Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in a Culture of Violence

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Abstract: Despite the protections provided to children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the issue of child soldiers has become a major global concern. More than 250 000 soldiers under the age of 18 are fighting in conflicts in over 40 countries around the world. During Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, thousands of children were actively engaged as participants in armed struggle. While there is ample descriptive evidence of the conditions and factors underlying the rise of child soldiery in Sierra Leone and elsewhere in the developing world, most of the literature has portrayed this as a uniquely male phenomenon. Yet in Sierra Leone an estimated 30% of child soldiers in oppositional forces were girls. So far, however, there is a paucity of empirical information that distinguishes the experiences of these girls from those of boys. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 40 Sierra Leonean girls formerly in fighting forces, this paper traces girls' perspectives and experiences as victims, perpetrators and resisters of violence and armed conflict.

Keywords: children and war, war-affected girls, child soldiers, Sierra Leone

Résumé : Malgré la protection garantie aux enfants en vertu de la Convention relative aux droits de l'enfant de l'ONU, la question des enfants-soldats s'est érigée en une préoccupation majeure sur le plan international. Plus de 250 000 soldats de moins de 18 ans combattent en effet dans plus de 40 pays en crise. Durant la guerre civile sierra-léonaise qui a duré une décennie, des milliers d'enfants ont activement participé aux combats. Alors que les conditions et les facteurs sous-tendant la montée de ce phénomène en Sierra Leone et ailleurs dans les pays en développement sont largement documentés, la littérature a généralement fait état des enfants-soldats uniquement au masculin. Or, en Sierra Leone, on estime que 30 % des enfants-soldats dans les forces de l'opposition était des filles. Il y a jusqu'à présent une carence de renseignements empiriques comparant les expériences de ces filles à celles des garçons. Résultat de profonds entretiens avec 40 filles qui combattaient en Sierra Leone, le présent article fait état des perceptions et des expériences de ces filles en tant que victimes, agentes et résistantes dans la violence du conflit armé.

Mots-Clés : enfants et guerre, fillettes affectées par la guerre, enfants-soldats, Sierra Leone

Introduction: Sierra Leone's Civil War and Gendered Representations of Child Soldiers

In March 1991, the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF/SL), led by former Sierra Leone Army corporal Foday Sankoh, and backed by Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia. Although initially claiming to be a political movement espousing "liberation," "democracy" and "a new Sierra Leone of freedom, justice and equal opportunity for all" (RUF/SL 1995), the RUF in reality was a loosely consolidated organization of largely disaffected young people that wreaked murderous havoc on the country. With its message of political revolution failing to attract popular support, the RUF embarked on a savage 10-year civil war that had devastating consequences for civilians, particularly children.

In many ways the RUF's campaign of cruelty and destruction was rooted in a long history of structural violence. With its legacy of colonialism and slave re-settlement, Sierra Leone had been integrated into the world system in such a way that its traditional social institutions were largely shattered and its economy was controlled by a small group of international enterprises and a kleptocratic governing elite (Clapham 2003; Richards 1998; Zack-Williams 1999). In this context of misrule and weakened social systems, the welfare of children[1] was severely undermined. Children, who make up nearly half of Sierra Leone's population, had limited access to good quality education, and suffered from the effects of high unemployment and maldistribution of resources. By the end of the 1980s, disillusion and anger among young people were widespread. With civic life increasingly overtaken by avarice and violence, children were highly vulnerable to forces of aggression and "war-lordism," and to perceptions of violent aggression as a legitimate means to attain power and prestige (Abdullah et al. 1997; Krech and Maclure 2003). Following the outbreak of hostilities, children were

rapidly engulfed by the conflict. Thousands of young people under 18 years of age became actively engaged as participants in Sierra Leone's armed struggle. As documented elsewhere, many of the children appear to have derived a sense of personal empowerment and family-like solidarity from their attachment to militarized groups (Peters and Richards 1998). For many others, however, acquiescence to the norms of violence and terror, either as aggressors or as unwilling victims, was the only recourse for survival.

As the war progressed and became more horrific, children engaged in the conflict were depicted by the world's media as being lost in a vortex of iniquity and madness. The image of child soldiers carrying out acts of horrible brutality became widely seen as the quintessence of youthful violence and irrationality (Skinner 1999). Moreover, once implicated in armed conflict, they were generally assumed to be permanently damaged:

> Even if [children] survive the rigors of combat, it's often too late to salvage their lives. Unrelenting warfare transforms them into preadolescent sociopaths, fluent in the language of violence but ignorant of the rudiments of living in a civil society. (Newsweek 1995)

By portraying child soldiers as largely perverse and uncivilized, the bulk of international news reporting, and indeed much of academic and policy-oriented discourse, has tended to "pathologize" children who have been caught up in armed conflict and to discount the complex realities of the experiences and perspectives of the children themselves. In addition, this image has almost always been reified as a masculine phenomenon, one that is persistently reinforced by familiar photographs of pre-pubescent boys armed with AK-47s. Because the majority of reports and international initiatives continue to regard the notion of "child soldiers" as either male or gender neutral, the effects of armed conflict on young girls, and the gender implications of children in combat, are rarely considered (McKay and Mazurana 2004).

