The Marginalization of Girl Soldiers in Sierra Leone's Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program: An analysis based on structuration theory

by

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ABSTRACT

An estimated 48,000 child soldiers were involved in the violent civil war in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002. It is suggested that approximately 12,000 were girls. Lacking material possessions and facing other negative structural factors, the majority was in need of some form of assistance post-conflict. Although international aid response was substantial, only 500 girls entered the countrywide Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program. The remainder followed a variety of different courses. Giddens' structuration theory offers a useful theoretical framework to explore the reasons for their absence in the program, as it permits a focus on the role of structure and agency in understanding behaviour. Social stigmatization and a gender-biased DDR program, within a broader structure of gender inequality, are identified as the principal problems.
RESUMÉ

On estime que 48,000 enfants soldats ont été impliqués dans la violente guerre civile en Sierra Leone entre 1991 et 2002. Il est suggéré que près de 12,000 d'entre eux étaient des filles. Avec des lacunes importantes au niveau matériel et faisant face à d'autres problèmes d'ordre structurel, la majorité de ces filles ont eu besoin d'une certaine forme d'assistance post-conflit. Bien que l'aide internationale ait été importante, seulement 500 filles ont été inscrites au programme national de Désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion (DDR). Les autres filles ont suivies différents parcours. La théorie de structuration de Giddens offre un cadre théorique utile pour étudier les raisons de leur absence dans le programme car il permet de focaliser sur le rôle de la structure et de l'agence dans la compréhension du comportement. La stigmatisation sociale et une inégalité de genre au sein du programme de DDR, situé dans une structure plus généralisée d’inégalité de genre, sont identifiées comme étant les problèmes principaux.
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<td>Armed Forces Revolutionary Council</td>
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<td>CDF</td>
<td>Civil Defense Forces</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>DDR</td>
<td>Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
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<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
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<td>ECOMOG</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group</td>
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<td>FGM</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation</td>
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<td>GoSL</td>
<td>Government of Sierra Leone</td>
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<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
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<td>National Commission on Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>RUF</td>
<td>Revolutionary United Front</td>
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<td>SC</td>
<td>Security Council</td>
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<td>SLA</td>
<td>Sierra Leone Army</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNAMSIL</td>
<td>United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone</td>
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<td>UN DDR</td>
<td>United Nations Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration</td>
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INTRODUCTION

“Basically when we talk about girls and demobilization, we are talking about something that never happened” (McKay & Mazurana, 2004, p. 111).

Rationale

Girls are recruited into fighting forces in situations of armed conflict across the globe. The experience of child soldiering can be extremely damaging, resulting in physical and psychological injury. Despite international and national laws that prohibit the military recruitment of children, this practice continues to affect tens of thousands of girls (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

For those who survive their wartime experience, the return to society poses many challenges. Extended time in fighting forces isolates them from family and friends and deprives them of basic healthcare and education. Many girls find themselves in poverty, poor health, and abusive relationships. Stigma attached to the girls for their involvement in the war, forces many to exist on the fringe of society as a marginalized group. Former girl soldiers face significant obstacles to post-conflict social integration.

In recent armed conflicts, the needs of former girl soldiers have been improperly managed. The United Nations Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs, installed in post-conflict societies to support the transition from war to peace, have failed to include girl soldiers. The DDR program in Sierra Leone (1998-2002) offers a case in point. Of the estimated 12,000 girls who were abducted or recruited by fighting forces, only 506 participated in the program (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). The striking absence of these girls is disconcerting and merits investigation.
Research Question and Objective

The following research question will guide this study: Why were girl soldiers absent from Sierra Leone’s Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program?

Divergent social theories and analytical frameworks were considered for this study. Recognizing that structural and agent determinist theories tend to exaggerate the role of either societal factors or free will, a decision was made to use the more dynamic and interactive approach of Anthony Giddens. Structuration theory, based on the interplay between the concepts of “structure” and “agency” as expressed in the “duality of structure”, will be used to help understand this problem.

The primary objective of this research will be to identify and evaluate the factors that contributed to the girls’ absence in the DDR program. It is hoped that through the study of this problem, recommendations may be offered for social workers to help in the design and implementation of more inclusive DDR programs in the future.

Overview of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter will provide a review of current literature on girls associated with fighting forces and their experiences post-conflict. The second chapter will present the situation of girl soldiers in Sierra Leone, and will include necessary contextual background on the civil war, including the United Nations DDR program. The third chapter will introduce the theoretical framework to be used in the analysis of this problem, where the main tenets of structuration theory will be explored. The fourth chapter will describe the methods of this study and the fifth chapter will contain the analysis of the problem and a discussion of the findings. The final chapter will provide recommendations for social work intervention in this problem.
CHAPTER 1
GIRLS IN FIGHTING FORCES AND THEIR POST-CONFLICT REALITIES

Girls are Soldiers Too

In 2007, 58 countries gathered at an international conference in Paris to discuss the problem of children involved in armed conflict. A notable outcome of the meeting was the development of the Paris Principles and Guidelines, which contained the following definition of a child soldier,

[a]ny person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities (Paris Principles, 2007, p. 7).

Although the media has popularized the striking images of boys clutching AK-47s, girl soldiers\(^1\) also play a major role in armed conflict. Webster (2007) warns, “[e]ven if the term ‘child soldier’ evokes an image of a heavily-armed boy, it also includes girls and unarmed children carrying out various tasks behind the front lines” (p. 230). Only recently have scholars such as Nordstrom (1997), Keairns (2003), McKay and Mazurana (2004), and Denov and Maclure (2005), begun to address the deficiency in the documentation of the dynamic experiences of girls as a distinct and legitimate group of combatants.

\(^1\) This term will be used throughout to refer to female child soldiers, as defined by the Paris Principles outlined in the introduction of this thesis.
In this chapter, a review of current literature on girls associated with fighting forces\textsuperscript{2} will be presented, beginning with an overview of the current international legal and normative framework around this issue.

**International Legal and Normative Framework**

In 1989, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is considered the centerpiece of children’s rights (Leibig, 2005). The CRC covers a range of issues that relate equally to girls and boys. For instance, Article 2 prohibits discrimination based on gender, Article 34 protects children from sexual exploitation and abuse, and Article 35 protects children from abduction and trafficking (United Nations, 1991; Leibig, 2005). The CRC also contains specific articles addressing children and armed conflict. Article 38 states, “State parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities” (United Nations, 1991, p. 19). Article 39 states that all appropriate measures are taken to promote recovery and reintegration (United Nations, 1991). Despite these legal protections, the CRC is often criticized for its lack of teeth, or capacity for enforcement (Leibig, 2005). It is the most widely ratified convention of the United Nations, yet the number of children recruited into fighting forces remains of critical concern (Liebig, 2005).

In recent decades, global attention to the problem of child soldiers has intensified. Webster (2007) explains, “Barely a crime thirty years ago, the ban on recruiting children took root in the 1990s and has since blossomed into over a dozen indictments in contemporary international criminal courts” (p. 227). The primary impetus for the

\textsuperscript{2} This term will be used in reference to both armed forces and armed groups. As outlined in the Paris Principles (2007), armed forces are defined as forces of a State, and armed groups, are defined as distinct from armed forces as non-State actors of war.
growing attention to this problem came from a groundbreaking report by Graça Machel in 1996 called “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” (Webster, 2007). Machel was appointed by the UN General Assembly to survey and document the scope and severity of this global problem (Webster, 2007). Below are some key international laws and guidelines that followed in the wake of this report, addressing the situation of girl soldiers either directly or indirectly.

In 1999, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child entered into force as a regional treaty. It extends protection for child soldiers, and includes some considerations for the distinct experience of girls (Organization of African Unity, 1999). Article 22(2) reads, “States Parties to the present Charter shall take all necessary measures to ensure that no child shall take a direct part in hostilities and refrain in particular, from recruiting any child” (Organization of African Unity, 1999, p. 11).

In 2002, the Optional Protocol on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict was established to address the issue of child soldiers directly, but does not address the existence of girl soldiers. According to Liebig (2005), while calling important attention to the problem generally, this has served to reinforce a “male-based definition of child soldiers” (p. 10).

The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (2007) emphasizes the distinction between boy and girl soldiers, stating,

While there are commonalities between circumstances and experiences of girls and boys, the situation for girls can be very different in relation to the reasons and manner in which they join the armed forces or armed groups...actors should recognize that girls are at risk of being ‘invisible’ and take measures to ensure that girls are included and relevant issues addressed at all stages (p. 14).
UN Security Council Resolutions have also shaped the international response to child soldiers. In 1999, SC Resolution 1261 strongly condemned the targeting of children in situations of armed conflict (Coalition, 2008). In 2000, SC Resolution 1325 was passed, and formally acknowledged the impact of war on women and girls, calling for greater inclusion of women in all aspects of peacekeeping and security initiatives (PeaceWomen, 2000). Building on the groundwork of 1261, UN Security Council Resolution 1539 (2004) called for special attention to the specific needs and capacities of girls associated with armed forces and groups.

These and other international laws and norms have helped put the issue of girls associated with fighting forces on the table and confirmed the need for concerted action.

_A Global Problem_

Despite advancements in international law and advocacy, child soldiers remain visible on the frontlines of violent armed conflict around the world. Current estimates put the total number of children in fighting forces in the tens of thousands, in one form or another, in at least 86 different countries (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). Countries like Columbia, Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, India, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), demonstrate the global nature of this humanitarian crisis (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). Thousands of these children are girls. They are estimated to comprise between 10% and 40% of child soldiers worldwide (Bouta, 2005; Mazurana et al., 2002). These estimates, which were gathered through the exhaustive research of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers in 2008, should be viewed as a modest assessment of the actual scope of the problem. Exact numbers are nearly impossible to calculate given the circumstances under
which children are drawn into war. The military recruitment of children is an illegal practice and great lengths are taken by perpetrators to conceal their presence within military ranks. However, there is greater potential harm in underestimating the size of this problem than overestimating it.

Experiences in Fighting Forces

Recruitment

The recruitment of girls into fighting forces typically occurs in two main ways: forced and non-forced recruitment (Wessells, 2006). Forced recruitment, or abduction, occurs when “girls are kidnapped or seized by fighting forces or groups and forced to serve in them” (Mazurana et al., 2002, p. 106). This form of recruitment is commonly characterized by threats or acts of violence and terror, leaving the child to choose between joining the group and defending her life. Between 1990 and 2003, the military abduction of girls occurred in 28 countries around the globe (McKay, 2006). As one girl associated with Sierra Leone’s main rebel group, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) explained about her abduction:

Who would dare refuse? Not even if you were mad... So they took me away... I did not know what we were heading for and what they wanted to do with me. I was in total fear (Denov & Gervais, 2007, p. 891).

