



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

In the January, 2006 edition of our psychosocial webpage, we introduce two new papers. The first: **Girls Formerly Associated with Fighting Forces and Their Children: Returned and Neglected (2006)** is by Susan McKay, Malia Robinson, Maria Gonsalves and Miranda Worthern. The second: **Children Affected by Armed Conflict: After Survival – What Next? Issues for Mental Health Services in England** is by Dr. Guinevere Tufnell.

The paper by McKay, Robinson and colleagues successfully outlines the considerable challenges facing girl mothers leaving fighting forces who seek to reintegrate into their communities in southern and western Africa. Often stigmatised and rejected by their communities, these girls struggle to find ways to earn a living to support themselves and their children in the face of economic and sexual exploitation.

The paper derives from a conference held on girl mothers (Bellagio, 2005 - see link below Editor's introduction). It is based on participatory research and papers presented there, and on the ensuing workshop discussions. It also draws on the extant literature, and the authors' own expertise and research in this area.

Given the integrative task facing them in writing this paper, the authors are to be congratulated on successfully allowing the voices of the girl mothers themselves to be heard. In spite of the physical and psychological sequelae of their experiences of extreme violence, the girl mothers speak of their own resilience, and demonstrate insight into their situations and a willingness to help themselves. They call for improved support from their communities so that they can better care for their children and earn their own living. They speak of a need for a healing period prior to reintegration, as well as access to public medical services, education and skills training. The authors succinctly outline key themes, issues and priorities for programming in this area based on an awareness of changing family structures, child protection issues and community concerns. Importantly, they draw attention to the plight of the children of girl mothers whose needs remain largely unknown, in spite of the child protection focus of agencies working with their mothers. Of particular note is their conclusion that formal DDR processes are not appropriate for girl mothers, and that community based programming offers the potential for a way forward in reintegrating this particularly 'at-risk' group. Given the knowledge gaps in this field, another identified way forward is the expansion of our outcomes evidence base by means of research collaboration between practitioners in the field and research experts acting in a facilitative and consultative role.

The second article focuses on issues related to meeting the needs of war affected children within the context of English mental health services. It is written by an eminent British child psychiatrist, Dr. Guinevere Tufnell, who works in a specialist post-traumatic centre in London providing assessment and treatment for refugee war affected children and their families. This highly specialised service sees psychologically distressed children who have survived severe

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and multiple traumatic events. Over the last four years the service has worked with more than 200 war affected children who have come to the UK as refugees, some with their families, others unaccompanied by adults. Using a clinical example of Mohammed, a former child soldier from Somalia as an illustration, Guinevere highlights the psychological and social difficulties these children face when they arrive in England and try to adjust to their new lives. She also discusses the clinical dilemmas and service issues facing clinicians who try to meet these children's psychological needs against a background of poorly resourced and inadequate services provided for them in England. The article's conclusions are based on Guinevere's extensive clinical experience with war affected children when they find themselves in England. She asserts that psychological support is only one aspect of what children affected by war need in order to enhance their resilience and enable them to adjust to life in a new country.

Dr. Linda Dowdney, Editor.

The Bellagio Conference Report can be accessed at:
<http://uwacadweb.uwo.edu/MCKAY/Documents/Bellagio.pdf>



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GIRLS FORMERLY ASSOCIATED WITH FIGHTING FORCES AND THEIR CHILDREN: RETURNED AND NEGLECTED (2006)

Susan McKay, Malia Robinson, Maria Gonsalves and Miranda Worthen

ABSTRACT:

This paper outlines the challenges to the successful community reintegration of girl mothers when they leave fighting forces, particularly in southern and western Africa. The paper grew out of an invited meeting on girl mothers, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, and held in Bellagio, Italy (April, 2005). Following country-specific analyses, which were conducted in preparation for the workshop, the authors present key issues discussed at Bellagio. Drawing upon these and other sources, they analyze some of the dilemmas provoked by the complex cultural, social and psychological situations of these young mothers and propose some approaches to working with them. Fuller details of the meeting and discussions amongst participants, along with their outcomes, can be found in the workshop report.¹

INTRODUCTION:

Although global in occurrence, the phenomenon of young mothers, or girls who are pregnant, returning from armed groups remains largely unacknowledged. This article focuses upon girl mothers (i.e. mothers aged less than 18 years) in sub Saharan Africa. These young mothers, sometimes termed “the most” or “particularly” vulnerable of all returnees (Onyango, Atyam, Arwai, & Acan, 2005; IDDRWG, 2004), typically do not benefit from formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) assistance. There are a number of reasons for this which stem in part from policy and programming decisions, from social and cultural attitudes towards girl soldiers and girl mothers, and from the attitudes and aspirations of the girls themselves. These factors interact with each other to decrease the visibility of these young women.