In Sierra Leone, while girls made up approximately 30% of fighting forces[2] (Mazurana et al. 2002), very little is known about the wartime experiences of these girls, both as victims as well as active agents in the conflict. In order to begin to fill this critical knowledge gap, in this paper we present the results of a case study that has attempted to "de-pathologize" girls who were involved in the Sierra Leonean civil war. By eliciting their own narratives of their experiences, and by involving a number of former girl child soldiers as research collaborators, we aim to highlight the gendered effects of the conflict on children. Before considering these narratives, however, we discuss briefly why it is essential to seek out and listen to the voices of children who have been involved in, or directly affected by armed conflict.

The Discourse of the Voiceless Child: Implications for Policy and Research

The prevailing image of child soldiers as largely "deviant males" has had important implications for both policy and research within post-conflict Sierra Leone. In light of what clearly has been a major humanitarian disaster, an understandable element of urgency has led to the rapid conceptualization and implementation of postwar development assistance projects and programs oriented specifically for children. For example, the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), various ministries of the Sierra Leonean government, multilateral organizations such as UNICEF, and a multitude of NGOs have all identified the rehabilitation of child soldiers as a top priority of social assistance. Guided by the experiences of previous peace-building efforts in Mozambique, Uganda, El Salvador and Rwanda, prominent attention has been directed towards demobilization of child combatants, the reunification of families, the reconstitution of community organizations, the reconstruction and expansion of the national educational system and the integration of young people into productive community life (Women's Commission 2002). For a country struggling to emerge from years of bloody civic strife, and hampered by profound institutional weakness and a fragile political economy, these are enormously challenging goals.

Yet precisely because of the complexity of these goals and the range of institutional actors involved, there are real risks that efforts to assist war-affected children may be further marginalizing them and leaving many feeling disoriented and frustrated. This has become particularly evident among girls who, despite their direct involvement in war, have tended to be regarded as "afterthoughts" during the phases of demobilization and reconstruction (Gardam and Charlesworth 2000; Machel 2001). Just as girls were peripheral to the locus of decision-making at all levels of society in Sierra Leone before the war, so too there are indications that in the aftermath of the conflict they are being rendered voiceless by the structures of government and international development assistance. When the DDR program was initiated, for example, it featured a "cash for weapons" approach to disarmament where individuals were required to turn weapons in to authorities in order to qualify for financial benefits. This rendered many children, predominantly girls, ineligible for DDR assistance since most either had no weapons of their own,

or had been forced to give them up to their male commanders[3] (McKay and Mazurana, 2004; Women's Commission 2002). By February 2002, of 6 900 demobilized children, a mere 529 were girls (Women's Commission 2002).

That girls in fighting forces have remained invisible and have had little say in the conceptualization and implementation of social programs designed to meet their psycho-social needs is in part a reflection of the predominant view of children as individuals who are not fully formed and are thus incapable of rational, far-sighted actions. Reinforced by the dominant discourses of academia, policy-making and development assistance practices that emphasize the formative influences of motherhood, families and other supervisory adult institutions, children are generally considered to be "appendages to adult society" (Caputo 1995). Valued essentially because of their current dependency and their future roles as adults, they are perceived to be in a state of psychological and social transition. Reflecting conventional notions of power where adults are expected to exercise authority over children who are not yet capable of responsible collective action, childhood is widely perceived as being inexorably subordinate to the conventions and institutions of an adult world (Hart 1997; James and James 2001).

In light of these prominent discourses, girls and boys who have been caught up in circumstances of severe disadvantage and prolonged violence tend to be viewed as objects of assistance rather than as agents of their own welfare. They almost never have opportunities to publicly articulate their own concerns, needs and aspirations. As Downe has observed:

> Despite the undeniable visibility of children in...academic and popular representations of despair, rarely are the experiences, thoughts, actions and opinions of the children explored analytically in a way that gives voice to these marginalized social actors or that elucidates what it means to be a child under such conditions. In effect, the children are seen, but not heard. (Downe 2001: 165)

This prevailing view of childhood as a problematic period of transition that is distinctive from the world of adults and is defined by fixed and consolidated power arrangements is fortunately not immutable. As Foucault argued, dominant discourses are fluid and invariably subject to challenge: "We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault 1981: 71). In line with this premise, a growing number of scholars working in the fields of child and youth studies have argued that young people often actively and successfully resist adult authority as a way to attain a strong sense of identity and social attachment (Cahill 2000; Ferrell 1997; Furlong and Carmel 1997; Maclure and Sotelo 2004). Such resistance is manifested particularly in impoverished or hostile social environments. As Wyn and Dwyer (1999) have argued, "where structured pathways do not exist, or are rapidly being eroded, individual agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns...which give [children] *positive meaning* to their lives" (Wyn and Dwyer 1999: 14, emphasis in original). In an era marked by weakened states and eroding social systems, growing numbers of disadvantaged children appear to be seeking self-assurance and the exercise of power through violent means (Caputo 2001: 186). Yet when such violence occurs, rather than being acknowledged as evidence of children's agency and of their search for power as "an intrinsic part of childhood" (ibid.: 186), it is widely viewed as a manifestation of pathological behaviour that must be contained and rectified by the instruments of adult authority (Griffin 1993).

