

# Young Women in African Wars

Young women are combatants in contemporary African wars. They also participate in a whole array of different roles. However, by and large, they remain invisible to us. In fact, our “northern” hackneyed views on women’s innate non-participation in war prevent us from seeing specific needs for young women during and in the aftermath of wars. For instance, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes often fail to address appropriate needs for young women and in a variety of ways “prevent” them from partaking. Issues of stigma, safe demobilisation, individual concerns for post-war marriage, health and education, need to be addressed in both a more gendered way, but also with an apposite understanding of young women’s agency in both peace and war. In this Policy Note it is argued that to improve policy and programming efforts it is necessary to broaden the understanding of young women’s roles and participation in armed conflict in Africa historically and today.

## Introduction

The focus on women and girls who actively participate in armed conflicts in Africa has increased significantly during recent decades. Yet, despite extensive research and documentation, in mainstream studies and in most policy programming they are largely absent. Female fighters, if they appear at all, are often seen as an anomaly and child soldiers are often equated with boys. When women and girls are mentioned it is often implied that they are predominantly civilians and thus predominantly ‘victims’, while male fighters are uniformly described as ‘combatants’ or alternatively ‘perpetrators’. In reality, both male and female fighters function in a variety of roles. Women, alongside men, kill soldiers and civilians, carry out atrocities, destroy property and participate in looting raids for the purpose of personal enrichment. Women may participate in a variety of ways, as spies, as commanders, or in logistical support functions. However, it is evident that most women and girls are also victims of war, girls and women are sexually abused, forced to work and to take up arms and fight. The experiences of girls and women in fighting forces are thus both multifaceted and complex, as

they may be both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, it is our contention that a too narrow focus on women as only victims rarely helps to ‘empower’ women in conflict zones and may even make it difficult to locate their real needs and thus to create emergency and development aid that work ‘on the ground’.

## Women and war

Still today in most analyses of war and violent conflict women and men are often positioned at opposite ends of a moral continuum, where women are generally considered peaceful and men aggressive, women passive and men active, women are victims and men perpetrators. With this perspective, war remains an exclusively male concern, and women are only seen as victims and are therefore denied agency. They are not like men perceived as actors in social, economic and political structures. Therefore, to view women as more nurturing and peaceful both supports and reproduces patriarchal values in war as well as in peace. Quite often many men and women also assume these roles, but the reality is that women are also active as fighters, while men may well be victims as well as fighters.

In mainstream literature there has been a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which men and women play stereotypical gender roles in armed conflict.

### *Victims or perpetrators?*

If women stereotypically are regarded as inherently more peaceful, what then do people think of women as soldiers/fighters/rebels? In many wars and violent conflicts, for example Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, Uganda and Eritrea, women have shown themselves to be as capable as men in performing violent acts. However, as soldiering has been included in the moral universe of men in ways that it has not for women, fighting women are frequently considered by their very existence to be transgressing accepted female behaviour, and the very act of fighting by definition makes women and girls less feminine and by extension 'unnatural' or 'deviant'. Despite the fact that there are an increasing number of women in armed groups, 'the soldier' is still conceived of as a man. The presence of female fighters thus both disturbs and complicates conventional notions of war.

## Overview of young women in armed conflicts in Africa

It is believed that women and girls participate in armed conflicts in Africa to a far greater degree than has been previously recognized. Women have been actively involved fighters in African countries as diverse as Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Some of these were wars of liberation from colonial powers, while others are current rebel insurgencies, and in these conflicts women have served in capacities from foot soldiers to high ranking positions. Today, young women in Africa participate in insurgencies and rebel movements, but they are also frequently employed in state-sanctioned violence.

### *Abduction or voluntary conscription?*

The mode of conscription of girls and women in armed forces varies, just as it does for boys and men. Some are abducted and forcefully conscripted, while others join for ideological reasons or as a survival strategy. The distinction between the various forms is also complex. Although the abduction and forced conscription of women and girls is commonplace, recent research has shown that it cannot be denied that some feel that there are beneficial aspects to joining.

### *Status positions and roles for young women in war*

The status positions of female fighters vary from conflict to conflict and between different fighting forces. It is important to note that African women's experience as fighters is not uniform and varies considerably depending on local context. Within patriarchal socie-

ties, such as Mozambique, Uganda, and Sierra Leone, where women and girls are oppressed in countless ways, this oppression often seems also to be reflected in the structure of the fighting forces, where women and girls in fighting forces carry out traditional gender roles such as cooking, cleaning and serving men, which seemingly replicates tasks that women and girls undertake in society at large. However, it has also been noted that women's and girls' participation in fighting forces can simultaneously bring about new opportunities for these women and girls, such as achieving positions of power and learning new skills that previously were out of reach. War can thereby oppress women and girls while at the same time it may also expand their possibilities.

Female fighters may gain status and control, feel pride, self-confidence and belonging by carrying arms. However, as has also been noted, except for the most powerful female fighters who have commander status or are important 'wives' of high commanders, most female fighters are also subjected to abuse from men and boys due to their low position in the gender hierarchy.

