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“IF I COULD GO TO SCHOOL...”

Education as a tool to prevent the recruitment of girls and assist with their recovery and reintegration in Democratic Republic of Congo

**CHILD
SOLDIERS**

INTERNATIONAL

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Introduction

In Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), programmes to support the release, recovery and reintegration (commonly known as 'DDR') of former girl soldiers¹ fall far short of what is required. Despite being estimated to comprise 30 to 40 per cent of children involved in armed forces and groups, girls only represent eight per cent of children demobilised.² They are particularly under-represented in recovery and reintegration programmes.

The dire situation of returning girl soldiers and their children has been consistently documented for nearly 15 years.³ Girl soldiers have almost inevitably been subjected to sexual violence or slavery. Some of them have had children while with the armed group. Many girls are subsequently stigmatised or excluded by their community for “having known men”; many are not accepted back into their homes and schools. A large proportion of these girls receive little to no assistance, and when they are supported by DDR actors, their specific needs are not necessarily taken into account.

The DRC government bears primary responsibility for the provision of DDR assistance. This assistance is currently mostly implemented through NGOs, with coordination and support from UNICEF and the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO). There is an urgent need for all DDR actors, under the leadership of

1 Child Soldiers International considers the term 'child soldier' to be equivalent to the following description of children associated with armed forces or groups: "A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any 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, 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 and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups, UNICEF, February 2007.

2 MONUSCO, Invisible Survivors: Girls in Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo From 2009 to 2015, 25 November 2015: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/151123-Girls-in-Armed-Groups-2009-2015-Final.pdf>

3 See for example the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict since 2002: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/virtual-library>



Map shows Child Soldiers International research locations (South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut Uélé provinces) © UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 21 April 2015

the government, to develop a strategy⁴ that reaches these girls, their families and communities, and supports their particular needs.

With this challenge in mind, Child Soldiers International's programme aims to improve best practice for DDR assistance, using the opinions and experiences of the former girl soldiers themselves. This work builds upon our consultations with Congolese NGOs, the DRC government, MONUSCO and UNICEF throughout 2012-2015, and follows on from the recommendations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the DRC government in February 2012.⁵

In January-February 2016, our research team spent six weeks in DRC (South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut Uélé provinces) and interviewed 150 girls about the circumstances of their recruitment, their experience within the armed groups,⁶ and the difficulties they are facing upon returning to their families and communities.

All interviewed participants were aged between 12 and 19, and had been recruited as children. Their opinions and experiences provided a unique and crucial insight into the interventions which are needed for more effective recovery and reintegration programmes for girls.



Photo: Child Soldiers International's research team interviewing former girl soldiers in Bweremana, North Kivu, January 2016.

4 As per the 2012 recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: "As a matter of priority, develop and implement in collaboration with the United Nations and child protection actors a strategy to identify and provide effective reintegration assistance to current and former girl soldiers and their children, which meet their complex medical, economic and psychosocial needs. Every effort should be made to ensure these initiatives, and any resulting programmes, do not increase the stigma and exclusion faced by former girl soldiers.", CRC/C/OPAC/COD/1 para 49 (b), Committee on the Rights of the Child, 59th session (2012).

5 CRC/C/OPAC/COD/1, Committee on the Rights of the Child, 59th session (2012).

6 Note: Child Soldiers International received unverified reports of many girls associated with members of the Armed Forces of the DRC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo/FARDC) and used for domestic and sexual purposes. We were unable to get access to them to document this violation, but we are concerned that there are potentially large numbers of girls exploited by the army and falling under the radar of child protection agencies and child DDR providers.

Our researchers also consulted UN and NGO actors in eastern DRC, and interviewed 84 members of Child Protection Community Networks (known in French as “RECOPE”); 46 DDR actors; and 14 local government officials in order to find out how they help girls return home and the impact of reintegration programmes on their lives.



Photo: Child Soldiers International's research team meeting with a national partner that works on child DDR in Goma, North Kivu, January 2016.

Education emerged from the research as a powerful factor in preventing girls from joining armed groups, in providing opportunities for returning girl soldiers, and in promoting their social acceptance. The girls identified that schooling was something they wish for, but is seldom made available to them. We also identified complementary practices for the release and reintegration of former girl soldiers. The findings will be fully detailed in a comprehensive report, once the next phase of the research is complete.⁷

⁷ This report will be available at: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/pages/shop/department/all>

Education as a tool to prevent recruitment

The recruitment of girls into armed groups in DRC must be considered in the context of circumstances which prevail in most conflict situations - widespread poverty; lack of access to education and employment; and failure of the rule of law. Amidst these factors, our participants identified education as a critical factor in preventing girls from joining (and re-joining) armed groups.

