some of the most commonly experienced health conditions have been: headaches from beating and psychological causes, stomach ache – possibly from STDs and pelvic inflammatory diseases, effects of drug abuse, scabies and skin diseases, chest pain, pain from beatings, genital injuries or infections such as swelling, fistulas, vaginal discharge, genital itch and pain from trauma to the genital and anal regions and sexual abuse. Common psychological problems have been fear, worry and anxiety related to being rejected and not having options while seeing a future with little hope (McKay and Mazurana 2004:67).

Given the extent of sexual violence, a major problem for young women that has been associated with their time in the armed forces is sexually transmitted diseases. However, few are diagnosed and treated unless they go through a rehabilitation or interim care centre where such services are offered or if primary medical care is provided by an NGO, but in war-torn countries there is an almost total absence of sexual and reproductive health services (McKay and Mazurana 2004:62). One strategy for preventing further infections is to inform and educate combatants before they are discharged as the demobilization phase presents a unique opportunity for this. Another recommended strategy is having combatants tested during demobilization. However, in many African countries, those who test positive for HIV can seldom afford treatment – a point that needs to be considered before HIV testing is proposed (de Watteville 2002:21). In Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, for example, the few girls who were tested and found to be infected with HIV have not had any access to treatment other than supportive counselling (McKay and Mazurana 2004:65).

Post-war trauma is a major health issue for many girls and young women who have lived through wars. Many NGOs have programmes that partially cater for psycho-social healing. In general, however, these issues are too complex and deep-seated to be dealt with efficiently by such organizations alone; this is particularly so for young women as (1) they may stay out of the public realm by demobilizing and reintegrating informally and are thus not reached and (2) because many have been more directly hit than young men by being sexually abused. Post-war traumas are medical, psychological and social, and must thus be dealt with in all their aspects. In many African

post-conflict zones there are various kinds of traditional healers who cater for aspects of trauma on both individual and social levels. Young women tend to turn to these healers and are aided in their post-trauma recoveries. Churches and other religious institutions are also successful in aiding young women with dealing with trauma (Utas 2004).

3.5 Shame and Stigma

When returning to civil society female ex-fighters are often looked upon with suspicion and fear for having been perpetrators of violence but also for having violated established gender roles. In Sierra Leone many female ex-fighters said they had been so badly treated and so disliked by civilians that they became ashamed of having stayed so long with the fighting forces. Feelings of shame originated from being called a rebel or having a 'rebel child'. In this and many other cases the issue is less a sense of personal guilt than of social shame (Coulter, forthcoming).

Having been subjected to sexual violence or having had a child outside of wedlock was a source of acute shame not only in Sierra Leone but also in Northern Uganda, as Mazurana and McKay note (Mazurana and McKay 2004:44). As has been shown, one effect of the social stigma attached to having been a fighter is that many women and girls hide their past and do not come forward to receive the DDR benefits they are entitled to (Coulter, forthcoming and Persson 2005). Another consequence of having been a female fighter is the difficulty of getting married. This is of great importance in many African societies as marriage is seen as mandatory for women. Unmarried women are sometimes likened to social outcasts Coulter, forthcoming and McKay 2007:393). In Sierra Leone and Uganda, female ex-fighters were worried about their marriage prospects and were reported as saying that, when war was over, men preferred civilian women, women without scars from battle, and women who were sexually 'untouched'. Similarly, Sierra Leonean and Ugandan men have said that they prefer not to marry a woman who has been associated with fighting forces. One reason given for this was that female ex-fighters were believed to have been sexually active with many men, but what seemed more important was that men feared that these women would be unpredictable and aggressive due to their past experiences (Persson 2005).

In the case of Eritrea, Barth noted that those female fighters who were married were largely married to male ex-fighters, and most male ex-fighters were married to civilian women, while female ex-fighters were hardly ever married to civilian men (Barth 2002). Similar observations were also made by West after the Mozambican liberation war. Female ex-fighters here faced difficulties in getting married, as they said that men, and even male ex-fighters, did not want equal partners after the war. Men complained that the female ex-fighters were too feisty and independent to be married (West (2000:190). This could be interpreted as meaning that although female ex-fighters had been highly respected within the armed forces they were not preferred marriage partners in the aftermath of war due to their war-time activities, and that they also faced some stigmatization as a result.

