



International
Labour Office
Geneva



Red Shoes

Experiences of girl-combatants in Liberia

Report coordinated by Irma Specht

Preface

Liberia is on the difficult path of recovery after 14 years of conflict. The conflict in Liberia has created havoc, misery and trauma. But people are filled with hope, busy reconstructing a peaceful society. Successful demobilization of combatants from various fighting factions, including those of Government, is key to create, but even more, to sustain peace.

Thousands of youth take up arms during violent conflict, in many cases a key motive is the lack of job opportunities. Lessons from the past teach us that the process of disarmament and demobilization can only be successful if strong reintegration support follows immediately after the first 2 steps are completed.

Although women generally comprise between 10 and 30 percent of armed forces and groups, surprisingly little research has been done on the lives of girl combatants in armed conflict. How does it affect their personalities? How do gender relations affect their choices? How do they cope after the conflict is ended? Are they able to use their experience to increase gender equality? Or do they go back to their earlier status of inequality? Do they have different needs than men? And if so, how well do DDR processes and programmes address these?

The ILO's Crisis Recovery and Reconstruction Programme recognizes gender equality as a central element in equitable, effective reconstruction and development, and for "universal and lasting peace", a major precept of ILO's Constitution. It has a special work item on crisis and gender, aiming at creating a "new environment" with less structural imbalances between men and women, primarily in the world of work, but also in other spheres.

The present study on the experiences of female ex-combatants in Liberia was coordinated by Irma Specht, a former ILO Official and experienced consultant on matters related to DDR, through her consultancy firm Transparency International. The study aims to gain insights in the motives of Liberian girls for taking up arms and their reintegration needs. It also aims to highlight the key issues for improving gender sensitive prevention and reintegration policies.

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This report is the result of a collaborative effort by a group of dedicated people. The primary research was conducted by Annemiek Buskens, who lived for three months in the field with the girl-soldiers as an anthropologist. Irma Specht wrote the report assisted by Yvonne Kemper and Larry Attree. Liberian researchers Constance, Estella Nelson and Winnie Saywah provided translation and research assistance on the ground.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFL	Armed Forces of Liberia
ALP	Accelerated Learning Programme
CAFF	Children associated with fighting forces
CAP	Children Assistance Programme
CCF	Christian Children's Fund
CEP	Community Empowerment Programme
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DDRR	Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GOL	Government of Liberia (in this text it refers to the army forces during the Taylor's regime)
GBV	Gender Based Violence
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICC	Interim Care Centre
IDC	Internal Displacement Camp
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Office
IHL	International Humanitarian Law
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LPC	Liberian Peace Counsel
LURD	Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy
MODEL	Movement for Democracy in Liberia
NCDDRR	National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration and Rehabilitation
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NPFL	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
RUF	Revolution United Front/Sierra Leone
SALW	Small arms and light weapons
SPIR	Samarian's Purse International Relief
THINK	Touching Humanity In Need of Kindness
TSA	Transitional Safety Net Allowance
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
ULIMO	United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNMIL	United Nations Mission in Liberia
VET	Vocational education and training
WAC	Women's Artillery Commandos
WACDO	Women and Children Development Organization
WAFF	Women associated with fighting forces

Glossary

CAFF	The term "child associated with fighting forces" (CAFF) takes account of the fact that boys with guns are not the only children that are concerned.
Child soldier	Child soldier refers to "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." The term therefore does not refer only to those children who have borne arms. ¹
Combatant	"The term 'combatant' should not be understood as solely denoting an individual carrying a gun. All members of an armed group can be part of a target group for demobilisation, including persons working in logistics and administration, as well as individuals – especially women and children – who have been abducted and sexually or otherwise abused and who have subsequently stayed with the group." ²
Community	The community is a socio-cultural and ultimately political entity. It can be a village or settlement.
Decent Work	"Work that meets people's basic aspirations, not only for income, but for security for themselves and their families, without discrimination or harassment." ³
Disability	Disability refers to physical, sensory, intellectual or mental impairment of one form or another. The denial of equal employment opportunities to people with disabilities forms one of the root causes of the poverty and exclusion of many members of this group. ⁴
Disarmament	Within the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration paradigm, "Disarmament forms an integral part of demobilization when the aim is to reduce the number of combatants or to disband an armed unit. The weapons used by personnel must be handed over to the authorities, who are responsible for the safe storage, redistribution or even destruction of those arms." ⁵
Demobilization	"Demobilization can be understood as the opposite of recruiting (mobilizing) combatants for an armed group. In the military sense, demobilization entails either disbanding an armed unit, reducing the number of combatants in an armed group, or it represents an interim stage before reassembling entire armed forces, be they regular or irregular." ⁶
Ex-combatant	The term ex-combatant consequently refers to all ex-fighters and those who directly supported them in their combat. ⁷ Ex-combatants furthermore include those who were officially demobilized through DDR programmes, but also those who "auto-demobilized" or "self-demobilized".
GAFF	The term GAFF (girls associated with fighting forces) has the same meaning as CAFF, except that it is used specifically in relation to girls aged under 18.
Gender	The socially and historically constructed roles ascribed to women and men, as

¹ Cape Town Principles, 30 April 1997.

² Douglas, I., Gleichmann, C., Odenwald, M., Steenken, K., and A. Wilkinson. 2004. *Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration. A Practical Field and Classroom Guide* © GTZ, NODEFIC, PPC, SNDC. Frankfurt: Druckerei Hassmüller Graphische Betriebe GmbH & Co. KG.

³ International Labour Organization (ILO). 1999. *Decent Work*. Report of the Director-General. Geneva: ILO.

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO). 2004. *Achieving Equal Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities Through Legislation Guidelines*. Geneva: ILO.

⁵ Douglas, I., Gleichmann, C., Odenwald, M., Steenken, K., and Wilkinson A. 2004, op cit., p. 15.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Specht, I. 2003, "Jobs for Rebels and Soldiers". In: *Jobs after war. A critical challenge in the peace and reconstruction puzzle*, ed. by Eugenia Date-Bah. (InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction). Geneva: ILO, 73-111.

	opposed to biological and physical characteristics.
Human security ⁸	Rather than the traditional exclusive focus on state security, the concept of human security takes individual human experience of security to be its essential referent. If carried out in a sustainable manner, DDR programmes can contribute to the reduction of human insecurity for ex-combatants and for the societies around them.
Local	Local refers to a sub-national area that goes beyond the community.
Peace building	Entails the strengthening or creation of those structures and processes that are inclusive, fair and responsive to the needs and concerns of the total population, including institutions which protect and advance political rights and responsibilities within the state and civil society. This includes increasing security through the promotion of sustainable economic, judicial and social practices and welfare.
Receiving communities	Those communities where demobilised combatants will live and work (not always their communities of origin).
Reconciliation	In the framework of DDR, reconciliation refers to the process of acceptance between communities and combatants and to the process of increasing trust between opposing groups such as among ethnic, religious and political groups.
(Re)construction	Rebuilding the social fabric and economic, physical and political structures and institutions after conflict. It should not necessarily imply a return to the pre-conflict situation since that very situation may have triggered the conflict. Ideally, reconstruction also includes measures promoting greater tolerance and equality in society. ⁹
(Re)integration	The long-term socio-economic process through which a combatant leaves behind his/her military identity, mode of living and source of income to become a civilian. It takes place primarily at the community level. ¹⁰ The term integration is generally preferred to reintegration given that return to the pre-conflict situation is not the objective.
Self-reliance	The capacity of people to care for their own needs, sustain themselves economically, access and maintain services, organize themselves, and respond to the special needs of community members. ¹¹
Targeting	Programmes and policies that prioritise specific sub-groups of the population such as ex-combatants. This might include providing them preferred access to services or giving them separate support for their social and economic reintegration. ¹²
Vulnerable groups/ special groups	Groups who do not automatically benefit from the opportunities around them or are at risk of social exclusion, and who therefore may require special targeted assistance to succeed. The term 'vulnerable' has become less favoured because it implies weakness, neglecting the unique capacities and skills special groups may have. Currently the terms 'special groups' or 'groups with special needs' are being used.

⁸ The concept of Human Security was introduced in: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 1994. *Human Development Report*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ International Labour Organization (ILO). 1999. *A Framework for ILO Policy and Action in the Conflict-Affected Context*, Geneva: ILO.

¹⁰ Douglas, I., Gleichmann, C., Odenwald, M., Steenken, K., and Wilkinson, A. 2004, op. cit., p. 15.

¹¹ ILO/UNHCR. 2003. *Introduction to Microfinance in Conflict-Affected Communities*. Geneva: ILO.

¹² Specht, I. and C. van Empel. 1998. *Enlargement. A challenge for Social and Economic Reintegration: Targeting Ex-Combatants or All War-Affected People? The Liberian experience*. IFP/CRISIS Report. Geneva: ILO.

Youth	<p>The UN defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Definitions of youth in fact differ considerably from one context to another. Social, economic and cultural systems define the age limits and roles and responsibilities of children, adults and the “in between” group called youth. Conflict/violence often forces youth to assume adult roles as parents, breadwinners, or fighters. The category of “youth in conflict” is currently receiving more attention in international discussions and programming.</p>
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Executive Summary

Although women generally comprise between 10 and 30 per cent of armed forces and groups¹³ and tend to be younger than their male counterparts, surprisingly little research has been done so far on the lives of girl combatants in violent armed conflicts.¹⁴

This study is based on interviews with girls who were actively engaged in the conflict, and provides insights on the motives of Liberian girls aged 15-24 years¹⁵ for taking up arms and the challenges they face in becoming civilian young women. It presents their experiences, needs, frustrations and ambitions and analyses the gender dimensions of girl participation in armed conflict. It also examines whether and how sexual violence and gender-based discrimination has affected the girls' decisions to join armed forces and what role gender-based violence played during and after combat. Beyond the relevance of this question for researchers and practitioners active in war-affected areas, this report aims to raise national and international public awareness on the problem of sexual violence as a weapon in warfare and its consequences.

Based on its findings, the report identifies policy implications for international practices in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration.

Liberian girls in combat

Girls' participation and experience in conflict in Liberia, for example in terms of their reasons for fighting, their exposure to gender-based violence and their relations with men, were found by this report to be dependent on differences within the overall category of 'girl combatants'. The key distinctions were those of age (whether they were children or adolescents), whether they were fighting or non-fighting, and their relative rank within the armed group. Age differences and rank further prove to have great impact on their reintegration as civilians after the war. Sensitivity to these distinctions could enable to better understand the experience and behaviour of girl combatants, and lead to more effective reintegration assistance for them.

Entry into fighting forces

The context in which girls joined armed groups is crucial. Liberia's youth have witnessed 14 years of civil war. They are thus unfamiliar with peaceful society and have in many cases not had the chance to go to school. In addition, growing up with rape and violence has shaped the character and perception of this generation, making many girls (and boys) ready to fight.

The distinction between forced and voluntary recruitment, though significant from a legal standpoint, is hard to uphold in practice. When the voluntary nature of the recruitment of many Liberian girls is closely examined, it can better be described as a "reasonable adaptive strategy or practical protection mechanism in situations of extreme danger or deprivation".¹⁶ Therefore, the distinction between "voluntary" and "forced" recruitment is based on the

¹³ Bouta, T., Frerks, G., and Bannon, I. 2005. *Gender, Conflict, and Development*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. P. 9.

¹⁴ The recent study "Where are the Girls?" alerts to this fact, studying the presence and experience of girls in armed forces and groups within the context of Mozambique, Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone (McKay and Mazurana 2004).

¹⁵ Also referred to as youth.

¹⁶ West 2004: 185.

misconception that a viable alternative existed for the girls, which can hardly be true given the lack of (human) security in Liberia.

Although recruitment of females is by no means a new phenomenon,¹⁷ it is striking in this case that explicitly "feminist" motives for enlisting were so widely cited. Girls interviewed gave two main feminist reasons for taking up arms: the first was to protect themselves and other women from (particularly sexual) violence, and to avenge such violence. Girls in Liberia have generally not been exposed to gender-based violence (GBV) in their families or in a context other than war. The conflict situation, and within that the prevalence of gun ownership amongst males, was accompanied by increasing incidence of rape. This eventually played an important role in girls' decisions to enter fighting forces. Civilian girls were left with no other option than to flee or to join the fighting forces themselves, if they wanted to escape the rapes. As mentioned above, the fight against rape brought solidarity, strong bonds and a sense of unity between girls in a female unit. On the other hand, the high susceptibility of women (civilians and combatants) to gender-based violence during Liberia's wars also partly explains the dependence of the girls on commanders for protection.

Liberian women are known as relatively strong and independent. Girls consulted in this study complained about their suppressed role in traditional society. The very fact that this generation of girls notice and criticize their inequality is in itself proof of a certain level of independence and strength, reflected in the second key feminist motive for joining up cited, which was to attain gender equality in a general sense. Girl soldiers proved to be at least as effective as their boy colleagues and the female units were feared by many.

In contrast, the study also discovered distinctly non-feminist motives for recruitment to be widespread. Many girls willingly sought or were forced to form relationships with male combatants because they needed protection. Some girls stayed with a particular male combatant after being raped by him, in some cases stating that the relationship was based on "love". This phenomenon is complex: it may reflect a way of coping with the experience, such as resignation in the face of an unchangeable situation. The girls in question seldom referred to themselves as victims of rape, which might partly be explained because the in Liberia rape has not been common historically, and where the concept of rape is not clearly defined. It also points to traditional gender roles in which women provide sexual services to their partners in exchange for protection and material benefits. The girls consulted in this research generally preferred to say that they voluntarily agreed to a sexual relationship. Careful consideration of the circumstances under which many such relationships were initiated and perpetuated would lead some to define them as a form of rape, given that the girls' options were at best severely constrained. Equally, some girls might really have fallen in love.

For others, the motive for entering fighting forces was purely economic, deriving sometimes from severe poverty but also the wish for material luxury items such as make-up and **red shoes**. In contrast to the more "feminist" combatants, these girls mainly ended up in supporting roles in male units.

¹⁷ Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. *Young Soldiers. Why they Choose to Fight*. Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Publishers/Geneva: ILO.

Gender roles and relations

Gender relations have changed in Liberia as a result of the wars. The possession of guns has been considered a male prerogative denoting power and status. The increased circulation of guns resulted in men's increased control over women, thus putting girls at the mercy of men. One of the visible signs of this increasing gender-related power asymmetry was the rise in gender-based violence, and “forced” bush marriages as a notable manifestation of it.

Problems in defining rape and forced recruitment are mirrored by the difficulty of defining forced marriage. While some girls interviewed were physically forced to “marry”, others were equally not able to make a free decision as the broader context of war and other war-related factors limited their options. The majority of younger girls, however, got involved with a male fighter by a combination of peer pressure and longing for material goods. Because of their age, they are particularly susceptible to the influence of “friends” who ascribe value to signs of wealth like clothes. When evaluating the degree to which girls entered relationships voluntarily, one should consider whether alternative means of attaining protection and economic survival were accessible to girls. In war-torn societies it often only seems possible to attain a pair of **new red shoes** through “forced” marriage, “soft forms of prostitution” or enlisting with an armed group. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether a young girl is able to make an informed decision about getting sexually involved as a man’s age and possession of a gun might impress or intimidate her.

Whether forced or voluntary, through such “marriages” many girls became dependent on fighting forces, relying on them for protection and material welfare, acting as wives, delivering babies and supporting the fighting force in various capacities.

Involvement in fighting forces did therefore empower some girls but it could also render many more inferior to men. Non-fighting young girls associated with fighting forces (GAFF), who form the majority of girl ex-combatants, were considered inferior to all other members of the armed group. As they were unarmed, they were vulnerable to sexual exploitation. As many of them were to some degree forced into marriages with male combatants, the self-esteem of these girls usually decreased. Such girls lost independence, rendering them more inferior to men than before the conflict. Conversely, while the situation of the large majority of GAFF worsened, fighting girls and especially high-ranking girl combatants gained status and respect in the military by taking up guns and proving their strength as soldiers.

Becoming civilians

Within a generation of youth born of two decades of continuous political crises, girl combatants have had little access to education or work experience. They are often completely unfamiliar with peaceful civilian life, unskilled and unprepared for future responsibilities. Most girls would like to continue their education, but this option is precluded by the immediate need for income. Training and finding a decent job are common objectives of many girl ex-combatants. Employment would help them redefine their role in society, increase their self-esteem, occupy their time, secure their income and allow them to become more independent. However, within a very weak economy the Liberian labour market has minimal absorption capacity and employers do not favour girl ex-combatants. While some girl combatants have been “equal” comrades in armed groups, their gender and lack of education precludes their entry into many jobs as civilians, driving them into occupations that are generally lower-skilled and lower-paid. This results in reinforced gender-based power relationships.

Problems to access education or employment are distinct for different types of girls. The needs and ambitions of former young non-fighting girls differ greatly from those of the more experienced ex-commanders. Different categories of girls also use, as in wartime, different coping strategies.

It seems that most young girls have been well received by their communities. However, a major problem remains that most families have no financial means to support these girls. It is less clear whether 18-24 year-old girls receive the same welcome, especially if they have children and/or are suspected to be infected with HIV/AIDS. In addition, many of the older girls are unwilling to re-adapt to rural life, authority and gender roles, and thus are often regarded as troublemakers.

A further challenge in the transition to civilian life is the dominance of commanders and "husbands". After the conflict, many girl ex-combatants continue to feel ties of solidarity and loyalty to their female commanders. Similarly, the conflict left a strong sense of responsibility towards their girls on the part of commanders, which also still persists. Female commanders, despite having difficulty sustaining themselves in many cases, generally still feel obliged to protect and provide for their girls. Their inability to do so is causing frustration on both sides.

Similarly, girls who "married" during combat, often remain dependent on their bush husbands, commanders and units, and stay with them even after the war for lack of income, food, protection and a sense of belonging. This prevents numerous girls from leaving their military past behind, becoming civilians and creating a new identity for themselves as women in society.

Many girl combatants also struggle with their role as women in society. As civilians, higher-ranking girls face a society which – unlike the military – neither recognizes their past achievements nor offers them other ways to prove themselves equal to men. It seems almost impossible to retain as civilians the independence and status which they acquired as fighters.

Girls and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process

Although women and girls were considered when DDR in Liberia was planned, it has insufficiently addressed the concerns and needs of the various groups. The most important reason is that their needs were not mapped through detailed research before the DDR programme was designed.

The self-demobilization of many girls prevents them firstly from accessing the benefits offered to those who demobilize within the official process, including reintegration programmes. It is thus important to examine the reasons why girls have not participated in large numbers, in order to try to rectify the situation and learn how to encourage participation in future DDR processes.

Girls consulted in this research expressed many different reasons why they did not participate, such as:

- Lack of trust in the ceasefire and the disarmament and demobilization process;
- Fear of repercussions, social exclusion or embarrassment;

- Unwillingness to be confronted with their past as combatants;
- Unwillingness to be in a camp (again);
- The wish to remain with their commanders (from which they had to separate in the DD process);
- Reluctance to return home;
- Obligations to children or family (unwillingness to take children to the camp);
- Poor logistics and timeframe;
- Exclusion from lists or confiscation of weapons by commanders.¹⁸

Most girls who were formally disarmed and demobilized were positive about the programme. In contrast, the delay in the reintegration assistance has caused much frustration and anger among both ex-combatants and social workers. Disarmament and demobilization without reintegration pushed many former girl combatants to subsisting in the streets through crime and prostitution, or to take on relationships of dependency on males with money.

One clear objective of the current DDR programme is to try to separate girl combatants from their commanders in order to break the command and control structure. While the case for ending these dependencies is clear, young girls in particular are often still close to their commanders and vice versa. Ignoring this personal attachment in units that have for some of these girls become substitute families can also undermine the reintegration process and make the girls much more vulnerable. While children should be separated from commanders who exploit them, there are also commanders who genuinely act in their girls' interests. In such cases, forced separation may be an unnecessary additional hardship for the girls to face.

The reintegration process could in many cases make positive use of the influence of commanders on girl ex-combatants by prioritising their successful socio-economic reintegration, and thereby harnessing their potential as role models for the transition from military to civilian life.¹⁹ Their example, influence and salaries may then be mobilised to increase other girls' chances of reintegration.

Many commanders developed management skills during combat. This is a valuable human resource that could be used positively to rebuild the country. Girl commanders have occupied leadership roles in military structures, but were neither included in the peace negotiations nor offered important positions in post-conflict society. While political positions and security-related responsibilities are assigned to men, these female military leaders are generally neglected.²⁰

¹⁸ The DDR process for those over 18 was only open to those who could hand in weapons or ammunition. This was the perception/interpretation of many combatants and unfortunately it was reinforced by some UN Military Observers who were in charge of the disarmament process. It was clearly stated in the DDRR Framework document that women who were associated with the fighting forces in other roles such as cooks, sex slaves and therefore did not carry arms can access the formal DDRR programme.

¹⁹ The potential was illustrated by one commander interviewed: "We first were fighting men with our guns, now we have given up our guns, but we still have to fight men – this time with our pens, that's what I try to tell my girls now."

²⁰ Farr, V. 2003. "The importance of a gender perspective to successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes." *Disarmament Forum* 4.

Introduction

War in Liberia

Civil conflicts have been raging in Liberia for the past 14 years, killing more than 250,000 people, displacing over 2,000,000, while injuring and traumatizing countless others. The first war started in December 1989 when the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor invaded Liberia from neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire. Other rebel groups also became involved: the ULIMO (United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia), supported by the government's followers, split later into the ULIMO-K and ULIMO-J. In 1997 a binding ceasefire, the Abuja peace accord, formally ended the fighting. Taylor won the subsequent presidential elections but could neither fully eliminate the rebel groups nor prove himself a responsible leader.

Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), an armed opposition group, launched an incursion from Guinea into northern Lofa County in July 2000, starting another four years of civil war. In 2003, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) broke off from LURD. While LURD and MODEL mainly drew refugee and IDP children and adults into their ranks, government forces conducted forced conscriptions in Monrovia. The attacks of these rebel groups, coupled with two years of UN sanctions imposed in response to Taylor's involvement in Sierra Leone's civil war, finally prompted Taylor to resign and move into exile in Nigeria on 11 August 2003. A transitional government composed of rebel, government, and civil society groups assumed control in October 2003. After two years of transitional government, elections were held in 2005 in which the former World Bank economist Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first female president of an African state. However, peace remains fragile, much depending on the successful reintegration of the large number of former combatants.

Young soldiers

Prolonged wars typically erode the adult generation before drawing on the younger generation as cheap, effective and obedient fighters. Fighting forces in Liberia recruited children and young people into their ranks on a massive scale. Some who fought as children in the 1989-97 civil war were re-recruited in 2002 and 2003 as adults. After two decades of political and economic chaos many young Liberians have never experienced peace. They have had little access to schools and grown up in families which are struggling to survive.²¹ Many of them have suffered or witnessed rape and other atrocities. When the second war started, many were ready take up arms.

Girl combatants

The association of women with fighting forces in both fighting and non-fighting functions has been a constant feature of Liberia's civil wars, with some units wholly composed of girls and female combatants (commonly known as the Women's Artillery Commandos (WAC)). The number of girls in the WACs is hard to estimate exactly as it changed over the course of the conflict.

²¹ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2004. *Nothing Left to Lose: The Legacy of Armed Conflict and Liberia's Children*.

This report focuses on girl combatants in the age category of youth (15-24 years),²² which includes older children (GAFF) and younger women (WAFF). These are not a homogeneous group, and therefore the research gathered information covering girls performing different roles within the military structure, including non-fighting girls in male units and female units, lower-ranked fighting girls and female commanders. These big girls and small women shared their different experiences of war and post-war life.

Reasons to join

The long-running war provided the broad context in which many girls decided to take up arms. Illustrative of how all encompassing and normalized the state of conflict was for many such children, one girl described how she could not “remember when the war first started because (she) was very small,” and understood only that “everything was not good anymore.” All parties of the conflict committed many human rights violations, creating a constant state of fear among ordinary people. In this context, also large numbers of girls and young women took up arms.

Girl combatants’ experiences and reasons for joining, although sometimes similar to those of boys, can be clearly differentiated from them. This research highlights a number of factors that pushed and pulled girls into the armed forces, as fighters or in support roles. Although the participation of women in combat is by no means a new phenomenon, the overtly “feminist” reasons many girls cited for enlisting seem atypical. In contrast to the feminist reasons of some girls for fighting, other girls became associated with fighting forces to benefit from male protection from gender-based violence or to acquire material goods, such as **red shoes**.

Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence can be defined as the physical, sexual and psychological violence committed against both men and women as a result of their gender.²³ Violent armed conflict tends to aggravate sexual abuse, as in Liberia, where rape has been extensively used as a weapon of war. In the context of combat and widespread weapons possession among men, incidence of rape increased. Many girls had experienced house-to-house searches where all the women were systematically raped. In Liberia, about 75 percent of the demobilized children in 2004 were estimated to have suffered from sexual abuse or exploitation. Rape occurred before and during recruitment, as well as during their time in the forces. Some girls tried to protect themselves from these sexual assaults by getting a fighter as a boyfriend or by gaining prestige as a fighter. This research analyses the influence of gender-based violence on the girl combatants before, during and after the war.

Becoming civilians

Recently, the girls have stopped fighting, but it is unclear how their involvement with armed groups will affect their future lives. They face many challenges and adopt different methods for coping with life as civilians and possibly mothers or wives. For many, the hardships faced in rebuilding traumatized lives in the context of peace and reconstruction prove just as difficult as the hazards of war.

²² The UN defines youth as people between the ages of 15 and 24 years.

²³ Adapted from: Bouta, T., Frerks, G., and Bannon, I. 2005. *Gender, Conflict, and Development*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. p.33.

Many girls have very little to return to: their parents might be dead or reluctant to take them back, their houses destroyed, while local economies and protection mechanisms are shattered. This report also shows how reciprocal bonds of dependence and loyalty between girls and commanders continue to play a significant role in their lives.

Girls' experiences with disarmament, demobilization and reintegration assistance

Although women and girls were taken into consideration in the DDR in Liberia, girls' experiences with the DDR programme are not always positive. This report analyses the reasons why some girls went through the demobilization process, while many others did not, and how their needs are being addressed. Considering that girls were an integral part of the fighting forces, as combatants, wives and supporters, a failure in DDR to reach them is to be taken seriously. By seeking to comprehend the motives and concerns of the girl-combatants, and challenging the preconceptions of some DDR practitioners in Liberia, it is hoped that this report will encourage more serious attempts to address their needs. One such preconception is that continued bonds between commanders and ex-combatants are always contradictory to the aims of DDR: the research for this report suggests that, if assisted appropriately, many commanders could assist with "their" girls' reintegration.

Girl ex-combatants have a unique contribution to make to their society as females, young adults and former combatants. The authors hope that this research will also inspire further research in Liberia and in other DDR contexts, which will make assistance better tuned to their specific circumstances, so that it can be a tool for their empowerment.

We first were fighting men with our guns, now we have given up our guns, but we still have to fight men... this time with our pens, that's what I try to tell my girls now...

Methodology²⁴

The content and conclusions of this report are derived from in-depth qualitative field research. The research was conducted in a sensitive political atmosphere; girl ex-combatants were guarded about their past, the traumatic experiences they were exposed to and their aspirations. It included several field missions over a period of two years, three months of participatory observation, in-depth interviews and group discussions, primarily with a 22-year-old female ex-general and her girls. This was backed up with key-informant interviews, including with welfare workers and caregivers who have worked with former girl combatants. The research also built upon the insights presented in the book, *Young Soldiers, Why they chose to fight*.²⁵

²⁴ Described in more depth in Annex 1: Research and methodology.

²⁵ Brett, R., and I. Specht. 2004. op. cit.

Map of Liberia



Source: HRC Liberia 2004.

1. Liberian girls in combat

The roles females and males play in conflict are often considered as binary opposites, with men the aggressors, and women the victims. A more careful examination, however, reveals that within each gender there are a range of different behaviours and patterns of experience, some of which are common to both genders, while others are much less frequent in one or the other gender. Girl combatants tend to be more vulnerable than their male colleagues before enlisting in terms of the difficulties which lead many of them to be recruited, during conflict in terms of exposure to gender-related hazards, and after conflict in terms of deriving benefits from the peace, reconstruction and reintegration processes.²⁶

This chapter introduces key aspects of girl combatants' experience that will be further explored in subsequent chapters.

1.1. Who are girl combatants?

Key definitions of groups that are relevant in the context of this report, including combatants, child soldiers and children and girls associated with fighting forces are elaborated in the glossary. It is important to emphasize, particularly in the context of this study that the category "female combatants" contains many different sub-groups of big girls and small women. Within the category of women who are entitled to benefit from DDR, we find wives of combatants, victims of conflict-related abuses such as rape and amputation, women in communities which will receive demobilized soldiers, and female combatants. Among the latter, as in the case of males, there are many sub-categories: disabled, sick and elderly combatants, those from minority groups, child soldiers, youth, educated or illiterate combatants, and so on. Among these, this report focuses specifically on girls aged 15-24.

Child soldiers and women have recently received extensive attention in discussions related to DDR. Assistance to women remains problematic, but girls, who fall under both categories, hardly even figure as a target group in their own right in most programmes, although they do form a substantial and increasing share of armed groups, as in Liberia.²⁷

The age range of 15-24²⁸ is chosen to draw attention to the youth in society who are neither wholly children nor wholly adults but rather between the two states. The period of adolescence is a sensitive and dynamic phase in which people develop their personalities, worldviews and careers. During DDR, to maximise stability and harness their potential to rebuild a peaceful society, youth require tailored assistance that responds to their needs and ambitions.

In contrast to armed groups, which regularly offer youth an income, an occupation, status, identity and the "excitement" of violence, most DDR programmes fail to appeal to youth. A purely legalistic definition of child soldiers, for example, would leave out girls over 18 years of age who were recruited as children. Although they are legally adults, they often lack

²⁶ McKay, S., and D. Mazurana. 2005. *Where Are The Girls? Girls in fighting forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their lives during and after war*. Montreal: Rights & Democracy.

²⁷ McKay, S., and D. Mazurana. 2005. op. cit.

²⁸ Defined by the UN as 'youth'. See glossary.

education, are unable to find work and unaware of how to interact in civilian society. Thus their age is a poor indicator of their level of maturity and specific needs.²⁹

Girls as a heterogeneous group

Female, and amongst them girl, ex-combatants from the three armed forces in Liberia (Government forces during the Taylor regime (referred to as GOL), LURD and MODEL) are, as already emphasised, a diverse group. One important distinction stressed here is whether they were involved in fighting or supporting roles. The diversity of the functions performed by girls in the armed forces has a tendency to obscure their role as fighters. In many cases, girl combatants are simply referred to as "bush wives" although they may in fact have acted as fighters, cooks, spies, porters and so on.³⁰

As well as distinguishing between fighting and non-fighting girls, this report also notes the difference between girls of lower and higher rank. Within the forces, girl combatants were treated differently depending on their rank. This tangibly altered the way their association with fighting forces affected them. In some but not all cases rank was correlated with age.

The length of time girl-combatants spent in armed forces is also an important consideration. Some girls, mainly in the North of Liberia, only fought in their local area with family and friends. Others, now mainly located around Monrovia, and often separated from their families, fought on a "professional" basis. In general, experiences and post-conflict needs are quite different for those whose association with fighting forces was lengthy and caused them to move away from home.

The box below summarizes the inter-distinctions within the category of girl combatants set out above.

Important initial distinctions within the category of ‘girl combatants’ in this study

1. Was the girl’s role fighting or non-fighting?
2. Can the ex-combatant be most usefully described as adult, child, or ‘youth’?
3. What rank did she hold?
4. Was she under male or female command?
5. How long did her association with the fighting group last?
6. Did it cause her to move away from home?

Such distinctions could be useful in making DDR programming much more responsive to the diverse needs of the group than categorization according to the standard legal definitions.

1.2. The hardship of combat

What girl combatants experienced in war directly affects the way they approach and experience peace. As most of them joined armed forces at a young age, this part of their lives

²⁹ Kemper, Y: “Youth in war-to-peace transitions. Approaches of international organizations.” *Berghof Report* 10. Berlin: Berghof Center for Constructive Conflict Management.

³⁰ McKay, S., and D. Mazurana. 2005. op. cit.

has had a considerable impact on their personal, educational and professional development which will last far beyond their time within the armed forces.

Most girls recruited in the second war were still in their early childhoods during the first war. The large majority of the girls therefore could not read or write, hardly recognized peaceful society, and grew up with strong feelings of anger and resentment. When the second war started, many were ready to join and take up arms.

Most girls received some basic military training, covering maintenance and use of weapons, combat tactics, fitness and drill. The training was intended to toughen the girls, and for some involved regular beatings:

I had training for one week. They beat me every day. They told me it would toughen me, so that I was ready to go to the frontline.

A smaller proportion of girl combatants had to go to the frontline immediately, learning the "job" as they went. Life on the frontline meant hardship and danger for girl combatants. Many simply died from cold and hunger. One girl recalled one of her memories from the frontline:

I smoked cigarettes to keep me warm, sometimes even a whole package. Many times we slept outside, nothing to cover us up with. Even when it was raining we slept under trees on the wet floor. Then all your clothes are getting wet, and you're cold. So many died of that. Even more than from bullets. Your clothes could only dry from your body heat. We suffered.

