

**From Combat to Community:  
Women and Girls of Sierra Leone**

By Dyan Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson

With Contributions by  
Sanam Naraghi Anderlini

Series Editor  
Sanam Naraghi Anderlini

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### **About the Authors**

Khristopher Carlson is a research specialist at the University of Montana in Missoula. His areas of expertise include child soldiers, particularly girls and young women, in armed conflict and in post-conflict reconstruction. Mr. Carlson has co-authored several articles on these topics, including "Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilization, and Reintegration" *Journal of Peace and Conflict*. He was a contributing author to the United Nations Secretary-General's study, *Women, Peace and Security*.

Dyan Mazurana is a senior researcher with the Feinstein International Famine Center and a research scholar and faculty member at the University of Montana in Missoula. She is a lead researcher on and author of the United Nations Secretary-General's Study, *Women, Peace and Security*. Dr. Mazurana has written and developed training materials regarding gender, women's human rights, armed conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction for civilians, police, and military peacekeepers involved in UN, NATO, and regional peacekeeping missions.

## **PROJECT BACKGROUND**

Wars and internal conflicts do not end simply with the signing of peace agreements. To avoid a resurgence of violence, it is necessary to develop and support measures for strengthening the governance, security, justice, and socioeconomic capacities of a state. This is a complex task in any society, but daunting in post-conflict situations. While the international community can provide assistance and valuable resources, the local population, which has no “exit strategy,” has the greatest commitment to building sustainable peace. It is therefore essential to draw on the assets, experiences, and dedication at the local level and among all sectors of society. One sector often overlooked and underestimated is women. In most post-conflict societies women are more than 50 percent of the population and are actively engaged in peace building while addressing the basic survival needs of their families and communities. Yet they are often portrayed as passive victims, and little regard is given to their actual and potential roles in fostering security.

In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. It called on all parties to ensure women’s participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflict to negotiations and post-war reconstruction. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes with a particular focus on the contributions of women. Drawing on qualitative field-based research and quantitative survey data, “From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone” assesses how consideration of gender issues can improve disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) processes and documents the contributions of women in official and civil society-based reintegration programs.

## **KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Key Findings**

1. Throughout the conflict, women led civil society peace efforts. In 2002, as the country faced the breakdown of the 1999 Lomé accords, women were pivotal in galvanizing mass demonstrations that led to the end of the war.
2. Contrary to official reports, women played a military role in the pro-government Civil Defense Forces and in the rebel movement.
3. Female ex-combatants from all forces were significantly underrepresented in official disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs.
4. Women are playing a significant but unacknowledged role in the reintegration of former fighters, filling many gaps in official programs.

### **Recommendations**

1. When **planning DDR**, international actors, including the UN, multilateral organizations, donor governments, and national governments, must:
  - ensure the participation of women during all stages of negotiation;
  - assume that women are part of the fighting forces and be aware that, where children are present, 10 to 33 percent may be girls;
  - recognize the initial estimated number of fighters provided by military forces may be low, and thus be prepared to increase resources to ensure effective programs; and
  - extend the definition of *combatant* to include those who were part of a “regular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks and messengers...and girls recruited for sexual purposes...”—in accordance with existing norms followed by the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and outlined in the UN Secretary-General’s study, *Women, Peace and Security* (2002).
2. During **disarmament and demobilization**, implementing organizations should:
  - accept females even when unaccompanied by men; and
  - develop parallel systems for the demobilization of women and girls by:
    - offering women the choice to enter care centers with their children or to remain with their male colleagues and counterparts; and
    - ensuring there are facilities to separately house girls and boys without parents.
3. In **reintegration**, donors should ensure that:
  - local organizations and communities working with former combatants are direct beneficiaries of resources from official reintegration and rehabilitation programs;
  - income-generation and job-creation programs are created to provide employment for ex-combatants and members of communities into which they are returning; and
  - DDR programs support mothers, particularly single mothers, emerging from the fighting forces—including providing basic care for them and their children (through foster care programs or centers) to facilitate their participation in education and skills training that can help them avoid petty crime or the sex trade.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sierra Leone ended its national disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program in December 2003. Since the program began in 1998, 72,500 former combatants have been demobilized, including 4,751 women (6.5 percent) and 6,787 children (9.4 percent), of whom 506 are girls.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, there was some recognition that women and child soldiers made up a significant portion of the forces.<sup>2</sup> In theory, the DDR process was designed to include them. But while the program was effective in reaching out to male combatants, ultimately women and children were underserved. Despite this shortcoming, the plan has been hailed as a success and a model upon which other DDR processes could be based.

These DDR programs have also failed to support civilian populations faced with the reality of reintegrating former fighters. Instead, in communities across Sierra Leone, women as individuals and in groups have taken on the responsibility of assisting former combatants as they return to civilian life. But they receive little or no support from the national and international programs established to ensure successful reintegration.

### Women and the War

In March 1991, the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), led by former Sierra Leone Army (SLA) corporal Foday Sankoh, invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia. Violence against women and children, and general terror in rural and urban centers quickly became cornerstones of the RUF movement and were encouraged by its leadership. But as the war escalated, women and girls reported atrocities committed by forces on both sides. Preyed upon by the RUF and SLA, local civilians in many areas transformed traditional hunting societies, such as the Kamajors, into pro-government militias known as Civil Defense Forces (CDF). These militias gained prominence with the armed activities of the Kamajors in the eastern and southern provinces and the rise of the Gbethis in the north, among others. Throughout the war years, the government endorsed the CDF, providing them with resources, including weapons.

### Soldiers and “Wives,” Cooks and Spies

Women and girls were present in large numbers in pro-government and rebel forces and were involved in a variety of activities. In the survey of 50 female ex-

combatants (ranging in age from 10 to 35) conducted for this study, almost all stated “abduction” as their means of entry; one third stated that they had fighting experience; nearly half indicated that they received weapons training; one fifth described themselves as spies; and more than half indicated that in addition to performing other duties, they were forced to be captive “wives.” On average, they were 12 years old when they entered the forces.

Despite denials by government officials, girls and young women played an integral role in the CDF. They were spies, commanders, and frontline fighters; some were herbalists, meant to supply fighters with magic potions for invulnerability. Others were cooks, medics, and spiritual leaders. They witnessed brutal rituals and suffered significant sexual abuse.

Women and girls also made up a large part of rebel RUF forces. Many served as captive “wives” of commanders and were responsible for distributing weapons, food, and loot confiscated from village raids. They commanded fighting forces known as small boys units and small girls units; many were also involved in the mutilation and murder of civilians. In camps, commanders’ “wives” sometimes used their control over food and loot to prevent young boys and men from abusing girls.

In sum, the experience of women and girls in the fighting forces was complex. They were captives and dependents, but they were also involved in the planning and execution of the war.

### Disarmament and Demobilization 1998-2000

The Sierra Leone government and international partners, including the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group and the United Nations, conducted disarmament and demobilization in three phases between 1998 and 2000. Reintegration programs continued through 2003. At the start of the program, the estimated number of combatants was 45,000, of which 12 percent was presumed to be women.<sup>3</sup> At its completion, over 72,000 had been demobilized, indicating that the preliminary estimates of force size were inaccurate. As 84 percent of the demobilized were adult men, the program was effective in reaching out to this segment of the population. Since just 6.5 percent of the demobilized were women, however, it seems likely that thousands

more fighters, particularly women and girls, were not reached by the official process.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Qualifications for Entry**

Adults (18 years and older) were eligible for entry into the program by presenting a weapon at any of the official reception centers across the country. They were asked questions and required to disassemble and reassemble a gun, usually an AK-47, as a prerequisite for participation. In Phases I and II, wives and dependents were not eligible for entry.

In Phase III, a group could bring in a weapon. Late in the program, as men complained about their inability to sustain their families, “wives” were permitted to apply for microcredit. For a woman to access the loans, however, she had to be present with a man who was willing to identify her as his wife. No woman could claim benefits alone, regardless of the number of children in her care. For many abductees forced into “marriage,” there was no means of escaping their captors. But some senior DDR officials did not consider this important. “Even if they were raped and abducted,” said one unnamed official in a 2002 interview, “70 percent...want to be with their husbands.” Officially, those under 18 were not required to present a weapon to enter DDR. However, there was widespread inconsistency among the UN, government officials, and NGO staff on whether children were required to turn in weapons. The majority of girl fighters interviewed for this study, including those who passed through the DDR process, stated that the weapons test was repeatedly administered to children.

#### **Women and Girls in the Margins**

Nearly 7,000 children participated in official demobilization programs,<sup>5</sup> but estimates suggest that there were as many as 48,216 children in the forces. Thus, there is significant disparity between the number of children, particularly girls, presumed to be in the forces and the numbers that entered the DDR programs (see table).

**Table 1: Estimated Number for Total Forces, Child Soldiers, and Girl Soldiers<sup>60</sup>**

Force	Total	Child Soldiers	Girls Soldiers
RUF	45,000	22,500	7,500
AFRC	10,000	5,000	1,667
SLA	14,000	3,500	1,167
CDF	68,865	17,216	1,722
<b>Total</b>	<b>137,865</b>	<b>48,216</b>	<b>12,056</b>

In the survey referenced earlier, half of the women and girls had not gone through official disarmament and demobilization. Their experiences highlight a number of gaps in the process:

1. Forty-six percent cited not having a weapon as a barrier for entry into the program. Many women in the CDF were ordered to hand in their weapons prior to demobilization, then were left behind as their male colleagues were transported to assembly centers. Others indicated that their guns were taken away by their commanders and handed to male fighters. Many who were not “primarily” fighters had used weapons from a communal source but did not possess guns themselves.
2. Twenty-one percent feared reprisals from opposing forces at the centers and so avoided the process.
3. Others reported feeling unsafe among the men and thus stayed away from the sites.
4. Many had no knowledge of the program or felt there was nothing to gain by participating.
5. Little was done to reach out to women and girls in the CDF, as it was incorrectly assumed that these were male-only units.

According to local reports since the conclusion of the disarmament and demobilization components of the official program, some female ex-combatants have turned to prostitution and petty crime for survival.



With no hope of receiving assistance from the children's fathers, their own families, or the state, some are turning to violence. In 2002, social workers observed that young women, particularly those with children, were instigating riots in urban centers. Some young women fighters have reportedly crossed borders to join armed groups across the region.

**Rising to the Challenge:  
Women's Campaign for Peace**

From the early days of the war, women in rural and urban centers mobilized to protest the atrocities and call for peace. In May 2000, with the RUF flouting the 1999 Lomé accords, a group of elderly women came together, demanding a meeting with Sankoh. On arriving at the RUF compound, they were mistreated and insulted. Frustrated, the women tried a different tactic. They collectively hitched up their skirts, bent over, and bared themselves to Sankoh and his coterie. In Sierra Leone, such an action by women is the worst curse that can be brought upon anyone.

The news had a galvanizing effect on Sierra Leoneans. They had an obligation to uphold the women's honor and support the curse. But the women's actions also gave people the courage to stand up to the RUF. Coinciding with the arrival of the new UN mission and British Special Forces, the women's protest and subsequent public demonstrations, were pivotal in the struggle for peace, culminating in Sankoh's arrest.

