

Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions

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This paper is primarily based on the research undertaken by the two Quaker United Nations Offices (New York and Geneva), published as Yvonne E. Kearns: *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers*, October 2002.² It has been supplemented from other sources, see footnotes and bibliography.

Introduction:

War has traditionally been considered as a male preserve, and this remains predominantly true. However, women and girls participate in warfare to a far greater degree than is generally recognised.³ Why do girls participate?⁴ What leads them to join armed forces or armed groups? Are the reasons they join different from those of boys? Are their roles and experiences in armed forces and armed groups and in warfare the same or different? How do they experience demobilisation and reintegration into society?

These questions are at last beginning to be addressed, and some preliminary information is now available and hence some tentative policy and programmatic questions can be identified. Particularly interesting are the qualitative research studies which have been undertaken - some focused exclusively on girl soldiers, others broader but including girls.

This short paper will not attempt to present a complete picture, nor to do justice to the findings of *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers* research.⁵ It seeks only to identify some of the key findings which identify new dimensions or add greater specificity to the problem and which raise policy and programmatic issues: this is why it is entitled, "Girl Soldiers: Challenging the Assumptions".

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³ All numbers and proportions are mythical, but estimates indicate that where girls do join armed forces or armed groups, whether they are forced or not, up to a third of the child soldiers will be girls. In Colombia, Erika Paez estimates girls as 20-30%. The figures in the ILO Rapid Assessment of Child Soldiers in Central and Western Mindanao indicate a similar percentage.

⁴ According to the UNICEF/EAPRO study, boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 14 years face the highest risk of being recruited.

⁵ This was a qualitative research project in which former girl soldiers were interviewed in four situations (Angola, Colombia, Philippines and Sri Lanka) all of which at that time were armed conflicts.

1. Forced recruits or volunteers?

There are two distinct scenarios:

- (a) where girls are abducted or otherwise recruited by physical force or coercion, eg Angola, Sierra Leone, Northern Uganda; and
- (b) where many girls join "voluntarily" (ie, they are not abducted or physically forced) although some may also be recruited forcibly, eg Sri Lanka, Philippines, Colombia.⁶

It cannot be assumed that all girls are abducted or physically forced to join. Even in situations, such as Sierra Leone, where there was widespread abduction of girls, not all girls joined because they were physically forced to do so.

2. Sexual exploitation/abuse

The successful raising of the profile of girl soldiers has led to an assumption that this is an issue of sexual exploitation and abuse. In some situations, girl soldiers *are* widely sexually exploited and abused. Not surprisingly, there is a significant correlation between abduction/forced recruitment of girls and widescale and systematic sexual exploitation and abuse of them, eg Angola, Sierra Leone, Northern Uganda. However, even in these situations, it should not be assumed that *all* girls have been sexually exploited - to do so is to deny the individual experiences of the girls and to treat them as a category of actual or potential sexual objects. Indeed, some girls make a positive choice to become soldiers because having a gun is likely to provide greater protection against rape, and other ill-treatment (eg DRC).

In other situations, girl soldiers may be sexually exploited, or they may choose one or more partners, whether because this brings benefits (such as protection, money, clothes, transport rather than having to walk) or for emotional reasons. Some do not participate in sexual activity, and in some groups sexual activity is prohibited, or is strictly controlled, eg requiring consent of the authorities and/or of the parties concerned (eg New People's Army, Philippines).

To assume that all girl soldiers have been involved in sexual activity is likely to further stigmatise the girls and limit their future prospects and status in society. In addition, most girl soldiers are engaged in combat whether or not they are also sexual partners: they therefore need their role and experience as combatants also to be taken into account, eg during demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration. To screen them out of demobilisation processes is discrimination.

3. Sense of self and of time:

The experience of girls abducted (sometimes repeatedly), eg in Angola, leads some to lose their sense of time, the sequence of events, and of their own identity. The latter can occur either because the abducting group does not wish the girls to retain a sense of their own identity and seeks to deny it to them, and/or because the girls hope to escape and thus do not wish to reveal their true name, where they come from, etc.

At the base you cannot talk about your family, or talk about your village. They told us: here just forget your parents.⁷

⁶ According to the UNICEF/EAPRO study, 58% of the girls and boys who joined, did so voluntarily; only 23% were coerced. The situation of the remaining 19% was unclear.

This may not be unique to girls but may be more prevalent among girls because of these factors. This suggests that finding the family may be harder, and that the girls themselves should be helped during the rehabilitation process both to re-establish their own identity, and to tell or write their stories in order to bring to them some sense of order and understanding of their experiences.⁸

4. Why do girls volunteer?⁹

Many of the same reasons for boys' joining also lead or drive girls to join armed forces or armed groups without being abducted or physically forced. However, there are also some particular factors, or ones that are stronger or more prevalent amongst girls.

These include:

(a) *Domestic exploitation or abuse*: from the, albeit small, samples of girls who have been included in the qualitative research studies undertaken, there is a very high correlation of those citing domestic exploitation or abuse as the primary reason for their decision to volunteer (eg Sri Lanka, Philippines, Colombia). This is supported by material from other conflicts, eg DRC. Sometimes this is sexual abuse, eg by a stepfather, or physical beatings by mother, father, step-parent, or domestic exploitation such as working in the home or looking after younger siblings. These events may be in their "own" home, or they may occur because they have been sent to extended family, or to other domestic (non-family) situations.