As some assignments took months to finish, food and clean water supplies became an issue. Life on the frontline became a matter of mere survival:

There was always a shortage of food. If we attacked Taylor boys, and they run away we took their food. Then we were singing and dancing. But sometimes they poisoned the food, like with old fish. So also many died of this. We never poisoned our food for Taylor boys because we simply never did have food. If we had we would eat it right away. We drink the water from streams. Many times it was very dirty. So we used our shirts to filter the water (she shows). This also caused many deaths. Even more died of sickness and starvation than in the actual fighting.

One girl combatant said she lived off mango during the rainy season and cassava during the dry season. She learned never to think about food in the bush. Sleep deprivation was also common in the fighting units, owing to the constant fear of being attacked while sleeping:

You cannot go in a house to go and sleep. If you sleep and there is any attack and you are in a deep sleep and then you lay in a room. If anybody comes you will be captured because nobody knows your whereabouts.

As they were always fighting with men, the girl combatants interviewed were well aware sleep could have exposed them to sexual assault as well as capture.

The girl combatants used different coping strategies to deal with fear given the requirement "to be strong". Separation from their families and lack of alternatives made them more willing to take risks and continue fighting:

Because if you are afraid, you say: I'm afraid, let me go home and let me go to my family to be with them. But for me, I don't even have anywhere to stay; I don't have family to be with.

Others even derived a form of empowerment and energy from their misery:

If you think of what has happened to you in your life it will make you strong and gives you more courage to fight.

Some described how they sometimes felt torn between fighting more and running away. But the number who quit fighting because of the violence was very small. Some girls described the actual violence as a necessity of warfare. Putting it quite plainly, one girl explained that "anyone can get killed" in warfare "because if someone on the other side shoots, and you are on the other side and then shooting to the other side." She then continued to explain that the death of one of her comrades is meaningless for somebody on the other side and vice versa because they don't know each other. Another girl said: "If I killed anybody, then I don't know. I was just shooting".

One of the differences between girl and boy combatants is their treatment by enemy groups. Whereas males are killed, if a girl is captured by enemy troops, she is incorporated in the other army and subjected to abuse.

Despite their suffering, there were also occasions when the girls enjoyed themselves. Occasionally, victory celebrations provided an opportunity for dancing, singing and drinking.

Solidarity

In Liberia many girls enlisted after being raped, to avenge their suffering and/or protect themselves and other women against rape.

My fear was rape, if I move to another house you hear the other women crying ooh ... ooh, they rape me! Somebody was killed from raping because she just born a baby and then they came and raped her ... she was bleeding too much and died. So I decided to put women together ... to admonish how they have the right to stand and they understand me, all of them took arms.

The unifying impulse to take revenge against the rapists and protect other women often resulted in strong solidarity among girls both within units and beyond armed group boundaries.

When I met girls from the other groups I put down my gun and walk to them and explain to them my reason of taking arms. Why we women should stand and fight against one another? We put hands together to fight men, because the men are not treating the women right in war!

Drugs

In many cases girls used drugs, including cannabis, cocaine and alcohol, although they were reluctant to admit this. Some were supplied by boyfriends or commanders to make them dependent and/or fearless in battle.

My boyfriend gave me the drugs. I took marijuana. I did not like it but just my friends made me to do it.

Others use drugs to forget their situation or to be stronger in handling it:

In the bush we just got it from the land. You dry the leaves and then you smoke. Nobody provided me, we took it ourselves.

It is said, however, that the girls took drugs less frequently.

*They don't get drunk and they take their mission very seriously.*³¹

*The women rarely drank, smoked, or used drugs.*³²

Reflecting on their association with armed forces, most girl combatants saw it as a difficult and sad time, full of suffering, anxiety and misery. The girls displayed no enthusiasm for committing violence or possessing and using guns: "We were not happy at war, nobody can be happy."

1.3. Women's Artillery Commandos (WAC)

Throughout Liberia's belligerent history, there have always been women associated with fighting forces in both fighting and non-fighting functions. A special feature of LURD was that it had units purely consisting of girls and female combatants, commonly known as the Women's Artillery Commandos (WAC). WAC numbers fluctuated during the conflict making it hard to give a single estimate. At their peak they consisted of at least several hundred women. Most of them received training prior to their acceptance in combat roles. Rather than being inferior and relegated to supportive functions, the WAC was known for its fighting capacity and was integrated into LURD military structures. These were loosely based on the US military model, with a coherent system of ranks and titles respected by the majority of fighters. Promotion and the award of rank are based upon longevity of service, age, ability in the field, and more especially previous military experience or affiliation.³³

The female WAC director headed all the women units. Though the number of female generals could vary slightly according to the numbers of girls recruited, four other generals would normally help the director manage the WAC. The WAC also followed LURD's military structure, employing the same ranking system as the men's unit. Every general would thus be assigned several commanders, who had a group of girl combatants under their command. All their operations were closely co-ordinated with the LURD leadership, with the WAC director receiving her commands from the Chief of Staff before passing them on to her units.

Taylor's Government of Liberia (GOL) forces also recruited girls and women and included a WAC in its military structure. It appears, however, that the WAC played a less prominent role in GOL than in LURD. In GOL, girls were also fighting within men's units. In LURD, as a rule, all fighting girls were part of female units with female commanders, under the

³¹ Liberia's Health Minister Peter Coleman during an interview with the BBC.

³² According to civilians living nearby. 'The sisters-in-arms of Liberia's war', Christian Science Monitor, August 26 2003. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0826/p07s01-woaf.html>.

³³ Brabazon, J. 2003. Liberia: Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Africa Programme. Armed Non-State Actors Project Briefing Paper No. 1; Currently, the LURD structure is in disarray after a split in leadership.

command of the female WAC director (unless the girl was married to the commander of a male unit).

This does not mean that girls could not be part of male units. Besides the WAC that solely consisted of women there were also male units with women in supporting roles. In LURD these girls were exclusively non-fighters. Older girls and young women usually served as fighters in the WAC, while younger girls (GAFF) served more in supporting roles in the WAC or in male units, although a few younger girls were fighters as well. The majority of GAFF in Liberia worked in supporting roles, as cooks, porters, ammunition carriers, spies, nurses, etc. Some of them accompanied combatants to the frontlines. Almost all such girls were wives of fighters and consequently dependants. As in men's units, non-fighting women also assisted fighting women in the WAC.

Female commanders

Most interviews in this field have focused on mixed units rather than girl units which potentially have distinct structures, rules, behaviour, and *esprit de corps*. LURD strongly emphasized discipline and order (apparently more so than GOL), including through “a rigorous system of corporal punishment and the very real threat of execution for mutiny”.³⁴ Punishments varied according to the crime committed, but could include double-shifts at the front-line:

If they tell you to do this and then you refuse, she [...] had to report to the commander and the commander will know what to do. Sometimes I will leave you on the frontline and I don't let you to come back to rest. [...] But if you cannot take order we will leave you there all the time.

The WAC director, its generals and commanders always retained prime responsibility for their female members. Girl combatants in LURD made frequent reference to rules and regulations in their troop and assigned a high degree of importance to them. The rules and regulations prohibited LURD members from looting and harassing civilians and raping civilians or girls of their own faction. In case of misbehaviour on the part of a girl combatant, one of her superiors, the commander, the general, or even the WAC director – depending on the seriousness of the misconduct – would be informed and have responsibility for penalizing the combatant. In general, the female commanders at LURD were known as stricter disciplinarians than their male counterparts. One of the explanations for this discipline is found in relationships between commander-girls.

The comment of a Christian Children's Fund (CCF) staff member provides further insight to this: “Just like a mother, she would immediately punish a child or reward it when it is doing something wrong or right”. This analysis draws attention to the enforcement of quasi-maternal discipline by commanders as both an act of restraint and protection from the consequences of misbehaviour, suggesting both a strong sense of responsibility on the part of the commander as well as a clear power over the actions of the “child”. Such relations between female commanders and their girls and the cohesion of their units warrant close scrutiny and have important implications for their demobilization and reintegration.³⁵

³⁴ Brabazon, J. 2003. op. cit.

³⁵ The influence of commanders was in fact utilized in the sensitisation phase of the DDR process in this case.

Some accounts contradict the claim that LURD was living by its rules and regulations and that commanders could prevent crimes from taking place. Human rights were certainly violated by all groups in Liberia. For example some girls, especially civilians but also girls who were part of LURD, reported rapes by members of LURD, although the victims were more frequently civilians than other members of LURD. Some female LURD commanders stated that it would only have been possible to rape one of their girls in their absence, and that therefore the girls who were part of male units were much more vulnerable to rape. Another explanation for the rapes within the same faction could be that during the confusion of combat the distinction between LURD girls and civilians was lost. Much depended, however, on the integrity of the commander in charge, whether male or female. The proximity of the commander to his/her troops was also a key determinant to the discipline of the group.

These differences in order and discipline have important implications for how the girls experienced the warfare: whether they were exposed to random acts of violence (including rape) or whether they followed an assignment with the strict order to protect civilians.

Joint missions

Although the fighting girls had their own unit, they never went alone on an assignment. At least one male group would always join a female unit so that there were no women-only assignments, and they generally stayed together in camps, as these WAC commanders describe:

II: Yes women did not fight on their own because where so ever men were going, women used to go there.

I: Always together to go. [...] we were always at the same side. We all cook together, and eat together, the only thing we never did together is when we were ready to take a shower. We go separate.

II: Together we did everything common together. But we were the WAC unit. An unit by ourselves but we were always together.

Such joint missions did not undermine the WAC's hierarchy as the male and female units operated under different commanders. WAC units were usually ordered to fight at the frontline; but it was also possible to engage in more supportive/back-up military tasks, such as building a roadblock, guarding a territory or property, spying, and so on. Interviews with commanders revealed a sense of duty but also of responsibility towards "their girls". In the following discussion, two girl commanders tell about their experiences during assignments:

I: ... when we were going to attack any place or town or city, you are the commander of the girls. They tell you to give 20 girls or 15 girls or 25 girls.

II: Yes, yes. We went on different, different assignments, in different, different carpools. Everywhere we drop girls there, boys here, men and women as well.

I: So sometimes you had to be on a control post, sometimes you had to guard and sometimes you have to go to the frontline.

II: Yes but you have to go! If they call you to the frontline to fight you have to carry the girls and make sure you bring them back as a commander.

I: Like if they have wounded people on the line, you know the shots in people. I had some girls and will take care of them for people who were wounded.

II: But there are different assignments.

I: If you have to go to a checkpoint you have to select certain girls to go at the checkpoint. And there are certain girls who take care of the wounded soldiers.

II: We decided who we take on an assignment.

I: Yes, you should do that and you see to that.

II: But we are not staying at one assignment. So if you put 25 girls at a checkpoint you bring 25 girls and then come back and bring 20 girls to the frontline.

I: And we are travelling in between.

II: To check, to make sure.

I: That's why they make you a commander. You make sure all those things are done.

It was viewed necessary that males fight alongside females, as fighting women were not only the minority in the fighting force but also often seen as the weaker sex and not capable of going on an assignment themselves. However, girls were also acknowledged to be an asset in terms of their ability to encourage the men. As the LURD director stated:

[...] there are certain things girls can do on the line. If the boys are getting more weak or feeling discouraged, the girls can give them encouragement.

Furthermore, the WAC was taken seriously in terms of its fighting capacity, and male and female combatants were to some extent certainly dependent on each.

Altogether, the similarities between girls from LURD and GOL far outweigh their differences regarding central issues like the reasons for joining, gender roles and relations and DDR. For the purposes of this study, differences between girl combatants from various factions have generally not been of significance, compared to differences between those who fight fighting and don't fight, are lower or higher-ranked, and younger and older girls.

2. Entry into Fighting Forces

Growing-up in war

As already stated, 14 years of almost constant war provided the broad context in which many girls decided to take up arms. Many girls cannot remember a time without war. According to the “Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict”, the Liberian government under Charles Taylor and the pro-government forces conducted killings, torture, abuse of civilians, rape of women and girls, abductions, forced labour and combat.³⁶ They also systematically looted and burned towns, extorted money and other goods from refugees and blocked access of humanitarian support. Similarly, LURD and MODEL were involved in summary executions of government collaborators and civilians, rape of women, girls and boys, looting of civilian infrastructure, restricting refugee movements, abduction of refugees, forced labour and various other violations. The continuous perpetration of such human rights violations by all parties to the conflict created a constant state of suffering and fear amongst civilians.

Many children were left with no option than to flee without protection from place to place, becoming internally or externally displaced. In 2004, about 300,000 Liberians were internally displaced, while another 320,000 were refugees in neighbouring countries. An estimated 80 percent of these were women and children.³⁷ Life in a refugee camp was “always very pitiful, sorrowful” as one girl described it. IDP girls were regularly exposed to rape, sexual abuse and prostitution in camps according to UNICEF. Before and during the 2003 war, IDP camps themselves became targets of armed forces.³⁸

Atrocities in daily life

Many of the girl combatants interviewed were constantly under threat, from sexual assault in particular. Although they had never aspired to be fighters, living amidst this daily insecurity created a need for self-protection and led to violence. From very young ages, most Liberians have witnessed atrocities against their parents, brothers, sisters and friends, and/or suffered them themselves. One interview describes ill treatment by different forces, including being forced to serve as labourers under extreme and hazardous conditions.

In 1991 that was the first time Taylor boys entered. [...] when they entered, they drove people away. [...] They used to behave to the civilians very disorderly; they used to treat them like animal, during that time. [...] Terrible! [...] Then ULIMO boys entered. [...] They came and they fought Taylor from 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996. They took them out from Voinjama 1994. Most of the time ULIMO would just catch you to work for them. They never used to rape. But you wash their dirty clothes; you get water, like slave. [...] Everybody use to work. Everybody, even when you were small, small. Everyday. So our mother and father used to fear for us. So they used to keep us in the village.

³⁶ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2004. *Nothing Left to Lose: The Legacy of Armed Conflict and Liberia's Children*. New York: Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict.

³⁷ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2004. op. cit.

³⁸ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2004. op. cit.

After a period of relative safety, the second war intensified the violence again. One girl reported witnessing a massacre in town:

I also saw how they captured a mother. They wanted her son and daughter. She could not do anything to prevent this from happening. The son had to fight and the daughter had to marry a commander [...]

Another girl witnessed a mass rape:

When the rebels came in town they lined up the people. All little girls were taken out of the line and raped in front of their parents' eyes.

Such experiences not only left traumatic memories but also influenced the girls' future decisions making many ready to fight.

Girls gave many reasons for enlisting. Often a complex combination of factors contributed to the final decision to do so. To understand girl combatants and to respond to their specific needs appropriately, it is necessary to document and analyse how and why they entered fighting forces in each country context. If this is not done, reintegration assistance is very likely to fail, and the chances of re-recruitment increase. To analyse girls' reasons for enlisting, this chapter adopts the framework of a recent study on young soldiers' perception of their own reasons for enlisting with armed groups or forces in ten countries.³⁹

2.1. Forced recruitment

Many children who fought between 2000 and 2003 were forcibly recruited by government armed forces, LURD or MODEL during roundups or raids, in refugee or IDP camps. The proportion of girls who were forced to join as opposed to having joined voluntarily varies depending on the source of information. According to the Women and Children Development Organisation (WACDO), most young girls were captured and forcefully carried to the military base. The Christian Children's Fund (CCF) would put the share of forced recruitment versus voluntary recruitment of GAFF at about 50%. These estimates relate to GAFF (those under 18), while for girl combatants aged 18-24 years the percentage forcibly recruited is much lower. Among the girls interviewed for this study, approximately one third were forcibly recruited.

Schools and clubs where young people gather are easy targets for recruitment efforts.

When I was 12 years old, GOL came in my school and killed my teacher and forcefully carried the children to fight. I had one week training before I was carried to the frontline. I was scared to fight but I didn't have a choice. I even told them that I didn't want to fight but they beat me and threatened me kill me if I didn't fight.

Others were simply abducted when walking on the street.

GOL came in town. They captured only young girls. GOL forced us in a car and carried us to their military base. I had 2 days of training before I was carried to the frontline.

³⁹ Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

We were going to buy at the market and that's how LURD people saw us and capture us. I was 11 years old. The girls capture us to join them.

Some girls were raped and then straight afterwards forced to enlist. When girls who were already part of one faction were captured by the enemy they were usually, unlike male captives, spared from being killed. Instead, they were made to join the enemy. They lost all rights and were subjected to physical and psychological abuse, particularly rape.

We were with LURD until government troop capture us. The time I was 13 years old. We fell in an ambush. Some people died there. When they capture you some of them rape. Me they did not rape me but they only suffer me. They tie us; beat us from there, I was sick seriously. They could do everything.

It should be noted however that the distinction between forced and “voluntary” association with armed groups can become blurred even after such forcible recruitment. Some girls were initially forced but then “volunteered” to join another group later. According to CCF many girls switched from GOL to LURD to escape abuse within their own force.

They forced me. I was with them. They used to maltreat me. Their treatment from them to me was not so... how do you call it... So I decided to escape at that time I did not trust nobody. I managed to escape. I run away. In the night. Before the day I was in LURD territory. And when I was with LURD I explained to them. And then I was with LURD. Because I wanted to take revenge now.

Most such girls prefer not to reveal their former membership of another force following LURD's victory in Lofa.

Forced recruitment did not always meet great resistance and was even welcomed under certain circumstances. In some refugee camps, people were inclined to join armed forces after having been forced to flee as a result of violent raids and living under bad conditions in the camps.

In the refugee camp people were talking about fighting Taylor. We wanted to go back to our country. Life in the refugee camp was not good. Everybody was thinking the same. We talked about what Taylor did to us people. We had to do something. So many of us joined LURD to fight and defeat Taylor.

They were from different, different areas, but most of the people were refugees too. Like they didn't have a place to stay. They didn't have peace. So their only solution was to fight.

It is, again, hard to distinguish between forced and voluntary recruitment in such cases, which helps to explain the variation in estimated percentages of combatants voluntarily forcibly recruited have varied so much.

2.2. Voluntary recruitment: Reasons to fight

The book "Young soldiers" distinguishes between environmental factors for joining armed groups, an individual's personal history and specific catalysts for the final decision to enlist. Environmental factors consist of outer circumstances which can (but does not always) push

youth into armed conflict. Growing up in a war environment contributed to the wish by many Liberian girls, to inflict revenge but not all such girls became combatants.

Although it is complex to examine the underlying reasons for joining armed groups, it is crucial to understand where these girls ran away from. Reintegration programmes need to avoid putting girls back in exploitive situations in poverty with no access to schooling or jobs. In order to ensure that the reintegration processes offer them better alternatives, we need to know their motives to join.

The left-hand column in Table 1 below shows the list of generic risk factors for voluntary recruitment on which this study builds.⁴⁰ The factors present a particular risk where several are combined.⁴¹ This case study of Liberia provides a first assessment of the prevalence of these and other factors amongst girls and young women. Tackling them over the long term would make a significant contribution to the prevention of armed violence in Liberia, and girl participation in it.

Table 1: Typical factors contributing to decision to enlist amongst 'voluntary' young combatants

TYPICAL CONTRIBUTING FACTORS		FACTORS SPECIFIC TO LIBERIA	GENERIC PREVENTION STRATEGIES
PRESENCE OF CONFLICT	Insecurity	To save self	Create safe zones for civilians
		To save relative(s)	
		To avenge self or relative(s)	Access to justice, support grass-roots justice, demand adherence to and prosecute violations of IHL
		Violent environment	Security sector reform including community based policing, participatory Safer Community initiatives
	Economic Motivation	Hunger	Create conditions of food security, provide relief
		Need for money	Economic development, research aspirations, job creation through local businesses/ reconstruction projects/ microfinance, training, apprenticeships
		Need for work	
	Family and friends	Abuse (particularly among girls)	Social protection
		Relocation	Conflict prevention, minority rights, protection for IDPs, refugees
		Death of relative(s)	Conflict prevention, security

⁴⁰ Based on Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

⁴¹ Ibid.

		Insecurity of relative(s)	To protect family	sector reform, SALW control
		Relative(s) enlisted	Following their example	Provide alternatives: life skills training, alternative family placement, foster-care, support to community and team-based activities (e.g. sports)
		Primary family is armed group	“Marrying” a male combatant	
		Poverty	Longing for material things	Economic development, poverty relief
		Ill-health		Provision for healthcare and dependants
		No family	Need to survive and take care of siblings when parents are dead	Social protection
			Following friends	Positive role models
	Education	No access	Schools closed	Provide/demand access to education, free school meals/water, child care in schools
		Segregated		Demand end to segregation
		Incitement to extremism		Offer non-partisan education
		Disinterest		Skills training, recreation
		Abuse		Social protection
		Extreme behaviour/expulsion		Projects targeting delinquency
	Politics/ Ideology	Religious hatred (less in girls)	Krahn and Mandingo tribes were targeted	Inter-communal/-confessional exchanges, confidence building, non-violent communication, objective media (for youth, possibly also run by youth)
		Ethnic hatred (less in girls)		
		Nationalist		
		Grievance	To attain gender equality; to avenge human rights abuses by all factions	Include young people's concerns in peace settlements, create non-violent channels for addressing grievances, support responsible reporting (with youth involvement)
	Adolescence	Independence	To react against strict parental discipline	Social protection, skills training, support to independent youth initiatives
		Excitement	Peer pressure	Sports, recreational activities
		Power	To attain status, power, equality through gun possession/“marrying” a male combatant	Support youth advocacy groups
		Attraction to guns, soldiers, fighting		SALW Awareness
	Culture/ Tradition	Of fighting	Surrounded by long-running conflict	Non-violent communication, encourage alternative (male) identity
		Of gun ownership	Availability of status, power, equality through gun possession	SALW Control and Awareness

		Partisan media		Support to independent media, closure of hate media
				Campaign with parents not to expose youth to violence
			Abduction	Penalties for those who are actively recruiting and disseminating information

In Table 1, factors identified as contributing in other countries but to be major factors for recruitment of girls in Liberia in this research are shaded light blue, while minor factors are shaded grey. The central column explains how the factor found in other countries was reflected in the case of the Liberian girls studied. For example, the motive “to save self” (in the first row) was most commonly manifested among the Liberian girls specifically as protecting oneself from rape, while “to save relatives” (in the second row) among the Liberian girls more commonly meant protecting other women. A more extensive explanation will follow in the sub-paragraphs of this chapter.

The suggestions made in the right hand column of Table 1 on how to address the occurrence of factors which commonly lead to child recruitment are by no means an exhaustive list of proven solutions, but it would be desirable if DDR programmes contributed to the existence of such a list by rigorously testing ways to minimise the exposure of children and youth to these risk factors.

2.2.1. Seeking Protection

During the conflicts, many girls in Liberia lived in terrifying conditions under constant threat of sexual assault:

When I was small there was peace. There was peace! We never knew anything of war. That war was coming to Liberia; nobody had an idea of that. It was a peaceful country. And then it went wrong. [...] They treat other people bad, but the women, whooo; it was too dangerous, because I'm a woman too. But also the men they forced them to take arms and fight. Even the girls they force you to fight, rape ... the thing they want you, you had to do. And then things were not the way how it supposed to be for me.

For many, the number one reason to fight was to protect themselves and other women from rape. Rape is widely documented as a weapon of war which is used to dehumanise women and the communities they belong to. There are many known examples from both Liberian wars where groups of male fighters systematically went from door to door to rape girls.

They started going from house to house searching. In the villages all over. They started searching. When they see you, they rape you.

Possibly because of the high concentration of Mandingo people (targeted by Charles Taylor) living in Lofa County, girls from that area repeatedly reported that they joined armed forces after government forces had killed their parents and raped them.⁴² The possession of a gun was the means by which these men had imposed their power over weaker unarmed victims,

⁴² The reason for this concentrated violence on Lofa County could be the high percentage of Mandingo people living there, who Taylor's targeted.

such as girls, and thus the reaction of many girls was to take up arms and join fighting forces as their only means to gain security.

They went from door to door to search for civilians. We could hear them in the street. When they came to our house they kicked the door. We were hiding ourselves under the bed. They killed my parents and they raped me. When I came to myself in the hospital I knew within myself I had to fight these men who were doing this to us. The raping had to be stopped, also for all the other women.

Other girls became associated with fighting forces without holding guns themselves, often by “marrying” a male combatant, to protect themselves against this violence.

The remark of one girl re-emphasises the important point that becoming associated with fighting forces improves personal security. It was more of an adaptive strategy than a voluntary choice between viable alternative options:

When I was young I never dreamt of becoming a fighter. So I never just went to come and fight. Fighting is not a career.

2.2.2. Wishing for revenge

After experiencing rape, the killing of relatives, the burning of homes and the destruction of their future aspirations, some girls armed themselves not just for protection, but also to take revenge:

Like the rape that happened to me, it made me feel very angry. I could not sit still and do nothing about it. All the rapes in this country made me frustrated, I wanted to take revenge. We should stand up and fight against rape!

Within LURD, the Director of WAC explains how the unit was nicknamed to state explicitly its purpose of exacting revenge on behalf of women:

It happened to some people, but they are not able to revenge. Some people were raped but they cannot do anything. Because not everybody can get strong heart. So we were doing... we were revenging for everybody. So we call the unit Mother Unit.

Many girls were more focussed on the fight against rape than the objective of taking over the country. This was sometimes evidenced by a strong solidarity between girls that even went beyond armed group boundaries. The ability to share experiences in the WAC comforted and increased solidarity between girls, as well as attracting new recruits:

Some of them they had stories just like my own story. They didn't have peace. So their only solution was to fight. Being together and talk to one another that alone encouraged us to be happy. We used to encourage each other. So more girls used to be encouraged to come.

The key issue of gender-based violence is further discussed in Chapter 3.

2.2.3. *Becoming equal to men*

Over the course of conflict, traditional female roles and decision-making structures lost precedence to military strategies, leadership and victory. After the first war very young ex-fighters were chosen as village chiefs, while councils of elderly men and women lost power.⁴³ Girls were at the margins of social life, with a minor role in supporting the heroes of war and their children. As men were usually the ones carrying guns and exercising power, gender inequality and gender based violence increased in Liberia. Heightened vulnerability and dependency created for some girls the need to achieve equality by fighting like men.

Because I think what men can do I think women even can do better then men. So I decided to join them.

In the army we were equal to the men. We were fighting as well. So we proved to the men that we could do it. What men can fight women can fight, even better!

Just as the drive for women's rights and equality has emerged within various other liberation or revolutionary movements,⁴⁴ so here some girls joined the armed forces in order to assert their equality, or "do what a man can".

The possibility of attaining equality by joining the armed forces will be further elaborated in Chapter 4.

2.2.4. *Economic motivations*

Poverty

Poverty is a widespread phenomenon in Liberian society. Over 76% of the Liberian population are currently living below the poverty line.⁴⁵ Before the outbreak of civil war an unemployment rate of 50% was reported, but this is stated to have increased to 80% since then.⁴⁶ Poverty, and the lack of anything to do or any means to sustain oneself do not explain by themselves why the girls became associated with fighting forces, but are important contributory factors.

The girls interviewed referred to the lack of employment of their parents and how difficult it was for them to care for their families. Many children had to work. If one of the parents died or got sick, the survival of the entire family was at stake:

⁴³ Cf. Ellis, S. 1999. *The Mask of Anarchy*. London: Hurst and Company. 'Young Liberians today are generally far less respectful of their elders than would have been thought proper in the past' (p. 285); 'warlords had become role models for young people' (p. 286).

⁴⁴ Barth, E. F. 2002. *Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies. A Comparative Study from Africa*. Oslo: PRIO.

⁴⁵ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005, op. cit. p.5, citing: UNDP: Poverty Profile of Liberia (Monrovia, Jan. 2001); Liberia: Report on Post-Conflict Economic Situation and Prospects for January-June 2004-Staff Report; Staff Statement; Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion; and Statement by the Executive Director for Liberia. Country Report No. 04/84 n (25 March 2004). Liberia: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix. Country Report No. 03/275 (September 3, 2003).

⁴⁶ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. *Labour Market and Training Needs Assessment: Mapping of Reintegration Opportunities for Children Associated with Fighting Forces. A Report Covering Liberia*.

When my father was living, I was selling, but after he died I was not selling, because my mother was scared. My mother was having plenty children, but nobody was there to take care for the children.

My father could not work anymore because there was nothing to do at that time. There was nothing, it was very chaos.

Because the pappy, our father, decided to make farm ... for precaution you know. So that we know when food business was difficult we know how to save ourselves. So we went in the bush to be able to know how to farm. He was working in the hospital, but he just went days to increase food, to bring more food.

They burned the house, everything was gone, nothing was there anymore. My parents are dead nobody to take care of us anymore. So I had to provide for my younger ones. So I decided at that time, because the only way to help yourself, or to get food for your family is to be a soldier. So I was having no choice.

Faced with such difficulties in sustaining themselves, life in the armed forces seemed a viable alternative to the girls. Long after the civilian population became destitute, armed soldiers still had access to clean water, food, and clothes, often through looting.

He [the Commander] told the people to give me water and then he gave me clothes to wear. They gave me food, everything. So at that day I felt at home. I feel at home that very day.

So when LURD entered Monrovia from Voinjama in Lofa, through Bomi, all the way to Freeport, there was sufficient food. But people who were in this area now [i.e. the town], there was no food. So you had to cross the rebel land to take your food. So that's where I met them [LURD].

Red shoes

In discussing economic motives a careful distinction is to be made, between those who joined because their survival was at stake and those who simply hoped to improve their economic prospects and get “the red shoes”. Besides fulfilling subsistence needs, many young girls were also attracted by less essential material possessions. In Liberia the link between money and societal status/power is very pronounced. Some social workers involved in DDR identified the search for higher status by economic means as one of the most prevailing reasons for young girls to join armed forces. One explained that “while many joined because of their poor situation at home,” other girls were enthralled by the material things that the commanders possessed and wanted them for themselves. One of the girls recalled joining the armed forces so that the commander would buy her the same red shoes he had given to another girl.

I saw the new red shoes of my friend. I asked her where she got them from. She took me to these boys. Later on I got involved with one of them. When he was fighting I followed him.

Touching Humanity In Need of Kindness (THINK) drew particular attention to the simple wish to earn quick money and loot as a key motive for enlisting. It should also be noted, however, that for many girls it was the sad truth that the only way to access material goods was to become sexually involved with a male combatant.

2.2.5. Education

Before the war, Liberia enjoyed relatively high literacy rates, whereas now the large majority of girls in Liberia is illiterate as a result of the war. Schools have not functioned properly for 14 years, leaving a generation of young people in Liberia with hardly any education. In 2004, 50% of boys and 24% of girls were estimated to be enrolled at school. Of these, only 35% of the boys and 27% of the girls were expected to reach the fifth grade.⁴⁷ Lack of access to education is a critical risk for young people, who are therefore left with nothing to do and with little prospect for employment and a meaningful future.

In the context of conflict, girls living in combat zones had to end their education abruptly as most schools closed.

When the war came I was not able to go to school at that time. The school was damaged and there was no money. [...] I stopped school because of the war. I was still going to school when war entered Voinjama but then I had to stop.

When I was small I went to school but the school closed when the war came. I was in seventh grade. I had to stop.

I was in school in Sinoe but I quit school in fourth grade. When the war came I had to flee to Monrovia. That was in 2000.

It was common for a girl's education to be disrupted if the economic situation of the family declined. In such a situation, she would have to work and help in the house.

I wanted to go to school but certain thing came up. With my father's car business it gave me a hard time. I started to go with my stepmother selling in the market. I used to carry pepper and pineapple.

In other cases, parents could not afford to care for their children and send them to family in the city, which equally failed to put them in school.⁴⁸

When I was small I was living with my mother. I have five siblings. My mother never had money that's why she sent me to my uncle. He said he was going to send me to school. But my uncle left, because they wanted to kill him, and he couldn't carry me. He left me with one woman whose children couldn't do anything, whole day she was mocking me and embarrassing me. Her children were going to school and she was not sending me to school, I will be there cooking and doing everything, clean the house after I got fed up with it I left.

When I was eight years old I was sent by my parents to my aunt in Monrovia to go to school there, because my parents didn't have money. But also my aunt, who has two children herself, could not afford to let me go to school all the time.

⁴⁷ United Nations. 2003: *Liberia 2004 - Consolidated Appeals Process*. Geneva: OCHA, p. 20.

⁴⁸ In Liberia it is common practice for parents living in the interior part of the country to send their children to a family member, mostly the uncle or aunt, in Monrovia, hoping for a better life for the child and themselves. These are called "foster parents". Only in rare cases have these turned out to exploit the child, forcing them to work, denying them the right to education or mistreating them in other ways.

Frustrated with the lack of meaningful activity, these girls became an easy target during recruitment efforts. Thus poverty, a risk factor in its own right, affects other critical issues for young people such as the inability to access schooling, which in turn limits their employment or other economic opportunities and makes them more vulnerable to recruitment.

2.2.6. Family and friends

The direct and extended family, community, friends and possibly other influential figures such as teachers or sports coaches surrounding a young person from the social support network which can exercise a powerful influence on the choices she/he makes. Liberia is no exception to the tendency observed elsewhere that young people often join armed forces due to encouragement from friends and/or relatives.

Relatives enlisted

If parents, siblings or other family members were involved with the armed forces, this may have made enlisting appear a more acceptable option, especially among younger children.

My brother was the first to join. So I joined the same unit as my brother, Jungle Fire [unit's name]. We were in the same unit.

In some cases, the whole family was associated with an armed group. This phenomenon apparently happened especially in the northern counties of Lofa and Nimba. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), who was in charge of the Disarmament and Demobilization process for children in Lofa, most ex-combatants were, in fact, civilians who just supported LURD or GOL when they were engaged in fighting close by. Typically, the men or fathers would fight and temporarily become members of an armed group, perhaps holding a rank. Meanwhile, the rest of the family would support the same faction and, in some cases, the children would also become actively involved. In contrast to full-time or professional combatants, such families remained in their homes rather than moving with the frontline.