**Caring for Ex-Combatants:  
Women's Contributions to Reintegration**

Across Sierra Leone, women as individuals and in groups have been critical to reintegrating former combatants, particularly those excluded from official programs. Some women whose children were killed have opened their homes to former child soldiers. Others have set aside their own suffering and offered help, believing that, "If left abandoned, the child ex-combatants would have nothing positive to do...and would prove a threat to a fragile peace."<sup>6</sup>

In the study survey, 55 percent of respondents indicated that women in the community played a significant role in helping them reintegrate. This was higher than responses for assistance given to them by traditional leaders (20 percent) or international aid workers (32 percent). They said community women provided guidance, shared meager resources, and, perhaps most important, helped facilitate their skills training and

education by providing childcare, clothes, and food. Women's organizations have also provided models for many of the female ex-combatants; over 65 percent of respondents said that they would like to join such organizations, which they see as offering practical assistance.

Nationally, the Forum for African Women Educationalists and the Progressive Women's Association are the main organizations active in reintegration programs. Among local organizations, Caritas-Makeni, affiliated with the Catholic Church and operating in central Sierra Leone, has developed a foster care program for young mothers, enabling them to attend school while their children are tended. Caritas-Makeni also offers counseling and programs on health and alternative income generation for those who have entered the sex trade.

Among international actors, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) offer strong models for working with local groups and reaching former combatants excluded from the national programs. UNICEF has an innovative program of providing resources to schools that accept former child combatants. In addition, UNICEF, with the support of USAID, runs training centers that offer mothers childcare and food. A number of their programs combine vocational training with basic literacy and numeric skills. Non-traditional trades such as welding, carpentry, and house building are among those taught to women. Forty-nine percent of survey participants said such training, as well as education, are critical in facilitating their adjustment to civilian life.

**Conclusion**

Sierra Leone's DDR process failed women and girls. As many were classified as "dependents" only, their real experiences were not acknowledged, and they were precluded from receiving the benefits provided to "combatants." The assumption that women and girls were victims only, with no role in either the execution of war or the building of peace, is proving detrimental to their future, with potentially negative consequences for the country's recovery and the region's security.

First, despite their horrific experiences in the war, women and girls have shown tremendous agency and initiative. Even during their captivity, those in the

forces regained some control of their own lives by developing skills to ensure their survival and strategies to protect others. Yet when the DDR program was implemented, there was virtually no recognition of the multiple roles women played or the skills they had gained. Many have ambitions for education and independence. They feel tremendous responsibility for their offspring and aspire to give them a better future. By being treated as passive victims, they are again stripped of their sense of self-worth and dignity. Second, women's exclusion from official programs will have significant social consequences, including poverty, crime, prostitution, and an increase in HIV/AIDS. Moreover, the exclusion of single mothers means the exclusion of their children—and thus another generation of unskilled, marginalized youth.

Third, in the same way that disaffected male youths and ex-fighters might lead rebellions, form militias, or join other guerilla groups, so can women and girls. As the 2002 riots and female militia activities indicate, some have already taken up violence. Without support, these young mothers have little to lose from resorting to armed activity as a means of survival.

Finally, local community efforts, informal networks, and organizations—primarily led by women—provide critical support for former combatants. Women's commitment to rehabilitating and coexisting with former fighters is a matter of basic survival for themselves and others. Unlike the international community, they have no exit strategy. If they fail, violence returns to their doorsteps. At the same time, local groups are under immense pressure. They have meager resources, their work is rarely acknowledged in official processes, and they receive only limited assistance from the international community. Supporting the work of these women is a cost-effective and essential ingredient for ensuring sustainable reintegration.

Drawing on qualitative field-based research and quantitative survey data, this study assesses how a gender perspective can improve formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs and documents women's contributions to official and civil society-based initiatives.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Bradley, Sean, Massimo Fusato, and Philippe Maughan. "Sierra Leone: Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR)." Ed. P.C. Mohan. *Findings Africa Region 81*. Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2002, 1, 22 October 2003 <<http://www.worldbank.org/afr/findings/infobeng/infob81.pdf>>; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. *Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*. New York: Women's Commission, 2002, 46; Sierra Leone. National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration. Statistical data provided to the authors. Freetown: NCDDR, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates indicate that up to 50 percent of fighters in rebel forces were children and some 10-30 percent of force members were women.

<sup>3</sup> Malan, Mark, et al. *Sierra Leone: Building the Road to Recovery*. Pretoria, South Africa: Institute for Strategic Studies, 2003, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Sierra Leone, NCDDR; Women's Commission 46.

<sup>5</sup> Women's Commission 46.

<sup>6</sup> Shellac, Davies, personal interview, August 2002.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 2003, Sierra Leone ended its official disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program. From the time of its initiation in 1998, 72,500 former combatants passed through the program, including 4,751 women (6.5 percent) and 6,787 children (9.4 percent), of whom 506 were girls<sup>1</sup>. From the outset there was recognition of the large presence of child soldiers (up to 50 percent of fighters in rebel forces were believed to be under 18) and women (estimates ranged between 10 and 30 percent) among the various forces, so the program was in principle, designed to include them. At completion, however, while the program was noted for its effective outreach to male combatants, women and children were underserved. Despite this significant shortcoming, the program has been hailed as a success by the UN, the World Bank, and others, and a model upon which other DDR processes could be based.<sup>2</sup>

The DDR program also failed to provide support to civilian populations faced with the reality of reintegrating former fighters. Instead, women as individuals and in groups took on the responsibility of assisting these fighters, particularly the children and youth among them, as they returned to civilian life. The majority of these community-based efforts, however, received little or no aid or recognition from the national and international programs established to guarantee not just successful demobilization, but ultimately effective reintegration and rehabilitation.

**This report revisits the Sierra Leone conflict and peace process from the perspective of women. Drawing on field-based interviews and data, it outlines the diverse roles played by women and girls in the war and highlights the importance of women's activism for peace. This study presents key findings of the experiences of women and girls in the DDR program, focusing on obstacles to access, entry, and full participation. It documents women's individual**

**and collective contributions to the reintegration of fighters, concluding with an analysis of the importance of a gender perspective to DDR efforts and practical recommendations to support the development of such programs.**

Outlined here are the rationale for this study, assumptions of the research, an explanation of methodology, and the working definitions that frame this report.

### Rationale

Limited research has been conducted to assess DDR programs' ability to respond to the experiences of women and girls within fighting forces, in Sierra Leone or elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Still less is known about how programs that do or do not address gender considerations may contribute to or hinder peaceful transitions. Drawing on the Sierra Leone conflict (1991-2000) this report uses quantitative and qualitative methods and gender analysis to document and examine women and girl ex-combatants' roles and experiences within the forces and official DDR processes.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to a lack of information on the experiences of women and girls in official DDR programs, knowledge is scarce regarding the contributions that women make to official and community-based DDR processes. As conflicts increasingly involve civilian populations, women are more and more often called upon to "unofficially" assist in demobilizing and reintegrating ex-combatants, especially child soldiers. In Sierra Leone, children constituted half of some of the fighting forces; up to one third of these were girls.<sup>4</sup> This study, therefore, also documents women's previously unrecognized actions to strengthen official and community-based DDR, assist ex-combatants, and contribute to peace building within Sierra Leone and the region.

<sup>1</sup>Results presented in this study draw in part on data collected under a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, "Girls in Militaries, Paramilitaries, Militias, and Armed Opposition Forces" (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2003). Principle investigators for the CIDA grant were Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, Professor of Women's Studies, University of Wyoming, USA; the full results are presented in the forthcoming book, *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).

### Assumptions

This study rests on the assumption that effective DDR processes are critical for achieving sustainable peace. Further, it presupposes that it is insufficient to prioritize the disarmament and demobilization elements alone at the expense of the reintegration component. Finally, it acknowledges that the burden of reintegration and longer-term rehabilitation is largely placed on the families and communities into which former combatants return; too often official national and international DDR programs overlook this key component.

The study does not assume that women are more peaceful than men by nature. Indeed it shows that women play many roles during times of war, ranging from frontline combatants to community peacemakers. They should therefore be recognized as active agents rather than passive victims in peace processes, including DDR. To exclude their voices and experiences and to ignore their contributions ultimately undermines peace.

### Methodology

Throughout August and September 2002 in Sierra Leone, over 60 in-depth interviews were conducted with community leaders, social workers, NGO staff, psychologists, traditional and religious leaders, as well as with government officials, representatives of international organizations and women and girls formerly in the fighting forces.

Secondary quantitative data on the fighting forces and their participation in DDR programs with particular emphasis on children and girls was gathered from the Sierra Leone National Center for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) and the Child Protection Unit of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Sierra Leone.

Finally, a survey using quota sampling was used to gather quantitative data.<sup>5</sup> The Sierra Leone survey was a quota sample of girls and young women formerly associated with the fighting forces during the 1991-2002 war. Sub-categories of the study population included captive "wives" of commanders and girls involved in pro-government Civil Defense Forces (CDF). Study sites were selected with the assistance of UNICEF in Sierra Leone and international and local NGOs working with child ex-combatants or war-affected communities in Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> The

sampling took place in different regions of the country and included the Western Area (the area including and surrounding the capital Freetown) and two of three provinces, the North and the East. Throughout August and September 2002, surveys were conducted in a variety of locations including remote villages, "suburbs" of urban centers, urban centers, and interim care and training centers for war-affected youth.

The survey contained 99 questions pertaining to basic demographic data, entry into the force, roles and experiences within the force, experiences of physical abuses within the respective forces and in community reintegration, experiences of time spent in the army barracks, official disarmament and demobilization, direct community entrance, reintegration, skills training, assistance needs, and current status. Fourteen open-ended questions were included in the survey itself; issues ranged from questions regarding why a girl joined an armed force if she reported joining, skills learned in fighting forces that could assist the respondent now, to difficulties and assistance during reintegration.

A full description of the research methodology can be found in Appendix 1.

### Definitions

#### *Peace Processes*

Just as scholars have identified the "lifecycle" of conflict,<sup>7</sup> current thinking in the field identifies a lifecycle of peace. The establishment of peace is not a single event, but rather a process characterized by progress and setbacks, successes and failures. Observers of peace processes, including those who live in societies with protracted conflict, are all too familiar with premature celebration of ceasefires and peace accords that are later violated. Even if a settlement holds, the transition to a state of peace is a long-term operation. It requires extensive logistical and financial measures to create or reestablish the physical, social, and political infrastructure necessary for the country to transition towards a culture of peace.

Perhaps the most realistic approach to understanding the peace process is to acknowledge that, though negotiations are "the best-known stage in a process of peace," as Anderlini et al. write in *Journeys Through Conflict: Narratives and Lessons*,

*[They] represent but one moment. Though essential, they nevertheless do not exhaust all the possibilities of actions or initiatives that such a process may require. For negotiations to take place, prenegotiations are necessary, be they formal or informal. For a political settlement to succeed, implementation of the provisions of an accord in the postnegotiation period is vital. In other words, it could be said that peace processes have three broad phases: preparation, transformation, and consolidation.<sup>8</sup>*

It is important to note that these three phases are seldom distinct; they blend into one another in a continuum from ceasefire toward the consolidation of peace. Timelines often blur, for example, when the reintegration phase of DDR ends and the longer-term process of reconstruction begins.

