

The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers

“If only the enemy would listen, it would have been wonderful, and the firing would stop and we would listen to each other, we would just talk and try not to use guns. I wish we could end all this violence and we could develop our country.”

– Child Soldier, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is unacceptable. Addressing this problem requires the work of governments, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector and individual men and women. It also requires that we listen to the voices of child soldiers to understand their story. This is an important aspect of our work on prevention, demobilization and reintegration. This study is an effort in listening to the voices of girl soldiers from four conflict areas around the world.

February 12, 2002 represents a major event in the efforts to end the use of child soldiers. On this day the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force. The enforcement of this international treaty will be important in preventing children from becoming child soldiers and living through the horrific experiences described by the girls in this study. Under the Optional Protocol governments are charged with enduring the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers as well as protecting not punishing them. Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated on February 12, 2002 “We are urging all governments and armed groups to end the military recruitment of children under 18 and to release those children already in service. There can be no excuse for arming children to fight adult wars.”

The UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in his address before the UN Special Session on Children, May 2002, stated that “the deployment of child soldiers is a despicable and damaging practice that

must end”. He went on to say “those who practice this form of child abuse must be held accountable.” In addition, he stated that, “for far too long, the use of child soldiers has been seen as merely regrettable. We are here to ensure it is recognized as intolerable.”

WHY LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF THE GIRL SOLDIER?

Many documents have been and are being developed to address the concern of violence against children. These are necessary actions to gain understanding and agreement among international parties to prevent the use of children as soldiers and for rehabilitation. The characteristics of many of these actions are to call for “providing resources” or “establishing mechanisms to facilitate activities for children” or “ensuring provisions for demobilization and reintegration are spelled out.” To accomplish these objectives, we must understand what resources to provide, what activities will meet the child’s need or what provisions need to be spelled out. We can rely on theories, typically Western concepts of treatment, and we can also listen to the child and try to gain an understanding of what may be most effective in meeting their needs.

Child soldiers cannot be treated as all having the same characteristics – even in the same conflict area.

It has often been the case that child soldiers have been thought of as a common category of children who would possess the same characteristics and needs. The unique individual features and characteristics of the children were often overlooked or ignored. There was a time when the prevailing opinion was that all child soldiers were boys. We now know that child soldiers include girls as well as boys and that demobilization and reintegration programs must take into account the unique needs of girls.

The fundamental needs of girls who have been child soldiers have not been very well documented, understood and addressed. It has only been recently recognized that girls are used in many different ways by the armed groups. Their demobilization and reintegration needs are directly related to the specific ways that they were used.

For example, it has been assumed that most if not all girl soldiers were raped and sexually abused by the armed groups of which they were a part. This study reveals that not all armed groups raped the girls. The stated position of some of the armed groups forbids sexually intimate relationships between men and women without the consent of the woman and the approval of a commander to enter into a relationship. In some armed groups contraception shots were required and abortions performed even when the girl opposed this action. In all armed groups there were power differentials between the men and the young girls and many of the girls agreed to a sexually intimate relationship when they recognized it brought with it benefits such as more food, better living conditions, opportunities to ride rather than walk long distances and other privileges. None of the girls talked about receiving information to protect against sexually transmitted diseases.

WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS IN THIS STUDY?

The key messages include:

Becoming a child soldier

- Becoming a child soldier is very dependent on a combination of the local environment and the personal circumstances surrounding the girl's life.
- Living in poverty was an important factor in girls joining a movement or being abducted.
- Girls were not willing to remain at home and live with their family when a member was exploiting them sexually or treating them violently.
- Propaganda provided by the movement was important. (This was not true for girls abducted.)
- If significant others in their life joined, the girls were easily influenced to join. (This was not true for girls abducted.)

The child soldier experience

- It is incorrect to assume that all girls used as soldiers are sexually abused.
- The mother-daughter relationship was significant for the girls (even when it appeared they did not have a very positive relationship with their mother) prior to becoming a soldier, during soldiering and following escape or capture.
- For two of the four conflict areas, girls felt the armed movement provided them with enhanced possibilities for their life – they learned valuable skills. If it were not for the violent battles, many of the girls would have elected to stay in the movement.

The future

- The decision-making process for the girls changed after capture or escape from being a child soldier.
- Girls from all conflict areas saw education or training as fundamental to their future after being a child soldier.
- The girls are not searching for ways to retaliate and bring harm to those who had used and misused them. They were looking for ways to make a contribution, to do something meaningful and productive with their life and to make up for the harm they have delivered upon others.