Death of relatives

Those girls who had lost their family or separated from them were especially vulnerable to both forced and voluntary recruitment.

My parents got killed. So I decided at that time, because the only way to help yourself, or to get food for your family is to be a soldier. So I was having no choice. And I was the only one left to take care.

They killed my pa. He was a soldier, he was in the barrack. He was a soldier for Taylor. LPC (Liberian Peace Council) people killed him. So now my mum was alone with 7 children. So she decided I should come with my brothers to Monrovia. (...) My mother said I should follow my brothers because no father there to care for us, so we left. By that time if they catch men they will kill them. And girls they can rape. So my mother decided to send my brothers and me in Monrovia.

So I found my parents dead at home. I thought, because I was at home, no family, no mother, no sister, that I had to join the rebel group, ULIMO. No parents, no mother, I decided to join. I was looking at my mother, I was frustrated!

My father died in Monrovia. He was killed by soldiers, LURD rebel, stray bullet. This made me angry.

They put us together and at that time they killed my mother and my father right in my presence. There is nothing left for you when your parents are killed, so you come and join.

Some girls also felt angry and longed for revenge against those who had killed their families.

I wanted to go with them [LURD soldiers] to fight because the people who [got] my parents killed and [...] raped [me], I knew that they were going to fight them. They [parents] were gone away, they don't come back anymore.

Homelessness

With death of or separation from parents, having nowhere safe to go meant that joining armed forces was the only option for some girls.

Some of them [girl combatants] had stories just like my own story. Like some people were fighting because they didn't have parents, they didn't have a place to stay.

Peer pressure

Along with family, friends have considerable influence on decisions of children, especially adolescents. As with the other environmental factors identified, encouragement from friends does not always result in a young person enlisting, but in many cases contributes to the decision to do so. The more members of a particular peer group are, or are considering becoming, associated with armed forces, the greater the pressure becomes for the rest. According to THINK, peer pressure is strong among young people in Liberia. Girls were often protected from conflict-related violence by being kept at home by their parents. Some girls wished to rebel against this, under pressure from both male and female peers. They wanted to lead an independent life and be with their friends. In some cases this led to enlisting or exposing to captures by armed groups.

I wasn't allowed to go out of the house from my parents. They wanted to protect me. One day I followed my friends and then it became late. I was afraid to go home, as I knew my parents would be angry. So I decided to stay with my friends. Because I was out on the street with my friends, I was captured by a fighting force that made me a wife and a fighter.

Some girls were introduced into armed forces by “friends”. They initially appeared to be people one might “hang out” or have fun with and trust, and the association with the fighting groups developed from there.

I went there with my friends at that time I thought it was just funny you know you didn't think about it seriously it was just one day with friends like I can go to my friends like you know... so it was just one day and then you are thinking okay now I go back home but then my aunty was not there any more. I never saw her again. That's how come I joined the society [armed force]. So when I was there, I was just enjoying myself with my friends.

I went to my friends; time came my friends started fighting. So myself I started fighting for GOL [...] nobody forced me in it. My friend then used to encourage me.

I was not fighting I was just with the boys. Then me and my friend we joined in 2001.

Peers and drugs

Some of the girls also started a relationship with male combatants to supply themselves with drugs. Using drugs was largely a social activity among friends but also numbed girls to war-related trauma, including gender-based violence. It is common to hear the expression “through drugs you can do everything” in Liberia. It seems that most, non-fighting and fighting, girls only used soft drugs. Cocaine, amphetamines and alcohol were also widely used by combatants.

Getting into a relationship with a male combatant

Some girls became involved if their boyfriend was associated to an armed group. In fact, some girls chose male combatants and commanders as their partners for reasons of protection, material needs and status.

He was [a] former government man. [...] I was living with my aunty and then my friends always visited male fighters. [...] One day I decided to go with them and I never went back to the aunty. [...] I stay with the male fighters. That it now I was living with one boy.

I can say all of us now we were just there. So later on I started having boyfriend. One of the fighters. [...] He approached me then we started loving.

According to THINK, peer pressure combined with desire for material goods presumed to be available through association with fighting forces (which may in turn involve becoming the wife of a combatant or providing sexual services) are key motives. Unlike girls who joined following rape, many girls who did not experience rape became sexually involved with male combatants and commanders because of peer pressure and their longing for material goods. The wish for protection also played a role. Girls that joined for material goods such as red shoes were more often associated as non-fighters within male units.

These relations will be further explored in Chapter 4.

2.2.7. Politics and ideology

The political situation in Liberia, and the ideology and political opinions of friends and family members also influenced children and young people’s involvement in the conflict. Some young people joined based on strong ideological motivation. Some felt urged to overturn the oppressive regime, and many witnessed or experienced acts of brutality which motivated them to fight for one side or another.

Creating hatred

Liberia is an ethnic and religious melting pot, in which different “tribes”, “clans”, linguistic and religious groups coexist and follow clear divisions of labour in society. There is a history of tension between groups, such as discussion whether the Mandingo tribe are “true”, or deep-seated resentment against the descendants of the “black Americans”. During conflict, when goods and jobs were scarce, these sensitivities increased, while political leaders deliberately played on pre-existing tension, using these to cement loyalty and build a platform for recruitment.

From the early 1990s, politics has been an inescapable issue for ordinary Liberians. A brutal civil war killed over 200,000 of them, and war crimes including torture, beatings, rape and sexual assaults were witnessed for the first time in the country's history.⁴⁹ From the beginning of the wars in 1989, Charles Taylor directed violence, including the widespread use of rape, chiefly against two tribes, the Krahn and the Mandingo. After Taylor became President in 1997, these two tribes experienced a wave of violence against them. For many, awareness of the repercussions of Taylor's presidency for members of their tribe inspired them to take up arms.

Taylor boys came back in town after everything! (...) I said I will kill myself because I knew the same problem we would get again here. Because the two years the Taylor boys spent in Lofa, it was terrible for us. And then I heard he became president again. I was not happy. (...) So when he got in power now then he started behaving worse then ever before. (...) In 1999 we know he is no better. The whole country was hot. The raping rate start going up. (...) And then the second war, I started fighting.

Thus political awareness made some girls decide to join. Most girl combatants studied were raised during the first war, and acted based on what they had seen in that period, strongly influenced by the lobbying and indoctrination of local political leaders.

While Taylor drew on resentment against the Mandingo and Krahn to recruit, LURD and MODEL called for a fight against injustice to remove Taylor from Presidency. Part of their strategy was to mobilize civilians. ULIMO⁵⁰ and its successors LURD and MODEL also specifically wanted Mandingo and Krahn to join.

Taylor was against two tribes: Krahn and Mandingo. And then ULIMO was founded by two tribes: Krahn and Mandingo. Any tribe could join, but if you are one of those two tribes you have the privilege to join. They encourage to come quick. Also the girls.

Thus the political agenda, tribal/regional affiliation, and openness to female recruits of each faction were factors draw girls into each of the armed groups.

Ethnicity and religion are regarded as closely related in Liberia and differences are explicitly exaggerated by all warlords.

I went fighting because of my religion. You see if you are a Muslim or Mandingo in this country, they say you don't belong in this country. So I had to fight.

Historically, many Liberians have not considered the Mandingo tribe to be "real Liberians". Using existing prejudices, Taylor exaggerated differences between Mandingo and other Liberians, stressing, for example, that the majority has a Muslim background. Targeting he Mandingo was fairly arbitrary, but carried very serious consequences.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch. 2004. *How to Fight, How to Kill: child soldiers in Liberia*, Vol. 16, No. 2. New York: Human Rights Watch.

⁵⁰ United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) fought against Taylor during the first war. Many of their members joined LURD in the second war.

Because we were Mandingo we were target. We could not stay in Guinea because of the situation, we had no money, and we were not used to the place. And here again we cannot be here. No father again, no mother.

Somebody among the people within the town pointed at our house. So I came back to the house and found everyone there dead because someone in the town pointed at our house.[...] In town there was hatred between the different tribes. [...] Because the Mandingo people are strong, they know how to do business, and some of them [Liberians] didn't know how to do nothing. They go around and dig. Because the Mandingo people are strong business people and my mother was a business woman [...] My mother used to credit out things to people, different people. So whenever these people refuse to pay, she will go to the police to get to them to pay her money. So that created already hatred within the people's heart. Because of the war, now when the people came they pointed her out. The people were jealous at all the Mandingo people.

Grievance

Within the larger movements, the WAC in LURD also had the characteristics of a political movement. As stated above, it drew strength from styling itself as a force for asserting equality and avenging the common grievances shared by women.

If you were ill treated, if you were raped and you are not able to do anything, we are there for you. So we call the unit Mother Unit. So the unit is for all! The women. Not only for the women that were in LURD, but for all the women all over the world.

2.2.8. Culture and tradition

Culture and tradition provide the individual with a framework through which to observe and interpret what is happening. It is difficult to generalise “Liberian culture”.⁵¹ Liberia contains 15 counties, 16 languages and even more ethnic groups (or “tribes”). These are characterised by distinct social and cultural practices and rich and diverse histories. The following general statements are therefore made with the caveat that they are not necessarily applicable throughout Liberia.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence has been identified in various countries as a reason for girls to join armed forces.⁵² It is thus striking that in Liberia, where sexual violence has routinely been used against women in the last two wars, there appears to have been almost no sexual abuse of girls in the home. Notwithstanding that some girls might be unwilling to report abuse, all the girls interviewed described coming from “happy” families where parents and children had a loving relationship. Although it would be counter-intuitive to suggest that such incidents never take place in Liberia, all the social workers interviewed likewise confirmed that they had not encountered a single case of domestic gender-based violence. More generally, before the wars harassment and rape had always been strongly rejected by Liberian society. Thus it appears that in Liberia a history of domestic gender-based violence was not a common environmental factor among girls who decided to enlist with armed groups, although they

⁵¹ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

⁵² Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

were exposed to very high levels of such violence outside the home (discussed further in Chapter 3).

The culture of violence

During Liberia's 14 years of conflict pre-existent traditions were overturned, and a culture of violence developed in which extreme acts of violence such as rape, cannibalism and burning people alive became a routine occurrence. Thus witnessing such events and playing minor supportive roles around combatants from an early age also played its part in influencing many girls who later became associated with fighting forces.

When I was very young Taylor boys came to my village. They treated the civilians very bad. Then we decided to go to Guinea. That's where I met the ULIMO soldiers. There were plenty of them. I use to do small things for them like carrying water or ammunition. I never went to fight with them because at that time I was still too small, but I listened to all their stories and saw them making their arms ready to fight.

As noted above, experiencing the first war made many girls ready to fight from the outset of the second.

Secret societies

Liberia has a tradition of secret societies through which local customs and traditions are maintained.⁵³ Through this traditional societies discipline, respect and responsibilities of life were taught. They were thus important for the education and socio-economic integration of the youth. Due to the war, the secret societies either became politicised or could not operate. The current generation of youth, including the girl combatants, is the first not to have been collectively initiated into secret societies. The effect of this on Liberian youth and their relationship with older generations should not be underestimated. Further detailed research would be required to develop a full understanding of the link between the breakdown of this socialization process and the involvement of children and youth in armed groups, but it is likely that there is such a link. It is still to be seen if the Poro⁵⁴ and Sande⁵⁵ schools of the Mel⁵⁶ group are going to be re-launched in the new Liberian society.

Child labour

The use of child soldiers in Liberia dates back to the start of the conflict in 1989. The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No.182) has been ratified by Liberia. Liberia has, however, not yet produced a list of the worst forms of child labour. There is no conscription in Liberia and the minimum age for voluntary recruitment is believed to be 18. According to the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, however, this is not enforced in practice. The fact that LURD, an armed group that drew strongly on civilian support, and MODEL recruited child soldiers suggests that active participation by children in conflict was culturally accepted. In fact, in Liberia as in other cultures with traditions of child labour, child soldiering is commonly regarded as a job comparable to selling in the market, forming part of the child's necessary contribution to the survival and welfare of the family unit. Therefore, when the war started and protecting the communities was part of daily life,

⁵³ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

⁵⁴ Traditional school for boys and men.

⁵⁵ Traditional school for girls and women.

⁵⁶ The Mel includes the Lorma, Kpelle, and related tribes.

children helped their parents in doing so. When joining armed groups proved to bring some material wealth, adults and children joined. It was almost naturally to do for adolescents who were “expected” to contribute.

2.2.9. Societal expectations and gender roles

Girls interviewed for this report complained about their suppressed role in traditional society. Many affirmed that men are always the head of the household and hold power over women.

People always think that men are better and feel that men are stronger than women because they think that women are weak-minded.

When I was growing up men were always seen as more and better than the women. Even my mother thought me this. The men have always power over the women.

However, Liberian women are also viewed as relatively strong and independent. The fact that this generation of girls notices and criticizes gender inequality underlines a certain level of independence and strength. Also noteworthy are the respectful and non-abusive inter-parental and parent-child relationships reported.

I grew up in a happy family. My mother and father loved me very much and also my brothers. My father also loved my mother very much, he always treated her good.

Gun ownership amongst males, and the power and status it conferred, increased gender inequality in Liberia, and some girls took up arms directly to challenge this tendency.

Because girls, for girls before you become part of society, you know where you pass through before you can become part of society. Yes people always think that men are better than the women because they think that women are weak minded. So for the girls you have to be very careful if you don't want to be useless, because for rebel or for soldier they don't have women often. So if you make yourself useful that mean everybody can use you. So you have to prove that that you are strong as men. Because if you don't do you will die he? [laughs] So you have to do everything to protect your life. To do everything to prove that you are strong. That you can be one of the survivors.

It was primarily female commanders who reported these motivations. These higher-ranked women acquired status in the war and generally retain the respect of their male colleagues. However, their motives are not necessarily shared by lower-ranking females. Furthermore, the majority of Liberian women did not take up arms, although the civilian women interviewed stated that one would have needed a weapon to protect oneself from rape or harassment. It is perhaps surprising therefore that not more women did not take up arms, which was probably due to the constraints exercised by women on the societal roles and notions on femininity in Liberian culture, where women are suppose to be peaceful and loving, not fighting.

2.2.10. Specific features of girl-adolescents

Analysis of factors that lead young people to join armed forces or groups cannot be complete without recognizing the significance of the adolescence in the individual's personal development, and their common behavioural characteristics. Although the term “adolescent”

is not used in Liberia, there is wide recognition that there is a time when a young person is no longer a “child” but not yet an “adult”, and s/he begins to take on adult roles and activities. This can be a difficult time for the young person and his/her family. Adolescents commonly appear adult and self-sufficient, challenge rules and authority, and demand change and justice, possibly at the same time as suffering or perpetrating violence and abuse. However, they need support, encouragement, and moral and emotional guidance. Again, this is why the decline of initiation rituals in Liberia might be a cause for concern.

In Liberia, a child is subject to strict discipline. As elsewhere, with increasing age, s/he reacts more and more against her/his parents. For some, joining an armed group is one way of revolting against parents. Although parents may not mistreat their children, many children feel mistreated.

I saw other girls going out with men but for me I was not allowed. I was even not allowed to go out with my friends. After school I had to go straight to our house and had to make my homework. My parents kept me inside because they said it was too dangerous for a girl to go outside. I didn't like to sit inside all the time.

3. Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence can be defined as physical, sexual and psychological violence committed against women or men as a result of their gender.⁵⁷ Armed conflict tends to aggravate sexual abuse, as in Liberia, where rape has been extensively used as a weapon of war. Both boys and girls were targeted but, in contrast to boys, girls carry the additional burden of undesirable pregnancies and are more often sexually abused. According to a recent study in 10 countries, a common motive for joining armed groups among girl combatants was the wish to protect themselves by taking up arms, while boys expressed the wish to protect the female members of their family from sexual abuse.⁵⁸ Liberia is one of the first cases where girls also explicitly stated they were fighting to protect others.

I can even remember the time I joined [...]. To protect the women because of the rape [...] not even my own but they did to so many women...

In Liberia, an estimated 75 percent of the demobilized GAFF in 2004 have suffered sexual abuse or exploitation. Rape occurred before and during recruitment, but also during their time in the forces. Some girls tried to protect themselves from these sexual assaults by getting a fighter as a boyfriend or by gaining prestige as a fighter. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, girls were capturing other girls to provide sexual services for male comrades.⁵⁹ However, the girl combatants and commanders interviewed in this research denied this and declared this was just one of many lies told by journalists.

This chapter analyses the significance of gender-based violence for girl combatants in Liberia's war. It focuses on its perpetrators and victims as well as the protection strategies girls developed. Finally, it discusses the links between gender-based violence, revenge and "feminism".

3.1. Gender-based violence during Liberia's wars

Harassment and rape of women was never socially accepted in Liberia before the war. Men could be sentenced to up to seven years in prison for rape. With the advent of war and gun possession amongst men widespread, moral and legal standards faded, especially as regards the treatment of girls. As men were the fighters and the primary holders of guns, they could exert power over women, oppressing and abusing them in various ways. There was an outburst of indiscriminate violence, especially rape, which went along with the attacks. Girls were especially vulnerable to becoming the victims of sexual violence. One girl described how routinely such crimes were committed during the war:

Because anytime they come and you are young and you just have little breasts coming, and then [claps hands] they just rape you.

⁵⁷ Adapted from: Bouta, T., Frerks, G., and Bannon, I. 2005. *Gender, Conflict, and Development*. Washington DC: The World Bank. p. 33.

⁵⁸ Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch. 2004. op cit.

How Liberia turned from a country relatively untouched by gender-based violence into one of the countries where such violence was most common worldwide is difficult to explain. The fact that rape was so unacceptable prior to the war may partly explain why it was chosen as a means to terrorise those targeted.

3.2. Forms of gender-based violence

While the definition of gender-based violence can include any physical or psychological violence directed at a person because of, or with reference to, their gender, rape seems to have been its most common form in Liberia. This and other forms of gender-based violence increased during the Liberian wars. During the first civil war, various estimates state that 40% of Liberian women were raped. In the second war, this number seems to have increased, with rapes perpetrated by GOL, LURD and MODEL. Many crimes were related to the conflict with one third of the reported cases of gang rape perpetrated by armed members of fighting forces.⁶⁰

Almost all girls who took part in this research experienced some form of gender-based violence. Estimates of rapes committed during the wars vary considerably though. According to CCF about half of the girls they assisted stated they had been raped. THINK has given much higher estimates, indicating that almost all girls whom they assisted were victims of rape. One explanation for this difference could be the periods they stayed with the organizations, allowing them to establish with the social workers the trust relationship necessary to talk about such sensitive issues. THINK concentrated on a small group of girls who stayed with the organization for nine months, while a larger number of girls stayed in CCF's Interim Care Centre for 12 weeks at the most. As research in Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda indicates, feelings of shame or social stigma may cause girls not to speak about their experiences.

Another explanation of the variety of estimates of rapes lies in the different perceptions of the definition of rape between social workers and the girls themselves.

3.3. Defining rape

Most people working with girl combatants called a sexual contact rape if it was the result of the man possessing a gun and military power, especially if the girl was a minor. The girls often merely agreed to a sexual relationship because they felt threatened or intimidated. Some people would use the term "rape" to describe sex between an adult man and an underage girl – a regular occurrence in Liberian fighting forces. American law calls sex between an adult and a person aged under 16 "statutory rape". The idea behind this law is that a young girl is not yet mature enough to make decisions about having a sexual relationship and, this is pressured by the older man.

Some girls, however, "choose" to get involved in a sexual relationship to protect themselves from rape and other threats to their security or welfare (see also section 3.6). Despite the lack of physical coercion, the lack of viable alternative options makes it difficult to describe such relationships as voluntary, especially in a context where there was no sanction against the rape of single women.

⁶⁰ Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. 2004. op. cit.

Of similar complexity is the term “prostitution”. The sexual relations many young girls with combatants to acquire material belongings, is generally referred to as “prostitution”. However, use of the term is complicated: firstly by the fact that the girls themselves do not use this term for such situations; and secondly by the fact that in a war-torn society blighted by very severe poverty young girls have very few other means to obtain the “goodies” such as make-up and clothes, which are important to teenagers.

The disruption to stable family life created by the first war left many girls with little grasp of what a respectful, loving relationship consisted of, and therefore the distinction between rape and loving a boy is not clear to them. Furthermore, their relationships often developed in environments where there was little chance to reflect or think very far beyond their immediate survival. In disarmament and demobilization sites or care centres, girls might have to talk about their past and answer searching questions about it. Many of them have not been offered any opportunity to reflect on, form an opinion of, and deal with, their past, and many girls change their opinion about their relationship at this point. Most social workers are persuaded that these girls lived in forced relationships but lack the confidence to admit this and then leave their bush husbands. However, the girls’ reflections on these issues are rather different.

External influence is also a reason why girls are now confused about the nature of their relationships. Some girls described their first sexual encounter with their boyfriend as “rape” that happened “out of love”. While they may have considered it voluntary during war and when they were still young, some are now re-evaluating this view, using the term rape and loving the boy in the same sentence. As a result of this re-evaluation, some couples have separated. The judgement outsiders make of such relationships needs to be approached with extreme caution, especially because alternatives to remaining in such relationships may be emotionally, physically and economically worse for the girls involved.

It must be understood that in most of Liberian culture (some tribes have different customs) if a boy has sex with a girl and then takes care of her, he is regarded as her husband. Therefore it is not all that strange that girls regard those who raped them as future husbands. Interviews with demobilized and non-demobilized girls revealed that girls who did not receive formal DDR assistance almost never used the term rape except in absolutely clear-cut cases, such as rape at gunpoint or while tied up. This girl says explicitly that she was not raped although she admits that she was forced.

They didn’t harass me. They never raped me! But they were forcing me to love to them. I was loving the one. Because I was forced to survive. They were force me because they have arm! I have one that took me. That was my only one. (...) And you are forced. When you see them you have fear, and when that fear enters you, you do anything. Then you are praying for your life.

Although many girls did not define their first sexual encounter with a male combatant as rape, most of them could be said not to have given their full consent, and yet a surprising number of them stayed in a relationship with the boy during combat:

I was raped. It was done by the boy I’m loving now. As soon as he raped me, I just started to love to him.

He raped me while with my friends. My friends carried me, it was just like to say me and my friends went to walk about and then this boy saw me, put me in the house and raped me so myself too said but then I will not move from behind you, eh [smiles]. I was just with him now because he raped me so I just decided to remain with him.

When I went with my friends then he raped me. He the one raped me, I was behind him, and he is my boyfriend now.

I left my aunty with my friends. We saw these men. The boy raped me. Because he did so I just felt that I be part of them. I should just stay there to do anything besides fighting just because I wanted to be with the boy. I was carrying ammo (ammunition) for them. If he had not raped me, I was going to go back to my aunty. (...) I loved for me and him to get together.

Such statements certainly show again how narrow the margins are between voluntary choice, an adaptive strategy where options are very limited and outright coercion. Most girls stated that their sexual involvement with members of fighting forces was voluntary. However, one could interpret this as a manifestation of any of the following:

- *Fear of reprimination*: Most girls remain with their partner, and may fear reprimination if he discovers that she claims to be in a non-voluntary relationship.
- *Fear of stigma*: A girl may fear the stigma of being classified as a rape victim which may diminish her chances of getting married, or make her feel or appear weak or dependent.
- *Agreement without alternatives*: A girl may not believe she was raped because, even though she had few other options, she agreed to sex.
- *“Love” (as a coping strategy)*: Although the relationship was involuntary, the girl may convince herself that she chose it to make it easier to bear.
- *“Love” (for material goods)*: A girl may say that she is in love with the man, although she is actually attracted by material goods, for which she consents to exchange sexual favours.
- *“Love” after rape*: Many girls said that they were raped initially but then came to love the man who did it.
- *Genuine, voluntary love*.
- *Ignorance of other kinds of relationship*: A girl may be so unfamiliar with peaceful society that she has no experience of a voluntary and equal relationship with which to compare her experience.
- *Acceptance of her new husband* as determined by the culture that the man who has sex with the girl needs to take care of her and become her husband.

How do Liberian GAFF define rape?

A focus group discussion with four high-ranked girls between the ages of 22 and 32 who entered fighting forces when they were still minors offered interesting insights to how the girls themselves defined and thought about forced or voluntary marriage. At the beginning of the discussion, all women agreed on the definition of rape as “one party forcing the other one to have sex against that person’s will”, and stated that this would then not be a “good” relationship. One girl argued that this depended on the period of time spent with that person: “If you are already a long time with your boyfriend then you can’t call it rape anymore.”

The women were then asked what they thought about young girls (typically aged 11-15) approaching commanders to get the same presents as their friends had received. One girl knowingly laughed: “this is exactly what happens”, and added resolutely, “these girls don’t know. They are still young. The men take advantages of them. This is rape.” Another girl doubted the innocence of such girls: “If you are young and you are a virgin and you don’t know about ‘men business’, then it is rape. But many girls who are young are not innocent anymore and know what they have to do for material things. So if they get the shoes, they know what the men want so this is not rape.” However, another participant pointed out that the girls may not yet be mature enough to realize the implications of their decision: “Girls are really after material things so they will agree in making love. But then still they are too young to really decide if they want to make love for it in return.”

3.4. Perpetrators of gender-based violence

In Liberia harassment and rape of women had never been socially accepted and did mostly not take place in the family sphere. Rapes took place mainly in combat situations, largely committed by male combatants. Senior male commanders in particular could rape anybody, as could lower-ranked men with “permission” of the commander (often doing so in groups). Girls and women interviewed gave several reasons why men became perpetrators of gender-based violence: loss of inhibitions due to drug abuse, the urge to display power and control, or as a war strategy (i.e. to terrorize a particular target population). The most common explanation offered by the girls was, however, that gun ownership gave them the power to do whatever they chose. The links between possession of guns and gender-based violence are obvious, as this civilian girl argued:

We the women are suffering the most during war. We are completely powerless. We are powerless because the men have weapons. It’s only due to their possession of weapons and not because they are men. The weapons give them power. This is the reason why they can rape and harass the women.

Although men were clearly the main perpetrators, there is some indication that a small number of girls and women also committed acts of gender-based violence. As some girls joined in order to inflict revenge, some of them may have committed gender-based violence against men. Indeed there are unconfirmed stories that female commanders cut off men’s genitals to avenge rape. In one case, a girl joined fighting forces in order to take revenge after having been raped in front of her whole family and her husband. Paradoxically, she joined the same fighting force to which the boys who had raped her belonged. Apparently she wanted to feel a sense of empowerment by taking up arms. Within the unit, she raped another

girl. It appears however that female commanders generally adhered to the rules and regulations, and would avenge rape in their group by punishing the perpetrator with the death sentence.

3.5. Victims of gender-based violence

Some boys also became victims of gender-based violence. Amongst the women, who were the main victims, it is possible to differentiate between rape within armed groups, the rape of girls from the enemy and the rape of civilians. Women civilians in particular were targeted in the widespread violence, as they had no means to defend themselves against the male combatants with guns.

In some cases girls were captured by fighting men to become their wives. Likewise those girls who were forcefully recruited were often then married to one of the combatants or the commander. Typically, civilian and non-fighting girls were the ones forced into such marriages.

When I used to come and go to Monrovia, one time I decided to pass through Lofa to go in Guinea. And then Charles Taylor rebels there; they arrested me there again. They raped me again! They forced me to go with them. Cooking for them, shooting for them. They forced me to fight with them. They gave me a gun. I was entitled to an AK47. They gave me an arm to fire. They forced me. I was with them. They use to maltreat me. And the worst thing was they forced me to marry! [...] I was forcibly married to one man.

In these cases, they had no choice if they wanted to survive. As stated above, women from the opposing side who were captured were also likely to be retained within the unit and repeatedly raped, but not killed. If she was captured by a female commander, her chances were slightly better.

Rape within a fighting force

Girl combatants were also sometimes victims of rape by members of their own fighting force. Most girls said that such cases were possible and even common, but generally have not personally been a victim.

It is not possible to prevent yourself from rape when you are among the men [in the fighting force]. When they all jump on you, you can't [...] but it didn't happen to me.

Although rape occurred within all factions, all had strict rules and regulation. LURD's rules and regulations stated: no rape, no looting and no harassing of civilians. One girl commander pointed out how LURD in particular stressed the importance of adhering to these rules:

Like in my organisation LURD. Like they have certain rules and regulations that you have to go by. Like they tell you, you should not rape, you should not loot anybody property, don't take someone's money that don't belong to you. If you are caught you going to be this or going to be that. So they can tell you before time. Like in my organisation you can't rape, if you rape you going to get killed.

Most girls stated that the rules and regulations protected them from being raped. But it is less clear whether the rules did anything to protect civilians.

Within my unit the boys could not rape a girl from the same unit or other GOL because of the rules and regulations they had. The boys only raped the women they captured and the civilians. The commander could do what he wanted but for the rest of the men there were rules and regulations. They could not beat and rape the women in their unit otherwise they would go to jail.

Thus civilian girls and girls of the opposing side were very frequently raped. There is also disagreement among the girls interviewed as to whether LURD truly adhered to its rules in relation to its own female members, with some girl combatants also stating that rapes occurred within LURD. Some girls and social workers suggest this may have occurred because the distinction between civilians, enemies and fellow fighters was hard to maintain in the chaos of combat situations. Others said that the rules and regulations were not enforced, and that they had “never heard about the rules and regulations” and concluded that they were “not working”. Some girls stated that being part of a military group could also expose a girl to gender-based violence as she would risk punishment if she refused to obey a demand for sex from a superior.

Girls themselves had little direct influence over whether the rules were enforced, so that the attitude of the commander to the rules was key in determining how rigorously they were applied. In contrast to civilians or female non-fighting CAFF, girl fighters usually had a higher degree of freedom to choose (or reject) a partner, depending on their rank and the rank of the male. A female commander said:

He was just fighting. He was impressed by me being a commander [laughs]. He was interested in me. So that's how he became my boyfriend.

Despite being able to reject a partner, most girls, with only a few exceptions, did have a boyfriend or husband in the same faction. One girl explained how her past experiences prevented her from having such a relationship:

After all the rapes I was gone through I had no appetite for men. So I didn't was in a relationship.

Only higher-ranked girl combatants could choose to stay single and protect themselves from gender-based violence without assistance. Even higher-ranking men would not dare to harass or rape female commanders:

I don't fear. I'm smart and I know how to handle. People respected me. They cannot harm me because they fear.

In some units, where the commander lived up to the rules and regulations out of discipline or respect for women, girls and women could be relatively safe. Rape within the fighting force mainly occurred in male units, and non-fighting girls in male units were in greater danger of being raped than members of the WAC. Higher-ranked girls tended to emphasize that rape hardly ever happened in their unit, with some female commanders very active in enforcing the rules.

I never experienced rape. My commander who is a woman herself didn't allow this. So it never happened to us. For other girls I know it was different.

I prevented my girls, and girls could come to me for protection. There are rules and regulation within LURD and if you report it to me I will deal with it and the boy gets killed.

In exceptional cases it was possible that WAC girls were raped. This was for example possible in the absence of a female commander. The commander still had the power to punish the offenders if she was informed afterwards. This emphasizes the power of the female commanders.

My friend was raped. This was possible because our woman commander she was not there in person. When she came they told her and the boy who did the act, they burst his foot because the man who goes on the line can't rape no girl. The commander gets to know about it and she reported to the big man and he give order for then to fire the boy's foot.

However, “even a female commander has to obey”, and thus if a superior requested a female commander to release captured girls to him, she had to give in to this request. Thus the commander's power and influence determined her ability to enforce the rules and protect her girls and other women from gender-based violence. The WAC was less prominent in GOL forces than in LURD, and many girls in GOL were also fighting within men's units. The female military structure was thus less visible and powerful, and female commanders were less able to insist on the rules if, for example, a higher-ranked men decided to rape one of her girls. As one girl stated:

You cannot protect yourself from being raped. Only by the grace of God I was never raped. The commander can always send for you. Even a female commander cannot protect you - there are always higher commanders who she has to obey to and want to have one of her girls.

The high ranking male commanders in particular could rape anybody within the same fighting force, although again it is unclear whether girls in such situations would classify this as rape. Many girl combatants consented to sex with higher-ranking men either because they felt honoured or impressed by the man, or felt they were under pressure and obligation to do so.

Table 2: Criteria that determined susceptibility to gender-based violence

Civilian/enemy/ associated with armed group		Civilian girls and girls captured by the enemy were not protected by the (informal) rules and regulations of the unit and were frequently subjected to sexual attack.
Protection by armed group's internal rules	Success as a fighter/rank	The military structure did not interfere with the violent or sexual abuse of lower-ranked (usually younger) girl combatants by their superiors, while higher-ranked (usually older) female combatants tended not to suffer sexual violence.
	Character of the commander/ discipline in the unit	If the commander adhered to the rules and regulations in the unit prohibiting gender-based violence, incidences were rarer and were punished.
	Gender of the commander	Female commanders tended to protect girls and punish perpetrators where their power enabled them to.
	Gender of the unit	Girls in all-female units were less exposed to gender-based violence
	Relationship to the commander	Relatives and close friends of the commander were usually under his/her direct protection.
	Presence of the commander	In the absence of the commander rules were more likely to be violated.
	Confusion over civilian/military status	Girl combatants might be raped by their comrades if mistaken for civilians, for example during the chaos of battle.
	Ability to defend oneself	Girls who could defend themselves were less likely to be attacked.

3.6. “Protection” strategies of girls

During the war girls were constantly at risk of rape, and could expect little outside intervention to prevent it as all factions were involved in committing rape. Girls frequently described being forced to have sex with combatants at gunpoint.

