

CHAPTER THREE

GIRL SOLDIERS

Just as child soldiering is not a newly developed phenomenon being witnessed in the latter days of the 20th century and the dawn of the next, neither is 'girl soldiering'. Mazurana and colleagues refer to Joan of Arc as the best-known Western girl combatant in history. In 1429 sixteen year-old Joan led an army of 4,000 against the English and successfully expelled them from Orleans.¹⁰⁵ However, her victory was short-lived as the following year she was captured by Burgundian soldiers and sold to the English who proceeded to burn her at the stake—a form of execution meted out to all suspected 'witches'. More recent examples of girls participating in armed conflicts are available. During the First World War fourteen year-old Marina Yurlova found herself at the front lines of battle as a private in the Cossack army, which was used by the Western front in Europe (against Germany and Austro-Hungary). Around the same time thousands of miles away another fourteen year-old girl, Jesusa Palancares, joined her father to spy for the *federales* during the Mexican revolution.¹⁰⁶ African history also yields tales of girl fighters. In fact, Mazurana and colleagues claim that "the most intriguing historical female army comes from the African kingdom of Dahomey" which is present-day Benin.¹⁰⁷ During the 18th and 19th centuries the people of Dahomey are said to have regarded female warriors as superior to their male counterparts. Therefore, every three years fathers had to report to the king with daughters aged between nine and fifteen years in order for the fittest to be selected for military duty. In this way the strength of the royal female forces was maintained.

Not only does the practice of using girls in conflicts around the world continue today, but so does the silence enshrouding this phenomenon. International discussions, peace accords, reports, studies and demobilisation and rehabilitation programmes all use the generic term 'child soldiers' to describe children involved in armed conflicts and then proceed to focus primarily on boys as combatants. Girls are largely forgotten, ignored or dismissed. If lucky, they will be acknowledged as an appendage, an after-thought in a concluding paragraph or an appendix in the deepest recesses of a report or book. This view is supported by Vincent in the following statement, "there is little awareness of the dimensions of the suffering inflicted on girls, or of the many roles

they play during conflict"¹⁰⁸ or of their experiences with their 'war-related' or 'war-spawned' offspring after conflict. It is widely agreed among commentators and practitioners that girl combatants are still very much out of the picture; if child soldiers as a whole are arguably 'invisible', then girls simply disappear out of sight. Nordstrom describes the situation appositely:

When I started looking for girls in numerous war situations, I found silences and empty spaces, punctuated only sporadically by a handful of researchers focusing on children in general and girls in particular.¹⁰⁹

It is pivotal that more research is conducted on the particular needs and experiences of girl combatants during war and its aftermath in order to address their marginalisation both in the discourse and in field-based programmes. This section hopes to contribute to a gender-analytical framework on the involvement of children in armed conflict by examining the extent of the 'girl soldier phenomenon', methods of recruitment, reasons behind their recruitment by both government forces and armed opposition groups, the treatment they receive and their contributions to armed forces and opposition groups as well as the implications of their participation for themselves and the wider society. Underpinning this section are the following questions: to what extent is the deployment of girls in civil wars condoned by African cultures? And how does the phenomenon of 'girl soldiering' affect the various cultures experiencing conflict?

Case studies from El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda show that girls comprise one-third of all child soldiers.¹¹⁰ In Angola and Sierra Leone, girls are said to have consisted of between 30% and 40% of child combatants whilst in Kurdistan they made up 10% and in Northeast India, between 6%-7%. The Shining Path in Peru is reported to have one of the "largest female contingents of any armed group in the world."¹¹¹ In Sri Lanka, young Tamil girls, often orphans, have been systematically recruited by the opposition, Tamil Tigers, since the mid 1980s. In fact, in recent recruitment drives in schools the LTTE have focused on girls. Ironically, the group insists that this is its way of "assisting women's liberation and counteracting the oppressive traditionalism of the present system."¹¹²

African countries where girls are used by either government forces or armed opposition groups or both include Angola, Burundi, DRC, Eritrea Ethiopia, Liberia, Libya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Uganda. In Angola, girls as young as thirteen years have reportedly been used by UNITA rebels whilst in Uganda, of the 183 child soldiers recaptured from the armed

opposition group, 55 were girls.¹¹³ Furthermore, research indicates that girls are more likely to be found in armed opposition groups than in governmental forces.¹¹⁴ One apparent exception is Sierra Leone where evidence points to the recruitment of girls as well as boys by the APC government, some of whom proved highly effective combatants.¹¹⁵

Methods of recruitment

Methods used to recruit girls into various armed factions are numerous. The participation of girls may be the result of:

- compulsory military service (for example, Cuba and the Philippines);
- abduction or gang-pressing (for example, Angola, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Colombia);
- being born into or adopted by an armed opposition group (for example, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Uganda);
- being sold or given to armed forces by a parent as a form of a 'tax' payment or due to social rejection (for example, Colombia and Cambodia);
- 'volunteerism' because of a desire for protection, survival, to earn an income, further career options, including those relating to the government or military, or because of state violence against families and communities (for example, DRC, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Colombia).