### *Sex slaves or labour force?*

Many of the young women that have been abducted or forcefully conscripted have also been exposed to sexual violence. But was this the principal reason for their abduction? We argue that one important aspect has received too little attention in most writing about the forceful abduction of girls and women in many African wars: women's productive labour.

Even during war, the chores of everyday life have to be performed, cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. Women in armed insurgencies in Africa are also involved in the trading and trafficking of looted goods, and in agricultural production. The roles young women perform in armed insurgency groups in Africa go far beyond being simple 'sex slaves' or 'camp followers', rather they are essential to the functioning and maintenance of the war system itself. Rebel movements in Africa often need women and children to maintain this system and abduct them for that reason.

However, it seems clear judging by the conflicts in Africa in recent decades that rapes and sexual violence inflicted on young women, female fighters included, is widespread. Therefore, any analysis of female fighters in Africa has to inquire into this issue, and more importantly be sensitive to and contribute to an understanding of local concepts of rape or sexual stigma in order to adequately address these issues on the ground.

## Female fighters: Disarmament and demobilization

The frameworks for most disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes for combatants are set and negotiated in official peace agreements. The aims of the projects are basically (1) to collect,

register, and destroy all conventional weapons, (2) to demobilize combatants, and (3) to reintegrate ex-combatants. Those combatants who are enrolled in DDR programmes are usually provided with some monetary and material assistance and are also frequently given some weeks or months of vocational or literacy training. As we have described above, there are a considerable number of female fighters in various fighting forces in Africa although no one knows exactly how many. Most agree however, that those women and girls who have registered in DDR programmes in Africa are very few and do not accurately represent the real number of female fighters. In most DDR processes in African countries with high numbers of women in fighting forces, there is a low turnout of girls and women because, it is assumed, most women do not demobilize unless specific measures are made to include them in the process.

### *Female fighters excluded from DDR programmes*

The reasons for not working actively to include girls and women in institutionalized DDR programmes could be that female fighters also perform additional roles – they are labourers, ‘wives’, girlfriends, domestic workers, farmers – and this can render the notion of who is a fighter and who is not unclear. They are frequently misrepresented as only dependants or wives of male fighters, and as ‘camp followers’, and few efforts are made to determine whether they in fact were also fighters. Their different roles may prevent the UN, aid organizations, and ordinary civilians from seeing girls and women as ‘real’ fighters, thereby screening them out of the process of demobilization. As discussed above, we argue that those women who are only thought of as abducted women or sex slaves, and who as such are excluded from formal demobilization, have actually formed the backbone of many armed forces, and have been vital to the war enterprise.

Lately there have been some attempts to broaden the definition of combatant, but although both UN Resolution 1325 and the Cape Town Principles (CTP) address this issue, and include in the category of combatant not only those carrying guns, this has not improved the situation for female fighters who continue to be excluded from DDR efforts. Therefore, if the intention is to reach all fighters, including women and girls, it is essential to understand the mechanisms behind female fighters’ lack of access to official DDR programmes and why they sometimes choose not to participate.

### *Avoiding DDR*

Many female ex-fighters may choose not to take part in official DDR programmes out of fear or the feeling that they have nothing to gain but much to lose by attending. It can be a question of security with regards to the demobilization camps, as has been testified by

fighters in Sierra Leone. The facilities were perceived to be dangerous for women and girls with large numbers of men and inadequate protection. Special safe, secure and single-sex centres for the demobilization of women with predominantly female staff should therefore be provided.

Female ex-fighters may also not turn up for disarmament and demobilization out of fear of having their identities as former fighters revealed. This is a very central aspect that we argue has not been seriously dealt with in the planning and implementing of DDR programmes. There is often a high degree of stigma attached to female fighters, and women and girls may feel that registering at the DDR centres and joining the programmes will only result in further social exclusion by the civil community. Given that female fighters are not easily accepted back into civil society and often looked upon with fear and suspicion, there is a real risk that these apprehensions may turn out to be justified. The negative attitudes that civilian societies often have towards female ex-fighters, as well as the issue of shame and the threat of stigmatization of these women and girls if they are identified as former fighters must be taken under serious consideration when DDR processes are planned. The challenge is to reach female ex-fighters without simultaneously contributing to their stigmatization. Assistance must take its point of departure from the fact that female ex-fighters may lack social networks due to rejection by families and male partners.

### *Surviving war – surviving peace: Post-conflict challenges*

Female ex-combatants are by definition those who survived war, while many did not. Through years in fighting forces, often under immense pressure, these women and girls learned survival techniques and made tactical choices, and they obtained skills and strengths that kept them alive. But ironically, surviving war does not automatically make peace an easy project. While roles and status positions of female combatants vary widely during war, what most of them seem to share is limited access to benefits at the time of peace and demobilization.