I run away with my little sister from GOL fighters into the swamp. Here they could not find us. If you stay in the house and lock the door, they know that someone is in the house and they will force the door to rape you.

The protection strategies many girls developed were often “lesser evils” with their own troubling implications in terms of human rights, peace building and the girls’ overall well being. They included forced and nominally voluntary marriages, “soft” prostitution, becoming combatants or fleeing from their homes.

In 2000 things changed. GOL captured my hometown I was living. A group a GOL boys raped my girlfriends. Myself was not raped. But I was worried for the future, they could come back to rape me. So I decided to join GOL myself. I offered myself to be the girlfriend of one of the boys that raped my friends. He accepted. So from now on I was part of the group and as the wife of a fighting man I was ensured that the other men of this group did not rape me anymore. It was common in this group of about 10 men often raped girls. Now

they could not rape me anymore. But instead I had to do only sexual favours to my boyfriend. I never liked my boyfriend but everything was better than to live every day in fear to be raped by this group. Because my boyfriend was a good friend of the commander, the other boys could not harass me or rape me and also the commander will never send for me. The commander can always send for any girl, what also happened but not to me because my boyfriend was the commander's good friend. My boyfriend probably was still raping other girls with his friends during the time we were together, but at least I was spared.

When I was fighting on the front line, they did not rape me anymore because this was not possible - by then I was fighting.

Because all the things they did to us women, we went to Guinea to live there in a refugee camp.

Those who did flee were often equally or more vulnerable in their new location. In the case of those who became fighters, one of the preconditions for accessing weapons was often to offer one's sexual services to members of the fighting forces.

Even picking up a gun was no means to defend yourself. Because to get access to a gun you will have to do the fighters sexual favours to obtain a gun. You get a gun through sex.

When hearing about an imminent attack, some girls would run off to join the fighting forces preventively. In many cases, they were raped first or given to a man – some to the commander as part of their initiation into the force. “After this initial rape”, according to WACDO, “the chances of being raped by your own faction diminish. As now you are part of the organisation, you know of armed business - you know how to use a gun and men will be afraid of that, or you are married to a commander.” There is, however, a difference between those “married” to commanders and those “married” to regular combatants. If girls are married to lower-ranked soldiers, the girl can still be ordered to the commander to be used for sexual services. A non-married girl may also be ordered to marry him or have sex with him.

CCF outlined the case of a girl who was orphaned aged 7 or 8. She was then taken under the foster-care of a commander, who treated her as his daughter. When she began to develop breasts with the onset of puberty the commander noticed this, and then forced her to have sex with him.

In contrast, girls in most units were not forced to marry regular combatants, although girls might “choose” to do so to reduce the chances of being raped by others, and join the fighting force for this purpose. Such girls were protected by informal rules that allow only one fighter to be married to a woman.

Having a boyfriend in the fighting force is a reason for not being harassed by other fighters.

I was married to one of the boys. If you are part of them they cannot bother you anymore. It's against their military law. It is not permitted that more than one fighter is involved with one woman. Two fighters cannot be married to one woman. If you get involved with a woman who is already taken then you are disgraced.

I was cooking for them and cleaning. They were beating me all the time. Then I started carrying the ammunition for this boy. I liked him he was a high officer. We were starting to love each other. After that life became easier.

Such strategic marriages would protect the girl from gender-based violence within the group, so long as no higher-ranked person sent for her. As CCF points out:

Also marrying one fighter out of free will, so many others can not take and rape you anymore, is no prevention from doing sexual favours for another man, as there is always somebody higher in the military structure who can still take you. Its all about position and power! Only women who are related or the wives of commanders are safe from being the targets of sexual violence.

Some girls went directly to the commander to become his wife. At least, they would then “only” have to have sex with one man.

Parents were equally powerless in saving their children from abuse as they themselves were in serious danger of being killed and raped. In this situation some parents exchanged the sexual services of their daughter for protection and food, and to save their other children (in particular to protect other daughters from rape).⁶¹

If a family managed to marry their daughter to a commander, the girl’s entire family became his relatives and stood under his protection and care. Even if the commander then had to leave to fight, for example at the frontline, one of his bodyguards could remain to protect the family. It was thus not unusual for parents to offer their daughter to a commander in marriage, or for commanders to send bodyguards to search for girls for him in villages.

Remaining civilian exposed girls to the highest degree of vulnerability to sexual violence. Coming under the protection of a particular combatant or group meant a very high degree of dependency for many girls. Some girls also joined in groups. According to Children Assistance Programme (CAP), this made them consider themselves, “stronger so they could defend themselves from men”. However, a social worker from THINK criticised this notion:

To be in a girl group can also not protect you from being raped. It's even so that a group of girls stimulate more GBV: access to one girl who is in a group is access to all the girls in that group. If girls sit together and one of them has sex-- with her husband or another one - then most probably he will also take other girls in that group.

Nevertheless, some girls interviewed insisted that joining a military group protected them from rape.

3.7. Gender-based violence, revenge and "feminism"⁶²

It seems hard to understand why some girls joined a fighting force immediately after its members had raped them. Social workers working with girl combatants in Liberia explain

⁶¹ According to WACDO.

⁶² The term feminism refers to "the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of equality of the sexes".

this as a reaction to the feeling of powerlessness – they want to take charge of their lives again. CCF comments:

These girls say that they joined them out of revenge. According to us, it is strange that the girl joins the same group she wants to take revenge against. We think that it's a kind of revenge against the world. At the time she joins she is bitter and wants to take revenge, she wants to take action. Often the only available group to join is the same faction that is around. It is a kind of revenge against what has been done to her, a revenge against the world: feeling strong with a weapon.

Unsurprisingly, all the girls who stated that revenge was their motive for joining armed forces had occupied fighting roles.

So I explained to LURD what happened [that she had been raped]. While I explained to them what happened they understood what was going on, because they already knew Taylor people. So I was encouraged. [...] Because I wanted to take revenge now.

And before that I saw many girls with LURD boys who were just like me raped.... I met girls in LURD who had training and learned how to fight. I asked: "why you people are fighting?" They say they were raped by Taylor boys. And the same happened to me. So I joined.

Although any woman could enter WAC, it mainly targeted (and attracted) those who had been raped or had suffered as a result of the war. After having lost their families or having been separated from them, for many girls the military unit became a family and the headquarters a home. In the following statement, one commander gives an example of the discovery of the common experience of gender-based violence attracting new recruits in this way.

Like most of the girls sometimes they used to ask me questions: why are you wearing military uniform, or why do you like to go and live with the military people. Sometimes I go through my story and explain to them and then some say the same things happened to me. And I don't have nowhere to stay. Do you think if we talk to your father [Chairman of LURD] he will help us? Sometimes I asked them the question: to help you in which way? They say because they have no option, they don't have nowhere to stay. If they can come and be to his place to where I was living there. So I used to take them home. I say: no problem you can come.

The experiences the girls had in common offered some comfort and created a sense of solidarity within the unit. Some female commanders used this to mobilize them for war, as in the following example, where the recounting of stories of rape helped to rally the girls around the faction's cause.

When I start fighting I met other girls who were raped. We shared our stories and it appeared we had all gone through the same. So I shouted we will fight Taylor and then all the other girls put their gun in the air and repeated we will fight Taylor. So we encouraged each other.

The WAC's self-image was of a unit fighting for all women who needed protection or who could not avenge themselves. As cited above, one commander who was herself raped as a girl described the WAC as "a unit for all".

Because like the rape that was going on, like some of the things they used to do to some of the women, different, different women. Like they are not all able to revenge.(...) But something is heartening from their heart.(...) You are not able to do anything. But people may be there who will do something that will satisfy you. So we call the unit Mother Unit. Everybody cannot fight.

Some described how drawing on their common history of rape made them more courageous and they gained their reputation as fierce fighters by drawing on their pain.

Like most of the men, they used to be afraid of fights. Like when they see a girl ...because most of the girls are getting brave. Especially since the majority of them was raped. Was in a rape case like me. So they were fighting with their heart.

The struggle against rape was more important for some girls than political affiliation and on occasion united girls from opposing factions. One commander commented:

I will never kill a female combatant of the enemy when we capture them. Even if they would order me to do so. I would rather die myself. As they are women I could never harm them. If we took women from the other fraction I talked with them and often they had the same story as me. They were also raped or others were forcefully captured to fight. Together then we went fighting.

The shared objective, distinct from that of LURD and other factions, was achieving a level of equality that would ultimately render them less vulnerable to gender-based violence and discrimination, and this raised the unit's morale.

The clearer sense of purpose may also account for the tendency among female units of less substance abuse than in the male units. Some Liberians also describe the female combatants as more vengeful than their male colleagues as a result of their personal hardship.

Further research could help to clarify how widely the WAC's objective of reaching equality with men through the possession of guns was shared among its members, and to what extent this wartime "feminism" remains alive after the war.

4. Gender roles and relations

This chapter examines how gender roles in Liberia changed during and after the recent conflict. It does not cover the broader historical context of gender relations in Liberia, which would be a vital element of a fuller analysis of the subject.

Girls and women take active part in contemporary conflicts. Preconceived notions of women as peaceable, passive, and domestically oriented tend to influence assistance and support given to women and men in conflict contexts. Girl fighters are not accounted for by such preconceptions, and as result often receive less attention in reconstruction processes than non-fighting or civilian women.⁶³ As part of changes in societal including gender relations which conflict tends to bring about, some women in armed forces experience more gender equality. However, they tend to do so by “masculinising” themselves rather than “feminising” men,⁶⁴ experiencing the same dangers and living conditions as men, and sharing the same objectives and enemies. As already noted, this equality status was less attainable for girls in lower ranks and in support roles.

It is certain whether pre-conflict gender roles will be re-embraced in the post-conflict period, or how women ex-combatants will adjust to the roles afforded to them in post-war society. In many cases, “conflict itself also accentuates resourcefulness in adoption of coping and survival strategies with progressive and empowering gender role changes”.⁶⁵ For example, during the war in the 1990s, women were, in some regions, less in danger than men when travelling and able to pass roadblocks more easily. In such cases, men stayed home looking after children, while women took responsibility for trading over longer distances.

In many post-conflict situations, opportunities to support gender equality have not been seized. Instead the traditional gender stereotypes and division of labour have been reintroduced, and even reinforced by DDR programmes. In post-conflict reconstruction assistance, it is crucial to be sensitive to the evolution of gender roles and relations before, during, and after conflict, and to seize the opportunity to assist women in attaining roles they choose for themselves which realise fully the positive contribution they can make to post-conflict society.

4.1. Pre-war gender roles and relations

In most interior parts of the country, where many GAFF came from, men were typically head of household, making the major decisions and earning money. Women, on the other hand, ran the household, cared for the children and worked in local markets. Although women were relatively independent, the girls interviewed for this study perceived that women’s status was lower than that of men and there was no complete equality before the war:

For married people the husband is always the head. You don’t have equal rights.

⁶³ Farr 2002, Heyzer 2002.

⁶⁴ Barth, E. F. 2002. op. cit.

⁶⁵ Data-Bah, E. 2003. “Women and other Gender concerns in Post-conflict Reconstruction and Job Promotion Efforts”. In: *Jobs after war. A critical challenge in the peace and reconstruction puzzle*, ed. by Eugenia Date-Bah. (InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction). Geneva: ILO, p. 111.

As already noted, the very fact that this generation of girls notice and criticize their inequality, is itself evidence of a degree of independence and strength. Some girls report that they had the same opportunities as their brothers.

When our parents had money during the time the schools were not closed yet, we were sent to school. My two brothers as well as my sister and me. When the war started there was not enough money anymore and the schools closed. From then me and my sister and brothers, we all had to help to make farm.

Although girls often had the same opportunities as boys in their family, there was an important difference. For some girls in the interior, marriages were arranged in which the consent of girls was not required:

You know those days [1990] they had the primitive marriage; they use to force people to marriage. If you don't want to marry the person, at that time, they force you to marry. And I was reaching 14 years. I was forced!

Such relationships are somewhat similar to the “bush-marriages” of GAFF with male combatants during the war, although there are important differences. Parents tended not to have a role in arranged bush marriages, which girls often entered to seek protection from, and sometimes under coercion of, gender-based violence, out of desire for material possessions or drugs, or under the influence of peers (see the discussion in Chapter 3).

4.2. Roles and relations with men during conflict

Gender roles and relations changed in Liberia as a result of the war. Girls tended to “grow up” earlier. Many were separated from their parents at a young age, and recruitment ages declined. According to social workers, the age of girls having their first sexual experience dropped significantly, while teenage pregnancies increased.⁶⁶ One reason for this early sexual activity was that, as discussed above, many girls became dependent on male fighters and commanders at a young age, while others were simply forced to have sex.

The prevalence of gun possession amongst males also increased the inequality between men and women. Therefore, girls sought protection by getting involved with a male combatant. Others took up a gun to be able to protect themselves, or sought revenge. Some could not accept the increased inequality and took up arms with feminist motives.

As stated above, increased equality and status was only attained by higher-ranking fighting girls. The large majority of GAFF during their association with fighting forces experienced less gender equality than before the conflict. There was an informal hierarchy between non-fighting and fighting girls, described here by a social worker from CCF:

If you are equal as a girl to a boy depends on where you find yourself. If you are a fighter, you can be equal. If you are non-fighter, you can never be equal. These girls are always less.

The status and rank of the husband and the wife had a direct effect on the nature of their relationship. The higher the girl was in the military structure, the more likely she was to have

⁶⁶ According to CAP and CCF.

an equal relationship with her husband. Non-fighting girls would thus generally be in an inferior position.

Non-fighting girls

The majority of the girls were associated with the fighting forces but not involved in actual fighting. They are primarily the wives of combatants with some supporting roles such as carrying water or ammunition, cooking, spying, etc. The traditional division of labour between husband and wife was largely upheld. The girls were expected to be faithful and take care of their man by cooking, cleaning, raising the children, doing him sexual favours, etc. If the woman did not fulfil these functions to her husband's satisfaction, he would punish her, which often entailed violence; this was also the military way of dealing with disobedience. He could also separate from her or give her to somebody else. Men usually chose their wives. In turn, male combatants would endow their wives with a degree of protection from sexual harassment and take care of their basic financial and material needs. Within the relationship most women had no decision-making power. In contrast to their wives, husbands could have other relationships and sexual contacts.

As a result of their non-fighting role and their young age, the majority of girls were considered inferior to all the others in the army. Those "forced" into marriages with male combatants, experienced decreased self-esteem. Together with civilian women, the non-fighting young CAFF ranked at the bottom of society during wartime, and could be (sexually) exploited, as they were unarmed. Therefore, these girls lost their relatively independent status, which they had in pre-war Liberian society, rendering them more inferior to men than before the conflict. The widespread distribution of guns, mainly in the hands of men, contributed to this gender-related power asymmetry. According to WACDO, guns translated into power and women's traditional roles prevented most of them from taking up arms. As a result of the conflict, most non-fighting CAFF as well as civilian girls became even less equal than before. Especially non-fighting girls in men's units were prey to the worst types of abuses.

Fighting girls

There is some debate as to whether girls who asserted their equality by taking up arms were considered to be equal or inferior to male combatants during active combat. According to THINK, there was no true gender equality for girl fighters: "There was always a higher male in their military structure who could force you to marry or demand sexual favours." In the view of men, the girls were also weak in that pregnancy could keep them from fighting. Furthermore, as WACDO points out, girl combatants were always a minority among combatants and thus were taken less seriously.

However, some men also testified to their respect for the WAC's fighting capacity:

When I was fighting also some women were fighting, but most women stayed behind to cook and prepare ammunition. Some of the girls had reasons to fight and they went with us to the frontline. The men have respect for these women, especially when the girl is a good fighter.

Some boys are laughing in the beginning when women want to join, but if the girl proves herself, the men will look up to her. The men can as much obey a male general as a woman general. Men have respect for good generals and they are also afraid of them so they will obey.

All women who were fighting were equal to the men with the same rank. The only problem is that more men have higher ranks than women. But there are also more men fighting. But the men respect the women; women are good fighters, even better. Like Cita, she didn't have a rank but she was a well-respected girl.

Further, in contrast to non-fighting female CAFF, girl fighters had the primary function of fighting and performing military duties, not acting as wives. This also altered their relationships with their husbands. For example, a girl combatant might have to separate from her husband to go to the frontline:

Mostly everybody was fighting, but he and myself were not on the same frontline. We used to meet, because we were in different, different units. So we were not fighting together.

These girl combatants acquired a higher degree of independence from men than they had before the war. They also broke with the traditional division of labour that defined fighting and possession of guns as a male domain. This gave them power and respect, especially in higher ranks, and a female commander would never have to be afraid of being forced to do something.

Wartime feminism

Female commanders wanted to prove that women were as strong as men, and defy common notions of femininity in Liberia that described women as peaceful, obedient, fearful and weak people.

Many of them derived a certain pride from being part of an activity that was typically preserved for men, and felt driven to prove their equality with men. Several of them encountered scepticism from male comrades:

You know, sometimes the remarks they used to make were that men are more brave than women. And men can even do better than women. So the answer I used to give them, "what men can do, women can do. In fact, women can even do better than men". And most of the time when I used to go with my girls, we used to prove to them that we could even do more than men.

The phrase "women can even do better than men" became one of the slogans of the WAC. Within LURD, WAC members enjoyed some visible successes in their struggle to demonstrate gender equality. While girls had initially been instructed to stay behind their male comrades when heavy fighting occurred, some girls simply broke these rules, earning the respect of their male comrades. Proving women's toughness was one of the recurrent themes in interviews with girl combatants, motivating them to take considerable risks:

Sometimes we, the girls, will volunteer. We say yes we want to go. Sometimes we forced it, we said we have to go and then we went and then we slept in the bush. Sometimes we went a whole week in the ambush with them. Rain beating us. We were there with them. So they began to know that yes the women were more than men.

This account demonstrates the feminist logic which led women to battle, conveying women's awareness of their relative equality to men and the wish to prove their equality in traditionally male domains. It becomes more comprehensible in the context of a society in which violence-related domains dominated by men had become more important over the course of a long conflict at the expense of other spheres of influence and status, where

women used to have a prominent social role (such as education, community forums and Sande-societies). Engaging in violence was the only sphere left to women in which they could assert their equal value to men.

The discipline demanded by commanders, the wish for equality and impulse to avenge gender-based violence raised the effectiveness of the girl fighters in combat. The WAC was respected for fighting more fiercely than male units, which was one of the reasons why male and female units went on joint assignments. The Chairman of LURD Sekou Conneh and the WAC director emphasized that even if WAC fighters were only a small proportion of the troops on an assignment, their role in encouraging the male combatants was crucial. As one WAC commander explained:

Girls can encourage the boys on the frontline. Like when the men are tired, they don't want to fight, they are scared. You add a woman, the men see they are fighting on the front line. You get encouraged to join me and to fight.

The commander highlighted that “The girls were very, very strong”. For the boys, traditionally supposed to be the stronger sex, the sight of women fighting challenged them to display their courage. Another WAC fighter described an instance of this:

When we were attacking Taylor boys, sometimes the LURD boys were afraid and slowly crawled backwards. Then I came from the back and kicked them under their ass. [She shows] And then I went in front of them, facing the enemy.

With fighting considered primarily as a male responsibility, some men rejected the very notion of having girls as combatants in armed forces. Even where girls reached the frontlines, they would usually fight behind their male comrades. Some girl combatants were ridiculed by males when they began fighting, and had to earn respect by proving their skills in combat:

When men, saw women for the first time at the frontline, there was laughing really. When they first saw us they didn't know that we were strong. So they were laughing at us. Only when we proved we could fight really, they never used to do things like that because we proved we were more than men.

Despite their supposed empowerment in combat, girl combatants remained vulnerable to gender-based violence, even within the WAC if the commander was absent (see the discussion in Chapter 3).

4.3. "Bush marriages" in fighting forces

Marriages in the armed forces differ from regular marriages as they did not involve an official state ceremony. Instead, couples simply stayed together. Such relationships, however, were generally referred to as “bush marriages”, which gave them a sense of legality and respectability. It requires further research to examine whether these “marriages” are considered binding in terms of traditional rights and duties, for example in terms of children or inheritance of land/property. It would also be interesting to know whether bride prices were paid to the families and whether any traditional ceremony took place.

The marriages entailed commitments on both sides, but whether the relationship was equal depended again on the rank and status of the partners and on their personalities.

Getting a husband

The entry into relationships with fighters is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Many girls got married to combatants in dire need of protection for themselves or their family, or for material goods. Some girls stated that they did not know that the combatant would expect sexual favours in exchange for gifts or protection because they were still young and sexually inexperienced. If the girl did not know or was unwilling, she might still be forced or pressured to have sex, with little means of resisting an armed military male. Other girls were simply captured and forced to marry and serve their captors. Once a girl became sexually involved with a male combatant she usually stayed with him and was “married” to the man, whether or not she was initially raped.

Voluntary or forced

The implication of the extreme difficulty to distinguish between a forced and a voluntary sexual relationship (see Chapter 3), is that many girls and their communities may not believe that these marriages or sexual relations were forced and that the girls or women are not to be blamed for them. Many girls (and their families) try to hide their past when returning home or settling in new communities.

4.4. Solidarity/Relations between women

The relations between girls a female unit were, of course, very different from the relations between males and females in mixed or male units. Female units were characterised by strong and unconditional bonds between women, despite the fact that they were thrown generally together from different origins and surrounded from the outset with great hardships. Shared traumatic experience, particularly as victims of gender-based violence, helped them understand and identify with one another (and sometimes resulted in shows of solidarity with girls in other fighting forces as well). The wish to protect themselves from such trauma united them. Many girls called their unit their family because of the unconditional love and support.

Female commanders encouraged this sense of solidarity, and sometimes redoubled their emphasis of the crimes of men to strengthen the fighting spirit and to attract recruits. They were also committed to protecting their girls, while girls in turn became strongly dependent on their female commanders. It is unclear how these relationships will be affected by the end of the conflict, and whether WAC girls and commanders will continue to claim equal roles in civilian life. The sustainability of “bush marriages” and their legal status will also be an important determinant for the position in girl ex-combatants in post-war Liberian society.

The next chapter describes how the first steps towards civilian life are made.

5. Becoming civilians

The previous chapters describe the experiences and reasons for girl to become combatants in Liberia. This chapter discusses the consequences of these experiences, roles and relationships for post-conflict adaptation to civilian life. The main challenges faced by girls in the immediate aftermath of war are:

- Finding income for themselves and their dependants;
- Gaining access to and supporting themselves during education;
- Feeling dependent /loyal to former units/commanders;
- Relating to their war-time partner (“bush marriages”);
- Adjusting to a new social status;
- Returning to dependence on male providers;
- The negative perception of the receiving community; and
- The negative perception of employers.

For the majority of girls who actively participated in the conflict, very little remains from their former life. Often, their parents are dead, houses destroyed, and the local economy and support structures shattered. Some girls are stigmatised by their communities for their involvement, and this may lead to their exclusion from traditional community-based social-support mechanisms. Many girls lack financial means to sustain themselves and their dependents. A labour market devastated by war has minimal capacity to absorb them, while ex-combatants are already generally not welcomed by employers because they are perceived to cause social disruption and have problems with substance abuse. The need for immediate income also them from increasing the employability through training and education.

The financial imperative to support themselves and their dependants forces many to stay with their commanders or "bush husbands", or to look for new boyfriends as providers. This dependence negates the feminist ideas and self-esteem they may have developed as girl-combatants.

Girl fighters and commanders are particularly affected by loss of respect and status. It is often the case in DDR processes that female commanders who have occupied leadership roles in military structures are neither included in peace negotiations nor offered important positions in post-conflict society. While political positions are bestowed on their male colleagues, female military leaders are generally neglected, while responsibility for security-related matters such as DDR is left to men.⁶⁷ In Liberia, some girl combatants who attained equal status to males in armed groups now find that access to many professions is denied to them as girl civilians, and that they are being driven into poorly paid, less skilled occupations. In such cases, an opportunity is being missed to build on the positive shifts in gender relations which may have occurred within fighting forces, and use them to contribute to a more just and peaceful society.

⁶⁷ Farr, V. 2003. “The importance of a gender perspective to successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes.” *Disarmament Forum* 4.

5.1. “Bush marriages” after war

Most girl combatants were sexually involved with a male fighter during the war. Both non-fighting girls and higher- and lower-ranked fighting girls have had difficulties in their relationships with “bush husbands” after war. The following boxes contain accounts of the relationship difficulties of three girl ex-combatants after the war.

I was just fighting with them, and then I saw my old friend. We went to school together. He was older than me. So we were fighting together and then we fell in love with each other. It was not that serious in the beginning because at that time I never had time for men business that much because I was fighting. And also because I knew what happened with me before. Because I was raped before and because of their behaviour you cannot love them. But you know not all men are the same. In the beginning I never knew, so I just felt that all men were just the same. But later on he became my boyfriend. But because we were both fighting I saw him twice a month at the headquarters. We were both commanders. I became pregnant. I never knew that I was pregnant only after 8 months. I was very strong. At the time I was pregnant he was not treating me bad. When I delivered also.

Directly after the war I went living with my boyfriend and my daughter and also some younger ones of my girls and some of my other ex-fighters. Then everything changed. During the war I saw him only twice a month and then he was nice to me. After the war everything changed. Although I explained to him that I was raped he didn't consider my feelings that I didn't have “much appetite for love”. So sometimes he also tried to force me, even when I said no. Often it had to do with drugs. Then I just went out of the bedroom and went into another room to sleep and locked the door. Otherwise I may have killed my boyfriend, what I didn't want. And then I would be the one to blame as we were already together. Nobody would understand and even yourself you didn't want to kill him. Sometimes I also slept on the ground next to the bed, just to avoid lying next to him so this could bring him to ideas.

But he told all his friends that I didn't want to make love to him, so they accused me of having another boyfriend. This was really awkward and hurting me because I didn't have anybody else, but it was just because of what happened to me. And because my ex accused me of having another boyfriend because I didn't want to make love to him, he kicked me out the house one night at 2 a.m. in the morning. I could not take anything only my daughter.

I met my boyfriend during the war. We both were fighting for GOL. He was a commander and we were both fighting for the same unit. He was ok to me, but not like my first husband. He was also a fighter. We loved each other very much. I have a son from him. But he died at the frontline from a bullet. And then I got involved with my commander.

He provided me with drugs. He gave me marijuana to smoke. He also used cocaine. He always took care of me. After the war things changed. I lived with him, but he had no job. So he could not take care of me anymore. I was the one who did small things, like selling on the market. Always when I earned some money he used it to buy cocaine. He didn't treat me well anymore. Even one day when he didn't have money to buy cocaine he sold all my belongings, even my golden necklace and my clothes. When he is using the stuff he is not good to me. One time he forced me to make love to him. I didn't want to but he forced me. Then I hit him with a stick.

My friends told me to leave him. I did and now I'm living with a friend. But I don't have a job and I quit school in third grade. So what is there to do for me? Now he says he has a new job and that he changed his life. He asked me to go back to him. I don't know what to do because I still love him, but I don't know if he really changed.

When Taylor soldiers came into town we had to flee to Guinea. Because we were Mandingo we were target. Since then we don't know the whereabouts of my father. We were living with our mother and uncles. They had no money to send me to school and then my father doesn't help me to go to school. In the refugee camp I met my husband. He is a Liberian but lived in a refugee camp in Guinea. We married and together we are having a child. But life in the refugee camp was very pitiful. Sometimes when I see the tension cool down I come as a passenger to Monrovia. I went back, I came, I went back, I came. I was in Monrovia trying to look for my father. When I used to come and go, one time I decided to pass through Lofa to go in Guinea. And then Charles Taylor rebels there, they arrested me there again. They raped me again! They forced me to go with them. Cooking for them, fire for them. They forced me to fight with them. They forced me. I was with them. They use to maltreat me. Their treatment from them to me was not so... how do you call it... so I decided to escape. Because my mission was to go to Guinea. But then I came in LURD territory they caught me. I explained my story. To prove the people that what you are explaining, you have to be part. And I also wanted to take revenge now. After I got to LURD I was afraid now to go to Guinea because now I was rebel again.

My husband didn't know what happened to me so he married this other woman. His family made him marry this other woman. After the war we got together again and we went living in Monrovia. Because I married him first, I am his first wife. But he also had this other wife so one week he is with me and one week he is with the other woman. I don't like this at all. I told my husband he has to choose. I'm jealous, but good jealous. Not that I'm suffocate him but I just don't want to share. I gave my husband time to think about it. I don't want him to make a decision that he didn't think through. If he chooses me he must want this with his heart. I don't want anyone who doesn't really love me.

The family of my husband don't like me. They call me "action lady" because they say I always follow the action. I don't like it if they call me like that. They don't like me because they say I'm an ex-rebel. So when they found out that I had been fighting the family pushed him into a second marriage. He even he didn't want this other wife.

These are the testimonies of slightly older girl combatants of higher rank. Despite the greater equality and status they attained they remain beset by relationship problems of one kind or another after the conflict. As might be expected, young non-fighting girls who were "married" with a fighter during the war, experience more serious difficulties in having a respectful relationship now. During the war their relationships were already unequal and this did not change after the war.

During the war he took care of me. He was a fighter; myself I just followed him, carried his ammunition and cooked. He was good to me and for a while I liked him. But since I'm pregnant he beats me. I don't know what to say to him, as I don't want to lose him. He is the only one who takes care of me.

Strong bonds between the girls and their "bush husbands" were created during the war. Young non-fighting girls were particularly dependent on their husbands for protection and money, and continue to be so immediately after the war, both out of habit and as a matter of

survival. Most young girls who stayed with their “bush husbands” stated that they chose to do so, thus following a similar pattern to that established during the war.

I'm living with my aunt now but I still see my boyfriend. Me and him are still together I can still go there because he can give me things my aunt cannot give me.

It appears that in some cases the men also wanted to keep their wives, at least immediately after the cease-fire. In one case shortly after the beginning of the DDR process “husbands” violently entered interim care centres, and claimed back their partners who were under 18 years of age.

For all GAFF, whether non-fighters or higher-ranked girls, their relations with men seem to have a strong influence on their lives after combat. This is especially true for those who are pregnant or have children:

I was living with my commander [female] after the war. Then I got involved with this ex-fighter. I wanted to go to disarm but I became pregnant. I wanted to be with him so I didn't go anymore. Now I'm living with him. I'm not going to school because I'm pregnant.

The fieldwork for this report ended six months after the end of the conflict. It would thus be premature to draw longer-term conclusions about the implications of “bush marriages” for the girls’ future lives. Crucial questions include how durable and viable the relationships will be, how acceptable they will be to Liberian families and communities, how issues of dependants, bride price, land rights and inheritance will be dealt with and whether the marriages will gain formal recognition in the legal system.

5.2. Commander-girl relationships after war

Dependency on commander

During conflict, non-fighting girls typically established a strong dependence on their commanders, often stemming from their need for protection or desire for material goods. For some girls, marriage to their commander made them very dependent, and for those who had children with commanders, separation now seems unthinkable. However, even girls fighting in female units were dependent on their commanders for protection and survival. The young age of many girls when they entered fighting forces also explains their dependence, as in many cases commanders filled the place of absent parents.

The girls’ dependence did not automatically end after the cease-fire. Many girls wanted to stay with their commanders even after the war. CCF’s social workers say that this dependence can be observed with both male and female CAFF, but the bond seems to be even stronger for girls, who are typically determined to stay with their commanders. The close ties between girls and commanders, boyfriends and fellow combatants prevent many girls from adapting smoothly to civilian life.

After the war I went with my commander to her place to live with her. I know my family but I wanted to stay with her because she was treating me nice. So I just decided, just let me be with her. Because I know my parents are not able to take care of me. So I say: just let me go. She could take care of me. I wanted to stay with her forever. But then [long silence] my mum sent for me. I tell my commander my ma sending for me. But I can spend time with her, with my commander. I cannot forget about her, because what she did.

The immediate post-war situation failed in many cases to offer an effective substitute for the income, food and sense of belonging which the fighting unit provided to the girls. During the war the fighting unit provided an identity which could not be easily replaced after the war, and this is also crucial in reinforcing the girls' dependence.

Loyalty from commanders towards their girls / Commanders as providers

As noted above, the bonds developed between girls and commanders during combat were like the bonds between members of a family, especially in female units. *In loco parentis*, female commanders came to act as mothers in that they felt a heavy responsibility to take care of and protect their girls, especially as they tended to have experienced the same suffering and vulnerabilities as their girls. One higher-ranked female commander explained that girls would become loyal to a commander, if she provided them with enough food, clothes and other items.

You have to give them more, to take good care of them, so they do anything for you.

Even after the end of the war, some female commanders still feel that they have to take care of and provide for their girls. An example of the problems this presents is offered by the 22-year-old female General who facilitated the information gathering for this report, whose situation and testimony are recorded in the box below.

Dependency: a commander's perspective

Immediately following the cease-fire the General accommodated forty of "her" girls in her two room apartment in Monrovia, while hundreds more girls previously under her command retained bonds with her but stayed in villages. She later moved to a rented house with four bedrooms which could accommodate more people. The household included girls in the age-range of 11-35, predominantly younger girls, their babies and one elderly woman who had taken care of her baby during the war and a number of other babies left behind in the bush by their mothers during the war.

