

Reaching the Girls

**Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups
in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

Save the Children UK and the NGO Group: CARE, IFESH and IRC
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Executive Summary

This study analyses the situation of girls associated with armed forces and groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In particular, this study seeks to understand why girls are not reached by the efforts to gain the release of children associated with armed groups in DRC and to support their reintegration. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged by child protection organisations globally that knowledge about the involvement of girls in armed groups, and how to support their particular needs in reintegration efforts, is insufficient. Undertaken as a partnership between four international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Save the Children UK and the NGO Group of CARE, IFESH and IRC, the study featured two months of in-depth fieldwork covering the five Provinces of Eastern DRC -- Maniema, North Katanga, North and South Kivu and Orientale.

It has been widely observed that very few girls, as compared to boys, have been demobilised through official processes in DRC. Over the period of December 2003 through September 2004, 1,718 boys but only 23 girls were demobilised to these four international NGOs. In September 2004, CARE identified and verified the cases of an additional 112 girls in Maniema Province. However, it should be noted this did not represent an improvement in the willingness of armed groups to release girls; rather these girls had escaped and were identified at the community level as part of a new initiative to employ more creative efforts to reach girls. Further, disparities in the release of girls and boys have been consistent over a number of years of effort on these issues. Save the Children UK has been working to demobilise children since May 1999. In this earlier period, over May 1999 through 2003, only 20 girls were released to SC as compared to 1,522 boys.

So where are the girls? Some purport that girls are simply not taken by armed groups in the same frequency as boys. To the contrary, this study found that girls are recruited, or abducted as extensively as boys. In interviews with boys who have been released, they report that 30% to 40% of children in their unit or armed group were girls. Ultimately, this study concluded that thousands of girls are still with armed groups and thousands have already escaped and found their own way back to their communities, friends or extended family members.

The issue of gaining the release of girls associated with armed groups and supporting their reintegration is highly complex. This study concludes that only a minority of girls will be reached through the formal processes of “DDR” – disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Indeed the military-oriented conception of DDR contributes to the obstacles in achieving the release of girls. Rather, reaching girls associated with armed groups requires a prioritisation of community-based approaches that address social conceptions and attitudes about girls used by armed groups.

Socio-cultural conceptions of girls form obstacles to their release from armed groups from both the question of the armed groups themselves and from the community in terms of the reintegration context. Military officials view girls as a form of possession and claim that girls are their ‘wives’ rather than ‘child soldiers’ they are obligated to demobilise.

Girls themselves often do not see leaving the armed group or their ‘military husband’ as a choice. This is due to the real threat of violence and recrimination as well as socio-cultural upbringing where girls are expected to be submissive and accepting of men. Further, once a girl becomes associated with an armed group and is used sexually, she becomes identified socially as a ‘military wife’. If a girl has a sexual contact with a man -- whether voluntarily, by rape or by assumption due to being taken by an armed group -- outside of marriage and the dowry, she is considered to ‘no longer have any value’ in society. Knowing these social views, girls may not seek to be released or demobilised in the same way as boys because they are more fearful of the social stigmas they will face upon returning to their family and community. Certainly this is complicated even further if the girl becomes pregnant and bears children by these relations.

In expressing the socio-cultural judgements about girls associated with armed groups, throughout focus groups for this study, community members and children themselves identified the following ‘fears’ on the part of the community:

1. Assuming that all girls associated with armed groups will have been sexually abused or have had sexual partners in some manner, the community views all such girls as “having lost their value” and “having lost the possibility of getting married”.
2. Fear that they will return infected with all manner of transmissible and communicable diseases. HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases feature as the primary concerns, but other transmissible and communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, were also highlighted.
3. Fear that their military commanders or ‘husbands’ will pursue the girl and that they will commit further violence against the family, neighbours or community as part of ‘reclaiming’ the girl or avenging her escape.
4. Presume that the girl will have learned a ‘military mentality’ -- being brutal, impolite, aggressive, ‘becoming a bandit’ or collaborating with thieves.
5. Fear that the girls will recruit other girls in the community to join armed groups or generally incite bad or ‘promiscuous’ behaviour in other girls.

The massive extent of abuse and exploitation of girls by armed groups and socio-cultural conceptions described above may lead to a conclusion that nothing can be done. Certainly, fatalism and despair are pervasive sentiments expressed by the girls themselves, parents and communities. The study encountered a consistent, seeming contradiction where girls faced extensive prejudices and stigmatisation and yet they were also remarkably present and surviving back in their communities. Countering the fatalism, this study found that the majority of parents hope their daughters find the means to leave these relationships and return home. Plus, many girls report that their peers would leave these relations if they could be informed of their options in a sensitive manner. Further, from experience in communities with nascent efforts supporting reintegration, there is evidence that projects that support mediation, negotiation and conflict resolution can address the social marginalisation and stigmatisation faced by girls. Beyond this study, more pro-active community level work is needed to better understand the ways girls who have escaped from armed groups are finding means of sustenance and livelihood, especially for girls with children.

This study presents some recommendations to improve the access of girls to formal demobilisation, but stresses that the majority of girls will be reached through more discrete community-based efforts. This is indeed the preference of many girls. The study recommends that girls clubs be established as an open forum for vulnerable girls and the baseline of support mechanisms to more specifically reach and support girls associated with armed groups. The open forum nature of the clubs is central to the need for such activities to be discrete and redress stigmatisation.

The conclusion emphasising broader community level approaches is also important to note for lessons learned globally. Despite extensive progress on work with children associated with armed groups in the last decade, too often, funding and attention is overly focused or restricted to linkages to a formal, adult DDR process. This study found that improving the degree to which programmes reach girls requires broader and more flexible community-based mechanisms that take into account the community context of children affected by armed conflict.

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1. Introduction and background

The objective of this study was to gain a multi-faceted understanding of the situation and attitudes of girls associated with armed forces and groups¹ in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in order to contribute to advocacy strategies and programme approaches towards their reintegration. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged by child protection organisations globally that knowledge about the involvement of girls in armed groups, and how to support their particular needs in reintegration efforts, is insufficient.²

The study was undertaken as a partnership between four international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Save the Children UK and the NGO Group of CARE, International Foundation for Education and Self-Help (IFESH) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The study featured two months of in-depth field work covering the five Provinces of Eastern DRC -- Maniema, North Katanga, North and South Kivu and Orientale.

It has been widely observed that very few girls, as compared to boys, have been demobilised through official processes in DRC. Over the period of December 2003 through September 2004, 1,718 boys but only 23 girls were demobilised to these four international NGOs.³ In September 2004, CARE identified and verified the cases of an additional 112 girls in Maniema Province. However, it should be noted this did not represent an improvement in the willingness of armed groups to release girls. Rather these girls had escaped and were identified at the community level as part of a special follow up effort to reach girls. Further, disparities in the release of girls as compared to boys have been consistent over a number of years of effort in DRC. Save the Children UK has been working to demobilise children since May 1999. In this earlier period, over May 1999 through 2003, only 20 girls were released to SC as compared to 1,522 boys.

So where are the girls? Some may purport that girls are simply not taken by armed groups in the same way as boys. To the contrary, this study found that girls are recruited, or abducted as extensively as boys. In particular, in interviews with boys who have been released, they report that 30% to 40% of children in their unit or armed group were girls. Especially in the interior of Maniema, North Katanga and North and South Kivu Provinces, entire villages have been abducted or dozens of girls taken in the same incident. Where are the girls? Ultimately, this study found that thousands are still with armed groups and thousands have already escaped and found their own way back to their communities, friends or extended family members. As is often described, girls are hidden. Indeed, this study found that the majority of girls who have escaped prefer to guard their presence in the community discretely, both to combat social stigmatisation and due to the real threat of being pursued by their former commanders.

1 The phrase “children associated with armed forces and armed groups” has been widely adopted by child protection organisations globally because the phrase “child soldiers” discriminates against children used by armed groups in non-combatant roles. The term has also been adopted by the government of DRC for the official policy and procedures on demobilisation and reintegration. As such, the French acronym EAFGA – “enfants associés aux forces et groupes armés” - is used in DRC to refer to children who are or have been associated with armed groups.

2 Readers are referred especially to: “Where are the Girls? Girls in fighting forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War” by Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana. See Annex II for reference.

3 The figures presented start with December 2003 as the month the NGO Group commenced their programmes. Other children, including a few girls, have been released to other organisations in Eastern DRC and are not reflected in these statistics. These figures represent the majority of work with children associated with armed groups across the five Provinces but draw solely on the work of the four international NGOs involved in this study. In addition to the role played by these four international NGOs in the five Provinces, other children are accessed through a few transit centres supported by UNICEF in North and South Kivu Provinces and the Ituri District in Orientale Province. For example, in Beni in North Kivu, collaborative efforts between SC, UNICEF and local partners have supported the demobilisation and reintegration of 15 girls and 189 boys. Further, the most specific action for girls has been a partnership between UNICEF and COOPI, an international NGO, to establish a special interim care centre for girls in Bunia, Ituri District. The Bunia transit centre worked with 57 girls associated with armed groups in its first six months of operation.