Girl mothers are invisible in the eyes of those who fund, design and implement DDR programs. This invisibility stems from several factors: sexism, whereby boys and men are privileged; policy priorities that emphasize “giving up guns” as a pre-

¹ Conference report can be found at <http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/MCKAY/Bellagio.asp> or www.child-soldiers.org/resources/psychosocial

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requisite for programmatic help, and the fact that girl mothers are often not perceived as soldiers. Rather, their involvement with fighting forces is typically dismissed by the act of describing them as the “wives” of soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Girl mothers and their children often face community judgment, stigmatization, and social distancing upon their return from fighting forces - especially when their “bush husbands” continue to be part of their lives. Their psychological trauma is compounded by the sexual violence that most have encountered, which may include physical injury to their genitals and reproductive organs as well as sexually-transmitted diseases. Also, the girls often experience a sense of shame due to the violation of community norms through their forced involvement in sexual relations outside of the traditional bounds of marriage. At the same time, community members may also feel shame as a result of their inability to protect the girls from these violations (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Adding motherhood to this equation makes reintegration much more difficult for girl mothers than for other girls or boys. Consequently, some girl mothers do not desire reunification with family members, and, instead, seek new living arrangements. The non-traditional living situations of girl mothers in war-affected countries are thus altering household patterns and kinship arrangements.

A complex array of maternal and child issues are raised when working with these returning girl mothers. These issues include, but are not limited to: the reproductive health of the girls; infant and child health and development; the involvement, or non-involvement, of the “bush husbands” who are the fathers of the children, and changes in relationships within the larger kinship group. The situations of girl mothers also challenge child protection workers who may well have concerns about both the well-being of the girls themselves and the safety and development of their children, but are uncertain as to how best to proceed. There are a number of reasons for this. First, these young mothers and their children require a major time investment. Secondly, practitioners are working in a context where program and policy guidelines are absent, and knowledge gaps are significant. Thirdly, community and professional concerns about “privileging” this at-risk group of children compared to other vulnerable children can further complicate their work. The issue is not straightforward. While acknowledging that there may well be issues relating to the ‘privileging’ of groups of children by focusing attention and resources upon them, it is important to recognize that when girls are subsumed within the broader category of vulnerable children, they effectively become largely invisible to the international community. For example, five years ago girls in fighting forces were not included within the category of child soldiers. Their presence was poorly recognized until research and program initiatives began to uncover their distinct situations. The recognition of the particular needs of girl mothers and their children is even more recent. Finally, another issue facing child protection workers is that the child rights focus which informs much of their work can be at odds with the way that the girl mothers see themselves. These mothers, though young in years, often self-identify as women rather than as children. Such self-identification as women makes cultural sense because in sub-Saharan Africa and much of the world, motherhood connotes womanhood.



LEARNING FROM GIRL MOTHERS – PERSPECTIVES FROM NORTHERN UGANDA, LIBERIA AND SIERRA LEONE

Although recent studies of girl soldiers have improved our understanding of their situations, little is yet known about experiences of girl mothers from their own perspectives. Recent investigations in Northern Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone, based on participatory research methods, however, provide us with insights into their views and experiences².

Girl mothers in Northern Uganda: In a two stage investigative process, girl mothers in Northern Uganda shared their experiences. In the first stage, with sponsorship from World Vision, the Kitgum Concerned Women’s Association and the Concerned Parents Group, 317 girls mothers drawn from internally-displaced persons’ camps in eastern and northern Uganda came together. Methods included group discussion, brain storming and case vignettes (Onyango, Atyam, Arwai, & Acan, 2005). In the second phase 20 girl mothers from the larger group attended a workshop held in Gulu, Northern Uganda, in March 2005.