### *Changing gender roles?*

War often entails a temporary change in gender roles. Even though it may not be true for all women and girls, life as a female fighter can bring about opportunities to attain positions of power and gain agency in a way that would not have been possible prior to the war. In some cases women manage to change their status positions after war too, but frequently they revert to more traditional or conservative gender roles. When male and female ex-fighters return to civil society they are often received differently; while men are perceived to have strengthened their gender role through life within the fighting forces, women are instead increasingly

marginalized. During and after the Mozambican war of liberation, for example, new female roles emerged, urged and supported by FRELIMO. However, after the war FRELIMO either failed to provide support for or directly opposed the gender struggle of women.

Opportunities to support gender equality in many post-conflict situations have often not been seized. Traditional gender stereotypes and divisions of labour have instead often been reintroduced, and sometimes even reinforced by DDR programmes. Post-conflict settings can bring about windows of opportunity with regards to equality between women and men and the expansion of traditional gender norms. However, such changes will not come easily. It has to be acknowledged that although war can oppress women and girls in countless ways, it may at the same time expand their possibilities and contribute to gender equality. It is of fundamental importance that these opportunities are acknowledged.

### *Skills and strengths*

Despite traumatic war experiences and life under immense pressure, female ex-fighters are among those who have survived war. To do so women and girls had to be strong, learn survival techniques and make strategic choices. However, it is evident that the skills and strengths female fighters obtained during their time in fighting forces will never be acknowledged if women are continuously regarded as passive victims. By treating them as passive victims or 'dependants', and by not acknowledging the skills and resources they have acquired, female ex-fighters are again stripped of control of their lives and a sense of dignity. DDR programmes thereby also risk losing tremendous social capital that could be of importance for post-conflict reconstruction.

### *Shame and stigma*

Facing stigmatization is often a reality for many former female fighters. When returning to civil society these women and girls are often looked upon with suspicion and fear for having been perpetrators of violence but also for having violated established gender roles. In Sierra Leone many female ex-fighters said that they had been so badly treated and so disliked by civilians that they became ashamed of having stayed so long with the fighting forces. The feelings of shame often originated from being called a rebel or having a 'rebel child'. One effect of the social stigma attached to having been a fighter is that many women and girls hide their past and do not come forward to receive the DDR-benefits they are entitled to. Another consequence of having been a female fighter is the difficulty of getting married. This is of great importance in many African societies as marriage is seen as mandatory for women. Unmarried women are sometimes likened to social outcasts. In cultures where women's access to land, property, social networks, and status is determined to a large extent by her husband and his clan, a woman's

inability to marry poses serious challenges to her human security and livelihood options.

### *Education*

Many female ex-fighters often express a strong wish to get access to education for themselves and their children once the war is over. According to some, this wish was especially expressed by young women who had been abducted or pressured into armed forces, had been held as forced wives or had given birth to children as a result of these unwanted relationships. Related to this is the fact that young mothers are often among those most stigmatized. These young women probably see education as an opportunity to regain control over their lives and to offer their children a future.

### *Health*

Most female ex-fighters return from war with physical and psychological health problems. The suffering from physical health problems such as STDs, often due to sexual violence and abuse, contributes to the overall psychological effects of war traumas that female ex-fighters also experience. In addition to this, such health problems may cause even further stigmatization of these young women in civil society, leaving them even more vulnerable. Testing, treating, and educating female ex-fighters on STDs and other diseases and health problems should therefore be complemented with psychological assistance and counselling if the young women so wish.

### *Livelihood options*

While many NGOs emphasize that their objective in post-war societies is to make women independent and self-reliant, few however ask if the skills they offer lead to sustainable livelihoods. In creating livelihood options for young female ex-fighters, it is also essential to examine their social position and the links between being able to make a living and social well-being, between economy and social life, and the socio-cultural background is of the utmost importance in planning for post-war rehabilitation projects. One issue which is seldom addressed by organizations targeting these women is that the ability of abducted and ex-combatant women to reintegrate into post-war society is not only a question of them being able to generate an income but is also largely dependent on how they are viewed in post-war society. It matters little how many projects a female ex-combatant participates in if her ability to put her skills into practice is circumscribed by society's negative view of her. For these and other reasons, many female ex-combatants do not always view NGO projects as their best option. Some choose other ways to survive, some become 'girlfriends' and others prostitutes, where those who have nothing else trade the only thing they have, their bodies. The fact that post-war prostitution often concerns those women who have been subject to war-time rape, also speaks to the continuation of structural violence. Unfortunately,

prostitution as a survival strategy in post-war societies is quite common, and in war-torn countries with large resident peacekeeping or humanitarian aid interests, this prostitution is often described and acknowledged for what it is, a survival strategy.

## Conclusion

The experiences of women and girls in fighting forces are both multifaceted and complex as they may simultaneously be both victims and perpetrators. To fully comprehend what women really do in war-torn societies, it has to be acknowledged that women not only have their own agenda but that 'women' is a highly differentiated social category. Women can be active participants in war, supporters and advocates of continued armed struggle; they can be spies, soldiers, rebels, but still – and this is an important distinction to make – women's choices in times of conflict and war are often circumscribed in ways which differ from men's.

## Suggested reading

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