#### **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)**

International policymakers consider DDR one of the most important steps in any peace process. The World Bank has defined a successful DDR program as “the key to an effective transition from war to peace.”<sup>9</sup> Although each of the three elements of DDR has distinctly different goals and requires independent planning, the phases do overlap and are dependent upon each other.<sup>10</sup>

The UN defines **disarmament** as “...the collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone.”<sup>11</sup> Former combatants are gathered in pre-determined assembly areas, where weapons are confiscated, safely stored, and eventually destroyed. Individuals then receive support in the form of food aid, shelter, clothing, medical attention, basic education, and orientation programs. In addition, censuses are often conducted, and ex-combatants are issued discharge documentation.<sup>12</sup>

**Demobilization** is both the formal disbanding of military formations and the release of combatants from a “mobilized” state.<sup>13</sup> Discharge of ex-combatants often occurs over a period of time, during which they are usually transported to their home districts or given small transportation grants and the process of initial reinsertion begins.<sup>14</sup>

Nicole Ball of the University of Maryland breaks down **reintegration** into two phases—initial reinsertion and long-term reintegration.<sup>15</sup> Reinsertion refers

to the short-term arrival period of an ex-combatant into his/her former home or into a new community. Support during this phase may include basic household goods, land, food supplements, and housing materials. Reintegration takes a long-term approach, to assist the community and the ex-combatant in the difficult transition to civilian life. Assistance during reintegration usually includes job placement services, skills training, credit schemes, scholarships, and rehabilitation programs.

The international community at times refers to a second “R” in DDR, which represents “rehabilitation.” This concept encompasses difficult issues, such as the need to address the psychological and emotional aspects of returning home and problems that arise in relation to the wider community. Nearly all DDR programs address rehabilitation in some form, but the most often-used acronym for the process is DDR.

Security sector reform—such as dismantling and restructuring the military and constructing a new civilian police force—is often included in discussions surrounding disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. For the purposes of this paper, DDR will only include the processes defined above and will **not** address issues pertaining to security sector reform.

#### **Gender**

The term “gender” refers to the socially constructed—as opposed to biologically determined—identities of men and women. Gender is not the same as “sex,” and gender differences are not the same as sex differences. For instance, the ability of women to bear children is a sex, or biologically determined, difference from men; that women, in many societies, are responsible for food preparation and household chores is a gender, or socially constructed, difference.

Gender roles are assigned to men and women early in socialization. They cut across public and private spheres; are specific to a given culture at a given time; are affected by other forms of differentiation such as race, ethnicity, and class; and can change in different socio-political and economic contexts within a society. World Bank literature notes that in any given society, gender shapes the definitions of acceptable responsibilities and functions for men and women in terms of “social and economic activities, access to resources, and decision making authority.”<sup>16</sup>

This report is careful not to conflate the terms “gender” and “women.” It examines how gender considerations are a necessary component of DDR planning and implementation, and how women in Sierra Leone enhanced the DDR process, primarily through their numerous ad-hoc and local reintegration and rehabilitation programs.

## **PART 1: THE TRANSITION FROM WAR TO PEACE**

### **Pre-Colonization to Independence**

Prior to colonization no ethnic tribe dominated the geographic area that is now Sierra Leone. The largest ethnic groups, the Mende and Temne, have long been divided into chiefdoms in the south and the north respectively. A country rich with natural resources—timber, ivory, palm oil, and valuable mineral deposits including gold, bauxite, and diamonds—Sierra Leone fell into British control in the early 1800s. During its movement to abolish slavery, Great Britain allowed thousands of freed slaves to find refuge in the West African territory, effectively reshaping the demographic composition of Sierra Leone. Other ethnic groups including the Kono, Limba, Kissi, and Krio migrated into the new British territory.

Democratic reforms following World War II established an assembly for the territory led primarily by Paramount Chiefs. Fearing marginalization, the Krio elite, along with other chiefs, created the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), led by Sir Milton Margai, a Mende. The creation of the Temne-dominated All People's Congress (APC) followed in 1957, splitting the assembly's composition and dividing it ethnically between the Mende (SLPP) of the south and the Temne (APC) of the north. Margai was elected Prime Minister after successful constitutional talks in London in 1960. A year later, Sierra Leone became independent, women gained the right to vote, and a parliamentary system within the British Commonwealth was established. The years after independence gave way to protracted political clashes between the two parties until 1967, when the APC won in a democratic election.<sup>17</sup>

### **Cold War to Civil War**

Adopting a policy of non-alignment during the Cold War, the Sierra Leone government upheld the colonial practice of emphasizing the export of raw materials over industrial production. Independent mining made up the bulk (80 percent) of economic export from Sierra Leone. Continuing a tradition of maintaining power through asset control and patron systems, by the early 1970s, the APC, with Siaka Stevens as president, controlled 52 percent of the national diamond industry. In 1978, facing increased opposition from professionals and trade unionists, Stevens consolidated his power. He destroyed many of the political institutions established in the British parliamentary system, rendering them ineffective. Tightening its grip, the

APC leadership cut off access to natural resources to those outside its sphere.<sup>18</sup>

One result of these actions was increased frustration and unrest among youth and students unable to support themselves and their families. The political ideals expressed by jobless university students, graduates, and dropouts supplanted the unorganized political frustrations among the uneducated youth, who were sometimes used as thugs by the political leadership. Buoyed by public support, the youth promoted the idea of pan-Africanism, drawing parallels between the colonial past and the post-colonial present. The APC tried to attract distinguished “radicals” among the youth class as potential candidates for the party, but none accepted.<sup>19</sup>

The economy faltered throughout the 1980s, due in part to lost revenues from diamond smuggling. Yet those within the patron system, including politicians, powerful chiefs, and traders, prospered while the average citizen's standard of living continued to decline.<sup>20</sup> Government expenditures on health and housing dropped and state-sponsored scholarships decreased. Looking for allies to overcome the West's containment of Muammar Qaddafi's regime, Libya eagerly nurtured the political discord among young Sierra Leoneans.<sup>21</sup> One of those who traveled to Libya was Foday Sankoh, formerly a corporal in the Sierra Leone Army (SLA). It was in a Libyan military training camp that Sankoh met Charles Taylor of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). In 1987, the two agreed to support each other's efforts to overthrow their respective governments. Financiers and recruits were found in the main diamond mines of Sierra Leone, located in the Eastern and Southern Provinces, in some cases more easily accessed from Liberia than from the Sierra Leone capital of Freetown.<sup>22</sup>

In August 1985, the APC named Joseph Saidu Momoh as successor to Stevens after several years of economic decline, increased political opposition, and Stevens' increasingly autocratic approach. Corruption, the collapse of the economy, and heavy cuts in social programs, partly due to International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programs, had severely weakened the country.<sup>23</sup> Momoh attempted to re-establish a multi-party government with elections scheduled for 1991. However, armed

rebel forces led by Foday Sankoh, calling themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and backed by Liberia, launched their first attack into Sierra Leone just prior to the elections, thwarting the president's efforts to stabilize the economy. Initially, RUF forces consisted of three groups: those trained in Libya with fighting experience in Liberia, young men from Liberia and Sierra Leone who had little or no work, and seasoned NPFL fighters from Taylor's army.<sup>24</sup>

### **Violent Conflict and the Rise of the Civil Defense Forces**

In March 1991, RUF rebels invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia and occupied the eastern regions of the country, securing lucrative diamond reserves. In exchange for weapons, drugs, and supplies, Sierra Leonean diamonds were smuggled into Liberia for sale on the international market, generating millions of dollars annually. Controlling the diamond mines also allowed Sankoh to recruit, forcibly and voluntarily, young miners and locally unemployed men and boys into his fighting forces. By the mid to late 1990s, global exposure of these "blood diamonds" led to an international outcry against their export and sale and initiated numerous UN investigations and resolutions.<sup>25</sup>

Within the first 18 months of RUF attacks, over 400,000 people were internally displaced while hundreds of thousands became refugees. The war quickly came to involve not only Liberia, but also Guinea and Côte D'Ivoire. It destroyed hundreds of hospitals and schools and tens of thousands of homes. Because of a lack of health care, failing schools, and the widespread destruction of infrastructure support systems, the population grew increasingly vulnerable. The Sierra Leone countryside became militarized as a result of the presence of international forces, widespread proliferation of small arms, and a general suspicion towards one's neighbor, especially in areas protected by local militias.<sup>26</sup>

Women and girls reported atrocities committed by all fighting forces during the war.<sup>27</sup> Early in the conflict the RUF perpetrated widespread violence across southern and eastern Sierra Leone. Violence against women and children and general terror in rural and urban centers quickly became cornerstones of the movement and were encouraged by RUF leadership.<sup>28</sup>

As government revenues fell from the loss of mineral sales, so too did the salaries and the resolve of the SLA. Soldiers committed gross human rights violations, including rape, mutilations, looting, property destruction, and murder. They forced women and girls to exchange sex for "protection" and used them as prostitutes.<sup>29</sup> With the rebellion spreading virtually unchecked in the south and east, rebels preyed on civilians for food, supplies, and labor.<sup>30</sup>

Subjected to violence by both the RUF and the SLA, local militias known as Civil Defense Forces (CDF) emerged.<sup>31</sup> CDF gained prominence with the rise of the Kamajors, the largest traditional hunting society, in the eastern and southern provinces. Other hunting groups were the Tamaboro, Donso, Kapra and later, the Gbethis in the north. With the exception of the Gbethis, these groups existed prior to the war, relying on perceived magical powers and customary hunting weapons such as spears. Combining skill and valor, these groups at times thwarted RUF offensives.<sup>32</sup>

As the war progressed and the RUF gained ground, the government supplied the CDF with weapons and financial and logistical support. Although under the supervision of Samuel Hinga Norman, who was the deputy defense minister, chairman of the CDF, and a Kamajor, the CDF did not feature prominently in the president's overall war strategy. This was a result of the army's unease at what it perceived as competition from other fighting forces and possibly due to fear of the CDF gaining political leverage over the president's hold on authority.<sup>33</sup>

In 1995, the government hired Executive Outcomes (EO), a South African "mercenary" force composed of 2,000 former South African Defense Force combat veterans. The intervention of EO along with the CDF propped-up the failing Sierra Leonean government. EO's rapid deployment and well-trained soldiers attacked RUF forces and regained control of resource-rich areas. Its military victories allowed local traders to re-establish trade networks and, more importantly, enabled a corporate web of allied mining partners to fence off valuable mining zones, squeezing everyday miners into smaller low-paying illicit operations.<sup>34</sup> With the assistance of local landowners or policemen, these traders kept wages low, forced slave-like labor, and traded diamonds on the informal market.<sup>35</sup> Those who did not cooperate were removed from political positions and trading zones.<sup>36</sup>



**Women and Girls in Fighting Forces**

The presence of women and girls within the former rebel RUF and AFRC fighting forces was known early on in the war.<sup>37</sup> Much less is known about their presence or roles in the SLA or the CDF. Drawing on field-based data and secondary sources, this study concludes that the estimated number of girls and young women in fighting forces was higher than previously reported (see Table 1).<sup>38</sup> This increase is partly due to their presence as fully initiated members of the CDF.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 1: Estimated Number for Total Forces, Child Soldiers, and Girl Soldiers**

Force	Total	Child Soldiers	Girl Soldiers
RUF	45,000	22,500	7,500
AFRC	10,000	5,000	1,667
SLA	14,000	3,500	1,167
CDF	68,865	17,216	1,722
<b>Total</b>	<b>137,865</b>	<b>48,216</b>	<b>12,056</b>

Of the study population, nearly all stated “abduction” and “forced recruitment” as their means of entry into the various forces. Ten-year-old Maria B.<sup>40</sup> was outside her home playing with friends under the moonlight when the RUF attacked.<sup>41</sup> All of them tried to escape, but she was captured. She was told to carry looted items for the rebels and was given a five-gallon container of palm oil; anytime she tried to rest she was beaten.