Non-forced recruitment occurs in the absence of direct physical coercion and involves an element of choice on the part of the child (Wessells, 2006). However, the pressing forces of poverty, hunger, and perpetual insecurity that typify wartime scenarios, may limit the capacity to make educated and informed decisions; cautious interpretation is advised. Susan McKay (2006) argues, “The notion of girls freely joining is a contested

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3 A term generally used to describe the “compulsory, forced and voluntary conscription or enlistment of children into any kind of armed force or armed group” (Paris Principles, 2007, p. 7).
one, because these girls usually lack quality choices” (p. 95). To complicate matters further, commanders of fighting forces tend to play into children’s concerns over personal and economic insecurity. For children, membership can be a means of securing food, shelter, and safety (Mazurana et al., 2002). For girls who may have lost everything in armed conflict, joining becomes more than a choice, it becomes a way of survival. Situations of physical or sexual abuse at home may also lead to unforced recruitment into an armed group (McKay, 2006). One girl from the DRC explained why she joined an armed group by highlighting her relationship with her father: “I left because he beat us, he drank, and then he took me as his wife. I preferred to die in the war rather than to stay at home and to keep on suffering” (Brett & Specht, 2004, p. 88). Girls have also reported joining fighting forces to assert their equality with boys (Brett & Specht, 2004). Another girl soldier from the DRC justified her recruitment by explaining: “I was the only girl with three brothers, I wanted to help the rebellion, I thought that if my brothers could do it, well so could I” (Brett & Specht, 2004: 91).

The Indoctrination Process

Following recruitment into an armed force or armed group, girls are molded into soldiers. The process of indoctrination is essential for converting an otherwise peaceful child into one that is capable of extreme acts of violence. Singer (2006) states, “Indoctrination is the act of imbuing a child with a new worldview of a soldier” (p. 70). To facilitate this transition and to promote the ‘combat motivation’ of female recruits, military commanders employ a range of physically, verbally and emotionally abusive tactics, the severity of which depend on the creativity and cruelty of those in positions of power (Singer, 2006, p. 70). Common activities include initiation ceremonies, weapons
and logistical training, hot metal branding, physical abuse, narcotic sedation and ideological brainwashing (Singer, 2006). During Sierra Leone's civil war, many girls recruited by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) were branded with the letters ‘RUF’ on their backs and chests with hot metal irons to mark them as property of the rebel group. In Northern Uganda, girls have been forced to abuse and kill members of their own family at the time of abduction, instilling overwhelming guilt in the girls and extinguishing their hope of ever returning home (Pham et al., 2007).

Over time, some girls report adopting a military identity following the indoctrination process, which speaks to the impact that these abusive techniques can have. Formerly peaceful children can quickly be manipulated and trained to think and act like soldiers. Studies on girl soldiers reveal the range of ways that girls make meaning of their time with fighting forces. Some begin to identify with their abductors and commanders, and admit feeling powerful and exhilarated in performing violent acts.

Denov and Maclure (2005) found in Sierra Leone,

> [m]any girls were actively involved in perpetuating acts of violence, and became adept at using weapons as a means of attaining power and status. Actions that were initially alien and frightening eventually became synonymous with expressing their new group identity, and perversely, were seen as a source of recreation, excitement, and skill (p. 12).

One girl admitted, “I didn’t have the mind to kill someone initially...but later on I enjoyed the wicked acts...I was responsible for killing anybody that was assigned to die. I was so happy and vigilant in carrying out this command” (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 12).

The indoctrination process can be extremely powerful in altering the mental state and capabilities of innocent children. The emotional abuse, physical discipline, social
isolation, brainwashing and narcotics all work to force this transformation of identity. This is important in understanding the overall experience of girls in fighting forces and their post-conflict challenges.

Roles, Responsibilities and Experiences as Soldiers

The roles and responsibilities of girls in fighting forces are "multifaceted, complex and context specific" (McKay, 2006, p. 96). McKay (2005) elaborates further in stating that the experiences of girls "vary according to the force in which they are enrolled, their ages, and how gender is constructed within the force, such as whether girls are viewed as ‘equal’ to boys or are treated as slaves or servants" (p.389).

Girls are often considered the “prize possessions” of fighting forces, for the range of active, supportive and symbolic roles they play (McKay, 2006; Denov, 2007a). According to McKay (2006), girls are often included within fighting forces to help reproduce “traditional societal gender roles and patriarchal privilege” (p. 95). Girls tend to cook and clean for fighting forces, which often entails ensuring a constant supply of drinking water and firewood at military bases and camps. Depending on the circumstances of the conflict, girls also perform slave labour (Denov, 2007a). Girls are put to work checking roads and paths for explosive land mines. Often performed manually, with a lack of technological assistance, this is extremely dangerous work. Children are also exploited as porters to carry the group’s weapons and looted items, as fighting forces are continuously on the move.

Girls perform symbolic duties in fighting forces. In many conflicts in Africa, including Sierra Leone, girls are forced to perform traditional dances and put together theatrical pieces for the entertainment and levity for the troops (Denov, 2007a).
Sexual violence is commonly used to humiliate and emotionally break female recruits, and is reportedly the most debilitating aspect of the girl soldier’s experience (Denov, 2006). Treated as objects for the amusement of commanders and troop members, girls are subjected to many forms of sexual abuse, including gang rape and molestation. Many girl soldiers have reported being passed around to multiple abusers, resulting in sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive health problems.

Girls married to a member of an armed group, typically to a senior commander, are often referred to as “bush wives” (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Some former girl soldiers have admitted feelings of relief upon being “married” to a commander, as it may award them a certain level of protection from the advances of other soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Conversely, unmarried girls in armed groups are especially vulnerable to repeated rape, “[o]ften by many men during a single day” (McKay, 2006, p. 96).

Girl motherhood is one of the consequences of the pervasive sexual abuse of girl soldiers. These are girls, under 18, who become impregnated and give birth to children while a member of a fighting force. Under some circumstances, pregnant girls may be forced to undergo makeshift abortions, especially if the birth of the child would interrupt important military operations. Other girls endure painful unassisted deliveries, from which many do not recover (McKay, 2006). According to McKay (2006): “[m]any girls purportedly die during pregnancy and childbirth because of immature bodies, unsafe conditions and lack of healthcare” (p. 96). The babies of these young girls are immediately exposed to the turmoil and violence of war.
After the War: Effects of child soldiering on girls

While the effects of participating in war are wide-ranging, some of the more commonly reported problems for girl soldiers, relating to health, education and social stigma are presented below.

Health-related problems. Most girls emerge from war with some extent of psychological trauma. Direct exposure to violence and warfare over a prolonged period leads to symptoms of depression, anxiety, guilt, flashbacks, and nightmares (Mbengue Eleke, 2006). Girl soldiers will almost inevitably return in very poor physical health. Many have war-related injuries, including bullet or shrapnel wounds and amputations, and suffer from diseases related to malnourishment, sexual abuse, and drug addiction (McKay et al., 2006; Singer, 2006). Malaria, skin and respiratory tract infections have also been commonly seen among girl soldiers (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). Difficult medical issues include gender-specific problems like reproductive or urinary injuries resulting from traumatic sexual assault and unassisted deliveries (McKay, 2006). There is a high incidence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases due to repeated victimization from several different abusers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Lack of education and skills. Prolonged military isolation denies girls access to primary and secondary education (Honwana, 2006). When girls finally return to their communities, some as young women, the interruption in their studies is a major impediment to their reinsertion. With limited education and no marketable skills, many girls and young women are left in destitute conditions. Girls with dependents have an added obstacle to income generation as well as increased economic needs.
Social marginalization. Girls are socially marginalized post-conflict on two main levels. First, the crimes committed during war, looting, killing and maiming, at times by the girls themselves, often lead to their community resentment and exclusion (McKay et al., 2006). Many girls face rejection by their own families. In the aftermath of Sierra Leone’s civil war, mothers were known to have rejected their own children stating, “A child who committed such an atrocity could not have been born from my womb” (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004, p.22). Second, girls are harshly stigmatized post-conflict, especially for their sexual victimization. In some cases, as in the conflict in Northern Uganda among the Acholi\(^4\) people, girls who have been raped are deemed spiritually ‘unclean’ (Pham et al., 2007). Moreover, health complications due to repeated rape and molestation leave many girls feeling shameful of themselves and of their experiences. As a result, many former girl soldiers never marry; some are considered undesirable and others avoid men out of shame, distrust or fear (McKay, 2005). However, as Brett (2004) explains, girls who are not sexually victimized during the conflict, or who are able to conceal it, report less stigma from the community. Girl mothers are most harshly stigmatized post-conflict (Burman & McKay, 2007). The children of these young women offer living proof of their culturally taboo experience of sexual abuse, which leads them to be marginalized as social outcasts (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In some cases, girl soldiers, particularly those with children, choose to remain with their commander husbands after the war. Motivation for this is case-specific, but must be understood in relation to harsh treatment from families and communities.

\(^4\) The Acholi tribe inhabits the Northern region of Uganda, and has been the primary target of the Lord’s Resistance Army’s (LRA) violent 22 year insurgency.
The developmental consequences of war on the babies of girl soldiers remain unclear. More research is needed to document the long-term well-being of these children, as they are becoming a more prominent part of the social landscape of war. McKay (2006) states:

We have limited understanding of how girls' social reintegration affects their identity and their parenting which, in turn, affects the emotional and psychological development of their children. Their children...may be highly vulnerable because of the parenting they receive as well as the circumstances of their conception and early childhood years spent in the bush (p. 103)

Girl mothers and their children are most commonly reported in situations of protracted civil conflicts, like Northern Uganda, Colombia and Sri Lanka (Mazurana et al., 2002).

Support for Girl Soldiers

Recognizing the difficulties that girl soldiers encounter as they return from war, programs have been developed to help facilitate a smoother transition from combat to community. Intervention takes many forms depending on the social and cultural context, but most have the underlying goal of helping girl soldiers cope with the harsh realities of post-conflict reinsertion. Programs administered from international humanitarian organizations, usually rooted in Western values and principles, often attempt to address the psychological and medical aspects of the girls’ experience. In the DRC, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has worked on projects tailored to the needs of victims of sexual violence. Their projects offer gynecologic surgical treatment for incapacitating genitourinary fistulae\(^5\) in an effort to promote the girls’ acceptance back into their communities (ACQUIRE, 2006).

