

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community and Family Responses to Youth Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: A Long Term View on Acceptance, Marginalization, and Psychosocial Adjustment

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Background: Of the many dangers of war, involvement with armed groups is considered particularly damaging to the development and psychosocial well-being of children. Over the past decade, children have been conscripted into fighting forces in 87 countries; it is estimated that at any given time, anywhere from 300,000-500,000 children are involved with fighting forces worldwide. In post-conflict settings, children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, commonly referred to as “child soldiers” face a number of challenges. The reintegration of former child soldiers is a long and complex process, yet many of the programs designed to support these processes are brief, underfunded and do not provide long term follow up. Adequately addressing the consequences of war on youth development and opportunities in the post conflict environment is critical to the success of transitional justice efforts. This study used mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) to explore the reintegration experiences of boys and girls formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG) in Sierra Leone, with particular attention to illuminating dynamics that must be considered in post-war programming and transitional justice efforts.

Methods: We used maximum variation sampling/purposeful selection to conduct a series of key informant and focus group interviews among war-affected children, youth and adults in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Individual interviews were conducted with 31 male and female CAAFAG and their caregivers and where, possible, their caregivers (n=12). In addition, a series of ten focus group interviews were carried out involving 90 male and female youth participants. In addition, a total of 120 caregivers and community members in Kono, Kenema, Bo, and Bombali districts also participated in focus groups, including eight focus groups with caregivers of youth formerly associated with the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and nine focus groups with community members and caregivers of non-RUF youth. We identified data describing marginalization and acceptance in this population and its relationship to psychosocial adjustment and social reintegration in CAAFAG. All interviews were coded and analyzed according to a uniform analysis scheme.

Results: Over time, a number of factors shape the process of reintegration and psychosocial adjustment. These include a child’s war related experiences, including the loss of key attachment relationships and their implications for the sources of guidance that CAAFAG may subsequently turn to. Long after the war, features of the post-conflict environment including stigma facing CAAFAG as well as access to education and livelihoods become pressing concerns. Many former child soldiers interviewed demonstrated an impressive capacity for resilience and personal agency despite horrendous experiences. However, the fact that rebel groups took steps to directly sever relationships between abducted children and their families and communities via the involvement of children in atrocities in continues to pose challenges to post-conflict

social reintegration in Sierra Leone. Despite sensitization programs, some former child soldiers faced stigma and blame even six years upon return. Stigma, and marginalization related to being a former child soldier, which is different for males and females, contributes to poor psychosocial trajectories. In the post-conflict environment, youth who had the support of key attachment figures to provide guidance better navigated stressors and “provoking” in the post conflict environment. Youth who lived in unsupportive families or whose families struggled with severely limited resources were impeded in their ability to build a more positive future for themselves. Unfortunately, few formal or non formal systems are in place to assist those young people who are not served by naturally-occurring protective processes.

Conclusions: A number of community-based initiatives can help to better address youth psychosocial issues in a transitional justice framework. First of all, naturally occurring protective processes such as family and community acceptance can help mitigate some of the adverse consequences of war but must be provided opportunities to flourish. However, additional help and monitoring might be needed for youth who are lacking people in their lives to provide adequate guidance and support. Our data indicate that child welfare committees set up after the resettlement were not well maintained with time and few formal social protection or mental health services exist. Systems of care and protection overall have not been given adequate priority in post conflict reconstruction efforts and children affected by the war in many ways (including CAAFAG as well as the general youth population) continue to remain underserved. For war-affected youth of all backgrounds, transitional justice should attend to developing systems of care and protection that better help them to succeed in the post conflict environment. For those most at risk, formal monitoring and social services (using a mix of traditional and standard social work responses) may be needed to assist those not well served solely by indigenous protective responses.