Factors behind the recruitment of girls into armed groups

About a third of the girls we interviewed had voluntarily⁸ joined an armed group (generally a community-based, self-defence militia, or “Mai Mai”). Reasons for joining could be typified within the following four categories:

- 1. Interruption of schooling:** Almost half of the girls had joined armed groups after they could no longer pay their school fees. They believed that an education was unobtainable and that life with an armed group would offer more opportunities.
- 2. Needing protection:** Most of the girls who ‘volunteered’ to join had witnessed violent attacks by armed groups. They joined a militia to seek protection. Some parents encouraged them to join, as a measure of protection against attacks.
- 3. Seeking revenge:** Some girls joined armed groups to seek revenge for the killing of a parent, a sexual assault or other attacks on their families and communities.
- 4. Poverty:** Some joined armed groups with the belief that they would provide for them. Many needed food and had seen armed groups offer goods which were otherwise impossible to obtain.

8 The extent to which children's recruitment is genuinely free and informed is difficult to establish when broader circumstances, such as insecurity, lack of education, economic or other opportunities are taken into account.



Photo: Former girl soldiers in Nyiragongo North, North Kivu, January 2016.

Interruption of schooling and recruitment

As identified above, a significant proportion of the girls we interviewed cited their ambition to go to school, and a lack of means to pay for an education as a key factor in their recruitment:

- *“If I had been going to school, I would not have joined.”*
- *“We heard that we could get money there [in the armed group]. I went because I wanted to get enough money to go back to school.”*
- *“I was pushed out of school for failing to pay the fees, so instead of roaming aimlessly in town, it was better to go and help them in the bush.”*
- *“I was in 3rd year Social Studies but the money for school fees ran out. I was spending my days roaming the streets here and there. With other girls also unable to go to school, we decided to join the Mai Mai APCLS [Alliance of Patriots for a Free and Sovereign Congo].”*
- *“My brother stopped paying the school fees, so I was chased out...I left for the bush because I was told that you could get some money there. I wanted to eat and go back to pay for my education.”*
- *“Every day I was pestering my parents, asking them to put me in school, but they refused. So I went and joined the Nyatura [a Mai Mai militia] in the bush.”*
- *“My father made me stop school. I was so angry, I left to join the Mai Mai defence.”*
- *“My father kept saying: ‘School is for boys, not girls’. I was angry, but I found a way. I would go to the forest and collect palm nuts, crush*

them with a stone and sell the oil. So I was able to go to school, but only for a while because then it was not enough. I joined because I was angry at my parents for not keeping me in school.”

The role of education in preventing children from joining an armed group was also recognised by Child Protection Community Networks:

- *“Being out of school is at the core of recruitment of children.”*
- Member of Child Protection Community Network, Rubari, Rutshuru

Factors underlying interrupted schooling

Assessing responses from the girls we interviewed, we identified two key factors behind their inability to attend school:

1. Inability to pay school fees, combined with competing financial pressure for the girls to earn money for their families;
2. Gender-based views on girls’ roles in society.

Some parents do not have the financial means to pay for their children’s education; others told their daughters that they no longer deserve to go to school because (in their words) they have “known men”. One girl told us that when she asked her parents for money to pay for school fees they responded: *“Why don’t you ask the men with whom you lived in the bush?”*

These factors are still at play once the girls return home. The majority of the girls we met expressed the wish to go back to school, but very few were able to.

Primary education is free and compulsory by law in DRC.⁹ However, in most schools in the country, students have to pay for school fees and cover other costs such as exercise books, uniforms and shoes. One of the girls we interviewed was asked to buy and bring her desk to school. In practicality, the lack of financial means constitutes a barrier to education for many children.

⁹ See article 38 of the 2009 Child Protection Code (Loi no. 09/001 du 10 janvier 2009 portant protection de l’enfant).

Life in the bush

The vast majority of the girls regretted bitterly having joined the armed group. Once in the group, they faced physical and psychological abuse and many recounted experiences too horrific to convey.

- *“Not being able to go to school after my father was killed, I was afraid I’d become a street child... I found a lot of children when I reached [the group]. They told me: ‘You would not have come if you knew what’s happening here.’ I was raped on the first day. I was told I’d be killed if I fought back.”*
- *“We were forced to kill using a big stick and were told exactly where to hit. When I was ordered to kill, I trembled. They gave me a little time, but if I did not manage to kill soon, they told me I’d be killed.”*
- *“When there was nothing left to eat we became like animals, eating grass, anything we could see.”*
- *“I was often drugged. I would wake up and find myself naked. They gave us drugs so that we would not get tired of all of them using us.”*
- *“Life in the bush was only suffering.”*

It also became clear that these girls had few sympathetic individuals to share their experiences with. One girl told us: *“Today is the first time that someone is asking me about what happened”*.



Photo: Former girl soldiers in Rubare, North Kivu, one of whom can be seen with her young child, January 2016.

Education as a tool for recovery and reintegration

Whilst there has been a degree of success in getting boys out of armed groups and into DDR programmes, shame and fear of rejection has kept many girls in the bush. One girl told our researchers that it was better to stay and die with the armed group than to return home and be rejected. Social stigma remains a driving factor in preventing girls from demobilising from armed groups.

- *“If we leave the group, we’re going to be targeted. So many girls accept and continue to live with their bush husband.”*

Amongst those that took the decision to return, many described an initial welcome home of “joy and tears”. Yet relationships with their communities frequently deteriorated, as they became labelled “prostitutes” – sometimes by their own families. Shamed and stigmatised, with assumed sexual relationships with members of the armed group, some are not accepted back into their homes and schools.

Child Soldiers International recognises that acceptance by families and communities is one of the most determining factors in the successful reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. Education has a critical role to play here.

Education to support social acceptance

For most girls that we interviewed, participation at school was seen as the best way to regain and secure their “lost value”. The girls were clear: if they could regain social value, then acceptance would automatically follow. They said that school attendance was important, not only to receive an academic education, but also as a means to erase their past, and form a positive identity, especially in the eyes of their community.

- *“If we could go to school, the community would be nicer to us, we would get some consideration that would help a lot.”*
- *“A woman who has not studied has no value.”*
- *“In church, youth from the youth group tell me: ‘You don’t study, you have nothing to say.’”*

- *"I have to go back to school. I don't know how to do it, but I must study."*

A few girls we met are lucky enough to be sponsored by NGOs. Others registered for schools even when they were unable to pay the fees. They keep trying to attend classes even after the money has run out.

- *"I work in other people's fields to pay for the classes. The fields are 4 hours away and sometimes I can't go...I have not paid in 3 months, I am afraid they'll tell me to go away."*

Some of the girls we spoke to are repeatedly sent home, but try to enter the classroom again, conscious that school may be their only hope of acceptance and to once again be "like the others".

Members of local Child Protection Community Networks confirmed the role of schooling in countering rejection and discrimination. They were explicit in their recommendation that assistance programmes should support the education of former girl soldiers:

- *"There should be enough funding to help all girls go back to school. It would help them forget the past. They would also be better accepted by the community."*
- *"To give them some social value, the girls should be in school."*
- *"When they have either an income-generating activity or are in school, there is a big difference. It gives them value in the eyes of the community. Otherwise they don't have a place in the community."*



Photo: Former girl soldiers attending their first literacy and numeracy course in Lupango, South Kivu, September 2016, © Ajedi-ka.

Discrimination in schools

In a few cases, girls told us that they faced further discrimination in school.

One girl told us: *“At school, others discriminate against me. They say they are afraid of me. Some don’t talk to me.”* A few told us that their classmates call them “HIV carriers” and encourage others not to associate with them. In one school the teachers would not let former girl soldiers carry the school register. If they made a mistake, teaching staff would remind the whole class that they come from “the bush”. We received reports of some schools refusing admission to children formerly associated with armed groups.

There remains much to be done to sensitise communities to the experiences, rights and needs of girls returning from armed groups. It is essential that assistance programmes for former girl soldiers in particular should assess and respond to the social dynamic within the community, rather than exacerbate the isolation of the girls whom they exist to support.

Conclusion and recommendations

The benefits of an education for children affected by conflict are clear. Too many girls told us that they joined armed groups because they could not afford an education. And the girls we talked to were unanimous – attending school would support their acceptance back into their communities.

Research shows that going to school, receiving an education and engaging in the social aspect of being with peers helps mitigate the effect of war and trauma on children.¹⁰ It builds their psychosocial resilience, provides a structured context that helps to regulate emotions of distress, allows them to develop a positive identity and improve their confidence, promotes a sense of self-worth, and provides social opportunities which can break isolation from their peers and community.

Providing access to education is crucial if we are to better protect children from recruitment (and re-recruitment) and help former child soldiers rebuild their lives. This education must be available for all children within affected communities. Whilst education is free by law, the government of DRC should ensure that all children who do not have the means to pay for uniforms, classroom materials and teaching fees are nonetheless able to receive an education.

To this end, Child Soldiers International is making the following recommendations to the DRC government in the field of education:

- Increase education funding to ensure that primary and secondary schooling is available free of charge for all children in DRC.
- With the support of the UN and international community, expand current governmental programmes on “catch up education”, which is more accessible to girls unable to re-join the formal education system. Ensure that both primary and secondary level classes are offered and permit reintegration into formal education as required.
- Include a specific country-wide programme on girls’ literacy in the new Education Sector Plan for the period 2016-25, building on efforts initiated in the Interim Education Sector Plan during

10 Betancourt TS, Simmons S, Borisova I, Brewer SE, Iweala U, Soudière M de la. “High Hopes, Grim Reality: Reintegration and the Education of Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone.” *Comparative education review*. 2008;52(4):565-587. doi:10.1086/591298.

the period of 2012-14. Illiteracy is a breach of children's rights and exposes girls to an increased risk of recruitment.

- Ensure that all child protection and psychosocial support training for teachers includes a section on understanding the difficulties of supporting girls formerly associated with armed groups.
- In line with UN Security Council Resolution 2225, take concrete measures to deter the military use of schools, which may render schools legitimate targets of attack, through the implementation of the *Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities From Military Use During Armed Conflict*.
- Provide funding for awareness raising and mediation amongst families and community members – including teachers – in order to facilitate their acceptance of children formerly associated with armed groups.

Efforts must be made to support the DRC government, with the assistance of the UN and NGOs, to adopt and implement a national strategy on girls' DDR. This strategy must include provisions to make education more accessible to girls, whether through the formal education system; "catch-up education"; or through literacy and numeracy classes.

Child Soldiers International is extremely grateful to the girls who spoke to us and shared experiences that no one should suffer. We were there to give these girls a voice and to be able to better advocate for improved assistance to help them rebuild their lives.



Photo: Former girl soldiers receiving their school kit for the 2016-2017 school year in Katogota, South Kivu, September 2016, © Ajedi-ka.

As a result of our findings, we are working with our NGO partners in eastern DRC to trial a pilot programme of educational support for former girl soldiers. In September 2016 we launched a series of small-scale projects to support approximately 50 of the girls who participated in our research (along with other vulnerable girls in their communities) so that they could return to school or attend literacy and numeracy classes.

These girls received a school kit containing a backpack, uniform, a pair of shoes, books and other school supplies for the 2016-2017 school year.

- *"I didn't know I would find my way back to school this year. I thank all the kind people who are supporting us... Really, I am so happy."*
- Child Soldiers International education programme participant, September 2016

Our programme continues, with further research scheduled to assess the success and impact of these education programmes.

Girl soldiers in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) experience severe hardships – both in the ranks of armed groups and after returning home. Programmes that support the release, recovery and reintegration of girl soldiers have so far been woefully inadequate. Only a small percentage of girls leave armed groups through formal demobilisation processes, and an even smaller number receive any assistance.

Following extensive consultations with DRC-based child protection partners in 2012-2015, Child Soldiers International travelled to eastern DRC in early 2016. We conducted interviews with 150 former girl soldiers, and spoke to community and child protection representatives. Our findings will form a set of best practice principles to improve assistance to former child soldiers, with a particular focus on the specific needs of girls.

The girls we talked to emphasised the importance of education in their lives. Using their words, this report illustrates the protective role schooling can play in the lives of girls affected by armed conflict, and the potential of education to support the social acceptance and reintegration of former girl soldiers into the community.

Child Soldiers International was founded in 1998 and works to end the recruitment, use and exploitation of children by armed forces and armed groups. To achieve our goal, we build community resistance to child recruitment and use, uphold and strengthen crucial laws, policies and standards, and increase pressure on key actors to ensure better protection for children.

Generous support for this work has been provided by the Protect Education in Insecurity and Conflict Program of Education Above All, Alistair Berkley Charitable Trust, UNICEF, and the government of Switzerland.

Cover photo: Former girl soldiers sharing the circumstances of their recruitment, their experience within the armed groups and the difficulties they are facing coming home with Child Soldiers International in Bweremana, North Kivu, January 2016.

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