The issue of gaining the release of girls associated with armed groups and supporting their reintegration is highly complex. This study concludes that only a minority of girls will be reached through the formal processes of “DDR” – disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. Indeed the military-oriented conception of DDR contributes to the obstacles in achieving the release of girls. Rather, reaching girls associated with armed groups requires a prioritisation of community-based approaches that address social conceptions and attitudes about girls used by armed groups.

Study approach and methodology

This study was conducted as a collaborative exercise between Save the Children UK and the “NGO Group” consortium of CARE, IFESH and IRC. Together, the four international NGOs (INGOs) serve as the main implementing child protection actors on children associated with armed groups in the five Provinces forming Eastern DRC -- Maniema, North Katanga, North and South Kivu and Orientale.

Each of the four organisations has core funding for work on children associated with armed groups from the World Bank coordinated Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Program Trust Fund (MDRP). In addition, the four INGOs work within the national framework for DDR in DRC. This takes place under the coordination of a national body called CONADER – *Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion* – which in turn receives technical support from UNICEF.

Reaching and working with girls, especially those who have been abducted and used by armed groups, requires careful, sensitive approaches. Indeed insensitive efforts to identify such girls and arrange interviews with them can contribute to their stigmatisation. As such, the study adopted the theme “community protection of vulnerable girls” and emphasised community-based information gathering rather than attempts to reach girls through military and armed group hierarchies. Adopting the theme “community protection of vulnerable girls” helped to arrange focus group discussions, especially with girls themselves, around the complexity of social protection issues and circumstances for girls. For example, community reintegration and acceptance issues could be discussed regardless of which armed group a girl may have been associated with, the length of time a girl may have been with an armed group, issues for communities where girls are regularly raped by different armed groups and issues for girls that have children from these situations.

The study featured two weeks of in-depth field work by an experienced international child protection consultant with each of the four NGOs. The series of two-week field sessions with each of the four NGOs took place over August to October 2004. In each Province, the study included focus groups, interviews and visits to an interior, more rural location as well as the chief town of the Province. These interior field visits ranged from one to five days due to security and logistical constraints. Indeed it should be noted that the study was postponed twice due to security incidents and concerns. Main locations in the study, in chronological order, were: Bukavu, Goma and Walungu in North and South Kivu, Kindu and Kalima in Maniema, Kalemie and Kawama in North Katanga and the Ituri District (Aveba, Bunia and Mahagi) in Orientale.

In each of the locations, the study held consultations with the programme team of each NGO, visited care centres, interviewed key UN, government, military and civil society organisations. In particular, knowledge and lessons learned was sought from organisations working on sexual violence. Nineteen focus groups, including 235 people, were conducted with local women’s associations, groupings of local civil society organisations or particular child protection networks or committees.

The study also featured special efforts to include children. Ten focus groups with boys were conducted, including 103 boys. Most sessions with boys were either with a group demobilised to a transitory care structure or with a group already reintegrated in their community, but some sessions included other vulnerable boys in a given community to ensure a diversity of perspectives. Similarly,

nine focus groups with girls were conducted, reaching 89 girls. All focus groups were organised through local partners of the four INGOs or through women's associations. The study was also able to have 5 individual interviews with girls. All focus groups and interviews were limited to the consultant and a female interpreter so that children could express themselves in local language. Constraints in conducting interviews or focus groups with girls include the great geographic dispersion in which individual cases have been reunified as well as evolving security issues.

Further towards including children, the study included a girls peer survey. We were able to conduct the girls peer survey in 5 of the locations. In each location a team of five to six girls were selected as well as a woman facilitator. Following an orientation and planning session with the study consultant, the girls worked in pairs or individually to talk to other girls in their community over 2 to 5 days, and then held a reporting and feedback session with the study consultant. The peer survey was conducted in a fairly informal manner so as to facilitate the participation of girls whose ability to read and write is limited. As such, common questions were prepared with the girls, but they did not administer a questionnaire or take notes during their individual discussions with other girls in their community. This also facilitated a more natural dialogue and expression of views by the girls. The girls then worked with their facilitator to report back individual or small group discussions and some prepared their own notes intermittently. Through the work of the girl peer surveyors, the study was able to reach more than 600 girls in addition to the direct focus groups and interviews.

Context of work on children associated with armed groups in DRC

This report focuses on the situation of girls, but it is important to situate this within the broader context of work on children associated with armed groups in DRC and DDR. Indeed the recruitment and use of children by armed groups has been a widespread phenomenon noted since the 1996 – 1997 conflict resulting in the overthrow of the regime of Mobutu Sésé Seko. It is widely acknowledged, including by the national programme for child demobilisation, that the number of children associated with armed groups in DRC is unknown.⁴

The issue of children used by armed groups in DRC has received a high and consistent level of international advocacy and diplomatic attention since the onset of the current conflict in mid-1998. While direct contact with the armed forces and groups remains limited, advocacy efforts have been consistently maintained by the United Nations Peacekeeping Mission⁵, UNICEF, international human rights organisations, international child protection NGOs⁶, and national NGOs, including various efforts to broaden advocacy through a national “Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers”⁷. Of particular note in international advocacy actions, almost all of the armed groups in DRC were named in the UN Secretary General's 2002 and 2003 annual reports on children and armed conflict to the Security Council.⁸

At the national level, the legal framework on children associated with armed groups is especially strong in DRC. In addition to being a party to key international laws prohibiting the recruitment and use of children, including the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a national law was decreed in June 2000 clearly prohibiting the involvement of children less than 18

4 There are no official sources estimating the number of children associated with armed groups in DRC. An estimate of 33,000 is sometimes used; this being based on estimating that 10% of the 330,000 total combatants in DRC are children. The 330,000 figure for total combatants is attributed to the Ministry of National Defence in the government's “Programme National de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion”.

5 The United Nations peacekeeping mission in DRC is known by its French acronym MONUC - Mission d'observation des Nations unies au Congo.

6 Of particular note, Save the Children UK has been actively working on the issue in the East since 1999. See Annex II for reference for “Going Home: Demobilising and reintegrating child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo”.

7 The Coalition is a forum of non-governmental organisations, formed under, and affiliated with, the international NGO by the same name based in London.

8 “Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict”, 26 November 2002, S/2002/1299 and 10 November 2003, S/2003/1053..

years of age in any armed group.⁹ More recently, this prohibition was incorporated into the Constitution of the Transition following the December 2002 Pretoria comprehensive peace agreement.¹⁰

Towards practical steps to achieve the demobilisation of children, a number of efforts have been made over the last five years. Of particular note, efforts in DRC have been important globally in demonstrating that it is possible to achieve the demobilisation and reintegration of children during ongoing conflict. Save the Children documented lessons learned from this experience in their 2003 publication “Going Home – Demobilising and reintegrating child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo”.¹¹

The 2002 Pretoria peace accord establishing a transitional government for DRC has opened and expanded the context for DDR significantly. Taking efforts on children towards a national framework for the first time, in August 2003 UNICEF began leading a technical group on children under an inter-ministerial coordination body, the CTPC-DDR – “Comité Technique de Planification et de Coordination des activités de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion des ex-combattants”. Work begun by this committee led to the issuance of an interim national policy and procedures on children’s demobilisation and reintegration on 19 February 2004. The national policy and procedures on children are known as the *Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire* – “Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire pour la prévention, le retrait, et la réintégration des enfants associés aux forces et groupes armés.» The *Cadre Operationnel* serves as the basic reference for all actors working on children’s DDR and is in the process of being updated. In April 2004, the government adopted its National Programme for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reinsertion (PN-DDR). The CONADER – Commission Nationale de Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion – was created as the national institution responsible for its planning and implementation. This body includes a special directorate established for children’s DDR.

Especially important for girls, the *Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire* adopts the ‘Cape Town Principles’¹² definition of children associated with armed groups. Specifically, a child associated with an armed group is defined as “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.” This is especially important in addressing claims that girls associated with armed groups are ‘wives’ rather than ‘soldiers’.

Unfortunately, despite all of these positive efforts and developments, the recruitment and use of children continues today as do obstructions to releasing children.

Overview of armed groups and their recruitment of girls

⁹ The Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict was signed by DRC in September 2000 and ratified in November 2001. The June 2000 national law is known as “décret-loi 066”. Other key international legal instruments signed by DRC include the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the two additional protocols, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, signed in March 2001, the 1999 ILO Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, signed in June 2001, and the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, ratified in April 2002.

¹⁰ Article 184 of the Constitution of the Transition.

¹¹ See Annex II for reference.

¹² “Cape Town Principles and Best Practice on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilisation and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa”, Adopted by a Symposium organised by UNICEF and the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, 30 April 1997.

The majority of girls associated with armed groups are forcibly recruited. Throughout the small towns and villages of the Eastern Provinces, thousands of girls have been taken by force whilst working in their fields or as part of an entire village being attacked. This pattern was reported consistently by the interviews and focus groups of this study regardless of which armed group was being discussed.

In covering the five Provinces of Eastern DRC -- Maniema, North Katanga, North and South Kivu and Orientale -- this study covered the situation of girls associated with nearly all armed forces and groups involved in the DRC conflict. This study did not attempt to ascertain estimates of girls in specific armed groups and it is beyond the scope of this study to provide information on the different armed groups.¹³ Indeed the conflict in DRC has often featured complex, evolving alliances, splinters and mutinies between armed groups and even amalgamation of foreign and local groups. However, during the course of this study, a number of observations were made about the recruitment of girls by different armed groups and this section seeks provide such commentary where it was received.

