“Silences and Empty Spaces” – The Reintegration of Girl Child Soldiers in Uganda: Gendering the Problem and Engendering Solutions

by

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Abstract

“Silences and Empty Spaces” – The Reintegration of Girl Child Soldiers in Uganda: Gendering the Problem and Engendering Solutions

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This thesis examines the experiences of girl child soldiers in Uganda in order to explore the gender gaps that exist in post-conflict programming and to engender meaningful policy solutions that target these gaps. This thesis uses a gender lens to analyze the challenges faced by Ugandan girls and to explore how entrenched gender norms feed into a singular narrative of conflict – dangerous boys and traumatized girls – that renders particular combatants – and their unique needs – invisible. Adopting a feminist methodology that prioritizes the importance of girls’ narratives and self-perceptions, the author argues that girl child soldiers must be meaningfully included in the design and implementation of programming aimed at serving their needs. A participatory action research methodology is presented as a promising way forward. It can help address specific gendered challenges in the post-conflict environment, while also recognizing and drawing upon the resiliency and strengths of the girl child soldiers themselves.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto for their infinite patience and understanding throughout this entire process. In particular, this thesis would not have been possible without the excellent guidance of my supervisor, Professor Jennifer Nedelsky.

To Megan and Kate, two exceptionally inspiring ladies. And to Mom, Dad, Kyle and Rich, thanks for – well, for everything.
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### Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACORD</td>
<td>Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACRWC</td>
<td>African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCF</td>
<td>Christian Counseling Fellowship</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Child Protection Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDR</td>
<td>Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECPAT</td>
<td>End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography &amp; Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAP</td>
<td>Formerly Abducted Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUSCO</td>
<td>Gulu Support the Children Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRIN</td>
<td>Integrated Regional Information Networks</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDU</td>
<td>Local Defence Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRA</td>
<td>Lord’s Resistance Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRA</td>
<td>National Resistance Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRDP</td>
<td>Peace, Recovery and Development Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPLA</td>
<td>Sudanese People’s Liberation Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWAY</td>
<td>Survey of War-Affected Youth</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UPDA</td>
<td>Ugandan People’s Democratic Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>UPDF</td>
<td>Ugandan People’s Defence Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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Introduction

What we hear and do not hear about the world we occupy is no accident ... Silences, spheres where knowledge has been kept from public awareness are undeniably political.¹

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live;”² and one of these stories is this: children have no part in armed conflict.³ And yet they do. While children have participated in war throughout history,⁴ the issue is now a global one, with tens of thousands of children currently affected worldwide.⁵ In Uganda alone, the conservative estimate is that at least 25,000 children were abducted to serve as part of the fighting forces over the course of the decades long civil war.⁶ These reported figures, coupled with media images of young kids brandishing big guns, have garnered a recent upswell of international outrage and have led to impassioned demands for the end of the use of children as weapons of war.⁷

At the same time, what is often absent from the discourse is the significant presence of girls

³Graça Machel, Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Report of the Expert of the Secretary-General, 26 August 1996, A/51/306, at para. 231: “the effective protection of children from the impact of armed conflict requires an unqualified legal and moral commitment which acknowledges that children have no part in armed conflict.”
Conflicts in which child soldiers have made up a significant portion of an armed force or group include: Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Cote D’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, Palestine, the Philippines, Russia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uganda, and Yemen.
⁷See, in particular, Roméo Dallaire, They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children: The Global Quest to Eradicate the use of Child Soldiers (Toronto: Vintage Canada Edition, 2011).
within the ranks of fighting groups. Until very recently, the narrative has focused solely on boys. In part because of traditional perceptions of war as the purview of males, it is this group that has been most visible both during and after conflict. As the director general of Save the Children UK, Mike Aaronson, observes: “[w]hen people picture conflict they think of men in bloody combat, but it’s horrifyingly girls who are the hidden faces of war.” Thus, the stories we tell are gendered as well. As Mary-Anne Fox argues, “as shocking as the idea of child soldiers might be to our Western minds, the phenomenon of girl soldiers goes a step further and to some may appear to be an almost impossible oxymoron.”

This disconnect between our sense of war and the reality on the ground has exacerbated a situation in which girls are frequently deemed peripheral, or otherwise rendered invisible, within the fighting groups in which they serve. The complicated and multiple roles that the Ugandan girl child soldiers played within the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), as well as their centrality to the war effort, remain obscured and largely misunderstood. Despite the fact that these girls served important combat, tactical and support functions, their story has largely been told as one of victimization, with most reports focusing on their sexual violation. Thus, to the extent that the figure of the child soldier is becoming visible in the international arena, it is also critical to reflect on what is being “rendered invisible in that process” and why. The persistent narrative of boys as dangerous and girls as traumatized victims obscures their actual experiences, self-perceptions, and needs. It also, all too often, results in girls being overlooked by designers and implementers of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs, thus

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8 While the proportions vary according to geographic region, it has been estimated that girls represent between 10% and 30% of all combatants (Tsjeard Bouta, Gender and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration: Building Blocks for Dutch Policy (Netherlands: Clingendael Conflict Research Unit, 2005) at 5). In Uganda, some claim that girls represented between 15% to 30% of armed groups’ forces (See, i.e., Annan, Blattman & Horton, supra note 6 at 53; Susan McKay & Dyan Mazurana, Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2004) at 29.


12 Denov, “Girl Soldiers and Human Rights”, supra note 9, at 813.


perpetuating their invisibility in the aftermath of war. In the post-conflict world, in which societies and communities struggle to regain a sense of normalcy, it is those who are deemed to be a security threat rather than those who are considered to be a social concern who become the priority.

What is needed, therefore, is a new narrative; one that is firmly rooted in these girl child soldiers’ own stories and depictions of their experiences. As Carolyn Nordstrom urges, “We need to ask the girls to tell their own stories of war … rather than assuming the right to speak for them.” To do otherwise is to fail to expose the “canyons of silence” that surround these girls and thus to design post-conflict programs that are unresponsive to, and unreflective of, their unique and multiple needs. At the same time, however, it remains important to recognize that gender is a critical marker of these child soldiers’ realities both during and following conflict. These girls “are likely to experience trauma in distinct ways, and to exercise agency and resistance in unique ways as well, precisely because of their gender.” Gender is a complex conceptual term that refers to the “different needs, experiences, and status of men and women, boys and girls based on a sociocultural context.” It is analytical, in the sense that it provides a lens for examining social relations as both sexes experience them within a given social context. It is also mutable, as it refers to characteristics and norms that are assigned to, or associated with, men and women based on social expectations rather than biological imperatives. Thus, it is critical to adopt a gendered lens in examining the distinct experiences of girl child soldiers to illuminate the “intentionality as opposed to naturalness” of their situation. Without a gendered approach, we fail to account for the ways in which existing gender norms, relationships, and identities shape the experiences of these girls before, during and after war. If we fail to attend to

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15 Fujio, supra note 10, at 7; 8.
17 Megan Hazel Mackenzie, “Disciplining Development: Sex, Power and the (Re)Construction of Women in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone” (PhD, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, Fall 2008) at 146.
21 Ibid. at 82.
the larger gendered universe in which these girls live their lives, we will continue to overlook
the ways in which entrenched power dynamics also serve to foster their invisibility in the post-
conflict setting.23 Without this larger theoretical lens, effective reintegration for these girls will
remain an “empty concept.”24

The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is to examine the actual experiences of Ugandan girl child
soldiers, both during and following conflict, in order to explore the gender gaps that exist in
post-conflict programming and to engender meaningful solutions that target these gaps. To a
large extent, this thesis is written in the ‘shadow of law.’ While there exists a growing body of
protections at the international level, the majority focuses on the front-end of the issue, namely
halting the recruitment and use of child soldiers.25 Much less attention has been paid to the needs
of these children, and in particular girls, once the guns fall silent. The beginning of this story is
thus at the point where the international legal regime has already failed to protect the rights of
these girls.26 Its end lies in the design of post-conflict programming that directly targets the
unique and diverse needs of these girls, for whom the law has often been more aspiration than
reality.

23 Lahoma Thomas, “A Forgotten War Within a War: An Examination of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the
Conflict-Affected Districts of Kitgum and Pader, Northern Uganda” (M.A., Dalhousie University, July 2008) at 7.
429 at 442.25 The recruitment, conscription, enlistment and use of children under the age of 15 is prohibited under the
Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention (Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949,
and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts, 8 June 1977, 1125 UNTS 3, article
77(2), and Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of
Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts, 8 June 1977, 1125 UNTS 609, article 4(3)); the Convention on the
Criminal Court, 17 July 1998, U.N. Doc. A/CONF-183/9, articles 8(2)(b)(xxvi) and 8(2)(e)(viii); and the
International Labour Organization, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 17 June 1999, C182, article 3(a). The
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict,
standard for the minimum age for direct participation in armed conflict at 18 years and prohibits non-state forces
from using, recruiting or enlisting any person under the age of 18. Furthermore, the African Charter on the Rights
and Welfare of the Child, 11 June 1990, CAB/LEG/24.9/49, article 22(2) (“ACRWC’), requires States to take all
necessary measures to prevent the use of children in armed conflict and refrain, in particular, from recruiting
children under the age of 18. The gaps that exist in this legal regime in terms of the protection of girls are outside of
the scope of this thesis. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see, in particular, Abigail Leibig, “Girl Child
26 Kristen E. Cheney, “‘Our Children Have Only Known War’: Children’s Experiences and the Uses of Childhood
The first section provides a backdrop to the discussion to follow by exploring the nature of the conflict in Uganda and by presenting the experiences of girl child soldiers, both during and after conflict, in order to ensure that the proposed solutions are solidly grounded in a contextual reading of the problem at hand. As I ultimately argue that these girls must be meaningfully included in the design and implementation of programming aimed at serving their needs, I adopt a feminist methodology that posits that we must first listen to the voices of those most affected to ensure that any proposed responses are not a misrepresentation or distortion of their own understandings. The second section examines the gender gaps that exist in both the international legal regime and the existing post-conflict reintegration framework in Uganda. While Northern Uganda is currently in the process of rebuilding following the brutality of the civil war, there is no official DDR programming in place and measures to reintegrate girl child soldiers have been largely ad hoc. In many instances, existing strategies have failed to meet the needs of these girls as they are either treated as a cohesive bloc, with similar needs, or have fallen outside the purview of the official channels, thus perpetuating their invisibility. To provide a deeper understanding of why these gaps exist, this section also provides an analysis of the challenges faced by Ugandan girls and women more generally, and explores the ways in which entrenched gendered norms feed into a singular narrative of conflict that works to obscure the multiple needs of girls in the post-conflict world. The final section proposes a meaningful way forward that draws on the stories of the girls themselves, recognizes the specific gendered challenges they face, and works to debunk the myth that these girls are solely victims, rather than critical actors in their own right, whose resiliency, strengths and know-how can be drawn upon in designing more effective programming that meets their self-defined needs. To this end, a participatory action research methodology is presented as one possible solution to fill in the gaps that continue to plague the lives of the former girl child soldiers in Uganda.

**Part 1: A Contextual Reading of Girl Child Soldiers in Uganda**

**History of Conflict**

This section provides a brief overview of the history and nature of the conflict in Northern Uganda in order to present a contextual backdrop against which to reflect upon the experiences
of girl child soldiers within the region. As each “conflict has its own set of peculiarities, politics and social culture,” it is critical to examine the phenomenon of child soldiering within its specific temporal and geographic boundaries to ensure that conclusions are not drawn in the abstract.

Northern Uganda is in the process of rebuilding following the end of what some have called “Africa’s most brutal conflict” in which it has been embroiled since 1986. Over the course of the most recent civil war, an estimated 20,000 people were killed; nearly two million were displaced; and tens of thousands of children were abducted. Despite these figures, the conflict in the North has also been named “the hidden conflict” and “the forgotten war.”

The seeds of conflict were sown in colonial times (1894-1962), during which the colonial administration exacerbated existing regional divisions through its “divide-and-rule” tactics. The British awarded top civil service positions and large-scale private land tenures to those from the Buganda tribe, located in the Central and Southern regions, thereby politically marginalizing other ethnic groups, including the Acholi and Lango in the North, who found that their only route to power was through military service. However, the roots of the civil war stem from the turbulent period following Ugandan independence in 1962. In that year, Milton Obote, a Lango from the North, was elected the country’s first prime minister, while the King of the Buganda tribe was appointed as President. In quick succession, Obote used the military, led by Colonel Idi Amin Dada, to oust the King; appoint himself President; and consolidate all political power in this office by rewriting the constitution. Obote was then ousted, in turn, by Idi Amin in 1971, instituting a nearly decade-long “reign of terror” that wreaked havoc on the country’s economy and infrastructure and saw an exceptionally high number of civilian casualties, mostly

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27 Elaine Chapman Halsall, “Girls at the Front: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Human Rights Education Policy and the Experiences of Girls Taken by the Militia in Northern Uganda’s Civil War” (PhD, School of Education, Roehampton University, 2010) at 349.
30 Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 95.
31 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 11.
33 Leibig, supra note 25, at 4.
amongst the Acholi and Lango. Following a series of failed coups, Tanzanian forces and rebel Ugandan soldiers from the North overthrew this regime in 1979, ushering in yet another period of turmoil. After a heavily contested election in 1980, Obote returned to power, only to be overthrown by Tito Okello in 1985.\(^{34}\) During this period, Yoweri Museveni, the current President, formed the National Resistance Army (NRA) – now the Ugandan People’s Defense Force (UPDF) – to overthrow the government, drawing heavily on support from the South. Following Museveni’s election in 1986, the country entered a period of relative stability. However, the North-South divide became even more entrenched, with development largely benefiting only the populations in Southern and Central Uganda.\(^{35}\)

In the meantime, the remnants of Okello’s defeated forces retreated to the North, forming the Ugandan People’s Democratic Army (UPDA). In the mid-1980s, several groups, including the Holy Spirit Movement, and its successor, the Acholi-based Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) headed by Joseph Kony, split off from the UPDA.\(^{36}\) The LRA adopted a mandate to overthrow the government and to institute a new order based loosely on a syncretic reading of the Ten Commandments, as well as the notion of a “purified Acholi race.”\(^{37}\) The LRA initially enjoyed some support from the beleaguered Northern population, which had suffered violence at the hands of the NRA. However, beginning in the early 1990s, the LRA’s tactics became increasingly brutal, and Acholi support declined. In retaliation, the LRA initiated a series of large-scale attacks on civilians in the North, including the wholesale abduction of children.\(^{38}\)

\(^{34}\) Weber et al., supra note 32, at 9; Leibig, ibid.
\(^{35}\) Leibig, ibid.
\(^{36}\) The Holy Spirit Movement was founded in 1985 by Alice Lakwena, an Acholi from the North, who claimed she “had been given spiritual powers by the spirit Lakwena (meaning messenger in Acholi) to cleanse the Acholi of their ‘sins.’” One year later, Alice claimed she was directed to go to war with the NRA to protect the Acholi population (Weber, et al., supra note 32, at 10). The movement foundered in 1986, when she fled to Kenya following military defeat (Cheney, supra note 26, at 25). In April 1987, Kony, a distant cousin of Alice Lakwena, announced he had inherited her spiritual powers and spearheaded his own movement called the Lord’s Salvation Army, later renamed the LRA in 1994 (Weber, et al. ibid.). These were not the only two factions. Between 2000 and 2005, there were 27 known rebel groups operating within Uganda (Halsall, supra note 27, at 293).
\(^{38}\) Cheney, supra note 26, at 25; Weber, et al., supra note 32, at 11. The civilian population suffered a wide range of abuses by both the LRA and the State forces – including intimidation, torture, harassment, killings, captivity, forced labour, and sexual violence (El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 17). The LRA also used highly ritualistic forms of public torture against girls and women – including “lip, nose and ear severing” – to instill terror in the civilian population (Peter Eichstaedt, *First Kill Your Family: Child Soldiers of Uganda and the Lord’s Resistance Army* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2009), as cited in Halsall, supra note 27, at 329).
The conflict also had international implications, as the government of Sudan supported the LRA by providing weapons, training and a “safe haven” in the South. Uganda, in retaliation, supported guerrilla forces (the Southern Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)) attacking the Sudanese government. 39 Throughout the 1990s, the LRA operated out of Sudan, implementing cross-border attacks into Northern Uganda. The ongoing conflict deeply scarred the region, destroying its “economy, trading centers, agricultural and livestock production.” 40 In 1999, following pressure from the US, Sudan and Uganda entered into the Nairobi Agreement to cease supporting their respective rebel groups. During this rapprochement, the Sudanese government allowed Ugandan forces to cross over into South Sudan to destroy LRA camps during the ominously named “Operation Iron Fist” in 2002. 41 As a result of the military push, the LRA flooded back over the border into Northern Uganda, increasing the strength of their attacks against civilians in the North, as well as in the East: “Displacement, massacres, and abductions … resumed on a ‘massive scale.’” 42 The UPDF, in response, instituted a policy of forced displacement to cut the LRA off from the civilian population. At the height of the conflict, as high as 90% of the Northern population was displaced into “protected camps.” 43 For those living in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, the conditions were dire, characterized by acute overcrowding, chronic poverty, disease, and extreme social dislocation. 44 Security was also a significant concern. Individuals remained vulnerable to attacks by the LRA, as well as by the local defence units (LDUs) charged with protecting civilians. 45

There have been several unsuccessful attempts to reach an official peace agreement between the LRA and the Ugandan government. Following peace talks in Juba, South Sudan, the Ugandan

39 Leibig, supra note 25, at 4; Halsall, ibid. at 363.
40 Leibig, ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Cheney, supra note 26, at 35. Another military campaign in March 2004, dubbed “Operation Iron Fist II,” once again increased the pace of abductions and attacks against civilians by the LRA (Vera Chrobok & Andrew S. Akutu, Returning Home: Children’s Perspectives on Reintegration, A Case Study of Children Abducted by the LRA in Teso, Eastern Uganda (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, February 2008) at 6).
45 Halsall, supra note 27, at 60.
government and the LRA signed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in August 2006, and the parties agreed to a Permanent Ceasefire in February 2008. However, formal resolution has been delayed by Kony’s failure to appear to sign the agreements, and peace talks officially collapsed the following year. Since this time, however, LRA operations in Uganda have all but ceased, and the slow process of resettlement is nearly complete, with only 30,000 IDPs remaining in camps as of 2011. The LRA’s leadership relocated to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and, later, the Central African Republic, where it continues to engage in sporadic attacks against civilians.

The Stories They Tell

Feminist Methodology

“[I]t is the wearer of the shoe who knows where it pinches.”

With this backdrop in mind, I now turn to a discussion of the experiences of the individual girls who served as ‘child soldiers’ throughout the course of the conflict. For the purposes of this

46 Ted Dagne, “Uganda: Current Conditions and the Crisis in Northern Uganda” Congressional Research Service (8 June 2011) at 10, online: http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33701.pdf. In 2007 and 2008, the parties also drafted a Comprehensive Solutions Agreement (outlining the causes of war and proposed remedies); an Accountability and Reconciliation Agreement (providing for alternative justice mechanisms and criminal prosecutions); and a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Agreement (to be implemented in line with a final Peace Agreement).


48 US Department of State, supra note 6, at 15.


50 Kaari Betty Murungi, Bearing Witness: Girl Mothers of Gulu District (Kampala: FIDA-Kampala, 2011) at 8.

51 Throughout, I purposefully adopt the term “child soldier” as shorthand for the broader term “child associated with an armed force or group,” which has gained prominence in the international arena. The UNICEF, Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (The Paris Principles) (February 2007) – a set of non-binding principles that were drafted to guide international interventions in the field of children in combat – uses the latter term to highlight the multiple roles that children play in armed forces and groups. Within these principles, a child combatant is defined as: “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for a sexual purpose” (principle 2.1). My understanding and use of the term “child soldier” is equally as broad, so as to include any child who has been involved with an armed force or group in some capacity. However, I have opted to adopt this shorthand to highlight that girls, too, played a combat role within the LRA, and were not merely peripheral figures “associated” with the group. I also use the term
thesis, I adopt a feminist perspective centered on the notion that “women’s way of knowing, women’s experiences, and women’s knowledge” must form the basis of any discussion of gendered phenomena, and that any proposed solutions must begin first and foremost with their standpoints and understandings. Feminist authors have encouraged an epistemology in which “old ways of knowing” are challenged by examining the ways in which they may conflict with women’s subjectivities to avoid perpetuating a “distortion of female experience.” In order to both deconstruct and reconstruct established social and legal categories (such as ‘child soldier’), it is imperative to first understand that ‘singularities’, in fact, have many potential meanings, if viewed from a “variety of angles.” To fully engage with an issue it may thus be necessary to attempt to “enter the other person’s frame to discover the premises for the other’s point of view.”

The basic foundation, here, is that experiential, embodied and particular knowledge is a critical source of evidence, and that listening to women’s and girls’ voices, as well as “for the silences, the absences, the nameless, the unspoken, the encoded,” is of utmost importance. In other words, hearing and listening to those who “live the perspective” rather than trying to “master it in the abstract” is a key component of the feminist methodology. These narratives can provide the necessary foundation upon which to build effective responses by ensuring that

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“girl child soldier” throughout to highlight the distinct experiences of these children because of their gender, thus avoiding lumping all child combatants into a singular category – children – while remaining cognizant that their experiences cannot wholly be explained because they are female either (Jordan A. Gilbertson, “Little Girls Lost: Can the International Community Protect Girl Soldiers?” (2008) 29 U. La Verne L. Rev. 219 at 220; Susan McKay, “Girls as ‘Weapons of Terror’ in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leonean Rebel Fighting Forces” (2005) 28:5 Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 385 at 385-386).


55 Belensky, et al., ibid. at 94.


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“the very complexity that characterizes phenomena in the real world is reinserted back into concepts, environments and solutions.”

This approach is of particular importance in the context of armed conflict, where women’s and girls’ voices are too often silent or silenced, both during war and thereafter. The experiences and perspectives of girl child soldiers are diverse. They depend on multiple and context-specific factors. Thus a focus on the dominant “single story” – child soldiers as boys with guns, and girls as victims of war – only serves to further mute their lived realities and to undercut attempts to help them rebuild their lives in the post-conflict environment. Furthermore, as I ultimately argue that former girl child soldiers must be predominant actors in their reintegration efforts, it is essential that their own stories inform the analysis from the very beginning and that they are recognized as agents and narrators in their own right: the “process of asking/listening/hearing the girls’ stories has the potential to be emancipatory, empowering, and to give ‘voice’ and validation to experience.” It is also crucial to ensure that girls’ own experiences and views of their future be incorporated into post-conflict programming so as to fully represent their needs and interests.

