

# Women in Conflict

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*This article focuses on female combatants serving in armed conflicts in Africa, South America, and Asia, profiling their time engaged with these forces as well as the realities they face upon their return to civilian life. Women play a significant role in these conflicts, sometimes constituting up to 30% of the armed forces, although they are often overlooked. When they are acknowledged, women are frequently regarded as helpless victims rather than active participants. Through statistics and country profiles, the groundwork is laid to develop a fuller picture of female participation in conflict in terms of their numbers, the ways in which they become involved, and the various roles that they play. Conditions women commonly face upon returning from war are explored, including stigma, psychological and physical health issues, and a lack of options to provide for their own livelihoods. The article specifically notes the deficiencies of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs in serving female populations. The article concludes with analysis and recommendations for improvements to DDR programming, specifically as it relates to serving women and girls, and noting the precedent set by international human rights law for gender mainstreaming in DDR.*

Portrayals of conflict in the developing world commonly represent women and girls as victims suffering at the hands of violent men (Coulter et al., 2008). It is true that conflict often disproportionately victimizes women and girls; they are at increased risk of sexual violence, are more likely to be pulled out of school, bear increased care burdens, and face decreased access to resources (Buscher, 2009). Research by McKay and Mazurana (2004) reveals that armed conflicts tend to escalate sexism and intensify gender roles. However, what is often overlooked is women and girls' active participation in war. Women and girls represent a substantial minority of active participants in global conflicts, playing diverse roles within militaries, paramilitaries, militias, and armed opposition groups. Women come to these organizations through abduction, as a survival strategy, or voluntarily. Their experiences are complex and become even more so in the aftermath of conflict.

This paper examines the participation of women and girls in armed forces in the developing world, highlighting specific cases from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including civil conflicts in Nepal, Colombia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Mozambique. The fate of these women when they return to their home communities is specifically addressed, with particular concern for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs. Finally, the paper concludes with analysis and recommendations for improvements in programming.<sup>1</sup>

## Women in War

Girls and women join military forces in a variety of ways. Many are abducted, while others enlist voluntarily, or as a survival strategy (Coulter et al., 2008). According to Specht (2006), approximately one third of female ex-fighters in the civil conflicts in Liberia were forcibly recruited. Most who volunteered cited survival and protection as their primary motivation, while others joined due to economic concerns, a desire for revenge, or a chance for equality with men. According to research on post-independence wars in several

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the terms "young women" and "girls" will be used interchangeably. A detailed analysis of the differing experiences for women and girls, disaggregated by age, is beyond the scope of this paper, but deserves scholarly attention.

African nations, girls who enlisted often did so to escape domestic violence, abuse, and poverty (Coulter et al., 2008).

“Home life was difficult. My father [stepfather, in fact] was a heavy drinker, he didn’t work...I left because he beat us, he drank, and then he took me as his wife. I preferred to die in the war rather than to stay at home and to keep on suffering.” - Vanessa, DRC (Brett & Specht, 2003, p. 88)

Motivations rooted in ethnic identity and religion were rarely cited, as is more common for young men and boys who join liberation struggles in this region (Coulter et al., 2002).

However, this is not universally the case. Although not all female members of the Maoist movement in Nepal joined freely, many young women from marginalized ethnic groups and lower castes joined the movement of their own accord – first as political supporters and later as combatants. Their decision was inspired by a number of grievances that later developed political focus as they received ideological training (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012). Interviews with these women revealed motivations rooted in a desire for social, economic, and political emancipation, as well as self-defense and revenge. Although Nepal does not adhere to a rigidly gendered social structure, women who joined the mobile militia units and People’s Liberation Army (PLA) still made a difficult and costly decision that significantly countered cultural norms (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012). These women had a clear idea of what they hoped to gain. This case demonstrates that some women who participate in armed movements make deliberate, empowered choices that they believe can bring new freedoms and opportunities.

### **Life in Combat**

Female participation in armed conflict is strongly characterized by the variety of roles they play (Coulter et al., 2008). Wide variation in roles may exist even within the same country. In the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), some women were forced into domestic labor and sexual slavery, while others were given more traditionally masculine assignments as fighters, recruiters, trainers, intelligence officers, spies, and weapons experts. Nepalese girls and women in the PLA shared the same duties and responsibilities as men, although they were expected to conform to new, more masculine gender norms (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012). Women were given new, “revolutionary” names and cut off their long hair, which had historically symbolized their femininity. Typically, these roles tend to reinforce gender norms (Brett & Specht, 2003). For example, an International Labour Organization study of child soldiers in the Philippines found that all girl soldiers, and no boys, were assigned to feminized, caretaking jobs such as nurses and medics. Other common roles for women and girls in military groups include agricultural food cultivation, cooking, and cleaning (Coulter et al., 2008).