Agnes V.<sup>42</sup> was nine years old and on vacation with her family when rebels attacked the village. After looting the village, the rebels rounded up around 50 people, locked them in a building, and began to set it on fire. A junior commander pleaded with the senior commander to release the young girl. She was then selected by the junior commander to be his captive “wife.” The people remaining in the building were burned. Agnes was forced to be the captive “wife” of the commander for the next nine years. During the commanders’ absences from the camp, she was in charge of the military compound, including organizing raids and fighting units.

Mariama M.<sup>43</sup> was seven years old when she was captured and spent 10 years with the AFRC/RUF as a fighter. She received basic military and weapons training with machine guns and two-grip pistols. She was trained with approximately 50 other girls and 100 boys.

Once recruited, women and girls had numerous roles, including that of frontline fighters. In fact, nearly half (44 percent) of the study population received basic military and weapons training from their commanders or captor “husbands.” However, nearly all women and girls performed additional roles:

- 72 percent as cooks;
- 68 percent as porters;
- 62 percent as assistants for the sick and wounded;
- 60 percent as “wives;”
- 44 percent as food producers;
- 40 percent as messengers between rebel camps;
- 22 percent as spies;
- 18 percent as communications technicians; and
- 14 percent as workers in diamond mines for their commanders or captor husbands.

Notably, all of the study population who reported their primary role as “fighter” also reported that they were forced to be captive “wives.” According to Kama F.,<sup>44</sup> who at age 15 was an RUF frontline fighter, it was better to be a fighter and the “wife” of a common soldier because you could protect yourself with your own weapon, you had access to food and loot, and your chances of escaping were greater, unlike captive “wives” of commanders who were closely guarded with little chance of escape.

**Women and Girls as Full Members of the CDF**

Official claims that the pro-government CDF were composed only of males are inaccurate.<sup>45</sup> Women and girls were fully initiated members of the CDF.<sup>46</sup> This study focuses on the two largest CDF: the Kamajors and Gbethis. Although the Kamajors were originally a male-only traditional hunting society, in response to the increased pressure from the RUF it became a

self-defense force and enlisted women and girls beginning in the early 1990s and continued this practice throughout the war. The Gbethis, never a traditional male society, were created as one of the CDF in the mid 1990s in response to increased rebel attacks. They enlisted and initiated women and girls where they acted as integrated members of the CDF and were included in all ceremonies, amulets, and scarification. They served as commanders, frontline fighters, initiators, spiritual leaders, medics, herbalists, spies, and cooks.<sup>47</sup>

Ramatu T.<sup>48</sup> was a fighter with the Kamajors and fought alongside other girls and women Kamajors in Kenema and Bo Districts. Describing her initiation she says,

*They use native herbs, which you drink and they bathe you in. These herbs make it so you don't feel like returning to your family. The initiator placed charms around my neck so that bullets are deflected, and a special charm to protect against knives and pangas; they will just bounce off my body. After this they gave me my special dress and herbs and charms. I was instructed not to bathe for several days because it would reduce the magic. Later, they rubbed the blood of a human being on my skin, and I found that I was not afraid of anything. I had a strong and fearless heart.*

Some women and girls joined the Kamajors and Gbethis at the request of their husbands who were already initiated in the militias. Mamuna K.<sup>49</sup> was married to a Gbethi man who asked her to join for her own protection. Mamuna, who was pregnant, sent her remaining children into Freetown for their safety and joined the Gbethis the same year. Importantly, Mamuna was an herbalist and her role within the Gbethis was to prepare the baths and drinks for those undergoing initiation. Within the group she was regarded as crucial to maintaining the magical powers of the fighting force, as she collected and prepared herbs for the fighters' food and drink.

Others were abducted and conscripted by the Kamajors and Gbethis. At times, women and girls worked with their male counterparts to capture civilian adolescents and children whom they forcibly initiated and trained as fighters.<sup>50</sup> Some "joined" or became "wives" to male CDF fighters as a matter of survival. Mariatu R.<sup>51</sup> agreed to become a "wife" of a

fighter and join the Gbethis when an RUF attack on her village left her and her elderly parents as the only survivors. Upon joining, Mariatu was able to bring her parents and herself within the ring of protection offered by the Gbethis.

Many adolescents and children "joined" the Kamajors and Gbethis with the approval of their parents. This was especially the case when the Paramount Chief of the area endorsed a particular unit of the CDF; it then became mandatory that all families contribute a member to the CDF.<sup>52</sup> Dissension was rare. For example, in Kenema Township, Kenema District, where the Kamajors were especially active during the war, the burned homes are not the result of rebel activities. Instead, they belong to families who did not contribute a family member to the Kamajors, and thus were suspected rebel sympathizers. According to one informant, "There is not a house in Kenema [Township] left that did not contribute someone to the Kamajors."<sup>53</sup>

Women and girls in the Kamajors and Gbethis observed widespread human rights violations by members of the CDF, including cannibalism, human sacrifice, and sexual abuse. For example, Ramatu T.<sup>54</sup> reported that a common practice among her Kamajor force was for adult Kamajor males to enter a village and capture an adult civilian. They would then cut the person's throat, turn them upside down, and "squeeze them from toe to head" to drain their blood into a bucket. All members of the fighting party, including the women and girls, would then drink the blood so they would not be afraid during the attack. Perhaps in part because of their participation in such violent acts, as well as their involvement in activities such as warfare, that went against traditionally acceptable roles for females, all young women and girls formerly with the CDF in the study population reported stigmatization, threats, and abuse upon returning to the communities they had fought to protect.

#### **"Wives" of RUF Commanders in Camps and Command Structure**

The RUF was loosely configured, and camp and command structure varied throughout the country. In general, a commander held "houses" or compounds in which his or her recruits and captives served. While there were a number of female RUF commanders, the majority were males.<sup>55</sup>

Captive “wives” of commanders exerted substantial power within the RUF compounds. These “wives” were predominately girls. When the commander was away, they were in charge of the compound. They kept in communication with the commander and would select and send troops, spies, and support when needed. These girls and young women decided on a daily basis who in the compound would fight, provide reconnaissance, and raid villages for food and loot. Some counseled their captor husbands on war strategies, troop movement, and upcoming attacks.<sup>56</sup>

Saramba M.<sup>57</sup> spent five years with the RUF as a commander’s “wife.” During that time she distributed weapons to boy and girl fighters prior to village raids and attacks on enemy forces. She also chose boys and girls for spy missions to infiltrate camps of the SLA, CDF, and Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and to report on force locations and size. At times, such spying led to the deaths of these children and sexual abuse by male soldiers, particularly in the case of girls who were told to become intimate with the men in these forces to gather information.<sup>58</sup>

In the absence of the commander, when food and loot were delivered to the camps, it was brought to his captive “wife.” She would then decide how these goods were to be apportioned among those in the compound.<sup>59</sup> Lynette S.<sup>60</sup> distributed food and loot to groups of boy fighters within her RUF compound to try to persuade them not to harass or sexually abuse the young children in the camp. She expressed deep sympathy for the young children and had a number of strategies she would employ to try and influence her commander “husband” to also look out for the well being of the children.

Bodyguards accompanied the commanders’ captive “wives,” both to provide protection in case of attack on the compound and to prevent their escape. Between four to six children might serve as bodyguards; 25 to 50 percent were girls.<sup>61</sup> Ester C.,<sup>62</sup> a commander’s “wife,” was guarded by six boys and three girls; the youngest boy was six. They were armed with AK-47s and two-grip pistols. Nearly all bodyguards and the commander’s captive “wife” or “wives” carried guns and other weapons.<sup>63</sup>

In some cases, as documented in Kono District, commanders’ captive “wives” were replaced by new or

more favored girls. Subsequently, the rejected “wives” were sent by their commander husbands to the front lines to fight.<sup>64</sup> Ramatu S. and Inna T.<sup>65</sup> described RUF camps in the south with strictly enforced separations between civilians and soldiers. RUF commanders believed that a separation of camps would prevent civilians from witnessing atrocities committed by soldiers or learning about force size and strength should they escape and inform government factions. Consistent with this strategy, “wives” of commanders or soldiers who were rejected were forbidden from returning to the civilian camps and were instead sent to the front lines.

Commanders’ “wives” were in charge of Small Boys Units (SBU) and Small Girls Units (SGU).<sup>66</sup> The SBU were made up of boys aged 6-15 used primarily for scouting to prepare attacks and food raids, but were dispatched to execute some of the most violent killings and mutilations.<sup>67</sup> The SGU were made up of similarly aged girls and were used primarily for raiding villages and spying, although they too were sent to fight and commit atrocities.<sup>68b</sup> In some cases, commanders’ “wives” used loot to mitigate abuse by the SBU or to reward them for not abusing the girls within the compound. In other cases, they could order punishment of the SBU or SGU for “disrupting life in the compound.”<sup>69</sup>

Fighters, male and female, had their own “families” within the compound, which consisted of children they had captured and who were under their protection and care. Girl fighters could and did serve as heads of these “families.”<sup>70</sup> Food and loot were distributed on the basis of these “families.” Much has been said about girls trying to attach themselves to boys or men within the compounds to avoid gang raping.<sup>71</sup> While this appears to be accurate, this study also found that older children and adolescents who were not attached to a “family” were not given food and had to survive as scavengers. Thus, attachment of girls to boys or men was also means to secure food as well as (some) protection against sexual assault.<sup>72</sup>

The presence, roles, and experiences of women and girls within the fighting forces in Sierra Leone has a number of important implications for the design of those processes that seek to build human and national security and peace in the post-conflict period. It is evident that despite their trauma, women and girls showed tremendous agency. They developed a number

of skills and strategies that enabled them to survive and regain some control over their lives during their time with the fighting forces.

From the standpoint of DDR programs, however, the need for strict categorization of individuals as “combatants” or “non-combatants,” and the reluctance on the part of the international community and local governments to acknowledge that women and girls are integral to the fighting often devalues the multiple roles they play in conflict. This is not only detrimental to disarmament and demobilization, it also harms the women and girls. By being treated as passive victims or “dependents,” they are again stripped of control of their lives and their sense of dignity. Moreover, by not acknowledging the skills and resources that they have attained, DDR processes risk losing tremendous social capital that could be utilized for post-conflict reconstruction.

#### **The Role of Women in the Peace Process**

Throughout the war, rural and urban women from all classes and ethnic groups mobilized to form active organizations, conduct marches, and lead rallies for peace and justice. Many women’s organizations participated in peace processes during and after the war, including the Mano River Women’s Peace Network, Women’s Movement for Peace, Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Sierra Leone Women’s Forum, Network of Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, and the Sierra Leone Women’s Movement for Peace. They educated civilians on electoral proceedings, recruited and trained observers, and pressured the military to respect the results of elections.<sup>73</sup> Their efforts were critical in shaping informal and formal peace processes, and in bringing about an eventual end to the conflict.<sup>74</sup>

The first attempt at a ceasefire came in January 1996, after a bloodless coup that overthrew the brief military dictatorship of Valetin Strasser. Brigadier General Maada Bio opened negotiations to cease hostilities with the RUF. Women’s groups, led by Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN), pressured Bio’s military government, the National Provisional Ruling Council to hold demo-

cratic elections. WOMEN was the first non-partisan women’s group in Sierra Leone that promote women’s representation and concerns in the period before elections.<sup>75</sup> It incorporated many smaller women’s groups under one umbrella organization. Yet, when elections were held, only five women were on a list of 68 candidates representing the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP).<sup>76</sup> Although given the opportunity, the RUF did not submit candidates of its own. The SLPP won the elections, led by Ahmed Tejan Kabbah.