\(^5\) This type of problem occurs when a pathological opening exists between the bladder and the vagina or rectum allowing for the constant escape of urine or feces. It results from sexual trauma or traumatic child birth (ACQUIRE, 2006).
The psychological disturbances that so many girls experience is often interpreted through a Western lens as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Trauma counseling is a common service offered by organizations involved in this problem. At times, this view of the problem clashes with locally held ideas about the girls' experience. Depending on the context, local approaches might incorporate views of ancestral or evil spirits into understanding the behaviour of the girls during and after the war. Traditional therapies offered to the girls could involve ritual cleansing of bad spirits, as is commonly performed in Northern Uganda among the Acholi people. In their study of child soldiers in the region, Pham et al. (2007) discovered that more than 50% of children underwent ritual cleansing ceremonies when they returned from war. Stepping on an egg and the slaughtering of a goat were commonly performed, in line with traditional views of justice and forgiveness (Pham, 2007).

Other forms of support are related to skills building and specialized education. Deficiencies in training and education are commonly reported as major impediments to community reinsertion after the war. Many organizations have intervened in different post-conflict situations, offering seminars and training programs to aid girl soldiers. A common criticism of these methods is that they fail to take into account the dynamics of local economies, providing skills to young women that are ultimately unmarketable.

These offer only some of the varied and creative programs available to respond to the needs of former girl soldiers by international and locally based organizations. The efforts of individual organizations and centres have been instrumental in reaching out to this marginalized group, however their overall capacity is overshadowed by the size and influence of government and United Nations driven initiatives. Currently, national
governments, in collaborative post-war efforts with the UN, draw substantial funding from the international community. In recent conflicts, the needs of ex-combatants have been addressed through programs of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), which have had varying degrees of success. Attention to the capacity of these larger intervention programs to address the needs of girl soldiers is highly relevant. DDR programs are typically the first point of contact with the combatants in war, and therefore have major potential to reach out to this vulnerable group. An examination of the influence of DDR programs on girl soldiers is essential to this review.

The Road to Peace: The role of DDR

The United Nations DDR program is designed to promote the post-conflict stability of a nation or region as it begins the peace process. It is implemented to encourage combatants to leave their fighting forces, deposit their weapons and begin their return to society. The UN defines DDR as follows:

Disarmament is the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants, and often also of the civilian population. Disarmament also includes the development of responsible arms management programs.

Demobilization is the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups. The first stage of demobilization may extend from the processing of individual combatants in temporary centres to the massing of troops in camps designated for this purpose (cantonment sites, encampments, assembly areas or barracks). The second stage of demobilization encompasses the support package provided to the demobilized, which is called reinsertion.

Reintegration is the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and a national responsibility, and often necessitates long-term external assistance (UN DDR, 2005).
With the signing of a peace agreement or the declaration of a ceasefire between warring groups, all combatants are called to abandon their military roles and begin their return to peaceful society. This can be a long and arduous process. In civil conflicts, there are often many thousands of combatants involved in the war, and thousands of weapons in circulation. One of the greatest threats to long-term peace is the large volume of small arms and light artillery weapons that remain in the hands of armed groups (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2000).

**DDR Programs and Children**

DDR was not designed to manage the demobilization of children. The recent surge of child soldiers in armed conflict coincided with the implementation of the first official DDR programs. There was some awareness at a policy level that children were assuming active military roles in war, but corresponding practical changes have been slow to follow. Some efforts have been made to respond to the presence of child soldiers, but they have been poorly and inconsistently implemented.

According to UN DDR policy, children who present themselves at reception centres or disarmament sites are transferred to Interim Care Centres (ICC), where age-specific care is provided. Considered the “bridge” to reintegration, ICCs provide children with a range of services including psychosocial support, medical care, drug rehabilitation, educational and recreational activities, cultural cleansing rituals, and different forms of art therapy ((UNICEF, 2005, p. 20; Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). ICCs are included in DDR planning primarily to cater to the special needs of children and to begin the process of family reunionification, which is typically executed in collaboration with local child protection agencies and networks. Due to the high number of casualties

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6 Reception centres, demobilization centres (sites) are terms that are used interchangeably in this thesis.
in war, some children must be placed with extended family members, or in orphanages or group homes, according to the child’s age (UNICEF, 2005). ICCs are also intended to sever potentially abusive relationships between child soldiers and adult commanders.

The Marginalization of Girls in DDR

Despite the success of some DDR programs in promoting overall peace and stability in post-conflict societies, the program has proven ineffective for girl soldiers, particularly in the recent conflicts of Angola, Mozambique and Sierra Leone (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

In the case of Angola, whose civil war began in 1975 following independence and ended in 2002, Stavrou (2004) explains that girls were considered ‘dependents’ of male soldiers within armed groups, neglecting the combat duties many of them performed. As a result, girls were almost entirely left out of the DDR program. In Stavrou’s study of 40 girls associated with fighting forces, only 1 reported that her military status was officially recognized (Stavrou, 2004). Girls exiting the war were left to return to their community with no support. No ICCs were installed to aid their transition (Hill & Langholtz, 2003).

McKay and Mazurana (2004) revealed a similar problem in Mozambique. Despite the strong presence of girls involved in the war, which also began in 1975 and ended in 1992, they received discrimination in both UN and government initiated demobilization and reintegration programs for ex-combatants (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Many girls returned to their communities after the war completely unassisted.

The DDR program in Sierra Leone has gained attention for its near total absence of girl soldiers, and will form the focus of this study. In the following chapter,
background information on the decade-long civil war in Sierra Leone, including the experience of girl soldiers and the DDR program, will be provided.
CHAPTER 2
THE CASE OF SIERRA LEONE

Outbreak of Civil War

The war in Sierra Leone broke out in 1991, when a rebel group known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began its violent assault on the country (Gberie, 2005). Led by ex-army corporal Foday Sankoh, the RUF movement was waged on the backs of mostly impoverished disillusioned youth, who were struggling in the face of educational and economic inopportunity (Denov & Maclure, 2005). The notoriously corrupt All People’s Congress (APC) government had been swindling the people of Sierra Leone for decades, using revenue from the national diamond industry to pad their pockets, instead of building much needed social infrastructure in the country (Abraham, 2004). Youth, who represented more than 50% of the population at that time, were an especially marginalized group prior to the conflict (Denov & Maclure, 2005). The anger and frustration of so many young people was strategically harnessed by Sankoh and channeled towards a violent rebellion.

In the beginning, the RUF moved through the countryside, declaring themselves liberators of the people from a corrupt and repressive regime (Gberie, 2005). The frustration and powerlessness that so many Sierra Leoneans felt led some to sympathize with the movement. However it wasn’t long before the RUF revealed its true motives, power and greed. Desire for control over the diamond fields overshadowed any claims to rid the country of a corrupt regime (Gberie, 2005). In pursuit of their objectives, the RUF directed attacks almost exclusively at innocent civilians, especially women and children, to gain access to the diamond fields. Their violent tactics and total disregard for human life shocked the world gaining them international notoriety. Signature expressions of
terror included mass amputations of hands, arms, legs, and feet, systematic rape of women and children, murder and cannibalism (McKay, 2005).

The government initially underestimated the RUF as a mild security threat contained to the countryside. A lightly manned and poorly equipped military unit was deployed to contain the problem, which proved to be a major oversight with disastrous consequences. The RUF, initially a small movement of approximately a hundred young men, grew with time to a force in the tens of thousands (Gberie, 2005).

The Sierra Leone Army (SLA) led many unsuccessful offensives against the rebels. This has been in part explained by evidence of state collusion and complicity with the RUF, which unnecessarily prolonged the war (Abraham, 2004). Historians Arthur Abraham (2004) and Ibrahim Abdullah have exposed this collaboration, stating that government soldiers struck deals with members of the RUF to rotate control of the diamond fields for mutual profit. This phenomenon was dubbed the sobelization of the army: “soldiers by day, rebels by night” (Abraham, 2004, p. 106). SLA soldiers discovered that they could earn more by looting innocent civilians and stealing national revenue through the diamonds, than they could by performing their jobs, protecting the citizens. This collusion culminated in the installment of a junta government, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), led by sobel elements of the SLA and members of the RUF (Gberie, 2005).

In this highly insecure environment, the people of Sierra Leone felt completely unprotected. Once it was clear that the government forces could not be relied upon for protection, Civil Defense Forces (CDF) began to emerge. The CDFs, including the largest group known as the Kamajors, were based on local traditional hunter societies,
with deeply held spiritual and magical beliefs (Muana, 1997). They used charms and concoctions of herbs to make them invincible and impervious to bullets (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Using locally fabricated weapons, the CDFs engaged in military campaigns against the RUF, with surprisingly successful results (Muana, 1997).

After many failed attempts at peace, significant destruction of the country’s infrastructure and unquantifiable damage to the hearts and minds of Sierra Leoneans, the war finally came to an end in 2002. It is estimated that 48,000 children were among the approximate 130,000 soldiers that fought with armed groups and armed forces (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Of these, 12,000 were believed to be girls (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). The RUF had the largest portion of children within its ranks, but all the warring factions included child soldiers.

Children in the War

The number of child soldiers involved in the conflict in Sierra Leone was startling. At the time, children had been observed fighting in armed conflicts in Angola, Mozambique and Northern Uganda, but not on that scale. The exact motives behind the unprecedented use of child soldiers in Sierra Leone are unclear. Perhaps the most compelling explanation is the fact that there was a major shortage of adults willing to participate in the war. The RUF, unpopular with the vast majority of Sierra Leoneans, relied on the abduction and enslavement of children to continue the rebellion and pillage the diamond fields. Viewed as easy targets for their vulnerability and immaturity, the children were viewed as ideal substitutes who could easily operate the RUF’s weapon of choice, the Kalashnikov AK-47. Many surplus AK-47s, slated for destruction at the end
of the Cold War, instead flooded the illegal markets of politically unstable regions all over the world (Klare, 1999).

McKay and Mazurana (2004) completed a detailed study of child soldiers in Sierra Leone’s fighting forces, highlighting the presence of girls. They estimated that approximately 22,000 fought with the RUF, 5,000 with the AFRC, 3,500 with the SLA, and 17,000 with CDFs (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Of the approximate 12,000 girls, McKay and Mazurana (2004) suggest that the majority, nearly 8,000, were associated with the RUF. Most information available on the situation of girl soldiers in Sierra Leone centers on this dominant group. Limited data exists for girls formerly involved with the CDFs, and even less is known about the conditions within the SLA. McKay and Mazurana (2004) estimate that there were approximately 2,000 girls in CDFs and the SLA in total.

It should be noted that these figures represent only estimates of the actual number of child soldiers engaged in the war. UNICEF (2005) has declared that the exact number of children is “impossible to calculate” (p. ix). The collection of precise data is complicated by the fact that many children may have died during battle or escaped without ever revealing their soldier status (UNICEF, 2005).