The continued pathologizing discourses surrounding child soldiers in Sierra Leone, as well the ongoing marginalization and voicelessness of children, clearly limit scope for understanding and insight. There is a compelling rationale, therefore, to develop alternative visions and strategies that are grounded in the perspectives of the children themselves. A reasonable first step, as Rudd and Evans (1998: 41) have argued, is to "map out young people's attitudes and beliefs," and the ways they create their own opportunities and social identities in extraordinarily harsh circumstances. By engaging former child soldiers to talk about their own personal experiences and to reflect on the forces that led them to participate in war, researchers and those desirous of facilitating processes of reconciliation and reconstruction should come closer to de-pathologizing children who were involved in armed conflict (Unger and Teram 2000).

In addition, however, it is essential to account for diversity among young people and to acknowledge how factors such as gender, race and class shape as well as constrain children's realities (Caputo 2001). This is particularly significant in relation to girls who were engaged in fighting forces in Sierra Leone. Because of the gendered nature of society and the tendency to exclude girls and women from realms of social, political and economic power (Human Rights Watch [HRW] 2003), significant attention needs to be placed on war-affected girls. Accordingly, in this study we focussed on girls who were caught up in the RUF as victims and as agents of conflict. By relying on the voices of girls themselves, we examined their experiences and perspectives of the conflict, both in terms

of their victimization and their active participation in hostilities. We also traced girls' strategies for survival, their capacity for independent action, and their ingenious modes of resistance within a pervasive culture of violence.

In acknowledgment of girls' intrinsic agency, and to ensure that the subsequent accumulation of knowledge can contribute in some way towards the strengthening of girls' involvement as genuine participants in processes of social reconstruction, we opted to conduct the study in the context of a rights-based framework. By referring to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* which views children as ideally participating in reflections and decisions pertaining to their own development, we considered it important to focus essentially on the voices and perspectives of our female "subjects" (Berman 2000) and to be sensitive to their intrinsic agency and their gender differentiated perceptions, experiences and behaviours. To further these ends, we also engaged a number of girls as collaborators in aspects of the research process itself.

Methodology

This study, sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), has been conducted by the University of Ottawa in conjunction with a Sierra Leonean NGO, Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone (DCI-SL). Through the study we have examined the life histories and circumstances that led to children's (both boys and girls) involvement in armed conflict, the nature and extent of this involvement and the long-term effects of the experience.[4] In eliciting the narratives of war-affected girls, a series of semi-structured, one-to-one interviews and subsequent focus group sessions were conducted. A key aim of the fieldwork was to gain, not only a *thick description* of girls' experiences during the armed conflict, but as well their reflections and interpretations of these experiences, and their psycho-social effects.

The entire research team consisted of 16 individuals: eight Sierra Leonean researchers (five males and three females) from DCI-SL, two Canadian researchers from the University of Ottawa (the authors) and six female adolescent researchers who had been part of the RUF fighting forces during the conflict. The adolescent researchers were selected by the adult research team on the basis of the earlier contact between NGO staff and war-affected children, and their evident interest in the project. Besides our conviction that adolescent researchers would enhance the richness of the discussions and therefore the quality of the data, we were keen to involve a group of girls in a purposeful activity that could prove to be educational and empowering.

Once the entire team was established, the project leader (Denov) conducted in-depth research training workshops with the team. This included separate training sessions for the adolescent researchers. Training focussed on the goals of the research, on interview techniques with children, on gender and cultural aspects of interviewing, on ethical issues and on the potential challenges they were likely to face in the field. As part of the training, young female researchers undertook mock interviewing and mock focus-group discussions as a way to hone their new skills. On completion of their training, the research team embarked on fieldwork that lasted from May, 2003 to February, 2004. Travelling together, the adult and adolescent research team conducted interviews and focus groups with 40 girls living in the northern, southern, eastern and western regions of Sierra Leone. One-to-one interviews by the adult researchers usually preceded the focus group sessions led by the adolescent researchers.

The girl respondents, all of whom had been under the age of 18 years before the end of the conflict, were identified and recruited for the study with the assistance of DCI-SL who had close ties with community inhabitants. At the time of research fieldwork, all participants were between 14 and 21 years old. All of the girls had been abducted by the RUF and remained under their control for a period ranging from a few months to seven years.

The majority of girls were interviewed twice. The first set of interviews was conducted in each child's native language (either Krio, Mende, Temne and Limba) by the adult researchers from DCI-SL. These interviews explored girls' life histories and recruitment into armed conflict, their experiences and coping strategies, as well as the long-term effects of participation in war. Interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed and translated into English. Several months later, with the assistance of interpreters, Denov conducted a second round of one-to-one interviews with the same girls. These interviews were likewise audio-taped and transcribed.

Focus groups were conducted with the same 40 research participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the psycho-social needs of girls in fighting forces, to assess what they themselves deemed important for their well-being and healing, and how this could best be achieved. Focus groups were led and facilitated by the adolescent researchers. Similar to the earlier round of interviewing, all focus groups were audio-taped, transcribed and translated into English. Once the focus groups were completed, the adult research team solicited feedback from the adolescent researchers on their experiences and perspectives of the focus-group discussions.