The next two sections present the varied experiences of former Ugandan girl child soldiers in their own voices, where possible. It is acknowledged that there are limitations to this method. First, there is a danger of presenting a unified picture of what are, in reality, individualized experiences. As Jason Hart cautions: “Not all situations of child recruitment are identical … These points are ignored by authors ready to shuffle quotes from children in one setting with those from somewhere entirely different to build up a generic picture of child recruitment in

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60 Jill McCalla Vickers, “Memoirs of an Ontological Exile: The Methodological Rebellions of Feminist Research” in Angela Miles & Geraldine Finn (eds.), Feminism from Pressures to Politics (New York/Montreal: Black Rose Press, 1989) at 46-47. While Colleen Sheppard and Sarah Westphal caution that using personal narratives can result in misappropriation, “it can also provide a greater understanding of the physical, psychological, emotional and concrete contexts of social injustices, and offer the reader a model for responding to them” (Sheppard & Westphal, supra note 53, at 338).
63 Halsall, supra note 27, at 132.
which the worst stands for the all.”65 There is thus a concern that the use of narratives, without appropriate methodological limitations, can be presented and read as representative of a larger social reality.66 I have attempted to minimize this risk by focusing on one specific country setting to ensure that the girls’ voices are appropriately contextualized. The accounts that follow are thus not representative of the experience of girl child soldiers, but rather individual stories of some girls’ experiences in one given time and place. Furthermore, while I have made a real effort to be judicious in presenting as holistic a view as possible of these girls’ experiences, without access to firsthand accounts, there is still a risk that “the most sensational rather than the most common experiences” are being replicated.67 Received wisdom of girls as victims of war can inflect the questions that are asked, and the answers given: “Academics and particularly journalists have been guilty of parachuting in during the conflict, wanting to talk to these women and getting them to recount how they’ve been forced wives, how they’ve been raped, all the horrible things.”68 Moreover, in post-conflict situations, ‘telling one’s story’ may be a means of securing greater resources and thus “stock” or “expected” answers may become the norm.69 This can result in an undue emphasis on one component of an experience to the exclusion of others, thus precluding contextualized knowledge, and merely reinforcing inaccurate generalizations.70 Lastly, there is also much that can be lost in translation when relying on secondhand reports: “‘transcriptions are decontextualized conversations.’ The living, dynamic conversation is lost: what is not said is as important as what is said, and this does not transfer perfectly to the page.”71 Nevertheless, with these limitations in mind, I argue that these girls’ narratives are critical to gaining a deeper understanding of their individual gendered experiences and in providing a bridge to a meaningful post-conflict process that reflects their realities. While these stories are not ‘new,’ I hope that the more they are pressed upon us, the more we will not only hear, but also listen.

65 Hart, supra note 4, at 218.
66 Sheppard & Westphal, supra note 53, at 357.
69 Murungi, supra note 50, at 14. See also, Halsall, supra note 27, at 132; 304.
70 Sheppard & Westphal, supra note 53, at 352.
71 Halsall, supra note 27, at 172.
Girls' Stories of War

In Uganda, the vast majority of children are forcibly recruited, abducted or ‘taken’ into the LRA rather than joining voluntarily. According to the Survey of War-Affected Youth (SWAY), over one-third of male youth and one-fifth of female youth reported being abducted. A survey of school children in Kitgum puts these numbers in perspective. Asked whether they had ever been abducted, 75% tellingly answered “not yet.” Over the course of the conflict, the age of the children taken became progressively younger as the LRA sought to fill out its depleted ranks. The time the children spent with the LRA ranged anywhere from a few hours to over ten years. Boys were abducted more frequently, but the length of abduction was typically longer for girls.

The abductions often occurred during LRA attacks on civilian populations. Twelve-year-old Janet M.’s account reflects the generalized context of violence in which these children were taken: “The next day they divided up the captives, and told the old people, including my father, to lie down on the ground. They started beating them with a machete. They cut him badly and left him there.” The civilian population remained vulnerable throughout the conflict, as the

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72 Some authors have argued that the term ‘abduction’ is not one that resonates in the Ugandan context and that girls often refer to “being taken” (See, i.e., Halsall, ibid, at 256; Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 15). However, I use the term throughout as shorthand for the complex process of capture, as it is one that has resonance within international law.

73 While a small number of volunteers joined up in the early stages of the conflict, there are very few accounts of children voluntarily joining the LRA after 1990, and almost none after 1994 (Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants”, supra note 67, at 108). It should also be noted that the focus on the LRA does not suggest that other armed forces or groups are immune to allegations of child recruitment or use. NGOs have accused the UPDF of recruiting children (mostly boys) as young as 15, and of allowing underage recruitment within the LDUs (El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 12; Report of the Secretary-General, 2007, supra note 6, at para. 6).

74 Dyan Mazurana, et al., “A Way Forward for Assisting Women and Girls in Northern Uganda: Findings From Phase II of the Survey of War Affected Youth” (Kampala: SWAY, 2008) at 4 [SWAY, “A Way Forward”]. These numbers do not specifically account for the number of ‘children,’ as the survey focused on ‘youth’ between the ages of 14 and 30. However, the SWAY report is the most comprehensive and representative quantitative data on war-affected youth in Uganda to date.

75 HRW interview with Geoffrey Oyat, Save the Children Norway (Uganda), 31 March 2003, as cited in Weber, et al., supra note 32, at 68.


78 Anett Pfeiffer & Thomas Elbert, “PTSD, Depression and Anxiety Among Former Abductees in Northern Uganda” (2011) 5:14 Conflict & Health 1 at 2. While girls are more likely to experience shorter abductions, if held for more than one month, the likelihood of being held captive longer than their male counterparts was greater (SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4.)

79 Jo Becker, Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda 15:7(A) (New York: HRW, March
LRA frequently threatened or carried out retaliatory violence against the relatives of any child who managed to escape.\textsuperscript{80} Thirteen-year-old Sharon remembers: “They told us if we escaped, they would kill our families.”\textsuperscript{81}

The children were inducted into the group through a combination of violence and ritual. Grace T. was told: “Now we want to train you to be soldiers, but first we must harden you by beating you twenty strokes.”\textsuperscript{82} The LRA forced her to strip naked and then beat her on the back, first with a stick, and then with a machete. The group also performed various rites to manipulate the children into believing they would be invincible during battle.\textsuperscript{83} Some children understood this as marking them, irrevocably, as part of the group. As Brenda O. explains: “then you are no longer with your mother and father, but for the LRA. If you leave, they will kill you.”\textsuperscript{84}

In the early stages of the conflict, the LRA often brought their new ‘recruits’ across the border to camps in southern Sudan.\textsuperscript{85} The 50 to 100 mile journey, in which the children were often tied together and forced to carry heavy loads of ammunition or looted goods, was fraught with hardship. Sharon, thirteen years of age, recalls: “Some of the children died of hunger. I felt lifeless seeing so many children dying and being killed.”\textsuperscript{86} During the march, many developed painful conditions. Stella has this to say: “On the second day of marching our legs were swollen. They said, ‘Eh, now, what should we do about your legs? You must walk, or do you want us to kill you. It’s your choice.’”\textsuperscript{87} Sondra O. recounts the fate of children who made the latter ‘choice’:

Three children with swollen legs had difficulty walking and tried to stop. The LRA tied the children’s hands behind their

\textsuperscript{80} Rosa Ehrenreich, \textit{The Scars of Death: Children Abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda} (New York: HRW, 1997) at 3.  
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.} at 19.  
\textsuperscript{82} Becker, \textit{supra} note 79, at 8.  
\textsuperscript{84} Becker, \textit{supra} note 79, at 8.  
\textsuperscript{85} Following the launch of Operation Iron Fist in 2002, and the return of the LRA to Uganda, the children’s lives became more mobile and less settled, with the group often moving to a new location each night (\textit{ibid.} at 11).  
\textsuperscript{86} Ehrenreich, \textit{supra} note 80, at 20.  
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.} at 19.
backs and ordered the others to beat them to death with sticks as big as my arm. Later they removed the clothing from the children and threw their bodies into a swamp.  

The nature and extent of the children’s actual role in combat is not well documented, perhaps in deference to the common view that these children are all victims, rather than active participants in the conflict. Human Rights Watch (HRW) describes their roles nearly exclusively as “human shields.” However, children were expected to fight during raids or when ambushed by UPDF forces. Christine, seventeen, says: “They told us we were soldiers now, we were no longer students.” It is also clear that many of the girls received basic training (at least during the earlier stages of the conflict). According to one study, approximately 70% went through training and were given a weapon. Thirteen-year old Sharon explains the basic nature of the regimen:

> When we got to Sudan … Our group was divided into four smaller groups of about a hundred people. I was the youngest in my group. I was twelve. Others were about thirteen or fourteen years old. They trained us in how to use guns, and the names of all the gun parts.

Some of the girls displayed comprehensive knowledge of the materiel they used. Sixteen-year old Sarah, following three weeks of training in Sudan, was able “to put together guns and handle the weapons – antipersonnel mines, antitank mines, SMG, LMF, PKM, mortars.” Others held command positions as captains, lieutenants, and corporals. One girl, who became a commander

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88 Becker, supra note 79, at 9.
89 Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 38.
90 Ibid. at 23.
91 Before 2002, children typically participated in a formalized training program. Later, training became more sporadic, and some children were not issued a weapon or a uniform (Becker, supra note 79, at 12).
92 See, Noelle Quenivet, “Girl Soldiers and Participation in Hostilities” (2008) 16 Afr. J. Int’l & Comp. 219 at 222. According to another study, 8% of girls reported receiving advanced training (McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 73). In yet another study, 11% of females reported that fighting was their primary role (Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 883). However, not all girls were trained in combat. Sarah, seventeen, says: “While boys had much training in war activities, we young girls were not trained” (Halsall, supra note 27, at 231). Many, instead, spoke of their dual roles as both combatants and captives. Mary, fifteen, remembers: “We all underwent training, every day … Then we would go home and cook the vine leaves” (Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 27).
93 Ehrenreich, ibid. at 26.
94 Ibid. at 27–28.
95 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 74. According to Mary O., a commander in the Gilva Unit, which contained over 200 boys and 100 girls, she “hand-picked girls 15 and 16 years old to fight along with her” (ibid.).
at age 16, was highly politicized and believed in the cause: “I was in charge of leading raids to abduct children. I was quite ruthless … I was feared as a commander and even the men respected my intelligence.”\footnote{Murungi, supra note 50, at 37.} Girls also partook in a variety of logistical tasks outside of direct combat, including raiding, looting, maintaining bases, nursing, and radio communication.\footnote{Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 3; Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 885.} Others describe their function as “standbys” (or lookouts).\footnote{Winnie, fifteen-years-old, as cited in Halsall, supra note 27, at 227.}

The productive labour of the children was also essential to the LRA’s operations and survival. The younger children often performed most of the domestic work, including running errands, fetching water, babysitting, and participating in various agricultural tasks.\footnote{Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 3; Van Woudenberg, et al., supra note 47, at 42; and Halsall, ibid. at 226; 228.} The girls were often referred to as \textit{ting ting} (or servant).\footnote{Leibig, supra note 25, at 6.} A female student, abducted from St. Mary’s school in Aboke, remembers: “In Sudan, we worked just like slaves, cutting grass for thatching their huts, and also cutting grass for the Arabs when they demanded. We used to grind sorghum for bread, and our hands got sore because we were not used to such work.”\footnote{Student Letter #2, as cited in Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 106.}

Children were also often used as the instruments of violence, and girls report perpetrating a similar number of violent acts as boys, including some of the worst: killing civilians, friends or soldiers.\footnote{Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 884; Jeannie Annan, et al., “Women and Girls at War: ‘Wives’, Mothers and Fighters in the Lord’s Resistance Army”, Working Paper No. 63 (University of Sussex, Institute of Development Studies, Households in Conflict Network, October 2009) at 9.} Girls may be expected to kill a family member or someone they know to dissolve existing community bonds.\footnote{Crystal E. Lara, “Child Soldier Testimony Used in Prosecuting War Crimes in the International Criminal Court: Preventing Further Victimization” (2011) 17 Sw. J. Int’l L. 309 at 315. See also, Anna Borzello, “The Challenges of DDR in Northern Uganda: The Lord’s Resistance Army” (October 2007) 7:3 Conflict, Security & Development 387 at 396.} Alice, fourteen, was forced to kill her sister: “We stabbed [her] until her body was totally shattered. This was the ugliest experience of my life … I had a hand in killing my own sister.”\footnote{As cited in Erin K. Baines, “The Haunting of Alice: Local Approaches to Justice and Reconciliation in Northern Uganda” (2007) 1 Int’l J. of Transitional Justice 91 at 92.} Girls were also used to humiliate the enemy. Juliet Atto, twenty, recalls: “I and other girls were taught how to use guns and occasionally were used to humiliate errant men whom we were made to cane with sticks until they messed on themselves, fainted or
bled to death.” Some did not self-identify as victims of violence, but rather its agent. Apio, a girl of approximately 14 years of age, explains as follows:

One day we were told to go and find out which shops had more things at Kitgum town so that when we attacked at night we would go directly to those shops. In one of the shops was a man who sold nice clothes, toys, and foodstuff. I asked him how much a cloth cost and he told me a high price. He did not want to reduce it. At night I led our group to that shop. After taking all we wanted, the commanders did not know what to do with the man. I killed him of my own initiative.

Others were simply beaten or otherwise abused. Christine described her treatment as follows:

“[Sometimes] they beat us, fifteen strokes each. When they beat you, they tell you not to touch the areas where we were beaten. I touched myself there, and so did another girl. For that they made us step out and lie down on the ground. Then they beat us with canes. There were seven of them.”

Girls were also routinely physically abused for failing to follow orders or to otherwise complete their assigned tasks: “sometimes when we meet with the government [army] and they start shooting, we run away and we throw our luggage. If you throw your luggage you are beaten, so you have to run with your luggage.”

Some girls were ill treated by the commanders’ “wives,” who were other abductees. Charlotte W. maintains that her commander did not mistreat her, but that some of his “wives” “beat me every day for small mistakes, or for no reason.” Not all girls experienced violence, however. Susan, fourteen, claims she was “never threatened with violence and they did not ask her to do anything else [beyond carrying heavy loads].” Some commanders also worked to protect their charges, as evidenced in the story of Alia, age fifteen: “my captor was a captain whose home was near ours and asked them not to kill me.”

Many of the girls also experienced sexual violence and abuse. Despite assumptions to the

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107 Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 24.
108 Cheney, supra note 26, at 27.
110 Halsall, supra note 27, at 223.
111 Ibid. at 238.
112 It should be noted that there is limited evidence that boys, too, suffered from sexual abuse. One study of 330
contrary, however, the SWAY survey reveals that the majority of the girls in the LRA were “not used as sexual slaves.”¹¹³ One female student explained: “None of us [were] raped except two girls, and those who did it were killed by their commanders.”¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, many report suffering from extreme sexual coercion over their time with the LRA.¹¹⁵ Sexual relations were heavily regulated.¹¹⁶ According to Juliet: “Soldiers are not allowed to fall in love. If one is caught charming a girl he is killed. Girls are there to be used whenever they want.”¹¹⁷ Instead, those who reached the age of 14 or 15 were often, although not exclusively, given as “wives” to commanders within the group.¹¹⁸ Florence, a seventeen-year-old from the Central African Republic, recalls the basic nature of the arrangement: “With the LRA, a man can only have one wife, and a woman can only be with one man. If they disobeyed this rule, they would be killed. Kony and the other high-level commanders were the exception, and they could have many former child soldiers aged 11 to 17 found that of the 25.8% of those who reported being raped by members of the armed group, 22.4% of these were boys, and 29.4% were girls (Fionna Klasen, et al., “Posttraumatic Resilience in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers” (2010) 81:4 Child Development 1096 at 1103). However, reported incidents of male sexual victimization remain more difficult to verify. Cases of male rape are often reported as instances of “torture” rather than of sexual violence (Dharmpuri, supra note 19, at 63). Furthermore, pervasive portrayals of females as victims of sexual violence, and males as perpetrators, can perpetuate stigma, “making it virtually impossible for male victims to speak out” (Sandesh Sivakumaran, “Male/Male Rape and the ‘Taint’ of Homosexuality” (2005) 27 Hum. Rts. Quarterly 1274, as cited in Dianne Otto, “The Exile of Inclusion: Reflections on Gender Issues in International Law Over the Last Decade” (2009) 10 Melb. J. Int’l L. 11 at 24). This stigma is entrenched in Uganda, given existing laws and taboos surrounding homosexuality (Halsall, supra note 27, at 347). In many ways, “forced homosexual sex and the sexual abuse of boy soldiers is an issue even more invisible than the use of girls” (Mazurana, et al., “Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups”, supra note 4, at 109). There is a pressing need for further research on wartime sexual violence against male child soldiers to ensure that their needs are being met in post-conflict programming design and implementation (Myriam Denov, Is the Culture Always Right? The Dangers of Reproducing Gender Stereotypes and Inequalities in Psychosocial Interventions for War-Affected Children (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2007) at 2).

¹¹⁴ Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 113.
¹¹⁵ While the stories that follow illuminate the sexual nature of some of the violence done to these girls, they may not fully capture the extent of the abuse. As one study notes, girls often had difficulty describing experiences of sexual violence in the first person; instead, they often coded the violence as “being attacked” or suffering from a “stomach ache” (Akello, et al., “Silencing Distressed Children”, supra note 106, at 215).
¹¹⁶ Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 30; Weber, et al., supra note 32, at 28.
¹¹⁸ The term “wife”, “husband” and “marriage” are put in quotations throughout to distinguish instances of forced marriage. While a full exploration of the issue is outside the scope of this thesis, forced marriages are “coercive relationships [in which the label of ‘wife’ is imposed by threat or by force] without valid consent of the female and her family, and have the traditional characteristics of shared domicile, bearing of children, domestic responsibilities, exclusivity and sex” (Annan, et al., “Women and Girls at War”, supra note 102, at 9).
women.”

While the numbers are contested, at least one-quarter of female abductees became “wives.” Plan UK reports that girl child soldiers were often assigned a “husband” through a ritual in which “soldiers would throw off their shirts in a pile and force girls to pick out a shirt and become a ‘wife’ of the man whose shirt she selected.” Girls were often stripped naked to see their breasts and “asked if they know gonorrhea, if they said yes they are killed.” Chancy’s story reflects the intensely coercive nature of these “marriages”: “I was so scared but I could not refuse. I had seen a girl refuse to go to a man. She was beaten so bad and she was tied on a tree to be shot … When she was about to be killed, she went to him.” For those who were “married,” many became pregnant. According to some, almost half, in fact, bore children. Seventeen-year old Sarah reports: “I don’t want to be a mother at this age. But it happened and I must accept this.” Many of the girls experienced serious trauma because of, and within, these coerced relationships. For example, Angela P. reports: “as a wife I was beaten and sexually abused. As a ting ting [servant], I was beaten twice; as a wife I was beaten so many times I couldn’t count.” Janet A., sixteen, vividly describes the perverse nature of these unions: “During the day he would treat me as a prisoner … but at night he would want to treat me as a wife and would force me to love [engage in sexual activity] him.” Others claimed that

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119 Van Woudenberg, et al., supra note 47, at 42. The ability to “take” a “wife” was typically forbidden until a male soldier had “achieved a specific rank, usually after several years of combat, and proving a loyalty to the LRA” (Liu Institute for Global Issues & the Gulu District NGO Forum, “Young Mothers, Marriage, and Reintegration in Northern Uganda: Considerations for the Juba Peace Talks”, The Justice and Reconciliation Project, Field Notes No. 2 (September 2006) at 5).

120 Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, supra note 43, at 153; SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4. Other studies have reported that over 50% of girls in their sample group were taken as “wives” (See, i.e., Mazurana, et al., “Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups”, supra note 4; and Sofie Vindervogel, et al., “Forced Conscription of Children During Armed Conflict: Experiences of Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda” (2011) 35 Child Abuse & Neglect 551 at 555). Some authors have also posited that the numbers are likely much higher “as girls living within this context rarely report sexual violence, because of the cultural stigma attached and the resulting sense of shame” (Halsall, supra note 27, at 257).

121 Van der Gaag, supra note 61, at 59-60.

122 Hansal, supra note 27, at 220.

123 Cheney, supra note 26, at 27.

124 Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, supra note 43, at 153; SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4. Others have claimed that the number was lower at 37% (Denov, “Girl Soldiers and Human Rights”, supra note 9, at 820).

125 Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 31.

126 Leibig, supra note 25, at 6.

127 Yvette Efevbera, “What’s Happening to Uganda’s Girls? The Effects of War on Youth Culture in Northern Uganda” (Michigan State University Center for Gender Studies & University Undergraduate Art and Research Forum, 2009) at 12.
resisting the imposition of the label of “wife” could have serious repercussions, but that resistance was nonetheless possible. Sarah, seventeen, explains: “They gave me as a wife, but I refused the man … He ordered other boys to beat me on my back with a panga [machete]. He hated me. I got eight strokes with the panga on my back. It hurt so much, I thought I would die. After that we never spoke. I just stayed with the other girls.”

Not all of the girls’ experiences within these forced unions were inherently abusive, and some recounted kindness on the part of their “husbands.” Interviews with girls reveal a range of feelings; for example, one woman remembers: “We got along well. You know, he was abducted like me.” Another nineteen-year old recounts the complex nature of her relationship:

He is a good, kind man. He did not torture or beat me. Well ... he only became good to me when I conceived. What he always has at heart is when a lady is pregnant. He has to respect and not beat her. But before I was pregnant, any slight mistake and he would beat me. I feel I will go back to him as a wife, as he is already the father to my children. I will willingly go back with him.

Moreover, some girls claimed that being a “wife” had some benefits, including fewer work hours during the day and better food rations. Some also gained authority over lower ranking men and boys. A girl’s status as mother could alter her position within the group. Having a child “sometimes allowed them exemption from fighting and arbitrary punishment. Those attached to high ranking LRA commanders were provided with maids or helpers.” The position was often precarious, however, as loss of one’s “husband” could trigger a renewal of abuse. Christine A. reinforces this point: “[T]hey start to treat you like a girl again and beat you. I was beaten severely and given less food. Sometimes I didn’t have food for my baby. I had to work in the garden like a slave, beginning at 5:00 a.m. and coming back late in the evening. Unless you get another man, you suffer.”