*Girls in Fighting Forces*

Research on the experience of girls in fighting forces in Sierra Leone is limited. Denov and Maclure (2005) explain that,

Given women and girls’ low status within Sierra Leonian society and their exclusion from social, political and economic power and influence, it is perhaps not surprising that there have been very few accounts of girls’ involvement in the conflict (p. 4).
The research that does exist largely traces the experiences of girls in the RUF (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). As noted earlier, data on the 4,000 girls who fought with the SLA, AFRC, and CDFs, is scarce (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The description that follows is based on research conducted with girls formerly associated with the RUF and to a lesser extent, CDFs. Further work is needed in this area to clarify the diversity of experiences of the girls in different fighting forces.

Recruitment and Indoctrination

In their studies of former girl soldiers of the RUF, McKay and Mazurana (2004) and Denov and Maclure (2006) demonstrated that nearly all girls were forcibly abducted and forced to fight against their will. It is possible that some girls joined in the absence of direct force, but these were likely exceptional cases. Most girls interviewed by Denov and Maclure (2005), explained that their initiation into the world of conflict occurred under the threat of a gun. The abduction experience was also commonly characterized by sexual violence. Many girls reported being raped and molested in clear view of family and community members at the point of abduction (Human Rights Watch, 2003b). Maria, who was taken when she was only 12 years old states,

I was raped the moment they captured me by an older man and I bled and bled. They gave me some medicine, but I could not walk. The man who raped me later carried me on his back. The same day other girls were raped too. They would just rape you and leave you. It happened to me so many times, I can’t even count (Denov, 2006, p. 326).

Separating the girls from their communities and prolonging their isolation was an important part of the indoctrination process. All of the girls interviewed by Denov and Maclure (2005) reported feeling intense fear as they were dragged away and separated from their friends and family members.
Most girls received physical discipline and military training as part of their indoctrination, the extent of which varied among recruits (Denov & Maclure, 2006). Depending on what was expected of the girl, she may have been forced to run the perimeter of a field, or undergo intense physical and weapons training. For many, this was an unpleasant, frightening experience. One girl explained, “I felt very uncomfortable during the training, I was very nervous about it and I was trembling” (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p.8). In a study by Mazurana and Carlson (2004), 44% of girls interviewed reported receiving military and weapons training that eventually led to active duties in combat. Denov and Maclure found that all 40 of their respondents had received military training (Denov, 2007a).

Drugs and alcohol were frequently administered to alter the emotional and psychological states of the girls. Marijuana, cocaine, and “brown-brown”, a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder, were commonly used (Denov, 2007a; Singer, 2006, p. 81). Girls were also injected with substances they could not identify. According to Denov and Maclure, the drugs and alcohol engendered feelings of strength and fearless courage, which made the girls capable of carrying out acts of violence (Denov, 2007a). A girl with the RUF stated, “Before the injection [in the arm], I was nervous, afraid and unsure of myself. Later, after the injection, I felt more confident” (Denov, 2007a, p. 6).

Anti-government propaganda was instrumental in securing the loyalty and commitment of the girls to the RUF (Denov, 2007a). One girl admitted, “I did not willingly go and join them [RUF], but when I was abducted and my consciousness was raised about the movement, I became willing to fight (Denov, 2007a, p. 7). The RUF
easily exploited the poverty and inopportunity in Sierra Leone to convince young recruits that their violent rebellion against the government was justified. As one girl stated,

> When we were recruited there was a meeting held with all the recruits. At the meeting they were preaching that those in power were not giving all people access to benefits and that [the rebels] needed to get control...I was convinced by this meeting and it pushed me and motivated me to go to war (Denov, 2007a, p. 7).

In the CDFs, most girls were recruited by their fathers or husbands (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). Some reportedly joined out of sympathy for the cause and a willingness to defend the people of Sierra Leone (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Physical abduction was reported in a few cases, but does not appear to have been a common recruitment method by these groups.

Indoctrination ceremonies in CDFs were unique in that they involved rituals based on the spiritual beliefs of the traditional hunter societies. The girls were often bathed in native herbs and donned charms, believed to make them strong and invincible warriors (McKay & Mazurana, 2004).

Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of girls in the fighting forces of Sierra Leone were similar to those reported in other conflict. Younger girls were typically made to perform duties according to their physical strength and size, including light domestic chores like cooking and cleaning (Denov & Maclure, 2005). All girls assumed paramilitary roles to some degree. They worked as food producers, messengers, medics, spies, and porters, carrying weapons, ammunition and looting goods for the group. Many reported being regularly threatened with violence to secure their obedience. A girl formerly with the RUF states,
If you refused or failed to do what you were told, they would put you in a guardroom or tie you up. In some cases, one of [the commanders] might pass a command saying, ‘Kill that person for not taking orders’ (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 7).

Sexual violence was widespread in fighting forces in Sierra Leone. Girls were frequently used to satisfy the sexual impulses of many men. One girl states,

We were used as sex slaves. Whenever they wanted to have sexual intercourse with us, they took us away forcefully and brought us back when they finished with us. Sometimes, other officers took us up as soon as we were finished with, and subsequent ones were particularly painful...I don’t even know who might have been the father of my child (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 7).

Denov and Gervais (2007) discovered that in many cases, the girls were offered to senior commanders as “bush wives” in what have been called “AK-47 marriages” (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 7). This form of sexual enslavement typically began shortly after abduction. A bush union to a senior commander in the RUF afforded some girls positions of power and influence within the hierarchy (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). “They were in charge of deciding whom from the compound to send on raiding, abduction and spying missions; they gave orders and enforced discipline in the camps; and some advised their ‘husbands’ on military strategies” (McKay & Mazurana, 2004, p. 93). Commanders’ wives were also given authority over Small Boy Units and Small Girl Units within the RUF (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). These troops of children between the ages of 6-15 were dispatched to perform missions of food gathering as well as mass mutilation and murder (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). One described her role in the RUF as follows, “I became a soldier and later a commander. My job was to mobilize soldiers and lead them to fight...As a commander, I had six [child] bodyguards who protected me...I was a commander not only for children but even for some soldiers”
(Denov, 2007a, p. 10). As Denov (2007a) argues, participation in fighting forces provided some girls the chance to assume positions of power and authority over their male counterparts, a foreign concept to many.

As frontline fighters, girls were made to carry out horrendous acts of violence. As Denov (2007a) explains, the effectiveness of the indoctrination process, notably the constant exposure to violence, led many girls to normalize violent behaviour. Over time, committing acts of atrocities became routine. As one girl explained about her combat role,

"Our only motive to exist was killing. That is the only thing we thought about... I burned houses, captured people, I carried looted property. I was responsible for tying people, and killing. I was not too good at shooting, but I was an expert in burning houses. This was less risky. We could just enter the house after the enemy had left the area and set it on fire with kerosene or petrol (Denov, 2007a, p. 9)."

Amputations were widely used as a symbolic response to the government of Sierra Leone's campaign slogan, which read, "Let's put our hands together to create a new future" (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 8). Chopping off the hands of prospective voters was a terror tactic designed to intimidate pro-government supporters. Girls were made to carry out these types of activities, and were rewarded for bringing back bags full of evidence (Denov & Maclure, 2005).

**The DDR Program in Sierra Leone (1998-2002)**

The legal framework of the DDR program in Sierra Leone was based on the successive peace agreements of Abidjan (1996), Conakry (1997) and Lomé (1999), and Security Council resolutions (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). The National Committee for Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (NCDDR) was established by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) as the institutional body that
would oversee and manage the implementation of DDR (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). It was chaired by the President of Sierra Leone at that time, Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. The committee was composed of representatives of key internal ministries, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, the UN Military Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), the head of the RUF and the head of the AFRC (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). As a result, the international community heavily influenced the planning and policies of DDR. A UN military observer mission, UNOMSIL, was also deployed to assist in the disarmament phase of DDR.

The objectives of the NCDDR were threefold: to collect, register, and destroy all conventional weapons and munitions turned in by combatants; to demobilize the initially estimated 45,000 combatants from the SLA, RUF, AFRC, and the CDF; and to support ex-combatants through demobilization to prepare them for reintegration (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The program evolved over 3 phases.

**DDR: Phase I**

Phase I of DDR began in August 1998 and was short-lived due to renewed RUF attacks on the capital city Freetown (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). Over 3,000 combatants were registered, of whom 189 were children (UN DDR, 2008). During this phase of DDR, there were no official demobilization centres. Make-shift camps were designed to manage the collection of weapons and registration of combatants (UNICEF, 2005).

During phase I, no formal structures were in place to handle the disarmament and demobilization of combatants under the age of 18, especially not girls. Child protection
agencies were informally invited to handle the family reunification process of children, but there was no official protocol overseeing this process (UNICEF, 2005). Near the end of Phase I, UNICEF was invited to advise the NCDDR and the GoSL on technical and operational policies and procedures for child combatants (UNICEF, 2005). The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs (MSWGCA) in Sierra Leone was not involved in establishing post-conflict support mechanisms for child combatants (UNICEF, 2005).

**DDR: Phase II**

Phase II began in the wake of the Lomé Peace Accord (July 1999), wherein the following provisions on DDR were included,

Disarmament and demobilization of combatants of the RUF, CDF, the SLA and paramilitary groups was to commence within six weeks of the signing of the agreement;

The SLA was to be restricted to their barracks and their arms to be stored under the surveillance of a neutral peacekeeping force comprising UNOMSIL and ECOMOG who was to monitor the DDR process and provide security guarantees to all combatants;

The international community was requested to provide the necessary financial and technical resources for DDR; and

Particular attention was to be accorded to the issue of child soldiers, with resources to be mobilized to address their special needs (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003, p. 21).

After Lomé, it was clear that ECOMOG, long an active participant in the war, had lost its legitimacy as a neutral force in the eyes of RUF fighters. The RUF was reluctant to hand over weapons to these former adversaries at disarmament sites (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). To address this problem, the UN

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7 The Economic Community of West African States Military Observer Group (ECOMOG) was the multilateral regional security force deployed in Sierra Leone to reinforce military efforts against the RUF.
intervened with SC resolution 1182, which established the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) (UNICEF, 2005). UNAMSIL was mandated to govern the process of disarmament and demobilization at reception centres and cantonment sites in all 12 districts of the country. In addition to monitoring the country's overall security situation in key locations around the country, UNAMSIL was also given responsibility to oversee the "establishment of weapons storage centres, weapons verification at the reception centres, and screening and registration of ex-combatants at the demobilization centres" (UN DDR, 2008, p. 7). With joint funding support from the World Bank and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, phase II of DDR began in November 1999 (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). The goal of this phase was to "[c]ollect and destroy voluntarily surrendered weapons and to demobilize ex-combatants prior to reintegration into civilian life" (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003, p. 22).