With hundreds of pages of interview and focus group transcripts at hand, the authors conducted an initial analysis of the data in Canada. With the use of *NVivo* qualita-

tive analysis software, all of the data were organized and coded around a number of thematic categories. The initial thematic organization of interview and focus group data, along with the authors' own interpretations of the data, were the subject of several days of discussion with DCI-SL and our six focus group leaders. This was followed by a conference involving most of the child participants who had the opportunity to comment on the research findings and on implications for child social assistance policies and programs.

The Culture of Violence: Girls' Experiences of Sexual Victimization

As recounted by our female participants, the RUF's culture of violence was one that none of them was drawn to voluntarily. All participants revealed that they had been abducted by the RUF under circumstances of extreme coercion, violence, and fear. Once attached to the RUF, this aura of violence whether verbal, physical, psychological or sexual, became an integral feature of daily interaction. As these girls reveal:

> There wasn't a single day in RUF territory that was trouble- and violence-free. People were always maltreated and any wicked act you can think of in this world was perpetrated by the rebels.

> If you refused or failed to do what you were told, they would put you in a cell or tie you up. In some cases, one of [the commanders] might pass a command saying "Kill that person for not taking orders."

While the threat of violence was always present and manifested in a variety of forms, girls reported that it was the pervasive sexual violence that was most debilitating. All but two participants revealed that they had been subjected to repeated sexual violence—gang rape, individual rape and/or rape with objects:

> The more senior men had the power to say "this [girl] is mine, this one is mine." After they captured women, they would rape them. I was raped the moment they captured me at 12 years old...and I bled and bled...I could not walk. The man who raped me later carried me on his back.

> 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 being finished with and subsequent ones were particularly very painful...I don't even know who might have been the father of my child.

Alongside ongoing sexual violence, many girls were forced into becoming the sexual "property" of specific males in the group. In Sierra Leone, this sexual slavery was euphemistically referred to as "bush marriages" or "AK-47 marriages." At times "marriage" to male commanders who held senior rank would actually provide girls with a modicum of protection:

> The girls were serving as wives were treated better, and according to the rank and status of their husbands....At the beginning, I was raped daily....I was every man's wife. But later, one of them, an officer, had a special interest in me. He then protected me against others and never allowed others to use me. He continued to [rape me] alone and less frequently.

Given the potential protection that "marriage" brought, girls reported trying to gain the attention of powerful men:

> I was married in the bush...it was more advisable to have a husband than to be single. Women and girls were seeking [the attention of] men—especially strong ones for protection from sexual harassment.

While most of the worst excesses of sexual violence on girls and women appear to have been perpetrated by boys and young men, one participant reported that sexual violence was also perpetrated by females:

> Female officers treated us like slaves. The females were even more wicked to us than the men...I was raped by a male officer [and he was] interested in having further relationship with me, but my female commander stopped him. Little did I know that she was also after something. She was a lesbian and each time we went very close to the men, she would punish us. We were four in her group and she slept with all of us. At night, she told us to "play love" with her.

Girls' Experiences as Combatants

Girls' brutal experiences of violence and victimization are clearly disturbing and reveal the constraints and crude authority structures that ensured girls' subservience. Yet it is misleading to focus solely on situations of victimization, for this tends to obscure the layers of complexity that surrounded girls' experiences with the RUF. Reflecting the need to explore girls' agency, it is equally important to trace the ways in which girls actively became drawn into the conflict as active participants and combatants. By promoting the voices of girls in fighting forces and soliciting their views and perspectives, we came to appreciate

the complexity of girls' experiences within the RUF's culture of violence, not only in terms of their experiences of severe victimization, but as well as in terms of their participation in violence.

As we learned from our interviews, girls who were victimized by their commanders often became their unwitting soldiers and allies. The "enemy" was thus transformed from the individuals who captured and coerced them, into those who fought against these same individuals. Although girls reported that their status as combatants tended to be low in relation to that of most boys, they revealed that carrying and using arms nonetheless gave them a sense of power and control that they otherwise lacked in the norms of gendered inequity within the RUF.

> I was not very powerful in my own group, but I had a lot of power over civilians. The commander would give us each a civilian—he would say, "This one is yours, this one is yours," and you would kill the one that was given to you. At that time, I was quite enthusiastic about it—I was proud and confident. I felt good....That was one way of building confidence in me that I am just like them.

To handle a gun was, for many girls, a means of recourse from utter powerlessness and victimization.

> I felt powerful when I had a gun. As long as you are holding a gun, you have power over those who don't. It gave me more status and power.

> It was exciting...I was eager to become a soldier so that I would be able to resist threats and harassment from other soldiers.

In becoming fighters, a minority of girls gained powerful positions as leaders of other combatants. One of our respondents was promoted to the rank of a commander:

> 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 older soldiers....We were cherished by the senior officers for our wicked deeds.