Kabbah’s first attempt at brokering a peace plan was the 1996 Abidjan Peace Accord. Drafted between the RUF and the Sierra Leone government, the accord called for a cessation of violence and the transformation of the RUF into a political party, with a power-sharing incentive to entice the RUF to lay down its arms. Although women suffered greatly from the war and were active in civil movements for peace, none were present at the Abidjan negotiations.<sup>77</sup>

At the signing of the Abidjan peace accord, some girl captives were released from RUF control as a goodwill gesture. However, mutual distrust in implementing the provisions of the accord, and RUF reluctance to lay down arms without the unconditional departure of EO ultimately led to its failure. Other contributing factors included the government’s belief that military victory remained possible and the RUF’s fear of judicial reprisals.<sup>78</sup>

The government’s failure to consistently pay or supply its soldiers, its increasing dependency on and financial support of the CDF, and the high price tag of EO led to the splintering of the SLA. Some soldiers joined the RUF or became part of the new rebel Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which aligned itself with the RUF. In 1997, the AFRC overthrew President Kabbah’s regime. Former Army Major Johnny P. Koroma headed the AFRC in Freetown. Shortly thereafter, the RUF was invited to join the regime. Support for the AFRC came from professionals, civil servants, politicians, and other members of the socio-economic elite who felt alienated from the Kabbah government.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>73</sup>While much is written on the SBU, this study presents some of the first data on the presence and roles of the SGU. We interviewed girls who headed the SGU, girl members of the SGU, commander’s wives who were in charge of the SGU, and boys within the SBU who confirmed the presence of the SGU.

Growing concern in the region regarding a joint AFRC/RUF government in Freetown brought about the intervention of the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS) to restore the Kabbah regime. ECOWAS determined to act militarily to prevent further chaos, economic ruin, and violence. In March 1997, with the approval of the UN, the Nigerian-led ECOMOG, the military wing of ECOWAS, attacked Freetown, forced the AFRC/RUF regime out and restored Kabbah to power. Key policy objectives of the Kabbah government were to de-legitimize the AFRC/RUF, uphold the rule of law, create a competent and trustworthy national army, and defeat the rebellion.<sup>80</sup> Kabbah's restored government continued to rely on ECOMOG for protection, as well as the support of the CDF.

ECOMOG's presence, however, contributed to violence against civilians. Violation of women and girls' human rights by ECOMOG soldiers was widespread. Girls desperate for income would prostitute themselves or become "girlfriends" of ECOMOG troops for protection. ECOMOG soldiers coerced others into spying on enemy camps. Girls were made especially vulnerable during RUF attacks on ECOMOG forces, and it was common for suspected "girlfriends" of ECOMOG soldiers to be targeted by the RUF for torture and murder. At the same time, girls from RUF and AFRC camps would be sent into ECOMOG areas to befriend soldiers, establish sexual relations with them, and collect intelligence.<sup>81</sup>

In January 1999, a joint AFRC/RUF attack on Freetown resulted in the deaths of over 5,000 civilians. Thousands more were mutilated and raped, and over 5,000 were abducted, mostly women and girls. Recognizing the improbability of a military victory over the AFRC/RUF, the government sought a peace plan and eventually agreed to the 1999 Lomé accord. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), as a founding member of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, played a leading role in the negotiations that led to the signing of the 1999 Lomé peace accord, officially ending the war (though fighting and unrest continued into 2002). It called for RUF inclusion in a power-sharing government and granted blanket amnesty to gross violators of human rights.<sup>82</sup> In addition to pardoning RUF leader Sankoh, it placed him at the head of the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources.<sup>83</sup>

Two women were involved in the Lomé process, one a member of the government delegation and the other a representative of the RUF. Although they were not chief negotiators, the final document reflected at least some gender-specific issues as a result of women's participation. For example, Article 28 calls for special attention to victimized women and girls in formulating and implementing rehabilitation, reconstruction, and development programs. The formation of commissions to promote good governance was also called for in the peace accord. Yet within the key entities including the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, the Commission for the Management of Strategic Resources, National Reconstruction and Development, and the Council of Religious Leaders, there were no women represented at the time of writing.<sup>84</sup>

In October 1999, the United Nations Assistance Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) deployed troops to support the implementation of the Lomé peace accord and bolster the government in the DDR process. However, because there were vast areas still under RUF control, UNAMSIL forces were unable to fully restore peace. In particular, fighting in the diamond-rich eastern province persisted. Small RUF raids and offensives against UN troops yielded large numbers of UN weapons and armored vehicles. RUF attacks peaked on May 3, 2000, when 500 UN peacekeepers were taken hostage. Less than a week later, British Special Forces arrived in Freetown, expelled the RUF from the city, and restored a sense of security. Subsequently, British forces trained and armed Sierra Leonean troops and drove the remaining RUF soldiers from their territory, allowing UN peacekeepers to return.<sup>85</sup>

#### **Women Tipping the Balance Toward Peace**

The Lomé accord collapsed when the RUF broke the ceasefire following UNAMSIL's assumption of control of the diamond-rich areas of eastern Sierra Leone. Recruits from Liberia continued to enter the country, facilitating RUF control over the resource-rich region. When Sankoh's intentions of continuing the war despite Lomé surfaced, women assembled in the streets demanding "Not again! Enough is enough!"<sup>86</sup> Their slogan was a response to both the inadequate representation of women after the 1996 elections and Sankoh's tactics, which the women understood to be a means for him to re-arm for war. The women on

the streets called for an end to male domination and male-biased decisions within parliament. They were particularly critical of the decision to appoint Sankoh as a minister and repeatedly called attention to the fact that he was refortifying for war.<sup>87</sup>

Women's activism reached a high point in 2000 when they ultimately played a catalytic role in bringing an end to the conflict. A group of elderly women, representing churches and mosques, requested a meeting with Sankoh, who was living in Freetown. The women came as an interfaith group with an agenda of peace at any cost. Upon arrival they were abused by Sankoh, his guards, and advisors, who refused to listen and mistreated them. The assembled older women stood outside the house of Sankoh, hitched up their skirts, bent over, and bared themselves. In Sierra Leone, such an action by women of this age and standing constitutes the worst curse, sign of shaming, and insult that can be brought upon anyone.

When word of what had happened reached the streets, people were shocked. But they were also mobilized, both because they now had courage to stand up to Sankoh and the RUF, and because they had an obligation to enforce the curse of these respected, senior, religious women. Previously, people had lived in fear of retaliation and violence by the RUF as Sankoh sent death squads to any part of the capital where people spoke out. Yet when such a curse is given, it is the family and society's obligation to back the curse. Men in particular were mobilized to defend the power and honor of the women. May 8, 2000, was set as the date for mass peace protests and demonstrations.

The families of the women, religious organizations, labor and trade unions, and adolescents and school children committed to join the peace protests. Since it appeared that many people would not be going to work or school, the government declared it an unofficial holiday. The mass demonstrations on May 8, 2000 marked the turning point in the conflict.<sup>88</sup> This time the women marched to Sankoh's house with parliamentarians and civil society leaders. Sankoh's guards opened fire, killing a number of the protesters. On May 13, British troops captured and arrested Sankoh, charging him with the murder of unarmed protesters. With the incarceration of Sankoh, the RUF began to splinter, creating a vacuum in which General Issa Sessay became the new RUF leader and eventually the head of the RUF, a newly formed political party.

The war was officially declared over in January 2002, when hostilities between the CDF and RUF soldiers in eastern Sierra Leone ceased.<sup>89</sup>

When the war ended there were approximately 400,000 internally displaced people and up to 500,000 refugees in Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, and Côte D'Ivoire. At least 55 percent of the refugees were women.<sup>90</sup> Women's organizations continue to address these ongoing issues. For example, recognizing the regional dimensions of the conflict, the Mano River Union Women's Network for Peace visits women refugees in Guinea and Liberia encouraging them to become a part of the peace process, addressing problems such as sexual assaults in camps and food shortages, and, with assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), reuniting women with family members and returning them to their homes in Sierra Leone.<sup>91</sup>

## **PART 2: THE ROLE AND EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN DDR**

### **DDR Design and Implementation**

DDR was initiated by the government of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) in the aftermath of the 1996 Abidjan accords. A National Commission for Reconstruction, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation (NCRRR) was established with a department that had responsibility for disarming the varying factions.<sup>92</sup> In 1998 the department was restructured as the National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (NCDDR), after which the program began. Its goals were threefold:<sup>93</sup>

- 1) collect, register, and destroy all conventional weapons and munitions turned in by combatants;
- 2) demobilize the *initially* estimated 45,000 combatants from the SLA, RUF, AFRC, and the CDF, 12 percent of whom were thought to be women;<sup>94</sup> and
- 3) support ex-combatants through demobilization to prepare them for reintegration.

DDR was conducted in three phases, the first beginning in 1998. Phase I was conducted by the NCDDR, chaired by President Kabbah, and ECOMOG, which was mandated to assist in disarmament, weapons collection, and demobilization. In 1999 with the Lomé accords in place, Phase II was initiated, running until April 2000; DDR was conducted by NCDDR and the United Nations Observer Mission to Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL), which was mandated to assist in disarmament and monitoring of demobilization. UNOMSIL was replaced in October 1999 by a significantly larger peacekeeping mission to support the DDR effort. Phase III, which ran from May 2001 to January 2002, was conducted by NCDDR and the new United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL).<sup>95</sup>

Reception centers were established for disarmament and demobilization throughout the country. From September 1998 through May 2001, during Phases I and II, a series of questions and performance of disassembly and reassembly of a gun, usually an AK-47, were used to assess combatants and their DDR eligibility status (combatants 18 years or older). It was believed that the ability to assemble and disassemble a weapon was a good litmus test to determine whether an individual had participated in the conflict as an

armed combatant—the requirement for participation in the DDR program. During this time, women accounted for six percent and girls for 0.6 percent of participants. In Phase III (May 18 2001 through January 2002) group disarmament was allowed, meaning a group could bring in weapons together. This helped marginally to increase women's participation to seven percent and girls to 0.7 percent.<sup>96</sup>

Combatants voluntarily presented themselves at the reception centers to disarm and surrender all weapons and ammunition, and to be assessed for eligibility in the program. While officially those under 18 years of age were not required to present a weapon to enter DDR, this study found widespread discrepancy among UN and NCDDR officials and staff of NGOs working within the DDR process as to whether or not children had to turn over a weapon.<sup>97</sup> According to nearly all interviewees who passed through DDR, despite official policy the weapons test was repeatedly administered to children to determine their admission into programs.