Phase II afforded the first official NCDDR policy recognition to children in the fighting forces of the conflict. During this phase, the NCDDR and UNICEF placed child protection managers and agencies on the premises of disarmament and demobilization sites to help manage arriving children (UNICEF, 2005).

Demobilization centres were intended to receive adult and child combatants returning from the reception centres where they had turned in their weapons and been registered as a child or adult. At the demobilization centres, those individuals confirmed as children by workers at initial contact were sent to the children's division. They were then screened by a child protection agency to ensure that they had participated in the war and required demobilization (UNICEF, 2005) (See Figure II). According to the NCDDR
protocol, children should have been transferred from the demobilization centres within 72 hours to either family members or Interim Care Centres (ICC) (UNICEF, 2005).

During this phase of DDR, ICCs were included in the program for child combatants. Psychosocial and medical services were offered to help prepare for re-entry into society. There was also a specialized Rapid Response Education Program for children between 10 and 14 years of age, intended to bring the children up to the educational level of their peers in the community, over a period of six months (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003). Promoting these centres as a valid form of interim care was a priority of DDR. There was concern that the children would become institutionally dependent on the protective environment of the ICCs.

Limited funding was given to community-based reintegration programs, involving educational and skills training, and follow-up visits from social workers from the child protection agencies (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003).

Phase II was arguably better managed and planned, and ultimately led to the disarmament and demobilization of over 18,000 combatants, including 1,982 registered children (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003; UNICEF, 2005). Unfortunately, implementation and procedural errors led to the break down of phase II. The exit/entry strategy for ECOMOG and UNAMSIL forces was poorly timed. ECOMOG was pulled out before UNAMSIL had been properly established in its place, creating a "[s]ecurity vacuum that the RUF exploited fully" (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003, p. 22). Recurrent hostilities broke out in April 2000, stalling the DDR program until the signing of the Abuja Ceasefire Agreement in May 2001 (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003).
**DDR: Phase III**

Phase III of DDR began in May 2001 after the signing of a second Abuja peace agreement on 10 November 2000 (UN DDR, 2008). This was the final and most productive phase of DDR in Sierra Leone. With increased financial support from the international community and a strengthened and a reinforced UNAMSIL contingent, phase III led to the disarmament and demobilization of 47,781 combatants, including 4,272 children (Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003; UN DDR, 2008).

During this phase, UNAMSIL managed the disarmament sites, while the NCDDR managed the establishment of demobilization centres in old school buildings (UNICEF, 2005). The order of operations and procedures implemented during Phase II regarding adults and children were left unchanged for phase III (UNICEF, 2005). As of January 2002, when President Kabbah announced that “the flames of war have been extinguished”, a total of 72,500 combatants, including 6,845 children, had been formally disarmed and demobilized, and 42,500 weapons had been collected and listed as destroyed (Human Rights Watch, 2003a; UNICEF, 2005; Department of Peacekeeping Operations, 2003).

**The Missing Girls**

Despite credit for its role in the successful disarmament and demobilization of over 72,000 soldiers, the DDR program in Sierra Leone received criticism for the absence, and apparent exclusion, of women and girl soldiers. Mazurana and Carlson (2004) stated,

> there is substantial disparity between the numbers of girls within the forces and those entering DDR programs, thus calling into question the design, implementation and success of these programs (p.19).
Out of the 6,845 children that passed through the DDR program in Sierra Leone, 547, or 8% were girls (McKay & Mazurana, 2005). Of the estimated 12,056 girls thought to have been associated with armed forces and armed groups, only 4.5% entered the program (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). These figures compare with an attendance rate of approximately 70% for adult soldiers and 17% for boy soldiers (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). The absence of this group is a cause for concern and forms the focus of this study.
CHAPTER 3
OVERVIEW OF GIDDENS’ STRUCTURATION THEORY

Introduction

British sociologist Anthony Giddens introduced the theory of structuration in the late 1970s in response to what he perceived to be a shortcoming in the works of earlier scholars (Giddens, 1984). Sociologists before him, including Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, explained human behaviour as a product of either external pressures in society, or of motivational impulses located within the individual. These philosophical traditions portrayed the macro and micro levels of society as largely separate and independent of one another. By presenting structure and agency as isolated opposing forces, Giddens felt that these perspectives were inherently flawed in that they failed to recognize the complex interdependence of the two (Giddens, 1984). He proposed a relationship of interdependence between the individual actions of human beings and the overarching structures of society. This approach to the study of social behaviour represented a major departure from earlier traditions and its logical application has established Giddens as one of the great sociological thinkers of the modern era.

In this chapter, Giddens’ structuration theory will be presented and offered as an analytical framework to explain the absence of girl soldiers in Sierra Leone’s DDR program. The main tenets and constructs of this theory permit a multidimensional examination of the factors surrounding this problem. Structuration theory seeks a balance between structural and agent determinism in explaining social phenomena, highlighting the importance of the relationship between the structure and agency. Current literature on the situation of girl soldiers tends to overemphasize structural influences, while
undermining the role of agency and thus the power of choice (Denov, 2007a). This theory was selected as a framework to avoid an overemphasis on strictly societal factors in understanding the problem.

**Structuration Theory**

Structuration theory was formulated to offer a more generally applicable model of social behaviour. Acknowledging the value of structure and agency based theories, Giddens developed a perspective that incorporated the strengths of both, rejecting that either is sufficient on its own. Structuration theory holds that structure and agency exist in a relationship of interdependence, where one constantly influences and affects the other. This dynamic relationship is referred to as the “duality of structure”. Giddens argues that to understand why human beings behave the way they do, the structural factors in society and the capacity for human agency must be acknowledged. A review of Giddens’ conception of the terms structure and agency is helpful.

**Structure**

Giddens defines the structure of society as “Rules and resources organized as properties of social systems” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). He explains that the rules, which are entrenched in society to varying degrees, are established according to the distribution of resources in society. In other words, those with the greatest control of resources, both in terms of material wealth and political and social power, have the greatest potential to affect the structure of society. They have the ability to establish structures that promote their best interests. Giddens’ states, “Resources are media through which power is exercised” and through which rules can be created to either maintain or transform the existing structure of society (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). In this way, the structure of society is
an expression of domination and power (Giddens, 1984). The structure of society is essentially a macro level representation of micro level behaviour.

Structure is essentially the defining features of a society. Taking many different forms, including traditions, religion, politics, laws and gender norms, the structure embodies the values and belief systems of a society. As previously stated, those in positions of power and dominance can more readily shape the structure for their own benefit, which can create structures of oppression for more marginalized groups in society. However, Giddens maintains that even seemingly disenfranchised individuals do contribute to affect the structure. He notes that, “…all forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 16). This point is significant as it implies that all individuals, even those in desperate conditions, have the capacity to affect social change through their actions (Giddens, 1984, p. 15).

Giddens’ argues that the structure of society is created by the interactions of individuals and based on the distribution of power, and influences their behaviour in return. In this way, the structure of society acts to constrain and enable actions. To understand this concept, a description of Giddens’ concept of agency is useful.

Agency

In simple terms, agency refers to the capacity of an individual to make choices. Long and Long (1992) offer a helpful description of this concept,

In general terms the notion of agency attributes to the individual actor the capacity to process social experience and to devise ways of coping with life (p. 22).
Structural theories view human behaviour as a product of imposing societal influences, minimizing the potential for independent choice. Conversely, Giddens views agency as a necessary point of analysis in deciphering social behaviour and phenomena.

While acknowledging the influence of structure on individuals, Giddens conceives of human beings as knowledgeable agents or actors in their social realities, with the capacity for rational thought and informed decision-making. He is careful not to overstate the freedom of choice of individuals by arguing they are both constrained and enabled by the structures in their societies (Giddens, 1984). Through their capacity to make choices individuals can choose to either, uphold and sustain existing structures, or challenge and transform them through their actions. In their decision-making, which he argues occurs on different levels of consciousness, individuals constantly tap into their understanding of the structures in society and take actions that promote their well-being (Giddens, 1984). Sometimes individuals can process structures on a “discursive” level, meaning they can articulate their understanding, and other times it occurs much more subconsciously on a “practical” level (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). In either case, Giddens stresses that individuals always maintain some level of understanding of their structural environments.

_Duality of Structure: Linking Structure and Agency_

The concept of a duality of structure refers to the constant interplay between the individual members of society and the overarching social structures. Individuals are guided by existing structures and existing structures are guided by individuals. Giddens views these two spheres of social behaviour as inseparable and mutually dependent.
Structuration Theory and Girl Soldiers

The lack of participation in DDR by girl soldiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone highlights a complex profile of structural and agency factors, which will be studied using Giddens' theory. Estimating the relative importance of the girls' own decisions and the various societal pressures is an important step in the analysis of past experience and the planning of future intervention strategies.

Using the lens of Giddens' structuration theory, the girls' behaviour will be studied in terms of both agency and structure. Whether they were empowered individuals, who made rational choices, or helplessly bound by structural factors, will be analyzed in detail. The girls' collective actions in bypassing the DDR program will also be analyzed as a potential illustration of the duality of structure.
CHAPTER 4
METHODS

Design

In addressing the research question, this study used a qualitative approach involving the analysis of documents. This research design was chosen as a substitute for the collection of primary data in Sierra Leone. Constraints of time and resources prevented travel to the area of study, where interviews with former girl soldiers would have been a valuable source of data, in addition to a review of documents.

Anthony Giddens' structuration theory was selected as a theoretical framework to examine the problem. Its emphasis on societal influences (structure) and individuals’ capacity to make choices (agency) offered a useful lens through which to understand the post-conflict situation of the girl soldiers.

Sample

A sample of documents was collected based on four key criteria, as specified by Flick (2006) when using documents as data; authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The lack of direct access to the population of study made adherence to this selection style critical. As noted earlier, the inability to conduct interviews with the girls regarding their personal experiences meant that the study was dependent on previously collected data. Steps were taken to ensure that the above criteria were respected to obtain as accurate an understanding of the situation as possible.

A sample of documents was obtained from academic sources, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and inter-governmental organizations, and formed the base of the analysis. The work of leading scholars in the field, notably Susan McKay, Dyan Mazurana, Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, were reviewed in detail. These
individuals are well known and respected in the field, and are credited for the high quality of their work. Their writings are based on field research, involving interviews with girl soldiers in Sierra Leone and other parts of the world where girls have been implicated in armed conflict. Their studies have led to the significant advancement of knowledge on the situation of these girls as a distinct group of child soldiers.

Documents produced by NGOs that have dedicated themselves to the problem of child soldiers were considered carefully. These included Rights and Democracy, Human Rights Watch (HRW), and Women and Peace. Reports of The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, an advocacy and research-based network of organizations and individuals committed to ending the military recruitment of children, provided current statistics and information on the status of child soldiers worldwide. While NGOs have their own biases and agendas, they nevertheless provide an important balance for data gathered from government sources that are sometimes motivated by political agendas that shape the type of information published.