After a time the General began to struggle with this burden, stating that she wished to go to school, live a normal life and continue to struggle against sexual inequality through peaceful means. Nevertheless, the sense of having to provide for those who had been under her command persisted. Her success as a General had been partly founded on her ability to offer her girls access to resources, but this had been largely achieved by force of arms. Initially she still received bags of rice and money from business people she had protected during the war, but this did not last long. During the peace process, the victorious rebel movement was also inclined to forget about the WAC, and so the female combatants were beginning to feel overlooked.

At the time when the research for this report was being conducted, she faced serious problems: unable to take care of her girls, she was losing contact with many of them (although others continued to visit regularly), but was still willing to share whatever she could with them:

After the cease-fire, all the girls were also in Tubmanburg, and when I came to Monrovia, most of the girls followed me here. Eight girls were living with me, only the younger ones. They were just like 14, 15, 16 or 17. And the rest, some of them stayed in Tubmanburg. We were not fighting anymore so everybody was enjoying their life.

They were having a fine time.

So only the younger ones I was having with me. But they were all still depending on me at that time. I was getting support from the Chairman and from some Lebanese I helped during the war. But this was not enough to support all the girls. I used to encourage them, especially those who have family, to go back to their family. 'If you can, go to school, you should go back to school. If you are learning a trade, you should go back to trade.' So that was the only advice I was having for them. But I was not even having money to give them. To say that the war is over and this is your pay. Because I didn't have money to pay them. So the only thing I could give them was advice.

But most of them refused to go back to the family. They say they want to be with me. And the war is over, I don't have even money to take care of myself. So all the time I used to be talking to them for them to be with their family. Especially for the younger ones. Because the older ones, let me say from 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 because they were more mature than the younger ones, so I was only after for the younger ones. So most of the younger ones were living with me.

Sometimes the family come to me to say, "I want for you to talk to my daughter. I want her to come home"... you've born your child, you have feelings for her and you want her to be with you. But you're a person living in a different society that the child has never been in before. So someone who has been commander for them got to talk to your child. So most of them used to come to me. So I carried them to their family, they run away from their family and come back to me. I was not their commander anymore, but I still had responsibility. Because I was nice to them and we were used to one another.

At the time we were fighting, they never used to give us money; they never used to supply us with rice. [...] So when the war was over, I could not afford any longer to take care of them. I was desperate sometimes. Some of them used to reason with me, but sometimes some of them never used to reason with me. Some of them used to say that I was commander for them and that the war is over, maybe they give me a special price to give to them. So they were disappointed in me, but it was not like that.

Sometimes, someone in the system gave me money. If I got it, I could not keep them hungry. I always used to share with them. But some of them used to feel that they [external help organizations] gave me money to give to them and that I kept it. But it was not like that! I'm not working, I go to school. Sometimes, I have 5 dollar of my own, I share! [cries]

The lack of money to provide for herself, her baby, her nanny and her girls are a heavy burden on the shoulders of the 22-year-old girl. Likewise, many other commanders could barely sustain themselves and lacked the means to take care of their girls. Most girl ex-combatants, on the other hand, expect their commanders to provide for them, by providing either money or a job. This causes frustration on both sides, with the girls feeling abandoned and lost:

After cease-fire many girls came everyday to my house to ask me for money or a job, some are still doing that. But I cannot sustain all these girls, this is not possible; I cannot provide

for so many fighters. They expect me to pay for them. So now they are angry with me. It's like the day you have nothing to eat. It makes you forget all the days that you have eaten, but now you can only think about your empty stomach. This is the reason I moved into town, I could not take it anymore to have to say no to all these girls. So now that I moved nobody knows where to find me anymore.

In the research for this report only female commanders were consulted, but it is probable that male commanders felt similarly tied to their combatants after war. However, there is some indication that female commanders were more inclined than males to support the socio-economic reintegration of their girls. The female commanders interviewed all stated that they used their significant influence to encourage their girls to enter the DDR process:

I encouraged them to go and disarm because we heard that if they disarm you they would do certain things for you. Like if you are disarmed in a camp, you going to get benefit. Like putting you to school, or giving you something to help yourself, like small money. So I encouraged them to go and disarm. Because at that time I never have money to give to them.

I am an example for many and all girls will do what I'm doing, so I went to deliver my arms.

And the only way I could encourage the other people, the only way to encourage them was to go with them. If I could not go with them they not coming.

However, it should not be claimed that all female commanders always sought to act in the best interests of their girls. Male and female commanders might also encourage dependence because of the money, power and status which came with having followers, and might at some stage seek to exploit or re-recruit the girls.

5.3. Education

Schooling has been severely disrupted in Liberia for the past 14 years. Having in many cases received no schooling, the large majority of the current generation of Liberian girls can hardly read or write. None of the girl combatants interviewed for this research finished their schooling before joining fighting forces. Most girls had to stop their education as a direct or indirect consequence of the war.

I quit school when I was in 9th grade when the war came.

In 6th grade I had to stop school because the school closed.

I run away for the war to Monrovia. Before that I was in 7th grade.

I was living in Monrovia, I went to school whenever my father had money. When my fathers' second wife got pregnant I went with him to Lofa to help out.

In fighting forces there was no opportunity for girl combatants to go to school, and since the war ended the girls have great difficulty enrolling in education again. The return to schooling is not only a human right which is essential for the reintegration of girl ex-combatants, it is also the most commonly cited aspiration of Liberian girl ex-combatants:

I want to go back to school. And then I want to become a secretary.

I want to learn and finish my school. So I can be a nurse.

However, after the war 50% of boys were estimated to be enrolled, compared to just 24% of girls. Of those who are enrolled, only 35% of the boys and 27% of the girls are expected to reach fifth grade.⁶⁸

The biggest obstacle in accessing schooling for many girls was lack of money for school fees and lack of time to attend school given the pressing need to generate an income. Therefore many girls see going to school as a luxury or a symbol of status. One girl said about a fellow girl combatant:

She is doing well now. She must have enough money because she can afford going to school now. She doesn't have to search for money all the time and do small lousy jobs, like myself. I want to school as well and want to be like her, but I don't have the money.

Even when girls could pay their school fees, many were not able to go because of the obligation to look after their own children and/or younger siblings. This research only found one case where a girl combined school with a teen-motherhood, and even she only managed to do so with the help of her mother.

I go to evening school so I can work to earn money during the day. I also have two children. My mum helps me - otherwise it is not possible to take care of them.

The return to school also proves difficult because of the long interruption in the girls' education. They have grown unaccustomed to sitting in a classroom and concentrating, and are much older than their classmates.

I'm 20 years now and I stopped going to school in the third grade. I don't want to go back to school and sit between young children. But I would like to learn how to write and read.

UNICEF is assisting the Ministry of Education to establish catch-up education programmes, described in Chapter 6, but up to the point when the research for this report ended, very few girls were benefiting from that option.

Another problem is that schools have insufficient capacity for large numbers of additional students after the war. Schools are generally overcrowded and have long waiting lists, especially for the grades generally appropriate for girl ex-combatants (grades 7-10). There is a shortage of teachers, and classes of 40-50 children are no exception, which diminishes the quality of education provided.

Some of the girls would rather go to single-sex schools because of their experience of rape, and this limits their options. An additional problem is that girls who went to a Christian school before the war now have to go to Muslim schools because Christian schools are already full. Such girls are then required to pass Arabic, which is usually taught from first grade, to reach the grade above. Many girls are thus precluded from progressing, which creates frustration and increases dropout rates.

⁶⁸ UN: CAP 2004.

A degree in education empowers girl ex-combatants and raises their self-esteem. It also raises their chance to find decent work in the future and building a new civilian identity. The failure to provide girl ex-combatants and other Liberian girls and women with assistance in accessing education, addressing all the above challenges, greatly increases their chances of serious socio-economic marginalisation.

5.4. Lack of income

Apart from receiving education and training, finding a decent job is generally the main objective. Employment helps girls redefine their role in society, increases their self-esteem, occupies their time, secures their income and gives them the potential to become independent of undesirable associates. There are currently few employment opportunities in Liberia. About 80% of Liberia's workforce is estimated to be unemployed. Taking into consideration hidden unemployment or underemployment, the reality may in fact be even worse.⁶⁹

The formal employment sector offers few possibilities in general, and even fewer for ex-combatants who tend to lack education, skills and job experience. Although this report cannot quantify the finding, the girls perceived what is reported in many other contexts: that within the already stigmatised group of ex-combatants, they face further discrimination in seeking work because they are women.

It's especially difficult for us women who fought to find a job. There are many of us that don't have a job now. There is nothing to do for us.

Most girl ex-combatants interviewed are currently unemployed or underemployed. For some girls this led to the dependence on commanders discussed in section 5.2. To many it seems that GAFF were given less attention and assistance after the conflict than male combatants.

For many other girls the lack of employment reinforces the need to depend on male providers:

What I want to become in the future? I want to have a husband. I want to have a family.

I met a boy after ceasefire - he was not a fighter. He kept on coming to my mothers place and brought me presents. One time he came with his parents and my mother agreed in the relationship. I'm going to live with him so he can take care of me because at the moment it is difficult for me to get a job and earn money myself.

This is not only a coping strategy for young non-fighting girl ex-combatants. Some high-ranked girls also turn to men with whom they would not choose to have a relationship if not constrained by the need to support dependants.

Apart from dependence on partners and commanders, lack of employment also forces girls to adopt unacceptable coping strategies such as "soft" prostitution, begging, providing services to drugs dealers etc.

⁶⁹ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

Not having an income makes young people frustrated and is therefore a critical risk factor in terms of both human security and macro-stability in Liberia:

I don't have a job now. And this is the way tensions are created, and we don't want any more tension here. And they're forgetting too, that people who play with arms do a lot of things when they are frustrated. Because if you don't have a job, what do you do? You don't want to become a prostitute, you don't want to become a murderer, and you don't want to become an armed robber. It is very dangerous for the future.

Lack of meaningful occupation and income, and dependency on former commanders, places young people at very real risk of re-recruitment both within and outside Liberia. For example, a March 2005 report by Human Rights Watch detailed the efforts of former Liberian commanders and Ivorian army officers to recruit demobilized Liberian children to fight across the border in Côte d'Ivoire.⁷⁰

The few girl ex-combatants who succeeded in finding jobs had often been helped by former comrades. Commanders in particular try to find jobs for their girls, partly to compensate for their inability to provide for them:

My commander arranged for me a job at the harbour. A former member of LURD is there the boss now. More ex-LURD fighters are working there.

Others remain in the security sector, for example providing close protection:

I work in the security. I have to make sure nothing happen to my boss. He was a high general in LURD.

When analysing how well girl ex-combatants were absorbed in the labour market after the war, it is useful to differentiate once again between higher-ranked girls and lower-ranked or non-fighting girls. Higher-ranked girl ex-combatants appear to be able to find work more easily through their personal connections and the respect they earned, among both men and women. However, the jobs available to them are low paid and carry little status, affecting their sense of equality, and overlooking their capabilities and ambitions:

I was offered a job in the saloon as a hairdresser. I refused. I don't want to work all day in a salon of somebody else to do other people's hair.

5.5. Problems related to status

Many girl ex-combatants struggle with the role ascribed to them by society. As described in Chapter 4, gender relations evolved over the course of the war. Liberian pre-war society was described by the girls as unequal, with dominant positions mostly held by men. During the war, fighting girls and especially higher-ranked girls developed a degree of equality with men.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch. 2005. *Côte d'Ivoire: Ex-Child Soldiers Recruited for War. Hold Ivorian Authorities, Liberian Accomplices Accountable for Recruitment in Liberia*. New York, March 31, 2005. <http://www.humanrightswatch.org/english/docs/2005/03/30/cotedi10404.htm>.

Only the war can show them that you are as strong as men. Because if you don't do you will die he? [laughs] So you have to do everything to protect your life. To do everything to prove that you are strong. That you can be one of the survivors. So this is something positive of the war: a revolution of girls. You become stronger because the strongest will survive. [laughs]

Many of the commanders developed management skills during combat. However, there are no jobs available that build upon these capacities. All fighting girls, especially those of higher rank, face a society that neither recognizes their past achievements nor leaves women space to prove their equality to men. The girls in this research expressed their frustration that Liberian girls are still regarded as inferior to men and stated their perception that Liberian society forces them to adapt to this inferior role, if they do not want to become isolated or subject to ridicule.

During the war I was equal to men. But my present fiancé doesn't want me to be too independent. In Liberia men are still the head. If I want to keep the relationship I should change according to what he wants me to be.

Although the girls feel pressure to conform to social norms, some continue to push for equality:

We first were fighting men with our guns, now we have given up our guns, but we still have to fight men... this time with our pens, that's what I try to tell my girls now...

In contrast to higher-ranked and fighting girls, young non-fighting girls lost social status in relation to men during the conflict. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, widespread male possession of guns, forced marriages, sexual abuse and exploitation, and the inability to attain income, food or safety for themselves and their families, except by becoming dependent on men, all contributed to this gender-related power asymmetry. Following the cease-fire, these girls had very little sense of self-worth or self-esteem, and therefore faced very serious difficulties creating a life for themselves independent from their commanders and the military.

After the war I was living with my commander. Without him I was not able to survive. I never went to school and I don't know where my parents are. So I cleaned his house, did his laundry and got him water. I could not leave his place because who then to take care of me? Now I'm living with my boyfriend who takes care of me.

Thus nearly all girl ex-combatants interviewed, whether they were non-fighting girls or commanders, faced problems in relation to their status in Liberian society after the conflict, for quite distinct reasons. This is likely to have serious consequences for their successful reintegration. Young, non-fighting girls who became more dependent on men need to be encouraged to develop confidence and become independent, if they choose. Meanwhile, higher-ranked girls who became equal to men during the war, but lost status thereafter, need assistance to access respected and prominent positions in civilian society. Their management and leadership capacity is a valuable human resource that could be mobilized to help rebuild the country.

5.6. Political representation/decision-making processes

With their survival and personal safety taking precedence, most girl combatants paid little attention to politics during the war. Many of them now say that they would like to see some women in government to represent their interests and concerns. Higher-ranked girls in particular advocated this:

There should be more like myself in this interim government. More women ex-fighters should have been part of this government. Even the highest post. But we need a helping hand.

However, most girls cannot imagine working for the government themselves in the future. They feel they lack the requisite intelligence or education. Only higher-ranked girls consider becoming politically involved, as was this female commander:

I would like to tell other people about the war and what we are been through. I want to tell them, even the whole world. We the women should tell the world what happened to us and what they did to us. I think that women even should have the highest positions. If they like me I will do it. But first I have to finish school. Now I'm still in ninth grade.

These female/girl commanders have already challenged traditional gender roles in the military. Although many female commanders have proven their leadership qualities, they are not taken as seriously as their male colleagues who held the same rank and were given political appointments in the post conflict context. It appears that none of the higher-ranked female combatants have been offered any key political position.

And you see in any society women are very important. But they are trying to exclude us. The women fighters. They are trying to exclude us. If they exclude us [...] we saw what happened to us, we know. We suppose to talk to the people and they will understand. If they trying to explain the story to me I will know directly, exactly what they mean because I know, and went through it. I know how to advocate for them. But they don't want us to be part of it. That's the problem.

It is desirable girl ex-combatants who previously asserted their equality and challenged traditional gender roles can continue to do so in their new lives, potentially in the field of politics or as government officials. Given the decline of the status and treatment of women in the war it offers an important message to women and men that Liberia elected a female president after the research for this report was completed. Nevertheless, it is disturbing that girl ex-combatants' perceive that women they identify with are neither well represented at all levels of authority nor speaking out.

I can even remember the time I joined... to protect the women because of the rape... not even my own but they did to so many women...but they are no longer here now, now they are happy to be silent... so I got to talk for everybody... we got a lot of people that was raped in the war...

5.7. Drug addiction

Drug addiction is a serious problem among all ex-combatants in Liberia, including the girls. Usually, a girl's would get drugs from a boyfriend or commander. THINK estimates that 90% of the girls were using drugs. The most commonly used drug is marijuana, but some also use harder drugs such as cocaine. Overcoming addiction is a long-term process, and is

very difficult if the girls remain surrounded by peers who continue to take drugs. Depending on the substance, addiction can prevent them from leading a normal life, causing them to become involved in stealing, neglect their families, suffer from mood swings and have problems finding or keeping a job. In these circumstances they have little chance to reintegrate successfully.

Those who succeeded in overcoming addiction pointed out the strength and support this required.

I took drugs, just like anyone else. But only the opium leaves you chew on. After the war I had difficulties to quit. It took me a long time to get rid of it. You need a strong mind. And I was also encouraged to quit by some good friends.

5.8. Trauma

War has left many visible and invisible scars. Having seen their parents and relatives killed and their communities destroyed, and having suffered rape, beating and humiliation, as well as their own role in violence, many girls cannot escape their trauma.

When I came home, the whole night I was dreaming. I was fighting about how the people got killed and about the bullets, so I was dreaming the whole night. And when I woke up I came to myself. I was scared.

In their new civilian live, there is hardly space for dealing with the past. At school, for example, the girl ex-combatants confirmed that they rarely talk about the war. The churches occasionally draw attention to the issue. There is an underlying expectation that ex-combatants must change and adapt; but no sense that society needs to try to understand what they have experienced. Most girls feel that they are basically alone with their experiences, and try to come to terms with their past by meeting their former comrades. They find comfort in sharing their memories of hardship and suffering in the fighting forces, as they did during the war. This maintains strong bonds and interdependence between girl ex-combatants.

A common strategy in reintegration programmes is separate children from commanders as soon as possible, and so, to remove them from the military structure. However, ignoring personal attachments, comfort and support provided by units which many girls value as substitute families can undermine the reintegration process, and increase the hardships the girls face.

5.9. Reconciliation

Reconciliation is defined here as the long-term process of (re)building human relations in an environment characterised by insecurity, mistrust and hatred, so that people can envisage a common future for all people in their country. The girl ex-combatants interviewed generally did not express extreme hatred towards their former enemies, although they said that they had felt such hatred immediately after the war. They affirmed that their hatred was diminishing over time, and in some cases they had even established strong friendships with former members of enemy groups: girls from different fighting forces in particular felt solidarity with each other not only because of their common experience as combatants (especially of gender-based violence) but also because they faced common problems in adapting to and surviving civilian life. For example, after the war the former LURD General

who facilitated the research for this report became best friends with an ex-GOL girl commander:

We are good friends because we understand each other. We both have been raped and we both went fighting because what happened to us. Although things were different in GOL we are both girls so we understand each other.

Likewise there were some cases of fellow feeling between boy and girl ex-combatants:

I don't feel hatred against the Taylor boys I was fighting. We were fighting our own brothers and sisters, now the war is over. You cannot keep on hating them. I have to go on with my life. And otherwise I have to hate everyone here in the street.

Yet although hatred can subside relatively quickly, the underlying tribal division which fuelled much of the violence of recent years persists. Members of the Mandingo tribe continue to be concerned about their status as a minority in society and feel discriminated against, while other tribes also harbour deep resentment toward one another.

Reconciliation processes are needed between ethnic groups, political groups, old and young and men and women. It will be difficult for girls and women who have been raped not only to forgive the men involved but also to feel comfortable and secure in a society where such crimes are not spoken of and remain unpunished. Although some girls made the attempt to avenge their suffering in combat, more needs to be done to acknowledge and deal with the wrongs done to women during the conflict.

Reconciliation within communities

Reconciliation also needs to take place between girls and the receiving communities. The Liberian proverb, "There is no bad bush to throw a child" demonstrates the predominant attitude of communities to children, indicating that there can be no justification for excluding a child, and that society has a non-derogable duty to protect children. Normally, if ex-combatants prove they are no longer going to act like combatants, they are accepted by communities. A finding of this research, confirmed by UNICEF, is that the reaction of communities to young girl ex-combatants has been remarkably positive so far, while older girl ex-combatants have tended to struggle to find a place in society. Almost all social workers who have reunified girls with their communities said that Liberian society was ready to accept these girls and incorporate them into the community without problems. However, there are cases where communities reject girl combatants who are very rebellious or disruptive. This seems to imply that the girls are expected to readapt to pre-war gender roles and relations to be accepted. One social worker stated that in problem cases, former girl combatants tended to act more aggressively than was acceptable for girls, whereas problems with returning boys were more often related to criminality.

The acceptance of former girl combatants in receiving communities depends on:

- Empathy with combatants: Almost every Liberian knows someone in their family or among their acquaintances who was also involved in the course of the long war.
- Sensitisation: Social workers have sensitised communities and parents on their role in reconciliation and tried to convince them that ex-fighters have changed. The community is thus prepared for its role in accepting children but expects the children to be changed.

- Behaviour of ex-combatants: If the girl ex-combatant behaves well, people can more easily overlook their former role in fighting forces.
- Age: Children are easier to forgive. In general younger girls are not seen as a threat, and their suffering is acknowledged. Resentment is predominantly reserved for senior figures who appear to profit from, or retain influence, as a result of their involvement in the conflict. In the perception of many people it is thus easier to reintegrate a girl child.

For girls in the age category 16-24, reconciliation with communities has been a more difficult process than for younger girls. Many of them are unenthusiastic about readapting to rural life and authority and are often seen as troublemakers. They may also struggle with the resentment communities feel towards combatants. This gives rise to feelings of exclusion and binds them more closely to their former comrades and forces. Some receiving communities also reject ex-combatants for acts of violence. One commander explained:

Some of the family they were afraid of their own children. They are thinking that they are rebels. Like they no longer... eh... no longer... they can say that they were not human beings anymore because they have blood on their hands. And so you have to talk to them...

It is also important to consider how sustainable the initial acceptance by communities will be. The DDR programme in the 1990s showed how many child soldiers who were placed back with their families left later on. The lack of financial means to support the girls remains a problem.

A further legacy of the gender-based violence so commonly suffered by girl combatants may be that they find it hard to find a husband. In pre-war Liberian society, men would not marry a girl who had been raped. This is less likely to be the case following the conflict because of the sheer numbers of girls, both civilians and combatants, who were raped. Meanwhile, many girl ex-combatants have stayed in big cities after the cease-fire where they can retain anonymity about their past life. Even though rape may not carry the same stigma as before, many girls experience feelings of shame.

Another important issue is resentment over the targeting of assistance towards ex-combatants. While innocent civilians bore the brunt of unspeakable suffering, ex-combatants now appear to be reaping rewards for their actions, while communities are expected to forgive them. The following statements, gathered from women in an internal displacement camp exemplify the resentment felt by many about the DDR programme:

The people who brought the war are now the ones in high places and enjoying themselves. They forgot about all the people like us who were suffering, raped, beaten, displaced etc. We are the losers from this war and this was already so during the war. All the women are hoping that the war in the future will not continue but if it comes back to us we are going to pick up arms as well because this war showed us that the bad people who were fighting are praised and rewarded. They enjoy themselves now.

The former fighters they received money for their disarmament, ex-boy and -girl fighters can now go to school or do a skill training. The DDRR gives them 30 USD a month. We have children who also want to go back to school, but we don't have the money. So our girls are looking for a boyfriend, who can pay for their school fees, but then they get pregnant and now they cannot go to school anymore because they are pregnant or having a baby. We lost

everything because of this war. Even our own children run away from us because we have nothing to offer them. They will live in the streets.

The same group who distressed us are now benefiting even after the war. We get only 5 USD to resettle. It's nothing it can only pay your way to go. We don't have our houses anymore we have to start all over from 5 USD. Ex-fighters get 30 USD a month.

This kind of animosity towards ex-combatants leads some of them to conceal their identity.

I can show you my ID card that you can see that I did the DD... just a moment... I put it far away in my pocket. I don't want for others in this refugee camp to see it. I don't want them to know that I'm an ex-fighter. People in the camp don't like ex-fighters.

The resentment between civilian and military women persists in spite of the fact that they have faced many same hardships as women in war, and that few of them actually had much control over whether they became IDPs, refugees or WAFF.

The resentment of these women towards the girl ex-combatants may also be linked to notions of femininity that preclude girls from being fighters. The IDP women interviewed thus acknowledged weapons as both a source of power and an effective means of defending oneself, but maintained that they were right not to take up arms themselves and condemned girls who did take up arms.

The women fighters were cruel as well, they could also loot and kill. So they are not seen as heroes. No they are outcast. The girls who are fighting they became wicked. They took drugs and they were under the influence of the men.

6. Girls experiences with the DDR programme

The elements of assistance given to the girls in Liberia's ongoing DDR programme are presented in Annexes 2 and 3.⁷¹ Alongside other efforts to review and evaluate the DDR programme in Liberia,⁷² this chapter examines how the way some girls experienced the way that the DDR programme responded to their needs. It should be kept in mind throughout that this is based on a qualitative inquiry into the perceptions of a small sample of girls. Therefore the analysis, based on in-depth research into the girls' feelings, cannot be taken as representative of all Liberian girl ex-combatants who did or did not enter the DDR process.

There is much to criticize in the way women have typically been dealt with in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) processes around the world. Gender guidelines, checklists, articles and books have improved the understanding of women's issues in DDR, but this does not necessarily mean that DDR programmes are now in practice delivering assistance which reflects women's needs and aspirations.⁷³

The transition from war to civilian life presents challenges for all Liberian girl ex-combatants. Although some girls attempt to confront these challenges on their own, many have looked to the official DDR programme for assistance. Despite the efforts made in Liberia to accommodate the specific needs of girls, there are still large numbers of girl-combatants who were, for a variety of reasons, unable or unwilling to come for DDR support. It is important to identify the reasons why they have not participated in the formal disarmament and demobilization processes, so that damage done can be mitigated and lessons learned can be addressed in future DDR processes. At the same time, it is also crucial to understand why other girl combatants decided to participate.

Among the negative aspects of the disarmament and demobilization processes raised by demobilized girls, one important issue raised was the exclusion of some girls from the lists made by the commanders, which in part determined who gained access to the DDR process. Another problem was that some girls had their weapons confiscated by commanders before the start of the official disarmament process, and were thus prevented from accessing assistance⁷⁴.

However, those who went through the formal disarmament and demobilization process generally had positive feedback. By contrast, the delay in subsequent reintegration assistance caused much frustration and anger among ex-combatants and social workers. As a result some regarded the entire DDR process as a failure. If reintegration assistance is not delivered immediately following disarmament and demobilization, many former girl combatants risk to be forced to live on the streets through crime or prostitution. In fact, some of the girls

⁷¹ Because this report discusses girls between the ages of 15 and 24, some of whom fall under the child programme, others the adult programme, Annex 2 outlines the official DDR programme for children (those aged under 18) and Annex 3 the official DDR programme for adults.

⁷² Paes, W. C. 2005. Eyewitness: "The Challenges of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Liberia". *International Peacekeeping*, Vol.12, No.2, pp.1-9. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Ltd.

⁷³ Farr, V. 2005. "Gender-aware Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR): A Checklist". (UNIFEM), first published in *Gendering Demilitarization as a Peacebuilding Tool*, Paper 20, Bonn International Centre for Conversion, 2002 (<http://www.bicc.de/general/paper20/content.html>).

⁷⁴ For girls under 18 this was not a problem as child soldiers were able to Demobilize without giving in any weapon.

consulted were pushed into abusive relationships for food, as they could not provide for themselves after being demobilised.

This chapter also examines how the girls experience the reintegration assistance provided to them. Reintegration programmes generally tend to reintegrate girls back into the situation they came from, and thus fail to address many of the underlying causes of their initial recruitment. Chapter 5 illustrated the challenges girl-ex-combatants face in again becoming civilians. A large majority have little left of their former life, and many now have babies to care for. Having been engaged in unequal and abusive relationships with boys and men, they have little means of changing or breaking these relationships, as they remain dependent on their partners for survival. Gender-sensitive reintegration assistance can only be effective if these experiences and concerns are understood and addressed.

6.1. Distinguishing between children and adults

The international community has repeatedly condemned the recruitment of children into armed forces and stressed the importance of protecting them. The age categories established under the current legal framework⁷⁵ should, however, not lead to the neglect of those over 18 years of age. For girls of this age group the current Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration approach seems largely inappropriate. Those under 18 are regarded as child soldiers or children associated with fighting forces (CAFF) and are treated as children,⁷⁶ not taking into account the ambitions and extended responsibilities many of these young people have as providers. Those just above the age of 18 are treated as adults in programmes with a “livelihood focus” which neglects their need for catch-up education and alternative career aspirations.

In Liberia, this issue has proven additionally problematic as the UNDP-NCDDR led adult programme and the UNICEF-led children's programme are implemented in relative isolation. Although initially coordination took place through working groups on DDR, competition, funding problems and different policies between the DDR planners have led to separate (and non integrated) assistance for child- and adult combatants.

6.2. Liberian girls in DDR

Before the DDR programme was launched, the number of ex-combatants in Liberia was estimated by the International Crisis Group at between 48,000 and 58,000. The UN has

⁷⁵ Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (2002) it is a war crime to conscript or enlist children under 15 years old into armed forces or groups. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the two additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions already prohibit all recruitment and use of those under 15. Worst Form Of Child Labour Convention (1999), No.182, prohibits 'forced or compulsory recruitment of children [under 18] for use in hostilities' as one of the worst forms of child labour. The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2000) requires states bound by it to: take all feasible measures to prevent under 18's within their armed forces from fighting; refrain from conscription of under 18's; raise the minimum age of voluntary recruitment from 15 years (except in military academies); ensure that voluntary recruitment of under 18's is genuinely voluntary based on awareness of duties involved, conducted with parental consent and submission of reliable proof of age; and prevent all recruitment and use of under 18s by non state armed groups.

⁷⁶ Most organizations working with children use the legal category of children in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A child is therefore every human below the age of 18.

estimated that over 15,000⁷⁷ children were involved in the last Liberian war. However, when the programme finally ended in late November 2004, a total of 102,193 people had been processed – more than double the initial estimates. Out of this number 68,952 (67%) were adult males, 22,020 (22%) adult females, 8,704 (9%) male children and 2,517 (2%) female children.⁷⁸ According to UNICEF statistics of April 2005, exactly 11,780 CAFF have been formally demobilized. About 2,738 are female and 9,042 are male.⁷⁹ If the estimation of 15,000 children were involved in the most recent war is correct, this would leave 3,220 CAFF, with an unknown number of girls among them, who did not demobilize formally.

No official numbers are known for the amount of girl ex-combatants in the age category 18-24 as the information received, like the programmes themselves, only distinguishes between children and adults. According to the latest research, there were 22,370⁸⁰ adult female combatants who demobilized formally. Again, these numbers do not specify the number of girls in the age category 18-24 and the number of girls who did not demobilize officially. Most probably over half of them were under 24, therefore bringing the total number of girls to roughly 14,000. This research furthermore found that it is likely that the figure of 18-24 year-old female combatants who did not demobilize formally is much higher than for GAFF (girls under 18).

In this research it appeared that the majority of the young women interviewed, especially those aged 18-24, did not participate in DDR. This would bring the total number of girls up to 24 years old who participated in the armed conflict to far over 25,000. One explanation for the apparently higher percentage of GAFF who demobilized could be the fact that the GAFF interviewed in this study were mainly selected through social workers working in ICCs, who thus predominantly had contacts with children who demobilized. THINK, however, established contacts with girls aged 14-22 who did not demobilize. The older girls were mainly selected by the LURD General who facilitated the research for this report.⁸¹

Whatever the exact numbers, the research revealed that there were greater obstacles for older girls (18-24 years) to be admitted to the DDR. For example, the adult programme was much stricter in denying access if a girl did not have a weapon or ammunition to hand in, whereas GAFF could normally enter without handing over a gun or ammunition.

All numbers mentioned above are rough estimates. The current DD process has been criticized because of its stringent criteria for entering the process: to register, each combatant was required to bring a gun or certain amounts of ammunition. Black markets in Monrovia were thriving on the proceeds of selling guns for 20% of the Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) provided to ex-combatants at the DD camps. Another criterion for entry was that a combatant's name had to appear on a list drawn up by her/his commander. Some commanders put additional or different people on their lists in exchange for part of the

⁷⁷ UNICEF Liberia, 'Protecting Children', information sheet, April 2004,

<http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/liberia/coordination/sectoral/DDR/doc/CP%20Brief%20April%2004.DOC>

⁷⁸ National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDRR) 'Joint Implementation Unit DDDR Consolidated Report (Status of Disarmament & Demobilization Activities as at 11/24/2004)',

http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/liberia/coordination/sectoral/DDR/doc/Forthnightly%20Report_24112004.pdf

⁷⁹ UNICEF: correspondence with author.

⁸⁰ Paes, W. C. 2005. op. cit.

⁸¹ See also Annex 1: Research and methodology.

assistance. Thus an unexpectedly large number of ex-combatants gained entrance to the DD process, swelling the cost of the DD process and the caseload for reintegration.⁸² Many of those now classified within the process as ex-combatants are thus in fact non-combatants. This group rarely includes girls, whereas among the many real ex-combatants who are not part of the DDR process, there are many girls.

While the number of people demobilized is fairly reliable, it remains difficult to verify how many ex-combatant girls did not appear at registration sites. The research for this report indicates that the number might be much higher than previously thought. Whether or not there are as many as 14,000 non-demobilized girls, the number is significant enough to warrant greater attention to their reintegration needs.

6.2. Reasons for entering the demobilization process

The most important reason for demobilizing reported by girls who participated in this research was to receive money, while other girls acted under the influence of their commanders or fellow combatants. Often they had a combination of motives.

Money

Many girls identified money as the determining factor for participating in the DD process. Most social workers confirmed that the TSA was a major incentive for the girls to go.

Influence of commander

The commander's influence on a girl's decision to enter the DD process was considerable. The order of the commander was one of the key reasons why a girl would appear at the cantonment site.

If she [commander] tells us we have to do it, then you have to do it. So we went the same day to deliver the arm.