The girl mother participants expressed distress because of the lack of concern for them that was shown by their communities. They described being treated as “second hand class citizens” i.e. without value, first by their abductors and then upon their return by their communities. Forced against their wills to become parents, the girls reported that they were not psychologically, physically or socially ready for the responsibilities of motherhood. Upon their return home, they had expected, among other things, to receive help in learning how to care for their children; to be cared for medically, and to be told how to get along with “once-friendly people” who now treated them aggressively. Unfortunately, these expectations were not realized. Further, the girls reported that their educational and skills-training needs seemed overwhelming to them.

Based on these experiences, these girl mothers made a number of recommendations. They advocated that girl mothers remain for at least three months at reception centers prior to re-entering the community. This would provide time to heal, to re-establish family and community contacts, and to learn vocational and life skills. They also wanted to learn how to care for their children, and identified the importance of, education and access to reading materials for themselves and their children. These girl mothers felt that their parents’ family was the most desirable place for them and their children to be and believed that successful reunification with their families would be facilitated by the provision of goods such as food, bedding, clothing, and school fees. In relation to themselves, the girls recognized that they needed to exercise greater self control, to refrain from aggressive outbursts and to avoid conflicts where possible, so that they would be better accepted by their communities. A key conclusion from the group’s deliberations was that girl mothers required a *longer reintegration period than other returnees, and that they have a need for consistent follow up*.

Girl mothers in Liberia: 38 girl mothers participated in the investigation reported by Browne (2005). The girls were formally disarmed and demobilized in Montserrado

² These investigations were undertaken as part of the preparation for the Bellagio workshop.



and Bong Counties under the auspices of Save the Children. The girl mothers subsequently received follow-up visits, and participated in focus group discussions with the staff who worked with them. The girls selected the topics to discuss. These included: their own and their babies experiences in the reintegration process; issues related to their own and their babies' well-being; and their own role in programmatic responses to girl mothers.

In relation to their reintegration experiences, the majority (about 75%) of girls said that they had initially experienced support from their parents when they returned home, with parents giving help with babysitting, obtaining food and clothing, and accessing the health clinic. However, tensions arose when the girls received a payment (of about \$300 US) as part of their formal demobilization. These tensions arose because the girl mothers and their parents had differing plans for use of the money. For example, some girls had made plans for how to use the money with their ex-combatant boyfriends. Parents/families, instead, expected the money to be used for purposes such as for paying debts, school fees and petty trading. Because of these differences of opinion, the level of family acceptance and care for the girls and their children decreased - even when girls agreed to contribute to financial costs such as meals, medication and clothing for themselves. Another issue of concern was that some girls who had started small businesses were unable to continue running them either because they needed to take care of their babies themselves, and/or because business proceeds were used to contribute to the family instead of being re-invested into the business. When the girls were less able to contribute to family finances, and if their boyfriends did not help to support their babies, the girls' families insulted them and referred to both them and their children as "rebels." The result, according to the girls, was that many girl mothers moved out of their family homes to live with their ex-combatant partners. Another reported difficulty was that within the larger community, parents often did not support their children's friendships with any girls who had previously been associated with fighting forces, but especially with other girl mothers.

In many Liberian communities, former girl soldiers are believed to be sexually active, drug addicted, violent, and unpredictable. Therefore, they are considered useless. Parents in the larger community consequently fear that their own children will adopt these habits and were reported to make remarks such as "What do you expect of a rebel girl?" "You know they are used to seeing blood," and "It is better to avoid these rebel girls; otherwise they could wound you." As a result, many girl mothers could make friends only with other girls who had been associated with fighting forces. One activity that has helped bring girls together is attending community children's clubs where girls have gained new friends.

To summarize, the major constraints to successful reintegration experienced by these Liberian girl mothers include: the perception by parents and communities that the girl mothers are useless people; parental unwillingness to care for their babies so that the girls can access reintegration programs or maintain businesses; and the failure of reintegration programs to accommodate babies so that their mothers could participate in training. A key concern of these girl mothers, therefore, is how they and their children will survive. In order to do so, some girls may garden, work in cook shops, or engage in petty trading, whereas others sell sex "privately" - the latter survival strategy being frequently resorted to.