An array of factors and circumstances propelled some girl into combat and acts of atrocity. A prominent factor was the presence of a powerful and calculated indoctrination process, both formal and informal, which made girls more receptive to the rebel cause and thus more willing to fight. Once abducted into the ranks of the RUF, girls reported attending formal "lectures" given by adult commanders which addressed the working "philosophy" of the rebels, and conveyed the urgent necessity to overthrow the corrupt and inefficient central government. More informally, girls were promised significant financial benefits and social status in the aftermath of the conflict. For these girls, who had been displaced from family and living in circumstances of extreme poverty and social marginality, with little or no educational or employment prospects, such potential rewards were enticing. Equally important was the sense of group solidarity and empowerment that girls encountered during the latter phases of their attachment to the RUF.

As recounted over and over by our female respondents, an aura of menace, repeatedly manifested through verbal abuse and acts of wanton cruelty, was an integral feature of daily interaction in the RUF. The process of acculturation was a violent one that promoted terror and compliance among young recruits. All our respondents suffered physical abuse from those who commanded on them. They likewise all witnessed the perpetration of outrageous forms of brutality that were clearly intended as public displays of horror. In the face of persistent violence and threats of assault, mutilation and death, a primary compulsion among all recruits was to survive.

Yet over time, for some girls the abhorrence and fright that they experienced during their initial attachment tended to diminish as the commonplace nature of violent behaviour gradually assumed a semblance of normality. Immersed in a social environment that rationalized violence, for some girls, terror gave way to acquiescence and cruelty came to be trivialized. What was once frightening and intolerable not only became acceptable, but in fact synonymous with excitement and even skill.

> By then I felt good, especially when I was with my colleagues....I was an expert in burning houses....The flames form large chunks of fire like those in the movies. They were very exciting.

As our respondents recounted, a few girls evolved from being frightened disoriented recruits into de-sensitized combatants, steeped in a sense of collective purpose and power, and perpetuating the relentless culture of violence that defined the RUF.

> 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.

> [Among the RUF] our only motive to exist was killing. That is the only thing that we thought about...I burnt

> houses, captured people, I carried looted properties. 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 left the area and set it on fire with kerosene or petrol.

As recounted by our respondents, power and privilege came to those who were particularly violent both in combat situations and towards civilians.

> Very active and obedient soldiers were given promotion. You only needed to show some enthusiasm and be very active at the war front. [That would mean] fighting and terrorizing civilians, including abducting them.

As these last commentaries indicate, ultimately some girls came to be infused with an intoxicating sense of the power that accrued from cruelty to others. In such cases, the sheer force of acculturation and structural upheaval transformed their state of mind and behaviour. The sentiment of supremacy that arose from acts of wanton cruelty may have been tantamount to an expression of release at no longer being objects of terror and abuse themselves. Likewise, the realities of chronic poverty, a weak and venal state and the loss of their families and communities left these girls without the institutional and normative buffers needed to protect them from the coercive persuasion of rebel forces. Once they were absorbed into the ranks of the RUF, often after the trauma of witnessing and experiencing unspeakably brutal acts, sheer survival necessitated adhering to the dictates of the new community into which they had been propelled. Without family and community support and the capacity to escape daily bouts of cruelty, they were caught up in a severe culture of violence. Once incorporated into this "culture," some girls were easily socialized into the norms and behaviours that fomented and perpetuated it. This transition from disoriented and highly impressionable youngsters into often ruthless combatants was fueled by the spate of small arms that inundated Sierra Leone throughout the conflict and by the abundant use of alcohol and hallucinatory drugs (Clapham 2003; Peters and Richards 1998). These drugs greatly facilitated the manipulation of children and the diminishment of their capacities for comprehension and self-control, and ultimately fostered desensitization to the culture of violence.

More research is required to fully understand why some female child soldiers were more prone to acts of cruelty than many others. However, previous studies of coercive persuasion and the so-called Stockholm syndrome in which terror-prone victims can easily become psychologically and emotionally attached to tormentors as a form of survival conditioning (Galanter 1989) tend to reinforce interpretations of children's unwitting de-sensitization and participation in atrocities during the Sierra Leonean conflict. While this generally occurred among boys, it clearly also affected girls. Nevertheless, it is extraordinarily difficult to delineate distinctions between girls who were victims and those who perpetrated actions of violence and cruelty. In many respects all children who were caught up in Sierra Leone's civil war can be considered victims even though many were implicated in perpetrating severe acts of violence (Sherrow 2000). Moreover, the transition from "victim" to "perpetrator" is not a linear one and we are cautious about suggesting that all—or even most girl combatants—experienced the entire transition from victim to hardened perpetrator. Instead, it would appear that girl combatants continually drifted between committing acts of violence, and simultaneously being victims of violence by others. The blurred line between victimization and perpetration is clearly illustrated by the narrative of this girl:

> [The] Colonel gave me a gun and instructed me to fire a shot. I told him I didn't want to hold a gun. He threatened me to do whatever he commanded otherwise he was going to kill me. I then did as he commanded and fired my very first shot in the air nervously.

Despite the shame and confusion that often accompanied such complex circumstances, many of the girls appeared to have maintained a substantial degree of sensitivity and abhorrence to social situations and actions over which they had no control:

> [The combatants] were very nervous and wept bitterly when out of sight of the rebels. Some even fainted at the sight of dead bodies.