These two commanders confirmed:

Everybody comes because we told them. It's not because of the money because 150 dollars and 150 dollars that's money but it can't be there for a lifetime. So the people are coming because they obey their generals. This is why they do it.

The reason that people are coming to the DDRR is because they obey their generals. And we told our people to go because we don't want to say to the DDRR people that here it is arm-free, when there is actually still arms. We will get into problems. So the DD worked because influential people, like myself, like generals go to the bushes to talk to them to do DRR. We also know who was fighting and where they are. We can bring them. We did that because we wanted peace.

In some cases, simply putting girls on the list was sufficient motivation for them to register for the DD process:

I did the DD because my former commander who is also in Monrovia put me on the list.

⁸² Human Rights Watch. 2005. *Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors*. Vol. 17, No. 5 (A). New York: Human Rights Watch.

Commanders had different reasons to encourage their girls to demobilize. In some cases they were motivated by greed, wishing to claim a part of the girls' TSA. Other female commanders acted in the best interest of their girls, encouraging them to get help. It was also logical for commanders who typically experienced increasing difficulties providing for and taking care of their girls after the war to encourage them to find support from other sources. One female commander explained:

They were still depending on me but when the war was over I could not afford any longer to take care of them. I only used to encourage them, especially for those who have family, to go back to their family. If you can go to school, you should go back to school. If you are learning a trade, you should go back to trade. So that was the only advice I was having for them. I did not have money to give them. To say that the war is over and this is your pay. So the only thing I could give them was advice. And at that time any money I have, from people who helped me, I share it with them.

The person girl combatants generally trusted was their commander, not “the DDR people”.

I disarm but one woman sold my ID card and run away with it. I was due to go to the camp but I could not because that woman stole my paper. I did not tell the people of the DDRR. But I told my commander and she is taking care of it.

In such cases, the commanders mediated between the DD process and the girl combatants. This military hierarchy could, however, also work against the DD process, if the commander refused to cooperate or misused his/her power for personal gain. The commanders thus played a significant role in either convincing girls to participate or denying them access.

Influence of peers

As already noted, most girls developed very close friendships with other girls in the unit, partly as a result of their shared experience of having been raped or the experience of war itself. After the cease-fire, these friendships usually continued, and the DD process was a popular topic for discussions. Such discussions or peer pressure from fellow ex-combatants sometimes influenced the girls towards joining the process.

I went there with a lot of other girls. The girls were many, everybody went to the camp.

Many girls went to the DD process in groups, but the influence of peers could also act as a disincentive for others if their friends decided as a group not to go.

Information

The girls received information about the DDR programme through the sensitisation processes – via radio and newspapers, as well as from fellow ex-combatants and commanders. The kind of information received was often an important factor in a girl's decision to participate.

Why I decided to go? I don't know... Because the people starting telling us that it will be good and two, if any thing happens in the community, they will say, oooh an ex-combatant here. If anything then you can say I disarmed. Because you can show them your ID card.

I heard about the DDRR through the radio and through my mother. They said it was good to go. That's why I went.

The following testimony from a commander demonstrates the key role played by commanders in the sensitisation and demobilization of ex-combatants, and their potential to play a positive role in other similar tasks if carefully managed. It also expresses the disappointment felt by some commanders at not having their efforts in this respect sufficiently acknowledged or rewarded. From a peace-building perspective, such frustration is, of course, fairly dangerous.

Sensitisation – A Commander's Perspective:

The Chief of Staff was choosing the 16 generals for LURD to sensitise the people. Likewise for GOL, their Chief of Staff will choose. MODEL, too, the Chief of Staff will choose. They selected me because I'm a commander. Because plenty soldiers will listen to me, they will take direct order from me and I would not lie to them.

So we went around, we used to go to the capitals [of the counties], around the country to go and sensitise. And after that our identity card was changed into D&D facilitator. For the sensitisation we got an identity card that will make the people know your function. It was a real job. When we got the card they gave me 75 USD, right there. And then later, after 2 months they gave me another 75 dollars. That is 150 dollars. But where they were taking us, where we were going to do this job, each trip, they supposed to pay us allowance. But they did not pay us the allowance. We never received the allowance. But I was doing the job because I wanted peace to come in Liberia.

Beginning of April, we started to sensitise, to tell the people what will happen. We went to the capitals with some officers and American soldiers. We sat down, they watched us what we were saying, what we were doing. We carried them. Also the big man, the director of the NCDDRR. We carried them to Grand Gedeh to go and sensitise, to MODEL area, carried them to Lofa to go and sensitise the LURD area, also carried them to... everywhere we went. We went to different, different, different places.

People knew that we were coming so all the ex-fighters will come. Many came. Everybody did what was told to them, everybody in this country. Because every commander promised to do their best. Every 48 general did their best in this country towards the disarmament process. We talked to our soldiers to leave the arm and told them that shooting cannot solve the problem. We had already agreed on peace now so we were talking to everyone now. For example if you were from LURD, and I from GOL and this person is from MODEL, we go together and go to LURD side and you introduce me: This one is from GOL, this one is from MODEL, but we are together now. Then if you go to my side I will introduce you to show them that we are together now. Everybody will go to every place in joined teams. To go and talk to the people. To show to the people that we are one now. We are one.

And all the ex-fighters they came, they all came to listen. We told them that the war is over. We don't want war again in Liberia. The war cannot solve our problem. The war set us back. The war made us to lose our education, the war made us lose our parents, and the war made us blind to the war. The UN is here to resolve the problem with us.

Each person they will give you 150 USD. That's what I told them because that's what they told me! So that's why I have to tell them. Because everything I tell them it got to be true. Everything from my mouth must be the truth. So that's what I told them. And then after we talked to them, that everybody should give their arm, they did it. Everybody talked to their

soldiers, everybody carried the arms inside until the disarmament started. And after the sensitisation we went back to the bush to tell them: look what we came to tell you people is truth.

We went two times for sensitisation. We told them that it was necessary to be in a camp. That you will go there and surrender your arm, they give you a paper. You go to the cantonment site for four days. In the cantonment site, we have counsellors, we have clinics, and we have religious people. If you are Christian or you are Muslim, you should leave the bad habits, if you were smoking joints, leave the joints and be yourself now. Because you are no longer a rebel again, you are no longer fighting. There is peace now in the country.

We had different, different things at the cantonment site we had people to treat people. Within the four days, the people counsel you. You graduate the fifth day and then you get your 150 USD, a bag of rice, oil, beans, salt... And then, after two months you go again for the second payment. You just listen to the radio till you hear your ID card number, and then you go wherever you are supposed to be. Then you have 300 USD. 150 first, 150 second. That's what they are supposed to get. And then we did that. We facilitated everything after sensitisation till the DD ends to make sure that everybody that's coming will disarm peacefully, no problem. [claps her hands]. We did that.

And now they say the DD is over. We the 48 generals now, we had done our best! But they say the DD is over on the 31st of October. But it was not over. I worked till December and up to now they were not giving us our pay. They never paid us for November; they never paid us for December. Because now they are letting us down. They say our time is over, the DD is over. We are with no job. We are responsible people. We have children, husbands, wives, and now they say we have to sit without job.

And tell me now how would you feel! In the country, you fight, you come, you told people to leave arm. They leave the arm, people know you. You pay your rent, you got to feed your child, you got to send your child to school, you got to do this, you got to do that. Because your child was not fighting, they cannot go to school free. You have to send them to school. You have to provide for your family. And then they say your time is over! They promised three years we would work together. It is not even one year we worked for them. They are letting us down now. And here is the frustration! Again.

And also the soldiers whom we told to leave the arm, all of them are not getting their money, up to now. Now they are threatening us. I cannot go to Gbarnga. Because they told me if I go to Gbarnga, they will beat me. They will beat me because I lied to them. Some of them are not getting their second money.

Some people never even go to the first D – it is not finished. They wanted to, but there was no time. They said that they have neither gone through the DD nor the RR yet, and now they are letting us down.

I have not anymore a function in that, what will I tell them? They think I'm a liar. I swear to God I'm not, but I cannot go to Gbarnga. If I go there, they don't have arm, but they will harm me. What to do in Monrovia? I don't have a job now. And this is way tensions are created, and we don't want anymore tension here. And they're forgetting, too, that people who play with arms and do lot of things if they're frustrating them. Because if you don't have

a job, what do you do? You don't want to become a prostitute, you don't want to become a murderer, you don't want to become an armed robber. It is very dangerous for the future ...

Like for me, I'm confused. I don't know what to do. Because we are many, we combine. I'm concerned about the country because the way some of us were taken care of. And now it is shameful and disgraceful, and it is threatening. There is no satisfaction. Tell me what happens: tension! That's what they create, it's a problem.

As for me I don't want arm business in my life, I suffered a lot. So this time I need help! For other people, it is the same, they are not satisfied. I'm a lady; especially so many ladies are threatening. I talked to so many. I know. I was one of the generals advocating for everybody in the NCDDRR. They say they will not fight, but some of them will not tell me exactly. Because first, when we started the sensitisation, they gave up their arms. But when it come to this again, to the frustrating part, they will not listen to me, they won't!

6.3. Reasons for not entering the demobilization process

Considering that girls constituted an integral part of the fighting forces, whether as combatants, wives or supporters, the failure of the DD to reach many of them is not only regrettable from a social perspective, but it may also put the peace process in jeopardy. Self-demobilization is problematic as it excludes girls from assistance given to participants in the formal disarmament and demobilization process. Even more importantly, girls who were not formally demobilized automatically became ineligible for reintegration assistance. This seriously damaged their prospects of acquiring education, skills training and, ultimately, new jobs. Furthermore, they were deprived from then on of all the other help DDR programmes offer, such as psycho-social counselling, child-care, life skills training, and so on. The reasons for non-participation given by girls interviewed for this report are described below.

Lack of trust in the ceasefire and the DD process

For some girls, the reason for non-registration was lack of trust in the process. In a few cases, girls had bad experiences with DDR in the first war; older girls especially gave this as a reason for non-participation in the process this time. A girl who was a child soldier in the first war explained her disappointment as follows:

I was involved in the first DDR. But it didn't help me. It was of no use. The people eat the money. You just had to turn in your weapon. You were not compensated. And there was also no good reintegration. And then I went fighting again. So now I'm not doing the DDR any more.

An even bigger issue for some girls was lack of trust in the cease-fire, which made them keen to retain their weapons. One social worker was told that girl combatants felt that the DDR programme was "sweet talking them", but would not follow up on its promises. Those who wanted to wait and see if the ceasefire would hold and whether the DD process was effective were left out of the process.

Fear of repercussion

Some girl ex-combatants did not want to reveal their past as ex-combatants because they were afraid of repercussions. They did not want to be registered and photographed (a precondition at the DDR camps), as they feared they might later be prosecuted in a criminal court for their involvement in the war.

Some information the girls received through formal and informal channels regarding the DDR process also discouraged some girls from participating. One of the rumours was that ex-combatants would never be able to travel into the United States because their picture and name registered at the DDR would be forwarded to relevant offices, denouncing them as criminals or even terrorists.

If you do the DD then they take your name and your picture and put them in the computer. If you want to travel in the future to the US or Europe then they can see in the computer that you are an ex-rebel and then they not allow you. So I didn't want to go through the DDDR. I gave my weapon to somebody else who took it to the DDDR.

CCF confirmed that they also heard of ex-combatants not showing up because of possible travel restrictions. Other social workers further stated that they could not address these worries as they did not know whether there would be legal charges or travel restrictions for ex-combatants in the future. UNICEF offered assurances that the pictures and names of ex-combatants would not be passed on to international airports and visa offices, and that they would only be used by donors and people working with the DDR.

Such rumours of travel restrictions and the risk of prosecution were especially prevalent in highly populated areas such as Monrovia. Concerns of this kind were stronger for higher-ranked girls who were in positions of responsibility and had a realistic chance of travelling in the future.

Although these were apparently only rumours, many girls believed them and stated this as their reason for not entering the DD process. While extensive information on the DDR was disseminated, it did not reach these girls, or was outweighed by information received from other sources, including their peers.

Fear of social exclusion

Other girls did not want to reveal their past as ex-combatants because they were afraid that if they revealed their identities they would have to suffer consequences such as social exclusion. Some remembered the reactions of the civilian population to the proposed targeted DDR programme in the 1990's when "the general perception was that ex-combatants should not be further rewarded for having been fighters. Many atrocities were committed by soldiers even against their own tribal groups, so that reintegration of fighters or those known to have been involved in such acts is difficult".⁸³ It was common practice then for combatants to burn their ID cards and claim to have been refugees, as the benefits offered by the reintegration programme did not counterbalance the problems they would encounter if people knew they had been combatants. Many girls and women preferred to hide their history rather than benefit from assistance programmes.⁸⁴

The fear is not just that the general population will resent "rewards" being offered to combatants, whom they view as having caused suffering. It is also that their character will remain stained in the community:

Most of my friends don't know that I was fighting. I like to keep it that way. People don't like ex-fighters. After the war I went living with my aunt, only she knows, but for the rest I don't

⁸³ Specht, I. and van Empel, C. 1998. op. cit.

⁸⁴ Barth, E. F. 2002. op. cit.

want them to know. If they know and something bad happens they will point at me, saying I did it.

Wish to escape the past

Some girls said that they just wanted to forget as soon as possible that they had been part of a fighting force, as it brought them predominantly bad memories. They thus avoided formal demobilization in order not to be confronted with their past and their former colleagues.

I don't want to go to the DD and talk with a counsellor what happened to me, I don't think that that is good for me. I just want to forget.

Not wanting to be in a camp

A further reason, similar to the one above, stated by some girls was that they were unwilling to enter a camp again, as they believed the DDR camps would be too similar to the circumstances they encountered in the bush camps they often stayed in during the war. Again, these girls stated that they would prefer to forget the experience of being in the camps:

We do not want to stay in the camp, we don't want to be part of that thing again.

Avoiding separation from their commanders

Many girls, especially younger ones, did not want to be separated from their former commanders.

I lived with her [commander] after the cease-fire. She took me into her home with some other girls. I cannot forget about her, because what she did for me. I wanted to stay with her and I did not want to go in a camp for weeks.

After the war we lived with many of us in an empty building in Monrovia. Me, some other girls, the boys and our commander. He didn't do the DD so we didn't do it as well we wanted to stay with him.

As explained in Chapter 5, most girls remained strongly dependent on and committed to their commanders after the conflict ended, and often wished to continue staying with them. Some girls did not go to the ICCs to avoid separation from their commanders. Others, who did go, lied about their age when they arrived at the cantonment sites, claiming to be 18 years or older in order to stay at the cantonment site where their commanders also stayed, rather than going to separate ICCs for children, which would return them to their parents. In addition, the stay at ICCs – and thus the separation from commanders – was longer than in the adult DD camps. In other cases, girls ran away from ICCs to rejoin their former commanders. Social workers confirmed that the large number of girls who claimed to have been born in 1986 (i.e. just turning 18 at the time of the DD) was striking. It was difficult to question the false age given by many girls during the screening process during demobilization, as most girls no longer had birth certificates. As a result, many girls who were in a legal sense children did not receive the assistance was offered for children.

Another consequence of the girls' continuing dependency on their commanders was that some girls lied about their origin and the identity of their parents, giving names of their former commanders or his/her relatives in the hope of being reunited with him or her after the ICC.

The TSA, consisting of two instalments of US\$150, was paid to the parents under the children's DDR programme, rather than to the children themselves. In some cases, commanders would supply the children with bogus parents in order to take a share of the first TSA payment. To prevent this from happening, the child protection agencies talked to both parents and children and compared their stories. In addition, CCF would carry out follow-up visits after reunification, which were an important means of verifying whether girls were still with their families or had run away to their former commanders.

Others did not want to go to a camp because they did not want to listen to anyone other than their commanders, nor live by the rules of DDR personnel.

I don't want to go in a camp because I'm not used to the people there. I don't want them to tell me what to do. I don't know these people. I rather stay with my friends.

Avoiding embarrassment

Higher-ranked girls and especially female commanders often did not enter the process because they did not want to be seen by their soldiers again without having something to offer them. After the war most commanders struggled for their own survival, and thus were far from being able to provide for their girls. Having previously controlled and catered for a significant number of fighters, many commanders preferred to avoid the embarrassment of living in a camp alongside those previously under their control in these changed circumstances and status.

During the struggle, those children were living with my husband and me. If my husband could be alive, my husband would have taken good care of them ... now I lost my husband and I don't have the opportunity to help them. So I will feel embarrassed to myself by going there and seeing those children.

Reluctance to return home

There were also girls who wanted to remain with their comrades because of the bonds of trust and friendship within the group. The DDR was unappealing to such girls as they did not want to be among strangers. Other girls explicitly said that they wanted to remain with their friends in armed forces in preference to returning to their families. Having been independent of their parents during the war, they did not want to be placed under parental control again. This is especially true of girls classified as children by the DDR, who would face reunification with their parents or families if they went to the ICCs. Many such girls did not register for DDR.

I haven't seen my mother for two years now. She is living in Sinoe. She is a farmer there, but I don't like to work on the farm. I want to stay in Monrovia. And my boyfriend is here too so now I live with him.

Again, fear of what will be said about them within communities is a further determinant of this preference for staying among ex-combatants.

Teen mothers

Some information gathered for this report appeared to indicate that teen mothers were less likely to participate in the formal DDR process than other girls. From the 583 girls who had stayed in the ICC in Tubmanburg, 34 girls brought one baby each with them and a few more were pregnant. Two of them actually gave birth in the ICC. Considering the wide prevalence

of rapes and sexual activity reported amongst young girl combatants in Liberia, it cannot be assumed that there were only 34 teen mothers among the girl combatants in Tubmanburg. In the THINK centre, which also took care of female CAFF who did not go to the formal DDR, there were 25 girls. Of these, at least half brought one baby with them. This difference in the proportion of girls bringing babies could be explained by girls coming to the DD without their babies. However, as they were yet to be reunited with their families, they would presumably not have been able to leave any children under the care of a family member. Nor was THINK specifically targeting teen mothers, which would have provided an alternative explanation for the high proportion of their beneficiaries who were mothers. The most plausible explanation for this divergence is that less teen mothers were participating in the formal DD because they did not want to take their children to encampment sites, even if there were child-care facilities. Some girls interviewed confirmed this.

Family obligations

Having family obligations was certainly an obstacle to participation in the DD process:

They asked me whether I wanted to go in the camp. Because at that time my family was in town here. My 2 younger ones, my daughter and the grandmother. So everybody was here. So I cannot leave them and then go lay in the camp for two to three weeks.

Access and timeframe

Some girl ex-combatants wanted to enter the DD process but were not able to reach the cantonment site. Social workers stated that problems in physically accessing the DD process were one of the most important reasons why ex-combatants did not register. This was particularly true in big counties like Lofa, where there was only one cantonment site, in Voinjama. If a girl lived far away from Voinjama, entering the disarmament and demobilization process meant travelling a long way, through dangerous terrain, and (given the destruction, and poor state of much of the infrastructure) with limited means of transportation. Moreover, as the DD took place during the raining season, the roads became even more difficult to pass. Some girl combatants were unable to reach the cantonment sites either at all or in time to participate in the process. Similar problems occurred in Maryland. The DD did not provide sufficient transport for the girls to reach the cantonment site.

In Tubmanburg, there were some minor problems relating to logistics. The original plan there had been that a battalion of up to 250 ex-combatants would be picked up at a pre-arranged time on a particular day to be taken to the cantonment site, to allow swift access for a commander and his unit to enter the process. Before long, however, ex-combatants started to gather at the pick-up point to wait, disregarding pre-arranged dates and times. Instead of a single battalion assembling in an orderly manner, thousands of ex-combatants waited and slept at pick-up sites for days. Although for ex-combatants this was unpleasant, it did not cause a problem for the DD itself. However, clearly, assembling alongside huge groups of male ex-combatants was neither an attractive nor a viable option for girls.

Some girls criticized the short duration of the DD process because it did not give them enough time to consider their decision and travel to pick-up points. Furthermore, there were also some specific timing problems in the various counties. Initially, the DD process only began after some delay, and the time pressure thus generated meant that the rest of the process had to be rushed. For example, the two-month delay in Lofa, caused by poor infrastructure and funding delays, curtailed the time period for ex-combatants to disarm and demobilize, which for some girls made participation impossible for some girls.

The examples discussed above demonstrate the variety of reasons which led girls not to participate in the formal DDR process. In some cases, several reasons in combination discouraged a girl from registering. The discussion also highlights the fact that different considerations affected lower- as opposed to higher-ranked girls and younger as opposed to older girls within the 15-24 age group being analysed. Although women and girls were taken into consideration in the DDR in Liberia, cases where such concerns were not addressed and where girls therefore missed out on assistance were all too common.

It is advisable that future DDR processes carry out extensive assessments of the concerns of girl combatants in advance, so that the DDR programme can be designed to encourage the inclusion of more girl combatants. One recommendation emerging is the need to increase the separation of the DD camps for girls and boys. In the ICCs this was done, while in the adult camps grass mats separated the girls' and boys' areas. Girls still had to await transportation, and assemble and disarm at the same place as men. Completely separate DD camps could substantially have increased the participation rate of girls.

6.4. Access denied

Besides girls who chose not to go for various reasons, there were also girls who wanted to go but were denied access. Often this had to do with commanders. Cases are reported where male soldiers and commanders did not allow their girls to demobilize. They sometimes wanted to keep girls to compensate for their loss of power after war or use them for household and family tasks. This occurred most often in the case of young non-fighting girls in male units. In most cases, however, the girls said they voluntarily stayed with their "bush husbands" or commanders.

After the cease-fire my husband went living in a house in Monrovia. I followed him there together with our baby, so I could help him with cooking and cleaning. But life was hard for us now. No money. I wanted to look for my family but my husband didn't want me to search for them. I think he was afraid that I would go to them. He also didn't want me to go to the DDR because then I had to stay in a camp there. And I wanted to stay with my husband.

Weapons taken

The first criterion for entering the DDR programme in Liberia was the possession of a weapon or ammunition to hand in. The adult programme was much stricter in denying access if a girl did not have a weapon to hand over, whereas the policy was that GAFF could also enter without handing over a gun or ammunition. According to social workers and caregivers this did not always work fairly in practice. Many girls interviewed for this report, especially older ones but also in some cases girls under 18, stated that they were unable to register because their commanders had taken away their weapons.

Already before the official DDR started, girls were ordered to leave their guns with their commanders and go to town or their homes. One girl explained that her commander told her that it "would look bad on you to walk around with a gun now we are no longer fighting".

The DD strategy was that people would show up at the disarmament sites with their weapons or ammunition and would then receive a ticket allowing them access to demobilization. After a few days in a demobilization camp, they would receive a cash instalment of US\$150, to be followed up by a second instalment of US\$150 a few months later. In the case of children, these Transitional Net Safety Allowances (TSA) were paid to parents. Although not designed

as a "weapons buy-back programme", the system was definitely perceived as such by the combatants.

At the time when this research was initiated, an AK47 could easily be found at the local black market for US\$23, and this would guarantee access to the nearest DD camp. The black market in guns was very lucrative due to the DD programme since a gun would, after a few days' shelter, food and health assistance, lead to a return of US\$150. Local business people would lend a gun to boys and demand US\$75 after their return from the camps. Thus although the DD process reached an impressive number of people, many DDR ID holders are not ex-combatants, while many ex-combatants have remained outside of the process among them. The consequences of this are potentially disastrous given the necessity that reintegration assistance targets those who are most vulnerable, who present the clearest risk to future social cohesion, or who have the potential if they receive assistance to make a positive contribution to post-conflict society.

When the DDR programme started and the benefits became known, commanders often requested half of a girl's TSA, or gave her weapon to somebody else.

First he [commander] took away our guns and brought it to the DI. In turn he got our ticket. He put us on the list. But then he made a deal with me that I could only get my ticket if I agreed in giving my commander 100 USD from my first payment and 50 USD from my second payment. I agreed and this is what we did.

A comment made by a female commander confirmed this sort of practice:

Those who are never gone through the DD they don't have arm now but some of their commanders took their arms from them before. So they don't have arm now to present the arm. They don't get the ID card. They don't get the money, because they never went through the DD. When the commander took the weapons before DDRR they cannot go to the DDRR because they don't have a weapon.

However there were differences between the different cantonment sites concerning the criteria for registration. In some counties you had to be on the commander's list.

Commanders' lists

In many DDR programmes implemented around the world the target group has been finally defined by lists of all members of a unit being supplied by commanders. Access to the DDR and any cash payment then depends on being on one of these lists. This method was developed in the context of relatively "organized" conflicts (e.g. Mozambique) where it was more or less clear who was and who was not a member of the armed groups. It presents difficulties in contexts such as Liberia where armed groups are less organized and the distinction between civilians and combatants is difficult to define.⁸⁵ A recurrent problem has been that, if given the opportunity to choose beneficiaries, commanders abuse this power. This system is generally discriminatory against girls, as their names often are replaced by those of the male commander's friends.

⁸⁵ Cf. Specht, I. 2003. 'Jobs for Rebels and Soldiers'. In: *Jobs after war. A critical challenge in the peace and reconstruction puzzle*, ed. by Eugenia Date-Bah. (InFocus Programme on Crisis Response and Reconstruction). Geneva: ILO, pp.73-111.

To take advantage of the availability of cash in Liberia, some commanders demanded a share of the TSA from some girls, put family members, relatives or friends on the list instead of combatants.

As I was a good friend of the commander, he put me on the DDRR list.

As a result, some girls showed up at cantonment sites, but were denied access. In Lofa, many commanders took girls' weapons and gave them to family and friends not just for cash, but also to ensure that the relative received skills training or schooling. Other commanders took girls' ID cards and sold them to somebody else.

She put our name on the list and then she took my ticket from me. She sold it behind me. Instead of giving the tickets to us she sold the tickets to marketers.

The photos on ID cards were supposed to make it more difficult for commanders to sell an ID card. Although this personalization discouraged illegal sales to an extent, many girls said that it was still possible to enter demobilization camps using another person's ID card.

My commander mistakenly gave my ticket to somebody else. So now I got her ticket with her name and picture, her name was Comfort. So from now my name is Comfort.

Social workers from CAP who worked in Maryland said that most of the girls they saw at the cantonment site were related to the commander who put them on the list. Sometimes commanders gave girls no association with fighting groups a weapon to enter the DD process and bring them the money. In other cases the commanders put real ex-combatant children on the list, but had disarmed them beforehand in order to demand a share of their money for putting them on the list.

In some counties, social workers had no power to correct mistakes over admission to the process. In Maryland, CAP's social workers were only entitled to screen the children on the list in the cantonment site, but could not add names. Many people who apparently were ex-combatants, including girls, came to demobilize but were denied access to the DDR programme. IRC also stated that many people showed up at cantonment sites in Lofa claiming to be ex-combatants who were not on the official lists. In contrast, according to CCF's social workers, in Gbarnga ex-combatants, but were neither on a list nor in possession of a weapon could enter the DD process. In Maryland, handing in a weapon was also not a precondition for GAFF to gain access to DD.

Commanders could easily take the girls' ID cards or disarm GAFF before the DD because the girls, who were still part of the military structure, obeyed. Children were particularly easily cheated as they were often not brave, mature or self-confident enough to understand and expose the misdeeds of their superiors, who were generally older than themselves.

As already noted, besides these problems with commanders, there were also certain advantages of the girl-commander relationship that have proven useful for the DD process. In some cases, without the encouragement of a sincere commander, girls would not have registered for DD. Commanders also helped in finding and accessing some girls. Much depended on the sincerity of the individual commander.

UNICEF has explained reluctance of commanders to put children on demobilization lists as shame and fear to harm their own reputation and face social, political and legal repercussions. One General did indeed cite fear for his reputation as his main reason for not listing the children in his unit. However, the female commanders studied in this research, as well as some social workers, didn't agree that worry about conformity with international law played a role. Their view was that children were kept from the lists so that commanders could actually increase the amount of money (TSA) they could squeeze from the process. Children were not provided TSA, while adults were.

6.5. Girls' experiences with DD

The girls interviewed in this research who actually formally demobilized were generally satisfied with the DD process and programmes.

I stayed 5 days at the cantonment site. The camp was fine but I am frustrated about the DDRR process. They don't do what they promise us.

I went through the DDRR programme at VOA. My commander put me on the list. I disarmed ammunition. I got 150 USD. The programme was all right. I enjoyed. When we went there the people counsel us, they say we must not fight again.

The separation process of males and females during DD ensured that girls were not subjected to gender-based violence throughout the process. Likewise, children and adults were separated in order to end potential dependency structures. All the girls surveyed who participated in the DD affirmed that the different groups were separated from each other throughout the process, starting from the pick-up points.

The women were separated from the men and the children were separated from the others. The children had a special area where boys and girls were separated, and the men had their area different from the women.

The girls have their own place, the men have their own place, and the children have their own place. So it is a good place to stay and I was happy I went.

All the girls were satisfied with the manner in which this separation process was carried out. Studies in other DDR processes identified women's fears of being exposed to gender-based violence at cantonment sites and ICCs as a reason for not attending. This fear was apparently addressed in the case of Liberia.

Although most girls were satisfied with the efforts made to accommodate girls' specific needs, girls still identified some general problems with the DD.

Lack of capacities

Some counties lacked the capacities to handle the large numbers of female CAFF showing up at the DD. In some cases, ICCs were not able to accommodate them. The girls' ICC in Tubmanburg had capacity for 100 girls, but sometimes had to cope with 130.

In order to respond to the high demand, *ad hoc* drop-in centres were established which were similar to ICCs in that they separated boys and girls, offered counselling, recreation, education and similar services, and family tracing. A big difference between the drop-in

centres and the ICCs was, however, that they were not part of the original DDR plan or budget. Consequently, whereas ICCs accommodated ex-combatants for up to 12 weeks, a stay at a drop-in centre lasted 5 days. According to CCF, this period was too short to prepare the children for reinsertion.

Another issue related to planning was that Lofa County proved to be far too big for family tracing to be successfully conducted from a single ICC in Voinjama. Thus drop-in centres which were separate for boys and girls were set up in other villages. CAFF would first have to go to the ICC in Voinjama to identify where they were from. The personal information about the child was then sent to the appropriate drop-in centre so that it could proceed immediately with family tracing. In contrast, adult combatants always stayed at the cantonment site in Voinjama.

In Maryland, there were initially only two ICCs for boys and none for girls, although it quickly became clear that significant numbers of girls were going to appear. CAP thus took the initiative of establishing a drop-in centre for girls. In Maryland most girl ex-combatants were already living with their families again and some had already returned to school before the DD started there. Therefore, as family tracing was not necessary and in order to minimise the girls' absence from school, the preferred strategy was to keep the girls' stay in drop-in centres short. Again, social workers and caregivers held the view that demobilization should have lasted longer than five days.

Cash for CAFF

Although UNICEF strongly opposed the measure children were, *via* their parents, paid in two instalments the same US\$300 Transitional Safety Net Allowance (TSA) as adult ex-combatants. They received the first payment after their stay at an ICC, before being placed with their family or foster family. The second payment was made after a follow-up visit. Although the policy was to give the TSA to parents, many girls received the money directly.

The distribution of TSA differed from county to county; therefore some girls lied about their place of residence and the identity of their parents. Some girls in the ICC in Tubmanburg, who were from Monrovia, wanted to stay in Tubmanburg rather than being first transferred to Monrovia, since this would make it easier to obtain the TSA.

The policy of giving cash to ex-combatants and especially to CAFF is highly contentious. UNICEF has expressed serious concerns regarding this practice for children, pointing to the fact that giving children cash makes them more vulnerable to abuse from profiteering commanders, boyfriends and even family members as described above. There are other dangerous implications in providing targeted support to CAFF.⁸⁶ One is that communities/families take from such assistance the message that “*sending your child to war brings benefits*”. This is an undesirable and harmful message that should be avoided at all costs. Likewise, if TSA is seen as a reward for violence, it can cause communities to reject CAFF.

According to a Labour Market Analysis and Training Needs Assessment in Liberia,⁸⁷ demobilized CAFF should preferably only receive exclusive targeted assistance, such as

⁸⁶ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

⁸⁷ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

medical care, trauma and vocational counselling, within ICCs. As soon as they leave ICCs, they should be treated the same as other war-affected children. In fact, the practice of providing cash to ex-combatants more generally makes the reintegration process much more complicated. Its superficial appeal as an incentive for disarmament is more than outweighed by the complex social problems caused by it. It certainly did not have a positive affect on the situation of most girls.

UNICEF's admonition not to pay TSA to children in Liberia was unfortunately not followed. This was partly due to disarmament campaigns that strongly focused on promising benefits to all, such as cash, training, jobs etc. The harm done could not be reversed as children aged 16-17 would have reacted strongly against finding themselves belatedly excluded from the benefits publicized.

6.6. Reintegration assistance for girls

At the time when the research for this report was being conducted, the reintegration phase of the DDR was just beginning.⁸⁸ Although some girls in certain places had received some assistance, the large majority of the girl ex-combatants interviewed were not certain what their assistance would consist of, or when and how they would receive it. Although follow-up research could provide a more systematic evaluation of reintegration support by comparing girls who went through the DDR process with those who did not, it is already possible to make some remarks at this stage.

A significant problem with the reintegration assistance was its widespread late delivery. According to UNICEF, reintegration assistance has been under-resourced and delayed throughout the country. In the gap between demobilization and the delivery of reintegration assistance, girls have been left on the streets with nothing to do, putting them at high risk of becoming involved in military or criminal activity or exploited as prostitutes. The girls have also come to feel cheated and betrayed by DDR personnel during this time.

