



# LESSONS FROM LIBERIA: REINTEGRATING WOMEN IN POST- CONFLICT LIBERIA

Thirty to forty percent (25,000-30,000) of all fighting forces during Liberia's 14 years of conflict were women and girls. The majority were forced to participate, particularly during the first conflict from 1989 to 1997. In the second conflict however from 1999 to 2003, more women reportedly 'volunteered' to join the fighting forces, to protect themselves from sexual violence, to avenge the death of family members, under peer pressure, for material gain, and for survival.

*"I stayed with them throughout the course of the war as I was so young and had nowhere else to go" Magdalena, forcibly recruited in Foya at the age of 10, beaten and raped.*

## ENGENDERING DISARMAMENT AND REINTEGRATION

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, and recognising the significant numbers of women and children involved, the UN Security Council determined in 2003 that the new Disarmament Demobilization Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) process in Liberia must give particular attention to their special needs.<sup>1</sup> This approach is in line with the Security Council's landmark resolution 1325 (2000), on Women Peace and Security.<sup>2</sup>

The UN Integrated DDR Standards also require the building of a gender-responsive approach to DDR into every stage of the process.<sup>3</sup> This includes the active involvement of groups representing women's interests during peace negotiations, and in the design, implementation and evaluation of DDR programs.

The UN Integrated Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) led the disarmament and demobilization phase which began in December 2003. The reintegration and rehabilitation phase was jointly run by the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR) and UNDP when they started with the training program.

From the outset, the DDRR plan in Liberia anticipated special arrangements for female combatants. These included separate interim care centres in the cantonment sites, where they would receive special assistance in such areas as reproductive health, counselling, training on women's human rights and sexual trauma support.<sup>4</sup>

## FUTURE CHALLENGES WITH REGARD TO THE REINTEGRATION OF WOMEN

*"The women who tried to get involved in the planning of the DDRR process were told to go home and take care of the children." Leymah Gbowee, Representative of WIPNET*

Despite UN and government intentions for a gender-based approach to DDRR in Liberia, there was not enough high level political support to make sure that DDRR staff followed the UN's DDRR Standards, and involved women and former combatant groups in the planning and implementation. Women were often reluctant to identify themselves as fighters, or as being associated with the fighting forces out of fear of stigmatization, which played a much greater role for girls and women than for boys and men. These factors and others including fear of reprisals from former male commanders, and a lack of childcare facilities or the option of evening classes, discouraged women and girls from participating fully in the DDRR programs and has hampered further reintegration into civilian life.

These barriers need to be considered today as the country moves beyond the DRR process and into community based reintegration programs that address all the needs in the community.

*"We are now moving beyond targeting specific groups of people and future programs will be community based and target war affected people overall which will assist in reintegration. We have learned that in order for programs targeting women to be affective, special considerations such as their roles as wives and mothers needs to be taken into account."* Ruth Caesar, NCDDRR Deputy Director.

## CAMPAIGNING FOR WOMEN THROUGH FILM

Marking International Women's Day on 8 March 2008 in Monrovia, Amnesty International released the documentary film *Women of Liberia: Fighting for Peace*,<sup>5</sup> highlighting the challenges remaining for the reintegration of women and girls associated with the fighting forces. In collaboration with a coalition of Liberian non-governmental organizations, the NCDDRR and two former fighters featured in the film, Amnesty International subsequently conducted a film tour from July to November 2008 in all 15 counties of Liberia, and in the USA, Canada, UK, Netherlands and Belgium. The local film screenings and ensuing discussions have encouraged more Liberian women and girls to transcend stigmas associated with war, and to actively participate in finding solutions for reintegration.

*"If I tell my story and listen to other people's stories, we cry together. [Then] we come together and make a decision about what we want for our country and for women in Liberia. Because we are part of the decision-making, and we have our rights."* Jackie Redd, former girl soldier.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### TO THE LIBERIAN GOVERNMENT:

- Involve Liberian women's interest groups and women leaders in the design, implementation and evaluation of national and county-level strategies for the reintegration of persons associated with fighting forces, and for poverty reduction and implementation of all UN Millennium Development Goals;
- Make sure that psycho-social counselling is widely known and available in local communities to all women, men and children; and that medical services are accessible to women with particular health conditions from the conflict;
- Make sure education and vocational training programmes are well funded, accessible and specifically designed to meet the needs of Liberian women and girls

### TO THE UN SYSTEM AND MEMBER STATES:

- Maintain and increase funding of women's interest groups in Liberia;
- Ensure that lessons learned from the Liberian DRR program, including issues raised in the film *Women in Liberia: Fighting for Peace*, have been incorporated into future DRR programs;
- In all reports to the Security Council on the situation in Liberia, the UN Secretary-General should consistently include an analysis of challenges remaining for the protection and promotion of women's human rights, as required by UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820

<sup>1</sup> Security Council resolution 1509, 19 September 2003

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/media/pdf-scr1325.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unddr.org/idders/framework.php>

<sup>4</sup> First progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia, S/2003/1175, 15 December 2003

<sup>5</sup> [www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/video-and-audio/women-liberia-fighting-peace-20080723](http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/video-and-audio/women-liberia-fighting-peace-20080723). For DVD copies, contact AVProduction@amnesty.org