In the last decade girls have become the targets of active recruitment by armed groups in many countries afflicted by conflicts. In Mozambique RENAMO promised study-abroad scholarships in order to attract adolescent girls and boys into its forces but very few of these scholarships ever materialised. Uganda provides more recent and better-known examples: On 10th October 1996, 139 girls were abducted from St. Mary's College at Aboke in Apac District, northern Uganda by members of the LRA. International attention became focused on this case when the Italian deputy headmistress of the school, Sister Rachel, followed the abductors and managed to secure the release of the majority of the girls.

Like their male peers, many girls make an active decision to participate in conflict and 'volunteer' with an armed group, for numerous reasons, including the

fact that having a gun is likely to provide greater protection against rape and other abuses. In Sierra Leone, one young female member of the RUF proffered her reasons for joining the group succinctly and simply, "they offered me a choice of shoes and dresses. I never had decent shoes before."¹¹⁶ In Ethiopia, "an increasing number of young girls were looking at the armed forces....as a means of winning their living in the context of widespread unemployment."¹¹⁷ Furthermore, according to a recent report produced by Refugees International in eastern DRC, the choices facing girls (and boys) are, "to join the military, become a street child, or die."¹¹⁸ Many girls also join armed groups in order to escape from domestic abuse and exploitation (by a parent, step-parent or other relative).

Why girls?

Very often girls are recruited for the same reasons as their male peers—for the very qualities that they possess as children, outlined in the previous section. Just as the shortage of manpower leads to the recruitment of child soldiers generally, it also results in an increased proportion of girls among the child soldiers.¹¹⁹ However, it is necessary to go beyond this explanation and ask: what further qualities do girls possess that render them appealing to armed groups? In Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers use suicide bombing as a vital war tactic, girls are recruited because it is easier for them to evade government security.¹²⁰ This reason also applies to armed opposition groups not necessarily using suicide bombing as a war tactic elsewhere, including many African countries currently or recently embroiled in conflict.

It is important to consider another dimension. Just as in the wider society, men are seeking younger and younger sexual partners in order to avoid HIV/AIDS infection, rebels are recruiting younger girls for the same reasons. This further emphasises the view that many wartime practices reflect the attitudes and practices of peacetime society. According to Terburgh, "such rebels are forcibly 'recruiting' young girls with no minimum age of recruitment. Once a girl shows emerging breasts, she is considered ripe for recruitment and for being handed over to a rebel as a 'wife'"¹²¹ Brett and McCallin add to this view when they claim, "the recruitment of young girls may be a deliberate attempt to provide 'wives' free from HIV infection, thus the criteria used for 'marrying' girls to rebel men seems to be a sign of puberty."¹²²

The importance of girls to armed opposition groups is glaring. Sierra Leone, a country currently in the process of building peace and reconstructing its society,

is a good case study to consider. Between 1992 and 1996 the majority of inhabitants of RUF camps in Sierra Leone were girls. In fact, whilst it was estimated that up to 80% of all RUF forces were children between the ages of seven and fourteen, 30% of that figure were girls.¹²³ According to a recent statement made by Chris Robertson, the head of Save the Children’s Fund (SCF) in Sierra Leone, “negotiating the release of girls is a lot harder than boys.”¹²⁴ Whilst boy combatants are of little value in the post-war period because they performed largely combatant roles, armed groups are reluctant to release girls, despite the fact that the fighting has terminated. The RUF continues to use abducted girls as domestic workers and ‘wives’.

In a bid to enter peace talks with the government in 2001, the RUF released hundreds of children in summer 2001. The month of May was particularly notable as shown in Table 4.1.

The disproportionate number of girls released is particularly surprising because, as previously mentioned 30% of RUF forces were comprised of girls. Sometimes RUF commanders formed ‘strong’ bonds with their female captives, telling child protection agents that they wanted to marry them. In turn, some of the girls in RUF camps claimed to be in love with their captors and did not want to return home.¹²⁶ In the case of Liberia, girl combatants consisted of only 1% of all child soldiers demobilised¹²⁷ but this does not necessarily mean that the number of girls used in the Liberian war by various armed factions was insignificant; like in Sierra Leone, it may also be related to the reluctance of armed groups to release girls after the conflict has officially ended. According to a report produced by UNICEF/Liberia,

Table 2: Child Soldiers Released from Revolutionary United Front, 2001.¹²⁵

| Date | Boys released | Girls released |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 17 May 2001 | 110 | 0 |
| 20 May 2001 | 86 | 2 |
| 26 May 2001 | 581 | 10 |
| 29 May 2001 | 421 | 3 |
| Total | 1198 | 15 |

Source: Mazurana et al, 1998.