In a few focus groups and interviews for this study, it was reported that some girls 'recruited' by Rwandan or Ugandan forces were taken with them as these forces repatriated and are still missing. This was particularly mentioned in some discussions concerning Ugandan forces and the conflict in the Ituri District.

Many community discussions for this study noted periods of time wherein they had hoped the arrival of the national army, the FARDC,¹⁴ would improve the treatment of civilians, but, for girls, the patterns of sexual violence simply continued. Generally speaking, communities do not distinguish between groups when discussing the issue of girls. Further, when discussing issues for girls, community members in focus groups often made little distinction between the recruitment of girls and acts of sexual violence or rape committed by armed groups in more individual or intermittent incidents.

Some girls have joined armed groups by choice. In a few cases, this was described as participating in something of patriotic value and in other cases, girls were described as being 'difficult' and thus joining to escape conflictual relations at home. In some cases, 'following' an armed group or a particular military official is viewed as the best opportunity to access food and other material goods. Indeed in many areas of DRC, militarised life seems to be the only option of value. Armed 'fiefdoms' exist and enrich themselves by exploiting natural resources, abusing girls and other civilians as labour and sexual partners and stealing livestock and other material goods. Even where one is not affected by such fiefdoms, military life in the national army is understandably perceived by the community as valorised through the payment of regular salaries as compared to civilian livelihoods.

This study encountered a prevailing assumption that girls are used as 'wives' and do not serve in active combat roles. This may derive from their invisibility in terms of so few being presented for formal demobilisation or directly observed in any interactions with armed groups. However, this study found that the great majority of girls serve multiple roles at the same time. They are often 'taken' or 'allocated' as the sexual partner of a particular member of the armed group but also serve as escorts, fight in active conflict and participate in the various food, water and other support tasks. Some girls interviewed described being informed immediately upon arrival to the armed group's encampment that they were expected to provide sexual services as well as take up arms.

Some distinctions were reported about Mai Mai groups in that they used young children, girls and boys as young as 8 years old, and virgins to sing chants and prepare special formulations believed to

¹³ See Annex I for a summary note on the armed groups.

¹⁴ Following the transition process agreed at the end of 2002, the national army of DRC is now the FA RDC - Forces Armées République Démocratique du Congo.

provide protective powers to warriors. Girls assigned to these special tasks seem to have consistently not to have been used sexually.

Maria and Salima

Maria joined a Mai Mai group voluntarily when she was 12 years old and served for three years. Her father had left their family when she was three years old and her mother refused to support her desire to continue education. She liked the sense of protection she felt in the armed group.

Salima was recruited by force while working in the field. Her mother had died some years ago and she was living with her paternal aunt.

Maria and Salima report that all girls were sent to the front. Younger girls who were assigned to sing special chants and prepare special protective potions were sent to frighten the other armed group and to provide protection and motivation to the combatants of their group.

Both Maria and Salima were 'married' to combatants in their group. One was the 6th wife and the other the 2nd wife, but reports that he took 6 more wives afterwards. They report that generally families are not informed about these marriages and that many parents are unhappy. Some parents try to recuperate their daughters and in some cases, a father may try to demand a dowry from the 'husband'.

Maria and Salima were officially demobilised when their Mai Mai group was integrated into the national army. When their group was gathered at the designated DDR site, they were informed by military officials that all boys and girls under 18 years old were to be demobilised. The group was dispersed to find their own lodging in the evening and Maria and Salima report that some members of the group simply fled during the process. The day after the group was informed about the children's demobilisation, a special demobilisation ceremony was conducted and an international NGO was called to bring the children to a special transit centre.

Maria and Salima report that some girls wanted to stay 'married' to their 'military husband' and followed him into the integrated army and that some girls have said they are 18 years old in order to integrate into the national army and receive the monthly salary.

Finally, Maria and Salima reported that other girls remain in the bush with elements of the armed group who did not come to the designated DDR site. They report that these girls would want to be demobilised but that some fear how they will be treated by relatives who might become their care-takers.

2. Reaching a deeper understanding of the situation of girls

As noted in the introduction, this study concludes that thousands of girls remain with armed groups in DRC and thousands more have escaped but are rarely accessed by reintegration efforts in the country. Rather than “where are the girls”, the question is more “why are girls hidden”. Girls are hidden by armed groups and their military hierarchy, but girls also hide themselves, preferring more discrete processes of re-joining their community.

Fundamentally, girls are hidden because socio-cultural conceptions of girls obstruct their access to the otherwise well-promoted efforts to demobilise children. In other words, gaining the release of girls from armed groups and supporting their reintegration requires a broader approach than “DDR”. This chapter presents the conceptions of girls associated with armed groups identified in the interviews, discussions and focus groups for this study. The conceptions point to important underlying obstacles to gaining the release of girls and to how they are received in their communities.

Conceptions and obstacles from the military side

The most prevalent pattern as to why girls are not released by armed groups, is that military officials view the girls as a form of possession and claim that girls are their ‘wives’ rather than ‘child soldiers’ they are obligated to demobilise. In some cases, advocacy efforts to explain the inclusion of girls in the national programme and legal definition of ‘children associated with armed groups’ are rebuffed with accusations of ‘breaking up families’.

In this sense there is a clash between the efforts of child protection organisations and the national programme under CONADER and socio-cultural traditions of polygamy and attitudes about girls and young women. On the one hand, it is illegal for any armed group to recruit and use girls, or boys, under 18 years old and many efforts have been made to seek their release or “demobilisation”. On the other hand, most military authorities view girls in their ranks as 2nd, 4th ‘wives’ rather than illegal members of their group they are obligated to release.

This is not to say that girls are only used by armed groups for sexual or domestic support reasons. The focus groups and interviews for this study found that the majority of girls associated with armed groups are used in a range of functions. Most consistently, they are both sexual partner and escort or armed combatant depending on if the group is currently engaged in direct conflict. In addition, as with children and lower rank soldiers generally, they may be tasked with support functions including preparing food and getting water.

Lessons to date in the demobilisation and force integration processes that have already taken place between the FARDC and some Mai Mai groups offer evidence of this conceptual obstacle to reaching girls. Interviews and focus groups with children who have been through these exercises report that children, minors under 18 years, are often identified for demobilisation by the FARDC official present, but girls are subsequently held behind as ‘wives’. In other words, girls may be identified within an armed group as being too young to integrate into the national army, but when their commanders claim they are their ‘wives’, this is automatically accepted and the girls are not included in the group of children referred to child protection actors. The girls themselves are not consulted and child protection organisations are not consulted or included in these exercises.

In some cases, girls are not reached by programmes due to persistent misunderstandings or miscommunications about the requirement to surrender a weapon in order to be included in DDR efforts. Perhaps understandably, some military officials overlook girls because they focus on the terms and conceptions of “soldier” and “disarmament” as definitions of “child soldier” or DDR plans are presented to them. Indeed contacts with military officials and armed groups, whether through

governmental interlocutors, MONUC or other international organisations, are limited to brief messages and explanations such that most dialogue only discusses general points about children rather than specific points that girls also must be released.

Further, despite written policies and procedures that children do not have to present an arm in order to be demobilised, conceptions persist that everyone must present a weapon in order to participate in 'DDR'. Indeed, *the Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire* might be interpreted to perpetuate this misconception in its' emphasis on "control and disarmament", by either MONUC or the national army, as part of the first step in the "identification" of a child to be demobilised.

Conceptions of girls themselves

Girls themselves often do not see leaving the armed group or particular military 'husband' or 'partner' as a choice. This is due to the real threat of violence and recrimination as well as socio-cultural upbringing and the influence of gender relations such that girls are expected to be submissive and accepting of men.

It must be stressed that the majority of girls have been 'recruited' by force and are often threatened with death and other violence if they try to leave. Indeed the focus groups and interviews for this study attest to a wide pattern in which adolescents are forcibly abducted and their parents or other relatives are killed if they protest this 'recruitment' of the children. In some discussions, children describe being made to witness the killing of civilians as a demonstration of what will happen to them if they try to escape. In one of the individual interviews with an escaped girl for this study, she described being made to sign a document acknowledging that she would be killed if she tried to escape.

Further, from the socio-cultural perspective, many girls simply do not see leaving their 'military husband' as a choice. There is a strong socio-cultural conception that a girl has to remain with a sexual partner, whether that relationship originated with or without her consent, including where this may be rape. For example, it is instructive to recall that a traditional justice approach to cases of rape or sexual relations outside of marriage is to force the perpetrator to pay a dowry/compensation to the family and marry the girl. Once a girl becomes associated with an armed group and is used sexually, she becomes identified socially as a 'military wife'. Most societies in Congo are traditional and view the life pathway of girls as one of maintaining virginity until the dowry is negotiated and marriage officially condoned. If a girl has a sexual contact with a man -- whether voluntarily, by rape or by assumption due to being taken by an armed group -- outside of marriage and the dowry, she is considered to 'no longer have any value' in society. This 'verdict' for girls was repeated throughout the focus groups for this study. Knowing these social views, girls may not seek to be released or demobilised in the same way as boys because they are more fearful of the social stigmas they will face upon returning to their family and community.