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128 Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 31.
129 Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 884.
130 Interview, Gulu Town, February 2006, as cited in Borzello, supra note 103, at 404.
132 Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 5.
Not all girls were passive victims, and some engaged in various strategies of resistance. For example, Patricia, fifteen, claims: “They would make us cut people’s legs off. If you don’t help they beat you. They said, ‘We will kill you some day, you are misbehaving!’ I said, ‘If you kill me, I will become a saint.’”\(^{135}\) Sue, fifteen, believes she was able to survive because “one of the captured teachers, who had rank, kept telling them not to kill me,” but also because she drew on her strengths of being “tough and outspoken.”\(^{136}\) Janet M., fifteen, also speaks of active resistance: “Because she was young and feared sexual abuse, she deceived her captors by saying she was [sexually] infected … When a report was given that she was not infected, angry commanders ordered her killed. Kony, the LRA commander, intervened to spare her life because, he said, her actions showed she was wise and tricked people.”\(^{137}\) Others took the opposite tack. For example, seventeen-year-old Stella opted for passivity: “she drew upon her ability to ‘pray’ and ‘dig’ as there was ‘nothing I can do, just only stay like that.’”\(^{138}\) Girls also relied on one another to survive, and some report setting up a “sort of tallying system to keep track of each other when they were with different sub-groups.”\(^{139}\)

Children within the group were closely monitored and controlled. As Chancy explains, “All the time I would think if there is a way I would escape … but it was very difficult because of the soldiers looking at us, watching us all the time.”\(^{140}\) Some girls managed to escape shortly after abduction. Others were able to escape during the confusion of battle, with some surrendering to the UPDF and others simply running away into the bush. Even fewer (particularly “wives”) were released.\(^{141}\) Ruth K., twelve, narrates the challenges encountered by those who managed to run away:

One night I was beaten terribly and then sent to sleep outside in the cold and rain. The next morning, at 5 a.m., I was beaten again and then sent to fetch water. My hands were swollen so I wasn’t able to lift the jerry can onto my head. No one came to help, so I decided to pour out the water and throw the can

\(^{135}\) Ehrenreich, *supra* note 80, at 24.
\(^{136}\) Halsall, *supra* note 27, at 220.
\(^{137}\) McKay, “Girls as ‘Weapons of Terror’”, *supra* note 51, at 392.
\(^{138}\) Halsall, *supra* note 27, at 222.
\(^{139}\) Van der Gaag, *supra* note 61, at 67.
\(^{140}\) Cheney, *supra* note 26, at 27.
\(^{141}\) Some studies have shown that release is far less likely for “wives.” (See, i.e., Vindervogel, et al., *supra* note 120, at 558; Becker, *supra* note 79, at 15).
away. I went into the bush. It was raining heavily so I stayed under a tree. When it stopped, I stayed in the wilderness, eating leaves. I spent three weeks there. One day I saw a road. I had no strength left and collapsed by the road. A hunter came and found me and carried me on his bicycle.\textsuperscript{142}

**Complexities, Diversities and Multiplicities**

In reading the stories above, the first thing that is clear is that these girl child soldiers are neither solely victims, nor are they only combatants or perpetrators of violence. Their roles, instead, are “varied and multi-dimensional.” They defy simplistic portrayals of these girls as wholly traumatized or “lost.”\textsuperscript{143} Crucially, it is imperative to deconstruct the narrative that their main function was sexual in nature. According to Rachel Brett, adopting this preconception “is to deny the individual experiences of the girls and to treat them as a category of potential sexual objects,” and no more.\textsuperscript{144} While it is clear that many suffered serious sexual abuse and other gender-based harms, some also exercised power in their own right or devised survival strategies that reflect clear instances of agency.

Without recognizing their individual voices, agency, and potential resiliency, we do these girls a great disservice. First, by failing to listen to their true experiences and, second, by building our knowledge base and post-conflict programming on “possibly erroneous assumptions about what sort of help ought to be provided.”\textsuperscript{145} We also fail to harness their potential as empowered social actors and enablers, capable of making distinct contributions within the post-conflict world.\textsuperscript{146} The assumption that girl child soldiers, as a function of their age and gender, are merely passive victims “contributes to the logic behind their exclusion” in post-conflict programs for ex-combatants,\textsuperscript{147} and can serve to undercut meaningful post-conflict transformation more generally. As discussed in further detail below, understanding “child” or “girl” as automatically implying innocence, vulnerability or victimization can have serious ramifications for post-conflict programming. Where innocence is read as harmlessness, the prevailing narrative of girls

\textsuperscript{142} Becker, \textit{ibid.} at 15.
\textsuperscript{144} Brett, \textit{supra} note 13, at 9.
\textsuperscript{145} Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants”, \textit{supra} note 67, at 107.
\textsuperscript{147} Fujio, \textit{supra} note 10, at 9.
as victims can negatively affect their visibility in DDR mechanisms, as there may be less of an imperative to deal with them as an immediate threat to safety and security. More seriously, it can hamper individual reintegration processes. To the extent that we continue to “see children as ‘targets’ of training – passive, imitative, conservative, and accepting of adult socialization practices,” we fail to recognize their multiplicities, as well as their agency, and may design reductive programs that simply re-inscribe victimhood onto the lives of these girls.

**Girls’ Stories of their Post-Conflict Worlds**

“*We return home, but to what?*”

This section explores the experiences of the returning girls in order to highlight their needs and vulnerabilities in the post-conflict environment, as well as to demonstrate the ways in which an underdeveloped understanding of their complex realities may contribute to their invisibility in post-conflict programming. While an effort has been made to incorporate their stories to ensure that any proposed response is rooted in their subjectivities, the sad reality is that much less attention has been paid to these girls once the guns fall silent, and thus their voices have often also remained silenced. Nevertheless, as is evident from the limited narratives below, their experiences are both highly individualized and multiple, but also inflected with unique gendered concerns, all of which must be taken into account in designing effective reintegration strategies.

The girls who escape, are rescued, or released often cannot return to their homes. Whole communities were brutalized, displaced, and destroyed. Family members were killed or otherwise died in the camps. For most, returning “home” meant living in a rehabilitation centre, an IDP camp, or relocating to an unfamiliar area. According to Sharon, thirteen:

> I haven’t been home since I was abducted, and I don’t know where my family is. I met my cousin in Gulu and she told me that after I escaped, my uncle was killed. She said my mother and family ran away. I want to finish my course in tailoring here, and try to look for a place to stay in Gulu town. I won’t go

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149 Girl, Northern Uganda, as cited in Denov, “Girl Soldiers and Human Rights”, *supra* note 9, at 830.
150 In one database study of 1,995 former abductees at the Rachele Rehabilitation Centre in Lira, 84% of the children’s families were internally displaced due to conflict; 26% had lost their father; 12% their mother; and 6% were orphaned upon their return (Vindervogel, et al., *supra* note 120, at 554).
Because of the high death toll and internal displacement rate, many of the girls end up alone, as heads of households: “Since we were abducted when we were young we returned to find our parents had died. You’re a [returnee], you’re a child, but you find yourself at the head of a family.”

Many suffer ill health, with girls facing gender-specific risks. While the evidence base is thin, it has been reported that at least 80% of returning girls have contracted a sexually transmitted disease. Many have also stopped menstruating due to malnutrition and stress and suffer uterine problems because of forced sex. It has also been documented that some girls experience long-term emotional trauma: “My wife and I had several of the escaped girls staying in our house … at one time, one of the girls woke us shouting, because she said she was seeing blood everywhere, blood floating on the bed.” Others display symptoms of anxiety, depression, or mood swings. For example, one aunt describes her niece Dorine’s experience as
When she left home she was different and when she returned, I realized changes in her behavior because whenever I could ask her question, she broke into tears. She could not say a word … If she was annoyed with her fellow children, she would just beat them. So when we realized the changes in her, we all got scared of her.\footnote{158}

Victims of sexual violence may also exhibit “unhealthy sexual behaviors,” including engaging in sex for reward, or fear of intimacy or sexual contact.\footnote{159} As explained by one seventeen-year-old girl: “When somebody tells me about boy–girl relationships I get so annoyed and aggressive, I just want to fight them, because I cannot think about boys or even look at them.”\footnote{160} Recurrent mental health problems can seriously affect some girls’ experiences of post-conflict reintegration. Christine, aged twenty, despairs: “I’m not happy at all because they ruined me. I had to cut short my studies. I have no hope that I will one day be somebody … I worry about what will happen next.”\footnote{161} Some studies have found that while “disabling symptoms of emotional distress” were rare, those who became “wives” or mothers were more likely to report psychological problems.\footnote{162}

Any physical or psychological trauma is compounded by the reality of social dislocation and lack of opportunity.\footnote{163} For example, most of the returning girl child soldiers have either limited or no education because of the young age at which they were taken, and “[m]any end up uneducated, unemployed and homeless.”\footnote{164} According to McKay and Mazurana, only 11% of their study cohort was able to go back to school upon their return.\footnote{165}

\footnote{158}Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, supra note 43, at 155.\footnote{159}Russell & Godziak, supra note 83, at 60.\footnote{160}Chrobok & Akutu, supra note 42, at 20.\footnote{161}Becker, supra note 79, at 17.\footnote{162}SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4-5. According to analysis, this is related to the ‘wives’ and mothers increased exposure to violence during their longer stays with the LRA, not because of the nature of their relationship, per se. See also, Klasen et al., supra note 112, at 1107, who concludes that female gender is not “a risk factor for pathology in adolescents” in the Ugandan study population. Elizabeth Schauer further argues that depressive symptoms are related to “cumulative number of traumatic exposure … and cumulative number of forced acts of violence,” rather than any gender differences in pathology (Schauer, supra note 156, at 14).\footnote{163}Michael Wessells, “Supporting the Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being of Former Child Soldiers” (June 2009) 48:6 J. Am. Child Adolescent Psychiatry 587 at 588.\footnote{164}Lara, supra note 103, at 316.\footnote{165}McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 105. Two girls from this same group enrolled in school for the first time upon their return (rather than returning to school).
researchers, the impact on education is particularly serious for those girls who return with children. Forced motherhood is associated with “nearly a third fewer years of education, in large part because young women with children are unable, disallowed or unwilling to attend school.”\textsuperscript{166} In one survey, none of the girls who returned with children went back to school.\textsuperscript{167} Moreover, there is some evidence that girl child soldiers may suffer from “moderately lower” employment opportunities. However, as discussed in more detail below, this gap is likely linked to the fact that there are simply fewer economic opportunities available to females more generally.\textsuperscript{168} While some have expressed a general concern that the returning girls may be more likely to participate in prostitution due to a lack of other economic options,\textsuperscript{169} there is little empirical documentation of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, one fifteen-year old from Gulu states: “My parents are dead; they were killed by the rebels and this is the only way for my survival. I earn between 5,000 shillings [US$3] and 8,000 shillings [US$5] a day from clients in night clubs and bars.”\textsuperscript{170}

One of the most broadly discussed issues affecting returning girl child soldiers is that of stigma. Many claim that the girls risk becoming “social pariahs,” rejected by both their families and their communities.\textsuperscript{171} As one young woman notes: “By the time we returned people said there was no stigma, but we’ve been stigmatized a lot within this community.”\textsuperscript{172} However, there is also an emerging body of research that posits that only a minority suffers extreme familial or community rejection.\textsuperscript{173} The reality is that the issue is complex. General theories play out differently across diverse communities and individual lives. Where it does exist, stigma may be linked to the girl’s association with the rebel group, and her participation in committing atrocities against the very community to which she returns. Fourteen-year-old Apiyo suffered

\begin{footnotes}
\item[166] SWAY, “A Way Forward”, \textit{supra} note 74, at 3.
\item[167] Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, \textit{supra} note 43, at 156.
\item[169] See, i.e., The Redress Trust, \textit{supra} note 44, at 15.
\item[172] As cited in Justice and Reconciliation Project, \textit{supra} note 152, at 6.
\item[173] See, i.e., Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, \textit{supra} note 43, at 153; and Apio, \textit{supra} note 133, at 8.
\end{footnotes}
harassment following her confession that she had killed several people, including family. She claims that she was called a “killer” and someone whose “head is sick,” and that she was frequently bullied at school. Others have reported that they were treated as undesirable because of preconceptions of the child soldiers’ experiences. One female student writes:

When our school closed for a while after the abduction, the majority of the students, including me, tried [to attend] various schools country-wide, but the life and the atmosphere in these schools was not conducive. We were nick-named by our fellow students as ‘Kony Rebels’ and many teachers and school administrators suspected us [of being] HIV+, and wherever we were, we were afraid of identifying ourselves as students of St. Mary’s College, Aboke, or else they would try to isolate us … we got burned psychologically.

Family relationships could also be fraught. According to SWAY, “one in six females report having negative family relationships and 13 percent have experienced domestic violence by a family member or husband in the past two months.” Molly, for example, says this: “My parents welcomed me, but my elder brother disturbed me a lot. If he was drunk, he could come and abuse me. He was quarrelsome and he could fight me. He abused me that I am a rebel, I am very stupid and I don’t understand.” Another young woman recalls being told: “You are from the bush, you are sick, you want to kill my brother. I do not want a rebel for a sister-in-law.” There is some evidence, however, that negative familial relationships improve with time. Moreover, not all girls suffer negative reintegration experiences or stigma. Marie, seventeen, is one example: “When she returned home, people sang and danced in celebration. Religious leaders came to her house and told her, ‘Don’t think backwards, only forwards.’” She was told

174 Grace Akello, Annemiek Richters & Ria Reis, “Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda: Coming to Terms with Children’s Agency and Accountability” (2006) 4:3 Intervention 229 at 231.
175 Student Letter #11, as cited in Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 113.
176 SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 5. According to Annan, et al., “Women and Girls at War”, supra note 102, at 15-16, females may be more likely to experience family problems: “18% of females compared to 7% of males reported at least one problem with the family.”
178 Interview with young mother, 27, once “married” to one of the LRA High Command, Palabek Kal, IDP Camp, Kitgum District, 20 August 2006, as cited in Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 7.
179 In the SWAY study, “39 percent of females reported that they were called names by their community when they returned, 35 percent said they felt the community was afraid of them, and 5 percent report that their own family was physically aggressive with them. Current reports by females of such experiences were dramatically lower, however – 7 percent for insults, 1 percent for community fear, and 0.4 percent reporting family aggression” (SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4).
by one clan leader that she was “a useful girl, and I should set an example … They believed in me.”

More specifically, however, many have argued that the most vulnerable in terms of reintegration success are those who have suffered sexual abuse or who became mothers of LRA-fathered children. One focus group participant describes the situation as follows: “All of these things, the psychological trauma, you feel like the community knows what happened to you. And those who come with children make it evident what happened. Men don’t have that.”

According to some reports and studies, these girls are viewed as having “lost their purity” and are thus rejected. Authors have posited that those who have been sexually violated may be viewed as “morally liminal,” and thus unmarriageable, in a social context that places a high premium on traditional gender norms, including ideals of female chastity and virginity. This may be critical in Uganda, where marriage is often seen as providing the best means of obtaining economic security and protection for girls and women. Furthermore, even those girls who have not actually suffered sexual violence may be presumed to be victims, thus rendering them victims of another type, namely, generalized stereotyping. According to some of the girls,

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181 See, Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 881, for a discussion of the literature on girl child soldiers and stigmatization. See also, Ochen, et al., supra note 49, at 93; and Chrobok & Akutu, supra note 42, at 2; 27. While the issue is outside the scope of this thesis, many authors have argued that children born to girl child soldiers are also peculiarly vulnerable and thus require specialized attention in their own right (See, i.e., Apio, supra note 133, at 2).
182 Female focus group participant, 1 October 2007, as cited in Justice and Reconciliation Project, supra note 152, at 8.
183 Leibig, supra note 25, at 7; The Redress Trust, supra note 44, at 15. While there continues to be a dearth of data on this issue, there is some empirical support. One study by ACORD found that 30 out of 36 Northern Ugandan women who had been raped during the conflict were rejected by either their husbands or families (as cited in Leibig, ibid). According to De Watteville, the divorce rate for ex-combatant returnees ranged between 50% and 65%, which was significantly higher than the average (Nathalie De Watteville, “Addressing Gender Issues in Demobilization and Reintegration Programs”, Africa Region Working Paper Series (Africa Region: The World Bank, May 2002) at 14). Another study found that 6% of 147 young mothers were married before being taken, while only 33% of these young women reunited with their husbands upon their return. For those who did not return to their husbands, the reason given was often that they were rejected as “unclean” or “shamed for bringing home new ‘bush’ children” (Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 6).
185 Van der Gaag, supra note 61, at 87.
“rumors spread that all the students of the school were raped by the rebels.”

Other girls’ experiences may work to negatively shape their intimate relationships. One social worker echoes these concerns, claiming that “women’s insecurities about social status combined with economic pressures pushed them into relationships faster than their peers, with some entering negative relationships, confirming their insecurities about having less value than other women.”

Susan explains the problem this way:

It is hard for women who return from the LRA to get a man because sometimes you think ‘if I accept this man with a wife, it won’t be a good situation because I may be abused.’ Also I think there is a way people look at [abducted women] from the bush. Sometimes you feel like there is no choice. You think that if you take long without a man, you want to get a man.

These problems may also be intensified in light of the girls’ economic situation in the post-conflict world, in which they often have very little control over land or income. Adong, shares her own experience: “The way my husband treats me. He drinks a lot. He argues. He says he wants to take food from the harvest and sell it because it is his land.”

Too often, these various pressures lead to domestic violence. Janet, thirty-years-old, explains: “Like one day, he took alcohol, came back home and began to quarrel a lot up to a point where he got two pangas and sat with them in front of the door.”

Because of these realities, some girls may opt to remain within the relationships forged in the “bush.” While most studies suggest that the girls are uninterested in staying with their LRA ‘husbands,’ some young mothers have reported that they would like to reunite with them because they had children with them; felt they had no other choice; or felt love towards them. Others may make the deliberate choice to remain single, living in new communities or in urban centres. For example, one “wife” of an LRA fighter

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186 Student Letter #11, as cited in Ehrenreich, supra note 80, at 113.
187 Annan & Brier, “Risk of Return”, supra note 43, at 156. However, in another study of 147 young mothers, 55% opted to remain single, while only 37% chose to remarry (Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 2).
188 Annan & Brier, ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid. at 157.
191 SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 4. The Justice and Reconciliation Project, supra note 152, at 8, reports that nearly 100% of young mothers who had knowledge that their former ‘husbands’ were alive had no interest in reuniting with them.
192 Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 6. See also, McKay, et al., “Returned and Neglected”, supra note 171, at 6; Murungi, supra note 50, at 35.
193 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 88. See also, Vahida Nainar, In the Multiple Systems of Justice in Uganda, Whither Justice for Women? (Kampala: FIDA-Uganda, 2011) at 12.
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claims: “I have decided not to get married because of the suffering I experienced ... I cannot repeat associating with men and sex.” Some former girl child soldiers have also forged important supportive bonds with one another, preferring to interact only with those who have undergone similar experiences to their own. As one seventeen-year-old girl recounts: “I feel easy with other formerly abducted, nobody insults me and we have all gone through the same trouble.”

It is clear, therefore, that the post-conflict experiences of these girls are diverse, and that different needs will arise depending on the specific life situation of the individual girl. It is also apparent, however, that certain gendered realities continue to inflect these experiences as well. The section that follows documents the failure of the reintegration framework to fully grapple with the multiple needs of these girls and explores the deeper reasons why existing arrangements continue to underserve this specific population.

Part 2: Mind the Gap

Legal Regime

The international community has explicitly recognized that the reintegration of child soldiers following conflict is a crucial component of the international human rights and humanitarian regime and that States have formal obligations to provide for the specific needs of these children in the aftermath of war. Having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in August 1990, the Ugandan government is obligated to take “all appropriate measures” to support the “physical and psychological recovery and the social reintegration of a child victim” of armed conflict or other forms of abuse, “in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.” These obligations are underscored in the Optional Protocol

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195 As cited in Chrobok & Akutu, supra note 42, at 16.


197 CRC, supra note 25, article 39. This article specifies that these obligations are owed to child victims of “any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts.”
to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict,\textsuperscript{198} to which Uganda acceded in May of 2002, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child,\textsuperscript{199} ratified by Uganda in August 1994. These treaties respectively require States Parties to provide returning child soldiers with “all appropriate assistance” and “protection and care.”\textsuperscript{200}

Ideally, the States’ post-conflict obligations described above would be read and implemented in a holistic manner, taking into account the other rights enumerated in these human rights or humanitarian instruments. This would support a more integrated response to child protection in the context of armed conflict.\textsuperscript{201} However, it is clear from the language above that these obligations, while critical, are almost pro forma in nature, and provide little guidance at the level of implementation.\textsuperscript{202} Rights exist on paper; however, their application on the ground continues to be mired in uncertainty, making concrete action difficult. This is particularly problematic for girls, who may be doubly disadvantaged (or outright ignored) in DDR programming because of their age and their gender.\textsuperscript{203}

In recognition of the lack of substantive legal guidance as to the best means to reintegrate child soldiers generally, and girl child soldiers particularly, the international community developed

\textsuperscript{198} Optional Protocol, supra note 25.
\textsuperscript{199} ACRWC, supra note 25.
\textsuperscript{200} Optional Protocol, supra note 25, article 6. ACRWC, ibid, article 22(3).
\textsuperscript{201} The CRC, for example, explicitly recognizes a whole range of children’s rights (thematized divided into “three basic categories,” namely survival and development, protection, and empowerment (Davison, supra note 196, at 131)). Under these groupings, children are granted an equal right to adequate nutrition, education, health care, and standard of living; leisure and culture; protection from violence, abuse, including sexual abuse, hazardous employment and exploitation; as well as the right to express opinions and freedom of thought in all matters affecting the child. This structure “reflect[s] the CRC’s holistic perspective of children’s rights: that they are indivisible and interrelated; that equal importance should be attached to each and every right recognized in the CRC because each one is fundamental to the dignity of the child; and that the implementation of each right should take into account the implementation of or respect for all other rights” (Sharon Detrick, A Commentary on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1999) at 723). A contextual reading can thus provide a more meaningful sense of what would be required to ensure that child soldiers are effectively reintegrated.

the Paris Principles. Endorsed by 105 States, including Uganda, these non-binding policy recommendations provide a detailed strategy that consolidates the current global thinking on best practices in preventing child soldier recruitment, supporting their release, and reintegrating them back into civilian life. The principles are significant from a gender perspective because they incorporate a definition of child soldier that explicitly acknowledges both the direct and indirect roles that girls play within armed conflict, as well as the gendered nature of their experiences, thus helping to render the girl child soldier a visible and recognizable figure within the international arena. Importantly as well, these principles advocate that concrete steps be taken to ensure that girls are included and involved in all facets of the reintegration process, and that programming be designed to respond to their unique needs. The principles thus adopt a child- rights-based and girl-friendly lens in urging governments and international organizations to make a long-term commitment to developing, strengthening, funding and implementing holistic and community-based initiatives aimed at sustainable reintegration. At the same time, however, as discussed below, the articulation of this ideal has not translated into measurable successes at the national level. In Uganda, despite best intentions, girl child soldiers were often marginalized within the larger reintegration framework and faced specific challenges that mediated the success of post-conflict programming targeting former combatants.