The United Nations, a major actor in human rights and conflict issues around the globe, offered an exhaustive supply of information. The UN Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Resource Centre, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Economic Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO) were all valuable sources. In particular, these UN agencies provide detailed documentation of the pre- and post-war situation in Sierra Leone.
Limitations

The reliance on documents as data was a limitation of this study. Meticulous review of documents can be a very effective method for understanding complex situations, however it does not allow for an empowering approach to research. In the study of this marginalized group in Sierra Leone, it would have been ideal to include the participation of the girls. Consulting with them on issues relating to the design, objectives and implementation of the study would have certainly added value to the project and enhanced its representativeness of this group. Additionally, including their voices and perspectives would have helped to triangulate data retrieved from documents alone.

Existing research in the literature has focused extensively on individual case histories and personal descriptions of experiences. With these studies the sample sizes have been relatively small and therefore it is difficult to extrapolate the data to the total experience of girl soldiers.

Research based entirely on a review of existing documents also presents the limitations of any retrospective study. Verification of data and the exact course of events is not possible and the likelihood of error increases as the events under study fade into the past. Since there are no satisfactory alternatives, it is hoped that this project will lead to a more structured plan for future research.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS OF DDR AVOIDANCE

This chapter will analyze the absence of girl soldiers from DDR under three basic categories; first, the structural factors that faced them on their return to society; second, a description of the choices available to the girls on return, and what choices they made; and third, an examination of the interplay between the girls’ behaviour and the structure of society.

Structural Influences Affecting Returning Girl Soldiers

Gender Inequality

The girls were confronted by a society in ruin. Eleven years of civil war had destroyed the country’s infrastructure, resulting in reduced access to education, poor quality healthcare and social services, and limited economic opportunities. These structures were accentuated by the thick layer of gender inequality embedded in the culture of Sierra Leone. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report,8

Women and girls in Sierra Leone, before, during and after the conflict, were subjected to discrimination by practice, custom and law. There is no basis to justify the discrimination that women have endured in Sierra Leone (Mossman, 2008, p. 85).

Social indictors convey the overall lower quality of life for women and girls in Sierra Leone. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that in 2007 only 26% of women, 15 years and older, were literate (UNESCO, 2008). This figure compares to a rate of 49% for men in the same age category (UNESCO, 2008).

8 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as a condition of the Lomé Peace Accord to promote justice and healing after the civil war in Sierra Leone, by offering survivors a platform to tell their stories (Mossman, 2008).
National legislation has long privileged men over women in Sierra Leone. Laws governing domestic relations offer clear evidence of this. Under recent customary law, which governs the majority of the population, a husband has the right to “reasonably chastise his wife by physical force” (HRW, 2003b). Only if he harms her to the point of wounding her or causing great pain does she then have the right to divorce him. This law has since been replaced by the Gender Acts of 2007⁹ which award greater protection for women. However, the improved laws have yet to affect local attitudes on violence against women. As Lindsay Mossman (2008) states,

The implementation of legislation can be problematic when it impacts on culturally sensitive practices and disrupts a system based on power hierarchies and community norms. Because the changes in legislation [Gender Acts] significantly affect customary marriage, customs of inheritance, and the methods for dealing with domestic disputes, implementation will be a challenge (p. 87).

Visible change on the ground will require more aggressive reform of the justice sector, including more regional court facilities (Mossman, 2008). Many local court systems, run by chiefs and traditional rulers, remain unclear about what the Gender Acts entail and therefore are unprepared to handle claims brought before them (Mossman, 2008). Ultimately, the effectiveness of these new laws to bring about change depends on the capacity and willingness of women and girls to come forward and report violations. This will require them to develop faith in the same legal institutions that have historically denied them protection, which will take time.

Gender-based sexual violence is another reflection of gender inequality in the country. While gross underreporting makes it difficult to obtain accurate data on the

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prevalence of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, Human Rights Watch has stated that the problem is widespread (HRW, 2003b). Attitudes towards victims of sexual abuse encourage secrecy around this socially taboo experience. Girls are often blamed for their role in the abuse, considered to have invited it some way. It is still widely believed that rape can only occur if the woman is a virgin (HRW, 2003b).

Local customs and traditions in Sierra Leone also reflect the inferior social status of women. Female genital mutilation (FGM)\textsuperscript{10}, specifically the “partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, with or without excision of the labia majora”, is still practiced on 90\% of girls and women in Sierra Leone (World Health Organization, 2005, 2008). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2008), this practice is extremely damaging both physically and psychologically, placing girls and women at an increased risk of infertility, bladder and urinary tract infections, complications during child birth and HIV/AIDS. FGM is considered a violation of international human rights, and according to the WHO reflects “deep rooted inequality between sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women” (World Health Organization, 2008).

The structure of gender inequality that existed prior to the war continued into the post-conflict period. According to Jamesina King, current Chair of the Human Rights Commission in Sierra Leone, “The inequality that women had faced in society before the war, and continued to face afterwards, had only been exacerbated by the gross violations they suffered during the conflict” (Mossman, 2008, p. 84).

\textsuperscript{10} The practice of FGM is rooted in cultural, religious and social factors within families and communities around the world. It is typically performed as a rite of passage for girls (WHO, 2008).
Social Stigmatization

The social stigmatization of returning girl soldiers was an influential structure of society affecting this group. The inferior status of women and girls in the country prior to the conflict, translated into harsher treatment and social exclusion of female combatants after the conflict. The involvement of girls in fighting forces upset the traditional gender norms held by local communities. Susan McKay (2005) writes,

Community members often react with hostility and fear to girls coming back from a rebel fighting force. This is understandable because these girls were among those who either witnessed or perpetrated acts of terror against community members and profoundly violated community norms of behaviour. Consequently, returning girls are often provoked, stigmatized, and poorly accepted by community members... (p. 393).

In Sierra Leone, communities were either unable or unwilling to accept the changed identities of returning girls, and often responded with rejection.

The widely publicized sexual victimization of girls in the war led to stigmatization. Their potential as wives was reduced, as traditional gender norms mandate that girls should be virgins before they marry (McKay, 2005). As Denov (2005) explains,

In societies like Sierra Leone where girls are valued primarily for their future roles as wives and mothers, and where marriage is the best option to obtain economic security and protection, being ‘unmarriageable’ often leaves girls marginalized both socially and economically (p. 9).

Stigmatization was worse for girls exhibiting proof of their victimization. This included girls suffering from major gynecological injuries, such as genitourinary fistulae causing incontinence, who were unable to hide the fact that they had been raped, and also girls returning with children of their own. Their babies offered indisputable proof of their taboo sexual experience (McKay, 2005). According to UNICEF (2005), the
stigmatization of girl soldiers was aggravated because there had been limited success in sensitizing the communities to the victimization and experiences of girls in the conflict. Stigma remained an imposing structure facing ex girl soldiers and a potent reason for the concealment of their combatant experience.

Post-conflict Options for Girl Soldiers

There was an expectation of girl soldiers to reintegrate and become productive members of society once the war had ended. The reintegration of former combatants is considered a necessary step in the promotion of peace and stability in post-conflict societies (UN DDR, 2005). The transition was made especially difficult for girls, due to the structures of gender inequality and stigmatization that they faced.

During this period, there were several support options available to aid the girls' return to civilian life. They were entering a new and unfamiliar society, one that had been turned upside by war. To ease the transition of combatants and to help them navigate the new social and political order, different initiatives were undertaken by the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), together with members of the international and local community. These programs can be understood as expressions of the structure of society, exerting influence on the girls.

The most far-reaching and heavily funded program available to ex-combatants, including girl soldiers, was the official DDR program. As noted earlier, the DDR program was a collaborative effort between the GoSL and the United Nations, and resulted in the establishment of countrywide reception centres to disarm, demobilize and

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11 This did not necessarily involve returning to former communities, as it was not always possible. Many villages and towns were destroyed during the war and families separated. The ‘return’ to society was often not a return at all, but rather an entry into a new post-war environment. The accuracy of the term (re)integration in describing this process can be questioned; integration may be more appropriate.
reintegrate the combatants in the war. DDR was one of the post-conflict options available to the girls as they planned for their return to society.

If the girls chose to return directly to their communities, they had the option to take advantage of community-based initiatives offered through international and local humanitarian aid organizations and child protection agencies. A wide variety of services and resources were offered to former girl soldiers and war-affected children more generally. Traditional healers who could perform ritual cleansing ceremonies to aid their acceptance back into the community were a trusted part of the cultural heritage of the girl soldiers, and available throughout the villages. The girls could also take advantage of more informal means of support, through the kindness of friends, families and strangers, depending on what was available to them.

*The Choices They Made: Evidence of agency*

There has been a tendency in the literature to reduce girl soldiers to helpless victims of circumstances beyond their control (Denov, 2007a). Such a portrayal of the girls can lead to the incorrect assumption that they were all affected by their wartime experiences in the same way and thus had similar reactions. This was not the case in Sierra Leone. Evidence of their agency can be found in research descriptions of the actions they took post-conflict. Denov (2007a) has stated, “Despite the powerful structural forces that affected them all, girl child soldiers demonstrated diversity in their capacity to exercise agency and to make independent choices” (p. 17). The fact that different girls made different choices when faced with the same societal structures, demonstrates their ability to choose for themselves. Individual case studies reveal the
fact that each girl chose her own path of reintegration based on personal needs and options provides further evidence of agency.

As noted earlier, there is a scarcity of data documenting exactly what happened to the girls as they left the war. However, what is known for certain is that 506 girls entered the DDR program as they left their fighting forces (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). When compared to the estimated 12,000 thought to have participated in the war, this represents less than 5% of the total. This indicates that most girls made alternative choices to DDR. Below, a review of the girls’ choices will be provided.

_Bypassing DDR_

Despite the potential benefits of participating in DDR, including access to food, shelter, and varied forms of psychosocial support, an active decision was made to obtain reintegration support through other means. Interviews with former girl soldiers have revealed that specific aspects of the program acted as major deterrents for them. Three of these are highlighted below.

_Exclusion at DDR entry._ To enter DDR, combatants were required to present a weapon or ammunition, or provide “acceptable proof” that they had been associated with a fighting force during the war (UN DDR, 2008, p. 4). This condition was commonly referred to as the “cash for weapons” approach (Denov, 2007b, p. 5). The emphasis on weapons led to the exclusion of girls who had assumed paramilitary duties of cooks, porters, and sexual slaves, but did not fit the ‘typical’ profile of a soldier carrying a gun. This was rooted in an initial over-classification of women and girls at the policy level as “camp followers” or dependents who would not require demobilization (UNICEF, 2005). Believing them to be primarily wives and sexual slaves, overlooked the needs of girls that
fought as frontline fighters, many of whom did not have sole possession of a gun. A common arrangement was for a small group of girls, 6 or 7, to share a single weapon. The failure of the DDR program to appreciate the complexity and diversity of girls’ roles and responsibilities led to gender-insensitive policies and practices.