Certainly this is complicated even further if the girl becomes pregnant and bears children by these relations. In fact, some view it as 'lucky' if one is taken as the 'wife' of a particular military member, albeit perhaps the 3rd or 5th wife, in the hope that the relationship and the paternity of the children might be 'normalised' some day through the payment of a dowry. Further, the prospect of being the 4th or 5th wife of a particular man, rather than 'being chased' by many men, may be seen as a form of protection and 'solution' - even positive given the circumstances - to their lives.

Some local organisations interviewed commented that even when armed groups move and are re-deployed, groups of 'young women' can later be observed moving behind these troops. Some of these observers say this demonstrates that the girls feel obligated to continue with — or even desire to continue with -- the armed group or their 'military husband' because they do not seize such opportunities to flee.

While the conceived lack of choice for girls in these armed group relations is strong, other discussions for this study emphasised that girls are not aware of the possibility to be demobilised or that it was illegal for the armed group to take them in the first place. Some interviews with girls stressed that if their peers still in armed groups could be informed, they would want to leave en masse. Thus this study concludes that more creative processes and efforts need to be established to reach and talk to girls associated with armed groups in order to begin to inform them of their options.

Conceptions and obstacles from the community side

Socio-cultural conceptions also create more obstacles for the reintegration process of girls than of boys. Generally speaking, communities are fearful of the aggressive behaviour children are presumed to learn and adopt through their association with armed groups, but such behaviour is especially ill-tolerated in girls and girls face additional social stigmas and isolation following their return from armed groups. ‘Being stigmatised’ can be a vague concept. This study sought to understand the conceptions, fears and attitudes behind why community members might stigmatise girls.

Some interviews for this study spoke comparatively of reintegration issues for adults, boys and girls. In these discussions, they consistently acknowledged that it was easiest for adults to reintegrate back in to the community. This was explained as being, in part, due to the adult having had social status before joining the armed group. By virtue of this social status, he can reclaim his position in the community, what remains of his property, and ‘normalise’ his life in that his wife and children are ‘obligated’ to stay with him.¹⁵ Reintegration was also explained as more difficult for children because children were forced to engage in the most direct combat and killing and to commit the most transgressions in terms of pillaging and harassing communities. This was explained as a simple matter of military hierarchy where adults, regardless of rank, were able to stay behind and pass on commands to others.

Following this pattern, communities have a range of fears and prejudices about children associated with armed groups. For all, the experience of children participating in killing and pillaging transgresses the traditional concept of children as submissive and obedient. Discussions for this study found a pervading dynamic where communities assumed children were uniformly brutal and aggressive due to their experience in armed groups, whether or not it was actually true that a particular child had adopted this behaviour. As such, reintegrated children are suspected of any theft, petty crime or other infraction that happens within their family or neighbourhood.

One of the most common phrases expressed about children associated with armed groups in this study was that their neighbours and community ‘point the finger’ at them for everything. Families in turn become fearful of their social relations when it seems it is always their child being humiliated or ‘pointed to’ for a real or rumoured infraction.

This fear and prejudgement that children associated with armed groups will permanently adopt aggressive and impolite behaviour is especially an obstacle for girls. While communities continue to fear that boys will make a habit of aggressive behaviour, this is ultimately more “acceptable” for boys than for girls.

The social stigma of ‘pointing the finger’ is also more pervasive for girls because they are presumed to have and retain sexual relations with members of armed groups and to have lost any prospect of getting married within the community. A number of discussions for this study relayed stories where boys, or men, ended their engagement with a girl after ‘jealous’ neighbours informed him that she was

¹⁵ The comments made during these discussions only mentioned comparisons to adult men reintegrating. Adult women are associated with armed groups but cases of them reintegrating were never mentioned by the informants to this study.

formerly associated with an armed group. Similar patterns are reported in DRC for victims of sexual violence; such as husbands divorcing their wives if they are victims and families breaking the engagements of their sons and demanding the reimbursement of dowries if a girl has been raped.

It should be noted that part of the stigma for girls as compared to boys is due to attitudes about sexual relations outside of socially sanctioned marriages rather than just the fact of having been associated with an armed group. In other words, boys have also been involved in sexual relations outside of socially sanctioned marriage during their association with armed groups but do not suffer the same social stigma for this during reintegration.

Focus groups throughout this study identified the following fears and prejudices on the part of communities towards girls associated with armed groups:

1. Assuming that all girls associated with armed groups will have been sexually abused or have had sexual partners in some manner, the community views all such girls as “having lost their value” and “having lost the possibility of getting married”. More broadly, the family has been “dishonoured”.
2. Fear that they will return infected with all manner of transmissible and communicable diseases. HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) feature as the primary concerns, but other transmissible and communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, were also highlighted. Even symptoms of skin diseases, malaria or losing weight in such girls are more drastically presumed to be due to STDs or that she induced an abortion.
3. Fear that their military commanders or ‘husbands’ will pursue the girl and that they will commit further violence against the family, neighbours or community as part of ‘reclaiming’ the girl or avenging her escape.
4. Presume that the girl will have learned a ‘military mentality’ – “being brutal”, impolite, aggressive, “becoming a bandit” or collaborating with thieves.
5. In some cases, this is described more gently as an inability of the family and community to cope with a ‘traumatised’ or ‘disturbed’ girl.
6. Fear that having learned such behaviour, including having multiple sexual partners, that the girls will recruit other girls in the community to join armed groups or generally incite bad or “promiscuous” behaviour in other girls. In some cases, a presumption was expressed that such girls automatically become prostitutes.

In some focus groups and interviews for this study, some distinctions were made for girls that were known to have been taken by force by the armed group or known to have joined voluntarily. The main distinction made in these cases was that girls that were known to have been taken by force would be accepted more readily and not immediately suspected of brutal, aggressive behaviour. However, as the massive extent of sexual violence and exploitation is known, all girls are feared to “have lost their value” and to be infected with all manner of STDs and diseases.

The approach of the study to initiate discussions on the more open theme of “community protection of vulnerable children” facilitated other points of comparison in addition to the issue of sexual violence and rape. One of the most important other points of comparison was a long-standing pattern that children living with extended family members generally were mistreated or marginalised compared to the biological children of that family. The extended family, especially through paternal lines, still feels obliged and honours responsibility to take in orphaned or other family members, but, even traditionally, such children are expected to play a more subservient role in the family. Decades of conflict exacerbated poverty and death of extended family members has extended and worsened this dynamic significantly. Extended families still offer important social protection roles to separated, orphaned and other situations for girls but this dynamic needs to be addressed through family mediation and other sensitisation efforts in programmes.

Girls with children

For girls who are pregnant and have children, '*filles meres*' in the popular phrase across DRC, from their sexual relations as part of being associated with the armed group, the judgements and stigmatisation of the community are all the more accentuated.

1. While she may 'physically' be accepted to live with her family or relatives, they refuse to support her and the child, explaining that the child "is an extra charge" the family can not afford due to also being impoverished by the war.
2. There is a general social stigma of children where the father is not known; not known by the family or society or sometimes not known at all in terms of identity. This also represents an additional dishonour to the girl's family.
3. In some cases, fear that the father of the child is of another nationality or ethnicity and that the child may thus become a future enemy of the community. This is the case in communities where some of the girls were taken by Rwandan (both Interahamwe and armed forces) or Ugandan combatants and where ethnic identity has been a particular feature of the conflict; for example in the Ituri District and in regards to situations where pygmies have raped Bantu tribes in Katanga.
4. There is a conservative fear that other girls will be influenced to have sexual relations and children outside of the formal process of parental consent, dowry and official sanction or that the girl will abandon the child and rejoin the armed group.

Ultimately, girls with children from their experience with armed groups are under the most pressure from their family and community to find some means of livelihood. While she and her children might be accepted physically, in terms of some semblance of lodging, by her family, an extended family member or a friend, she is socially distanced and expected to find her own means of sustenance and survival. A few incidents of girls that had children as a result of rape were relayed during this study as having been physically rejected, expelled from the community but such extreme situations were not reported during study discussions about girls associated with armed groups.

Outside observers often asked about what might be done about the children of girls associated with armed groups. Throughout this study, most girls expressed that they wanted to keep their children. In only one girls peer survey, girls with children suggested that centre be established where their children could be care for temporarily while they established a better means of livelihood. But even in this suggestion, they wanted to be able to visit the children and to take them back in the near future. In another small, but encouraging indicator, of girls who had infants and young children with them during focus groups, there was only one case where the infant seemed neglected and malnourished. The level of interest, attention and commitment demonstrated, albeit in these fairly brief sessions, by the girls to these young children was otherwise notable. Overall, the girls report that they want to gain more social, emotional and other support of their family or caregivers and find a way to establish their own means of livelihood. They consistently also expressed the hope to some day find a civilian husband who would accept their children. However, it should be noted that as child protection organisations establish more specific community-based work with girls, the situation of rejected young children should be borne in mind and explored more specifically.