> Yes, the [combatants] felt bad, lonely and always kept to themselves. They cried secretly.

It is within this context that, despite being bound by severely constraining authority structures, girls revealed their capacity for deliberative choice and independence of action through unique modes of resistance.

Agency and Resistance in the Culture of Violence

There is little doubt that within the context of armed conflict, a multitude of nefarious social forces controlled and hampered girls' behaviour and actions. Despite such powerful forces, amazingly, many girls responded to the culture of violence with individual autonomy, resilience and resistance. While interviews with girls uncovered dis-

turbing examples of sexual victimization and participation in violence, they concurrently highlighted the unique, resourceful, and often subversive ways that other girls resisted these same forms of victimization and participation. Apart from being highly functional means to protect themselves, these modes of resistance enabled the girls to assert, however minutely, their individual agency with the aim to subvert the culture of violence.

Resisting Sexual Violence

Girls' abhorrence and disgust with ongoing sexual violence was clear:

> I felt so depressed about the rape incident and since that day I hated the man and I still hate him. He was so dirty with a very awful odour which suffocated me and made me vomit.

In response, participants were found to use ingenious and resourceful forms of resistance that protected them from sexual violence. For example, one girl would pretend that she was menstruating which thwarted any potential sexual victimization:

> [To avoid being raped] I would fix a pad as if I was observing menstruation.

Other girls reported using violent forms of resistance to retaliate against male perpetrators of sexual assault:

> I stabbed one guy to death—he was always harassing me for sex. On that day he wanted to rape me and I told him that if he tried, I would stab him. He underestimated me and he never knew I had a dagger. He met me alone in the bush on my way to town after using the bush toilet. I knew that he and others were observing my movements...and I took the dagger along [to protect me from] rapists. As he attempted to rape me, I stabbed him twice...I was tired of the sexual harassment. He later died [from the stabbing].

> I always wanted to take revenge against men [because they raped us]. This is why I was so wicked and aggressive to men during the conflict. Men are heartless and some of us [girls] were killing them for their wicked acts.

Another means of resisting patriarchal authority and reducing the threat of sexual violence was through the establishment of close relationships and a sense of solidarity among other girls and women. Fostering supportive female relationships not only brought a degree of solace, comfort and solidarity, but also created a unique physical and emotional "space" where males were inherently excluded. One girl explained the importance of talking to and sharing with other girls about her experience of rape:

> One day a girl was brutally raped and she bled so badly she died...I had heard about it and was so affected by it, but I was afraid to discuss it....Two girls began discussing it and I overheard them. We all sat down and started sharing our stories [of rape]....I felt much better after this because I thought that I was the only one to have this happen to.

Another girl, who became pregnant as a result of rape at the age of 12, illustrates how the younger and inexperienced girls relied on the older women for knowledge and mentorship, as well as for the unique sense of female community.

> I heard from the older women in the bush that if you didn't menstruate for two months, you were pregnant. I didn't menstruate for more than two months, so I went to an older woman and told her. She told me that I was pregnant...I really didn't believe it and I began to cry. So after the woman told me that I was pregnant, I continued to go to other women in the group and tell them the same thing. I kept hoping that they would tell me something different. They all said the same thing and I was devastated.

This sense of female solidarity and male exclusion was reiterated by this same girl in describing the eventual delivery of her child:

> The delivery happened in the bush....The men stayed away....The older women helped me. They knew what to do.

Resisting Participation in Violence

Alongside resistance to sexual violence, it became apparent that girls also resisted RUF authority, command structure and participation in violence. For example, some girls deliberately refused to kill. During combat they fired their weapons in such a way that human targets were able to escape without being hurt. As these former combatants explained:

> While on patrol if we came across [unknown] people they would order us to kill them. But I was not really interested in killing people...[I] would normally fire, intentionally not aiming well. [I] would then report that the mission was completed without really killing the people.

> My first time in combat I was just firing sporadically. I was not really aiming at anything at all. I wasn't interested in harming anyone.

As the aforementioned statements illustrate, the retention of sentiments of compassion and outrage, however muted, appeared to give rise to acts of subtle resistance and extraordinary courage.

Aside from rejecting orders to kill, girls resisted the culture of violence by socializing covertly and engaging in forbidden or surreptitious discussions about their former lives as civilians. As this girl explained:

> If we came from the same place and we knew each other, we would share a few jokes or sit together and share thoughts and memories of home. This would go on until perhaps one of commanders came and said, "What are you sitting here for? What are you doing?" We would then pretend we were doing something else so that they would not learn of what we were actually engaged in. Because at those times, if you were caught in acts like that you [could be killed].

Resistance among girls also came in the form of mobilizing themselves to escape. Some girls fled from their captors, fully aware of the consequences of violence or death if they were discovered:

> I was about ten years old at the time....Several of us small children sat together and planned our escape.... We decided that when and if we are attacked by the CDF [Civil Defence Forces], we would not go with the rebel group, but we would go with the CDF. Everyone knew about the plan so when the CDF did attack, we ran away.

Although numerous respondents reported being unsuccessful in their attempts to escape and to protect themselves and others from violence and victimization, these efforts at resistance nonetheless reveal examples of children's remarkable courage and ingenuity.