Existing Reintegration Framework

Girl child soldiers who either escaped, were released, or rescued from the LRA did not benefit from official national DDR programming. Despite attempts to negotiate a DDR framework, arrangements ultimately failed when Joseph Kony refused to sign the final implementing

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204 Paris Principles, supra note 51. These principles are a revised version of the seminal Cape Town Principles and Best Practices on the Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, which were first developed in 1997 as a joint project of the NGO Working Group on the CRC and UNICEF (Murungi, supra note 50, at 33). The updated principles were adopted in 2007 at a ministerial-level meeting at an international conference entitled “Free Children from War.”

205 McVeigh, et al., supra note 64, at 45.

206 Murungi, supra note 50, at 33. See, footnote 51 for a more detailed discussion of the definition of ‘child soldier’ contained within these principles.

207 For example, principle 3.2 calls for girls’ full involvement and inclusion in gender-responsive programming; principle 3.18 reiterates the need for a contextual reading and gender analysis in the development and implementation of all strategies and programs; and principle 4 explicitly recognizes that girls are at risk of invisibility, and thus require special attention.

208 See, Jessica Oliver, “Promoting Reintegration and Building Peace? An Examination of Education Assistance for Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda” (M.A., Carleton University, 26 August 2010) at 3.

documents. As a result, disarmament and demobilization processes have been marginal, and the main focus has been on the “R” component of DDR, namely reintegration. Despite its centrality, reintegration in Northern Uganda has been typified as an ad hoc collaborative effort that has often failed to adequately target the needs of former girl child soldiers.

For example, one major development was the enactment of the Amnesty Act in 2000. As part of the government-run program administered by the Amnesty Commission in accordance with the Act, children over the age of 12 were entitled to full amnesty for any crimes they may have committed. As of 2006, those in possession of an Amnesty Certificate were also provided with a reinsertion package, consisting of household goods, a lump sum of money, and sometimes payment of school fees, in accordance with the Amnesty Amendment Act (2006). The extent to which girl child soldiers actually benefited from the amnesty program, however, is unclear. According to SWAY data, as of 2007, less than one-third of girls and female youth had, in fact, applied for an Amnesty Certificate. One-third of eligible females who had not applied claimed that they did not know about the program or where to obtain a certificate. Another third mistakenly believed they were not eligible because they returned too early, or because they had

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210 Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants”, supra note 67, at 7; Borzello, supra note 103, at 400.
211 Mark Knight & Alpaslan Özerdem, “Guns, Camps and Cash: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reinsertion of Former Combatants in Transitions From War to Peace” (2004) 41:4 J. of Peace Research 499 at 511. Part of the explanation for the failure of the Ugandan government to adequately meet the needs of these girls is because general development and reintegration strategies consistently fail to take gender into account. For example, the Peace, Recovery and Development Plan for Northern Uganda (PRDP) (2007-2010) (Kampala: Office of Prime Minister, Northern Uganda Rehabilitation, September 2007), which focuses on the reintegration of former combatants as part of a larger framework of reconstruction, peace and development, does not target women for any specific interventions, and girl child soldiers are nowhere mentioned (See, Nainar, supra note 193, at 12; Robinah Rubimbwa & Maude Mugisha, Security Council Resolution 1325: Civil Society Monitoring Report 2011 – Uganda (Global Network of Women Peacebuilders, 2011) at 110).
212 See, Halsall, supra note 27, at 266. However, as of May 25 2012, the Minister for Internal Affairs no longer recognizes blanket amnesty for former combatants (IRIN Africa, “Uganda: Lack of Funding Stalls Ex-Combatants’ Reintegration” (18 June 2012), online: http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=95672.)
214 See, Leah Finnegan & Catherine Flew, Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration in Uganda: Mini Case Study (Stanford: Center for International Cooperation and Security, July 2008) at 17; and Rubimbwa & Mugisha, supra note 211, at table 8, 128, for details on the amnesty packages. The viability of this program has been challenged by chronic lack of funds. According to the Amnesty Commission, as of March 2012, only 5,335 out of 26,288 ex-combatants have been successfully reintegrated into their communities (IRIN Africa, supra note 212).
216 This suggests that the information campaigns that were implemented to reach girl child soldiers and to inform them of their rights and where to report were largely ineffective (See, De Watteville, supra note 183, at 4-7, for a discussion of the various outreach strategies in Uganda).
not gone through official channels. Others have posited that stigma may be a factor in keeping former girl child soldiers outside of the amnesty process, as there is some evidence that the “packages are sometimes viewed by community members as a ‘reward’ to abducted persons, generating resentment and leading to stigma.” Some girls may have opted to avoid registration – and thus association with the LRA – to circumvent further social exclusion. In any case, only a small percentage of girls benefitted from reinsertion support, thus suggesting that many of their immediate needs were overlooked.

More specifically, for girl child soldiers, the informal DDR process consisted of three general stages, aimed at “turning a child soldier back into a child.” While it is clear that some girls benefited from this process, it is equally apparent that the general nature of the programming provided to the returning children often failed to adequately address the full range of experiences and needs of girls in particular. First, the UPDF established child protection units within its barracks, where escapees or rescued combatants were supposed to spend some time as part of a “reception and debriefing process.” Children were to receive clothing, food and, if necessary, immediate medical attention. From there, children were to be remanded into the

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217 Jeannie Annan, et al., “Making Reintegration Work for Youth in Northern Uganda: Findings from Two Phases of the Survey of War Affected Youth” (Kampala: SWAY, 2007) at 2 [SWAY, “Making Reintegration Work”]. While not the official legal position, there is some evidence that the Amnesty Commission developed an administrative practice of requiring documentation that the returnee had gone through the official reception network (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 39). Where former combatants had “quietly settled,” thus bypassing the centres, the Amnesty Commission was required to evaluate each individual case to determine if the individual had, in fact, been associated with a fighting force. However, financial and administrative constraints rendered this “practically impossible.” In light of these realities, and growing concerns about false reporting, where individuals did not go through the official channels, the commission often denied them a certificate, ostensibly to ensure that there were enough resources to help “genuine” reporters (ibid. at 40). The issue for former girl child soldiers was that only a small percentage of them went through the reception network (as discussed in more detail below), thus suggesting that there was an (unintentional) gender bias in terms of processing amnesty certificates and that many girls did not receive even the basic reinsertion support offered under the amnesty regime.

218 Liu Institute, supra note 119, at 10.


220 Veale & Stavrou, supra note 213, at 34. In earlier stages of the conflict, children would spend a few months within the confines of the barracks, as there was often nowhere else to send them. As of 2006, the average time decreased to around two weeks (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 31). According to one study, 75% of girls reported being held for one to seven days, while 20% reported being held for two to four weeks (McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 79). UPDF regulations specify that children should be held for no longer than 48 hours (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008* (London: Author, 2008) at 347).

221 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, ibid, at 81.
guardianship of one of the operating interim care (or reception) centres, where they received further medical care and counseling, participated in educational programming, music and dance, sports, and, where available, minimal skills and vocational training, while reception staff worked to trace their family members or relatives. Some centres, including those run by World Vision, also offered separate programming, including parenting classes, for girls and young women who returned with children. These residential centres were designed as “a transitional space for children” as part of the reintegration process. Within these spaces, the children were often provided with advice on how to “behave properly in the ‘community’” and were sometimes instructed to internalize a sense of vulnerability, innocence and victimhood by working to “forget” their time in the bush, while “forgiving” those who forced them to commit atrocities. It appears, therefore, that the question of girls’ agency was rarely on the agenda, as the focus was mostly on helping the children recapture their “lost childhood” and “sensitizing” communities to the children’s return through a heavy emphasis on the “innocence discourse.” The foregrounding of this psychosocial aspect of the child soldiering experience within the reception network is problematic to the extent that it undercut support for other

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222 The centres were run by local and international humanitarian organizations, including: Action Against Child Abuse & Neglect in Teso; Caritas in Pajule; Christian Counseling Fellowship (CCF) in Pader; Concerned Parents’ Association in Kitgum; Gulu Support the Children Organization (GUSCO) in Gulu; International Rescue Committee in Kitgum, Gulu, Pader and Lira; Katakwi Children’s Voice in Teso; Kitgum Concerned Women’s Association in Kitgum; and World Vision in Gulu.


224 No such family education was provided for boys or young men within the reception network, thus perpetuating the general truism that the girls would bear primary, if not sole, responsibility for raising their children (Muth, supra note 131, at 55-57).

225 Russell & Godziak, supra note 83, at 64. While the various centres operated under differing timelines, depending on their institutional goals and funding capacities, at the World Vision centres in Gulu, children usually spent between three weeks and three months with the organization (Muth, ibid. at 44).

226 Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 22.

227 Akello, Richter & Reis, supra note 174, at 232-234. Journalist Marc Ellison sums up the general ethos as follows: “ Basically you’d get . . . ‘counselling.’ The reason I say ‘counselling’ like that is because the councillors [sic] I spoke to said they simply tell the women to forget their experiences” (as cited in Stanczak, supra note 68).

228 Akello, Richter & Reis, ibid. at 234; Jeannie Annan, Moriah Brier & Filder Aryemo, “From ‘Rebel’ to ‘Returnee’ – Daily Life and Reintegration for Young Soldiers in Northern Uganda” (2009) 24:6 J. of Adolescent Research 639 at 643. Allen and Schomerus support this argument by stressing that beneficiaries of reception centre care were often “entirely left out of the decision about what should happen to them. They are not consulted during the process and staff quite openly admit that an FAP’s [formerly abducted person’s] view on their own condition is not taken seriously. FAP’s are seen as unable to judge their own well-being and their ability to cope” (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 43).
reintegration efforts, including effective educational and livelihoods programming.\textsuperscript{229} There is some evidence that girls’ needs, in particular, were overlooked in this regard. According to one study, only 8% of female youth underwent any form of vocational training (less than half the rate for boys).\textsuperscript{230} The type and scope of vocational training on offer was also very limited. For example, one girl interviewee “thought it would be good if more than one skill would be taught, as she and all the other girls at the center were learning tailoring.”\textsuperscript{231} Lastly, children were returned to their families, where it was possible to locate them. Various international agencies then sought to provide community-based support to ease the children’s reintegration back into their communities and to strengthen community capacity to support their rehabilitation.\textsuperscript{232} Agencies, including World Vision and GUSCO, Save the Children Denmark, the Concerned Parents’ Association, and Caritas, appointed and trained individuals within the communities to engage in child protection activities to help support the longer-term psychosocial and socio-economic reintegration of former child soldiers and other war-affected children.\textsuperscript{233} As of 2007, these agencies sought to harmonize these efforts through a central Child Protection Committee (CPC), with UNICEF and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development acting as co-leads.\textsuperscript{234}

Despite best efforts, however, serious gaps remain. For example, the Committee on the Rights of the Child “while noting the valuable reintegration efforts undertaken by NGOs to provide physical and psychological recovery for demobilized children, is concerned that such efforts are primarily short-term and are hampered by the lack of adequate resources and State party support.”\textsuperscript{235} The reception centres often operated under significant funding constraints. World Vision’s rehabilitation centre often faced “six times their capacity of children cycling through

\textsuperscript{229} I do not mean to argue, here, that psychological supports are not critical components of successful reintegration efforts for girl child soldiers. Instead, I mean to reinforce the point that a sole focus on these girls (or boys) as ‘traumatized victims’ fails to grapple with the whole complexity of their post-conflict reintegration needs. Blattman and Annan argue, for example, that “the most pervasive and arguably largest impact is on education and livelihoods rather than physical or psychological trauma” (Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants”, supra note 67, at 13).

\textsuperscript{230} SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 3.

\textsuperscript{231} Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 46.


\textsuperscript{233} Ochen, et al., supra note 49, at 96.

\textsuperscript{234} Ibid.

their program.” Furthermore, due to funding limitations, as well as ongoing security concerns, the centres often offered very minimal follow-up care for the girls once they left the temporary institutions. The community-based child protection system instituted through the CPC did not fully alleviate these gaps. Inter-agency conflict remained a barrier to effective cooperative implementation; the premium placed on “quick accountability” rather than long-term community development hampered its sustainability; and training, support and outreach mechanisms continued to overlook the longer-term needs of war-affected females.

Moreover, the reality is that a significantly large number of girls never passed through any of the official channels described above, as “spontaneous reintegration” was the overarching pattern for the majority of returning girl child soldiers. According to SWAY, only one-third of girls and young women passed through the reception centre system. Another study reports that of 262 children who entered one of the centres in Kitgum or Gulu City, only 41 were girls. The upshot is that girls appear much less likely than their male counterparts to benefit from programs aimed at returning children. In many cases these girls may have had no access to reintegration assistance of any kind. Even in situations where they did benefit from some degree of programming, the lack of monitoring and follow-up has hampered the development of effective longer-term reintegration strategies. The reality is that “[w]e simply fail to stick around long enough to learn whether our programs have made a positive difference in the lives of children,” and this lack of assessment, in turn, leads to “best practices” that are, at best, inadequate, and, more problematically, a misrepresentation of these girls’ needs.

236 Young, supra note 219, at 21; Onu, supra note 203, at 153.
237 SWAY, “Making Reintegration Work”, supra note 217, at 3. See also, Oliver, supra note 208, at 88. For example, according to interviews with FAPs, only 13% had received any form of follow-up (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 55.) In another study, only those girls who returned to the centres on their own reported receiving any follow-up care by a social worker (McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 83).
240 SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 6 (compared to one-half of boys and male youth).
241 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 34. These authors have estimated that nearly 30% of the fighting forces in Uganda were girls (ibid. at 29). Based on the numbers above, less than 16% of beneficiaries at these centres were girls, suggesting that a significant number are not going through official channels.
242 Ilene Cohn, “Progress and Hurdles on the Road to Preventing the use of Children as Soldiers and Ensuring Their Rehabilitation and Reintegration” (2004) 37 Cornell Int’l L.J. 531 at 537.
The Gendered Universe

“What was there before?”

In order to fully understand the gender gaps that exist in the post-conflict reintegration framework in Uganda, discussed above, it is critical to adopt a wider lens. To wholly gender the problem and engender solutions it is necessary to position our understandings within the “wider socio-cultural dynamics among men and women, beyond the time limited and location specific context of war.” We need to map the ways in which social realities, including normative gender identities, roles and relationships, shape the environment in which these girls are to reintegrate. It is also essential to consider the distinctive obstacles girl child soldiers may face in reintegrating back into “a culture that has not, on a broad scale, been protective of women.”

One critical point to consider when designing effective reintegration programs is that ‘reintegration,’ as a term, assumes there is some level of “normal” for girl child soldiers to return to. It is important to remember that these girls are returning to a particular gendered ‘universe.’ As some feminists have argued, the concept of ‘going back’ within DDR discourse can be regressive to the extent that it implies a return to ‘what came before’ without an adequate understanding of “the oppressive or violent nature of the previous power arrangements and institutions.” If girl child soldiers are reintegrating into a society that is characterized by a strong patriarchal regime, under which girls’ and women’s rights are “routinely violated,” and one that is plagued by high levels of gender-based violence, it is worth asking to what extent the experiences of the returning girls are, in fact, “qualitatively different” from those of their non-abducted peers.

On paper, Uganda is fully committed to gender equality. The 1995 Constitution, which enshrines a full range of women’s rights, has been declared to be “one of the most gender

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241 Researcher, as cited in Thomas, supra note 23, at 74.
sensitive constitutions.” The Ugandan government has also assented to several other pieces of legislation aimed at protecting the rights of women and girls. In practice, however, gender gaps remain. The problem is not so much a dearth of gender-sensitive laws, but rather that the existing regime is not being enforced. The reality is that retrogressive customary norms, practices and attitudes continue to undermine de facto female equality within Uganda. As one Member of Parliament notes: “People prefer their customs and beliefs over law. They always plead custom over justice in regard to the rights of women.”

Ugandan society remains largely patriarchal in the sense that “the organization of social life and institutional structures [is one] in which men have ultimate control over most aspects of women’s lives and actions.” As part of this ideological framework, men and women are slotted into specific binary roles as part of a “set script of gender-appropriate behaviours,” with men characterized as “strong, dominant, aggressive” and women as “weak, vulnerable and passive.” Within the confines of this heavily gendered “one-dimensional space,” women and girls face pronounced structural barriers, as they are often dependent on male-defined visions of their appropriate place within society. For example, while “public and productive roles” are associated with – and allocated to – men, women remain narrowly defined by – and tied to – their reproductive and familial capacities, and thus to their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers above all else.

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248 As cited in Doris M. Kakuru, “Rural Livelihoods, HIV/AIDS and Women’s Activism: The Struggle for Gender Equality in Primary Education in Uganda” (2008) 10:1 J. of Int’l Women’s Studies 36 at 42. Article 33 of the Ugandan Constitution explicitly enshrines women’s rights, including full and equal dignity; the enhancement of their welfare; the protection of their rights, taking into account their unique status and maternal functions; equal treatment, including equal opportunity in political, economic and social activities, as well as the abolishment of any law or custom that is “against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermines their status”; and affirmative action, where required, to redress the imbalances created by history, tradition or culture.

249 These include the Domestic Violence Act, 2010, The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, 2010, and The Prevention and Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2009. A Marriage and Divorce Bill, 2009, which seeks to provide fairness in marriage and upon its dissolution, is also before Parliament, although its enactment has been stalled (Rubimba & Mugisha, supra note 211, at 112).

250 The appellate court in Uganda Association of Women Lawyers and Others v. Attorney General, Constitutional Petition No. 2 of 2003, [2004] UGCC 1 (9 March 2004) – holding that several articles of the previous Divorce Act were null and void as they discriminated on the basis of sex and thus contravened the Constitution – cautioned, for example: “the old ideas and patterns persist, as do their psychological and economic ramifications” (at p. 10).


252 M. Akatsa-Bukachi, “African Feminism, Does it Exist?” Presentation made at the TGNP Gender Festival, 6-9 September 2005, at 6, as cited in Halsall, supra note 27, at 78.

253 Thomas, supra note 23, at 18.

254 Emmanuelle Goclaves de Souza Ogland, “Intimate Partner Violence Against Married Women In Uganda: Integrating Resource and Gender Theories” (M.Sc. in Sociology, University of Texas at San Antonio, May 2011) at 23.

255 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 15; Thomas, supra note 23, at 14.
This construction of women and girls as ‘lesser-than’ is evident across a plethora of customary social institutions. For example, women continue to suffer economic deprivation, despite robust constitutional protections, due to customary norms that proscribe women’s ownership or inheritance of property or land.\textsuperscript{256} In education, too, females continue to have lower attainment rates than do Ugandan males. While the State adopted a much-touted policy of Universal Primary Education for all children aged six to 12 in 1997, resulting in one of the highest enrolment rates for girls at the primary level amongst African commonwealth countries, serious gender gaps remain at the secondary level.\textsuperscript{257} The statistics are particularly grim for war-affected youth. According to SWAY data, for example, war-affected female youth on average only have 4.9 years of schooling, compared to seven years for male youth.\textsuperscript{258} Furthermore, one in five of this female cohort has no education, and one in three is functionally illiterate.\textsuperscript{259} While the primary barrier to children’s education remains school-related costs, which are out of reach for the majority of families in the North, other barriers are more gender-specific, including

\textsuperscript{256} One study found that “One hundred percent of cohabitating wives, 97.1 percent of married women, 75 percent of divorced women, 85.7 percent of separated women, 92.3 percent of widows, and 83.3 percent of women in polygynous unions felt that they had only user rights and could not sell or rent land, or pass on land to their children” (See, Lisa Karanja, \textit{Just Die Quietly: Domestic Violence and Women’s Vulnerability to HIV in Northern Uganda} 15:15(A) (New York: HRW, August 2003) at 45). This disenfranchisement occurs within a patrilineal society in which the “father’s family and clan determine a person’s identity and status in the community” (Bennett, et al., \textit{supra} note 251, at 457) and women are disempowered in matters of property because of traditional views that men will support their women. This view is evident in the customary institution of ‘bride price’ or ‘bride wealth’ in which women’s identity upon marriage is subsumed within that of her husband and his clan through the exchange of money or property, entitling them to “the bride’s lifetime of services, i.e. farming, bearing children, and maintaining the household” (\textit{ibid}. at 458). Widow inheritance, or forced re-marriage, is another customary norm that continues to resonate in some regions. Through this transaction “a widow must fulfill all wifely duties, including sexual intercourse and domestic activities, such as child rearing and agricultural production” (\textit{ibid}.), thus keeping the woman’s productive and reproductive labour within the family. Lastly, customary norms that grant males the right to profit from women’s labour also encourages polygyny, so that they may “profit from the labor of them all.” Polygynous marriages can undermine women’s equal property rights in the sense that the woman “becomes half, a third or a quarter, etc. of a wife, depending on how many wives the husband takes on” (\textit{ibid}.).

\textsuperscript{257} Despite the adoption of a policy of Universal Secondary Education in 2007, the gross school enrollment rate for girls remains at the very lowest end as of 2010 (26%), although it is improving over time (The World Bank, “School Enrollment, Secondary, female (% gross)” (n.d), online: \texttt{http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE})

\textsuperscript{258} See, Oliver, \textit{supra} note 208, at 93.

\textsuperscript{259} SWAY, “A Way Forward”, \textit{supra} note 74, at 3. There is some evidence that this is changing, as these rates were primarily a function of the inclusion of older females (i.e. 20 years and over) within the sample. According to the most recent statistics, in Uganda as a whole, the school life expectancy for females is 9.5 years as of 2005 (UNICEF, Division of Policy and Practice, Statistics and Monitoring Section, “Education Statistics: Uganda” (May 2008), online: \texttt{http://www.childinfo.org/files/ESAR_Uganda_pdf}) and the literacy rate for female youth aged 15 to 24 is 85% as of 2010 (The World Bank, “Literacy Rate, youth female (% of females ages 15-24)”, online: \texttt{http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FE.ZS/countries}).
“traditional beliefs that tend to favour boys’ education, early marriage and pregnancy.”