3. Implications for programme efforts to reach girls

The massive extent of abuse and exploitation of girls by armed groups and the attitudes and conceptions described above may lead to a sense of helplessness and conclusion that nothing can be done. Certainly, there is a wide-spread, fatalistic view about children that is difficult to address, even in communities where children have come back and demonstrated their desire to be an accepted member of their family and community again. The ongoing atmosphere of fear, mistrust and suspicion in many communities undermines efforts to extend solidarity, acceptance and tolerance to vulnerable groups. Yet, to the contrary, this study found that the majority of parents hope their daughters find the means to leave these relationships and return home. Many girls who have escaped report that their peers would leave their ‘military husband’ and armed group if they could be informed of their options in a discrete and sensitive manner.

The pattern of girls being hidden or hiding themselves creates a delicate challenge to programme efforts to reach them. The challenge being to reach girls without the process of reaching out to them contributing, unintentionally, to their ‘identification’ and stigmatisation. This study found a dynamic across the Eastern Provinces where the issue of girls associated with armed groups was discussed openly by many local officials and organisations, but girls prefer to ‘hide’ at the individual and family level. On the surface, this dynamic seems a contradiction. This can be understood in the sense that many girls face frightening repercussions if they are pursued by their former commanders or ‘military husband’ and in the sense that girls may be embarrassed and simply want to try to discretely regain the ‘normal’ social standing of other girls.

Thousands of girls are already back in their communities in a physical sense but need support to address the other ways they are isolated, stigmatised or marginalised by their care-givers and neighbours. The courage, resiliency, and agency of the girls to escape and their initial reception and acceptance by their family, extended family or other caregiver are strengths upon which programmes can build. Indeed, from experience in communities with nascent efforts supporting reintegration, there is evidence that projects that support mediation, negotiation and conflict resolution can address the social marginalisation and stigmatisation faced by girls. Beyond this study, more pro-active community level work is needed to better understand the ways girls who have escaped from armed groups are finding means of sustenance and livelihood, especially for girls with children.

Due to the conceptions and viewpoints described in the previous chapter and the stated preferences of many girls, this study concludes that the majority of girls will best be reached from the community level. Efforts should continue and improvements made to increase the release of girls in the more formal ‘DDR’ process, but, more pro-active investments are needed to establish activities and mechanisms to reach girls at the community level. Indeed, this study found indications that increasing efforts to reach girls at the community level will contribute to learning appropriate ways to reach girls still with armed groups and facilitating their release. Thus this study report first presents recommendations for starting more pro-active work with girls at the community level as the next chapter, followed by recommendations regarding the formal DDR processes.

Chantal's story

In September 2003, Chantal and her family were working in their field when a Mai Mai group arrived. The commander began harassing her father, saying that he was working for the RCD-Goma. When he began to defend himself, they killed him and her mother. Chantal pleaded with the commander, saying she would work for them if he spared her life and that of her three little brothers. She was also able to persuade the commander not to take the oldest of her brothers, who was 9 years old, because he was ill.

During her time with the Mai Mai, Chantal was assigned to preparing food. She reports that assignments were strictly made and enforced by the commanders of the group. Some older girls were assigned to fight, others, like herself, assigned to food preparation tasks and young boys less than 12 years of age and young, virgin girls were assigned to sing special chants and prepare special protective substances for the combatants. Chantal reported that some combatants had as many as five women in 'the armed village' or camp and sometimes 'wives' in other villages as well. Regarding other differences to boys, Chantal reports that boys, but not girls, in the armed group were allowed to keep or share money or goods they pillaged during fighting.

Chantal's ordeal ended in December 2003 when a special process was undertaken in Maniema Province to integrate Mai Mai groups into the national army. Chantal reported that representatives of a church organisation came and told the group's commander about the special DDR – integration process. Only the commander and a few others left to learn more about the process. The rest of the group was instructed to remain in the bush, but many, took advantage of the absence of the leaders and fled.

Chantal fled with many other girls and found her brothers living with an uncle back in her home village. The uncle readily accepted Chantal into his home, but soon decided to move everyone to a larger town because of the ongoing insecurity and suffering of village life. Chantal feels generally supported by her uncle, but reports that since living in town, the wife of the uncle is severely pressing her to find her own home for herself and her younger brothers. The uncle's wife rarely shares food with Chantal and her brothers and Chantal struggles to find sustenance for them everyday.

4. Recommendations starting at the community reintegration level

While very few girls have gone through the formal DDR process, this study found indications that thousands have already made their own way back to their community. The experience of these so-called ‘self-demobilised’ girls provides important insights to the reintegration context and process for girls.

As part of the focus groups and girls peer surveys, this study solicited suggestions as to key actions or responses that would help girls who had been associated with armed groups. These largely focused on the reintegration context and, it should be noted, responses seemed to first assume that girls had been reunified with their family or found an appropriate caregiver. Consistently, the suggestions of the focus groups and girls peer surveys were:

- Support a place and network of people to provide orientation, counselling, ‘listening’ or promoting girls’ resilience. In some focus groups with adults, they spoke of a need for “detraumatization” or “cleansing of memory” in view of the particular ritual practices of some groups and other conflict experiences many girls have endured;
- Support psychosocial activities, “clubs de vie”, religious groups, moral and cultural education;
- Mediation support with family or other care-givers and follow up;
- Sensitisation of neighbours and other community members – working to convince them to accept girls and to recognise that the events of their being associated with armed groups are “accidents” that can and are happening to everyone;
- Medical tests and assistance; especially related to reproductive health and STDs;
- Economic assistance – to valorise the victim, support their livelihood and even independence if they have children;
- Education assistance;
- Denunciation and follow up of perpetrators; and;
- Documentation, such as the ‘*attestation de sortie*’.¹⁶

Girls need social reintegration support as much as economic

Outside observers interviewed for this study often focused on the need for girls associated with armed groups to have access to skills training and income generating projects. Yet, as demonstrated by the order of the suggestions above, interviews and focus groups with girls, and boys, for this study reported social marginalisation and isolation as just as serious a concern. They emphasised that they may be accepted physically in terms of receiving shelter from their family, extended family or friends, but that they are marginalised and isolated in terms of the family’s social interactions, provision of food and other needs, and always suspected and criticised by their family and neighbours. Girls need options, such as girls clubs, where they can get advice and programme interventions to help combat the stigmatisation and prejudgements they face in the community.

‘Sensitisation’ of the community to combat the social stigmatisation and marginalisation of girls needs to be undertaken more specifically and rigorously. However, the idea of ‘sensitisation’ is often pursued in too vague a manner. For example, throughout the fieldwork for this study, local associations and committees claimed they undertake ‘sensibilisation’ activities or churches report that they have “groupes des mamas” that do sensibilisation work, but it was very difficult to identify concrete examples of what they do or who they have reached. In one of the most striking examples during the fieldwork, in a discussion exploring sensitisation work with a local, follow up committee for reintegrated children, it was finally revealed that no one had met with an individual care-giver of one

¹⁶ The ‘attestation de sortie’ is the demobilisation document established for the formal DDR process. This issue is taken up further in the next chapter on recommendations regarding formal demobilisation.

of the children. This example underscores the gap between children’s testimonies of social marginalisation and the lack of focus in many sensitisation efforts.

Rather than general sensibilisation activities, programmes need to more specifically emphasise mediation, conflict resolution, community dialogue, negotiation and problem solving. Some of the ideas raised during group interviews and other discussions for this study include:

1. Mobilising religious leaders, at both the individual level and through relevant religious hierarchies, to denounce such stigmatisation and promote tolerance and acceptance of victims in sermons. This will require a series of discussions by child protection actors on the ground as working with girls associated with armed groups may interface with unhelpful church traditions. For example, some church leaders during this study resisted entreaties to end common practices such as not allowing ‘*filles meres*’ in schools, denouncing such girls or their parents, or proposing that such girls be ‘sent away’.
2. Expanding the experience of door-to-door work undertaken in some sexual violence programmes. In particular, organising social follow up networks by women’s associations and other girls themselves to visit girls on a case-by-case basis. Or, where more serious influence may be needed in terms of how the grandmother, uncle, wife of the uncle, step-mother or neighbour is treating the child, local networks might organise a delegation of religious and local leaders to undertake such home visits.
3. Similar to the suggestions with religious leaders, it was also suggested that education officials be mobilised to intervene in cases where other children tease girls for having been associated with an armed group or having had a child.

The various local child protection committees established by the international NGOs undertaking this study provide a strong base from which to identify and extend more focused sensitisation activities. These local committees also provide a strong base from which to identify appropriate partners to initiate more pro-active activities for girls, such as ‘girls clubs’.

Establish Girls Clubs as the baseline of reintegration support

Establishing community-based girls clubs is recommended as a primary activity through which to improve outreach to girls and support their reintegration. The proposed ‘girls clubs’ would be open to all vulnerable girls in the community and provide open-format activities. Specifically reaching girls that are or have been associated with armed groups would be accomplished through discrete outreach activities using the girls clubs as a base. Initially, as part of a start-up phase, the open-format activities identified by this study as most appropriate and desired include:

- Theme-based, short, non-formal education or life skills sessions. Adolescent and reproductive health topics were the most frequently requested or suggested.
- There is a real dearth of cultural, spiritual and recreational activities to contribute to psycho-social well-being. Adolescents can organise many of these activities themselves and reach out to their peers who may need proactive outreach to join.
- While many informants in this study question the approach and value of ‘counselling’, girls did express a need for a place to ask questions and “be listened to”.