The feared implications were realised in 2005 when Human Rights Watch reported extensive efforts to recruit youth in West Africa for the war in Ivory Coast. Young demobilized ex-combatants were being asked to become mercenaries in neighbouring countries, with delays in the reintegration programme in Liberia named by some of the interviewees as a reason to take up this offer:

Almost all of those interviewed had in 2004 disarmed in Liberia and subsequently signed up for education or skills training programmes being administered by the Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDR) Programme. However, severe funding shortfalls in this programme appeared to have disproportionately affected Liberia's southern counties, where only a handful of education and skills training programmes have opened up.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Since the time this research was conducted, some statistics have changed as a result of recent developments. According to UNICEF's latest figures, the total number of children accessing reintegration programmes are 5,014 out of about 11,000 CAFF. This means that a little bit less than the half of the ex- CAFF is currently involved in reintegration programmes. Out of these, 3,279 have access to the Community Education investment Programme (CEIP) and 1,732 to the skills training and apprenticeship programme.

⁸⁹ Human Rights Watch. 2005. *Recruitment of Ex-Child Soldiers in Cote d'Ivoire: Background, Accounts, and Recommendations*. Background Briefing, March 31, 2005,

The lack of education and employment possibilities reinforces the sense of helplessness and despair that makes young people vulnerable to re-recruitment into armed groups.

Commander-girl relationships

The general view of DDR practitioners in Liberia is that it is necessary to separate girls from their commanders as soon as possible, as commanders have a negative influence on the girls. It is said that commanders prevent girls from developing a new identity not related to the military, that they exploit them and make them vulnerable to re-recruitment. According to IRC, bonds between girls and commanders should be broken as soon as possible because of their harmful effects. IRC is in favour of not giving commanders authority over lists and at cantonment sites because this gives them power over the children and they can manipulate both the process and the children. IRC also points out that when children escape from the influence of their superiors, the stories they tell are quite different from those of the commanders, often involving abuse.

Therefore, the policy of the DDR programme is that it is in the best interest of children to return to their families and home communities, even if this means moving. The subsequent follow-up for girl ex-combatants mainly relates to protection issues. Social workers check whether children stayed at their family home, run off or been negatively affected by former commanders. Their key task is to make sure that the children are not mobilized again for fighting.

In fact, relocation can be an effective way to ensure separation from former commanders and “bush husbands”. However, while there is certainly good reason to end dependencies, separation is not always the way to do it. In some cases, it would be more productive to recognize and use the close bonds between girls and commanders in the process of assisting these girls to leave their military identity and turn into civilians again.

It is certainly true that if these strong bonds are broken immediately after the war this can be highly traumatic for the girls: experience shows that young girls in particular still feel close to their commanders and *vice versa* at this time. Ignoring this personal attachment in units that have for some girls become substitute families can also undermine the reintegration process. While children should be separated from commanders who exploit them, there are also sincere commanders. In these cases, forced separation may add yet another (avoidable) hardship to these girls' lives.

To draw the girls away from the military structure without making it a traumatic experience, they should be offered a viable alternative support structure and path of development. In Liberia this was not provided effectively, as reintegration assistance was delayed and many girl ex-combatants who did not formally demobilize would in any case be unable to access it (unless a further outreach initiative were set up to enable them to be reached). To reach more girl ex-combatants, commanders could be a good entry point.

Chapter 5 illustrated that not all commanders affect their girls negatively, and that many female commanders acted sincerely and in the best interest of the girls. Such commanders could assist in helping girls find a secure and fulfilling way out of the military structure. Moreover, ensuring the successful socio-economic reintegration of commanders in

communities – by assisting them in finding work, training or education – would provide girl combatants with a very influential role model to leave the military structure and make a successful lives as civilians.

In the future I don't want to fight again. I want to go back to school. But it depends on what my commander will do. If she is going then I will go!

It is thus wise to assist commanders – who, despite their former status, are often struggling to survive – in their reintegration back into civilian life.

Education

Among the core elements of the DDR programme are education and skills training.⁹⁰ Education is highly valued among former girl combatants, although many think – having last attended at very young ages – that they could not now return to school. The provision of education and especially of Accelerated Learning Programmes (ALP) by DDR is much appreciated. The ALP, also known as catch-up education, targets “over-age” school children (girls who would be misplaced among much younger children in regular schools), allowing them to complete the first six years of elementary education in a reduced period of time.

Although the demobilized girls appreciated the offer of education, many girls interviewed were unhappy to in practice find themselves unable to return to school as they could not earn a living to support themselves and their children/siblings at the same time. The amount of money ex-combatants receive is the same for men, women, and teenage mothers, and is not enough to also support their families. Furthermore, some schools discriminate against ex-combatants – not because of their past, but because of delays in reintegration assistance payments, which caused schools to be hesitant in accepting them as they would not be able to pay their fees on time.

Non-payment of the US\$30 monthly schooling allowance has caused frustration among social workers and potentially dangerous tension among former combatants who are unable to access the education they were promised. The few girls who did manage to enter school while the research for this report was ongoing were also frustrated by the same delay in monthly fee payments.

My commander, she put me on the list. I went to disarm, it was all right. The DDRR programme gave me forms to fill in I choose school. I wanted to go to school but they never kept their promise. So we were on the street and then the old ma [THINK] decided to bring us here.

I received the 300 USD. But I'm still waiting for other money because they say every month you get 30 USD. The people are lying because we never got it.

I'm very frustrated with the DDRR, as they don't do what they promise. I never received the monthly 30 USD for schooling.

Now the DD is finished so now I should go back to school. But I cannot go back to school. I have no money to go back to school. They give no money to go back to school.

⁹⁰ See annex 2: DDR programme for children.

I am frustrated with the DDDR because the people who lose in the country, just like to say some of us. If war was not in the country we would have finished our school or learned our little trade or then we were sitting now with our parents, but we lose our family. The money that's only 150 dollar. But I want to go back to school and they are not doing that for us.

Without occupation or prospects, this frustration of former combatants can easily lead to violent and socially destructive behaviour, and shatter the fragile trust established between social workers and (girl) ex-combatants. It also stigmatises girls in schools where teachers have not been paid as a result of the delay.

Lack of income

Another huge problem for girl ex-combatants returning to civilian life is that they have insufficient income to provide for themselves, their children/siblings and, in the case of commanders, for their girls. Without a viable alternative, girls will fall back on the only support structures available to them, such as harmful dependences, exploitative relationships, military structures and re-recruitment. A job in civilian life is a crucial alternative to these undesirable outcomes. However, in post-war Liberia it is difficult to find a job, especially for girl ex-combatants who are often uneducated, unskilled and inexperienced as a result of growing up in a war-torn society and because of their involvement in the war.

Girls who do not wish to return to formal education can enhance their employability by completing a skills training of brief duration. Although most girl ex-combatants wish to continue their education, many of them regard this as impossible as their need for immediate income outweighs their desire to catch up on schooling. The older girl ex-combatants interviewed in particular preferred learning a trade, to help them in finding a job. These are typically girls who have to take care of children and/or other family members and provide for them. Vocational training would allow them to learn a trade and start earning a living in relatively short time, thereby maintaining a certain standard of living.

As this research was ongoing, some skill training projects had already started and had presented fewer problems than the education programme. However, a recent labour market analysis and training needs assessment for CAFF in Liberia⁹¹ pointed out the difficulty to find jobs once skills training completed, caused by the country's low labour absorption capacity.⁹² This draws attention to the need for skills training which is closely related to the needs of the local labour market and other economic opportunities available to ex-combatants.

Inequality

Involvement in armed forces can empower women but it can also render them more inferior. Non-fighting girls in male units suffered particularly bad treatment, and became more inferior to men than before the conflict, and their reintegration assistance needs to account for their loss of equality and self-esteem.

ICCs and NGOs have invested a lot of effort in empowering girls and raising their self-esteem. For example, girls have been encouraged to end harmful relationships with their former husbands and commanders. Although empowerment of these girls is important, the methods used may be too overwhelming.

⁹¹ ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

⁹² ILO/IPEC and UNICEF. 2005. op. cit.

For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, external influences have certainly caused some girls to become confused about the nature of their relationships. Some now adopt unfamiliar terminology in order to describe the relative degree of coercion involved in sexual relationships which they had previously come to accept as normal or loving. It is hard to judge in these cases whether re-evaluating relationships in this way will enhance the girls' well being, or lead them to abandon important – although admittedly sub-ideal – support and protection mechanisms. This is of particular concern if their potential to lead productive and independent lives outside of their erstwhile relationships is, for structural reasons that cannot be changed in the immediate term, close to non-existent. Introspection and identity crises may only succeed in damaging girls psychologically, unless they are at the same time offered more viable alternative strategies for survival than to continue in their current relationships.

Drug addiction

Overcoming drug addiction is usually a long process, often requiring supervision over a period of years. During the DD process in Liberia, a girl is supposed to stop using drugs within 5 days to 12 weeks. This is inadequate time to address the seriousness of drug addiction, particularly considering the strong bonds which many girls still have with friends from fighting forces who use drugs. Drug addiction is also problematic in the context of the payment of cash allowances, as girls with substance abuse problems may waste the resources intended to assist them on drugs.

Reconciliation

In Liberia, it should be noted that girl ex-combatants questioned generally did not express extreme hatred towards their former enemies. This could be partly because they were separated from other factions in ICCs and demobilization camps in order to prevent tension and confrontation. The DDR process plays an important role in reconciliation. The assistance given to former girl combatants in ICCs, demobilization camps and in the THINK centre, is intended to initiate social healing and reconciliation. A social worker from the THINK centre, where girls from all three fighting factions lived together, observed:

In the beginning the children they feel hatred against different fighting groups. But as the time goes by, the hatred against each other is going away. At the time the children leave the centre, you cannot discover any hatred left. This has to do with the time they spent together and the activities they do together and the reconciliation, for example talking about forgiveness, and the counselling they get. It can even be the opposite. They can become good friends and even become a strong solid group, as they experienced the same, as they were all ex-combatants.

Similarly, CAP drew attention to activities jointly involving members of different factions as an effective tool for reconciliation. The role of religion, on the other hand, should not be overemphasized in bringing about reconciliation in CAP's view. Though useful in other countries like South Africa, in Liberia it has the potential to stir up tensions among the different tribes.

Social workers for the DDR process are also responsible both for sensitisation of the children's families and communities and for monitoring and follow-up of the process. The CWC (Child Welfare Committees) go to villages to send out messages of forgiveness and reconciliation in meetings and workshops. These social workers would also engage in mediation with children, families and communities if needed. Some sensitisation teams also go to schools to facilitate acceptance.

It looks as if reconciliation is in general succeeding in Liberia, although the effect of this process and the degree to which girls are accepted will only become visible after some time, through follow-up monitoring and research.

7. Policy Implications

This chapter revisits the findings on the girl's perceptions and experiences on DDR as presented in Chapters 1-6 and reflects on its implications.

7.1. Sensitivity to girls' vulnerabilities and potentials

The reasons of boys and girls for becoming associated with fighting forces differ, as do their experiences during combat and their post-war reintegration needs. Girls and women have specific needs, capacities and ambitions that should explicitly be taken into consideration in DDR processes. Women combatants are rarely considered in DDR programmes, partly as a result of the lack of coherence and coordination in DDR, but even more so because they are not regarded as a security threat. This problem derives from different interpretations of the objectives of DDR. On the one hand there are those actors who see DDR as mainly a security issue. From this perspective, young males are strongly prioritised for assistance as "potential trouble-makers". Others understand that DDR must also enable those worst affected by war to achieve a level of human security and equality to which they are entitled under international law and which is enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals.

If this aim is kept in mind, it is clear that the diverse needs and potentials of girl and women combatants should receive more concerted and effective attention within DDR assistance. The contents of this report offer a starting point for the improvement of this assistance by bringing into focus the complexity of girls' experiences before, during and after their involvement in the conflict. If analysed appropriately, this information can lead to a more considered response to the suffering and challenges such girls face, as well as their potentials as individuals and members of society.

The report focused on girl combatants in the category of youth (15-24 years), and thus included older children and younger women. Within the group, however, it was found that *distinctions should be made according to the girl's age and maturity, whether she was an armed fighter or a non-fighter, whether she was lower- or higher-ranked, and whether she was part of a women's unit with a female commander or part of a mixed unit with a male commander, whether her association with the armed group forced her to leave her home, and the length of her association with the armed group.*

These factors affected girls' reasons for joining fighting forces, the degree to which they were exposed to sexual and other forms of violence, their relations with men, their self-confidence, their level of gender equality, the nature of their relation to their commander, the welcome they encountered within receiving communities and their reintegration into civilian life. The sub-divisions within the category of "girl combatants" described by this study in the case of Liberia thus may hold the potential to help DDR planners elsewhere to anticipate, in the run-up to demobilization, the kinds of vulnerabilities and potentials girl combatants can be expected to possess.

7.2. Reviewing girls' reasons for involvement

This report presents evidence which further undermines the illusion, propped up by the existing legal distinction between "voluntary" and "forced" recruitment, that children can

make a free choice to resist mobilization efforts. Reinforcing the findings of the recent book *Young Soldiers*,⁹³ there is a fine line between forced and voluntary recruitment, given the lack of security and viable alternatives for girls who grew up in Liberia. The more significant reasons for girls to enlist with an armed group were:

- Abduction/forced recruitment;
- To gain protection from the unit for themselves or their family;
- To acquire material possessions;
- To protect themselves from rape;
- To protect other women from rape;
- To avenge human rights violations;
- To avenge the killing of a relative;
- Growing up amidst war;
- “Marriage” to a male combatant;
- Peer pressure, becoming familiar with armed groups through friends, attraction to soldiers;
- To react against strict parental discipline;
- Lack of access education and job opportunities;
- Targeting of their ethnic/religious group;
- To attain gender equality; and
- To attain status, power, or equality through gun possession or by “marrying” a male combatant.

Aside from these major reasons for recruitment, less common factors which were found to have influenced girls included:

- Lack of alternative means to get food;
- Displacement and resentment among refugees/IDPs;
- To accompany relatives;
- Need to take care of siblings (when relatives are dead);
- Violence in media/films.

The understanding of these motives is of particular significance if it is accepted that reintegration is only likely to succeed if the complex reasons why girls joined addressed in as systematic a way as possible. In addition, the reasons for recruitment may hold the key to preventing ex-combatants and other children/youth from associating with fighting forces in future.

The main challenges faced by the Liberian girls in the immediate aftermath of war were found to be:

- Finding income for themselves and their dependants;
- Gaining access to and supporting themselves during education;
- Feeling dependent on/loyal to former units/commanders;
- Relating to their war-time partner (“bush marriages”);

⁹³ Brett, R., 2004, op. cit.

- Adjusting to a new social status;
- Returning to dependence on male providers;
- The negative perception of the receiving community; and
- The negative perception of employers.

Many girls became associated with fighting forces when it became impossible for their families to support them. In the future, schooling, training and job creation will be particularly important to such girls in Liberia: they are relatively worse educated, less skilled and more inexperienced than their competitors in an unpromising labour market.

Girls welcomed attempts to provide them with schooling, training and jobs as a way to improve their future. In some cases girls had problems in accessing/benefiting from such assistance. Where assistance cannot be accessed or fails, it is clear from their previous experiences and present circumstances that girls are at risk of losing hope, and falling into illegal and dangerous activities such as drug dealing, prostitution or re-recruitment into armed groups. They could also find themselves increasingly bound to unequal, exploitative or abusive relationships with partners and commanders. Helping girls to overcome these risks is a complex task, and will require a pro-active response to empower girls overcome gender-specific obstacles to their success as well as the problems faced by all ex-combatants.

7.3. The struggle for equality

Non-fighting girls – the vast majority of young female ex-combatants – had generally become more unequal to men during the conflict. Particularly younger, lower-ranked or non-fighting girls became associated with fighting forces either through coercion/rape, to attain protection for themselves or their families, or in order to support themselves and gain access to material goods ('red shoes').

However, the increased inequality and exposure to gender-based violence were also a major motivation for girls to enlist in fighting forces in Liberia. 'Feminist' motives for fighting girls included the wish to protect themselves and other women, the wish for broader equality, the desire to gain respect in the traditionally male sphere of combat, and the desire to inflict revenge to the harm done to women.

Female commanders, and to a lesser degree all girls who served as fighters, had to deal after war with a loss of status. Although it was desirable for them to abandon their military way of life, the concomitant loss of their capacities (management, leadership, logistics, engineering, etc) and equality was counter-productive. While many female commanders have proven their leadership qualities, it appears that girl ex-combatants are not taken as seriously as their male colleagues. A related finding is that younger girls appear to have found it easy to gain acceptance in receiving communities, whereas older girls – whose greater independence has made them less willing to readapt to rural life or conform to roles expected of them – are more likely to be viewed as troublemakers.

Thus the research revealed an ***overall risk that girls' appetite for equality may fade in the post-conflict period***. This risk had specific implications for the higher-ranked girl ex-combatants, whose capacity to make a greater contribution to DDR and post-conflict society, and in doing so to have a positive influence on other girls, is giving way to frustration, inequality, and poverty. Conversely, given their demonstrated qualities of courage, loyalty,

organisation and leadership, the potential of such women, if appropriately assisted, to live fulfilling lives on their own terms, is clear.

7.4. A new perspective on commander-girl relationships

Female units were characterised by strong bonds of solidarity which persisted after conflict. The quasi-maternal relations between many female commanders and the members of their unit contradict the prevailing view that commander-child relationships are necessarily in all cases pernicious to the interests of young ex-combatants. Many girls are strongly emotionally tied to their female commanders and units, and are further traumatised by the severing of these ties. In the year after DDR commanders were still feeding and lodging many of the girls and some paid for their school fees and uniforms. This report thus *questions the assumption that the bond between commanders and ex-combatants is best broken as quickly as possible in all cases*: it is now necessary to ask what the best approach is for girls who are strongly opposed to this break, or for girls for whom no viable alternative support network has been identified or put in place. It is possible that in specific cases, the support offered by former commanders and comrades could be of use to reach girls and assist in their reintegration.

7.5. Exploitation, abuse and psycho-social rehabilitation

Most girls studied suffered gender-based violence. Girls who were civilians or captured enemies were most exposed to gender-based violence. Within fighting groups, internal rules protected some girls, but this depended on: whether the commander was female; whether the unit was female or mixed; whether the commander was present; the character of the individual commander; his/her relationship to the girl or her partner; the overall discipline within the unit; the girl's success as a fighter or rank relative to the rank of her commander; whether the chaos of battle was such that the girl could be mistaken for a civilian; and the ability of the girl to defend herself.

In many cases girls who experienced gender-based violence remained in relationships with men who had initially raped them. This report found them to be in general lacking self-esteem, and accepting, or confused about, relationships which outsiders would tend to view as exploitative or abusive. Many girls found it difficult to define whether relationships were in fact voluntary or forced. Most girls stated that their sexual involvement with members of fighting forces was voluntary. However, one could interpret this as a manifestation of any of the following:

- Fear of recrimination;
- Fear of stigma;
- Agreement without alternatives;
- “Love” (as a coping strategy);
- “Love” (for material goods);
- “Love”, but after initial rape;
- Genuine, voluntary love; or
- Ignorance of other kinds of relationship;
- Traditional Liberian culture relating sex directly with marriage.

It was unclear in many cases whether girls would benefit from re-evaluating such relationships, and possibly redefining them as exploitative or abusive: they have often come to accept them as loving, and frequently have no other viable means of support.

Girls who were exploited by men throughout the war have trouble finding their role and position in Liberian post-conflict society, and building up their own life independent from their commanders and their "bush husbands", especially if they have children. GAFF are assisted by child protection agencies under UNICEF, which has a strong protection-oriented approach. However, ***girls over 18 years of age might face the same risks, but receive no protective assistance*** under the adult programme.

A further implication of the extreme difficulty of distinguishing between a forced and a voluntary sexual relationship is that many girls and their communities may not believe that these marriages or sexual relations were forced and that the girls or women are not to be blamed for them. In fact, in Liberia the question might even be less relevant as the tradition prescribes that if a man has sex with a woman he shall take care of her and marry her. Many girls (and their families) try to hide their past when returning home or settling in new communities.

A related finding is that, for most girls in their new civilian lives, there is hardly space for dealing with the past. Thus it was repeatedly found that forgetting trauma – whether related to things they had suffered or to their own role in violence – is the preferable option for the girls studied. The girl ex-combatants confirmed, for example, that they rarely talk about the war at school. As girls generally only feel comfortable dealing with past experience among former combatants rather than elsewhere in the wider community, this also causes them to remain related to each other rather than integrating better with non-combatants.

There is also an underlying expectation that ex-combatants must change and adapt; but no sense that society needs to try to understand what they have experienced. Many girl ex-combatants have stayed in big cities after the cease-fire where they can retain anonymity about their past life. Even though rape may not carry the same stigma as before the war, many girls experience feelings of shame.

In order for these girls to achieve an increased self esteem and a sense of equality, they require more viable alternative strategies for survival than to continue in their current relationships. Similarly, if girls' only means of attaining any level of financial security/material comfort is to accept inferiority or exploitation, they will continue to be bound by inequality. ***They currently lack the means to attain financial security and material comfort without having to compromise their equality.***

A final finding in terms of girls' psychosocial rehabilitation was related to drugs. Drug addiction was not found to be as great a problem among young female combatants during the conflict as it was among males. However, it can also be noted as a potential challenge for girls as they make the transition into civilian lives. The physical, psychological and social consequences of substance abuse among ex-combatants such as the girls in Liberia is a topic requiring further scrutiny and analysis, and potentially a long term-response in reintegration programmes.

7.6. DDR from the girls' perspective

The DDR programme in Liberia successfully tackled some of the problems that have beset similar programmes in other countries in relation to girl ex-combatants. At the same time, the perspectives of the girls revealed that, with the international community still learning how to approach girls in this context, inevitably, problems remain. Rethinking these problems could lead to the provision of even more effective DDR assistance in future programmes. The chapter thus concludes with a reflection on some of the key points warranting attention from the girls' perspective.

The budget for reintegration was put under strain because of unforeseen demand for and poor management of access to disarmament and demobilization. Many non-combatant boys successfully registered for DDR, while many girl combatants did not.

This was related to the payment of cash to ex-combatants, and children in particular, which has been a contentious issue in the Liberian DDR, with UNICEF's opposition to payment of cash allowances to children (or their parents) going unheeded. The bad effects of this included stimulating the market for weaponry, and the manipulation of the registration process by commanders and others for profit. This left many non-combatants as the beneficiaries of assistance intended for others.

While money and the influence of commanders and friends were found to be the key factors positively encouraging girls who did register for the DD process, from the sample of girls interviewed the impression was gained that more than half of the girl ex-combatants in Liberia did not formally demobilize. This may equate to over 14,000 girls, but further research would be required to give a true figure with any degree of confidence. The 18-24 year-old female ex-combatants interviewed appeared to have been much less likely than GAFF (girls under 18) to enter the process.

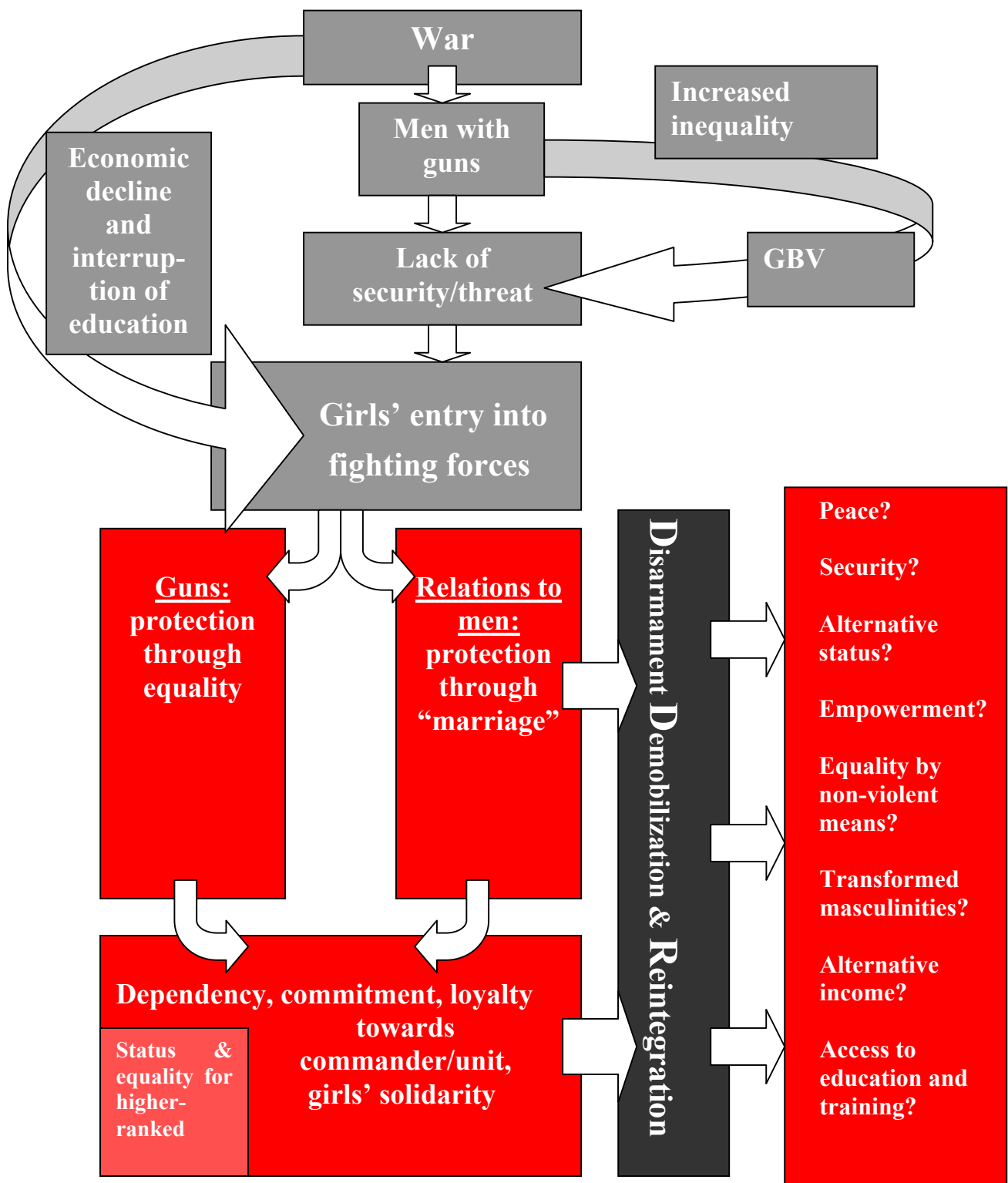
There were different reasons for girls to remain outside the process. These included:

- Dissuasion from husbands and commanders;
- Fear of stigmatisation in communities;
- Lack of trust in the peace process or the DDR programme (sometimes increased by false rumours, sometimes because of a bad experience with a previous DDR);
- Apparent unwillingness of mothers to bring children to camps;
- Unwillingness to be encamped because of negative wartime experience of camps;
- Inability to reach sites at all, because of poor transport/roads or following initial hesitancy about the process;
- Unwillingness to return to former families/rural life;
- The fact that pick-up points were sometimes crowded with males;
- The sale or loss of ID cards; and
- The powerlessness of social workers to change mistakes in registration.

The difficulty of ensuring that genuine ex-combatants are willing and able to register for DDR, with female combatants of all ages, ranks and roles proportionately represented among them, while non ex-combatants are excluded, thus requires careful further consideration. Likewise, it is crucial to raise the question of *how those girls who have self-demobilized can be reached in their communities with assistance appropriate to their needs.*

Girls also remarked on delays with reintegration, which again suggests the need for more foresight from donors in the timely release of adequate funds, and an improvement in the timing of planning for the reintegration phase.

Illustration 1: Dynamics affecting girl combatants in Liberia relevant to DDR



Annex 1: Research and Methodology⁹⁴



Girl commander after war, Monrovia 2004

1. Research objectives

The objectives of the research were:

- To gain insights in the motives of Liberian girls for taking up arms and their reintegration needs;
- To start building an understanding of the feminist motives of young women to join armed forces in several countries around the world;
- To raise national and international public awareness on the use of extreme sexual violence as a weapon in warfare and to explain its consequences; and
- To highlight key issues for improving gender sensitive prevention and reintegration policies.

2. General framework

The methodology used was highly qualitative as the research took place in a sensitive political atmosphere where girls do not easily reveal their past as a combatant. Participatory observation, in-depth interviews and group discussions were the main source of data, complemented with views and experiences of key-informants such as welfare workers and counsellors. A 22-year-old Liberian female ex-general was the main informant and partner

⁹⁴ The methodology through which this report was produced is presented here in order to be of use to those conducting similar research in other countries. It builds on Appendix 1 of Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

in this project. She provided unique access to her network of girl ex-combatants. For sensitivity reasons, the project did not have a government institution as direct national counterpart.

3. Background to the approach

The book *Young Soldiers. Why they choose to fight*⁹⁵ focuses on the reasons why young people around the world become involved in fighting. The book demonstrates that these reasons also have consequences for the demobilization and reintegration process. The book highlighted the need for more in-depth research in affected countries:

*A report and other publications with a broader analysis of the themes identified and the socio-economic reintegration policy and programmatic responses needed as a result for policy makers in governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental forums.*⁹⁶

Girls were selected as the target group as there is still relatively little knowledge about their roles and experiences in military forces. Liberia was chosen as the location for a first in-depth research study specifically on girls, as it had just emerged from conflict, had a high number of young girl combatants and was known for its war-related violence against women. In addition, Irma Specht, during previous work in Liberia, had encountered a number of girls with compelling personal histories and reasons for fighting, which had not been found in other countries. Furthermore, the security situation improved after the signing of the peace agreement, making the country accessible for this type of research. The girls were available for interview and observation, as they were no longer fighting. Liberia was also chosen because a network on the ground already existed through previous interventions of the consultancy firm Transition International.

Funding was made available by the International Labour Office (ILO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Liberia and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) who were all involved in and therefore concerned with the DDR programme in Liberia.

4. Sources

Primary sources

The large majority of this report's findings were obtained through in-depth interviews with girl combatants. Qualitative research was necessary to gain a detailed understanding of the situation faced by a range of girls from their own perspectives. It is in the nature of qualitative research that the size of the sample, or the number of situations described, is limited. Therefore the findings of this research go into depth, but generalizations should be made with caution.

Particularly because of the sensitive political environment at the time the research was conducted, to gather anthropological, qualitative findings looking in detail at personal histories, it was necessary to proceed through an established network on the ground, working through pre-established relationships of trust. There was thus little leeway in terms of

⁹⁵ Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

⁹⁶ Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

extending the geographical areas covered or redesigning the sample on the basis of purely 'scientific' factors.

This report is based on findings from in-depth interviews with 32 girl ex-combatants throughout the country. In addition, participatory research was conducted among a group of 12 girls from different ranks of the fighting forces. Non-fighters, lower-ranked girls and higher-ranked girls, up to the rank of WAC director, took part.

Interviews with the commanders of the girl ex-combatants provided a further primary source. Five female commanders were part of this research: three from LURD, including the WAC director, and two from GOL. During the war, each of these girl commanders had hundreds of girls under their command. This increases the explanatory power of this research, as relationships between girls and commanders defined for many girls the nature of their experience during and after war. Now no less than during the war, many girls still have frequent contact with their commander. Therefore the commanders had many insights to offer on girls' experiences and perspectives. However, it has to be remembered that this is always from their point of view as commanders.

All research was carried out by the authors, who were assisted by local translators (in some cases) and Liberian researchers. The fieldwork began in January 2004, but was mostly concentrated within the period November 2004 – February 2005.

Secondary sources

This research also used secondary sources to gain insights on the situation of girl ex-combatants. The researchers met with a number of social workers and caregivers who worked with the girls individually or in groups. The researcher interviewed social workers from both the official DDR process and from organizations that operated independently of the official DDR. These informants offered a degree of regional balance and provided a means of verifying the in-depth findings produced by the lead researcher while living among the smaller group against a wider range of cases.

Girls', commanders', social workers' and caregivers' views were then combined to offer an overview of the life experiences and perceptions of the girls during conflict and as the DDR process got underway. Although effort has been put into verifying stories and investigating contradictions between differing perspectives where possible, the report is based on the points of view of the persons observed, interviewed and consulted and the interpretations and impressions of the authors: it should not be read as an attempt to assert a factual, historical narrative of events. What it does present, however, is how the girls in Liberia experienced the war, how they got involved, their experiences in the armed forces, their struggles to become civilians, and how they evaluate the assistance provided to them.

Literature

The findings of this research were also in places compared to findings of other research from Liberia and elsewhere. Sources consulted are listed in the bibliography.

5. Selection of informants

It cannot be claimed that the young people interviewed in this research are a representative sample of all girl combatants in Liberia. The research, however, made deliberate efforts to gather information beyond the situations and areas commonly reported.

The 32 girls interviewed were associated with the fighting forces themselves. Key informants were used to identify the girls and to establish and verify their background and the interview situation. The selection of informants was constrained by practical issues, such as the established network of the researcher and the accessibility of the girls in terms of security. However, great effort was made to find a varied sample of interviewees: young and older girls, those who were officially demobilized and those who “auto-demobilized”, those who fought with government forces and with the armed opposition group, those who were actually fighting and those who performed exclusively support roles, those of lower and higher ranks, those from urban and rural backgrounds and members of as many different ethnic and religious communities as possible.

These criteria notwithstanding, the interviewees were in practice those girls who were accessible and willing to talk, with the risk of repercussions as a result of doing so. They were driven, however, by the hope that their voices might lead to change, that the world should know of their experiences and do more to prevent the suffering they have felt and witnessed.