Despite the legal age of marriage being set at 18, UNICEF statistics show that 12% of minors are married by age 15, and 46% are married by age 18. Uganda also has one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates in sub-Saharan Africa, at 25%. Many of these girls either drop out, or are otherwise forced out, of school. Girls’ and women’s lower educational attainment rates, when coupled with family responsibilities, also feed into their lower economic status. While both men and women in Northern Uganda suffer deprivation and economic challenges, including shortage of skills, working capital and access to productive assets, women are often disproportionately affected because of asymmetries in the division of labour. Men are more likely to be employed, tend to dominate better paying occupations, and are twice as likely to earn income through self-employment.

This general socio-economic marginalization can contribute to increased vulnerability to harm,

265 The World Bank, “Unemployment, Female (% of Female Labor Force)” (n.d.), online: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS/countries; Robert Wyrod, “Between Women’s Rights and Men’s Authority: Masculinity and Shifting Discourses of Gender Difference in Urban Uganda” (December 2008) 22:6 Gender & Soc’y 799 at 803. Despite women providing more than 70% of the labour in the agricultural sector, as well as more than 80% of food crop production, inequalities in land distribution and ownership have led to larger patterns of economic discrimination for women (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Third Country Status Report (Kampala: Author, 1999) at 44). This includes inequalities in terms of access to employment, credit, income, business ownership, and senior or managerial positions (US Department of State, supra note 6, at 22, citing a 2010 study conducted by a local NGO, Actionaid). According to SWAY findings, most female youth report working in the informal sector, largely in agricultural production and alcohol brewing, both of which can be performed alongside their primary unpaid household and childcare work (SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 18).
particularly in terms of domestic or sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{266} The reason being that “violence against women is ultimately about unequal power relations,”\textsuperscript{267} and thus a context of generalized subordination can result in women and girls being constructed as natural ‘victims,’ with their bodies serving as markers of male power and the means through which harmful gender norms are communicated.\textsuperscript{268} This is particularly true in cases of prolonged conflict, in which overarching patterns of violence and social dislocation help to reinforce women’s vulnerabilities.\textsuperscript{269} As noted by Thomas, for example, “The increase of [sexual and gender-based violence] in armed conflict is an extension of pre-conflict gender inequality, and an intensification of pre-existing patriarchal attitudes and practices.”\textsuperscript{270} Private violence is also intensified by the conditions of war, including the high levels of displacement, congestion within the IDP camps, as well as socio-economic and security crises.\textsuperscript{271}

Systematic studies of violence against women and girls in Uganda are sparse.\textsuperscript{272} Some authors have claimed that this is linked to a “conspiracy of silence” surrounding sexual violence against women and girls within Uganda: “it was well known to exist, but by tacit communal unspoken consensus was neither talked about nor acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{273} Nevertheless, there is evidence that domestic violence, rape, and sexual exploitation are widespread, and, for some women and girls, it has “literally become part of the fabric of their daily lives.”\textsuperscript{274} Uganda’s rate of domestic violence is among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa.\textsuperscript{275} Physical violence is common, and


\textsuperscript{267} Karanja, supra note 256, at 72.

\textsuperscript{268} See, Thomas, supra note 23, at 74.

\textsuperscript{269} See, generally, Askin, supra note 146, at 509.

\textsuperscript{270} Thomas, supra note 23, at 14. See also, Rashida Manjoo & Calleigh McGrath, “Gender-Based Violence and Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Areas” (2011) 44 Cornell Int’l L.J. 11 at 15-16; and Halsall, supra note 27, at 86, for further explorations of this view.

\textsuperscript{271} Nainar, supra note 193, at 9; 13; Thomas, supra note 23, at 66.

\textsuperscript{272} See, i.e., Ogland, supra note 254, at 2; Halsall, supra note 27, at 88; Christopher Carlson & Dyan Mazurana, “Beating Wives and Protecting Culture: Violent Responses to Women’s Awakening to Their Rights” (December 2006) 36 Humanitarian Exchange 1 at 14; and Karanja, supra note 256, at 40.

\textsuperscript{273} Akello, et al., “Silencing Distressed Children”, supra note 106, at 216. See also, Halsall, ibid. at 88.

\textsuperscript{274} Karanja, supra note 256, at 22. The UN Population Fund has reported that 60% of women ages 15 and above have suffered physical violence and that the “first sexual encounter of 24 percent of women was violent” (as cited in US Department of State, supra note 6, at 20).

\textsuperscript{275} Ogland, supra note 254, at 2. One study of married Ugandan women found that 47% had suffered physical violence, 46% had experienced emotional abuse, and 29% reported some form of sexual violence by an intimate partner over their lifetime (ibid. at 43). One local NGO, Human Rights Focus, estimates that the rates of intimate partner violence were astronomically high in the Northern region, claiming a prevalence rate of 95% (as cited in Nainar, supra note 193, at 14).
injuries, including “broken or dislocated arms and legs, and cuts to the face, neck and upper body, are inflicted by strikes with bare hands, machetes, firewood, chairs, knives and other sharp objects.” These experiences are distressingly reminiscent of the narrative of violence and coercion experienced by girl child soldiers during their time with the LRA. Sexual abuse within marriage is common as well, often linked with low tolerance for female sexual autonomy. As the former coordinator of Uganda Women’s Network notes: “Men proceed under the common law assumption that saying ‘I do,’ means that you no longer have the right to say ‘I don’t.’” Outside marriage, girls continue to be at a particularly high risk of sexual victimization. In general, women in Uganda experience early “sexual debut” (with the mean average just over 16 years of age). Defilement (or “sexual intercourse with a girl under the age of 18”) has been documented as one of the most frequent crimes, particularly within the IDP camps. Sadly, it has been reported that over one-fifth of girls, and 36% of married 15-19 year old females, have been sexually violated. Another 46% of Ugandan girls and young women report having been touched against their will or being otherwise sexually coerced by an adult.

276 Carlson & Mazurana, supra note 272, at 14.
277 HRW interview with Jackie Asimwe-Mwesige (UWOMNET), 14 December 2002, as cited in Karanja, supra note 256, at 23. High levels of marital violence are often linked with larger patriarchal attitudes and practices. This view is supported by field studies. In one, the majority of female respondents attributed household violence to “male drunkenness coupled with strict patriarchal customs imposing subservient behavior on women” (Carlson & Mazurana, ibid. at 14). Male officials tended to fault “the breakdown of Acholi culture” and the fact that women were challenging traditional gender norms by “no longer acting as housewives should.” For example, women’s “poor work ethic” in maintaining households, their “offensive” behaviour towards their husbands, and a refusal to have sex were cited as reasons for “disciplining” these “unruly” women (ibid.). While there is a draft bill, the Sexual Offences (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2004, which criminalizes forced sex within marriage, it has languished in Parliament. Furthermore, despite progressive elements, the bill also limits the circumstances under which a spouse can refuse consent to sex to “reasonable grounds” (such as “poor health” and a “reasonable fear that engaging in sex is likely to cause injury or harm”) (Karanja, ibid. at 51). At the same time, it must be noted that domestic violence is never “solely the product of custom and tradition.” Instead, it is a complex and interlocking issue that is “a result of, and reflects, prevailing economic, political and social conditions” (ibid. at 3).
279 The Penal Code Act of 1950, cap. 120, s. 129(1), defines the crime of defilement and provides for capital punishment. Under the law, a woman having sex with a male minor is not considered as defilement. Instead, it is termed “indecent assault” (section 147) and perpetrators are liable to “imprisonment for fourteen years, with or without corporal punishment.” The Sexual Offences (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2004 attempts to rectify this gender bias by providing that “any person who engages in sex with a minor” is guilty of defilement.
As with domestic violence, it may be posited that girls’ vulnerability to sexual abuse is linked to “gendered sexual expectations and power imbalances” that are “patterned by cultural forms of masculinity and femininity, which define men as active and dominant and women as passive and submissive” and which serve to undermine female agency in negotiating the conditions of sexual encounters. These same norms also work to place responsibility for this violence squarely on the shoulders of the victims, rather than the perpetrators. Many of these women and girls are “held responsible for not protecting themselves. Admitting to being ‘attacked’ amounted to having willfully involved oneself in sexual relations.” This high tolerance of sexual violence and the “responsibilization” of female sexuality – coupled with dire socio-economic conditions – can render girls vulnerable to other forms of coercion as well. For example, NGOs have claimed that the defilement law is being misused to pressure girls into marriage, as some families have opted to settle for payment of “bride price” rather than pursuing criminal charges. Moreover, in a context of generalized poverty and insecurity, where livelihood options are limited, girls may opt, or be otherwise forced, to adopt “alternative means of survival,” such as engaging in prostitution or other forms of transactional sex (including sex in exchange for food, material goods or school fees).

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282 ECPAT, Uganda: Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Profile (Uganda: Author, 2004), as cited in Hayer, ibid. at 498. These reported figures should be read cautiously. As with quantitative data on girl child soldiers, there is a similar dearth of representative statistics on the prevalence rates of sexual violence, and the numbers vary broadly depending on the nature of the study, the make-up of the study population, and the willingness of participants to share their experiences with researchers. There is a risk of at once underreporting but also overinflating the numbers on women’s experiences of sexual violence within, and following, armed conflict. Other studies that have focused on forced sex against minors have found that the prevalence rate ranges from nearly 15% (Eugene Kinyanda, et al., “War Related Sexual Violence and its Medical and Psychological Consequences as Seen in Kitgum, Northern Uganda: A Cross-Sectional Study” (2010) 10 BMC Int’l Health & Hum. Rts. 28 at 30) to as high as 49% (study cited in Rebecca Nicholas, “HIV Prevention for Young Women in Uganda Must now Address Poverty and Gender Inequalities” (2010) 24:5 J. of Health Org. & Management 491 at 495.)


284 Akello, et al., “Silencing Distressed Children”, supra note 106, at 216. For example, following the release of a UNICEF report in 2005 that claimed that more than 50% of women and girls in the Pabbo IDP camp had been victims of some form of gender-based violence, one high-ranking officer of the Gulu District Security Committee had this to say: “It was women’s own responsibility to take care of themselves and avoid situations which might expose them to rape” (ibid. at 217).


286 Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda, Nowhere to Hide: Humanitarian Protection Threats in Northern Uganda (Kampala: Author, 2004) at 109. While the numbers on commercial sexual exploitation of children are rough estimates, one 2011 study by a local NGO, Uganda Youth Development Link, found that the number of minors affected between 2004 and 2011 increased from 12,000 to an estimated 18,000 (these figures include children from the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and Tanzania) (US Department of State, supra note 6, at
The reality, therefore, is that most girls return to a gendered world that is characterized by lack of opportunity, subordination, and potential violence, underpinned by a patriarchal system that serves to render them vulnerable to continued abuse. As Jeannie Annan and others note: “for most women and girls, the alternative to abduction is dismal – low educational investment and few opportunities for skilled employment.” Moreover, “For most females, life at home bore certain resemblances to abduction: withdrawal from school, early marriage, and child-bearing.” The stories of battering, sexual victimization, and coercion are also all too familiar. This is not to seek to ‘normalize’ the LRA’s repertoire of violence, nor to undermine the unique experiences of the returning girls, but rather to highlight the fact that gender discrimination was a critical reality before, just as it was during and will be after, the war.

While armed conflict can work to shift gendered norms of behaviour in some post-conflict circumstances, these shifts are rarely fundamental, and all too often short-lived, without a broader and sustained commitment to change. This reality has led some feminist scholars to argue that the very term “post-conflict” may be an unfortunate misnomer when it comes to women and girls, as violence remains a common denominator in their lives. In Uganda, while there is some evidence that the civil war and its consequent disruption and displacement of nearly all of the Northern population worked to unsettle traditional gender roles, there is also support for the argument that the underlying gender ideologies that support them remain intact. In other words, “the Acholi cultural code does not seem to have changed as a result of

24). The figures on transactional sex are similarly approximate. However, in one small-scale study, 3.1% of females and 1.6% of males aged 15 to 24 years had engaged in transactional sex within the past year. According to the 2006 Demographic Health Survey, the national average is 10.6% for women, and 10.7% for men (Kathleen McDavid Harrison, et al., “HIV Behavioural Surveillance Among Refugees and Surrounding Host Communities in Uganda, 2006” (2009) 8:1 African J. of AIDS Research 29 at 38).

289 See, generally, De Watteville, supra note 183, at 17.
291 See, i.e., Wyrod, supra note 265, at 801.
292 El-Bushra and Sahl define this situation as one in which “Violent conflict may create opportunities for redefining social relations, but in doing so it rearranges, adapts and reinforces patriarchal ideologies, rather than fundamentally altering them” (El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 99).
war, but have simply become harder to put into practice.” The rampant poverty, insecurity, and disruption of livelihoods within the IDP camps created a situation in which men struggled to ‘perform’ their role as “family provider and protector.” At the same time, women were required to take on new roles outside the household in order to meet the expectations of the caregiver role. As a result, the combination of “Acholi men’s injured masculinity and women’s evolved femininity” has been theorized as a contributory factor in the high levels of violence against women and girls within the ‘post-conflict’ environment, as a form of “backlash.” The confluence of existing gendered expectations, with the new practical difficulties faced in realizing them, thus exacerbated female insecurity both during war, and post-conflict, as “lived experiences and lived expectations differ profoundly.”

Thus, although it is clear that some girl child soldiers’ experiences of war deeply affected their reintegration outcomes, other factors, including existing gender inequalities, discrimination, violence, and poverty also shape these girls’ lived realities upon their return. As urged by Dianne Otto: “It is not enough to ensure the indivisibility of women’s human rights, without also attending to the structural causes of women’s marginalization and exclusion.” With a shift of our lens, we can look to the ways in which the discrimination and violence faced by the girls is part of a “continuum rather than … a specific, unique time period.” Without ignoring the unique experiences of the individual girl child soldiers, we must seek to place their stories within a wider gendered context to ensure that post-conflict programming is, in fact, responsive to their real needs and resonant within the actual worlds to which they return.

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293 Ibid. at 23.
295 Ibid. at 63.
296 This theory draws on the feminist discourse that posits a link between shifting gender roles and growing violence against women in post-conflict contexts. The underlying premise is that an increase in women’s empowerment and independence (and thus a distancing from ‘traditional’ female roles) can work to create a “transitional period of misunderstanding and hostilities between the sexes,” eliciting a “backlash effect” among some men (Thomas, supra note 23, at 71). See also, Janet Gruber, “Does Conflict Increase Vulnerability to HIV Infection? Issues for a Research Agenda” (2006) 5:1 African J. of AIDS Research 41 at 44, who cautions that there are “potentially negative impacts of women’s increased visibility and voice.” Robert Wyrod, however, argues that “extreme backlash is not the norm” (at least in urban Uganda). Instead, there have been less extreme attempts to “balance gender equality and male authority” (Wyrod, supra note 265, at 814).
297 Anderson, supra note 294, at 65.
300 MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 218.
As will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow, without attending to girls’ voices and their social context, we risk adopting a gender-blind approach to reintegration that can result in a mere re-inscription and re-affirmation of traditional gender norms and structures that work to further marginalize the returning girls, thus winnowing their opportunities. As seen in the stories of the girl child soldiers above, some were able to achieve a degree of autonomy that may not have been possible pre-war. In this context, reintegration efforts that stress a return to “the way they were before the war,” can be harmful in the sense that some girls may be pushed to resume conventional socially-ascribed roles that fit uneasily with any new power, skills, or agency they may have gained throughout their time with the LRA. As Neil Boothby and others have argued, these girls may be discouraged in using “the strengths they have developed to make new choices and seek broader opportunities,” thus undercutting their potential to develop their own meaningful “individual life expectations” in the post-conflict world. At the same time, without attending to the larger gendered context, we risk missing the ways in which returning girls who exhibit behaviour that is deemed to be a “violation of acceptable gender norms and social values,” are at risk of further alienation or marginalization in the post-conflict environment. In both cases, it is critical that those designing and implementing reintegration policies and programs listen attentively to what girl child soldiers have to say, while also working with them to situate their narratives within the realities of their actual lived experiences. The following section describes the real consequences of failing to do so.

The Single Story - Dangerous Boys and Traumatized Girls

One of the main rationales for implementing DDR processes as conflict comes to an end is that there is a pressing need to “build peace by breaking links between the armed group and

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301 Ibid. at 141; 147; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, “Release and Reintegration of Child Soldiers: One Part of a Bigger Puzzle” (Paper presented at the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of War-Affected Children, Brussels, Belgium, 22-23 October 2009) at 7.


303 Handrahan, supra note 24, at 436.

304 See, i.e., Halsall, supra note 27, at 94; Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at 30; Ochen, et al., supra note 49, at 92; De Watteville, supra note 183, at 14; and Handrahan, ibid. at 440.


306 Onu, supra note 203, at 146.

individual and thus discouraging a return to violence.”

The concern being that a failure to adequately demobilize former combatants, and to offer them sufficient resources and support, may result in a cyclical pattern of lawlessness, violence, and harm. In this context, those individuals and groups who are posited to be a “security concern” or a threat against peace, order and development are a priority focus, and typically receive significantly more notice and funding from policy-makers and program implementers in the post-conflict world.

For child soldiers, there is a growing concern that they may be “dangerous” in the sense that their experiences as combatants has negatively affected their capacity to develop a “healthy psychosocial identity,” which, in turn, can have serious repercussions for peace and development following conflict, as these under-socialized youth mature and “impact their society through their own political behaviors.”

As Neil Boothby argues, “I think it’s safe to say unless we’re able to break the children’s socialization to violence … it’ll be the teenager who picks up the gun and starts the next cycle.”

Within this narrative, former child soldiers are stereotyped as belonging to a “lost generation of teenagers who have not only lost their childhood and opportunity for education but also their chance for proper moral development.”

Researchers have noted, for example, that the children may “have highly inflated expectations, exaggerated pride in their military identity, have learned to rely on aggression to meet needs and solve problems.” Some qualitative studies support these findings, drawing a link between child soldiering and difficulties in controlling aggressive impulses or engaging in non-violent

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309 Commission on Human Security, Human Security Now (New York: Author, 2003) at 62, as cited in Onu, supra note 203, at 118. This view is premised on the literature that shows that conflict can negatively affect human capital, leading to persistent poverty, and equally affect social cohesion, leading to exclusion and alienation, psychological trauma and aggression, thus, together, presenting a threat to the prospects for long-term security (Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 878-881). See also, Knight & Ozerdem, supra note 211, at 501-502; and Justice and Reconciliation Project, supra note 152, at 3.
310 MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 115.
311 Spellings, supra note 13, at 34. See also, Julie Guyot, Suffer the Children: The Psychosocial Rehabilitation of Child Soldiers as a Function of Peacebuilding (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2005) at 6, for a more comprehensive review of the literature on the psychosocial impacts of child soldiering.
312 As cited in Russell & Godziak, supra note 83, at 62.
conflict resolution. Others have argued that the children’s time with the rebel group may lead them to “model their behavior on the powerful and aggressive individuals in their environment” and thereby adopt the view that “violence is the basic relationship that characterizes humankind.”

At the same time, however, this association of the child soldier with violence and aggression is often gendered, in that the pervasive image of the modern combatant is that of a “young man with an automatic weapon.” In fact, the concept of the “dangerous boy” is built into the very legal regime that is meant to regulate the use of child soldiers. The Commentary on Additional Protocol II reads: “Recent conflicts have all too often shown the harrowing spectacle of boys, who have barely left childhood behind them, brandishing rifles and machine-guns and ready to shoot indiscriminately at anything that moves.” Child soldiers are thus constructed as naturally male, and inherently violent. The general fear is that these ‘out-of-control’ male youth, without targeted attention and assistance, will perpetuate further violence and prolong cycles of conflict. This fear is only intensified in a post-conflict environment in which opportunities are few, and conditions are bleak. Post-conflict programming is thus often designed around a presumed male beneficiary, and aimed at stemming the tide of an ‘army’ of ‘idle youth.’ Despite the “shortage of systematic empirical research in this area” the premise of the “dangerous

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315 C. Mgambo & R. Lett, “Post-Traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers” (2004) 363:9421 Lancet 1647, as cited in Schauer, supra note 156, at 21, found, for example, that former child soldiers in Northern Uganda generally resorted to physical violence to resolve conflicts and were often unable to conceive of non-violent alternatives. A later study, F. Glockner, “PTSD and Collective Identity in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers” (University of Konstanz, Department of Clinical Psychology, 2007), as cited in Schauer, ibid. at 22, provided some evidence of a “positive correlation between [rebel-related] collective identification and reactive aggression (physical and verbal aggression and anger).”

316 Guyot, supra note 311, at 6. Some authors have noted, however, that this may be more an issue of “self-fulfilling prophecy,” as agencies focus on community sensitization activities through which “children are told to expect stigmatization and the communities are told that they are receiving disturbed and dangerous individuals,” which, in some cases, has led to conflict between the communities and the returning children (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 60.)


319 See, i.e., MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 139, discussing this concern in relation to post-conflict Sierra Leone. Elsewhere, the French foreign minister, addressing a conference in 2007, claimed that young former combatants are a “time bomb that threatens stability and growth … lost for peace and lost for the development of their countries” (BBC News, “Child Soldiers are a Time Bomb” (London: Author, 5 February 2007), as cited in Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 878).