Organising the girls clubs as open to all girls in a community is essential to combat the stigmatisation and marginalisation otherwise felt by girls associated with armed groups. This underscores the principle of community-based reintegration adopted by the *Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire*. Simply put, girls avoid activities that identify or categorise them as having been with an armed group or other stigma such as being the victim of sexual violence. Girls in focus groups and the peer survey for this study consistently, simply expressed that they wanted to be treated, “approached” like other girls in the community.

This draws from lessons learned from sexual violence programming as well. For example, in a few focus groups with local women who are outreach workers and animators in sexual violence programmes, they explained that it was often difficult to convince women to take advantage of projects providing free medical help because the women were afraid of the consequences of identifying themselves to even a few people in the process of seeking that help. Certainly popularly cited examples of even pastors divorcing wives who have been raped contributes to victims concerns to hide their experience. A recent USAID assessment visiting a number of sexual violence programmes in Eastern DRC noted that “the massive scope of rape in the eastern provinces has brought a formerly taboo subject out in the wide open and under international scrutiny, and caused further humiliation and embarrassment [to victims].”¹⁷ This assessment stressed that “[...] the most effective programs observed had adopted a holistic, multi-sector approach [...]”¹⁸

It is important to note that the term ‘girls clubs’ should be adapted to local preference, but is specifically employed here to distinguish the activity from ‘*mouvements des jeunes*’, ‘*associations des femmes*’, ‘*clubs des enfants*’, already present in some communities in DRC. This study found that current activities are very much more accessed by boys or older youth. Similarly, sexual violence programmes report that they reach very few girls, as compared to adult women, through their women’s association partners. In other words, reaching girls less than 18 years old requires specific activities and attention.

Certainly boys and all children in a community would benefit from the open-format, non-formal education activities suggested above, especially in addressing issues of sexual violence and reproductive health. Indeed, such an approach will contribute to improving community and peer attitudes and prejudgements behind the social reintegration process. Further, as noted above, seeking to provide inclusive activities fulfils the community-based reintegration approach. In early discussions with the four international NGOs undertaking this study, some proposed that mixed gender clubs be initiated with special activities for girls developed subsequently. Certainly, appropriate community activities need to be flexible to local analysis as an organisation begins to establish such activities on the ground. Fundamentally, this study simply stresses that specific sessions, efforts, outreach and attention are needed for girls.

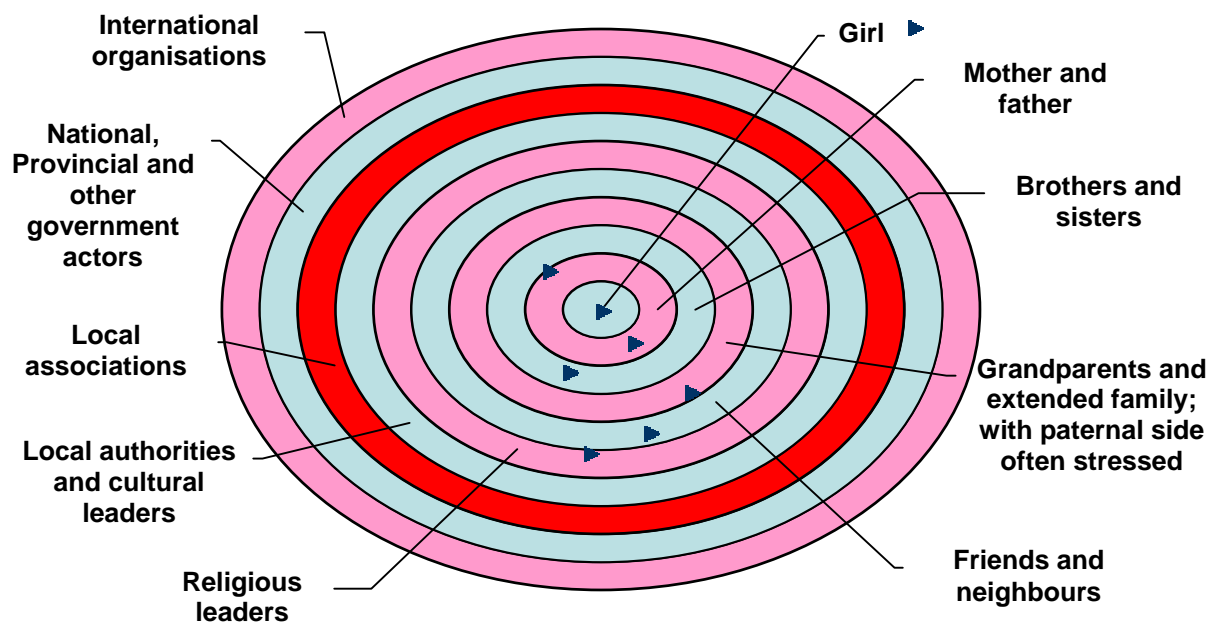
This study found an overall need for reintegration activities in DRC to be more diligent and pro-active in reaching children themselves. While important, unfortunately, a focus on the capacity building of local organisations and establishment of local committees can result in more attention and investment in adults than the intended child beneficiaries.

The diagram below represents the social protection structure around a girl, each layer of the concentric circles representing the closest and subsequent social actors with roles and responsibilities in girls’ lives and protection.¹⁹ This diagram was used as a tool in focus groups and with the girl peer survey teams to facilitate discussion as to who and where vulnerable girls are in their community and who are the social actors who can have the most influence in addressing issues and obstacles to their reintegration. As such, the layers of circles here represent the most common diagram developed by the children in these sessions. The various indicators of “girl” outside of the centre of the diagram illustrate that girls may be with various caregivers – extended family, friends or even pastors.

¹⁷ “Sexual Terrorism: Rape as a Weapon of War in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. An assessment of programmatic responses to sexual violence in North Kivu, South Kivu, Maniema and Orientale Provinces”, USAID/DCHA Assessment Report, 18 March 2004, page 13.

¹⁸ *Idem*, page 6.

¹⁹ It was interesting to note that children very rarely identified teachers as social actors when working with this diagram in focus groups, but this may be closely related to the lack of access to education throughout war-affected Eastern DRC.



The red colour of the circle representing local associations is used to demonstrate that programmes need to be proactive in reaching beyond the layer of local associations to children themselves and to the social actors more directly involved in the children’s protection and well-being. Turning back to the recommendation of ‘girls clubs’, they might be envisioned as a link between the role of religious and other local associations in a community and the various layers of society in which vulnerable girls can be found.

Finally, it is recommended that ‘girls clubs’ pro-actively adopt child-to-child or girls participation in their organisation and activities. Girls involved in the peer survey element of this study reported that their peers at first resisted talking about their situation, but, in the end, said they were grateful that “someone listened to them” and that they “were approached” by their peers. Indeed girls involved in carrying out the peer surveys reported that they were better placed than adults to reach out to other girls and would like to continue to be involved in such activities. Given the geographically disperse context of DRC and limited resources, the experience of the girls peer survey demonstrated that girls, and boys for that matter, could play interesting social follow up roles with their peers.

Drawing on the cultural and recreational activities, adolescents can play an important role in community mediation and tolerance through producing skits and demonstrating normal interactions between different groups and categories of children. Methodologies such as “theatre for development” would be valuable to explore with the girls clubs and child participation efforts with children formerly associated with armed groups generally. Finally, experience in setting up the girls clubs will provide the right basis upon which to identify appropriate health, education and economic or livelihood projects for girls.

Health referral options

While health services are not normally within the mandate and programmes of child protection organisations, creative linkages with health services or referral options need to be established for the girls clubs. This should be explored, and be feasible, in partnership with the various organisations

focusing on sexual violence. A core health need for girls is screening and treatment of STDs and other reproductive health complications following their often violent sexual experiences and, in many cases, difficult pregnancies carried in the harsh environment of armed group encampments. Further, in many cases, the young children the girls have borne as a result of these relations with armed groups have often had no access to infant or early childhood health services.

An underlying question in developing health services or referral systems for girls concerns the fees involved and the availability and training level of local health systems. Drawing from the experience of sexual violence programmes, caution must be noted on projects that arrange for the payment or reimbursement of health fees. A number of projects employ a system where a victim of sexual violence is provided with a “voucher” to access health services and the health service is reimbursed for the expenses by the project. Experience is finding that many women do not accept this modality to access health services for reasons of confidentiality and discretion. The main problem is that they still have to present information on the motive of their visit to a series of reception and nursing staff before reaching the doctor.

Discretion and confidentiality in accessing such reproductive health services is all the more of concern for girls than for adult women. Indeed experience and reporting to date in sexual violence programming demonstrates that projects reach very, very few girls as compared to women. Early analysis of this pattern points to greater reticence on the part of mothers and girls themselves to allow an unwed girl to be known to seek help related to sexual health issues. In one community where adult victims were accessing health referrals, it was reported that they preferred to perform traditional cleansing ceremonies at home for girls. Questions of discretion and confidentiality are especially delicate and will need to be explored as an organisation gains more knowledge about community dynamics as part of the process of establishing activities like girls clubs. Again, partnering and learning from organisations that have been directly involved in sexual violence work will be valuable. Training and the establishment of protocols and codes of conduct will be important to develop for key adults and adolescents involved in activities like girls clubs.