Qualifying adults (18 years of age and above) were sent to a demobilization center where they received pre-discharge orientation, their benefits packages, a small amount of resettlement and transportation money, and were discharged. Children (17 years of age and below) were to be sent to Interim Care Centers (ICCs) and could select to enter skills training or an educational program of their choice.<sup>98</sup>

Late in the program it was decided that “wives” of (male) ex-combatants could apply for micro-credit to help maintain their families, as the men complained about their inability to sustain families. However for a female applicant to access the loans, she had to be present with a “husband,” who was willing to identify her as his wife. No woman could claim benefits alone, regardless of the number of children she cared for. If women had been permitted to apply alone, it could have enabled them to abdicate their “relationships.” But this was not considered by senior DDR officials, one of whom said that “even if they were raped and abducted, 70 percent of the women and girls wanted to be with their ‘husbands’.”<sup>99</sup>

### Obstacles to the Participation of Women and Girls in Formal DDR

The DDR program in Sierra Leone is widely seen as a success and considered to have been sensitive to the needs of female and child combatants. During a visit to Sierra Leone by UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunno, a UN statement was released noting that “since the Sierra Leonean conflict ended in January 2002...[a]n ambitious programme for the demobilization and reintegration of 7,000 child ex-combatants has [reunited] 97 percent of them with their families and communities.”<sup>100</sup>

In March of 2002, in an interview with IRINnews, when asked about female ex-combatants, Dr. Francis Kai-Kai, Executive Secretary of the NCDDR stated “we had about eight percent of them...In the designed program we made every provision for the female ex-combatant.”<sup>101</sup> However, this study finds this claim difficult to substantiate when compared to actual experiences of women and girl ex-combatants through interviews and NCDDR data (see Table 2).<sup>102</sup>

As previously illustrated in Table 1, the estimated number of all forces was 137,865 of whom 12,056 were assumed to be girls.<sup>c</sup> Yet as Table 3, and data drawn from UNICEF and NCDDR indicate, there is substantial disparity between the numbers of girls within the forces and those entering DDR programs, thus calling into question the design, implementation, and success of these programs.<sup>103</sup>

### In the Disarmament and Demobilization Phases

Despite official policy, the possession of an AK-47 (even with a group) and knowledge of its assembly and disassembly was repeatedly used by disarmament administrators to determine entry into the program, even for those under 18. This proved to be a particular problem for women and girls who did not always have a weapon in their possession. There was a perception among them that a weapon was required for everyone seeking entry into the DDR program, and, indeed, among those in this study’s sample, all who entered into DDR (half the study population) were asked to turn in a weapon and perform the weapons test. This

**Table 2: NCDDR Gender-Disaggregated Data on Entry into DDR**

Force	Girls Number	Percent	Boys Number	Percent	Women Number	Percent	Men Number	Percent
RUF	436	1.8%	3,229	13.3%	3,925	16.1%	16,735	68.8%
AFRC	41	.5%	375	4.2%	530	6.0%	7,914	89.3%
SLA	22	No Data	445	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data
CDF	7	.0001%	1,996	5.3%	296	0.8%	34,890	93.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>No Data</b>	<b>6,181</b>	<b>No Data</b>	<b>No Data</b>	<b>No Data</b>	<b>No Data</b>	<b>No Data</b>

<sup>c</sup>It is not possible to make these comparisons about women, as there are no reliable estimates on the number of women within the various fighting forces. Data are available on children within the fighting forces because of the work of child protection agencies. Therefore, for this aspect of the study, findings relate only to young women and girls.



perceived requirement kept some who would have qualified from attempting to enter the program. Of the study group that did not go through DDR, 46 percent cited not having a weapon as the basis for their lack of participation. There were several reasons girl ex-combatants found themselves without weapons at this critical time. Although they had been in the fighting forces, many in the CDF were ordered

tion site after only three days, “There were too many people crowded in, too many men with nothing to do. The security was bad.”

Second, female ex-combatants, particularly women and girls from the CDF, reported fearing RUF former fighters housed at the centers. Christiana R.<sup>105</sup> left an adult center due to the sleeping accommodations.

**Table 3: Girls in Fighting Forces and Formal DDR**

Force	Estimated Number of Girls in Force	Number of Girls in DDR	Percentage of Girls in DDR	Percentage of Total Force in DDR
RUF	7,500	436	6%	54%
AFRC	1,667	41	2%	89%
SLA	1,167	22	2%	No data
CDF	1,772	7	0.4%	54%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,056</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>N/A</b>

Sources: Names withheld. Personal interviews. August 2002; Names withheld. Personal interviews. September 2002; Sesay; *Statistical Data from the National Committee on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*; *Statistical Data from the United Nation’s Children’s Fund*.

to hand in their weapons prior to demobilization and were then left behind as the men were transported to the assembly centers. Other girls indicated that their guns were taken away by their commanders and handed to male fighters. Additionally, many who were not “primarily” fighters had used weapons from a communal source but did not possess a gun themselves.

In further discussion, interviewees revealed six key concerns that affected their attitudes towards DDR and the reasons they chose not to join or remain in programs. First, some girls and young women indicated they did not know about DDR or felt there was nothing to gain by going to the centers. Twenty-one percent of the sample that did not go through DDR reportedly feared reprisals at the centers and thus avoided the entire process. Other respondents perceived the facilities to be dangerous with large numbers of men and inadequate protection. According to Agnes E.<sup>104</sup> who left a disarmament and demobiliza-

“As a woman,” she said, “I could not stay there.” With regard to children in particular, young women and girls explained that interviews conducted by DDR and ICC staff in the presence of other children and youth did not protect their affiliation with regard to fighting force. CDF girls reported immediate threats to their lives when RUF youth became aware of their affiliation, and they left the ICCs shortly thereafter. For example, Bintu O.<sup>106</sup> was interviewed in a room where other adolescents stood around looking in. As soon as it was known that she was a Kamajor, the former RUF children began to threaten her, and she left the center that evening.

Third, there was the widely perpetuated myth that women and girls were not involved in the CDF. This denial was propagated by influential figures such as then Deputy Minister of Defense and National Coordinator of the CDF Samuel Hinga Norman, who was himself a Kamajor.<sup>107</sup> For some women and

girls, official denial was considered a direct attempt to prevent them from entering DDR programs and collecting benefits. At the end of the war, Norman was promoted to Minister of Internal Security, which caused a number of this study's informants to insist that they remain anonymous when discussing issues of women and girls within the CDF. Recently, however, the Prosecutor for the Sierra Leone Special Court ordered the arrest of Norman and he is currently awaiting charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes, including for the use of child soldiers within the CDF.<sup>108</sup>

Fourth, there was a mistaken belief that children in the CDF were not separated from their families and communities. As a result, many were not classified by UNICEF and international NGOs as "separated children" and therefore could not receive other forms of aid. This is significant, as a number of UN, government, and NGO programs and benefits were designated for "separated children," including child combatants. It was not uncommon for NGOs to report that they did not work with children in the CDF "since they were never separated," and particularly with girls, since there was the assumption that the CDF did not include female members.<sup>109</sup> However, among the women and girls interviewed for this study, some with the Kamajors and Gbethis, had spent significant time away from their families and communities, including traveling the length of the country to fight with other CDF.<sup>110</sup>

Fifth, over-classification of girls and young women abducted by the RUF, AFRC, and SLA as "camp followers," "sex-slaves," and "wives" by some within the international community and the Sierra Leone government prevented the establishment of DDR programs to address their actual lived experiences. According to DDR officials, "wives," including those abducted, were to be explicitly excluded from formal entrance into DDR.<sup>111</sup> The focus of DDR was on the main fighting forces, and "minority" groups would not be taken into consideration.<sup>112</sup> However, since women and girls frequently played multiple roles, narrow classification of them as "wives" resulted in programmatic errors. Of the study population, 60 percent reported having served as a "wife," yet only eight percent reported this as their primary role.

Additionally, in the case of the CDF in particular, there was the erroneous belief that male CDF fight-

ers could not have sexual or casual contact with a girl or woman; it was largely considered impossible for female members of the CDF to exist in the category of CDF "wife" or "sex slave." This myth gained international legitimacy in October 1998 when a boy Kamajor refused to shake the hand of UNICEF head Carol Bellamy "because he was not allowed to touch a woman."<sup>113</sup> This story was widely circulated and repeated in contexts that helped strengthen the belief that women and girls were not included in the CDF.<sup>114</sup> However, among Sierra Leoneans, it was understood that interactions with members of the opposite sex, including sexual relations, were permitted for both male and female members of the Kamajors and Gbethis. It was common, especially among those Kamajors and Gbethis who were married to each other or lived together.<sup>115</sup> The only caveat was that sexual contact nullified the perceived magical powers of a fighter's charms, and thus after such contact, fighters had to reapply the charms to regain these supposed powers.

Finally, it is important to note that cultural notions of childhood in Sierra Leone affected the way in which young women and girls engaged with the DDR program. In many rural and urban areas, childhood and adulthood are defined not by chronological age but by actions undertaken by the person, such as a boy harvesting and making palm wine or a girl having a baby.<sup>116</sup> When girls who had borne children arrived to disarm, some entered the programs as women since this is how they were now "culturally" defined. Indeed, it was reported to the researchers by those in charge of DDR programs and officials who screened participants that it was not uncommon for girls under 18 with children to enter DDR as women.<sup>117</sup> Thus they did not benefit from the programs that were established for child combatants, and were largely left unsupported since the DDR program did not have adequate mechanisms to address the needs of women in the forces.

For those who did enter the DDR process (i.e. half of the study sample) many noted the paucity of supplies, particularly in terms of their physical needs as women. At the ICCs where child combatants and "separated children" were taken and demobilization centers where adults were taken, 43 percent reported not receiving adequate clothing; 54 percent did not receive proper sanitation materials, including soap, shampoo, and feminine hygiene products; and 23 percent did not

have access to medical care when requested. Women respondents also reported very poor conditions at adult demobilization centers.

In terms of the length of their stay at demobilization centers, the young women and girls surveyed had experiences that contradicted official claims. For example, while UN data indicate that nearly all children remained in the centers for at least six months, among those surveyed for this study, only 20 percent had remained for that length of time.<sup>118</sup>

Finally, only 44 percent of the sample reported receiving the benefits they were promised in demobilization. In particular, lack of financial payment was noted as a leading cause of rising tension among child ex-combatants and resulted in rioting, strikes, and attacks against NGO staff and property in 2002.<sup>119</sup>

#### *In the Reintegration Phase*

As in many war-torn countries, the reintegration of ex-combatants in Sierra Leone is complex and sensitive. For the young women and girls, in particular, there is a range of issues that create concern. In response to an open-ended question, 50 percent of the study population named material deprivation, including lack of food, clothing, and housing, as the greatest challenge for their reintegration. Others noted separation from family, rejection, and abuse by family or community, fear of a return to war, and the inability to attend school as major concerns.

When asked what factors helped to mitigate these issues, responses included the end of the war, support from their community or family, and support from NGOs. However, the most critical and often identified need was for education—a core component of most DDR programs for children. Seventy-five percent of the study population indicated a desire to attend school and gain literacy skills. Forty-nine percent stated that skills training would be essential to their successful reintegration.