“boy” continues to be the dominant narrative in media and advocacy reports, and feeds into the high visibility of boys versus girls in post-conflict programming design.321

Thus, part of the reason that girl child soldiers’ needs remain obscured in the post-conflict setting is because of the continued resonance of the traditional view that war and conflict is the purview of adults, specifically men, with women and girls, merely its casualty.322 As explained by Francine d’Amico, war is generally designated as “a masculine endeavor for which women may serve as victim, spectator, or prize.”323 Within this storyline, males are “depicted mainly as fighters, commanders and perpetrators of wartime atrocities,” while females, by contrast, are portrayed as peripheral, or primarily victims of sexual and gender-based violence.324 This traditional binary stems from overarching patterns of gender norms within the society at large, in which “these assumptions about what men do (and what women do not do) are so ingrained” as to seem “normal,” and thus “unseen” and “unquestioned.”325 Within the fundamental patriarchal divide, women are positioned as “essentially nurturing and creative, a feature which is deprived from their capacity to give birth, while men are essentially aggressive and territorial.”326 Thus while boys are socialized to develop their gender identity through activities that “assert their masculinity, autonomy, assertiveness, activity and ambition,” girls are encouraged to be “compliant and complicit” within a much more narrowly constructed social space.327 Without conceptualizing of these roles as socially constructed and contextually

321 See, Hobson & Aaronson, supra note 203, at 21.
322 See, Fujio, supra note 10, at 17. See also, Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at 7.
325 Handrahan, supra note 24, at 432.
326 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 110. As York argues, there continues to be a dominant mode of thinking that women are inherently more “peaceful” because of their ties to motherhood: “most traditional logic behind women’s peace groups relies on the conservative – even Victorian – ideal of motherhood, where women function as caring, nurturing and protective moral guides for their children” (Jodi York, “The Truth About Women and Peace” in Lois Ann Lorentzen & Jennifer Turpin (eds.), The Woman and War Reader (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 19 at 19). Interestingly, this conception of women as more “naturally” peace-oriented is reflected, to some degree, in Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women Peace and Security, 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325, heralded by some as revolutionary in that it calls on parties to a conflict to support women’s participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. As Dianne Otto notes, the sole reference to conflict “prevention” in the resolution is “in the context of increasing the representation of women in mechanisms aimed at prevention, as if more women might do the trick” (Otto, “Exile of Inclusion”, supra note 112, at 21).
327 Muhanguzi, supra note 283, at 715.
constituted, they are posited to be natural and thus the expression of a deep human reality. In this dualistic model, different statuses are associated with masculine and feminine identities, with the female ascribed an inferior position, understood to be “vulnerable and susceptible to danger” – a natural victim. In the context of warfare, these gendered presumptions are extended so that males remain associated with “traits deemed essential for warfare, including courage, chivalry and strength” and women continue to be linked to their productive and reproductive capacities; or, with “life-giving” rather than “life-taking.” Women are thus constituted as “civilian casualties or members of vulnerable groups who were either taken as ‘war booty’ or were seen as sexual assault victims,” rather than active participants in their own right. Furthermore, as violence is deemed to be the purview of men, female fighters are “considered by their very existence to be transgressing accepted female behaviour.” The reaction to these female soldiers is often to re-envision them solely as victims, forced against their will to participate, or otherwise “acted upon,” so as to reconfirm existing norms. A “general picture” has thus emerged in which these girls are positioned as “objects,” rather than “subjects” in their own narrative, “further stripping them of their agency, capacity and capability to change or devise ways to cope with life under traumatic circumstances.”

An offshoot of this gendered narrative, in which women and girls are passive, pliant, and natural victims of male conflict, is that their needs often remain unheeded and unheard – as they are considered to be “politically inexpedient” in the post-conflict setting where multiple stakeholders vie for a share of the spotlight, as well as access to critical funding. To the extent girl child soldiers are viewed as “non-threatening” and solely in need of protection and care, they may be shunted to the sidelines of the security discourse, as well as accorded a lower

328 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 109-110.
330 MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 123.
331 Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at 7.
332 Halsall, supra note 27, at 82.
333 Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at 8.
334 As argued by Nordstrom, to be “acted upon” is to be considered to be “without identities, politics, morals, and agendas,” and thus subservient to others’ definitions (Nordstrom, “Girls Behind the Front Lines”, supra note 1, at 81).
335 Halsall, supra note 27, at 83.
336 Fujio, supra note 10, at 17. See also, Carlson & Mazurana, supra note 272, at 38.
priority in programming and funding allocations.\textsuperscript{337} Instead of “security threats,” girl child soldiers are viewed as a “social concern,” and prioritized accordingly within the hierarchy of post-conflict reconstruction efforts.\textsuperscript{338}

Furthermore, the conceptualization of “a propensity for conflict and aggression as something inherently male”\textsuperscript{339} masks the complex experiences of all child soldiers and only serves to perpetuate patriarchal views and values in the post-conflict setting. There is little hard evidence in the Ugandan context that former male child soldiers are more prone to violence, aggression or anti-social behaviour than others within their peer group.\textsuperscript{340} According to the SWAY survey research findings, “formerly abducted youth do not exhibit higher tendencies for violent behavior than their non-abducted counterparts. In fact, they are more likely to be active and productive citizens and leaders.”\textsuperscript{341} The prioritizing of “dangerous boys” in post-conflict reintegration efforts is thus based on outmoded assumptions of gendered behaviour that does not resonate in contemporary conflict situations, at least in the case of Uganda. At the same time, to the extent that returning girl child soldiers do not fit into the presumptive mold of the victim, they may be doubly ignored, as they may not be considered as ‘deserving’ of attention, if they do not appear to be traumatized, nor in need of assistance. As argued by MacKenzie, the “unfortunate byproduct” of this entrenched gender binary is that “violent and aggressive women become constructed as unnatural or an aberration from the presumed norm,”\textsuperscript{342} with their experiences and needs falling outside the scope of post-conflict programming aid. As seen in the personal stories above, some of the girl child soldiers either had, or established, a resilient sense of self within the confines of the LRA, “having developed a strong voice, unconstrained by the view that women are merely victims of war.”\textsuperscript{343} Others, despite their horrific experiences,

\textsuperscript{337} MacKenzie, \textit{supra} note 17, at 48. Despite some developments in the international arena, including the adoption of \textit{Security Council Resolution 1820 (2008) on Acts of Sexual Violence Against Civilians in Armed Conflicts}, 19 June 2008, S/RES/1820, which attempts to put sexual violence on the security agenda, thus demanding a security response, the ‘securitization’ of women’s concerns at the national level has remained, to date, largely aspirational.
\textsuperscript{338} MacKenzie, \textit{ibid.} at 140.
\textsuperscript{339} Coulter, Persson & Utas, \textit{supra} note 239, at 7.
\textsuperscript{340} See also, Oliver, \textit{supra} note 208, at 69, for similar findings. Annan and others have interpreted this qualitative evidence as underscoring that “former abductees have strong incentives not to behave aggressively; anger and aggressive behaviour can be stigmatizing, as friends and neighbours are quick to interpret it as a sign of ‘bush behaviour’” (Annan, et al., “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, \textit{supra} note 77, at 901).
\textsuperscript{341} SWAY, “A Way Forward”, \textit{supra} note 74, at 6; SWAY, “Making Reintegration Work”, \textit{supra} note 217, at 5.
\textsuperscript{342} MacKenzie, \textit{supra} note 17, at 12.
\textsuperscript{343} Halsall, \textit{supra} note 27, at 275.
utilized a range of coping strategies during their time in the bush, which do not mesh with the simple narrative that these girls were solely ‘objects’ rather than active agents.

To the extent that the government, donor countries, and NGOs fail to recognize the unique experience of girls within armed conflict, and continue to see them solely as natural casualties of war, programs designed to achieve post-conflict reintegration will fail to meet their needs.344 One example of the ways in which a victimization narrative can influence the reintegration outcomes for girl child soldiers is the premium that has been placed on activities – such as family tracing and psychosocial programming – that are aimed at minimizing psychological trauma and social dislocation, rather than economic and educational needs, which remain smaller in scope and scale.345 To the extent that girls are presumed to be the “most” traumatized group of former child soldiers, there is the risk of “creating a situation where men get the jobs, and women the counseling.”346

Moreover, a continual stressing of the victim role of these girl child soldiers does little to challenge the “anchored preconceptions of gender identity”347 that may serve to complicate their reintegration into the post-conflict society. First, the dominant conception of the girl child soldier as, first and foremost, a “sexual slave” or object of sexual abuse has created a general narrative in which nearly all former girl child soldiers are presumed to have been victims, despite the clear evidence that this was not the case in Uganda. In a society in which female sexuality remains tightly controlled, and heavily anchored to the institution of marriage, girls associated with the LRA may be viewed as “immoral”, “promiscuous” or “unclean” because of presumed sexual violation.348 Without confronting the broader gender norms and expectations within Ugandan society, the victim script simply re-inscribes and reinforces a construction of the female as passive and vulnerable, dependent on “male definitions” of ‘appropriate’ normative behaviour,349 thus confining the returning girl child soldier to a continued subordinate

344 Ibid. at 84.
346 Women’s Commission, as cited in De Watteville, supra note 183, at 19.
349 Handrahan, supra note 24, at 437.
and vulnerable position. Second, those who are seen as having “broken rules of traditional
behaviour and gender roles, risk being marginalized during the rebuilding process.” Researchers have noted, for example, that former girl child soldiers who transgress expected norms – including “being aggressive, quarrelsome, using abusive language, abusing drugs and smoking” – may have a more difficult time adapting to life in their communities, as they are viewed as outliers. While deeply rooted gendered presumptions have fed into a situation in which “disaffected” boy combatants are positioned as posing a real security threat, “the reality of female anger and violence cannot be ignored.” In Sierra Leone, for example, Denov and Maclure found that many former girl child soldiers expressed a deep frustration and growing dissatisfaction due to the reality of marginalization in their post-conflict lives, which, at times manifested as a potential for ongoing aggression and violence. In Uganda, Elizabeth B., who was twelve when she was abducted by the LRA, exhibits similar tendencies: she “now becomes annoyed very quickly; when she’s angry, she feels like killing somebody.” The point here is not to posit that girls are more prone to violence, aggression or disaffection than their male counterparts, nor to argue that all former girl child soldiers will react similarly to post-conflict environments – as this merely inverts existing gender stereotypes. Instead, the point is merely that the dichotomy of the “dangerous boy” and the “traumatized girl” is not only a misrepresentation, but a near-sighted one at best, and a potentially dangerous one at worst. A failure to recognize the multiplicity of these girl child soldiers’ experiences, coupled with the continued emphasis on their vulnerability and victimization, threatens to render certain of these girls truly “invisible” in the post-conflict world. They are either viewed solely as “at risk” rather than posing a security risk – and thus granted less priority attention – or are otherwise marginalized where they do not meet the preconceived expectations of post-conflict programs.

351 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 36; Efervera, supra note 127, at 22.
352 Denov, “Girl Soldiers and Human Rights”, supra note 9, at 830.
354 Interview, Northern Uganda, 27 November 2001, as cited in McKay “Girls as Weapons of Terror”, supra note 51, at 392.
355 Researchers have reported that there is “little evidence of violence or aggression” amongst war-affected female youth and that while “distress and difficulties are commonplace,” the “serious problems are concentrated in the minority exposed to the most violence or with the least social support” (Annan, “Civil War, Reintegration and Gender”, supra note 77, at 879).
356 Denov, “Girl Soldiers and Human Rights”, supra note 9, at 830. See also, Spellings, supra note 13, at 22.
aimed at serving their needs.

Part 3: A Way Forward

The purpose of this section is to provide practical recommendations on how post-conflict reintegration strategies can be improved to ensure that the needs of girl child soldiers are meaningfully taken into account, thus enhancing their reintegration outcomes. While there is a wealth of literature and policy documents highlighting general approaches to post-conflict reintegration of child soldiers, there is also a growing recognition that “there is no one model that can direct how to effect the social reintegration of children – local realities have to be taken into account.” With this in mind, the discussion and recommendations that follow focus specifically on the needs of former girl child soldiers in Uganda, drawing on their voices and stories, to ensure that the solutions put forward are localized, contextualized and relevant to the world in which they live. In recognition of the challenges described above – including the overarching gendered environment to which these girls return, as well as the engrained binary of the dangerous boy/traumatized girl, which in part flows from existing gendered realities – the proposed solutions also seek to dig deeper in providing a framework that is broad enough to address these actualities as well. The experiences of these girls are diverse, multiple and complex, and thus demand a response that is equally multi-faceted, while remaining firmly rooted in the girls’ own understandings of their needs and their worlds.

Targeted Needs

It is clear that effective and sustainable reintegration programs need to adopt a holistic view of what ‘successful’ reintegration means for those girls who are being targeted for intervention. In Uganda, while efforts were made to ensure that former child soldiers had access to support systems – notably through the amnesty program and the reception centre network – it is clear that this ad hoc system often failed to serve the interests of returning girls. First, because the programming was often based on generalized assumptions of need; second, because a significant number of girls operated outside of the formal system; and lastly, because much of the programming was centered on short-term measures, with very little capacity for follow-up or

357 Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 5.
the adoption of more durable solutions. Instead, the government of Uganda, in collaboration
with its development partners, must articulate and implement a longer-term sustainable
reintegration strategy that embraces a gender perspective, takes the girls’ own views and
aspirations directly into account, and is firmly grounded in the communities in which
reintegration is occurring. This strategy must be holistic, in the sense that it aims to address the
diverse needs of these girls, including at the psychosocial, educational and economic level, and
gendered, in the sense that it takes their unique needs and vulnerabilities into account.

A focus on psychosocial needs is critical as it highlights the “dynamic relationship between
psychological and social factors – how each continuously influences the other.”358 Effective
community-based psychosocial programming aims to reinforce protective and preventative
factors, and limit the negative consequences of involvement in harmful experiences and
environments. Thus the focus is not on pathologizing experiences, but rather developing
responses that support individual and social resiliency.359 A crucial element of this process, as
identified by former child soldiers themselves, is enhancing community acceptance and
reducing stigmatization.360 In one study, children advocated for strategies such as “community
awareness-raising, opportunities to discuss their experiences in community meetings … and
inclusion in community recreation projects where they could interact with community
children.”361 A critical factor is thus creating positive communal spaces in which war-affected
children can interact with one another, while building bridges with other community members.

At the same time, to create effective psychosocial ‘spaces,’ the unique gendered experiences of
the returning girl child soldiers must be a salient feature of program development. To ensure the
meaningful participation of these girls, special measures, such as counseling for sexual abuse,
access to reproductive health facilities, and childcare support, may be required for those who
suffered sexual violence or return to their communities pregnant or with child.362 Similarly,
ongoing support to address sexual, domestic or other forms of structural violence,
marginalization, and harmful gendered practices, must be integrated as a critical element as

358 Russell & Godziak, supra note 83, at 60.
359 Ibid. at 62.
360 Elizabeth Jareg, Crossing Bridges and Negotiating Rivers: Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Children
Associated with Armed Forces (London: Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2005) at 5.
362 De Watteville, supra note 183, at 8; 11; McKay, et al., “Returned and Neglected”, supra note 171, at 2;
Coalition, “Release and Reintegration”, supra note 301, at 9; and Murungi, supra note 50, at 5.
well. Without such targeted support, gender-based discrimination and/or harm experienced during their time with the LRA, and within the communities to which they return, will remain an ‘invisible’ impediment to their successful reintegration.

Equally importantly, psychosocial support must be provided in tandem with interventions that target these girls’ educational needs, which have been identified as critical from the perspective of those most affected. For war-affected children, education has been recognized as “a primary means of psychological and social healing, skills-building, training for livelihood, peacemaking, social reintegration, good health practices and protection.” Education can help foster positive reintegration by instilling a sense of normalcy, meaning and identity, separate and apart from their association with the armed group. For returning girls, particularly those who find themselves as heads of household, education can also improve their ability to earn an income, and to provide for their families. Support for educational programming, including the extension of flexible “accelerated and age-appropriate” literacy and numeracy programs to aid in the transition from primary to secondary school, as well as material support to enable this transition, are thus key for girls, who suffer disproportionately from lower levels of educational attainment in Uganda. For girl child soldiers, beyond developing critical practical skills, school can serve as a forum in which they can cultivate their confidence to speak out and act as key agents in the post-conflict environment: “Access to school is therefore highly significant – symbolically as much as practically – in efforts to ensure that young women can

362 McVeigh, et al., supra note 64, at ix.
363 In one study, 79% of respondents called for assistance in returning to school (McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 85).
365 Machel, supra note 3, at para. 92.
368 While some NGOs, including CCF in Pader, and Food for Hungry in Kitgum, have established small-scale educational support programs (SWAY, “A Way Forward”, ibid.), there are very few accelerated learning programs available to former girl child soldiers in Uganda (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children & UNICEF, supra note 260, at 8). As of 2008, there were no accelerated literacy or numeracy programs in the North (Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants, supra note 67, at 21). At the same time, even if programming is made available, structural barriers, including an inability to pay for school-related fees and materials, as well as cultural barriers, including the devaluing of girls’ education, will need to be addressed as well (See, i.e., Yvonne E. Kearns, The Voices of Child Soldiers (New York: Quaker UN Office, 2002) at 18).
contribute to positive change and to help break the cycle that can so easily lead back to
violence.”

Programs that focus on economic support and development for the returning girls are equally
critical, particularly for those who come home as older adolescents, or even young adults. This form of support is of utmost importance for girls and young women who continue to be
discriminated against in the socio-economic sphere. To secure a sustainable future for the girl
child soldiers, it is crucial that they be given the “means and tools to gain financial
independence, and break cycles of dependency.” Long-term development programs that assist
girls and women in gaining access to, or ownership of, productive assets, such as land;
comprehensive vocational, business and leadership training; economic development initiatives;
as well as material support, such as the provision of necessary tools, start-up loans, or micro-
credit facilities, can help ensure girls are able to support themselves and their families
throughout post-conflict reconstruction. Importantly, economic independence has been
identified as a factor in facilitating successful reintegration, increasing acceptance, and
providing the returning child soldiers with a sense of meaning and identity. At the same time,
such programs must implement a critical gender lens, in identifying and working to overcome
barriers to girls’ and young women’s economic success, “so as to avoid creating false
expectations.” Without an in-depth understanding of the gendered dynamics, and the
development of grounded strategies to address them, economic and livelihood support will
continue to fail to meet the needs and hopes of the returning girls. For example, De Watteville

371 Van Der Gaag, supra note 61, at 80.
372 In one study, three-quarters of older female youth and young women identified the need for skills training as a
key element of reintegration (McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 86).
373 Van Der Gaag, supra note 61, at 93. See, De Watteville, supra note 183, at 12, for a discussion of structural
barriers.
375 Avery, supra note 266, at 133; US Institute of Peace, “Child Soldiers: New Evidence, New Advocacy
Approaches” Media Release (August 2007) at 3, online: http://www.usip.org/publications/child-soldiers-new-
evidence-new-advocacy-approaches; De Watteville, supra note 183, at 12; and McVeigh, et al., supra note 64,
at 21.
376 Machel, supra note 3, at para. 20; McVeigh, et al., ibid. at 20. Female focus group respondents have reported,
for example, that even where programming has not led to improved economic outcomes, the “projects can help
them become more self-confident and help them cope better socially” (Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at
37).
377 UN Security Council, “Role of the United Nations”, supra note 244, at para. 93. Authors have argued that the
limited types of vocational programming on offer for war-affected girls and women are often ineffective in actually
aiding them in securing a livelihood, thus increasing their frustration (Coulter, Persson & Utas, ibid; McVeigh, et
al., ibid. at viii).
cautions that employers often exhibit hesitancy in hiring ex-female combatants, as they are seen as “lacking in femininity, sexually promiscuous or homosexual,” or continue to “see women’s work as an extension of their domestic unpaid labor.” Others have pointed out that there may be real practical barriers to girls’ participation in programs designed to aid their economic reintegration – such as a lack of available childcare – that must be addressed if meaningful involvement is to occur. Moreover, programming developers must be studious in ensuring that their policies do not reinforce gendered stereotypes, such as segregating girls into “appropriate for gender” skills training in economically limited fields, such as “soap making and hair braiding” rather than broadening opportunities in both “traditional and non-traditional work, such as masonry, carpentry and welding.” Attention must be given to means of reconciling the need to develop more economically beneficial opportunities with the reality that cultural expectations for gender-appropriate behaviour may limit these prospects. Innovative, multi-dimensional approaches, based on “sound contextual, economic and gender analyses,” and that focus on building opportunities, while concurrently working with the skills and capabilities these girls already have, thus form the cornerstone of a sustainable approach.

Learning to Listen

While the section above describes the aspirational ends of a sustainable and gender-appropriate reintegration strategy, the following section outlines the particular means of implementing this on the ground. In particular, I stress that girl child soldiers must be directly and meaningfully consulted in all aspects of programming development, implementation, and follow-up, thereby

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378 De Watteville, supra note 183, at 13.
380 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 53. At the same time, while working to ensure that girls and women have access to a variety of vocational and occupational opportunities, policymakers and programmers must engage in a “market analysis” prior to developing programming to ensure that the programs are sustainable in the existing economy. For example, many child soldiers express a desire to develop skills training in more urban-based trades (such as hairdressing or mechanics), rather than in the “more realistic and sustainable farming and livestock management options” (McVeigh, et al., supra note 64, at 21). According to several researchers, certain skills markets become so saturated in the post-conflict environment (notably tailoring and carpentry) that vocational training in these areas will have no real economic impact (McKay & Mazurana, ibid. at 86; Blattman & Annan, “Child Combatants”, supra note 67, at 20; and Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children & UNICEF, supra note 260, at 9.
381 McKay, “Girlhoods Stolen”, supra note 184, at 128.
382 McVeigh, et al., supra note 64, at 21.
becoming co-authors of their own reintegration strategies. As has been argued throughout, while many, if not most, of these girls have suffered horrific experiences and untold abuses, which require our continued attention, they should not be defined solely as victims, nor presumed to be incapable of developing into productive citizens upon their return. As the Paris Principles stress, we need to recognize “their particular capacities and resilience as well as their vulnerabilities,”\(^{383}\) and work to “build upon the skills and confidence that girls and boys may have learned while associated with the armed force or group.”\(^{384}\)

While the participation of children, including girls, is a keystone of international conventions, national policies, and NGO programs, its meaningful implementation has proven elusive in practice.\(^{385}\) While the ideal has been clearly articulated at the theoretical level, policies and programs continue to be unrepresentative of children’s rights and needs because of mere tokenism on the ground.\(^{386}\) Part of the issue stems from definitional incoherence and inconsistency:

> ‘Participation’ is a word that has been used in child protection and development circles for many years. The term has come to mean everything from token consultation with a beneficiary group to full-scale participation by affected communities in program development, implementation, and evaluation.\(^{387}\)

Too often, it is the former meaning that is adopted, and children are only consulted after a project has been implemented, with humanitarian agencies directing the nature of the priorities and the course of the interventions.\(^{388}\) Here, children are conceptualized as mere ‘recipients’ of aid, rather than active participants in shaping the decision-making process in programs that

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\(^{383}\) Paris Principles, supra note 51, principle 7.48.

\(^{384}\) Ibid. principle 7.47. See also, principles 7.31.0 and 7.31.1.

\(^{385}\) See, Mike Wessells, “What are we Learning About Protecting Children in the Community? An Interagency Review of the Evidence on Community Child Protection Mechanisms in Humanitarian and Development Settings” Save the Children Fund (November 2009), online: http://forcedmigration.columbia.edu/faculty/documents/WhatWeAreLearningAboutProtectingChildrenintheCommunity_FullReport.pdf. This study of 160 community-based groups working in the field of child protection found that only a very small number actually managed to achieve real levels of genuine child participation.