In the time leading up to peace, and immediately following the conflict, females were probably of more use to the factions than the boys who were no longer fighters. Girls could still prepare food, clean, fetch water, take care of the younger children and generally keep house....there was little opportunity, then, to reach out to the girls and bring them into the [Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration] process.¹²⁸

Girls are often subjected to the same dangers and mistreatment as boys including tough physical training schedules and harsh living conditions.

Most commentators refer to girls working behind the scenes, as supporters and ancillary workers and as a result they are less visible and thus, less accessible for demobilisation programmes which is certainly the case for some. However, it is important to recognise from the outset that there are no fixed roles assigned to girls based on gender. The functions girls play are fluid and often overlap. This notwithstanding, *some* of the roles that *some* girls play in *some* armed groups reflect the different socialisation process for girls and boys in the wider society; for example, cooking, cleaning, child care and rearing. At the same time many of the functions carried out by girls during conflict are similar to those undertaken by their male colleagues; like boys, girls are used as porters, cooks, servants, spies to collect and provide information as well as to loot villages during raids. In Angola, girls as young as thirteen years old were used as porters, camp followers and concubines.¹²⁹

Indeed, girls in armed groups are often required to render sexual services and the majority are abducted for the primary purpose of serving as 'wives' to the male soldiers. Again, the sexual violence confronted by girls during war can be viewed as a reflection of peacetime attitudes. With regard specifically to Sierra Leone, it has been argued that fighters were products of a society that had reinforced patriarchal values for centuries: that the lives of women were not important and that they were placed on this earth for the sexual fulfilment of men.¹³⁰

Many commentators have documented these experiences of girls as victims of sexual violence in-depth. This has been criticised by Mazurana and colleagues because, in their opinion, an exclusive focus on these 'worst-case scenarios' has the effect of obscuring "the complexities within and extent to which girls serve in a variety of overlapping roles."¹³¹ Part of the reason for their argument is that the sexual abuse of girl soldiers is not a prerequisite feature of all armed groups using girls; for example, there is no evidence that girls

are systematically required to provide sexual services in the LTTE (Sri Lanka) or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK - Turkey). Thus, they argue that it is pivotal to consider the roles of girls in armed groups holistically or contextually within specific armed conflicts, geopolitical and cultural contexts, time periods, countries or region.¹³² This view is supported by Brett who argues that,

Even in situations of widespread abduction it should not be assumed that all girl soldiers have been sexually exploited; to do so is to deny their individual experiences and treat them as a category of actual or potential sexual objects. It also risks further stigmatizing the girls and thus limiting their future prospects and status in society.¹³³

Thus, focusing predominately on the sexual abuse experienced by girls reinforces social stereotypes and exacerbates their already fragile position during the rehabilitation and reintegration period. It is also important to recognise that gender does not dictate the enforcement of girls in sexual servitude. Although many girls were used in this way in Liberia and Uganda whilst the majority of boys were used in active combat, the reverse is also true in these two countries. That is to say, some boys were used as sex slaves whilst some girls were taken to the front line to engage in battle.¹³⁴

Like their male counterparts, a significant number of girls do indeed participate actively in conflict and fight on the front lines. A sixteen year-old girl in eastern DRC outlined her experiences of conflict as follows:

My sister and I joined the army because our parents were dead, and we had no jobs. I went to the front lines many times, and my sister was sent to the enemy to be a spy. Girls were sent to be prostitutes and get information from the enemy.¹³⁵

As a result of the participation of girls in active combat they experience considerable amounts of power and sometimes participate in abducting or press-ganging other children into armed groups as well as punishing and executing fellow child soldiers. Examples of African countries where this has taken place are Uganda, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Uganda the evidence suggests that the braver girls participate fully in the war; a few have even been able to attain positions of command.¹³⁶ In Liberia, girls were also supplied with drugs and according to the ex-combatants themselves, interviewed by Krijn Peters as part of a study by Save the Children, the girls who fought alongside the boys at the frontline were tough and excellent fighters and in return, they received a considerable amount of respect and were not exploited as easily as those

working in ancillary roles.¹³⁷ This leads Twum-Danso to ask the question: as this picture goes against the traditional image of the roles played by girls within various African communities, how does this factor affect the reintegration process?¹³⁸

Consequences of girl soldiering on girls and the wider society

In addition to suffering the same consequences of armed conflict as boy soldiers and other children generally, girl combatants face further challenges due to their combined role as girls and fighters and thus, have specific needs that need to be considered in demobilisation, rehabilitation and reintegration programmes.

