

Conference paper for the Sixth International Human Rights Education Conference "Translating Roosevelt's Four Freedoms to Today's World"/ PhD student Ms. Katri Tukiainen, University of Tampere/ Peace and Conflict Research Institute, Finland (Individual paper)

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Fragility of girls associated with armed forces and/ or armed groups in Sub-Saharan Africa

Focus: Eduational challenges for ex-girl combattants after the war experience in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo

Academic researcher has to be very innovative and careful about the used methodology while researching very often severely traumatized child soldiers, including girls. The Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo is a good example of the complexity and challenging nature of girl soldier problematic. Girl soldiers are in many occasions the big losers in conflict prevention and resolution so often all around the world, also in the DRC.

Here the focus is put on ex-girl combattants under 18-years old (The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Norwegian researchers Gunhild Odden and Milfrid Tonheim have done field research on this specific group of girls especially in South-Kivu in the DRC. PhD student Katri Tukiainen has done field work in North-Kivu and South- Kivu herself during 2007 – 2009, while working for the European Union and in North Kivu for her doctoral dissertation 2014 – 2015.

For the above-mentioned Norwegian researchers it is crucial that ex-girl combattants could be able participate themselves in determining how and in what way they want to be re-educated back to their communities and to normal life after have been forced to live their lives with armed forces or armed groups in the bush. The life in the armed conflict has become a normality for them and return to civilian life can be a challenging new phase of life for them, sometimes as traumatizing experience as the entrance to armed forces. Stigmatization of these girl soldiers is a huge problem. They very often have become persona non-grata in their communities of origin.

These girl soldiers have been forced to perform different kinds of tasks in the combat zones like cooks and combattants, and in the worst case scenario, sex slaves. They have been forced to "marry" rebel commanders, and they are often with babies, when they by good luck or by outside

help are able to leave the life in the bush. Girls themselves very often have means to overcome this traumatic experience, if they are involved in founding survival mechanisms inside official demobilization procedures. The most often their opinion is not even asked.

In many African armed conflict zones girl combattants constitute sometimes 40 % of the man/ woman power in the field. They very seldom participate into official DDRR (Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration) programmes piloted by the local governments and the UN. The DDRRs are mainly designed for adult male soldiers forgetting completely boy, and especially girl specificities. These DDRR programmes are rigid and sometimes don't even vary from country to country.

Instead of continuing being disempowered during all their lives, these ex-girl combattants have to be empowered. This cannot be done forcibly from the outside, but in close collaboration with girls, their families, if they still have one, and their communities of origin. Sometimes families and communities are simply afraid of letting these girls with their babies to come back home, because it is not accepted by the cultural code.

Sometimes it is better to find host families, at least for a 3-month period after demobilization, in order to find a peaceful environment, where to establish daily routines for these girls and their children. So that the healing process can start in a safe, sound and non-military environment. Sometimes ancestral purification rituals are needed to enter the civilian life.

Educational activities for these vulnerable girls are imperative (many of them are illeterate, and also a proper possibility to start/ continue studies and/ or vocational training and/or micro-credits after the war in order to get back some normality in their lives and become valuable members of their communities. Unfortunately many donors are not keen on giving funding on the rehabilitation and reintegration phase of the DDRR procedure, not even for adult males, and less for under-aged girls and boys.

Kirsten J. Fisher has been doing research on transitional justice for child soldiers. Her opinion is that for a just society to emerge on the other side of transitional phase, gender equality and respect for women's rights must be a priority of transitional justice processes. Unfortunately, this is very seldom the case.

Many ex-girl combattants demobilize themselves without any proper help from the UN or other national or international entity. One could say that they vanish again in the dark after have been already in the darkest dark. This is a worrying phenomena and still very much on-going practise.

Peer counselling could be one responsive measure. Talk and help from a newly empowered ex-girl combattant can be crucial for a self-demobilized girl combattant.

Child soldiers are used all over the world still today in mostly civil wars that affect very severely civilian population, especially women and children. Despite of the awakening of the international community in the child soldier matter, f. ex. recruiting children under 15-years old is a war crime in the International Criminal Court in the Hague, it is very difficult and almost impossible to catch the recruiters to answer for their crimes. Rampant impunity prevails.

The ex-girl combattants are the most vulnerable of all child soldiers and very often, almost always, their specific needs in the DDR process are almost completely ignored. New ways have to be found in order that these girls can become fully emancipated members of their communities and countries. Some kind of feminist discourse maybe could be raised in international affairs including conflict prevention and resolution.

Researchers Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry have been interviewing ex-girl soldiers in Mozambique after twenty years of warfare. The result in comparison with the DRC girl combattants is striking, because these ex-FRELIMO fighters from the DF (Destacamento Feminino, Women's Unit of the guerilla) have been strongly empowered by time spent in the armed group wanting the independence of the country from the Portuguese rule. According to FRELIMO rhetoric, the "emancipation of women" was both a means and an end in the war for Mozambican independence in the 1960's. F. ex. DFs staffed the FRELIMO bush schools where children and adults alike were taught reading, writing and arithmetic (skills necessary to the prosecution of guerilla war according the official FRELIMO discourse).

With Kirsten J. Fisher's concluding words: "To truly address a legacy of human rights abuses, the culture that supports gender discrimination and gives rise to gender-based violence must be addressed."

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