\(^{386}\) McKay, et al., Community-Based Reintegration of War-Affected Young Mothers: Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Liberia, Sierra Leone & Northern Uganda (PAR Project, July 2010) at 7; Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children & UNICEF, supra note 260, at 19.

\(^{387}\) Grace Onyanga & Miranda Worthen, Handbook of Participatory Methods for Community-Based Projects: A guide to programmers and implemented based on the participatory research project with young mothers and their children in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda (PAR Project, November 2010) at 1.

\(^{388}\) Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children & UNICEF, supra note 260, at 12.
af\textsuperscript{f}ect their lives.\textsuperscript{389} For girls, in particular, this is problematic. The dearth of understanding of the multiple roles they played while with the LRA, coupled with gendered preconceptions about women and girls that serve to mute their individual voices, has resulted in programming that continues to be unresponsive to, and unreflective of, their needs. Actors at both the national and international level continue to have an underdeveloped sense of what successful reintegration actually looks like, how this is accomplished, and what girls have to say about it.

For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I submit that full and meaningful participation of former girl child soldiers must serve as the foundational principle for all post-conflict reintegration programming. I further argue that this requires the actual involvement of the girls in the “creation, content and conduct” of programming aimed at serving their needs in order to prioritize their lived experiences and self-constructed narratives. In other words, policymakers must adopt a perspective in which these girls are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live”\textsuperscript{390} and utilize these understandings as the basis for program development. In line with the Paris Principles, a participatory approach also requires a sustained commitment to drawing on the strengths and capacities of the individual girls at both the design and implementation levels.\textsuperscript{391} These girl child soldiers must be recognized as resilient agents and “[s]teps should be taken to identify, acknowledge and utilize child agency as a resource.”\textsuperscript{392} As argued above, the adoption of an overarching ‘victim’ narrative has done little to serve the needs of the returning girls, as it works to reinforce existing gendered stereotypes and renders their experiences marginal at best, and wholly invisible at worst. To counter this, it is critical to draw on their sense of agency in recognizing that “they make choices, possess critical perspectives of their

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\textsuperscript{389} \textit{Ibid.} at 19. The Ugandan government, through its Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, has itself highlighted this as a key problem. Recognizing that a multitude of humanitarian and child protection agencies had adopted various definitions of ‘participation’ in their work, the Ministry, in collaboration with two NGOs, developed the \textit{National Child Participation Guide for Uganda} in 2008 (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, Uganda Child Rights NGO Network & UNICEF (Uganda Office), \textit{The National Child Participation Guide for Uganda} (Kampala: Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2008). This document defines ‘participation’ as the “active engagement of children in all issues that affect their lives,” requiring a “transparent commitment by adults to listen to, respect and honor the voices of children” (\textit{ibid.} at 11) and to provide equal opportunities for their involvement in all of the different stages of protection activities (\textit{ibid.} at 13; 27).


\textsuperscript{391} McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, \textit{supra} note 386, at 7.

\textsuperscript{392} Ochen, et al., \textit{supra} note 49, at 107.
\end{footnotesize}
situation, and organize in response to those situations." The stories of the girls illustrate that some adopted active coping methods, learned some positive skills, demonstrated functional resilience, and otherwise acted as “participating agents in their experiences both while with the armed group and in return and recovery.” With appropriate support, these skills and strengths can serve as a reservoir for developing positive reintegration strategies. A better understanding of their strengths and capabilities can also serve to highlight the barriers they may face in exercising them in the post-conflict world and thus serve as the basis for designing programs that strengthen capacities, while concurrently addressing structural obstacles.

This focus on their capacity for active participation is not to deny the traumatic experiences that some, if not all, of these girls have faced, and which may serve as impediments to post-conflict reintegration. As certain authors have argued, there is a real concern that “emphasizing the natural resilience of children in war-torn societies was, in effect, in denial about the negative consequences of trauma upon their well-being.” Rather, the idea is to highlight how resiliency can be nourished and drawn upon in the post-conflict setting in order to support more positive reintegration outcomes. Here, resiliency is not a “fixed quality which children do or do not possess, but a capacity to respond positively to adversity if other supportive contextual elements have been or are being experienced.” The real goal, then, is to gain a deeper understanding of the “web of protections” at both the individual and social level that are necessary to support these girls in their attempts to rebuild their lives. This project shifts our collective focus from one of individual pathology or victimization “toward survival strategies and factors that contribute to thriving.” A holistic approach to participation thus necessitates capitalizing on these girls’ self-defined capacities, while also recognizing their unique and specific vulnerabilities. Any proposed solution must embrace this more robust understanding and adopt concrete measures to translate this conception into actuality. In line with the feminist methodology discussed above, we need to adapt ourselves to the actual needs of the girls we are

394 Annan, Brier & Aryemo, supra note 228, at 640.
395 Guyot, supra note 311, at 3-4.
397 Elizabeth Jareg, as cited in ibid.
398 Halsall, supra note 27, at 93.
399 Ibid.
400 Guyot, supra note 311, at 8.
attempting to assist by actively listening to them, recognizing their legitimate knowledge and experience, and creating positive spaces for meaningful development.

**Participatory Action Research**

Part of the challenge is thus to design and implement programs for these girls that “facilitate the process of constructing a positive role and enabling them to assume meaningful, functional lives as culturally constructed and defined in the local circumstances.” Put another way, effective reintegration programs should provide individuals the opportunity to “work out their own problems (context), building on their own social and personal mechanisms (culture) in their own way (empowerment).” One means of achieving this goal is through the adoption and implementation of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach.

PAR gained prominence in the 1970s, as researchers in the field of critical pedagogy promoted participatory methods to open up space for disempowered individuals to express their own needs, and to act as co-creators of knowledge. This methodology was taken up widely in the 1990s, as academics, policymakers and international agencies working in the development sphere sought the means to implement more bottom-up participatory approaches in response to the critique that marginalized groups were being abstracted as “passive recipients of the grandiose development schemes of the Eurocentric, top-down western experts.” There was also concern that communities were being conceptualized simply as sites where development work occurred, rather than as consisting of a network of individuals, whose capacities and creativities could be built upon. The result was an attempt to reframe the development discourse by emphasizing that individuals are experts on their own lives and needs, and that their knowledge must be meaningfully taken into account by re-conceptualizing them as

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401 Wessells, “Psychosocial Issues”, supra note 156, at 517.
403 Hilde Refstie, “IDPs Redefined – Participatory Action Research with Urban IDPs in Uganda” (Masters in Development Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, December 2008) at 27.
404 *Ibid.* Megan Hazel MacKenzie, who is critical of the PAR approach, argues that it became the “new orthodoxy” during this period as most major NGOs, donor agencies, and development institutions integrated its maxims into their programming (MacKenzie, *supra* note 17, at 166).
partners rather than as merely recipients of aid.\textsuperscript{406}

PAR is not a fixed methodology, “but rather a set of principles with a basket of techniques and approaches that can be adapted to particular contexts.”\textsuperscript{407} At its essence, the theory is rooted in the idea that, through meaningful grassroots participation, individuals can be empowered to act on social practices that sustain unequal power relations and to transform policies and programs that affect them by taking control over their own development processes.\textsuperscript{408} The key is that all participants are to be involved in the entire range of programming activities – including planning, implementing, observing, monitoring, and re-planning – to address “issues directly experienced and explicitly recognized as problems” by those most affected.\textsuperscript{409}

This methodology thus necessitates a re-envisioning of roles, relationships and knowledge. In a fully participatory approach, researchers, as well as program developers and implementers, must cede control over the process, as the participants themselves are largely responsible for shaping the course of the investigation, and knowledge is not ‘found,’ but rather created relationally as between the participants.\textsuperscript{410} The underlying rationale is thus to “democratize” the process in order to help reshape unequal power relations between researchers/researched, as well as givers/receivers.\textsuperscript{411} Instead of “acting upon” communities, researchers, policymakers and program planners, work “side by side” with individuals within these communities.\textsuperscript{412} The process is a collaborative one in which those who are responsible for social action are involved in improving it, analyzing the “institutionally structured situations” that affect action, and learning from the consequences of change.\textsuperscript{413} In other words, the overarching process requires active engagement and reflection by participants on their efforts to shape the course of their lives, as well as on the structural barriers they face in achieving their self-defined ends.

\textsuperscript{406} Refstie, \textit{supra} note 403, at 28.
\textsuperscript{407} Worthen, et al., “I Had No Idea You Cared”, \textit{supra} note 379, at 152.
\textsuperscript{408} Refstie, \textit{supra} note 403, at 27; MacKenzie, \textit{supra} note 17, at 166.
\textsuperscript{410} Refstie, \textit{supra} note 403, at 95.
\textsuperscript{411} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{412} The Examining Community-Institutional Partnerships for Prevention Research Group, \textit{Developing and Sustaining Community-Based Participatory Research Partnerships: A Skill-Building Curriculum} (2006), online: \texttt{www.cbprcurriculum.info}.
\textsuperscript{413} Robin McTaggart, “16 Tenets of Participatory Action Research” Caledonia Centre for Social Development, online: \texttt{http://www.caledonia.org.uk/par.htm}. 
Participants engage in a systematic learning process, as they work together with the “explicit intention of collectively investigating reality to transform it,” while remaining “open to surprise and responsive to opportunities.” The process is thus reflective, flexible and cyclical. It reaches into the past for context; looks squarely at, documents, and responds to, existing issues in the present; and aims at social change for the future. The process often “starts small,” by targeting actions that the individuals can readily manage and control. However, it is also capable of supporting more extensive patterns of change, as the initial group of “collaborators” can be widened to include larger communities of participants who are affected by the practice in question.

This methodology is also capable of supporting individual development. While “empowerment” is not necessarily a stated goal of PAR programming, the process itself can be empowering for participants, as it can facilitate “a space of influence for people not heard” and to “articulate voices that have been silenced.” Empowerment has taken on an increasingly central role within development and humanitarian discourses, in part, due to feminist theories that advocated for the need to integrate women into the development process as active and productive agents, rather than typifying them as passive beneficiaries of assistance. Its centrality in humanitarian work was further cemented through the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which called for an increased focus on empowerment of girls as key to overcoming their lower status in relation to both women and boys. While there remains little consensus as to what the term actually encompasses, Parpart and others argue that it has “become a ‘motherhood’ term, comfortable and unquestionable, something very different institutions and practices seem to be able to agree on.” Thus, while the term can serve as a form of ‘catch-all,’ empowerment, as I understand it,

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415 Refstie, supra note 403, at 25.  
416 McTaggart, supra note 413.  
417 Refstie, supra note 403, at 95.  
consists of a web of overlapping elements at the personal, relational and collective level. In the first instance, it entails “developing a sense of self and confidence and capacity and undoing effects of internalized oppression.” At the relational level, it requires increasing one’s capability to negotiate social relationships, and to exert decision-making power therein. And lastly, it necessitates that individuals “work together to achieve a more extensive impact.”

Empowerment, to be effective, must occur at multiple levels. It is not merely enhanced individual capacity to “make choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes,” but rather part of a process in which individuals come to “perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions,” thus requiring the “un-doing of negative social constructions” that act as barriers to achieving this end. For feminists such as Yuval Davis, empowerment in and of itself is not the goal. Rather, it is the “social change that is the product of empowerment” that is vital. Thus, for the term to have meaningful substance, it must be conceived of as multi-dimensional, encompassing a range of interactions both within, and between, individuals. It is not something that can develop separate and apart from the specific context in which it occurs; it is not an ‘event,’ but rather a ‘process.’ It is in this sense that the PAR methodology supports the possibility of empowering action, as it can enhance an individual participant’s “sense of oneself within a community,” while also allowing the group to “achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone.”

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424 Ibid.
426 Jo Rowlands, Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras (Oxford: Oxfam, 1997) at 14, as cited in ibid.
428 One reason why it is crucial to adopt a more expansive vision of what empowerment entails is to avoid placing responsibility for reintegration solely on the shoulders of the girls themselves, without recognizing the structural, cultural and social barriers they face throughout this process. The danger is that adopting the language of empowerment as a “transformative strategy” can become a vehicle for off-loading the “responsibilities for risks” to “individual subjects” (Augustine Park, “Global Governance, Therapeutic Interventions and War-Affected Girls” (April-June 2009) 34:2 Alternatives: Global, Local, Political 157 at 159). In other words, it is critical to ensure that the problem of girls’ victimization during war, and thereafter, is not attributed to an individual “flaw” – i.e. lack of empowerment – rather than as part of a broader structure of gender and social inequality. As Park argues, there is a ‘dark side’ to discourses on empowerment, namely that “self-esteem takes the place of social issues, injustices are taken up as psychological injury, and ‘social transformation is to be achieved essentially through the transformation of personality” (ibid. at 164). Without recognizing broader structural inequalities, an emphasis on individual ‘empowerment’ may simply result in rendering the girls responsible for their own subordination (ibid. at 165).
430 Rowlands, supra note 426, at 15, as cited in ibid.
the individual and collective levels thus support and feed into one another to create a space in
which meaningful and positive change is conceivable.

It should be noted that the concept of PAR is not without its critics. In part, this stems from the
fact that ‘participatory’ methods were taken up so widely by a diverse group of development
actors over the past few decades, leading some to claim that its initial power has degenerated
into a situation where “it has become so routinized that many agencies treat it like an add-on to
prove their participation credential,”431 with ‘participation’ acting as a “technical method of
project work rather than as a political methodology of empowerment.”432 There are deeper
criticisms as well. One of the main charges levied against the methodology is that while PAR
espouses a commitment to representative and inclusive participation, it is no more than an
entrenchment of existing hierarchies in which an outside “expert” invites marginalized
individuals to “become empowered through participation in centrally directed programs.”433
Robert Chambers, for example, has argued that, in the end, PAR is merely the latest example of
an “outsider seeking to change things. It is effectively the same old discourse with a fancy new
name.”434 According to this critique, researchers and agencies continue to exert de facto control.
They direct the nature and course of development processes, by situating themselves as the
holders of the tools of empowerment, with the participants serving as the means through which
these tools are exercised.435 Others argue that it is that it is too small in scope, focusing too
heavily on the micro level, while disregarding deeper sources of marginalization.436 Without
attending to broader structural issues of “power and politics,” or deeply entrenched inequalities,
small-scale participatory projects may miss the mark if the “roots of vulnerability and
marginalization” are left unaddressed, and the key conditions for exercising rights and agency
remain absent.437 Individuals may be aware of their rights, and be empowered to exercise them,
without having the means to actually do so. The problem, therefore, is not so much within the

431 Refstie, supra note 403, at 28.
432 Ibid.
433 MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 168.
435 See, generally, MacKenzie, supra note 17, at 170.
436 Ibid. at 164.
437 Miranda Worthen, et al., “‘I Stand Like a Woman’: Empowerment and Human Rights in the Context of
Community-Based Reintegration of Girl Mothers Formerly Associated with Fighting Forces and Armed Groups”
concept itself, which is firmly rooted in the belief that people should participate in the processes that affect their own lives, but rather how it is implemented in practice. To overcome the reproaches outlined above, it is critical that the process not be one of mere tokenism. Researchers, development bodies, or national governments cannot adopt PAR in name only. Instead, they must be cognizant of, and attentive to, its full range of implications for development practice. Importantly, PAR must be understood to require that participants be “involved, consulted and heard” but also allow them to take “initiative and lead” to ensure that the process is sustainable once the programming comes to an end. The role of the organizing body must truly be one of facilitation, with the participants setting the agenda, and the agency becoming responsive. At the same time, PAR will need to occur in tandem with other programs and policies aimed at effectuating broader socio-economic development and change. PAR cannot operate as a ‘magic bullet’ for solving all of the issues that face individuals and communities throughout the post-conflict development phase. A judicious application of the PAR methodology recognizes the “links between immediate needs and longer term social change, and look[s] at the two as complimentary rather than opposing.”

Stories from the Field

There is evidence from the field that a PAR approach can serve as a useful and effective framework in helping to reintegrate Ugandan girl child soldiers. One example is the three-year Participatory Action Research Study with Girl Mothers and Children (PAR Project) that was initiated in 2006 in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda in response to the recognition that the needs of girls and young women who returned with children from armed forces or groups in these countries were not being adequately addressed. Designed as a joint collaboration between academics and child protection agencies working in the field, the study aimed to learn what “successful reintegration means to young mothers and what can be done to support them in achieving reintegration, as they understand it.”

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438 Refstie, supra note 403, at 29.
439 Ibid.
440 Ibid. at 30.
441 Ibid. at 25-26.
442 See, McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, for a full description of the project.
443 In Uganda, the partners were Caritas, Gulu Archdiocese, Concerned Parents Association, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, World Vision, and Makerere University.
In the beginning, each partner agency reached out to local leaders and stakeholders, particularly elder women, to help identify girl mothers who had either been associated with an armed group, or were otherwise identified as particularly vulnerable.\textsuperscript{445} The communities themselves were responsible for defining what constituted vulnerability, with the most frequent markers being young age, orphanhood or disability. Over 650 girls and young women (along with 1,200 of their children) from twenty communities were recruited and placed in small groups of approximately thirty members.\textsuperscript{446} Participants were then provided with training and support to conduct research on how the group members, their children, and other community members understood the problems faced by ‘girl mothers’ within the individual communities. The participants reported, for example, that “stigma, marginalization and perceived lack of social support from family and community,” as well as “inability to provide for their own needs and those of their children,” were key barriers to their successful reintegration.\textsuperscript{447} After completing this stage, the participants collaborated together, sharing what they had learned, and worked to design and implement “social actions” to address some of the identified issues, most notably in the areas of livelihood, health and education.\textsuperscript{448} The project provided small funds, on a phased basis, to support both individual and group initiatives, while prioritizing those actions that were attainable with “locally available, low cost, sustainable resources.”\textsuperscript{449}

Throughout the process, the role of the agency partners was one of facilitation, often responding to requests for specific types of assistance (such as “managing group dynamics, conflict resolution skills, health care, bookkeeping, literacy and numeracy, and business skills”),\textsuperscript{450} or helping the participants reflect upon which kinds of projects to adopt. Influential community members were also recruited to act as mentors, providing advice on implementing sustainable

\textsuperscript{445} Across the project, 67% of the participants in the study were formerly associated with an armed group, while 33% were other vulnerable young mothers. However, this number was lower in Uganda, with only 34% of participants reporting they were former child soldiers.

\textsuperscript{446} Worthen, et al., “I had no Idea”, supra note 379, at 152.

\textsuperscript{447} McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, at 13; 29.

\textsuperscript{448} Worthen, et al., “I had no Idea”, supra note 379, at 153.

\textsuperscript{449} McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, at 34. See also, pages 14 and 32 for a fuller discussion of the funding structure. While the amount of funding differed depending on each agency-developed budget, the total typically ranged from $100 to $300 per participant. While the amounts seem low, they are, in fact, a significant sum in Uganda, where the average per capita gross national income is $1,310 as of 2011 (World Bank, “Development Indicators” (n.d.), online: http://search.worldbank.org/data?qterm=per%20capita%20income&language=EN).

\textsuperscript{450} McKay, et al., \textit{ibid.} at 30.
activities, mediating disputes, and advocating on the participants’ behalf.\textsuperscript{451} The final decisions, however, as to the definition of the social problems to be addressed, the development and implementation of plans to tackle them, and the evaluation of what was accomplished, remained entirely in the hands of the girls themselves.\textsuperscript{452}

No one solution was adopted by any of the groups. Rather, they sought out multiple and integrated means of addressing their goals. For example, some groups adopted a multi-tiered approach to tackle the interlocking issues of education, economic self-sufficiency, health and child-care:

One group hired a local teacher to give them evening literacy classes, began individual petty trading businesses funded by micro-credit, and launched a group-run cassava farm. Later, they used the profit from their cassava harvest to pay for a nurse to educate them on how to better care for their children.\textsuperscript{453}

The PAR Project also supported a differentiated approach. Within other groups, some individuals opted to pursue formal schooling, while others focused on vocational training.\textsuperscript{454} Many of the groups also experimented with a variety of income-generating projects – ranging from individual petty trading initiatives, to small collective businesses, to agricultural activities – over the course of the project.\textsuperscript{455} The flexibility of the programming design thus meant that “groups were not constrained in their choices and that if one project did not meet with success, they had a chance to try something new.”\textsuperscript{456} In such cases, groups were supported in reflecting on the reasons for the failure, assessing any skill gaps or further training needs, and then

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{451} Ibid. at 62.
\item \textsuperscript{452} Ibid. at 8.
\item \textsuperscript{453} Worthen, et al., “I Stand Like a Woman”, supra note 437, at 9.
\item \textsuperscript{454} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{455} Ibid. at 10.
\item \textsuperscript{456} Ibid. This was particularly important for groups developing livelihood projects in urban areas, as they “faced stiffer competition, and their activities were strongly affected by daily fluctuations in international exchange rates and market conditions” (McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, at 37). For example, one group in Uganda developed a knitting and sewing project, which had to be abandoned as the “products produced were of low quality and the market for these good was extremely limited” (ibid.). These findings suggest that some PAR groups will need more robust support and advice from agency staff in terms of broader economic issues, including help in developing effective market analyses. There is an obvious tension here between the full enablement of the participant’s decision-making power and effective practice in the field of economic development (ibid. at 39). At the same time, however, if sustainable reintegration is to occur, projects that mesh with the demands of the local economy must be implemented. The key, therefore, is to develop appropriate economic and market analysis tools that also work to enable participation and decision-making on the part of the group members (ibid.).
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developing new, more sustainable initiatives.\textsuperscript{457}

Throughout the project, the group would meet regularly, to share, reflect on, and analyze their experiences, to engage in collective problem solving, and to draw on each other for social support. Thus another key component of the program, beyond any immediate educational or economic benefits, was at the psychosocial level. The girls and young women often forged or strengthened relationships with one another, and bolstered their sense of confidence through the development of a collective identity.\textsuperscript{458} The sharing of stories could have a transformative effect in the sense that “they no longer felt isolated or alone, but understood their own experiences within the context of a broader social group.”\textsuperscript{459} The collaborative nature of the process also helped strengthen the participants’ sense of empowerment and agency. As a group, the individuals became “more visible, had a strong voice and were better able to access community resources.”\textsuperscript{460} For example, at two different sites in Uganda, participants reported that they were emboldened to protest against mistreatment of themselves and their children by family and community members, which they claimed they could not do individually.\textsuperscript{461} For those who were experiencing stigma because of their status as “child soldier” or “young mother,” the sense of group membership empowered them to share these negative experiences more broadly and to work to forge more positive relationships with family and other community members.\textsuperscript{462} Some participants adopted creative means, such as the production of “dramas and songs that contained rich details about their lives in armed groups, about early pregnancy and their present situations” to help ‘sensitize’ those around them to their plight.\textsuperscript{463} Such public displays served as a springboard for closer interaction between the participants and other community members and helped forge a deeper understanding of the challenges they were facing.\textsuperscript{464} Others opted to

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\item[\textsuperscript{457}] McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, \textit{ibid.} at 34.
\item[\textsuperscript{458}] Worthen, et al., “I Stand Like a Woman”, \textit{supra} note 437, at 10. Susan McKay notes that while some of the groups were “initially characterized by mistrust, they gradually became cohesive as participants worked together, prepared food, met each other’s families, and socialized” (McKay, et al., \textit{ibid.} at 29). The development of a collective sense of identity and a supportive network is thus a longer-term process, rather than an immediate outcome of group membership and participation.
\item[\textsuperscript{459}] Worthen, et al., “I had no Idea”, \textit{supra} note 379, at 158.
\item[\textsuperscript{460}] McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, \textit{supra} note 386, at 33.
\item[\textsuperscript{461}] \textit{Ibid.} In Uganda, 85\% of participants reported that they “could now speak in public more easily” (\textit{ibid.} at 86).
\item[\textsuperscript{462}] For example, 80\% of Ugandan participants reported that “involvement in the project made me and my child more liked or loved by my family” (\textit{ibid.} at 85).
\item[\textsuperscript{463}] \textit{Ibid.} at 13.
\item[\textsuperscript{464}] \textit{Ibid.}.
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engage in specific social actions – such as sponsoring community get-togethers, organizing communal cleaning projects, or helping to fix a well – that benefited the community as a whole. According to the PAR Project researchers, this contributed to social cohesion, facilitated a sense of belonging for the girls and young women, and fostered a sense of acceptance on the part of the community.465 Many groups reported that where their communities saw them as actively working to rebuild their lives, and to develop positive roles as productive and contributing members of society, this helped support their reintegration.466 As the project progressed, some participants saw their social relationships shift from ones defined by “need and victimhood” to ones characterized by “reciprocal support,” thus aiding in fostering positive identity and enhancing social reintegration.467

Benefits

While there are thus multiple benefits to the PAR approach, as evidenced in the discussion of the PAR Project, I would like to focus on three specific advantages of this methodology in light of the issues facing the returning girl child soldiers highlighted above. In supporting a longer-term, flexible approach to meeting the needs of actual individuals, as defined by them, PAR is useful in that it places the girls front and centre in their own reintegration processes, thus rendering them visible by supporting their self-defined capacities; it can help reduce community tensions and stigmatization that these girls have identified as a barrier to their successful reintegration; and can further help confront existing gendered realities that undercut the real and meaningful participation of these girls in the post-conflict world.