To counter the above challenges, special adolescent health options should be explored. For example, special adolescent health screening days could be organised a couple of days a week wherein separate space is organised for girls. It is recommended that organisations working on child protection, sexual violence and health establish special, mobile adolescent health teams that would cover specific geographic areas. This would maximise resources and investments in terms of training a special team and extending geographic coverage beyond the few specialised health services in the towns of Bukavu, Bunia and Goma. All of these health services should be open to all girls in the community to counter suspicions and prejudgements that the clients are only girls formerly associated with armed groups or victims of sexual violence.

As a final note, while many raise the issue of HIV, caution must be exercised as this study found strong community assumptions that all girls associated with armed groups are HIV positive and certainly treatment will rarely be available or affordable. Early indications from UNICEF and other programmes are that 30% of victims of sexual violence are testing HIV positive. Where voluntary counselling and testing are feasible, access for girls should certainly be supported. Indeed a few instances were reported wherein being able to demonstrate a negative test on a range of diseases facilitated the acceptance of a girl by extended family or other care-givers. However, a key first step is to support STD screening and their attendant, more feasible treatment.

Girls want education

Girls, and boys, all want education but this remains a gap in reintegration opportunities. While the girls clubs would provide an appropriate venue for a number of non-formal education activities, formal, basic education requires more concerted attention and investment in DRC. CARE and SC are

already undertaking or initiating a few, sound efforts to support school rehabilitation as part of ensuring a community-based approach to improving access to education for all war-affected children, but these efforts will be very limited in reaching girls associated with armed groups. This is due to:

- gender disparities in education access generally;
- their adolescent age, after years of a conflict-affected environment, renders enrolment in primary grades difficult; sometimes due to restrictive policies on the part of education authorities and sometimes due to being stigmatised by classmates;
- while external support for school rehabilitation and help with supplies can reduce the overall expense of education, the fees remain prohibitive for most girls that have been associated with armed groups; and;
- girls are under more pressure to focus on livelihood activities than boys, in part due their perceived reduced prospects of getting married. This is especially the case for girls with young children.

Indeed throughout DRC, special strategies and investments are needed to more creatively address the education needs of the 10 to 18 year generation. It was beyond the scope of this study to analyse and develop specific education recommendations. However, more strategic education activities for the adolescent age group would contribute greatly to the community-based reintegration approach. Some of the most critical issues to address concerning education for adolescents are creative financing mechanisms, condensed or accelerated curriculum and modalities to help address the different shifts or hours girls may need to accommodate their livelihood tasks.

Socio-economic options and questions

This study found that the programming approach to reintegrating children associated with armed groups is often too linear and detached from community dynamics. Following family reunification, it focuses on identifying local organisations that can implement socio-professional training schemes, such as tailoring and carpentry. This overlooks the social marginalisation and family or community-level integration issues. This is the case generally, but this focus especially exacerbates the challenges of working with girls because the social dynamics and protection issues are more severe for them than for boys.

Girls, especially those with babies, face higher social expectations and pressure than boys to become economically self-sufficient, because “they have lost their value”, “are no longer marriage-able”. As such, there is a strong community-level social expectation that girls need to engage in behaviour and activities that demonstrate, over time, they can be “of value” and can integrate into civilian life. But fewer traditional socio-professional options are considered appropriate for girls and any given village or community can only absorb, in terms of market, a limited number of, for example, tailors trained for three months. Indeed the limitations of socio-professional training schemes have been raised in other reports, evaluations and lesson learned analyses.

More creative and pro-active livelihood options need to be developed for girls. This study found that local organisations who already have experience working with girls, stress that the majority of girls need small-scale activities that more quickly generate a small income. These organisations stress that the girls do not have the patience, skills or life circumstances that allow them to participate in the three to six month training periods that most of the professional training schemes require. As such, small group market gardens or livestock options may be more appropriate.

Identifying and supporting livelihood options for girls also need to take into account and address the social marginalisation they experience. Indeed, this study found that the emphasis on socio-professional or skills training may undermine the community-based approach. This is due to a prevailing pattern where local NGOs wait for international organisations to fund their establishment and implementation of such projects. A consequent dynamic is that communities wait for ‘outsiders’

to provide for children associated with armed groups rather than looking at appropriate roles and responsibilities across family members, extended family and neighbours, churches, local NGOs and civil authorities. In other words, there is a tendency to focus on a few, individual children outside of the social context in which they live. The diagram of concentric circles around the child presented above was helpful in analysing this dynamic in a number of discussions with local child protection committees and is helpful to recall here.

To help counter this dynamic, it is recommended that livelihood support to girls include negotiation with their family or other care arrangement. For example, negotiating with a girl's uncle or other extended family member to continue to provide shelter for the girl and parameters about how her income will be used for herself and as part of the family. Employing a methodology such as Save the Children's Household Economy Approach²⁰ in a few key locations to explore livelihood options for girls within the context of their care arrangement and peer group would be highly valuable to the effort to improve and expand practical projects and strategies.

Francine's story

Francine was almost 18 years old when she was abducted in the middle of the night from her home by the Interahamwe or FDLR. At the time Francine was abducted, she was visiting her mother and young sisters in their fairly remote village during school vacation. Francine had recently been able to enrol in a secondary school with the support of an aunt. Her father died some years ago.

When Francine and the members of the armed group arrived at their camp after a three day, circuitous journey, she was interrogated for information about other girls, livestock and other possessions of families in her and neighbouring villages. Francine reports that she saw some 15 other girls from her and neighbouring villages with different members of this FDLR group. As the interrogation ended and four men started to hold her down to rape her, she protested that she was a virgin and was given to the assistant commander. Francine reports that she had to have sex with him ten times a day but that he was not violent with her. In fact, she reports that the commander started to give her meat and bags of stolen clothes as symbols of her being "his woman".

Francine decided to pretend she was happy to be this commander's 'wife', hoping over time to gain his trust and find a way to escape. Francine was held by the group for almost five months and she reports that over time she recognised a number of the men from her and neighbouring villages who visited the camp and collaborated with this FDLR group.

Finally, one day she got permission to go to the river without an escort and made her escape. After walking and hiding for two days, upon arriving in a village near to her own, she collapsed to the ground crying. She was overcome with fear about how her family would receive her and what would happen if she was being pursued. Finally, a man approached her and, after finally gaining enough confidence to tell him her story, the man assured her she would be accepted and organised a delegation from the village to accompany her for the rest of her journey. Indeed, her family was greatly relieved she was still alive and overjoyed with the reunion. However, knowing that she would be pursued by the armed group, the whole family moved to another town to stay with a relative.

Francine's security continues to be at risk. When representatives of the FDLR arrived in her village to look for her, some of the neighbours reported where the family had moved. Francine decided to courageously report everything to the local authorities; including identifying the local men who were collaborating with the FDLR group. The local authorities arrested four of these men.

The actions of Francine and the local authorities are remarkable and unusual steps towards justice in the context of the situation in Eastern DRC. However, Francine and her family continue to be in danger. Relatives of the four men arrested have threatened to kill Francine. Whilst there are a few NGOs active in sexual violence and child protection issues, there are no witness protection options or systems.

²⁰ Save the Children UK can be contacted for the manual: Household Economy Approach: A resource manual for practitioners.

5. Recommendations regarding formal demobilisation

Despite a clear legal framework and adoption of a national programme, the *Cadre Operationnel Interiminaire*, girls continue to be absent in the efforts to demobilise children from the various armed groups. While this study and the previous chapter stressed that the majority of girls will be reached through, and prefer, more discrete community-based efforts, it is also important to try to increase and improve the access of girls to formal demobilisation. This may appear contradictory, but improving the degree to which girls are somehow able to leave armed groups is multi-faceted. Some of the focus of girls on discretion is due to their fear of being pursued because they escaped and in a few cases, being officially demobilised was important in reintegration in the sense that it gave confidence to the family or caregiver about the status of the girl.

5.1. Actions to improve the participation of girls in formal demobilisation

Throughout this study, many informants noted the lack of progress in getting children released generally. Indeed child protection actors continue to also struggle to prevent and address cases of re-recruitment and even new recruitment. The recommendations here will contribute to the work on children associated with armed groups generally, but also seek to provide the necessary specific attention to issues for girls.

1) Issue a military instruction

A central obstacle to girl's participation in formal demobilisation concerns the awareness, understanding or acceptance of the obligation to release girls on the part of military officials. As elaborated above, this starts with those military officials holding girls in their armed groups who claim that the girls are their 'wives', and thus different than boys, or other children, they are obligated to release.

Many children interviewed for this study, of those who have been through the formal DDR process, stated strongly that a specific military instruction needs to be issued, from the Minister of Defence and other top levels of the military hierarchy, in order to get girls released. It is recommended that child protection organisations develop a draft 'instruction' and then work with CONADER to request the issuance of the instruction by the Ministry of Defence. This 'instruction' needs to highlight the illegality, with reference to the June 2000 decree, of involving girls, as well as boys, less than 18 years of age in an armed group in any capacity. The 'instruction' then needs to incorporate appropriate legal references concerning polygamy and marital consent towards addressing the claims of commanders that girls are present in the armed group as civilian wives. Given the intention and desire of many armed groups to integrate into the national army, it might further be useful to reference military code. A number of interviews with military officials for this study reported that military code allows soldiers to have one wife, and children, in the support structures or benefits of the armed forces for the family of a soldier.