The Implications of Girls' Agency and Resilience in Post-Conflict Circumstances

This analysis has outlined the main themes elicited from the narratives of girls who were attached to fighting forces during Sierra Leone's civil war. Through interviews and peer-led focus group sessions, girls depicted a complex and extraordinarily harsh reality that engulfed them as a result of their attachment to the RUF. Almost all of them experienced sexual abuse and other forms of physical and psychological victimization. Yet while victimization was a shared experience, these narratives demonstrate that war-affected girls were often more than passive victims carried along by forces that overwhelmed them. Instead, as many girls in this study revealed, at different times during the conflict they demonstrated their resilience and their capacity to act autonomously. Some participated actively in armed aggression. For these girls, the occasion to exercise violent aggression enabled them to gain a sense of personal power over others, and was a clear departure from relations of subservience and victimization. More common, however, were instances of subtle resistance and female solidarity that helped girls to withstand the effects of oppression and cruelty, and to preserve a "space" for sisterly compassion. Through our interviews and focus groups, it became apparent that despite harsh circumstances, girls exercised resistance and individual agency in ways that enabled them to avoid engaging in violent acts. As we were told as well, on at least one occasion a girl lashed back at her oppressor.

While the accounts of most of these girls are highly disturbing, their stories and perspectives reveal a spirit of volition and a capacity for independence of action that counters a deterministic and commonly held depiction of girls as supine victims with no capacity to resist or to modify the circumstances imposed upon them. This has implications for current post-conflict policies and programs that are being developed for girls, and indeed for children in general. If, as the narratives of our research participants consistently indicate, many children were able to demonstrate a capacity for willfulness and collective agency during the war, albeit with often tragic consequences, then it would seem imperative that current strategies of social assistance should be designed to steer the energies of young people towards ends that are personally fulfilling and socially constructive. Likewise, given the unique experiences and perspectives of girls who were attached to fighting forces, there is a need to make special provisions for female ex-combatants in post-conflict forums of deliberation and decision-making. For societal reconstruction to succeed, it is essential to adopt approaches that aim to redress female marginalization and subservience by tapping into girls' agency and resilience.

For Sierra Leone, however, the pursuit of reconciliation and societal reconstruction is enormously challenging. Although substantial humanitarian assistance is aimed at helping to improve the welfare of children, the foundations of structural violence, patriarchal authority and the marginalization of the young are deeply rooted in Sierra Leone's social fabric. Within this framework of a fragile political economy, therefore, the connection between societal reconstruction and the satisfaction of

the psycho-social needs of war-affected children is fraught with uncertainty and complexity, particularly when there is still widespread resentment against those who committed unspeakable atrocities during the conflict. While undoubtedly justice must be served and the perpetrators of the worst forms of violence must be held accountable for their actions, it is also necessary to recall that vast numbers of individuals involved in the conflict were *children* for whom the line between victim and perpetrator was extraordinarily ambiguous. As stipulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it is imperative that war-affected children be accorded special rights. One right is that of being regarded as *subjects* of actions undertaken on their behalf. That is to say, instead of being considered as passive recipients (*objects*) of interventions that are formulated and implemented entirely by adult authorities, the voices and perspectives of children must be systematically sought and incorporated into decisions and actions that directly affect them.

Accordingly, not only is it imperative to address and overcome the effects of child soldiery in Sierra Leone, but as well girls and boys must be invited to actively contribute to the development and implementation of reconstruction policies and programs. As outlined by the articles of the CRC, a document that resonates deeply in relation to post-conflict Sierra Leone, a critical step in this process is to engage girls and boys in reflective dialogue, particularly with respect to the lingering effects of their wartime experiences and their immediate needs and long-term prospects. Policies and programs oriented specifically towards the improvement of children's welfare should be attuned to the capacity of young people to reflect on their own situations and to the prospects of children's participation in the processes of formulation and implementation.

In addition, for girls in particular, programs that concentrate on providing education, job training, psychological counselling, and community integration must be sensitive and responsive to the realities of gender differentiation. Just as we have attempted to do in a modest way in this study of girls in fighting forces, so too must there be specific policies and programs for former girl combatants that are designed to facilitate the public articulation of their own voices and experiences.[5] If interventions enable girls to exercise their demonstrable capacity for independence of thought and action, then they are likely to enhance the prospects of greater numbers of war-affected girls assuming more public roles in a society that is struggling to substitute violent conflict with a social and institutional framework of peace and good governance.

Conclusion: Benefits and Challenges of Girls' Participation in Field Research

To date this inquiry into the experiences and perspectives of war-affected girls in Sierra Leone has benefited from the involvement of six girls as research collaborators. Similar to the observations of others who have engaged children as participants in the research process (Alderson 2000; Alderson 2001; Hart 1997; Johnson et al., 1996), we have found that the involvement of our child focus group leaders has been mutually rewarding. It has greatly contributed to the depth of the oral narratives that were elicited during the fieldwork and to the insights that have helped us to "de-pathologize" young girls who were caught up in the fighting as victims and as perpetrators of violence. By encouraging their powerful narratives through peer-led focus groups, we have gained insights into girls' unique experiences of victimization, survival, perpetration of violence themselves and modes of resistance in a war-induced culture of violence. Girls' narratives highlighted their resilience, their diverse reactions to violence and their capacity for independent action in the most dire of circumstances. And likewise, as the focus group leaders themselves indicated in a de-briefing session held after research fieldwork, their involvement in the project appears to have strengthened their own sense of identity and purpose.