Girls Define Themselves and Their Worlds

A key advantage of the PAR methodology is that it facilitates a non-homogenous approach to the reintegration of girl child soldiers, by allowing the participants themselves to develop and

465 Ibid. at 14. The management of social tensions stemming from community resentment over perceived benefits accruing to girl child soldiers is a live and thorny issue. In Uganda, 30% of the young mothers participating in the PAR Project reported that “yes, community members do think worse of me” (while 49% stated “no”), with most respondents claiming that these negative perceptions stemmed from jealousy on the part of family or other community members. At the same time, however, most participants in Uganda also responded positively to the question about “more respect from community members,” thus suggesting that improved community relationships can be a positive outcome of PAR participation, with the caveat that it will not be a ‘cure-all’ (ibid. at 27).
466 Ibid. at 62.
467 Ibid. at 43.
implement strategies to address their diverse needs. While several agencies in Uganda adopted differentiated programming for those deemed to be “child mothers,” in general those who fell outside of this category were treated as a cohesive bloc, with similar needs.\textsuperscript{468} For example, while the term “girl child soldier” has been used throughout this thesis to emphasize the intersecting identities at play, it is critical to recognize that many of these girls will return home as adolescents or even adults, or will attain the age of majority over the course of the reintegration stage.\textsuperscript{469} Even for those who would still be deemed children under international law, “profound transformations in their identities” over the course of the conflict – either through ‘marriage’, childbirth, or the assumption of adult roles or responsibilities – might mean that “[I]n their own eyes, they no longer view themselves as girls – despite their chronological age.”\textsuperscript{470} To the extent that programming does not create meaningful space for the girls to work through and express their own sense of self it undercuts its relevance to the population it is meant to serve.\textsuperscript{471} Two examples underscore this point. First, the heavy emphasis on the “innocence discourse” within the reception network, in which girls were treated first and foremost as victims, was often at odds with the stated needs of the girls themselves, many of whom “expressed a preference for ‘economic empowerment’ rather than child protection-related activities.”\textsuperscript{472} Others identified individual agency as a priority, citing “being responsible, respected, and taken seriously, and participating in reciprocal support relationships within their community” as key to their social reintegration success.\textsuperscript{473} Second, the received wisdom that family reunification is a top priority for these girls because of their age and vulnerabilities may be inattentive to those who would prefer to seek out other arrangements. Some girls may prefer to settle with their LRA ‘husbands’ or the father of their children.\textsuperscript{474} Others may choose to seek out new non-traditional living arrangements, such as sharing a household with other war-

\textsuperscript{468} Apio, supra note 133, at 11.
\textsuperscript{469} For example, in one program, 80% of the participants were over 18 by the time they completed the programming (US Institute of Peace, “Child Soldiers”, supra note 375).
\textsuperscript{470} McKay, “Girlhoods Stolen”, supra note 184, at 125. According to Allen and Schomerus, a common complaint by FAPs within the reception centre network was that they were viewed as children, regardless of their actual age, and that they were thus “treated as if they were unable to think for themselves.” Several ‘child mothers’ who were actually in their late twenties complained of “patronizing” attitudes on the part of the staff; a few claimed that they were discouraged from interacting with their sexual partners (Allen & Schomerus, supra note 28, at 22).
\textsuperscript{471} Apio, supra note 133, at 11. See also, Borzello, supra note 103, at 403.
\textsuperscript{472} Apio, ibid. at 9. In the PAR Project, the young mothers “identified having a livelihood and sustainable income as one of their highest priorities” (McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, at 23).
\textsuperscript{473} McKay, et al., ibid.
\textsuperscript{474} Akello, Richters & Reis, supra note 174, at 240.
affected girls or women.\textsuperscript{475} In either case, either by choice or necessity, the girls are expressing different life choices than those being prioritized by the programs meant to assist them. Without attending to the different voices, needs and life situations of these girls, a homogenous approach simply pigeon-holes individuals into existing categories of need, without critically reflecting on whether these categories, in fact, serve as useful markers for developing effective reintegration strategies. PAR, by contrast, does not demand a standardized approach. Instead, supports are built around the participants’ own understandings and sense of agency, thus facilitating a more nuanced approach to reintegration. In providing a platform from which to construct a picture of what ‘successful’ reintegration looks like from their individual perspectives, and by promoting their strengths, self-efficacy and skills, PAR can assist these girls in reconstructing their worlds as they see fit.

Building Bridges

Another important element of the PAR approach is that it is community-based, working both within and with the communities to which the girls return. This is crucial to address existing gaps in the reintegration framework, as well as to overcome the challenges described by the girls above. First, the community-based nature of PAR can help contribute to the development of a more comprehensive knowledge base of the longer-term needs, successes and failures of the girls themselves. As discussed above, one reason that post-conflict programming has been unresponsive to these girls is that there is a lack of meaningful follow-up once they leave the reception network and return to their communities.\textsuperscript{476} Once the former girl child soldiers are “reinserted,” or otherwise return to their communities on their own, they often simply ‘disappear.’\textsuperscript{477} PAR programming, as it evolves and works within the communities to which they return, offers an opportunity for sustained support, monitoring and follow-up, and has the potential to provide richer detail of the actual post-conflict experiences of the returning girls. This feeds into more effective programming that is targeted to addressing the girls’ unique needs as they evolve over time. Importantly, too, it has the potential to reach the large number of girls who never went through official channels, either because of a lack of understanding of the

\textsuperscript{475} Save the Children Denmark, \textit{A Study of the Views, Perspectives and Experiences of ‘Social Integration’ Among Formerly Abducted Girls in Gulu, Northern Uganda, Gulu, Uganda} (Copenhagen: Author, November 2003), as cited in McKay, “Reconstructing Fragile Lives”, \textit{supra} note 153, at 21.

\textsuperscript{476} Mazurana, et al., “Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups”, \textit{supra} note 4, at 10.

\textsuperscript{477} Ochen, et al., \textit{supra} note 49, at 102.
amnesty or reception process or because of fear that they would be stigmatized if they participated. The community-based nature of PAR can improve outreach to those girls who may otherwise remain ‘invisible.’

Second, PAR’s strength lies in its recognition that the development of community capacity, not just individual agency, is a key factor in ensuring that reintegration efforts are sustainable. To be effective, programs must seek to work within, and with, communities in order to support and enhance the “environmental conditions” that contribute to larger-scale growth and resiliency. Here, PAR’s consultative and collaborative methodology is beneficial in that it seeks to increase “personal, interpersonal and intergenerational connections” to help strengthen community growth and capacity. PAR “unfolds slowly,” in a cyclical manner, beginning small, but working outwards, thus enhancing both individual and community outcomes. For example, the PAR Project found that as the participants developed their own capacities, “many girls extended their circle of care to others in the community,” with these individuals reporting that such measures increased their sense of belonging and acceptance. Furthermore, as girls found success in developing their economic capacities, they were often able to give back to their families, thus improving family relationships, which, in turn, helped facilitate further economic support. As the PAR Project developers note: “This is community business, even though the PAR is for girls, the community is indirectly benefiting.”

This building of bridges, both between individual girls and women and across communities, is crucial as well in helping to combat the stigma that many girls highlighted as a significant hurdle in their post-conflict lives. The focus on strengthening support systems and inter-community connections can help “stimulate a reconciled context” as individual community members work together, thus encouraging “shared responsibility” for reintegration efforts and outcomes and reducing the sense that these girls are something entirely ‘other’ because of their association with the armed group. As the girls develop and demonstrate their self-sufficiency,

479 Guyot, supra note 311, at 8.
481 Ibid. at 35.
482 Agency partner, Kampala meeting 2009, as cited in ibid. at 24.
483 Vindervogel, et al., supra note 120, at 561, citing extensive literature review. See also, Ochen, et al., supra note 49, at 104.
strengths and capacities, and help contribute to their larger communities, this can “influence the way they are perceived.”

At the same time, PAR’s flexible approach can help reduce stigma in that it does not mandate a “targeted” approach to the reintegration of girl child soldiers. There is a growing recognition that former child soldiers may be stigmatized when they are perceived as privileged recipients of benefits, when other war-affected children may be facing comparable social and economic difficulties. Similarly, it has been noted that a targeted approach may reduce the likelihood that girls participate in programming aimed at serving their needs for fear that association with the program will increase the stigma and isolation they may already face. In the DRC, for example, researchers found that “girls avoid activities that identify or categorise them as having been with an armed group or other stigma such as being the victim of sexual violence.” When asked, the girls consistently expressed that they desired to be “treated, ‘approached’ like other girls in the community.”

Ensuring that individual girls can receive programming support without having to self-identify as an “ex-combatant” may allow “otherwise invisible children” to access services. PAR programming can be designed to extend access to psychosocial, educational and economic support to broader groups of vulnerable children or females based on “identified needs rather than status,” thus targeting those deemed to be “most-at-risk” by the communities themselves and helping to integrate, rather than stigmatize, participants.

487 Ibid.
488 McVeigh, et al., supra note 64, at vii.
489 Blattman & Annan, “Child Combattants”, supra note 67, at 21. While the PAR Project provides one example, through its prioritizing of the needs of young mothers, other programs could be developed to target other specific and identifiable groups, including survivors of sexual violence; orphans; heads of households; or those experiencing persistent unemployment. At the same time, however, programmers must be circumspect in ensuring that the “equalizing” of benefits does not result in the specific needs of girl child soldiers being overlooked (SWAY, “A Way Forward”, supra note 74, at 8). It remains critical to recognize that subsuming these girls into a broader category of vulnerable children has the attendant risk of rendering them “largely invisible” by negating their shared experiences and unique needs (McKay, et al., “Returned and Neglected”, supra note 171, at 2; Annan, Brier & Aryemo, supra note 228, at 663). Programs will need to be carefully tailored, through extensive community dialogue and outreach, to ensure that the specific needs of girl child soldiers are being addressed and that they are meaningfully included within the participatory processes.
Gendering Reintegration

PAR is also valuable as a methodology in that it can set the stage for a deeper gender analysis within the reintegration framework, by providing important tools to examine gender differences and social and power relations, and by helping the participants to work together to subtly redress inequities based on gender within their own communities. It can operate as a ‘bottom-up’ method for helping to shift gendered power relations, through the individual participants’ harnessing of their capacity to challenge the terms of the gendered social script. As seen above, gender was a factor throughout the girls’ time with the LRA, as the group manipulated existing norms to slot girls into specific roles in order to help them sustain their fighting force. These same gendered identities and hierarchies, in which girls are positioned as subordinate, continue to affect their lives upon their return, and are a significant factor in their reintegration outcomes. Some continue to be marginalized within their communities, and accorded a lower socio-economic position, because of presumptions about female status generally. Others may be ostracized and stigmatized because of perceived deviation from traditional gender norms and roles because of their association with the LRA. The challenges faced by the returning girls thus arise “not only from the scourges of war but also from structural and direct violence and discrimination.” Without a robust commitment to supporting the rights, needs and aspirations of these girls and young women in shaping the course of their own lives, program efforts will continue to remain ineffective and exclusionary. As argued by Chris Coulter and others, “It matters very little how many projects a girl participates in if her ability to put her skills to use is circumscribed by society’s negative view of her.”

With this in mind, PAR is a powerful methodology from a gender perspective in that it can help “meet both women’s practical gender needs and more strategic gender needs” by helping to shift existing power relations. In the first instance, PAR projects can provide crucial funding support to help the girls’ meet their psychosocial, educational and economic needs, as defined

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490 McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, supra note 386, at 64.
491 Coulter, Persson & Utas, supra note 239, at 39.
492 Reeves & Baden, supra note 419, at 33. “Practical gender needs” are those “immediate needs identified by women to assist their survival in their socially accepted roles, within existing power structures” and can include access to adequate living conditions, or income-generating activities. “Strategic gender needs,” by contrast, are “those needs identified by women that require strategies for challenging male dominance and privilege,” and may be related to inequitable divisions of labour, ownership and control of resources, participation in decision-making, or experiences of domestic or sexual violence (ibid. at 14).
by them. At the practical level, developing the means to support themselves and to provide for their families is key to ensuring that their immediate needs and interests are served. Moreover, enhancement of girls’ skill set and material wellbeing and can help promote better familial and community relationships. As one participant in the PAR Project shares: “My mother used to abuse me and blame me for my children, but now I make soap that the community buys, my mom sees me better.”\(^{493}\) At the strategic level, as discussed above, the process of coming together collectively to share, reflect upon, and work to improve one’s existing situation can be empowering. Highly participatory programming can help reinforce the participants’ capacity to act individually, and to organize collectively, to effect change.\(^{494}\) Importantly, it is the girls themselves who develop the means to critically assess their own experiences and life situations to shape a transformation in the existing status quo. They are, and remain, the agents of change. Within the collective space they create, the potential to open up the “social landscape” to “reinterpretation and collaboration,” “yielding empowering new possibilities,” is given room to grow.\(^{495}\) For example, according to Akello Betty Openy, the adolescent co-founder of Gulu Youth for Action, her participation in a PAR-based program, motivated her to advocate for change:

*Girls in my country keep to themselves and are quiet, … Doing the study and advocacy with the Women’s Commission and my peers was helpful because a girl like myself can stand up for herself and advocate for others. I now have the confidence to talk to policy makers about girls’ rights. I want to continue to help other girls gain the same confidence.*\(^{496}\)

At the same time, PAR’s facilitative approach is beneficial in that it works at the local level to address the underlying causes of the girls’ subordination and promotes dialogue between individuals, community members and leaders, thus enabling “social change through the mobilization of internal actors.”\(^{497}\) Operating within the specific gender dynamics of the given social space, PAR programs can help enhance inter-community communication and understanding and build broad support for cooperative processes that help to shift cultural

\(^{494}\) Reeves & Baden, *supra* note 419, at 35.
\(^{495}\) Cheney, *supra* note 26, at 41.
\(^{496}\) As cited in Van Der Gaag, *supra* note 61, at 86.
\(^{497}\) McKay, et al., “Community-Based Reintegration”, *supra* note 386, at 64.
attitudes and expectations about the roles that girls, boys, men and women play within their societies, as well as harmful gender relations, that can serve as obstacles to the girls’ successful reintegration. As one young mother who participated in the PAR Project in Uganda explains, the interaction between the individual participants’ successes and the benefits accrued to the broader society more generally can serve as a basis for new social understandings and improved gender relations: “The men are also benefiting and appreciating. As when we sold ground nuts, that helped brothers, fathers, husbands in sorting out domestic issues like hospital fees or things like that. So [the men] are helped by the girls.” More concretely, the girls’ successes can help foster social change by working to shift entrenched patterns, roles and relationships, and in promoting positive strategies for coping and “thriving”:

My boyfriend beat me when I wouldn’t loan him money. But we went to the chief. Before he wouldn’t support me and now he wants my money. We decided to separate. He took one of our children and I kept the other one. I am not happy that we’re separated, but I was not going to give him my money and I was not going to tolerate him beating me. Before I wouldn’t have gone to the chief because I didn’t have confidence because I was provoking people in the community. But now I know my rights, I stand like a woman so I can go to the chief.

It will not be a linear process, nor one in which defined outcomes can be known in advance, as programs that are “designed to capitalize on the potential for change in post-conflict situations cannot realistically be expected to achieve a fundamental change in attitudes in the short-term.” Moreover, it cannot, and should not, be presumed that all of the girls have an interest in changing the status quo. If PAR is to be truly participatory, it cannot impose a liberal agenda from outside. It must engage with all voices and opinions, and confront the ways in which

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498 Ibid. at 4.
499 As cited in ibid. at 53.
500 PAR Project Participant, as cited in Worthen, et al., “I had no Idea”, supra note 379, at 160. This is not to suggest that more positive relationships automatically flow from the development of participatory projects. Domestic violence remained a frequent occurrence for some participants (Worthen, et al., “I Stand Like a Woman”, supra note 437, at 16). Others faced more entrenched community resistance, with community leaders seeing the participants’ increased sense of empowerment as disruptive, as when one of the PAR groups sought to become active in politics. In this case, community stakeholders urged the women “not to focus on their rights only, but [also] their responsibilities” (ibid. at 17).
501 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 103. For example, while the majority of the participants in the PAR Project reported improved community relationships, sexual exploitation and violence remained endemic in the communities in which the PAR Project operated.
gender dynamics “are being pushed by both progressive and regressive forces in the country and, indeed, often by the girls themselves.” At the same time, however, a PAR approach provides a springboard for positive social change through small, incremental steps and offers the possibility of helping to translate new individual gains into more equal power relations.

Challenges

PAR is thus a highly promising approach to developing longer-term reintegration strategies to meet the multiple and varying needs of the returning girl child soldiers in Uganda. At the same time, it is acknowledged that it is not an easy sell, as it requires long-term, flexible and fluid funding commitments. Developing programming that is highly participatory, works within and with communities, and provides the means for participants to gain sustainable psychosocial, educational and economic outcomes requires a significant amount of time and resources. It requires a “longer-term perspective” that is at odds with the dominant philosophy of “quick accountability” within the post-conflict humanitarian sphere. In general, the bulk of funding is provided during the ‘reinsertion’ phase to meet immediate needs, whereas actions aimed at rebuilding lives and communities are seen as outside the mandate of humanitarian donors. There is evidence, for example, that donor interest in Northern Uganda has reduced significantly following the end of the active conflict.

There are several challenges in advocating for the implementation of PAR in the post-conflict Ugandan context. PAR requires a significant investment of up-front resources, including dedication of time to building staff capacity to engage in facilitative processes and to mobilizing participants and communities. There is a disconnect between this type of programming – which requires high levels of initial investment, coupled with slower implementation – and the timeframes of other humanitarian processes, which focus on immediate measurable outcomes. A PAR approach also requires a shift in institutional attitudes and practices. For example, most

502 McKay & Mazurana, “Where are the Girls?”, supra note 8, at 122.
503 El-Bushra & Sahl, supra note 20, at 103.
504 Hobson & Aaronson, supra note 203, at 19. Part of the issue stems from the structural nature of the humanitarian aid system, which typically “differentiates between conflict, transition to peace, and post-conflict in terms of policy, funding and length of time and support.” When there are shortfalls in funding, medium- and long-term planning and programming often fall to the wayside (Gruber, supra note 296, at 43).
507 Ibid. at 60.
donors require that specific programming outcomes be identified before the program is initiated or implemented.\textsuperscript{508} PAR, on the other hand, mandates that funding cannot be tied to preconceived outcomes, as the priorities, scope and nature of the individual project develops slowly, over time, and will be variably shaped by the individual needs and interests of the participants themselves. Furthermore, PAR funding for individual and social actions must be left “open and unspecified,” with allocation of resources occurring as the need develops.\textsuperscript{509} Thus, while PAR’s “creativity and flexibility” is one of its inherent strengths,\textsuperscript{510} it also presents a challenge to dominant discourses in the development and humanitarian spheres.

At the same time, however, merely because a methodology challenges the status quo is not a sufficient reason to avoid seeking out new angles and embracing new approaches, particularly where there is evidence that a different way of ‘doing business’ can have a real and measurable impact in the lives of these girls. In large part, the status quo has failed to meet the expressed needs of the returning girl child soldiers. To do better, we must eschew arguments that are based solely on an engrained acceptance of the boundaries of what is possible. By actually listening to the stories girls tell, and acting on what they tell us, we can do more. We can, in fact, change the stories we tell about them, and thus help them write the futures they choose for themselves.

\textsuperscript{508} Ibid. at 59.
\textsuperscript{509} Ibid. at 60.
\textsuperscript{510} Onyango & Worthen, “Handbook of Participatory Methods”, supra note 387, at 26.
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