3.6 Post-War Insecurity

There is often an overall insecurity facing women, including female ex-fighters, in the aftermath of war. The continuum of sexual violence in post-conflict settings is such an issue. As stated by Bastick, Grimm and Kunz, armed conflicts can have long-term consequences in terms of sexual abuse and gender-based violence. According to their report it is difficult to determine whether levels of post-conflict sexual violence are higher than before the outbreak of conflict or whether there is an increase in reporting of such crimes compared to the periods prior and during conflict. It has, however, been noted that many post-conflict countries report very high and/or increasing incidences of sexual and other forms of violence against women. On top of the general post-war insecurity many young female ex-fighters must thus also navigate risky sexual terrains – yet again adding to their vulnerabilities.

3.7 Livelihood Options

In Africa today, after war there emerge hundreds of NGOs working with rehabilitation, reintegration projects and so on. Many of these projects target young women with the intention of ameliorating their general situation, improving their economic and emotional status, and increasing their knowledge of health and reproductive issues. It takes years before a country's basic infrastructure – roads, schools, hospitals, distribution of seeds and other

agricultural extension services to farmers, for example – can be restored, and in this setting NGOs become the major providers of both resources and activities, and their participatory projects are much coveted. One could speak of a new economy dictated by large-scale humanitarian interests. In this new post-war economy female ex-fighters and other war-affected young women have to navigate between agencies and projects created for their benefit. Many of these women are single with children, some live with their families and others with friends or boyfriends. Many feel insecure in their environments and few can support themselves through work or other activities, and NGO-funded skills training projects are therefore seen by many as the only opportunity to improve their situation. What most of these NGO projects share, however, is that they offer women training initiatives for a limited set of skills and are something of a quick-impact effort to solve a problem that is, in fact, much more complex (Coulter, forthcoming).

The post-war situation for girls and women associated with fighting forces is not unknown to the institutions dealing with post-war rehabilitation, national and international. Girls and women have frequently been described as the most vulnerable category in war-torn societies. Yet, also, as we have seen, they frequently get the short end of the stick, as fewer funds have been allocated to projects targeting them, in particular if they are ex-combatants. Also, despite the good will of the UN and NGOs, the types of vocational training offered to war-affected women are often not successful in securing an income for girls and women. The training programmes are often too short and there is often a lack of training materials. The variety and differentiation in the types of training are also extremely limited and perhaps demonstrate a lack of vision more than anything (Utas 2005c). Most programmes in post-war projects targeting girls and women are not successful in terms of economic viability.

While many NGOs emphasize that their objective is to make women independent and self-reliant, few, however, question whether the skills they offer lead to sustainable livelihoods. However, although few women can actually manage to make a living from the skills they learn, many women explain that the projects provide them with something new. For example, some mention that these types of project make them more self-confident and help them to cope better socially. For women known to be marginalized and stigmatized in African post-war societies, as discussed above, this

is significant. Therefore, some projects, albeit unintentionally, seemed more successful as a form of 'trauma healing' or 'psycho-social activity' than they were in providing long-term economic benefits (Coulter 2004).

In creating livelihood options for young female ex-fighters, it is essential also to examine their social position and the links between being able to make a living and social well-being, between economy and social life. There is often a dialectical relationship between material wealth and the quality of social relations in African countries. Women who have nothing and can provide nothing are often stigmatized and marginalized in the family. A woman who has provisions, on the other hand, is more likely to be well treated. Also, socio-cultural background is of utmost importance in planning for post-war rehabilitation projects. Many young African women who have been active in armed conflict are from rural backgrounds, and prior to the war many of these young women would not have had a large variety of livelihood options. Becoming a wife, a mother, and a farmer, and possibly getting a few years of education, is what many young rural women expect and experience. In many post-war societies this traditional trajectory is closed to them.

3.8 Prostitution as Survival Strategy

Despite many young women's wishes to learn a craft, to trade, and to read and write, quite a number of the girls and young women who have spent time with fighting forces during war and conflict chose strategies other than those to survive in post-war society. Some become 'girlfriends', while others become prostitutes. It is well known that many of the 'girlfriends' and prostitutes in Sierra Leone and Liberia, for example, are female ex-combatants, women who see few other options for surviving in post-war society (Mazurana and Carlson 2004:3, Persson 2005). It has been said that in war-torn societies, becoming a prostitute may be a woman's best economic option (Bennet et al. 1995, Higate 2004:43).