Becoming a child soldier is very dependent on a combination of the local environment and the personal circumstances surrounding the girl's life.

Girls were more readily abducted if they were poor and lived near a conflict zone. In addition, if left at home without protection of an adult or separated from their family, they were an easy target for kidnapping. Girls who volunteered were usually influenced to join by a significant person in their life or because they believed the movement's propaganda that promised them a better life. They saw themselves having food, a uniform that would give them status and a group to which they could belong. On a personal level they had either dropped out of school or found going to school problematic, were poor and lived in abusive or separated families. They also wanted to participate in the important decisions that were going to affect their life. For example, they did not want to accept an arranged marriage planned by their family or be hired out as a domestic servant for low pay, cruel treatment and separation from the significant people in their life. Generally speaking, the girls who volunteered had some notion that their life would improve by joining.

Living in poverty played a key role in the girls joining a movement or being abducted.

Most of the girls lived in families where there were many siblings. Often there was not enough food for everyone. Most of the girls came from

villages and their family had a small plot of land for growing food or they had a small number of animals that they sold or which provided them with food. Providing for the essential survival needs of the family was a constant source of anxiety and uncertainty.

Girls were not willing to remain at home and live with their family when a member of their family (parent, sibling, parent's live-in partner) was exploiting them sexually or treating them violently.

Also the girls who had been marginalized by new family configurations (remarriage, step siblings or siblings born as a result of the new marriage) preferred to go or were sent to go and live with relatives rather than live on the margins of a family where they felt of little or no value. When living with a relative was not possible, joining the movement provided a convenient way out.

Another significant factor in the girls joining was the propaganda provided by the movement. (Propaganda was not a factor for children that were abducted.)

The movement was seen as a place for adventure and excitement. For the most part, they were not attracted by the cause. It gave them a chance to experience some measure of prestige, exhibit power and gain respect. They saw the unique form of providing them with a ready made and immediate identity. It gave them a sense of camaraderie and belonging to something that would bring about significant change. Once in the movement they learned about

the philosophy and political agenda. Frequently the girls felt they were contributing to a cause that would enable their own family and the masses to have a better, more productive, life. They went off to the movement for the altruistic reasons because they loved their country and believed their participation in the movement would usher in a new and better era of social and economic and political change.

They also joined because significant others in their life had joined the movement and they wanted to be with them or follow in their footsteps. The significant others who had influence over the girls were boyfriends, brothers and girlfriends who influenced them to join. It was not unusual for the significant other to return to the village and escort the girl to camp or for several of them to plan to leave together.

It is generally assumed that all girl soldiers are sexually abused. This generalization is not supported by the results of this study. Many of the girls were sexually abused. The sexual exploitation was different in each conflict area. In Sri Lanka (with one exception), the girls stated nobody could have love affairs or sex. It was considered a major offence and severe disciplinary action was taken if discovered. The girls did not say if or how often this rule was broken. The armed group in Angola forced the girls to live with and sexually serve the chief and other men on demand. They were also forced to dance and entertain the men in preparation for battle. Those girls who refused were severely punished or killed. In the armed group in the Philippines, the stated policy was that men and women were not allowed to be alone together. Men and women were to be treated equally and have respect for one another. Men and women could each approach the other to initiate a sexually intimate relationship. In order to have the relationship, permission had to be granted

by a higher authority in the armed group. The women in the armed group in Colombia were the ones to decide if they would consent to sex. Men would ask to have sex and the woman decided. One girl from Colombia reported that she had been raped. Women were given contraceptive interjections. The women were not permitted to get pregnant. Women were threatened that they would be killed if they became pregnant. If pregnant, they were forced to have an abortion. There were some rare exceptions according to the girls. Men were not given contraceptives and the burden of responsibility was placed upon the women. The girls from the Philippines and Colombia would sometimes agree to a relationship because it brought with it special privileges and benefits (e.g., being able to ride rather than walk and in general have a less brutal way of life).

The desire, meaning and importance of the mother-daughter relationship was significant for the girls prior to her becoming a soldier, during the time they were soldiers and following their escape or capture. The girls longed to be in a significant relationship with their mother. When their mother was not available, the girl longed for a meaningful connection with her grandmother, an aunt or some other family member. Sometimes the girl's relationship with her mother became estranged when a new man entered her mother's life. Even though their relationship to the mother may have been uncertain the girl missed her mother and her family when in the movement.

What they wanted most was a strong family connection especially with their mother. In some instances they felt like they had abandoned their mother. After their escape or capture they wanted to be reconciled with their mother and make up for the time when they had been away.