Girl mothers in Sierra Leone: The experiences of girl mothers in Sierra Leone were considered by 300 girl mothers who participated in focus group discussions held within five communities in the northern and eastern provinces of Sierra Leone. These communities were being given assistance by the Christian Children's Fund. None of the girls had gone through DDR programs. (Abdul Shereef, 2005).

While participants in this investigation reported many difficult and distressing experiences, they also identified and reported positively on their own high levels of resilience. They believed these were evident in the difficult work conditions they endured, such as covering long distances on foot to sell wares, carrying babies on their backs, and participating in crop production and various skills. Similarly, they cited their organizational initiatives and participation in community sensitization through radio discussions. Nonetheless, these girl mothers reported that when they returned home with their "fatherless babies", their families and communities bore much resentment towards them and their children. Not surprisingly, therefore, they experienced some major challenges. These included issues relating to the availability and quality of alternative child care; a lack of acceptance of responsibility by their partners and families, and issues relating to work and training.

With respect to child care, 70% of the girl mothers complained bitterly of not having caretakers for their babies so that they must carry them everywhere. The girl mothers described this as tedious and distracting and feared that their children were exposed to extreme weather conditions. Where girl mothers could leave their babies with grandmothers or other relatives, the quality of care was often inadequate. The girls reported that their children were poorly fed, and they learned that they cried for long hours due to lack of attention or insufficient food. Some babies were filthy and unsightly. The girl mothers also judged the growth of these children to be distorted and impaired.

The responsibility for earning a living seemed often to be devolved by the families and partners onto these girls. But their ability to do so was limited because during the times when the girl mothers were engaging in petty trade, parents and male partners evaded their responsibilities for domestic welfare and depleted limited resources. However, girl mothers risked domestic tension and marginalization of their babies unless they bore these evaded responsibilities. This pressured the girls to work harder to generate income or else face collapse of their businesses. As a result of their financial and family responsibilities, these girls lacked the time to embark on skills training. Another concern the girl mothers noted was that, because they lived far from community health centers, their babies did not receive proper and sufficient nutrition or adequate health care. Even if they could travel to these centers, the girls did not have money to pay for the services they provided. The girls also lacked basic necessities such as sleeping mats, blankets and nets to protect their babies and themselves from malaria and scabies. Bed bugs plagued their babies and their sleeping rooms. Poor infrastructure allowed rain, damp and cold into the room. Also, babies were exposed to unsafe drinking water, often resulting in diarrhea and dysentery, while their mothers moved between villages to sell their wares.

The girls were able to suggest ways in which their lives could be improved. For example, they thought that older women in the community could be provided with incentives to commit themselves to caring for the babies while their mothers were



away. They want health outreach clinics and supplementary feeding programs for their children, and also for a better understanding of their situations.

Emerging key themes: The findings from these country-specific analyses are consistent with those of a recent Save the Children report (2005) in which single girl mothers indicated that they were frequently rejected or criticized by their parents and other relatives; received little help with child care; were often required to work to provide for themselves and their children, and were consequently exposed to sexual exploitation. If the concerns of the girl mothers and their suggestions for how their lives might be bettered are taken together with other data presented at the Bellagio meeting (see conference report), some key themes relating to reintegration emerge:

Resilience:

- The girls see themselves as resilient.
- The girls have significant insights into their circumstances and are willing, with assistance, to organize themselves and contribute their ideas to improve their situations.
- They are willing to work hard to earn money to take care of the needs of their babies and children, but they need to be supported in their efforts.

Relationships with ex-combatants, families and communities:

- Because of stigmatization and deficiencies within families and communities, girl mothers are seeking new family forms such as living with other girl mothers and as single heads of households.
- Many girl mothers maintain relationships with ex-combatant “husbands”
- When girl mothers become economically productive, they may face challenges from families and/or ex-combatant “husbands” who expect to benefit from their income. This, in turn, can affect girls’ ability to maintain their businesses and therefore support their children. To survive, therefore, many girl mothers engage in “secret sex.”