In the 1996 UN study on children in armed conflict, Machel, emphasised the main public health effects of armed conflicts specifically for girls and women. These are notably pregnancy and its possible birth complications, made worse by the widespread practice of female genital infibulation in many African countries. Other factors include abortions (a decision in which the mother often has no say) and its own associated complications. This situation is compounded by the lack of health facilities and medical infrastructure in many war-torn countries. In addition to emphasising the public health problems mentioned above, the use of girls as sex slaves and 'wives' leads to a high incidence of STDs including HIV/AIDS. In fact, nearly 100% of girl abductees who escaped the LRA in Uganda are said to have sexually transmitted infections.¹³⁹ Girls who have been raped and forced into sexual servitude suffer from abdominal pains, cervical tearing, bleeding and infections, which can result in the increased risk of STDs. This, in turn, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease. Furthermore, as infectious diseases can often be passed onto the offspring of the girls during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding, the physical effects of their abuse is passed on to the next generation. In addition, adolescent girl soldiers frequently suffer from loss of menstruation due to malnutrition and trauma.

Psychological effects of conflict on girls are said to differ from those on boys to an extent. Girls who have experienced sexual violence also suffer from shock, shame, low self-esteem, poor concentration, persistent nightmares and depression. However, according to Mazurana and colleagues, girls tend to withdraw more than boys who are more likely to behave with aggression.¹⁴⁰

Girls who have been abducted by armed groups and sexually abused during conflict are often rejected by their communities and find no support there.

According to an aid worker in Sierra Leone, “families don’t want a rebel child”¹⁴¹; the fact that they were forced into service with the RUF often appears to be immaterial. Counsellors at World Vision/Uganda, related experiences of fathers rejecting their daughters because they had been ‘tainted’ by their abusers and as a result, it was believed that they had definitely lost all prospects for marriage. With nowhere to turn, these children often become sex workers. What future do these girls and their children have without family or societal support? The psyche of girl combatants is further assaulted by stigmatisation and taunts in which they are referred to as ‘used goods’ that have lost their taste. Their children, who have been born as a result of rape, are often branded as ‘children of hate’ or ‘children of bad memories’¹⁴² and suffer from stigmatisation and rejection similar to that experienced by their teenage mothers. In some cases these children are then spurned by their own mothers. According to counsellors in Gulu Town, Uganda, the increase in street children in the capital, Kampala, could partly be due to abandoned children born to girls used as sex slaves. Although difficult to corroborate, a focus group discussion with sex workers, also in Kampala, raised the same point.¹⁴³

Additionally, girls who participate in conflicts as active combatants also confront severe challenges reintegrating into family and society. According to Brett and McCallin, many young women, whose identities were forged in combat, may have to conceal the role they played in conflict and, “for fear of total rejection by their husband’s family, must pretend to be the gentle, soft-spoken and submissive woman that their civilian counterpart is.”¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, it has been argued that the participation of girls and women in conflict can have some positive consequences in the post-war period. In Sierra Leone, the war is seen to have brought opportunities to this group; more women are heads of households as a result of the conflict and a change in gender relations, whereby women can negotiate more effectively, has been noted.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the findings of a recent report produced by the Quaker UN Office entitled, *The Voices of Girl Soldiers*:

These girls exhibited a strong sense of self or they would not have survived. They often felt broken and alone but ultimately not severed from some fundamental sense of who they were or who they could become. Even when stripped of the outward signs of their identity and forced to participate in abusive relationships they were able to maintain some sense of self. They often acted fearless when terrified, and stood up for themselves in the face of brutal treatment and consequences. They lived with contradictions and intense feelings of ambivalence about supporting the movement and being recognized

for their accomplishments and at the same time being perpetrators of violence. They wanted to be someone and they longed to be valued. The girls continue to pursue life recognizing that once others knew that they had served in armed movements, even when it was against their will, they would be viewed as untrustworthy and generally diminished in the minds of others.¹⁴⁶

In light of this brief review, it is fair to conclude that just as in the case of boys, the use of girls by armed groups in war is due more to socio-economic and pragmatic considerations and less to culture. Moreover, this section has particularly emphasised the notion that child soldiering changes culture. In the case of girls some positive consequences of their active participation in conflict, such as their empowerment, is evident.