The girls in the Philippines and Colombia felt the armed movement

provided them with enhanced possibilities for their life that they otherwise would never have achieved.

The movement served as a family that looked out for them. Their basic needs were met. They were respected and given a voice in “criticism” groups where they learned to confront and negotiate with others. They gained knowledge about self expression. They learned how to speak in public and teach others. They learned communication skills that would serve them in their civilian life. If it were not for the fighting, the girls would have preferred life in the armed group over their life as a civilian.

Decision-making took on a different dimension following their capture or escape.

At the time of their decision to join the movement the girls believed in their choice and made deliberate and calculated plans for getting away without being caught by their families. They paid a great personal price for pursuing their choice. After having participated in the armed movement they often regretted, in part, the choice they had made for a variety of reasons. When this was the case it made them doubt subsequent decisions they had to make. It made them question their decision-making ability. They began having ambivalent feelings and doubts about decisions they had to make regarding their future as they began to reconstruct their lives. Some of the girls expressed anxiety and fear about making the decision to participate in the interviews for this study. They considered the implications their participation might have for their family and their own self with regard to safety. They struggled with the future implication of their participation in this research project.

The girls from all four countries saw education or vocational and skill training as fundamental to their future following their time as a child soldier.

The girls realized after the fact the

importance of education and school. Prior to becoming a soldier none of the girls had completed high school. All of the girls had dropped out of school. The educational process presented them with several problems that prevented their continuation in school. Some villages did not have schools or only a few grades. In some cases the girls’ families did not have enough money to pay their tuition or purchase the necessary school supplies and clothing to attend school. In other situations if the family bought supplies and clothing they did not have enough money for lunch or for the girl to take food from home. Sometimes there was not a village school and the girl had to walk long distances because there was not money for transportation even when transport was available. In other situations the girl had to stay home to provide for an ailing parent or grandparent. Some had to stay home to provide child care for younger brothers and sisters when their parents were in the fields working. When the children did manage to get to school they were often humiliated by the teachers for not having completed homework or were treated with great cruelty for not being able to do class assignments. Attendance was often very inconsistent. On the other hand, some of the girls in Sri Lanka felt intense pressure from their families to constantly perform at the highest level of achievement. Several of the girls dropped out of school rather than live with the never-ending pressure and expectations placed upon them by their parents.

An important voice from the girls is they were not searching for ways to retaliate and bring harm to those who had used and misused them.

The girls were disillusioned and angry about the way they had been treated and used in the various groups to which they belonged. They were angry with the enemy who had killed their comrades but they were not intent on finding ways to injure them. The girls wanted the fighting to stop and the war to

end and the killing to be over. They were searching for ways to make up for the harm and injury they had delivered to others, recognizing they had been perpetrators of violence. They sought

atonement by wanting to find ways to help others and make constructive contributions to their lives. They especially wanted to help children and their own mothers.

WHAT ARE THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS?

Key recommendations on demobilization from the girls' messages include:

- Listen to the girl and her experience and needs – provide basic needs and safe forums for discussion when she needs help.
- Work to locate some member of her family or significant adult to bring about some level of reconciliation.
- Provide new experiences that will change her identity from soldier – to reclaim who she is and to regain faith in her decision-making ability.
- Provide opportunities for education and training – the girls recognize the value of education and job skills.

WHAT WERE THE COUNTRY DISTINCTIVES?

Some distinctive features from the armed movements were identified from the interview material that appear to be of critical importance or unique to each country. This is not to suggest that these were the only distinct features but rather they were the ones reported by the girls.

carry and after quite some days when we were used to it, we were given rifles. The day I got the rifle I was thrilled and happy.”

– Child soldier, Sri Lanka

SRI LANKA

The girls were issued a “dummy gun.” This gun was to be the girl’s constant companion. She was instructed to keep it with her always, even when she slept. She was instructed to become one with the gun. Once it was judged that she was comfortable and at one with the “dummy gun,” which was considered a great achievement, she was presented with a real gun.

”As long as you are frightened to handle a rifle you won’t get one. You have to wait till you are ready to get a real rifle. With the ‘dummy’ you have to get used to it. The moment they realize you are not scared and you are keen to handle a rifle you are given one.”

The girls who were fighters were issued a cyanide capsule on a necklace. The necklace was to be worn into battle and swallowed to prevent them being delivered into the hands of the enemy. The girls were told their death by cyanide was better and did not compare with the torture they

“Before we were given guns to carry we had to carry a piece of wood (a dummy). All the while we had to

would receive at the hands of the enemy. It was to assure their safety and protect them from the enemy.