Programming considerations:

- Programs for girl mothers must be developed at community levels rather than focusing on assistance solely as a responsibility of formal DDR processes.
- Considerable sensitivity must be exercised in reaching these girls so that they are not stigmatized. Developing community programs that include at-risk girl mothers - whether or not they have been associated with fighting forces - is an effective approach that can also assist ex-girl soldier mothers in developing friendships.
- The girls’ new living relationships, and the reasons for these, along with their relationships with their ex-combatant “husbands” must be factored into the design of programs that support them.
- Despite the attention girl mothers give to their babies and children, their offspring require focused programs of care and attention to survive and develop normally.
- Girl mothers identify that, with their their children, they would benefit from a period of healing time once they leave a force, and before re-integration into the community. They also identify that they would benefit from long-term consistent, follow-up.



ISSUES AND PRIORITIES EMERGING FROM THE BELLAGIO MEETING

During the Bellagio meeting, participants grappled with a wide range of concerns about girl mothers. A number of questions and priorities emerge from our consideration of these discussions, some of which are presented below.

Key issues from a child protection perspective: Many of the issues discussed at Bellagio overlapped with those raised by the girl mothers themselves and with those discussed in the extant literature about girls. However, there were distinctions in emphasis. The concerns expressed by the girl mothers themselves were principally contextually based. They focused upon practical ways to improve their situations within their families and communities, and within their work and personal lives, such as the provision of better health care and living facilities. In contrast, much discussion at Bellagio was influenced by a child protection perspective. Discussion was, therefore, often driven by policies, practices and concerns about which group or sub-group of children should be the focus of intervention/research efforts. For example, should girl mothers and their children receive separate programming from other at-risk girls and boys? Discussion also explored what needs to be learned through research about girl mothers, how such research could best be accomplished, and how to address the practicalities of funding given the targeted and sometimes narrow interests of international donors.

In spite of the child protection focus of participants, and although the meeting theme included girl mothers and *also their children*, discussion about these children was minimal. This raises a number of concerns for those interested in the well-being of these children, including whether or not these children have been included within the child protection perspective adopted by those working with their mothers. It would seem that even less is known about these 'at risk' children (who are probably neglected from a child protection perspective) than about their girl mothers. As a distinct group of children, they have not had their potentially unique needs assessed to determine the effects of being children who are conceived from forced sex within a fighting force and whether their experiences differ from other at-risk groups of children (see also, Carpenter, 2005). A further point to be considered is that girl mothers were seemingly perceived and discussed as distinct and separate "units" from their children. This contrasts with a public health perspective in which mothers and their infants/children are included within the more inclusive rubric of "maternal and child health." Considering that the well-being of the children and their optimal growth and development, even survival, depends upon the ability of girl mothers to nurture them, attention to the mothers and their children as a family unit is an approach that should be seriously considered.

A Community focus: Participants at the Bellagio meeting rightly emphasized the importance of community-based work if girl mothers are to be physically and psychologically supported when reintegrating into their communities. Formal disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) processes are not viewed as an appropriate model of reintegration for girls. Girl mothers attribute a large portion of their difficulties in reintegrating to their families and communities. Therefore, mobilizing and preparing communities for the return of these young mothers must be understood as a key component in any reintegration process. Yet, little is known about the complex reasons for the parental and community rejection of these girls. This might occur because of the girls' transgression of social norms, the communities' fears for the safety of their members, economic risk, or for some other



reason. These causes need to be understood in order to better address this dynamic. As Elizabeth Jareg (2005) observed, programmatic responses for girls and their children tailored to their experiences involves “working with families who must accept and adjust to their daughters returning with children - with sensitivity to the abuse they have suffered.”

In the participatory pre-conference inquiries outlined in the first half of this paper, the girl mothers themselves identified ways in which the community could help them. For instance, they identified elder women as a potentially invaluable resource for support in various ways, including helping them to learn parenting skills. To enable their participation, these women should be targeted and assisted through training. An example of such provision is reported in an exploratory study in a village in western Sierra Leone where women elders said that they would be willing to help girl mothers (McKay, Burman, Gonsalves, & Worthen, 2004). In this locale, some women who had participated in Safe Motherhood training agreed that approaches to supporting girl mothers could be integrated into this program -- for example, teaching girls midwifery or herbal skills. Women elders also identified their role in assisting girls in emotional healing.