When afforded equitable treatment, many women have experienced some degree of empowerment as combatants. In these cases, war appears to provide opportunities to take on leadership roles and develop new skills (Coulter et al., 2008). Female fighters have reported that carrying arms gave them a sense of power, pride, status, and control, and that they were able to gain self-confidence and a sense of belonging through their military roles. Still, McKay (2004) asserts that true gender equality has not been possible in African wars, even for women in high-ranking positions. In spite of opportunities for empowerment, female combatants are highly vulnerable to rape and gender-based violence at the hands of their male counterparts (MacKay & Mazurana, 2004). In their study of girls in fighting forces in Northern Uganda, Mozambique, and Sierra Leone, McKay and Mazurana (2004) found that girls associated with fighting forces almost universally reported experiencing sexual abuse. Sexually transmitted infections, especially HIV/AIDS, are of particular concern to these women and their children. Even women who are able to eventually achieve prominent positions face sexual abuse and gender discrimination on their path up the chain of command.

### **Return to Civilian Life**

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While their military experiences differ widely, all female ex-combatants face significant obstacles to their successful reintegration into civilian life. Whether former combatants are welcomed back into their communities depends on several factors including the nature of the conflict, the societal structure, and the roles that the women played in the armed forces, with tremendous case-by-case variation. For example, female Maoist combatants in Nepal were generally welcomed back without hostility, because of community support for the movement and relatively liberal gender norms (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012). However, returning child soldiers in Colombia, many of whom are voluntary recruits, are regarded with fear and hatred because of the atrocities committed during wartime, especially as the conflict in that country continues (Y Care International, 2008). Coming home can be especially difficult for girls who become mothers during their time away and for those who have “bush husbands”<sup>2</sup> from their time in combat, especially if these husbands are considered enemies of the community (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

For women who experienced empowerment as active combatants, being forced to fit back into highly oppressive societies can be extremely arduous. Even women who had taken part in gender-equal liberation movements found themselves back within patriarchal societies once the fighting ended (Coulter et al., 2008). Women in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) expressed that they had felt respected and equal during wartime, but that this was lost as their country began to shift into a normal civilian structure. McKay and Mazurana (2004) find that, in the aftermath of war, communities and outside organizations attempt to push female ex-combatants back into traditional gender normative roles rather than capitalizing on valuable strengths and skills developed during combat. As a result, many female combatants – even those who had been abducted, abused, or kept as sex slaves – have stated that wartime was actually preferable to the life that came afterwards (Coulter et al., 2008). According to one woman, Sarah, who fought against pro-government forces in Sierra Leone, her situation after the war was considerably worse than it had been during the conflict:

“Now I live with war stigma and trauma...In our community, decision making is not an active ingredient in the life of women...they are nothing but property. Even the affluent struggle to take part in decision making.” (MacKenzie, 2012, p. 81).

Marriage and conjugal relations can be particularly intractable issues for women and girls returning from combat (Coulter et al., 2008). The men in their communities regard them as having lost their femininity, and even male combatants who married fellow fighters often discard their wartime wives in favor of civilian women. Consequently, many female soldiers return without partners and are left alone to support children born during the war (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Women who had enjoyed equitable conjugal relationships during the war often saw their husbands change upon return to civilian life and faced highly gendered expectations from in-laws. Despite sharing labor equally in the past, husbands now expected their wives to fit into more traditional roles.

“I and my husband...had shared the same daily tasks in the cantonments, but when we came home my husband totally changed. I had to work at home and on the farm from 4 o’clock in the morning to 11 o’clock at night while my husband used to [spend the day] chatting about his war experiences with others...” – Nepalese female ex-combatant (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012, p. 13)

Most of the women who returned from war in Nepal, married or not, were regarded by their elders as morally corrupt for having cohabitated (and presumably engaged sexually) with members of the opposite sex (Centre for Peace Studies, 2012). For reasons such as this, girls and young women try to return home quietly, drawing as little attention to themselves as possible (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). They often attempt to

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<sup>2</sup> “Bush husbands” are, for female combatants, from either forced or consensual marriages made within the context of war.

reintegrate with their own families first. If rejected, they may turn to strategies such as sex work or seeking the help of an NGO.