In principle, combatants under the age of 18 were not required to offer proof of involvement in the war (UNICEF, 2005). ECOMOG and UNAMSIL forces were instructed to admit all children arriving at the reception centres. However, Mazurana and Carlson (2004) discovered that,

“Despite official policy, the possession of an AK-47 (even with a group) and knowledge of its assembly and disassembly was repeatedly used by disarmament administrators to determine entry into the program, even for those under 18” (p. 19).

If officials could not determine the age of a young person, they were instructed to bring the combatant to an Age Verification Centre, where a social worker would then interview the person in question in his or her local language to determine his or her correct age (UNICEF, 2005). Following this verification process, the combatant would be registered as either an adult or child, and transferred to a demobilization site or Interim Care Centre (ICC) accordingly. Girls were never supposed to be denied access to DDR.

The inconsistency that existed between policy and practice prevented many girls from passing through DDR. Mazurana and Carlson (2004) discovered that 46% of girls interviewed cited not having a weapon as one of the main reasons they avoided the program.

_Inhospitable conditions in DDR._ A common criticism, and reason for DDR avoidance, was the paucity of supplies specifically for women and girls (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). Mazurana and Carlson (2004) found that 43% reported that they did not
receive adequate clothing and 54% reported that they did not have access to sanitation items and female hygiene products.

There was also a shortage of healthcare professionals within DDR facilities prepared to handle the gender-specific medical needs of girls. Mazurana and Carlson (2004) found that 23% of those interviewed said that they were not given medical attention upon request at demobilization centres and ICCs. Given the health complications of girls during and after the conflict, this represented a major deterrent.

*Insecurity for girls in DDR.* Many girls experienced physical and sexual abuse at the hands of male soldiers and commanders during the war. A perceived lack of physical safety within the premises of the DDR program was thus a powerful deterrent for many girls. Three aspects of DDR were commonly reported as threats to their security. First, DDR was a program run and controlled by men. While child protection agencies employed some female staff at DDR sites, no formal measures were taken at a policy level to ensure proportional representation of female staff. Of the 260 Military Observers (MO) of UNOMSIL that were deployed to monitor and document the situation of human rights within the DDR program, none were women (UNAMSIL, 2005). Considering the girls' experiences of gender-based violence, many had become distrustful of males, particularly in a militarized context (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The lack of female authority figures was thus a deterrent to entering DDR.

Second, inadequate physical space was a characteristic of the DDR facilities that heightened the sense of insecurity among girls. A girl soldier formerly with the RUF admitted leaving the program after only three days, stating, “There were too many people crowded in, too many men with nothing to do. The security was bad” (Mazurana and
Carlson, 2004, p. 20). Under most circumstances, sleeping quarters were separate for girls, but during the daytime there was frequent contact with male soldiers (UNICEF, 2005). Another girl reported,

The officers [at the camps] who were on duty were not able to control the boys [former combatants], so the boys were coming over to [the girls] and harassing us for sex. I didn’t feel safe and my friend and I decided to leave and go to Freetown because of that. Since we came to Freetown I have been living in the street (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 20).

Girl mothers reported actively avoiding DDR out of fear for the safety of their children (UNICEF, 2005). There were no specific policies or procedures in place to ensure their safety and protection (UNICEF, 2005).

At some demobilization sites, the children were partially separated from the adults, but were dependent on adult camps for food and water (UNICEF, 2005). Continued contact with former commanders and soldiers was inevitable. According to UNICEF (2005), “Both the environment and operations within demobilization camps conspired to facilitate and enhance the very commander/child structure the process was designed to break” (p. 12).

Girls that made it to the ICCs from the adult reception sites reported similar problems. The child-oriented centres were largely designed to handle the needs of boys, which produced an inhospitable and insecure environment for the girls (UNICEF, 2005). Programming was directed at activities for boys and girls reported feeling left out (UNICEF, 2005).

Finally, the sense of insecurity of the girls within DDR was enhanced due to the extended time that they were kept at adult cantonment sites. According to official NCDDR policy, children were to be transferred to ICCs within 72 hours of their arrival at
the receptions centres (UNICEF, 2005). This target was rarely achieved. Some girls spent weeks at the DDR sites, indicating a breakdown between policy and practice, and a lack of appreciation for the importance of this rule, especially considering the girls’ vulnerability to sexual violence in the crowded spaces (Mazorana & Carlson, 2004; UNICEF, 2005).

*Gender blindness of DDR.* Lisa Denney (2006) has suggested that the blindness towards the needs of girls within DDR stems from an overly masculinized portrayal of war and soldiers. She argues that, despite evidence from recent conflicts which points to an increasing presence and participation of women and girls in armed forces and groups, there is a continued reliance on traditional notions of soldiers as men. In Sierra Leone, this resulted in a gross underestimation of the number of girls involved in the war, which severely impacted the design of DDR. Denov (2007b) has stated, “By downplaying the role of female combatants during the war, the DDR program had the effect of extending gender-based power differentiation and gendered insecurity into the post-conflict era” (p. 5). The structure of gender inequality thus influenced the girls through the male-biased DDR program.

*The effect of social stigma.* According to UNICEF (2005), “There had been little sensitization with communities on the victimization of girls in the conflict and most feared the stigma that would come with admitting eligibility for demobilization” (p. 16). This gender-based stigmatization acted as a powerful structure of influence shaping many the girls’ decision to bypass DDR. There was a clear preference for more anonymous sources of support. As one girl formerly involved with the RUF stated,

> No, I didn’t go through DDR. I was too afraid. I was afraid that people would be able to identify me and single me out as one of the bad people of
the war. I didn’t want anyone to learn that I was in the bush. I didn’t want my name advertised – I’m ashamed and very afraid (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p. 19).

**Alternative Choices to DDR**

The expression of agency led to the virtual abandonment of the DDR program by girl soldiers. In its place, the girls found alternative means of support based on a personal assessment of their needs. The extent of their volition is mirrored in the diversity of their choices.

**Continued ties with commanders.** Some girls opted to remain with former RUF soldiers and commander ‘husbands’ after the war, recognizing that they may be considered unsuitable wives in their former communities (Williamson & Cripe, 2002). Despite the abuse that characterized the majority of these wartime relationships, staying with bush husbands gave the girls a certain level of economic security that was more uncertain in the community. According to UNICEF (2005), many girls were “torn between the security offered by family and community relations and those offered by a combatant, sometimes caring and providing, other times abusive and denying”(p. 17).

**Returning to the community.** Some girls elected to return to their villages and obtain informal support from family, friends, and traditional healers. Some families were very receptive to returning girls and warmly accepted them home. Denov and Maclure showed that other girls developed social networks among themselves, which provided mutual social, economic and moral support during their difficult time (Denov, 2007a).

Community-cleansing rituals were also chosen by girls to promote their acceptance by communities (Denov, 2007a). Some girls have reported that these
cere monies help them to start anew after the war (Denov, 2007a). These experiences also helped to reconnect them with their traditional customs and beliefs.

Countless girls chose to benefit from community-based programs run by international and grassroots\(^{12}\) organizations. These types of programs reportedly offered the girls increased anonymity compared to the DDR program, allowing them to obtain assistance without necessarily making their status as a former soldier known (UNICEF, 2005). Some examples of these programs are provided below.

UNICEF’s *The Girls Left Behind Project* was effective in reaching out to some of these girls. In collaboration with local child protection agencies, the Ministry of Social Welfare and a consortium of NGOs, the project assisted over 500 former girl soldiers (UNICEF, 2005b). The girls were able to obtain educational assistance, skills training, trauma counseling and many other necessary services (UNICEF, 2005b).

Some girls took advantage of programs at the “Conforti” Centre. The Centre, which was in existence before the war, offered a range of services for former girl soldiers and other war-affected youth, including mediation between the girls and their families and skills training. There were also specialized programs to address the needs of girl mothers, including childcare assistance (UNICEF, 2005). Workers from the Conforti centre have emphasized that the girls were extremely committed to developing income-generating skills to increase their independence (UNICEF, 2005).

Many girls and young women chose to take advantage of programs created out of the collective actions of local women in their communities (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The Luawa Skills Training Centre and the Women’s Progressive Movement offered

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\(^{12}\) Grassroots organizations are those that are created by the constituents of a community and whose activities are carried out in the local community.
former girl soldiers skills training in tailoring and garra tie-dying, medical services, family reunification services and financial assistance (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). The Forum for African Women Educationalists “Rape Victims Program” was especially helpful for many girls suffering from the trauma of their experiences (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004, p. 24). The Progressive Women’s Association offered many girl soldiers education and literacy training to better prepare them for the job market (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004).

Life on the Streets. Unfortunately, some girl soldiers were not able to benefit from programs of support or more informal family assistance, and made a decision to survive on the streets (UNICEF, 2005). Case studies have shown that the commercial sex trade represented both survival and financial sustenance. Major drug use complicated this option for many girls. A former RUF girl soldier explained,

I now live on prostitution...I live in the street exposed to all kinds of danger and I am tired of living on the street. To cope, I take drugs; either cocaine or brown-brown [crack]. [When I take the drugs] I feel relieved and I don’t think of any problems, no bad memories of the war, and no sadness (Denov & Maclure, 2005, p.22).

Petty crime was also used as a means of survival. Deprived of schooling during the war, the girls returned to society with limited formal education or marketable skills. Denov and Maclure showed that none of the girls involved in their study found work in the formal sector after the war (Denov, 2007a). Developing strategies to earn money in the informal sector was thus a choice many girls made.

Facing the complex structural composition of society to which they returned, it is clear that in many ways girl soldiers exercised agency in the choices they made. Each of the above outcomes was realized based on their apparent rational thinking and assessment
of the situation. While not always leading to ideal situations for the girls, decisions were nevertheless made in an effort to minimize threats to their security. The limited options available to these girls speak to the power of the structures in their society.

Evidence of a Duality of Structure

In using agency, and thus their capacity to make active decisions to avoid DDR, the girl soldiers of Sierra Leone challenged the existing structure of gender inequality as expressed through the DDR program. This is an illustration of Giddens’ concept of structure as both the medium and the outcome of the actions of individuals. Their decision to reject the program due to its gender-insensitivity, gained international attention and forced a critical review of DDR practices in relation to female combatants.