Relationships: A repeated theme brought up by Bellagio participants was the complex relationships girls have with their children, the fathers of their children, their families, and with their own changing identity.

Relationships with their children: There is mixed evidence with regard to the girls relationships with their children. In the participatory inquiries outlined above, the girls themselves expressed their difficulties in finding suitable care for their children, and worries about their neglect by substitute caretakers. Participants at Bellagio agreed that most girls loved their children. Nonetheless, evidence exists that some girls have intentionally left children behind while fleeing and, in some cases, have killed them. Understandably, this is a very sensitive issue to explore with girls, and presently very little is known except through conjecture and personal experiences with girl mothers.

Domestic living arrangements: Perhaps because they often experience difficult family and peer relationships, many girls continue relationships with the father of their children, live apart from their families with their children, and/or form households with other girl mothers. For example, a UNICEF study (2003) of girls who had left fighting forces in Sierra Leone, found a high rate of female headed households where the burden of providing food, clothing and school fees fell primary upon single mothers. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Angola (Stavrou, 2005). Thus a key question to ask is whether a growing phenomenon of single mothers generally is occurring. If so, then we need to ascertain how best to reintegrate girls when family forms are changing, and how to support them as mothers, and promote their social reintegration *over time* when they live in non-traditional arrangements. Further, how can positive developmental outcomes be fostered for their children?

Little is yet known about girl mothers' relationships with “bush husbands”. Child protection workers appear to have good reason to assume that these relationships are harmful. A recent Save the Children report (2004) found that girls who resided with former commanders were physically and sexually harmed and that young mothers had to struggle to ensure that their needs and the needs of their children were met. However, it also is possible that girl mothers maintain these relationships



because they provide certain benefits. This possibility must be more fully explored in case programming that seeks to bring girl mothers out of seemingly-harmful relationships simultaneously denies them an advantage. Also, programming that unknowingly interfered with some key benefit would ultimately be unlikely to succeed.

Key research questions in addressing these issues could include : How can programs assist girls to make informed decisions about their relationships with the fathers of their children? Given the frequency of domestic violence in the community at large, do we know that these girl mothers who live with commanders are treated qualitatively differently from married girl mothers in the community?

Community influentials' role in protection of girl mothers: Another significant relationship to be investigated is the relationship between influential individuals within the community and girl mothers. Influential individuals, such as village chiefs, may act to protect girl mothers and their children, or indeed, fail to protect them. According to the testimonies of girl mothers in Mambolo, Sierra Leone, the paramount chief has been instrumental in ending name calling and harassment directed at them. In several instances, the town crier communicated the chief's message, informing the community that the girls and their children were not to be mistreated - which, the girls said, improved their situations. A Save the Children report (2004) similarly found the attitudes of chiefs to be important, especially as they may mediate community disputes and ensure positive treatment of returned children, or, in fact, condone maltreatment. Thus NGOs and UN agencies can encourage chiefs as well as community members to play stronger roles in protecting children's rights, including those of girl mothers and their children.

Identity: The identity of these girls' raises a complex set of questions related to how they perceive themselves as well as how they are perceived by their families, their communities, and child protection workers - all of whom affect their reintegration and the policy and programming decisions made about them. From a self and community perspective, the identity of these girls can be influenced by their ability to be economically self-sufficient, which may affect their ability to marry and further influence the way they are perceived. Currently, program support for these girls is guided by a child rights perspective. If girls view themselves as "women," and yet are regarded by child protection workers as "girl" (i.e. "child") mothers, inappropriate decisions may be created about how best to work with them. Better understanding of girl mothers' identity is an area where academic research could be particularly useful. Another useful area of inquiry is how girl mothers face the transition to adulthood without the structural supports that their communities might have previously provided.