Sierra Leone ranks among the lowest countries in the world in female literacy and education. Purposeful destruction of schools by the fighting forces further devastated the education system. Well-meaning social workers associated with implementing DDR programs at times discouraged or prevented older ex-combatant girls and girl mothers from entering school, instead urging them to attend skills trainings.<sup>120</sup> They

argued that since so many of these young women now had children and few had husbands to assist with income, they would need to develop skills rather than continued education to support themselves. At the same time, a number of women and girl mothers were unable to attend skills trainings because of a lack of adequate care for their children (this is related to stigmatism and rejection by families who may welcome a girl back, but not her child or children).<sup>121</sup> There is also a misperception that the older girls and young women considered themselves too old to attend school. Thus, while education was an option for those who went through official DDR, many of the young women and older girls were discouraged to pursue that option. Notably, this argument was not put forward to adolescent boys or men. NGO records themselves reveal unbalanced ratios of boys and girls enrolled in education programs.<sup>122</sup>

#### **Expanding the Safety Net:**

##### **Women's Contributions to Reintegration**

The reintegration of children and youth from fighting forces is a significant factor in any peace process. Yet few resources and limited time are given to the “R” in DDR. While significant research is being done on the need to support long-term reintegration and rehabilitation processes, in most cases, the burden of caring for ex-combatants still falls to individuals and communities. Women in Sierra Leone, though under-resourced and unheralded, have filled in these programmatic gaps and done much to reintegrate former combatants, particularly women and child soldiers. Working alone, as leaders and members of NGOs, and through the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs, women have taken in and cared for child soldiers, provided women and child former fighters with critical services and training, and thereby worked to normalize and bring stability to their communities and their nation.

Shellac Davies, a leading peacemaker in Sierra Leone, has observed the trauma inflicted on child soldiers and the mixed responses they receive in their home communities. At the end of the war, the attachment between commanders and the child rebels disintegrated, but children often felt that they couldn't go home. “The children were in a dilemma,” says Davies. “Mothers who survived the manslaughter but were witnesses to the evil acts committed by their children virtually disowned them. ‘A child who committed such an atrocity could not have been born from my womb,’

many mothers were known to have said.”<sup>123</sup> However, Davies has documented the work of some women and mothers to reintegrate the very children who committed the atrocities. It was these women who “realized that the children involved in the war were both victims and perpetrators.” She goes on to describe how the children’s violence was the result of their own victimization at the hands of commanders:

*Urged by their commanders... within the rebel movement, they were known to have committed most of the atrocities experienced during the war. Those children under the influence of drugs obeyed commands to kill their parents, burn down houses, and amputate the limbs of their siblings and other members of the community.*<sup>124</sup>

In the Bo District (south central Sierra Leone), a group of women decided to take back those children and youth from the fighting forces between the ages of 6 and 25. “The women claimed that such a move was their own contribution to upholding the peace,” says Davies adding, “It should be noted that some of those women had lost their own children and relatives as a result of the war.”<sup>125</sup>

Women in Makeni (Bambali District, north central Sierra Leone) also organized themselves to care for children coming out of the fighting forces. Women in this region, known as the rebel stronghold, experienced the realities of the rebel war in particularly brutal ways. They were forced to become “wives” of the commanders, rape was a weapon of war used against them, and they were forced into various functions including acting as human shields for rebels during attacks. “The women there knew those children who committed atrocities in Makeni and its environs,” says Davies. “Some of those young boys and youths were urged to rape women who could pass as their mothers, aunts, or elder sisters.”<sup>126</sup>

Despite these experiences, in their pursuit of peace the women were willing to play a pivotal role in the re-integration of these child ex-combatants. Davies notes: “If the peace so far achieved is to prove meaningful and sustainable then society has to take up its responsibility of caring for its children.”<sup>127</sup> As individuals and through collective action, women in communities are leading efforts to reintegrate women and girl ex-combatants. “The women argued that if those children were left uncared for now that peace has been

achieved they would easily revert to their old ways,” says Davies. “They argued that left abandoned these child ex-combatants would have nothing positive to do and or think, and will prove a threat to the fragile peace now in existence.”<sup>128</sup>

Fifty-five percent of the study population indicated that women in the community had played a significant role in their reintegration. This is noteworthy as it was higher than their responses for being assisted by traditional healers (14 percent), traditional leaders (20 percent), international aid workers (32 percent), health workers (51 percent), and on par with religious leaders and social workers, many of whom are women.<sup>129</sup> Interviewees noted that women in the community provided them with helpful guidance, shared meager resources, and, perhaps most importantly, helped to facilitate skills training and education by providing childcare, clothes, or food. The basic assistance given in the form of childcare was critical in enabling many ex-combatants to enter skills training programs.

#### **At the Community Level**

As staff of NGOs working to reintegrate combatants, women contributed to building peace throughout the country at the grassroots level. For example, Esther A.,<sup>130</sup> a reintegration and HIV/AIDS program officer with a local NGO that works with child ex-combatants and war-affected children, was captured by the RUF along with three of her siblings. She watched as her siblings, all university graduates, were killed. She narrowly escaped.

*After all that has happened to me, I still want to work with these children. Really the past is not easy, you cannot force people to tell their stories. I share my story with the children. I share my losses. They see this reality that they, the RUF, were the ones who took my beloved people, and yet I am here helping them. You can forgive, but you can never forget.*<sup>131</sup>

Esther’s colleague, Ramatu S.<sup>132</sup> was trained as a teacher before joining an NGO as a psychosocial supervisor for child combatants. In addition to her full workdays with children and adolescents and caring for her own two children, Ramatu has taken five girl mothers with their children and two foster children, all former members of fighting forces, into her home so they have a place to live and recover.<sup>133</sup>

With regard to women's collective action, the Luawa Skills Training Center (LSTC) in Kailahun, the Women's Progressive Movement (WPM) in Freetown, and Caritas-Makeni have been innovative in their efforts in the Makeni area. Founded by six women, LSTC now has 120 members. It serves as a reintegration program and assists women abductees, ex-combatants, and victims in their efforts at independent living. The organization offers tailoring and garra tie-dying classes. Once women learn the skills and sell their products, they are required to give some of their earnings back to the organization.

WPM was founded in 1998. Its mission is to find abducted children, provide financial and medical assistance, and help women become independent. When the parents of abducted children cannot be found or their relatives shun them, members of WPM adopt them. Today, nearly every member has taken on at least one child and in many cases, several.

Affiliated with the Catholic Church, locally based NGO Caritas-Makeni operates in central Sierra Leone with a staff comprised mostly of nuns and female social workers. In a country with a 60 percent Muslim population this organization has been effective in reaching beyond Catholic communities. In their programs in the Districts of Port Loko, Tonkolili, and Bombali, it has instituted programs that allow for girl mothers to bring their children to skills training or to care for them while their mothers attend school. They provide a room and mat for the child to sleep on and food for the mother and child during the day. This contributes to higher retention rates in the programs and helps prevent their involvement in illicit activities such as prostitution, which is on the rise.<sup>134</sup> Caritas-Makeni also offers a program on alternative income generation for those who have entered the sex trade and reproductive health and safe sex education.

#### ***At the National Level***

Women in international and national NGOs are also working with young women and girls to incorporate them into their skills training programs.<sup>135</sup> National women's organizations such as the Progressive Women's Association (PROWA) and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) are among the groups running skills training centers, which include education for basic literacy. With branches across Africa, FAWE established its Sierra Leone chapter in 1995 during the war. It is now a national

women's organization with branches throughout the country. It offers a range of training programs to girl and women ex-combatants including tailoring, carpentry, tie dying, and masonry. FAWE has rebuilt schools and community centers that were destroyed and in some areas, has constructed and opened schools for girls. Some of its programs cater to girl mothers and other vulnerable girl populations with the aim of increasing literacy and education.<sup>136</sup> FAWE is the only organization to accept pregnant girls into the classroom.<sup>137</sup>

In March 1999 FAWE began the Rape Victims Program. Their projects include radio programming, visits with school children, counseling, and referrals to team doctors. Female survivors who became pregnant were given pre- and post-natal care by the organization. FAWE has partnered with over 30 ministerial and government agencies, UN agencies, international and local NGOs to carry out their work.<sup>138</sup>

PROWA is operating in the Kono District, an area that has been heavily impacted by the war and where, at the time of publication, few international NGOs were active. PROWA was one of the few organizations in the area to offer skills training to female ex-combatants. Additionally, it is one of the few organizations that encourages and allows pregnant girls to participate in their programs. Since Kono was the last area to disarm and an RUF stronghold, many girls who recently came out of the bush are in Kono and in need of assistance, thus increasing the importance of the efforts of this women's group.

The UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has focused its support for women in Sierra Leone at various levels, working with other UN agencies, with national ministries, and with community-level official and non-government organizations to ensure gender-sensitive policies. In particular, UNIFEM has worked to ensure that special attention is given in the Truth and Reconciliation process to crimes against women, and that the needs and concerns of female survivors are addressed. In addition, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs, due in part to the advocacy efforts and technical support of UNIFEM, recently received government approval and funding for a gender directorate. The ministry works with UN agencies and international and local NGOs to provide accelerated education and skills training for ex-combatant children.<sup>139</sup>

UNICEF, in partnership with the Sierra Leone government, and local and international NGOs, has developed model programs for encouraging the schooling and reintegration of former child combatants. To summarize, communities that receive ex-combatant children (who benefited from DDR and elect to attend school) into the education system are “rewarded” by receiving books, supplies, and sports equipment. Schools and communities receive materials based on the number of ex-combatants they accept. Thus, ex-combatants are not perceived as “benefiting” from violent behavior in the fighting forces; instead all children in the school benefit by having their peers return. At the same time, accelerated schooling is offered for older child ex-combatants who have missed school years due to the war.<sup>140</sup> In partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UNICEF has developed targeted programs for young mothers, combining childcare and food with vocational training and basic literacy skills. There is also a focus on training women in non-traditional skills such as welding, carpentry, and the construction of houses.

These initiatives, led by individuals, communities, NGOs, and national mechanisms, and in some cases, supported by international aid, are relatively small and inexpensive compared to official DDR efforts. Yet their impact is notable: Over 65 percent of the study population said that women have reached out to help them and that they would be interested in joining a women’s organization to assist others.

## **CONCLUSION: THE CENTRALITY OF GENDER PERSPECTIVES TO DDR**

The presence, roles, and experiences of women and girls within the fighting forces in Sierra Leone are more complex than previously reported. This inaccurate assessment resulted in operational and programmatic errors on the part of the UN, multilateral organizations, international NGOs, donor governments, and the government of Sierra Leone. In short, the inadequate attention to women and girls, coupled with a lack of gender sensitivity regarding their particular circumstances and needs, had a detrimental impact on the DDR process as a whole. Bias in design and implementation of DDR programs resulted in the near exclusion of women and girls from DDR programs and benefits, with those within the SLA and the CDF particularly marginalized.

Disarmament and demobilization camps and procedures were constructed to attract large numbers of male fighters and did not give adequate attention to ensuring that the human rights of women and girls were protected and preserved. The efforts of child protection agencies operating in Sierra Leone are among the best to date. Still, due to biases within the DDR program, alternative approaches must be sought to address the needs and rights of the many excluded women and girls that potentially fall under the umbrella of war-affected children and youth.

A range of factors including inadequate funding resulted in limitations to reintegration and longer-term rehabilitation elements of the program. Yet the successful reintegration of ex-combatants is an essential component of national and human security, necessary to build sustainable peace.<sup>141</sup> Some international programs have recognized the need to address reintegration from the ex-combatants' and the community's perspectives. In addition, there is growing understanding that financial assistance alone is not sufficient for effective reintegration, that the needs and aspirations of ex-combatants and their families must be addressed, and that local support systems, psychosocial services, and other referral centers should be established to assist all ex-combatants in their efforts to return to a peaceful and productive lifestyle.<sup>142</sup>

But while these efforts are developing, it is critical to ensure that women and girls are fully integrated, and that there is greater understanding of the roles they played in the war.

By being over-classified as “dependents,” the real experiences of women and girls were not acknowledged and they were precluded from receiving benefits provided to other combatants. This assumption—that women and girls were victims only, with no significant role in either the execution of war or the building of peace—is detrimental for their future and could adversely affect the country's recovery.

First, as observed during 2002, the exclusion of child and female combatants from official DDR processes can lead to increased levels of insecurity.<sup>143</sup> For in the same way that disaffected male youths and ex-fighters might lead rebellions and form militias, so can women and girls. In 2002, riots increased, particularly among former child and adolescent combatants, and ICCs were attacked.<sup>144</sup> Social workers reported that adolescent women and girls were sometimes the leaders of these protests. Without support or care from their former “partners” or “husbands,” their own families, the community, or the state, many of the young women—particularly those with children born as a result of their captivity—resorted to civil unrest as a means of accessing basic goods for the survival of their children. For these young women and girls, the stakes are, in effect, greater than for some of the men and boys.<sup>145</sup>

Second, the exclusion of women and girls from official programs and assistance has significant social consequences including poverty, crime, and prostitution. Inevitably it also leads to an increase in HIV/AIDS. Moreover, the exclusion of single mothers means the exclusion of their children. Thus the emergence of another generation of disaffected marginalized youth is possible.

Third, despite the horrors they endured, the women and girls showed tremendous agency and initiative during their times in the forces. Within the confines of their environment they regained some control of their own lives by developing skills to ensure their survival and strategies to protect others. Yet when the DDR program was implemented, there was virtually no recognition of the multiple roles they played or skills they gained. Many have ambitions for education and independence. They feel tremendous responsibility for their offspring and aspire to give them better lives. But when they are treated as passive victims rather than as former combatants who played a sig-

nificant role in the conflict, they are again stripped of opportunities and a sense of self-dignity. International human rights laws oblige national, and particularly international, actors to ensure that women are treated equal to men.

Finally, women have held leadership roles throughout Sierra Leone's history. During the war, despite the widespread violence, women were fundamental to the reorganization of civil society, mass mobilization for peace, and the eventual cessation of the war. Women's organizations such as the YWCA played central roles in the processes that led to the signing of the Lomé peace accord.

The YWCA of Sierra Leone openly encourages women to "unite and initiate programs for self sufficiency and take up leadership roles in our communities and country as a whole."<sup>146</sup> National organizations such as FAWE and PROWA are rebuilding schools and educating children including ex-combatants. Local community members and informal networks and groups support some of those who did not pass through DDR programs or receive benefits. Women, individually and collectively, are playing important roles in assisting in the material, social, and cultural reintegration of former fighters.

Women's commitment to rehabilitating ex-combatants is a matter of basic survival. Unlike the international community, they have no "exit strategy." If the peace fails, violence returns to their doorsteps. But such groups are under tremendous pressure. They have meager resources. Their work is often undocumented and unacknowledged in official processes, and they receive limited support from the international community and donor governments. In a region that continues to be plagued with instability, recognizing the key role that women and women's organizations play and providing adequate resources to support them, is a cost-effective and essential ingredient for ensuring sustainable reintegration and ultimately, peace.



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## **APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection: Interviews**

Mazurana and Carlson designed the study and served as the primary researchers. They conducted fieldwork in Sierra Leone in August and September 2002. A structured survey with 50 women and girls formerly in the fighting forces was used for gathering data. Mazurana and Carlson also interviewed over 60 community, traditional, and religious leaders, parents of abducted girls and boys, and social and health workers who interact with the girls. The researchers interviewed the female ex-combatants in cooperation with NGO staff, social workers, and/or psychologists. Study participants were familiar with those serving as interpreters. In advance of the interviews, researchers explained the study to their translators and discussed the kinds of questions they might ask study participants. Most other interviews, such as with NGO staff and UN officials, occurred in English.

Prior to beginning interviews, the researchers and/or translator described the study to participants, including the study sponsorship, the purpose of the study, and why the individual was asked to participate. The researchers then explained the procedure of the interview, including that interview data and their identities would remain anonymous; participants were told that they could refrain from answering any question if they were uncomfortable, and they could end the interview at any time with no fear of penalty to themselves. No inducements were offered to the respondents prior to interviews that might have influenced their willingness to participate.

Mazurana designed the survey, consulting with a biometrician about issues of sample size and the precision with which she could estimate percentages. She then obtained reviews from two practitioners before finalizing the design. A survey using quota sampling was used to gather quantitative data.

Quota sampling was chosen because it was not possible for the researchers to do random sampling under the research conditions in Sierra Leone, due to challenges including locating mobile populations, concerns regarding anonymity, poor communication and transportation conditions, as well as security risks throughout the country. While quota samples are biased, they can do a good job of reflecting the population parameters of interest. The researcher then documents the bias.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

All surveys were recorded on the survey form with additional details offered on any of the questions recorded in field notes. Mazurana managed all field notes and surveys, identifying the main categorical components within each, including age at entry into force, force name, entry routes, roles, training with the force, experiences of human rights violations within force, exit routes, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Mazurana then compared categorical data first by force and then comparatively among the forces. When possible, both force and country findings were compared to previously published data, including historical facts, to assist in checks for accuracy. For analyses of surveys, working in Microsoft Excel©, Mazurana designed the database, Carlson entered the data, and Mazurana quality checked the data. Mazurana then used histograms and descriptive statistics for initial analysis.

### **Precision of Estimates**

For Mazurana and Carlson's study population in Sierra Leone (N=50) the precision of estimates is + 0.14 for 10,000 females within the fighting forces (95 percent confidence interval for a single population proportion) and + 0.2 for a population of 529 girls who went through disarmament and for a population of 506 girls that went through official demobilization conducted via ICCs.<sup>147</sup>

### **Bias**

Although every effort was made to ensure that the study population reflected an accurate quota sample, the broader group of women and girls from which the study population was chosen was itself biased in several ways. First, the group from which the study population was chosen consisted only of women and girls who came or were taken to NGOs for assistance. In some cases, the girls had not come forward but were identified for NGOs by community leaders as having served in the fighting forces. Although girls who had not participated in

official programs for child combatants (such as DDR or ICCs) were surveyed, the study population was in some way known to the NGOs they worked with. Thus, women and girls and that NGO staff did not know, or could not locate, were not included. For example, on some occasions, NGO workers were unable to locate girls they were responsible for; some had left the area, and/or had gone “unnoticed” for over six months.

Second, since the girls could be located, it can be assumed that they were having positive experiences in the various NGO programs. Third, the study population is positively biased towards female ex-combatants from the former rebel RUF, and negatively biased towards those within the SLA and the various CDF. This is because girls within the RUF were privileged with entry into programs. As this finding came to light, more focused attention was given to the girls and women who had been associated with the CDF.

At the time of interview, the mean and median age of the girls and young women was 18, with a range from 10 to 35 years of age. The study population came from a variety of ethnic groups, Temne (42 percent), Mende (23 percent), Kono (13 percent), Fuler (10 percent), Limba (8 percent), Kru (2 percent), and Soso (2 percent). The majority (94 percent) came from Sierra Leone, the rest came from Guinea (4 percent) and Liberia (2 percent). At the time of their entrance into the force their mean age was 13 and the median was 12, with a range of 2 to 32 years of age. Ninety-four percent reported abduction as their means of entry into a fighting force, while the remaining six percent reportedly “joined.” Eighty-four percent of the study population entered a fighting force under 18 years of age, with 12 years of age both the mean and median age of entry into the force. The mean length of time in captivity was over three years and the median was three years, with some girls held for up to 10 years. The mean years of schooling was over two years and the median was zero, with a range from no schooling to nine years of school. Ninety percent had only received primary schooling, with 58 percent only completing primary one (first grade). Thirty percent of the study population was married or served as a common-law wife, 24 percent had one child, and 8 percent had two or more children. Thirty percent had become pregnant during their time in the fighting force. The largest percentage of girls (58 percent) named the northern province as their home province, followed by the east (28 percent) and south provinces (12 percent) and the western area (zero percent). Twenty-four percent of the study population was outside of their original home province at the time of interview.



**APPENDIX 2: LIST OF ACRONYMS**

All People's Congress	APC
Armed Forces Revolutionary Council	AFRC
Civil Defense Forces	CDF
Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration	DDR
Economic Community of West African States	ECOWAS
Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group	ECOMOG
Executive Outcomes	EO
Forum of African Women Educationalists	FAWE
Interim Care Centers	ICCs
International Monetary Fund	IMF
National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration	NCDDR
National Patriotic Front of Liberia	NPFL
Nongovernmental organizations	NGOs
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	UNHCR
Progressive Women's Association	PROWA
Revolutionary United Front	RUF
Sierra Leone People's Party	SLPP
Sierra Leone Army	SLA
Small Boys Unit	SBU
Small Girls Unit	SGU
Truth and Reconciliation Commission	TRC
United Nations Assistance Mission to Sierra Leone	UNAMSIL
United Nations Children's Fund	UNICEF
United Nations Development Fund for Women	UNIFEM
United Nations Observer Mission to Sierra Leone	UNOMSIL
Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation	WOMEN
Young Women's Christian Association	YWCA

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**About Women Waging Peace**

Women Waging Peace, a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, advocates for the full participation of women in formal and informal peace processes around the world. Over 250 members of the “Waging” network, all demonstrated leaders with varied backgrounds, perspectives, and skills, bring a vast array of expertise to the peace-making process. They have met with over 1000 senior policy shapers to collaborate on fresh, workable solutions to long-standing conflicts.

**About The Policy Commission**

The Policy Commission is conducting a series of case studies to document women’s contributions to peace processes across conflict areas worldwide. The studies focus on women’s activities in conflict prevention, pre-negotiation and negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction—including governance; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and transitional justice and reconciliation. This body of work is pragmatic and operational, offering suggestions, guidelines, and models to encourage policymakers to include women and gender perspectives in their program designs.

**Advisory Group to the Policy Commission****Hizkias Assefa**

Professor of Conflict Studies  
Conflict Transformation Graduate Program  
Eastern Mennonite University;  
Founder and Coordinator  
African Peacebuilding and Reconciliation Network

**Leon Fuerth**

J.B. and Maurice C. Shapiro Professor  
Elliott School of International Affairs  
George Washington University

**Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf**

former Minister of Finance, Liberia;  
Coauthor, UNIFEM’s  
*Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts’ Assessment*

**Jane Holl Lute**

Assistant-Secretary-General  
Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
United Nations

**Rita Manchanda**

Program Executive  
South Asian Forum for Human Rights

**Jane Mansbridge**

Faculty Chair  
Women and Public Policy Program  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University

**Luz Méndez**

President  
Advisory Council  
National Union of Guatemalan Women

**Thandi Modise**

Chairperson, Portfolio Committee on Defense  
Parliament of South Africa

**Olara Otunnu**

Under-Secretary-General and  
Special Representative for  
Children and Armed Conflict  
United Nations

**John Ruggie**

Evron and Jeane Kirkpatrick  
Professor of International Affairs  
John F. Kennedy School of Government  
Harvard University

**Nancy Soderberg**

Vice President  
International Crisis Group