Unfortunately, prostitution as a survival strategy in post-war societies is quite common, and in war-torn countries with large resident peacekeeping or humanitarian aid interests, prostitution is often described and acknowledged as such – a survival strategy in which "women and children offer the only material asset they have to trade, their bodies" (Martin 2005). In Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the DRC it has even been reported that girls and

women have had sex with peacekeepers in exchange for a piece of fruit or some food (UNHCR/Save the Children UK 2002); it cannot be excluded that some of these girls may have been ex-fighters.

That there is an increase in prostitution wherever there are UN or other peacekeepers is well known and has been well documented all over the world, for example in Bosnia, East Timor, Ethiopia, and DRC, and particularly in Sierra Leone and Liberia. In a war-torn context, where there are few other means for women to earn an income, UN peacekeepers, international aid workers, and other expatriates represent an economic opportunity for some girls and women, as these expatriates almost always are much better off than the local population they are there to assist. To quote Richard Wilson "humanitarian intervention, however justified, creates all kinds of hidden social costs, including turning a sizeable part of the female population into prostitutes" (Wilson 2001:21).

One issue which is seldom addressed by organizations targeting these women is that the ability of abducted and ex-combatant women to re-integrate into post-war society is not only a question of their being able to generate an income but is also largely dependent on how they are viewed in post-war society, as has been discussed above. It matters little how many projects a female ex-combatant participates in if her ability to put her skills into practice is circumscribed by society's negative view of her. For these and other reasons, many female ex-combatants do not always view NGO projects as their best option. The fact that post-war prostitution has often concerned those women who have been subjected to war-time rape also speaks to the continuation of structural violence.

Conclusion

Even today, when female ex-fighters are discussed and planned for, it is often implied that they are predominantly 'victims'. Female fighters are seen as an anomaly – a category that is difficult to cater for. In reality, their experiences in fighting forces are multifaceted and complex as women and girls may simultaneously be both victims and perpetrators. In this text we have offered an informed alternative to victim-prone policy work on the topic of young women in African wars. Yet by locating young women's agency in war zones we have tried not to steer away from simultaneously discussing hardships and traumas.

Currently, in many conflict areas, not only in Africa, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former fighters into civilian life through official DDR programmes is the favoured means, with the UN and governments alike, of achieving sustainable peace. In the case of African wars, the international community often presses for official disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration measures. However, DDR programmes in their current forms do not seem to be the most effective way to identify, register, demobilize and reintegrate female fighters. Opportunities to support gender equality in many post-conflict situations have not been seized. Traditional gender stereotypes and divisions of labour have instead often been reintroduced, and sometimes even reinforced by DDR programmes.

There may be various reasons for this and it may take different expressions. For example, First, it appears that young female fighters have at times been denied access to official DDR processes because the international community does not recognize them as 'real' fighters. Second, it has been noted that many female fighters simply choose not to demobilize because they see few benefits in doing so. Third, female fighters may have not disarmed for social reasons: they may fear being socially stigmatized and ostracized. If participation in DDR also implies that women and girls by association are identified as ex-fighters in public this may be directly counterproductive for their reintegration into civil society. One of the most important reasons female fighters choose not to disarm is that they would be identified as former fighters. This is a central aspect that we believe has not

been taken into serious consideration during the planning and implementation of DDR programmes. If this aspect is not properly investigated, DDR programmes, instead of helping female fighters, may actually contribute to their social exclusion in the long term. However, the solution is certainly not to overlook and exclude female fighters from DDR processes. Rather, it is imperative to transform these programmes with regard to local contexts and gender-specific preconditions until they are shaped to fully meet the needs of female ex-fighters.

Recommendations

1. Acknowledging young women as actors in war

A. Practitioners in the field, including INGOs, NGOs, UN agencies and international aid donors should always assume that young women are involved in active warfare as fighters in contemporary conflicts in Africa.

B. Institutions and organizations attempting to assist and empower young women in conflict zones must acknowledge that a focus on female fighters as victims alone denies their agency. Female fighters are often victimized but they are not mere victims.

2. Humanitarian assistance and DDR programmes must support gender equality

A. Humanitarian assistance and DDR programmes for ex-fighters must seize theopportunity to support gender equality and always to administer their programmes in a gender-sensitive way; otherwise these interventions may risk exacerbating or reintroducing gender inequalities. It has to be acknowledged that although war can oppress women and girls in countless ways, it may at the same time expand the possibilities open to them and contribute to gender equality.