“The day I was given the cyanide (capsule) I was very happy because no one would catch me alive – abuse or harass me. This was for my safety. I felt good to carry this around my neck. One day another leader didn’t have her capsule. I don’t know what happened; she didn’t explain. She said that she wanted to use mine. That day, I never ever thought I will be caught, so I gave mine to her. I was fighting in a war. Four soldiers captured me. They surrounded me and I gave up. I had no cyanide so it was easy to surrender.”

“Our leader was a doctor, she was wounded and she fell. She ordered us to take the cyanide; I didn’t. The thought of the others – the way they died flashed before my eyes and I didn’t want to take cyanide.”

“I was given one cyanide capsule. As we began this journey we were warned – If the enemy catches you, you will be abused so do not get caught. If you do get caught take the capsule.”

– Child soldier, Sri Lanka

“Without the cyanide we don’t go to war. Even now I don’t like jewellery. I like a black thread round my neck. I had got used so much to the thread around my neck. I feel sad when I think of what happened to me. I had the cyanide and I didn’t take it and when I go back I’ll have to face death.”

The ultimate achievement was to be honoured at a “Hero’s Welcome.” A hero’s welcome was a special honor granted to those who risked and or sacrificed their life

in battle by killing and destroying the enemy. The supreme hero’s welcome was celebrated and took place after the girl’s death. If by some chance the girl was not killed in battle and had escaped capture and had not swallowed the cyanide capsule, her “Hero’s Welcome” might include a visit from some member of her family.

When someone goes out for a Hero’s death, they are honoured. I feel sorry for them. Many die and never come back. Some have come back after performing dangerous missions. They are then promoted and become respected.”

“I went out to die a hero’s death – you have to enter a camp and come back. I come back victorious. Finally I was major – nobody is called major, you are only given a name and you are called by that name. The rank is announced only after one’s death.”

– Child soldier, Sri Lanka

ANGOLA

The girls were used as “Okulumbuissa.” As soon as the girl’s breasts began to form they could be impregnated and the men did not have to assume or claim paternity or any responsibility for them or for the child. If the girl did not accept the man’s advances toward her she could be tied to a tree and beaten with sticks.

“...he didn’t really want me to be his wife but only ”Okulumbuissa.” It’s a common habit with chiefs in the forest – when a girl is in your care, you have to Okulumbuissa.”

– Child soldier, Angola

“They do this with all the girls, as soon as their breasts start to grow. After the girl becomes pregnant, the chief orders a house to be built and the girl stays there. Some let them have a husband, others don’t, and when a girl gets a husband they have her killed. He sent two men to tie me to a tree and they beat me with sticks. I was there for an hour; later they untied me. These are the punishments they inflict when a woman does not accept.”

The girls were used to entertain the troops. They were forced to dance, sing, respond to sexual demands and keep the men at a high level of excitement 24 hours a day. Cold water was thrown on the girls to prevent them from sleeping.

“The young girls even sang till midnight. Dancing every day, there was no sleep... even if you were tired, if you tried to sit down, they woke you up or they threw water over you.”

– Child soldier, Angola

“[T]he older girls washed clothes, cooked and danced every day: they began dancing from 18.00 to 7.30. Those who are 30 dance with the oldest of 70/60, those of 20/25 dance with the men whose hair is turning white; those who are 17/18 also with the oldest men; 14 and under, there are some of the oldest who dance with them. The young boys dance with the youngest girls. After dancing, those who have a young man/boy go and sleep with him. If you do not accept, they will take you to a place, and then kill you. Even if you don’t want to, you are forced to. The soldiers who want to have sex with the girls sent their servants to fetch a girl: when they wanted to have their way with a girl, they sent a servant to call her.”

“I went to four bases to teach the others to dance and sing. But whenever we travelled to teach the other we carried the chiefs’ backpacks. During the time that we spend in the bases we cannot sleep. At night, after we cook dinner, we dance and sing. When the day is breaking, we go to the chief’s house and then we take a nap. About 5 a.m. we have to wake up and resume dancing and singing. They did not let us sleep because they feared that the government would come and attack during the night... And if we were sleeping who would wake us up to carry all the materials and good? That is why they did not let us sleep at night.”

The girls were instructed not to talk about their former life with their family. They were not permitted to recall or talk about their family, use their family given name, speak about their village, acknowledge their birth date or age. In essence they were to give up their former identity. This created a sense of social isolation. This process led the girl to become socially and emotionally isolated from herself and others.