The WAC Director of LURD, a 22 year-old female general, who was both a primary subject of this study and also a key informant, was one of the entry points for obtaining data. With her assistance, sixteen girls were selected for interviews, four of them being commanders. Of these four commanders two had fought for LURD (one had switched from GOL to LURD) and two for GOL (one had fought for ULIMO in the first war and GOL in the second). All four commanders were friends of the LURD director. Two other informants were wives of high male LURD commanders. Of the ten other girls, nine had fought for LURD (one of whom had previously fought for GOL) and one for GOL. All of these girls had been combatants, but mostly in lower ranks. By establishing close relations with the WAC director, the researcher was able to select the girls for the interviews from a group of girls. The WAC director, however, chose the group.

The participatory observation undertaken for three months provided unique insights into the relationship between girl combatants and commanders. This issue thereby receives significant attention in this report. All the girls interviewed were still in contact with their commanders. In addition, this approach made it possible to examine the experiences of girls of different ranks within one unit, and also enabled the research to reach those girls who were not in contact with formal DDR or other assistance.

It is possible that the girl combatants interviewed could not always speak freely as they were still associated with the female commander through whom they were put in contact with the researcher. They sometimes merely wanted to please their commander with their responses. Moreover, working through a LURD commander, resulted in the disproportionate inclusion of combatants from LURD, although two GOL commanders and one GOL combatant were also interviewed in depth. Since the commanders pre-selected the group of possible interview partners, they might have chosen those with whom they have developed good relationships, and excluded those who might tell bad stories about their commanders.

In order to mitigate these biases, through UNICEF and other contacts, social workers selected the other 15 girl combatants to be interviewed. These girls were not aware of the relationship of the researcher with the commanders. The commanders were also not involved in the process of selecting these girls although in two cases the girls used to be under the command of the WAC director. Other girls were also consulted who did not fall under the direct command of any of the commanders interviewed. All these girls had received some kind of assistance for their demobilization and reintegration. This sub-sample complemented the insights gained from girls identified by the commanders. Most girls chosen by the social workers were non-fighters who had been associated with fighting forces. Some of them had served under a male commander. Five of the girls had been associated with LURD, of whom one had previously been with GOL, and 10 girls were associated with GOL, of whom one had previously been with LURD.

During an initial meeting before the DDR process started, approximately 22 combatants associated with MODEL were interviewed. However, no detailed interviews followed since no member of the network through which the research was set up could establish further contacts with a MODEL girl in Monrovia or the surrounding area. The researcher would only have been able to interview them by travelling to the eastern part of Liberia, which was not possible due to security and time constraints. This is a key shortcoming of this research, which was slightly mitigated by talking to social workers who had worked with MODEL girl ex-combatants in Maryland. Moreover, MODEL separated from LURD only 6 months before the cease-fire, and thus the failure to interview ex-combatants from MODEL is not a major oversight as they could broadly be expected to have had similar experiences as those from LURD.

As well as helping to identify social workers and caregivers who worked with children and youth in the DDR process, UNICEF also put the researcher in contact with three different implementing partners from the DD process. These partners worked in different counties, with each of the three armed groups. UNICEF's social protection officers also shared their experience on girl combatants and DDR.

The partners selected by UNICEF were:

Christian Children's Fund (CCF): as the lead child protection agency in Bong, Gbarpolu and Bomi counties, CCF coordinated DD activities for CAFF and operated Interim Care Centres for the demobilized children there.⁹⁷

International Rescue Committee (IRC): is the lead child protection agency in Nimba and Lofa counties, the IRC coordinated DD activities for children associated with the fighting forces and operated Interim Care Centres for the demobilized children there.⁹⁸

Children Assistance Programme (CAP): was running ICCs in Gbarnga, Buchanan and Monrovia (for those children demobilised in VOA) and Maryland and provided social workers to assist children during the instant disarmament and demobilization in three counties Sinoe, Grand Kru and River Gee.

⁹⁷ <http://www.christianchildrensfund.org/emergency/default.aspx?id=172>.

⁹⁸ <http://www.theirc.org/Liberia/>.

Along with these organizations, which were part of the official DDR programme, the researcher interviewed social workers and caregivers from Touching Humanity In Need of Kindness (THINK) Rehabilitation home as an organization that was linked to UNICEF but operated independently of the official DDR.

THINK is a Liberian aid organization who is partnering with Samaritan's Purse to house and rehabilitate women through a nine-month programme of counselling and skills training. Participants aged 14-22 receive instruction in basic hygiene, sanitation, and interpersonal skills. Micro-enterprise training in tailoring, sewing, and tie-dye production is also part of this rehabilitation programme. Twenty-five girl ex-combatants are currently enrolled at this location.⁹⁹

In addition, the researcher interviewed the Women and Children Development Organization (WACDO), an organisation linked neither to UNICEF nor the official DDR programme:

The Women and Children Development Organization (WACDO) is a non-governmental, non-profit and non-political organization established and registered under the laws of the Republic of Liberia in 1998 for underprivileged, disadvantaged or vulnerable women that live below the poverty line aged 16-55. WACDO, on a "Self-Help" basis, trains women in the remotest areas in Liberia. These women have been granted micro-credit facilities by local NGOs, lending institutions and individuals.

Finally, it must be explained that this research built upon insights obtained during the labour market and skills needs analyses, also executed by Transition International, for ILO and UNICEF. This earlier study covered 150 women, of whom approximately 100 girls were consulted through Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). At that time, just before DDR was started, group interviews were conducted to discuss if the women were informed about DDR, whether they would go and the reasons why, and what they wanted to do in life after being a combatant. These findings formed the basis of this research and were taken into account.

The 32 girls interviewed for this research project had all been involved in the last war before they reached the age of 18 years. The only exceptions to this were four girl commanders and two wives of male commanders, although they had been under 18 when they became associated with fighting forces in the first war. When the interviews with the girl ex-combatants took place, 21 of the 32 girls interviewed were 18 years or older. Since this study focused on youth, it intentionally did not refer to them under the more general term "children", although all persons under the age of 18 years are considered to be children under international law. In this research however they were considered as youth, and referred to simply as "girls". These "older children" account for the vast majority of the world's "child soldiers", yet were identified by Graça Machel in the *UN Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*¹⁰⁰ as being the most neglected age group.¹⁰¹ Although ILO 182 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child define all those up to 18 years of age as children, in

⁹⁹ <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/OCHA-64CB2J?OpenDocument>.

¹⁰⁰ Machel, G. 1996. *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*. Report of the expert of the Secretary-General submitted pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 48/157. UN Document A/51/306 and Add. 1. New York: United Nations.

¹⁰¹ This judgment was reiterated by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2000, p. 1: "adolescents are in desperate need of increased attention by the international community".

focussing on adolescent girl combatants this report prefers the terms “youth” and “young soldiers”. These terms articulate better the sense in which the ex-combatants studied are between child and adult status with vulnerabilities and potentials characteristic of both groups.

The information provided by ICC social workers and caregivers solely concerned girl combatants who were under 18 at the time of their demobilization, as were all the girls interviewed through these social workers and caregivers who worked at the ICCs. This is due to the strict age limits of ICCs, which only admit those aged under 18. The information obtained through THINK and WACDO also related to youth aged over 18, as a result of their more flexible age regulations. Thus all the girls interviewed through these social workers and caregivers were in the age category 15-24.

6. Data Collection Methodology

The following anthropological methods used in researching this report:

Participatory observation

The researcher lived for three months together with the WAC director and a GOL commander in Liberia. This made it possible to follow them in their daily routines. It also brought the researcher into close contact with many girls who used to be members of the commanders’ units and enabled her to get more insights into the relationship between the girl ex-combatants and their former commanders. On the other hand, by living with a commander, the girl combatants also associated the researcher with the commanders – situating her very specifically within the military relationships that persisted after the war. The researcher tried to offset any resultant foreclosure of responses by spending time with girl ex-combatants without the commanders being present, and by also spending time with girl combatants who were not associated with these commanders.

Life stories

As a result of staying at the commanders’ house, the researcher was able to conduct extensive interviews with the commander herself as well as some of the girl ex-combatants who frequently visited. The trust that was built during these three months offered her a very intimate view of these girls’ life stories, and decreased the likelihood of the commanders or the girls being dishonest to the researcher, as they were in almost constant contact with her.

The interviewer began with a first recorded interview after which she then pursued particular details and aspects in subsequent interviews. The researcher added her personal impressions of the interviews separately, including some background materials on the country and the girls. She also assessed how representative each girl was for the research.

With eight girls a series of in-depth interviews were carried out during the three months, and the researcher also followed these girls in many activities. This yielded eight very detailed narratives about the lives of the girls in question that were of major importance for obtaining information about commander-girl relationships.

Ethnographical interviews/in-depth interviews

Through her contacts with social workers, the researcher was able to do in-depth interviews with girls who were not aware of the relationship between the researcher and the commanders. In some cases the social workers selected the girl to be interviewed; in other

cases the researcher was free to choose one girl from a group. For example, she could talk to any of the 25 girls living at the THINK centre. In contrast to the girls who were selected through their contact with the commanders, the researcher made her selection among these girls based on their time and willingness to talk to her. In total, the researcher was able to conduct additional in-depth interviews with 32 girl ex-combatants. Of these, 24 were interviewed on a single occasion only. In these cases, although the questions covered all the research topics, the reliability of the answers could have diminished because there was no comparative second interview or trust relationship between the researcher and the girl. The researcher tried to address the trust problem by spending a long time with each girl and by doing an activity that was not related to the research with the girls before starting the interview.

Further in depth interviews were conducted with social workers and caregivers of the different organizations who worked with girl ex-combatants.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are group discussions about a certain topic. The researcher employed this method several times. One example was a discussion with 5 girls about the topic of rape, their experiences with it and the definition of the term. This method makes it possible to examine one topic in depth, with the different participants drawing out from each other a variety of opinions. FGDs present the disadvantage that some girls may be reluctant to express their ideas in a group. In general, however, they were a useful way to collect information alongside the individual interviews.

Factors influencing the research findings

Language

The official language spoken in Liberia is English but with a very distinct Liberian accent – generally referred to as Liberian English. This dialect of standard American English is sometimes difficult for a foreign researcher to understand. In addition to this language barrier, many girls had only received a few years of school education and were thus more fluent in their tribal language (e.g. Mandingo). In most cases, the researcher was able to communicate with girls directly, but the interview was held in rather primitive English.

The researcher's ability to understand Liberian English improved considerably over the course of her three months in the country.

Translator/local resource person

Several translators and research assistants worked with this project. The main translator employed for this research was a 25-year old Liberian female. Translation was used in the few cases where the girl combatants were only able to speak the tribal language or an extreme form of Liberian English. Although this assistance was necessary, the translator obviously had a certain freedom of interpretation. The researcher was almost always present when interviews were conducted, although some interviews were conducted by the research assistants, especially in the beginning of the project. As a result of their Liberian origin, the translator and research assistants were able to provide valuable insights into Liberian culture, society, history and politics, and assisted the main researcher in relating to the girls' stories and understanding references (to names or events) specific to Liberia.

Furthermore, they were able to ask the girls questions in a more direct way, given their understanding of sensitive areas in the Liberian context. The interviewees generally regarded the translator/local resource person as one of them. One of the negative consequences of using a local person was that some girls were more reluctant to talk, as they were afraid that the translator/local resource person might know the people they were talking about and use these pieces of information against them.

The researcher

A female anthropologist was selected for this research. This was an asset since the target group consisted of girls and young women who generally found it easier to speak openly to and trust another female, especially when talking about sensitive topics such as rape. Furthermore, the researcher was reasonably young and therefore able to participate relatively unobtrusively alongside these girls as they went about their everyday activities.

The fact that the researcher was a white-skinned foreigner had both positive and negative effects. One advantage was that it allowed for a more independent and impartial assessment of the interview data. The researcher passed no judgment on the experiences and decision of the girls she interviewed or the factual accuracy of the accounts. Nor did she espouse any political position on the Liberian conflict. Her sole objective was to understand things from the perspective of the young combatants themselves. As the researcher was white, the girls regarded her as neutral, but automatically assumed that she was rich and part of a help organization at first. By staying among them, however, she was soon accepted.

Reliability

Child and youth participants are known to have a fertile imagination and to lie about certain things. Nevertheless, their testimony is useful as it gives insight into the world of the girls. When the researcher was aware of potential reasons for lying it was sometimes possible to offer reassurances of disinterest and impartiality. Likewise, it was possible to increase the trust of interviewees by living with these girls, and by conducting several interviews with one girl. Thus it was sometimes possible to verify responses on different occasions or by raising a doubtful issue with other interviewees.

Oral history

Another important issue is that the researcher had experience with Africa's traditions of oral history. In many African contexts, including in Liberia, story telling is a strongly developed skill. Real happenings are told, re-told and re-told again, providing the speaker with the opportunity to interpret and add their associations into a narrative as it proceeds. Understanding and working with and through this tradition can be confusing, but is ultimately able to enrich the understanding of what happened, and more importantly, how it is perceived.

Use of material

Almost all the interviews were recorded on tape. The girls themselves were able to decide if the researcher was allowed to record. Afterwards, all the interviews were transcribed. In this report the exact words of the girls were used wherever practical, although minor adjustments were made to make quotes more readable (without altering the sense of what was said).

Security

Throughout the research period the security of the girls was an important consideration. In order not to put the informants at risk, the names used in the report are fictitious.

Ethics

The following ethical guidelines were followed in this research:¹⁰²

1. Keep all names and information confidential. Never use any identifying names in the written and recorded material;
2. Give priority to protecting the safety, security and privacy of the interviewee at all times;
3. Remain sensitive to the interviewee and stop the interview if this appears necessary or is requested by the interviewee;
4. Do not raise expectations or make promises that cannot be fulfilled;
5. Report the data with as much accuracy as possible and honour the voice, i.e. the story as given by the interviewee, subject only to changes to preserve confidentiality;
6. Report promptly to the project management any difficulties, problems or inadvertent breaches of these guidelines which might impinge upon the security of anyone involved.

The Primary Data

As stated above, the common feature of the 32 informants was that they were all women and were all previously associated with one of the fighting forces during the last war. Most of the women were still under 18 at the time of their recruitment into fighting forces, but were over 18 by the time of the interview. It was the individual girl's life history, not her current status, which was the criterion for her selection. Regarding their ages and length of military involvement, the following statistical data should be understood as approximations. It was in the nature of the interviews that precise answers were not always given on specific points; sometimes the answers were of dubious accuracy, and sometimes there were internal inconsistencies.

¹⁰² Following the research guide in Brett, R., and Specht, I. 2004. op. cit.

Age at time of interview

<i>Age at time of interview</i>	<i>Number of interviewees</i>
15	3
16	5
17	3
18	5
19	3
20	2
21	1
22	3
23 plus	7 (4 commanders and 2 wives of male commanders)
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

Age at time of recruitment

<i>Age at time of recruitment</i>	<i>Number of interviewees</i>
10	1
11	3
12	5
13	3
14	3
15	2
16	4
17	5
18 plus	6 (were all involved in the first war as children)
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

Other statistical data

<i>Participation in official DDR programme</i>	<i>Number</i>
Participated	14
Did not participate	18
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

<i>Participation in fighting</i>	<i>Number</i>
Participated	19
Did not participate	13 (all under 18 except for the 2 wives of the commanders)
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

<i>Faction</i>	<i>Number</i>
GOL	11 (2 commanders)
LURD	16 (3 commanders)
LURD to GOL	2
GOL to LURD	3
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

<i>Place of residence</i>	<i>Number</i>
Monrovia	24
Tubmanburg	5
Gbarnga	3
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

<i>Place of origin</i>	<i>Number</i>
Lofa County	8
Nimba County	7
Maryland	1
Montserrado County	3
Bomi County	3
Bong County	6
Sinoe County	1
Grand Cape Mount County	3
	<u>32 (Total)</u>

Note: some girls had come to Monrovia before they joined a fighting force.

The Secondary Data

CCF: One interview was held with a female social worker from CCF. She was involved with the DD process at different ICCs and a drop-in centre for CAFF girls. Another meeting was held with three female social workers/care-givers and the project director of CCF Tubmanburg, who all worked at the ICC for girls in Tubmanburg. One male social worker also participated in Tubmanburg. He was working with the boys there. In Zorzor as well in Tubmanburg CCF mainly dealt with ex-LURD girl combatants.

IRC: One interview was held with Samuel Kamanda, the IRC Liberia DDR manager for Lofa and Nimba Counties. Samuel was involved with children aged under 18 rather than girls specifically. In Lofa and Nimba he was in charge of the advocacy and coordination of the DDR for children in cooperation with the commanders, MILOB's (Military Observers) and UNMIL. He mainly dealt with ex-LURD CAFF.

CAP: One meeting was held with eight social workers and caregivers who worked in the ICC and drop-in centre in Maryland. Although they mainly worked in Maryland they said that their experiences in Maryland resemble also the other 3 counties. Only in Buchanan was an ICC for girls provided. In the other counties drop-in centres for girls were established, as there was no girls' ICC- this is as far as CAP was concerned there were other CPAs that operated girls only ICCs such as SC UK in Monrovia, Zwedru, CCF in Tubmanburg, Samaritan's Purse international Relief in Monrovia and in Buchanan, IRC in both Lofa and Nimba. They mainly worked with ex-MODEL combatants.

UNICEF: Several discussions were held with the staff of the Protection Unit from UNICEF Liberia – especially with Fatuma Ibrahim, the Project Officer.

THINK: One interview was held with the project coordinator and a social worker who worked in the centre in Monrovia. A follow-up visit took place to interview some girls at the THINK centre from GOL as well as LURD.

WACDO: One interview was held with 5 social workers who all worked at the WACDO Micro Finance Programme in an IDC in Monrovia. A follow-up visit took place to the IDC with three female social workers. Here also a group discussion with the women from the micro-finance programme was established and one in depth-interview with a girl ex-combatant from LURD was conducted.

YWCA: A meeting was organized bringing together 150 women, of whom approximately 100 were girls from all armed groups. There were also discussions within sub-groups of 20-25 women according to the group they had been fighting with. This meeting took place before the DDR process and formed the basis of the later research.

7. Analyses and Interpretation of Data

The process of collating, interpreting and analysing the large amount of qualitative research data was one of the major challenges of this research.

Based as it is on qualitative research, this report cannot offer generalizations about girl-ex-combatants, their experiences of conflict and the DDR process, or verify whether the types of experience recorded happened to a particular percentage of girls of a particular age, rank or provenance. It does provide insights into the “orientations” of people: the feelings, thoughts and ideas that constitute their perception of their lives as well as the society in which their actions are formed. In the process of selecting and emphasising material, it was important to go beyond these orientations as a collection of individual characteristics, and to try to identify that which was typical of girl combatants in Liberia, a perspective shared with comparable others or a group perspective.

The process of collating and analysing the girls’ interview statements was therefore an attempt to “see how their individual experience interacts with powerful social and organizational forces that pervade the context in which they live and work”.¹⁰³ Excerpts from the transcripts have been organized in categories, within and between which the authors have elaborated upon apparent connections and patterns. One of the advantages of presenting the excerpts thematically in this way is that it reproduces the words of the girls in a direct and striking manner and it makes the reader understand easily how far the words and themes of different girls mirrored one another.

This method of data collection and presentation could be criticized for providing too little background on the individuals discussed. The writers of this research document decided to provide very limited information on the exact background of the girls interviewed in order to reduce the likelihood of their being traced. Their background in terms of elements as ethnicity, region of origin, religion, age, place in the family, rural or urban settings, were, however, available to the writers and have been taken into account in analysing the materials.

¹⁰³ Seidman, I. 1998. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and Social Sciences*. 2nd edition. New York: Teachers College Press. p. 112.

Annex 2: DDR programme for children¹⁰⁴

CHILDREN in the DDR PROGRAMME

Definition of a child: Anyone below 18 years of age.

All combatants involved with the fighting forces of Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), Movement of Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) and the former Government of Liberia (Ex – GOL) are expected to go through the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) process. Children (boys and girls) associated with any of the above fighting forces will also go through the DDRR programme, using a different process.

Disarmament

Children associated with the fighting forces aged below 18 will be prioritised and disarmed rapidly and sent to the cantonment site for demobilization. Boys and girls associated with the fighting forces will go through the disarmament process whether they have guns or not, to ensure that those children with guns as well as those who played other roles such as cooks, messengers, porters and sex slaves are reached.

Demobilization

Priority will be given to children's activities and processes in the cantonment site so that they can be taken out of the cantonment site within 72 hours.

Once the boys and girls reach the cantonment, they will be received by social workers from child protection agencies such as Save the Children/UK (SC/UK), Don Bosco Homes, Christian Children's Fund (CCF), Children Assistance Programme (CAP), Samaritans Purse International Relieve (SPIR), World Vision (WV), International Rescue Committee (IRC) and others. There will be further screening of the children by Child Protection Agency staff to verify age and to ensure child is CAFF. Separated children will be sent directly to the Interim Care Centres (ICC), they will not go through the demobilization process. Thereafter, children will be separated from adults - Boys and girls will be separated from each other. They will have separate bathrooms, toilets and eating-places.

Once in the cantonment site, boys and girls will be:

- Registered;
- Photographed and issued Ids;
- Medically screened;
- Provided with personal items such as blankets, clothing, hygiene kits, plastic buckets;
- Briefed on the DDRR process and the DDRR packages for boys and girls;
- Issued discharge certificates.

¹⁰⁴www.humanitarianinfo.org/liberia/coordination/sectoral/DDR/doc/DDRR%20Fact%20Sheet%20april%202004.DOC.

Interim Care Services

The Interim Care Centres (ICC) are transit facilities for demobilized children to start the process of re-socialization to help children manage the transition from military to civilian life. The stay at the ICC helps children to get prepared to go back home and to give time for the preparation of families and communities to receive the children.

Demobilized boys' and girls' stay at the ICC will be short (between 2 and 12 weeks). Boys and girls will go to separate ICC. The ICC are operated by Child Protection Agencies such as SC UK, CCF, WV, IRC, Samaritan's Purse, CAP, and Don Bosco Homes. There are guidelines for operating ICC which all agencies operating the ICC must respect. At the ICC, children will receive care, support and basic services. They will be looked after by social workers.

Services and Activities at the ICC:

- Provision of food, water and shelter;
- Health care services;
- Education activities such as literary and numeracy;
- Recreational activities including sports, games, drama, and story telling;
- Life skills training on HIV/AIDS, children's rights, personal hygiene, childcare, sexual and reproductive health care and other topics children will choose;
- Services for boys and girls with special needs (e.g. those with disabilities and girls with babies);
- Psychosocial support and counselling services; special counselling for those who have survived sexual violence, rape, and those on illicit drugs;
- Documentation for family tracing and reunification;
- Alternative care arrangements for those children who cannot go home for various reasons;
- Career guidance and assessments for school placements;
- Preparations for returning home;
- Preparations of families and communities to receive the children.

Reintegration processes and programmes, for demobilized boys and girls

The reintegration process of demobilized boys and girls starts at the Interim Care Centres. Once the parents or families are traced/identified, the children will be taken to their homes and they will be given reintegration packages that will consist of:

- Clothes, beddings, hygiene kits, and educational materials received while at the centre;
- Food supply for one month.

Once the child or young person returns home:

He or she will be placed in an **elementary school with his or her consent** – and the school will be assisted with learning and recreational materials.

-or-

He or she will join **Accelerated Learning Programme** for between 1 and 3 years, and then go to secondary school or to receive skills training.

-or-

He or she will join a **skills training institution that provides skills training such as:** agriculture, computer, carpentry, masonry for between 6 to nine months and after completion will be given start up kits to help them start something on their own.

-or-

Some children and young persons may be placed in apprenticeships. They will be attached to an **artisan of the trade** of their choice and will learn the trade from the artisan.

Those living in foster care will benefit from support given to the family and communities and those living in group care arrangements and those who choose to live independently will get support to pay their rent as they learn a trade. Once they start working they will take care of themselves.

To sustain the reintegration of demobilized children, UNICEF is supporting capacity building of community networks and supportive structures at grassroots levels and the national level. Implementing partners have assisted communities to form Child Welfare Committees who will be monitoring the situation of the demobilized children. At national level the strengthening of the National Child Rights Observatory Group is on going. This group will work as a children's ombudsman; to monitor, document and take actions on violations of the rights of children in general.

Annex 3: DDR programme for adults¹⁰⁵

Disarmament and Demobilization

The DDRR process was to consist of a three-week (later reduced to five days) disarmament and demobilization period under the auspices of UNMIL at a cantonment site. In the absence of registers kept by the armed groups, eligibility for DDRR benefits was based on the willingness of a combatant to hand over a firearm. After disarmament by UNMIL peacekeepers at the so-called D1 site, former fighters were transported to the D2 site, where they were registered, received medical attention, human rights and peace training, as well as career counselling. During this period, fighters were separated from the civilian population and not allowed to leave the camps. At the end of the camp period, former fighters received food for one month as well as a cash stipend of US\$150, along with free transport to a location of their choice within Liberia. Foreign nationals were to be transferred to their country of origin or could opt for refugee status within Liberia. The second – rehabilitation and reintegration period – was to begin immediately after the arrival of the ex-combatants in their settlement areas, with available options including formal education, vocational training and job creation. During this period a second instalment of \$150 was to be paid to the former fighters as a sustenance allowance.

The first phase of the DDRR programme was launched on 7 December 2003 at Camp Scheffelin in the vicinity of Monrovia, mostly targeting former government soldiers and paramilitaries. However, this first phase lasted only a few days because UNMIL was overwhelmed by a higher than anticipated response from former combatants. Compounded by organizational and resource problems, this led to riots at the camp site that left several people dead, and led to rioting and looting in Monrovia.¹⁰⁶ Despite these adverse conditions, UNMIL managed to process 13,123 former combatants, and to collect 8,679 weapons and more than 2.7 million rounds of ammunition during this phase.

After these chaotic first days, the programme was suspended for four months and UNMIL re-designed the process. During this period the qualification criteria were expanded to include people who could not produce a weapon, but could present 150 rounds of ammunition instead.¹⁰⁷ The second phase began on 15 April 2004 with the opening of four cantonment sites at Gbarnga, Buchanan, Tubmanburg and Monrovia (at the site of the old Voice of America transmitter, the area therefore being known as VOA). While these sites covered only a fraction of Liberia's territory, unlike the aborted process in the first phase, their geographic dispensation targeted members of all armed groups. As during the earlier phase, it quickly became evident that the caseload exceeded the expectations of UNMIL, forcing the JIU to change certain programme elements. Though originally the combatants were expected to remain for three weeks in the camps in an attempt to separate the fighters from their commanders and to provide initial training, this period was reduced to five days. More significantly, the number of reintegration programme slots did not grow in tandem with the number of demobilized fighters, forcing discharged ex-combatants to wait for months, often

¹⁰⁵ Quoted from: Paes, W. C. 2005, op. cit.

¹⁰⁶ International Crisis Group. 2004. Briefing No. 75, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ The precise reason for this policy change remains unclear. Some people interviewed suggested that this resulted from problems encountered during the first phase; while the ICG claims that this is based on the DDR experience in neighbouring Sierra Leone, where 'camp followers' were often excluded from the process because they did not have a weapon to surrender. International Crisis Group. 2004. *Liberia and Sierra Leone: Rebuilding Failed States*, Dakar/Brussels: ICG Africa, Briefing No. 87, p. 10.

in destitute conditions in greater Monrovia. Things were further complicated by the fact that only the first instalment of \$150 was paid immediately after being discharged, while payment of the second instalment started only in September 2004. During the second phase 51,466 people went through the camps and a total of 9,417 weapons and 2.29 million rounds of ammunition were collected and subsequently destroyed by UNMIL.

The third phase of the DDRR programme began in early July 2004 with the opening of new camps in Zwedru, Ganta and Vonjama, following the deployment of UNMIL military contingents to these areas. While this should have been concluded by 31 October 2004, the deadline was extended by three weeks because of logistic difficulties in disarming pockets of combatants in remote north western and south-eastern Liberia. When the programme finally ended in late November 2004, a total of 102,193 people had been processed, and 27,000 guns and more than 6.15 million rounds of ammunition had been collected.

Out of this total caseload 69,236 (67 per cent) were adult males, 22,400 (22 per cent) adult females, 8,792 (9 per cent) male children and 2,561 (2 per cent) female children. Throughout the DDRR process UNMIL took great care to separate male and female, underage and adult combatants, by housing them in separate section of the camps. These precautions acknowledged that female and/or underage combatants would be prone to abuse by other camp inmates and required special reintegration assistance. Underage combatants were usually processed on the date of arrival and then discharged from the demobilization camp to an interim care centre run by a child protection agency such as UNICEF.¹⁰⁸

Rehabilitation and Reintegration

During the DD period, the former combatants were asked about their preferred area of settlement.

During registration at the D2 camp, combatants were also asked what kind of RR assistance they were interested in. The options presented to them included agriculture, employment, formal education and vocational training.

By November 2004, only 11,212 former combatants were registered in ongoing projects, with another 4,681 registered for formal education at various junior, secondary and tertiary institutions. Taking into account UNMIL's reasonable assumption that two per cent of the total caseload would 'spontaneously reintegrate', i.e. not request RR assistance, this left more than 82,000 former combatants unaccounted for. Consequently there is a dangerous mismatch between the DD and RR phases of the programme. Several thousand people have been waiting since April 2004 for RR benefits and as the caseload has grown, so has the waiting period for the few programme slots available.

¹⁰⁸ In August 2004, UNICEF claimed that 85 per cent of the 5,800 children processed at this stage had been reunited with family members, while 970 were still living at Interim Care Centres waiting for their families to be traced. Updated statistics were unavailable at the end of 2004, Integrated Regional Information Network (OCHA, NY), 26 Aug. 2004.

Annex 4: THINK & WACDO

In some cases, girls who did not do the formal DD still received external support for their demobilization and reintegration. These girls are not necessarily worse off than the ones who went through the formal programmes, but it is only a fortunate few who have access to such programmes. One of the examples of organizations who supported girls in their reintegration process was the NGO THINK Home.

The NGO THINK is running a centre for girls, which is funded by the Samaritans Purse International relief. The centre is not linked to the formal DDR process. Girls may thus go to the DD process but don't have to.¹⁰⁹ The centre normally takes in 25 girls, who are staying there for 9 months. At the moment, the second group is in the centre (Sept 2004 - May 2005) while the first group of 25 is already re-unified with their families. THINK has made it a priority to have a mixed group with girls from all three fractions, GOL, LURD and MODEL. The target beneficiaries are girls who were associated with the fighting forces and who are between the ages of 12 and 22. Its first group directly came from the frontline. In order to enrol participants of the second group, THINK searched in and around Monrovia areas where ex-combatants, men and women, were known to seek shelter, namely deserted buildings but also commander's houses.

Upon the girls' arrival, THINK first takes them to a hospital for medical examination. Some girls received extended medical treatment; STD and other injuries that result from gender-based violence and other physical abuse are frequent. In the centre, the girls receive some utilities for their stay and are assigned a bed; they receive food three times a day. In addition, girls enjoy intensive social counselling in groups of 8, especially in the first 3 months. Furthermore they receive education and skills training at the centre. In the morning, the girls attend school through an Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) for overage children where they learn to read and write. In the afternoon, THINK offers skills training programmes in tailoring, pastry, tie-dye or soap making. Some girls combine different training programmes. After completion of the skill-training programme, they are given courses in business management. Sunday is their "free" day, which the girls can use to visit family and friends, but, if they want, also their ex-combatant comrades or their ex-combatant boyfriends or their former commanders. After their 9-month stay at the centre, the girls graduate and go back into society. THINK will trace their families and talk to them. Part of the programme is to do follow-up after reunification to find out how well girls have reintegrated.

Although the number of girls who can benefit from this kind of intensive care is minimal and its impact thus limited, the small size of the centre has also some advantages. For example, THINK can adapt its programmes to the girls' specific needs, and counsellors can spend more time with each one of them. As there are girls from all three fighting factions, there is also an opportunity for reconciliation. The longer stays at the THINK centre in contrast to the stays at ICCs helps girls to replace their military identity and to quit drugs. These are all factors that are very important for their reintegration.

THINK offers the girls with their program an unique opportunity that in some respects even outdoes the official DDR, though it should not be idealized. One of its negative effects could be, for example, that the girls have become so tied to the institution after their 9-month stay

¹⁰⁹ While everybody went from the first group, only 7 out of the 25 girls went through the formal DD.

that they have trouble returning to their families. They were protected and taken care of, which might create another kind of dependency. Families might not be able to afford or offer the same kind of treatment as the centre. In this regard, the approach of the official DDR programme is more advantageous, as it reunifies the girls with their parents after a relatively short period of time; school and training would then start from home.

There are also other programmes that focus on women and girls like WACDO (Women and Children Development Organization). WACDO is running a women organization within an Internal Displacement Camp. The organization offers a microfinance programme for 100 women. Although it is not targeted at girl ex-combatants, this group is represented in the course, also giving those who have had no access to the formal R a chance to learn a skill. The course duration is 4 months. At the moment, WACDO has its second group of women.

Although such organizations that operate parallel to the official DDR programmes are beneficial for girl ex-combatants, their limited capacity should be noted; the large majority of girls will not be able to take advantage of their services.

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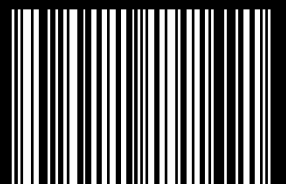
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