Some female ex-combatants have been able to ease back into society through cleansing rites, which can be part of a healing process for both combatants and communities (Bouta, Frerks, & Bannon, 2005). Cleansing rituals may be designed to drive away evil spirits, protect the community, connect with ancestors, and welcome ex-combatants home. McKay and Mazurana (2004) have observed that in Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Mozambique, such rituals help girls heal and reintegrate upon their return from conflict. These rituals take on various forms, from stepping on an egg to symbolize the beginning of a new life in Northern Uganda, to taking a special herb bath in Mozambique (Schirch, 2005). Some rites are female-specific, as in Mozambique and Sierra Leone, where special rituals were designated for sexually abused girls (Bouta et al., 2005). Stark (2006) found positive psychosocial results for girls in Sierra Leone who had undergone such ceremonies. They experienced greater acceptance from their families and communities and were able to heal through the supportive process of the ritual itself. These girls were also able to shed the spiritual contamination that they felt had been acquired through the war.

Nevertheless, cleansing rites are still primarily restricted to men, and women may have a great deal of difficulty gaining access (Schroven, 2006). Furthermore, while cleansing rituals may have tremendous benefits, they often focus on reestablishing patriarchal gender roles. Some can even be dangerous to women's health and wellbeing, such as female genital mutilation (Bastick, Grimm, & Kunz, 2007). Programs to address the needs of female ex-combatants should integrate cleansing ceremonies into their approaches, taking advantage of effective components and mitigating the risks.

### **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration**

DDR programs in post-conflict zones have overwhelmingly failed to address the needs of female ex-combatants. Generally, DDR programs have three primary goals: (1) to collect, register, and destroy all conventional weapons; (2) to demobilize combatants; and (3) to reintegrate combatants into society (Coulter et al., 2008). Benefits can include health care, counseling, cleansing rituals, education and vocational training, and aid in community reconciliation (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). However, DDR programs tend to be severely underfunded and poorly designed. Multiple studies have found deficiencies within demobilization programs worldwide due to the gendered nature of the reintegration process (Coulter et al., 2008). In fact, women overwhelmingly do not participate in these programs at all.

One of the main reasons that women avoid DDR programs is out of fear of identification as combatants (Coulter et al., 2008). Commanders, peers, or relatives may tell women that it is not appropriate for them to disarm because of the association with masculine roles and actions that disarmament implies. Furthermore, women are mostly excluded from post-war political structures and militaries, and they are often refused access to land. For many, the risks are not worth what the DDR programs have to offer.

Women who do participate in DDR programs often find that their needs are unmet. They are explicit about the importance of accessing education and training in skills that will allow them to develop sustainable livelihoods (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Unfortunately, however, the funding decisions of the global development industry have played a key role in confirming existing gender stereotypes (MacKenzie, 2012). Vocational programs typically offer training only in traditionally feminine fields such as dressmaking and cosmetology (Y Care International, 2008). In Sierra Leone, failure to conduct a local market assessment resulted in an overabundance of women trained in gara tie dyeing (MacKenzie, 2012). In this case, inappropriate allocation of funds wasted valuable resources in training women for a trade that not only failed to support their livelihoods, but also reinforced typical gender stereotypes and disregarded skills and strengths that they had developed during their time in combat.

## Analysis and Recommendations

The most effective DDR programming for female ex-combatants is comprehensive, market-based, and empowering. Noting the barriers listed above, DDR programmers must reach out specifically to female ex-combatants and provide services in a way that is both safe and private. Women should have access to female-only facilities and services without being forced to reveal their status as ex-combatants.

The failure of DDR vocational training in Sierra Leone demonstrates the critical importance of market-based approaches to livelihoods provisioning (MacKinsey, 2012). Before implementing any programming, DDR programmers must conduct needs assessments and market analyses in order to understand the desires, needs, fears, and strengths of the people they are serving. Furthermore, data collected must be disaggregated by age and gender. Women need equal access to all training, not just stereotypical trades with limited upward mobility. Ideally, the skills and strengths learned in wartime would be seen as such and applied to livelihoods strategies based in economic realities. For example, a former recruiter might be trained in marketing, advertising, networking, and business. Additionally, all ex-combatants should have access to educational programming that allows them to provide materially for themselves and their families.

Many female ex-combatants are dealing with serious mental health concerns, especially post-war trauma (Coulter et al., 2008). Effective programming will also address their psychological needs. While it may not be feasible to provide individual counseling to all, female ex-combatants should be encouraged to form support groups, where they can share their experiences of war and return. These groups have the potential to ease psychological burdens and build community and solidarity, especially if facilitated by skilled practitioners.

War is a tragedy wherever it occurs, and practitioners working in post-war settings must be better equipped to serve the needs of female fighters. Doing so requires that they understand the duality of these experiences, keeping in mind female ex-combatants' special needs, addressing trauma, and empowering them toward brighter futures. Ultimately, DDR programs should build upon the confidence and liberation these women may have developed while at war.

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