One of my mother's men tried to abuse me when I was younger. He tried to abuse me and because I didn't let him he got angry. He used to fight with my mum and he used to fight with me ... so I didn't want to live with my mum anymore. (Girl soldier from Colombia)¹⁰

About ten days before the day of the marriage, I started to plan to leave the house. I waited, tried to convince my parents, they were very adamant and would not listen to me. They never listened. The day before the marriage everything was ready. I ran away. I ran away to escape a marriage I didn't like. (Girl from Sri Lanka)¹¹

(b) Another major impetus for girls to join is for *their own protection*: given the high level of physical and sexual abuse of girls in some current armed conflicts, the decision to take up arms rather than waiting to be raped, maimed and/or killed is a rationale decision for teenage girls, eg DRC.

(c) Finally, some girls join because they specifically want, and want to prove, their *equality* with boys.

All these reasons highlight issues about the status and treatment of girls in society. This does not mean that these are the only reasons why girls join. They are subject to many of the same pressures and temptations of boys. However, unless these reasons are considered seriously and their programmatic and policy implications taken into account,

⁷ Girl soldier, Angola, quoted in Yvonne E. Keairns: *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary* (Quaker UN Office, October 2002)

⁸ Some of the girls interviewed for *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers* project specifically expressed appreciation for the interviews because they had helped in this respect.

⁹ The term "volunteer" in this paper is used to cover all situations in which the person recruited was not abducted or physically forced to join.

¹⁰ Yvonne E. Keairns: *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary* (Quaker UN Office, October 2002)

¹¹ Yvonne E. Keairns: *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Summary* (Quaker UN Office, October 2002)

it will not be possible to prevent girls from joining, and they will continue to be discriminated against and "mistreated" in the demobilisation and reintegration, and post-conflict phases.

The interviews with those who have taken an active decision to join show a strength of independence and character in these girls which should be affirmed and nurtured. This implies the need in demobilisation and reintegration processes to allow and encourage them to take charge of their lives, and to respect their individuality rather than assuming that all can and should be treated the same.

In particular, girls who have joined because of domestic exploitation and abuse may not wish to "return" to their family, even if this is possible. On the other hand, even those who ran away from home in the first place, show a strong desire to re-establish a relationship and be reconciled with their mother.

During the first few days with the NPA, I cried because I found the Garand and my pack too heavy. ... To tell you the truth, I was crying because I was thinking that my life would not be this hard if Mama had been more caring. [Philippines - joined when she was 13, now 16]¹²

Many feel remorse for the suffering they feel they have caused their mother, and wish to make amends. If the mother is not available (eg because she is dead) this wish may be transferred to other female relatives (grandmother, aunt), to siblings, and/or to engage in some form of "caring" activity or profession.¹³ If the relationship with the mother is to be re-established, this may require work with the mother as well as with the girl herself where the problematic nature of that relationship was one of the factors in the decision to join.

Some bitterly regret the decision they made, and as a result, not only want to make amends (to the mother and to others) but also have lost confidence in their decision-making capacity because this big decision which they took turned out to be wrong. They will, therefore, need help in learning to take, and trust their capacity to make, decisions again.

5. Benefits

Some feel that there were beneficial aspects to joining: whether simply that they did manage to protect themselves against rape, death, and so on, or because they acquired skills, were able to participate in the group or movement on an equal footing with boys, and to exercise leadership.

...they made me 'team leader' for a short time because they thought I was alert and smart. Then I was trained to become a medic. They taught me traditional ways of healing. [Philippines - joined when she was 13, now 16]¹⁴

¹² UNICEF/EAPRO: *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers:Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (October 2002), p. 46

¹³ Over and above the specific desire to be reconciled with the mother and to make amends, even where the girls were angry and felt betrayed at the way they had been treated, whether in the group or by opposing forces, their strong desire was not for revenge but to atone for their own harmful and violent acts by caring for others personally or professionally.

¹⁴ UNICEF/EAPRO: *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers:Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (October 2002), p. 46

The fact that they appreciated some aspects does not necessarily mean that they do not regret the decision to join. This may be because they suffered consequences, such as injuries, or because they did not like participating in armed combat, or because they missed their family, or mother, and came to feel that perhaps life at home was not so bad after all.

6. What future for these girls?

Again, the girls suffer from many of the same problems about their future as do the boys, such as lack of education, the experience of killing and maiming, and from injuries. What differentiates their situation from that of boys is the status of girls in society. The more limited options which tend to be available to girls in any case are compounded by the societal and personal perception of girls who have fought and/or been in the armed group. This is where the assumption that girl soldiers = sexual activity reinforces societal stereotypes about girls and the "value" placed on virginity, and is thus likely to restrict even further the girls' prospects, of both employment and marriage - whether or not the assumption of their involvement in sexual activity is true in the individual case. The links to a future in prostitution is too obvious to require spelling out.¹⁵ Education, vocational and skills training are at least as fundamental for the girls as for boys. It will be even harder for them to participate in these if they have babies, both because of the tendency to exclude girls with babies from education and because of the need to take care of and provide for the baby as well as for herself.

7. Addiction and Substance Abuse:

There is wide recognition nowadays that the question of alcohol and drugs needs to be considered in relation to the demobilisation and rehabilitation of boy soldiers. Is the same consideration being given to girls? This is posed as a question because it is unclear from the limited information available whether this is (always) so. In addition, girls in rehabilitation centres may arrive with babies and thus need both suitable accommodation and assistance. Others may become pregnant while at the centre: does this lead to their exclusion from the programme? The whole question of medical attention, including in relation to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, pre- and post-natal care, access to reproductive health services,¹⁶ information and advice, and emotional and psychological (and societal) aspects of these are additional factors to the general health/medical issues which are applicable to both boy and girl soldiers.

Summing up:

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

¹⁵ Graça Machel: *The Impact of War on Children* (Hurst & Co, London, 2001), p. 18

¹⁶ Girls who have been forced to take contraceptives or to be fitted with contraceptive devices may need specific medical attention and counselling (eg Colombia).

it was against their will, they would be viewed as untrustworthy and generally diminished in the minds of others."¹⁷

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