



Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

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This document is part of the Coalition's psychosocial web page. For more information on the psychosocial impact of armed conflict upon children go to:
www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

Psychosocial web page Editor's introduction

Trauma, resilience and cultural healing: how do we move forward? (2007). With contributions from: Napoleon Adok; Jiovani Arias; Lucia Castelli; Lucie Cluver; Chris Coulter; Myriam Denov; Nick Heeren; Elizabeth Jareg; Diane Lukeman; Orlee Oudwin; Malia Robinson; Patrick Smith and Mike Wessells (Edited by Dr. Linda Dowdney)

'Trauma, culture and community: Getting beyond dichotomies' Wessells (2007).

'Is the culture always right? The dangers of reproducing gender stereotypes and inequalities'. Denov (2007).

In this our eighth edition, we publish an edited discussion by experts in the field on issues surrounding child trauma, resilience and cultural healing. The discussion arose out of our reproduction in 2006 of two articles: 'Let us light a new fire' by Alcinda Honwana (1998) and 'Is the culture always right?' by Dyregrov et al, 2002 (see previous publications, English versions). Honwana's paper sought increased recognition of the importance of local healing approaches when responding to the psychosocial impact of war upon local communities. Dyregrov et al, on the other hand, asked whether the international community by emphasizing the natural resilience of children in war torn societies was, in effect, in denial about the negative consequences of trauma upon their well being.

Since it is some years since the original publication of these two papers, we were interested in whether, and how, the field has moved on since. We therefore invited a number of experts in the field of psychosocial interventions in war affected societies to comment on these two publications. Their responses were diverse, reflecting differing professional backgrounds, theoretical positions and experiences in the field. Our paper *'Trauma, resilience and cultural healing: how do we move forward?'* presents an edited summary of their key points, ideas and suggested future directions.

This expert contribution, we think, not only gets our 2007 webpage off to a stimulating and interesting start but also represents an important addition to the field. Our discussants effectively highlight the potential benefits for affected children from integrating non harmful traditional healing approaches and western trauma methods, and also highlight how the field needs to move on.

The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers unites national, regional and international organisations and Coalitions in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. Its Steering Committee member organizations are Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Human Rights Watch, International Federation Terre des Hommes, International Save the Children Alliance, Jesuit Refugee Service, and the Quaker United Nations Office-Geneva.



We also present in full, the contributions to the discussion by Wessells (2007) 'Trauma, culture and community: Getting beyond dichotomies' and Denov (2007) 'Is the culture always right? The dangers of reproducing gender stereotypes and inequalities'.

We would like to extend our gratitude and thanks to these extremely busy field practitioners who, in spite of their very heavy workloads, took time out to contribute to this discussion.

Dr. Linda Dowdney, Editor (research@child-soldiers.org). 11th January, 2007.



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IS THE CULTURE ALWAYS RIGHT? THE DANGERS OF REPRODUCING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND INEQUALITIES IN PSYCHOSOCIAL INTERVENTIONS FOR WAR-AFFECTED CHILDREN

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In their work on culture and psycho-social intervention, the two sets of authors, Honwana (1998) and Dyregrov et al., (2002) make highly salient points and, although they differ slightly in their focus, they both underscore the benefits of a nuanced and pluralistic approach to post-conflict intervention – one that acknowledges the importance of including ritual, social and political dimensions, local culture and practice, as well as, where relevant, appropriate and informed Western approaches.

While the articles undoubtedly contribute to the ongoing debate concerning psycho-social intervention for war-affected children and bring forth insightful arguments, a significant element that was overlooked by both Dyregrov et al. and Honwana, is the reality of gender and its impact upon post-conflict intervention, cultural practice, and local traditions. When assessing whether 'culture is always right', one cannot discount the importance of gender and the reality and implications of gendered exclusionary cultural practices. Given the relative invisibility of gender issues within the realm of conflict and security studies, as well as in discussions of post-conflict intervention, it is essential that gender be a salient part of the debate on appropriate psycho-social intervention.

In many societies, traditional cultural practices may accord automatic respect, power, and status to (older) males, while simultaneously discriminating against women and girls in both law and in custom, whether in the realms of social life, education, politics, and economics. In this vein and in an attempt to add to the debate and discussion brought forward by Honwana and Dyregrov et al., can we say that in cultures where such gendered exclusionary customs and practices exist, and which threaten the human security and well-being of women and girls, that such local practices are 'right' and therefore should be followed, accepted, and perpetuated? Both Honwana and Dyregrov note that culture can buffer its members from the impact of stressful experiences. While this is indeed true, they can also perpetuate

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traditional gender stereotypes and cultural practices which limit the potential of both males and females. For example, in the case of males within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, the militarization of masculinity works to normalize and even glorify male violence, including gun violence, and often stigmatizes men and boys who refuse to partake in violence as 'not behaving like men'. Violence becomes central, rather than peripheral, to the range of behaviours that males need to exhibit to be regarded as 'acceptable' by their communities.

GIRLS AS SEXUAL SLAVES, BOYS AS COMBATANTS

Reflecting traditional gendered stereotypes, in discussions and representations of child soldiery, both the Western media and local NGOs have frequently represented girls in fighting forces in mainly supporting roles, and as victims of sexual slavery. In contrast, boys have been depicted mainly as fighters, commanders and perpetrators of wartime atrocities. Informed by traditional views of gender roles which tend to view armed conflict as a phenomenon occurring between males (who are perceived as the key actors within a force), girls and women are often deemed peripheral and rendered invisible within fighting forces. Similarly, we rarely hear of the realities of males who have experienced wartime sexual violence. While the dichotomous and gendered media portrayals undoubtedly represent the experiences of some war-affected girls and boys, to characterize girls *solely* as victims of sexual violence and boys *solely* as violent perpetrators presents a skewed picture of children's lived realities. In fact, research has consistently shown that girls and boys play complex and multiple roles in conflict, whereby both boys and girls associated with armed groups are severely victimized and involved in domestic and supporting activities, espionage, as well as active combat roles as fighters and commanders. Failure to recognize the *complexity* of roles of boys and girls can lead to post-conflict intervention and programming that fails to meet their unique needs.