B. The recommendations of both Resolution 1325 and the Cape Town Principles should be incorporated in DDR programmes, otherwise many young women who should be eligible for registration and assistance are at risk of being excluded.

C. Female ex-fighters may avoid DDR due to lack of security in demobilization camps. Special safe, secure and single-sex centres with predominantly female staff should therefore be designated for the demobilization of women.

D. It should be acknowledged that many female ex-fighters also choose not to take part in official DDR programmes. One central aspect in this regard is these young women's fear of stigmatization and social exclusion if they are identified as former fighters. Humanitarian assistance and DDR must therefore take this issue into account and transform their

support so as to reach female fighters without contributing to their stig-matization.

E. Those planning and implementing DDR programmes must fully ac-knowledge how stigma and shame affect the lives of female ex-fighters and how this can become an obstacle for reintegration. Assistance start from the fact that female ex-fighters may lack social networks due to rejection by families and male partners.

3. Programmes must understand and connect to the local context

A. Local and context-specific knowledge of the conflict and its actors is im-perative when DDR programmes are planned and implemented. Young women's experiences in fighting forces may vary significantly depending on various factors such as type of conflict, mode of conscription and women's roles and status positions within the armed group. In order to create more effective assistance the varying experiences of young female fighters should be better contextualized.

B. It is crucial that gender roles before, during, and after war are evaluated when post-conflict reconstruction is planned so as to assist women in attaining the roles they choose for themselves (Specht 2006:58).

C. In cultures where women's access to land, property, social networks, and status is largely determined by her husband and his clan, a woman's inability to marry poses serious challenges to her human security and livelihood options.

4. Sexual abuse, trauma, and stigma

A. It should be acknowledged that sexual exploitation and abuse are ex-perienced by many young women in fighting forces. It is important to understand local concepts of rape and sexual stigma to address these issues adequately on the ground.

B. Traditional healers often have the psycho-social capacity and reach to cater for the large number of traumatized young women who have been sexually abused or otherwise traumatized during the war, and an

important aspect of post-war trauma aid is to work with these healers. For aid programmes it is important to locate such actors and cooperate with them, yet at the same time to supervise them carefully, so as not to increase trauma.

C. It is important to understand that even when young women have been forced to provide sexual services many have also been engaged in active combat. Consequently, their role as fighters should be taken into account as well and not overlooked in DDR programmes because of their experiences as victims of sexual violence.

D. Even though many young women in fighting forces have experienced sexual violence, it should not be assumed that this is the reality for all of them. To do so may only contribute to further stigmatization of female ex-fighters.

5. Young women's productive labour

It should not be assumed that the principal reason for the abduction of young women into fighting forces is to keep them as 'sex slaves'. Women's productive labour in the context of fighting forces has received too little attention. Rebel movements in Africa need women and children to maintain their 'war system' and abduct them for this reason.

6. Education, skills, and strengths

A. Female fighters should be given the opportunity to receive education as many of them see this as a chance to regain control of their lives, support themselves and their children, become independent, and be reintegrated into civil society.

B. Through their experiences in war and armed forces female fighters have acquired several skills and strengths. Recognized and supported by humanitarian assistance and DDR these skills and strengths can be made use of in efforts to empower these young women.

C. NGOs working with female ex-fighters in the aftermath of war with the objectives of making war-affected women independent and self-reliant should properly analyse whether the skills they offer lead to sustain-

able livelihoods. The long-term effects of reintegration programmes and their intended results must therefore be properly analysed before they are launched.

D. Given that female ex-combatants with children are among those who value education the highest and at the same time appear to be the ones who have most difficulty in gaining access to school, this group should be eligible for specially sponsored and designed school programmes that meet their specific needs.

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IN THE NUMEROUS ARMED CONFLICTS that are tearing the African continent apart, young women are participants and carry guns alongside their male comrades-in-arms. Challenging the stereotype of women in African wars as victims only, this issue of the Nordic Africa Institute Policy Dialogues shows how in modern African wars women have often been as active as men. Female fighters are victimized, yet they are not mere victims. Girls and young women who volunteer to fight often possess quite considerable strength and independence.
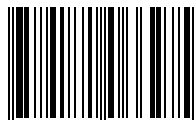

Programmes for disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating former fighters must be based on better understanding of the range of women's roles and experiences in war and post-war settings in order to act in a gender-sensitive way and to empower this group of women in the aftermath of war.