“It was forbidden to talk about fleeing or about your family: it is only talking about them. I didn’t know where my mother was, I had no one I could talk to about my family. There was no contact with the family. You could no talk about what you’d left behind.”

“At the base you cannot talk about you family, or talk about your village. They told us: here just forget about your parents. You’re going to live well here.”

– Child soldier, Angola

“It’s not worth thinking about the village you left behind. From now on forget your parents, because you came her to work.”

PHILIPPINES

The girls participated in criticism groups that were held in the afternoons. The participants confronted each other about their behaviors. They reviewed the ways they related and behaved toward each other. These groups provided them an opportunity to evaluate their own behavior and insights about how others perceived them. The prevailing philosophy was that men and women were equal. Men were not permitted to abuse women.

“In the seminar, it was made clear that it was absolutely prohibited to take advantage of women, for men to abuse women was not allowed. It wasn’t even allowed to touch each other, to speak to someone of the opposite sex alone, especially in dark places, this was also prohibited. I felt very safe; I had no fear.”

“The times we would be all together and you could open up all your problems. And you can speak of your mistakes, and of the hurt that you caused someone.”

– Child soldier, Philippines

“When there were times when we didn’t have work to do, we would relax, there would be lots of jokes and we would sing together. To everyone, if you are upset about something or someone, this can be discussed. Even relationships with women can be discussed. If you want to enter a relationship, then the man can approach the woman.”

“[I]n the movement, you will be criticized and admonished: Why did you not do your

task? Why did you not cook? Why did you depend so much on others? And you must say things frankly. Whether that person is a commander or a teacher, as long as that person committed a violation, you can voice out your criticism. There’s no place for fearing reprisal in blurting your criticism because that person is, say, a commander. If a person has done something wrong, it is necessary that you tell the person that he has done something wrong. That’s the movement’s policy. You must not be wary of giving criticisms. You must shed your bourgeois ways that still come from [traits] outside the movement.”

They were indoctrinated in the philosophy of the movement and sent out to politically teach and organize the people.

“We had to study about why we were there. To explain why there is a revolution now, things like that. They wanted us to really understand. My comrades were very strict during the period of education.”

“It’s important that before you enter the movement, they talk to you to understand the reasons why you want to join. For example, if your reasons for joining are just for personal interests only, they will give you a seminar because that’s not enough good reason to join.”

“...but in the movement, you have to learn to speak to large groups. So when you speak to masses, you really have to use your brains. When you speak, you have to speak for your principles.”

“We had to undergo education first. That’s how it is in the movement, study first. They did not give me any task yet until I have undergone some studies.”

– Child soldier, Philippines

COLOMBIA

The girls in Colombia received some form of contraception immediately upon their entry into the armed group. The type most frequently used was contraceptive injections, although IUDs and birth control pills were sometimes used. Contraception was as much a part of their life as a soldier as their combat training. They were given the injection even when they expressed their strong objection. It was reported that condoms were given to men with AIDS. The girl was held totally responsible for any pregnancy. All pregnancies were to end with an abortion. The girls reported there were some rare exceptions made to this rule and the girl was permitted to have the baby.

“...if a girl got pregnant she was made to have an abortion.”

– Child soldier, Colombia

“I think this was very painful for the girls, I mean, imagine that, making someone have an abortion. You’re told, from when you join that you can’t get pregnant.”

“[T]hey can’t use pregnant women, because at any moment a pregnant woman... they might even kill her. You were given contraceptive injections, they had many methods to stop the girls from getting pregnant. The men weren’t given contraceptives. They’d say that it’s the woman that has to deal with the contraception. It was just the women that were told because the commander said that it was the women that decided, the men asked to have sex and the women were the ones that decided.”

“I found out about one girl who got pregnant but she was made to have an

abortion after three or four months when the commander realized that she was pregnant. There was a very strong reaction. She cried, she said that she’d rather they killed her than have an abortion. She had an abortion, everybody has to have an abortion.”

“[I]f any woman gets pregnant there then they make her have an abortion. You can’t have the baby, it’s not allowed. The commander was in charge of birth control. He was the only one who knew how to give the injections. Every six months he gave you an injection. I wouldn’t let them give it to me. My boyfriend said that it was for the women’s good, it wasn’t for them but for the sake of the woman. Think about it, a woman out there, she gets pregnant and then she has to have an abortion. I was given the pill but what’s used most of all is the injection. The men were given condoms. My boyfriend said that condoms were for... that they were for those people with AIDS, that was what condoms were for. The majority of men didn’t use them, there were only a few people that used them.”