GENDER AND POST-CONFLICT INTERVENTION

Both Honwana and Dyregrov et al. neglect to address the gendered dimensions of post-conflict interventions, as well as tackle key questions that emerge from such a discussion. For example, should (and do) current and future psycho-social intervention practices post-conflict differ for boys and girls? If yes, in what ways? How do local customs and traditional practice influence who receives psycho-social attention and intervention post-conflict? Do boys receive greater attention (whether through local rituals or other means of intervention) post-conflict? Similarly, given the gendered and cultural climate, are girls more likely to be treated with collective denial and neglect than boys, or vice versa? While Honwana's article highlights significant traditional Angolan ceremonies and rituals that are practiced on former child combatants, the former combatants she discusses in her paper appear to be male. What about the girls? Are rituals performed differently for girls in the context of Angola? Moreover, how are victims of sexual violence, whether male or female, treated within the community in the conflict's aftermath? Are they offered attention and support through traditional mechanisms or other forms of support? Are they met with the silence and denial that Dyregrov speak of? More information needs to be gathered in this important area of study.

What remains clear is that gendered assumptions and beliefs have continued to proliferate into the post-conflict context and have greatly influenced psycho-social



interventions for war-affected children, particularly programs implemented by the international community. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs in many post-conflict contexts provide powerful examples of gendered exclusion and the invisibility of girls. Sierra Leone is a case in point. Although the DDR program in Sierra Leone has officially been touted as having greatly increased the country's security and is widely seen as a model upon which other DDR processes could be based, the number of female combatants was grossly underestimated by those responsible for planning and conducting the DDR program. Indeed, in the early phases of the program, girls were consequently considered to be ineligible by program planners. According to demobilization figures, between 1998 and December 2003 approximately 6,787 children were formally demobilized – 6,281 boys and a mere 506 girls. The very small proportion of demobilized girls stems in part from their inability to benefit from the initial 'cash for weapons' approach to DDR, which was highly exclusionary¹. In phases I and II of the program, the 'wives' of male combatants, as well as their dependents, were not eligible for entry. Many girls reported being ordered to hand in their weapons prior to demobilization, and were left behind as their male colleagues were transported to assembly centres. Other girls indicated that their guns were taken away by their commanders and were given to male fighters, or in some cases, sold to civilians who then reaped the financial benefits of the DDR program. On other occasions, girls used small arms that were provided 'communally' and thus did not possess their 'own' weapons and were simply not deemed to be 'primary fighters'. Sadly, therefore, instead of being formally demobilized and sharing in the putative benefits of the process, the vast majority of female combatants experienced demobilization as a struggle to fend for themselves and their children. Many girls simply drifted to camps for the internally displaced in search of alternative forms of support. By downplaying the role of female combatants during the war, the DDR program had the effect of extending gender-based power differentiation and gendered insecurity into the post-conflict era.

Both Western and local indigenous post-conflict intervention practices may be based upon gendered ideological assumptions. Although women and girls are largely responsible for rebuilding families and communities in the aftermath of conflict, females have generally been excluded from leadership positions in formal peace talks, within political parties, in formal reconstruction and peace building initiatives and generally regarded as 'afterthoughts' in the conflict's aftermath.

Both Honwana and Dyregrov et al. call for a pluralistic approach to psycho-social intervention, one that encompasses local traditional practice, and where relevant, applicable western approaches. However, based on the historical exclusion of girls and women from discussions of armed conflict, any such pluralistic approach would need to be sensitive to gender and the dangers of both western and local practices which perpetuate and reproduce gender stereotypes and inequalities.

References:

Dyregrov, M., Gupta, L., Gjestad, R. and Raundalen, M. (2002). Is the culture always right? *Traumatology* 8 (3), pp 135-145. Reproduced on: www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

¹ The one-person, one-weapon approach was later changed and group disarmament was instituted where groups would disarm together and weapons would be turned in jointly.



Honwana, A.(1998). Okusiakala ondalo yokalye: Let us light a new fire. Local knowledge in the post-war healing and reintegration of war-affected children in Angola. Christian Children's Fund (CCF)/Angola. Reproduced on: www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

For further discussion of the issues referred to in this paper, please also see the following references:

Denov, M. (2006). Wartime sexual violence: Assessing a human security response to war-affected girls in Sierra Leone. Security Dialogue, 37, 3: 319-342

Maclure, R. and Denov, M. (2006) 'I didn't want to die so I joined them': Structuration and the process of becoming boy soldiers in Sierra Leone. Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence, 18, 1: 119-135

Denov, M. & Maclure, R. (2006). Engaging the voices of girls in the aftermath of Sierra Leone's conflict: Experiences and perspectives in a culture of violence. Anthropologica, 48, 1: 73-85

Denov, M. & Gervais, C. (in press, 2007). Negotiating (in) security: Agency, resistance and the experiences of girls formerly associated with Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society

Psychosocial webpage Editor's note:

This paper was one of a number of responses to the Dyregrov et al (2002) and Honwana (1998) papers. The others can be found in:

Wessells, M. G. (2007). Trauma, culture and community: Getting beyond dichotomies www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

Trauma, resilience and cultural healing: How do we move forward? (2007). Edited by Dr. Linda Dowdney. www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial