

Women: Africa's ignored combatants

Gradual progress towards a greater role in DDR

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Freetown and Monrovia

In many disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) initiatives around the world, "women combatants are often invisible and their needs are overlooked," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has observed. While the participation of women in combat has been minimal in some of Africa's recent conflicts, in others, as in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women have taken part in significant numbers.

Originally, some of these female fighters may have been abducted. Some admit they joined voluntarily, for many of the same reasons as male recruits. A number may operate primarily as combatants. More often, they also serve as nurses, cooks, sex workers, messengers, spies or administrative or logistical personnel. Yet when a peace settlement opens the way for demobilization, they tend to be categorized among "vulnerable groups," a broad label that includes wounded or disabled male combatants and all women and children who accompany warring factions.

In Sierra Leone and Angola, notes Ms. Béatrice Pouligny, a senior researcher at the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales (CERI) in France, women combatants were classified as "dependents." As a result, "they were precluded from receiving the benefits provided to 'combatants'."

In Sierra Leone, child soldiers — who have been a great focus of international attention in recent years* — were immediately classified as a distinct category and were quickly discharged. But women were not offered similar attention. Some were excluded from the DDR programme because they did not have a weapon to hand in — one

*For more on child soldiers, see "The road from soldier back to child" and "Restoring lost childhood in Sierra Leone," in *Africa Recovery*, October 2001

Women
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of the criteria for participation. Many did not take part for fear they would be harassed or stigmatized. In the end, women constituted only 6.5 per cent of the participants, although a notably higher proportion were believed to have been actual combatants.

The legacy is still evident today. Many women who fought in the war — or were raped or otherwise victimized — have been ostracized by their communities and families. "Their husbands have given up on them," notes Ms. Christiana Lebbie, national coordinator of the non-governmental Friends of Africa Relief and Development Agency (FARDA). "They can't get work and it's hard to go back to their villages," she tells *Africa Renewal*. "So they engage in commercial sex work." She points to the top of Freetown's hills, where some have built shacks on vacant land, descending at night to the capital's bars, nightclubs and hotels to earn a little cash.

Ms. Lebbie reports that FARDA is currently working with about 50 young women in Kono, a diamond-mining district in the southeast with high rates of prostitution. "We took the girls from the street, and are equipping them with

skills," she explains. They are being taught cloth weaving and tailoring. When they finish their training, they will get sewing machines, fabric and other materials, with the goal of organizing them into cooperatives of 5-10 women each. Hopefully, she muses, their small businesses will survive and they will not drift back into sex work.

The DDR programme in neighbouring Liberia drew on some of the lessons of Sierra Leone's experience. The criteria for disarmament were expanded to make it easier for female fighters to take part. Out of the total of 103,000 combatants who completed formal demobilization by the time it ended in December 2004, nearly 22,500 — 22 per cent — were women.

The efforts of the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) "marked significant progress compared to other missions in terms of recognizing the need for separate facilities and services for women, girls, boys and men in the DDR process," according to an October 2004 report by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

"The entire process was gender-sensitive," agrees Mr. Moses Jarbo, executive

see next page

Women: Africa's ignored combatants

from previous page

director of Liberia's national DDR commission. In all eight of the cantonment sites, he reports, "special services were provided to include reproductive health and counseling on HIV AIDS [and] maternal and child health."

Still, there were shortcomings. UNIFEM pointed out. Not all the cantonment sites were designed so as to fully protect women against harassment from men.

Women who completed demobilization were eligible for reintegration benefits. As of October 2004, more than 10,000 women ex-combatants had signed up for various types of vocational train-

ing, while another 6,500 were going to school. At the agricultural training project in Duport Road they were especially well represented, with 230 women out of the approximately 500 ex-combatants in the project's first eight-month session.

As women's associations become more vocal and better organized, it is likely that future DDR efforts will improve their focus on women. In October 2004, for example, women's groups from several countries in Africa's Great Lakes region met in Rwanda. Among other recommendations for women's advancement, they called on DDR commissions to address the "specific needs of women ex-combatants." A month later, at an international conference on peace and development in the Great Lakes, that demand was incorporated into the final declaration signed by 11 African heads of state. ■