Relying on sensitivity and intuition, focus group leaders reported being able to read the verbal and non-verbal cues of girl child participants. On several occasions, when girls were evidently reticent to talk about their experiences at any length, the focus group leaders eased their anxieties through the use of humour, empathy, and above all self-disclosure regarding their own past experiences during the war. Through their own candour and efforts to minimize the power imbalances inherent in the research relationship, they were able to foster group trust among the participants and a willingnessness to be open and candid about their wartime experiences. The following statement reflects to varying degrees what all focus group leaders experienced:

> One girl in my focus group was very shy...she was so shy to talk. I tried to coax her to talk. I explained that I was a girl just like her. I told her what happened to me, that I became separated from my parents, that I was with the rebels, and that I was raped. The she began to open up.

In addition to their contribution to the research, the focus group leaders spoke of their own personal gains from participating in the study. All of them

expressed an appreciation of the learning experience, both from the exchanges they had with peers in the focus groups and also with the principal researchers. Besides being able to discuss and reflect upon the lives and the overall plight of children in the aftermath of the conflict, they became aware of the discourse of children's rights as outlined in the articles of the CRC. The experience likewise helped to reduce for at least a short period of time their sense of isolation and social exclusion. As they indicated, participation in the research provided an opportunity to develop friendships and to assume leadership roles. One focus group leader captured this common sentiment:

> I enjoyed sharing ideas with other [girls]...they would ask me what I thought about their situations and I gave them the best advice that I could. I think that I was a good leader.

For those of us who initiated this project, the evidence of self esteem and burgeoning leadership skills exemplified by this statement has been the most gratifying result of this project.

Nevertheless, we remain cognizant of the limitations and risks of encouraging war-affected girls to articulate their war-time experiences, particularly in group settings led by their peers. Participation of girls as research collaborators has so far been limited to serving as focus group leaders. Although we recognize the enormous potential of engaging children as research partners, the realities of distance (the authors being permanently based in Canada), the stipulations of proposal submission (i.e., the need for a pre-determined research design in order to procure funding) and time frames (i.e., the contractual obligation to complete the project within a specific period) foreclosed any early "ownership" of the project by the young subjects of research. For similar reasons, preliminary analysis of all interview and focus group transcripts has been conducted solely by the authors in Canada.[6] This was mitigated, however, by a community conference held during the summer of 2004 in Sierra Leone. Organized by DCI-SL, our partner NGO in Freetown, and attended by all focus group leaders and many of our young female participants, the seminar provided a forum for reviewing and discussing the findings of the research, and proposing policy and program recommendations to various representatives of civil society, government and the international donor community that attended. In this way, we were able to include research participants in the data analysis and preliminary dissemination phases of the research as well.

Throughout the project we have been keenly sensitive to the wrenching nature of the stories that we have sought, and the psychological risks that this might have entailed for the participants. While gaining an understanding of girls' experiences within the RUF's culture of violence is essential to challenging the male-oriented images and discourses of child soldiers, and to recognizing diverse realities of girls caught up in the maelstrom of war, it can have serious implications. Recounting the personal and painful memories of victimization and perpetration of violent acts could, for some participants, re-open newly healed wounds, potentially exposing them to a form of secondary victimization. While it appears that the overwhelming number of girls who participated in interviews and focus groups for this study found the experience to be something of a catharsis, a key facet of fieldwork was to pay scrupulous attention to the ethical dimensions of the research and to conduct follow-up visits and informal exchanges with all female respondents to ensure that their safety and psychological well-being had not been jeopardized by their participation in the project. This risk of emotional turmoil has become a feature of life in post-conflict Sierra Leone, and will likely underline all efforts to engage children as participants in research and in other forms of outside intervention. Yet by openly recognizing the risk, and by anticipating the necessary measures to minimize the effects of re-lived traumas, it would seem that in the long run the benefits of engaging children as partners far outweigh the potential limitations and drawbacks.

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Notes

1 For this paper, the definition of a child will coincide with the definition set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to the Convention, a child is defined as "every human being below eighteen years" (Article 1). "Children" refers equally to both boys and girls.

2 In this paper, the term "girls in fighting forces" includes not only girls who are carrying or have carried arms, but also girls who act as cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups. Importantly, this definition also includes girls who are recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage.

3 The one-person, one-weapon approach was later changed and group disarmament was instituted where groups would disarm together and weapons would be turned in jointly.

4 Future articles will focus on the differentiated experiences and perspectives of war-affected boys.

5 A gender differentiated approach to social interventions is nothing new in Sierra Leone or in Africa as a whole: conventional development strategies have long adhered to the ideals of WID movement that was prominent during the 1970s and 1980s.

6 We point out, however, that raw transcript data were voluminous (hundreds of pages), and hence it is difficult to envision any other method of managing the data in a timely and efficient manner.

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