Supporting girl mothers' decision making: Girl mothers have to make many choices. These include: whether to bring their children with them when they leave the fighting forces; whether they will stay with their family or seek other living arrangements; what work they will do, and what measures they will take so that they and their children survive. Upon return to their communities, however, they experience a lack of choice and of opportunities to make decisions for themselves. For this reason, child protection workers often seek to validate girl mothers for the decisions they have already made and to help them make informed decisions when presented with new choices. However, this approach may raise difficulties for both girls and workers when child protection officers have to confront the issue of whether to encourage or discourage the union of the girls and the fathers of their children.



Further, many people influence the girls, and girls have limited awareness of their rights.

The health of girl mothers and their children: At the Bellagio meeting, only a few questions were raised about the health of girl mothers and their children. These included the key role of primary health care services for this population, and reproductive health issues. And yet, as the pre-workshop participatory inquiries revealed, the girls when reporting the health concerns they had for themselves and their children referred to a broad spectrum of other health problems. As do other returnee children, they have health problems such as malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, diarrhea, parasitic infections and malnutrition, war-related injuries and disabilities. Girls have frequently reported headaches, anxiety and nervousness, “stomach ache,” effects of drug use, scabies and skin diseases, pain from beating, and trauma to the genital, anal and bladder regions. Because of gender discrimination such as their marginalisation in DDR programs that can provide health benefits, lack of access to health care, their age, and injuries to reproductive organs, girls’ health is at particular risk (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Programming approaches: Considerable discussion occurred at Bellagio about the best approaches to working with girl mothers, with varying perspectives voiced about whether or not girl mothers and their children should be regarded as a discrete at-risk category. A key issue in relation to program planning, was whether a broad net should be cast, encompassing all at-risk children, or whether interventions should be focused on the population of girl mothers alone. A difficulty for program planning is that the apparent ‘invisibility’ of girls soldiers within their communities (McKay & Mazurana, 2004), may result from the girl mothers making themselves invisible in order to protect themselves and their children from actual or perceived harm.

At the meeting, various suggestions as to possible groupings of girls for program provision were suggested and discussed. For example, programs could include all girls in the communities concerned, regardless of whether or not they were mothers. Alternatively, they could include all girl mothers regardless of whether or not they participated in fighting forces. Finally, they could include all girl soldiers, regardless of whether or not they are mothers.

Action research conducted within existing programming could help to illuminate whether the needs and experiences of girl mothers, and those of their children, are similar to or unique from these or any other ‘at-risk’ groups. It would be helpful to explore the utility of integrating programming for girl mothers with other groups which might be distinct in different contexts.

Girl mothers and their children – areas prioritised for future discussion:

In spite of the complex issues relating to reintegration outlined above, we suggest that there are some areas which should be prioritised in future discussions/decision making regarding policy and program development and future research with girl mothers and their children.

It will be important to consider what, if any, kind of DDR programming is provided for girl mothers. Formal DDR processes are by nature high profile processes, and may not meet the needs of a population that chooses to keep a low profile. Further discussion may be needed on how to change DDR processes to be more inclusive of girls, or whether they are not the right mechanism to facilitate the exit of girls (and girl



mothers) from armed groups and their reintegration. Also, emerging consensus is that community-based approaches emphasizing community mobilization, economic strengthening, public health and conflict mediation/resolution may be more appropriate.

Whether or not formal DDR programs are used with girl mothers, questions remain as to how best to address the material needs of girl mothers and their children, including primary health care and basic infrastructure requirements, without privileging them through highly targeted interventions. These run the risk of increasing, rather than decreasing, community resentment towards these young mothers. The likelihood of implementing appropriate and useful programming will be enhanced if agencies both facilitate girl mothers organizing on their own behalf and participating in program development, and build upon existing knowledge of collaborative processes that work.

Finally, it remains important to identify key psychosocial knowledge needed in developing best practices in this area, and to consider how best to bridge the existing divide between researchers, practitioners and policy makers. Each discipline has its own unique strengths which can enhance our understanding of the situations and needs of girl mothers. Collaboration could, therefore, make a positive contribution to the developing framework for practice and policy in program implementation. We would support the collaborative model that was proposed at Bellagio in which external researchers collaborate with practitioners in program implementation. Such collaboration would add rigor to participatory assessments, monitoring and evaluation processes. In addition, it would facilitate the possibility of action research designed to follow lines of inquiry arising out of program implementation.

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