Since the end of the conflict in Sierra Leone, the UN published the Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards, a report with a clear view to improving assistance for girls associated with fighting forces (UN DDR, 2005). In light of the lessons learned from the marginalization of girls in Sierra Leone, the report insists that DDR programs must adopt a gender perspective in both the planning and implementation stages. While the full effect of this report on the situation of girls in DDR programs cannot be determined at this point, its mere existence demonstrates the influence of the girls’ behaviour on the structure of gender inequality in this program. This illustrates Giddens’ concept of a mutually influential relationship between structure and agency. On the one hand, the girls were influenced to bypass the program due to gender inequality, and on the other hand, they have gradually influenced that structure through their actions. This circular relationship is the crux of the concept of a duality existing between structure and agency. If the girls had chosen to participate in
DDR, in spite of its flaws, it is reasonable to assume that the program would not have been the subject of criticism, and thus would continue with the same perspective and practices. This also speaks to Giddens’ understanding of how even seemingly disenfranchised individuals can use their agency, the only power they have, to affect negative structures and promote social change.

Findings and Conclusion

From the findings, it can be stated with relative certainty that the absence of girl soldiers in Sierra Leone’s DDR program was a product of two main factors. First, there was a dominant structure of gender inequality, as expressed through the gender-biased program of DDR and pervasive social stigmatization from the local community. Second, the agency of the girls played a major role. Despite being faced with these powerful structures of influence, the girls nevertheless used informed rational decision-making to minimize their post-conflict insecurity.

It can also be stated that the decision of the girls to bypass DDR illustrates the interplay between structure and agency as a duality. Current revisions to DDR programs, on a policy level, planned by the international community demonstrate the impact of the actions of these girls. Their avoidance of the program has attracted international attention, which is beginning to alter the structure that affected them.

Limitations of the Study

Theoretical Limitations

The main limitation of using Giddens’ theory in this context is the potential to overstate the actual level of choice available to these girls. There is clear evidence to support the premise that the girls exercised judgment and made personal decisions about
the actions they took, including the decision to bypass DDR. However, considering the
desperate societal circumstances in the country at that time, the extent that the girls had
real choices was limited. Many of the girls made decisions that jeopardized their health
and safety, pointing to a lack of legitimate options. They decided that the DDR was a
threat to their security, yet, in many cases resorted to other life-threatening alternatives.
This reflects the power of the structures of influence, gender inequality and social stigma,
in leaving many girls in a state of mere survival.

Another limitation of overestimating the power of choice is the potential to blame
the girls for their post-conflict problems. Suggesting that they selected these options
implies that they could have made different choices that may have improved their
outcomes. Reasonable use of this theory to understand this situation requires finding a
balance between recognizing that individuals have agency, and accepting that under
extreme circumstances, it may be severely limited.

Paucity of Data

The main limitation of this study was the paucity of precise data tracking the girl
soldiers after the war had ended. Studies have helped expose the fates of some of these
girls, but the stories of many remain unrepresented in the literature. It must be considered
that the samples quoted may not offer a balanced view of the spectrum of outcomes. The
worst case scenarios may well be underexposed as some girls have died along the way or
have withdrawn from society entirely. Also, girl soldiers who remain constrained by
abusive circumstances may not have been accessible for study. It is always difficult to
draw valid conclusions from historical data where prospective confirmation cannot be
undertaken.
Opportunities for Future Research

The scarcity of data points to the need for increased research in this area. To date, current research has focused on relatively small representative sample sizes. There is potential for error in making generalizations and claims about the larger group of girl soldiers based on the limited observation of a few. Leslie Butt (2002) warns against using “suffering strangers” as iconic figures whose experiences are then generalized and truncated into broad theories (p. 1). She argues that this can further mask or obscure the actual experiences of the population. It is important, therefore, to widen investigation of the experiences of girl soldiers in order to better understand their needs so appropriate support can be provided as needed.
These girls [girl soldiers] can never “go back” to being innocents because they have experienced what most people cannot imagine, and they also have gained strengths from their survival. The challenge, therefore, is to empower them to use these strengths and to expand cultural definitions of gender to enable these strengths to be harnessed. ...so long as girls remain invisible within the programs and policies of international, national, and local groups, these steps will not be taken (McKay, 2005, p. 394)

A Role for Social Workers

Social workers have an important role to play in promoting more responsive programs for girl soldiers. The commitment of the profession to values of social justice, human rights and equality, makes it well oriented to help in the generation of solutions. The following recommendations are suggested for social workers trying to improve the inclusiveness of DDR programs in future situations of armed conflict.

Advocating for Change to DDR

Considering the important lessons learned from Sierra Leone, a gender perspective in DDR is highly recommended. Policies governing DDR implementation must be sensitive to the special needs of girls as a distinct group of combatants. This means abandoning the traditional assumption that war is primarily fought among men (Denney, 2006). It should be assumed that girls will constitute between 10% and 30% of children involved in armed conflict, even if they are not clearly visible on the frontlines (UN DDR, 2005). Depending on the size of the conflict, this could mean thousands of girls.
New recommendations have been added to the Operational Guide to the Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards to create a safer, more responsive and more accessible DDR program for girls. Social workers working with NGOs, government agencies and the UN should be aware of these recommendations and work to ensure that they are incorporated into post-conflict planning. They should encourage design changes based on the problems identified by the girls in Sierra Leone, as they may have direct applicability in similar contexts.

One of the major problems in Sierra Leone was the lack of consistency between policy and practice. Some aspects of DDR were designed to protect girl soldiers, but failed on a practical level. To correct this deficiency, all staff working on the implementation of DDR, including peacekeepers, childcare workers and military observers, should undergo gender equality training. This will enhance sensitivity to the presence of girls in armed conflict, and understanding of the distinct needs of this group. Training should be context specific, with special attention to the local culture and societal structures in place, as they have a strong influence on the experience of the girls.

Qualification for entry into DDR must be consistent with the policy of universal admission for girls (UN DDR, 2005). Considering their many roles in fighting forces, a weapon should never be required as proof of participation.

DDR sites should be fully equipped to provide gender specific medical care. Girls exit conflict with a variety of health complications and injuries related to pregnancy, sexual violence and physical abuse. Girls with children require special care facilities. Medical staff should be sensitized to the pervasiveness of wartime gender-based violence
in order to overcome the secrecy that typically conceals it. Health status confidentiality must be respected, especially due to the role of stigma highlighted in this study.

Planning for the security of girls within DDR must be a priority. Female staff should be incorporated into the model to emphasize an atmosphere of gender equality. The presence of women staff at all the procedural levels at DDR sites may create a less threatening environment for girls. Those who have developed a distrust of men, particularly in a military context, will benefit the most from female staff in DDR programs.

Acknowledging the past victimization of girl soldiers and their vulnerability in the DDR program, planning should prioritize the creation of a safe physical space for girls. This should involve the construction of entirely gender separate cantonment sites, or the immediate transfer of girls to specialized child specific Interim Care Centres (ICC). Close proximity between girls and their former male soldier comrades and commanders should be avoided during this period.

To reduce fear of stigmatization, protecting the anonymity of girls that enter the program should be a priority. Girls should be able to obtain the benefits of DDR without fear of subsequent resentment or reprisal.

Despite resistance from others involved in the planning process, social workers should use their power to advocate on behalf of girl soldiers who are unable to represent their own interests at this stage. Former girl soldiers from other conflicts could provide valuable counsel to the planning process where possible. Emphasizing the importance of these gender-sensitive recommendations may help correct the earlier gender blindness in DDR and create more responsive programs for girls.
Addressing the Stigmatization of Girl Soldiers

To minimize the security risks of girl soldiers post-conflict, it is important to promote their integration into communities. The stigmatization of girls acts as a major obstacle to their acceptance and therefore must be addressed. This will require social work intervention with the families and communities of these girls. Community-sensitization projects aimed at changing attitudes may require clarifying the experiences of the girls during the war, emphasizing the harmful impact of stigmatization on their overall well-being. Communities should be helped to understand the situation of the girls by portraying child soldiering as a practice that violates international laws and human rights. A deeper community understanding of the problem may lead to greater compassion for the situation of this group. Successful implementation of projects will require a collaborative effort between local community-organizers, social workers and established leaders in the community. In countries like Sierra Leone, McKay has suggested that women elders could play this role (McKay, 2005).

Video cameras have also been helpful in community sensitization projects. They can be used to transmit messages between the girls and their families (Williamson & Cripe, 2002). This allows the girls to describe their current situations to their loved ones in a safe exchange. In return, community members can assure the girls that they are welcome to return.

Innovative strategies are needed to reach out to girls that remain with their "bush husbands" (Williamson & Cripe, 2002). This review has shown that fear of stigma from the community has encouraged many to remain dependent on these men. Helping to facilitate communication between the girls, their husbands and their families, may help
the girls to make more meaningful choices. Support should be offered to child-focused grassroots organizations who may be better positioned to identify these girls, gain access to them and provide them with information on the available support (Williamson & Cripe, 2002).

Social workers should use their power to advocate for increased funding for such initiatives from the world community. The capacity of local organizations to carry out these projects is limited given the infrastructural and economic damage characteristics of war-torn societies. Donors should be informed of the importance of reducing social stigma as a necessary precursor to the social inclusion of girl soldiers.

Community-sensitization projects may be helpful in reducing attitudes towards the girls in the wake of armed conflict, but they do not address the larger issue. The stigmatization of girl soldiers is rooted in a broader problem of gender inequality in the country. Social workers should support local initiatives to improve the overall status of women and girls. Girls and young women should be approached as agents of social change, who have the capacity to alter the negative structures around them. Their strength and resilience as survivors of war, whether they fought as soldiers or suffered as civilians, must be exploited in the pursuit of a better society. Women should be encouraged to organize themselves to realize changes in their society. Women’s rights movements and advocacy groups should be supported to change the structure of society, by lobbying for social change. Specifically, laws and policies that promote discriminatory or harmful treatment of women must be dismantled.
Social work intervention on this level will not lead to visible changes overnight. The transformation of laws, values and attitudes is an evolutionary process that over time will lead to an improvement in the situation.

Concluding Remarks: A word of caution

Effective social work in this problem begins with an understanding of the potential to do harm. This is important for local social workers but it is especially true for international social workers. For those from Western societies practicing in non-Western areas, it is important to be conscious of one’s social location and potential position of power. This is of utmost importance in work with vulnerable groups like girl soldiers. Considering the history of the West’s colonization and exploitation of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it is necessary to be aware of the potential to reproduce harmful relationships of domination through social work. To this end, the girls should be approached, not as victims, but as survivors. As Brett (2004) has stated, “These girls exhibited a strong sense of self or they would not have survived (p. 37). Social workers, whether involved in policy or practice, should establish themselves in supportive roles, seeking to build on the strength and resilience of the girls. Indeed, they know what they need better than anyone.
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