Certainly some will question the impact and reach of such an instruction. However, this would be a valuable tool for advocacy and follow up in that it provides a more official military statement than what has previously been a variety of radio messages.

2) Issue a formal transmittal of the Cadre Operationnel

The lack of awareness, understanding and acceptance of the obligation to release girls also includes military and other officials who directly negotiate and interact with armed groups. This interaction occurs during the range of integration or demobilisation actions with various armed groups; in particular the number of demobilisation and integration of forces processes that have occurred between the FARDC and some Mai Mai groups.

Many officials met during this study were generally aware of the obligation to demobilise children associated with armed groups, but were unaware of the national policy and programme, the *Cadre Operationnel Intérimaire*. Some informants for this study responded that international NGOs and other child protection actors should increase their efforts to disseminate copies of the *Cadre Operationnel*. While such efforts may be helpful, it must be recognised that provincial authorities and the various levels of military officers need to be informed of the policy, and their roles and responsibilities in its implementation, from their own hierarchy.

As the updated and elaborated *Cadre Operationnel* will soon be issued, it is recommended that an accompanying transmittal letter be prepared. This would also help focus the attention of such officials on key points under their responsibility as many will not take the time to read the full, rather lengthy *Cadre Operationnel*. Indeed many such officials do not need to be familiar with all of the details as the actions for children turn more to the reintegration side. The proposed transmittal letter should highlight the extra attention needed to release girls and the need to involve operational child protection organisations. The transmittal letter might best be issued by CONADER, but consideration should be given to issuance by the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Social Affairs and other appropriate actors.

3) Linkages with adult demobilisation

While there have been a number of demobilisation and integration actions between the FARDC and Mai Mai groups, the national demobilisation programme for adults, PNDDR, has yet to be fully developed and implemented. The special disarmament programme for the Ituri District, officially launched in early September 2004, is expected to provide a pilot of the national programme. As part of the programme in Ituri, disarmament and demobilisation sites are established to which all members of an armed group are to present themselves, disarm and begin the procedures for either applying for integration into the national army or demobilising and reintegrating to their community. At the entry of each of these sites, all children are to be identified and referred to a special location and process. In applying global good practice to recognise that children are used by armed groups in a variety of functions, the special referral procedure clearly notes that children are not obligated to present a weapon.

Lessons learned on linkages between the adult and children's procedures in the Ituri demobilisation programme provide important insights as the programme expands and proceeds. Special outreach and attention to girls should be incorporated into these procedures:

- The health posts or systems established in the sites should include a separate facility for women and girls and children under 5 years of age. Female nurses should be trained and employed in these health posts and systems. This should provide a minimal environment where girls begin to learn about their rights and options and might feel confident enough to discuss leaving their military 'husband' or 'relationship'. Health services for children are often established separately. This remains appropriate for boys, but a joint health service between the adult and children's processes for women, girls and very young children might help to create more opportunities to access girls that are in non-consensual relations with military officials. Vaccinations of young children linked to demobilisation sites should also be attempted. In addition to being an opportunity to reach such children, information gleaned during this study indicates that such health services provide a situation where military officials allow access to girls.

- Female outreach staff should be trained and employed to interact with ‘dependents’ present in or around a demobilisation site as it is highly likely girls will be amongst this population. Generally speaking, the Ituri and national programmes have insufficiently prepared for civilians that are presented at disarmament and demobilisation sites as ‘dependents’ of a member of the armed group. Sensitive outreach with ‘dependents’ may provide opportunities to identify and refer girls to special protection systems for children.

It must be stressed that these special outreach mechanisms to girls require closer linkages to key organisations active and responsible for the adult processes. There is a tendency to disregard the implications of adult procedures for children and the inherent roles and linkages organisations responsible for the adult process thus have with children.

4) Develop mechanisms for reporting, follow up and sanctions

As noted, child protection actors in DRC continue to struggle to prevent and address cases of re-recruitment and new recruitment. Girls face a high level of fear of being pursued or harassed by former commanders or ‘military husbands’. One of the suggestions from focus groups and interviews was that instances of recruitment, re-recruitment, harassment should be denounced by local and other authorities. Similar calls for more public denunciation against perpetrators were reported as part of work on sexual violence. During this study, it was learned that a significant case of child recruitment was being prosecuted in South Kivu, but such action is rare.

Pursuing redress and justice is expected to continue to be delicate and difficult due to ongoing insecurity in the transition process in DRC. However, some first steps are recommended here. Through CONADER, support to brigade-level military judicial sections and other appropriate authorities, it is recommended that a more rigorous and systematic reporting and follow up system be established. Child protection actors in the field continue to struggle with insufficient support from civil and military authorities in following up their reported cases of re-recruitment. Advocacy for the development and application of more specific sanctions by the military hierarchy against those commanders who continue to hold, abduct and recruit children should be undertaken. Sanctions such as excluding such military officers from being part of the new national army would have an impact and would serve as a demonstration of the government’s commitment.

5) Undertake more concerted advocacy plans of action

While DRC has a strong history on advocacy on child recruitment, this study found that advocacy actions remain diffuse and disperse. A wide range of actors – from CONADER to various sections of MONUC to UNICEF to international NGOs to local human rights organisations to members of the national “Coalition to stop the use of child soldiers” – undertake advocacy actions and regularly raise the issue in their opportunities to meet with local officials and representatives of armed groups. However, the impact of these communications and advocacy actions is limited by a lack of coordination, follow up and feedback between individual efforts. Further, while contact with armed groups is understandably limited, advocacy messages give insufficient specific attention to girls as compared to the more simple message of releasing “child soldiers” who are often more visibly boys.

It should be acknowledged that discussing the specific question of girls with the hierarchies of armed forces and groups is difficult. Such discussion is often rebuffed with accusations that child protection organisations are ‘breaking up families’. Thus these recommendations regarding advocacy should be considered in balance with other recommendations in this report on reaching out to girls through other girls or women’s associations in the communities and on opportunities through health posts and other linkages to other demobilisation processes.

More sustained and coordinated dialogue and communications with armed groups and influential community members is needed to gain progress on the release of girls from armed groups. It is recommended that child protection actors in each Province establish advocacy plans of action and meet monthly to report progress and agree on follow up steps. Ideally, UNICEF would lead and serve as focal point in these advocacy action plans in each Province. In South Kivu, the establishment of a children's focal point within the military brigade was reported to be helpful. Similar focal points, including within CONADER representation offices, should be considered in other Provinces. Focal points will especially be necessary in formal adult DDR transit centres or procedures.

6) Initiate a military training programme

Towards a more medium and longer term view, it is recommended that a child protection military training programme be initiated with the FARDC within the framework of integrating a national army and security sector reform. It is recommended that this be adopted as a national framework, agreed between the FARDC and child protection organisations, but that the framework should include immediate sessions organised at Provincial and other levels between regional brigades and specific child protection organisations.

Linking to the recommendation on reporting and sanctions, the national framework should include specific linkages with, and perhaps support to, military justice procedures. It is recommended that military justice procedures be a particular area of support from MONUC. This would draw on the multi-faceted military, civil police, child protection and human rights resources of MONUC and would provide an extension of the MONUC human rights teams' work on sexual exploitation and violence. Communities and girls need urgent steps to address and reverse the massive context of impunity. While addressing impunity with non-State armed groups remains a difficult challenge, sanctions and repercussions applied to the behaviour of national army troops, specifically rape and abduction, constitute an important first step that further contributes to the confidence of the population in the transition process.

5.2. Questioning some formal demobilisation processes for girls

Over the development and process of formal demobilisation, much discussion has been devoted to demobilisation documents and the standards and services of transit centres. During this study, a number of questions were raised about the relevance or desirability of some of these processes for girls. In a number of focus groups, girls explained that they avoid these processes because they prefer to reintegrate discretely and these processes involve their being more openly identified as having been associated with an armed group.

The question of transit centres and 'transit families'

Developing the appropriate variety and balance of structures to facilitate and support children in the transition from being released by an armed group and being reunified with their family or otherwise establishing an appropriate reintegration setting is always a challenge in work with children associated with armed groups. The *Cadre Operationnel Interiminaire* recognises that many demobilised children will not require the interim care and family tracing services of a transit centre. But some form of interim care is often vital in this work due to the death and displacement of family members as well as particular protection issues related to ongoing insecurity or concerns about particular actions in which a child may have been involved as part of the conflict. Most of the formal demobilisation work involves transit centres and the international NGOs conducting this study also have established a few 'transit families'. IRC is piloting an approach of combining a larger number

of transit families with drop-in centres in Orientale Province which will be interesting to evaluate in the future.

The issue of transit centres arose in the course of this study because a number of local authorities and local associations proposed that transit centres are necessary, but, to the contrary, interviews and focus groups with girls and some women's associations for this study stressed that girls resist associating with transit centres because it renders them more identifiable as having been associated with armed groups. Indeed, in Bunia, UNICEF and COOPI piloted a special transit centre for girls but learned that the girls were reluctant to go to a centre where they would be grouped together and easily identified by the surrounding community as having been associated with armed groups. Thus the work of the centre was broadened to providing temporary refuge in a variety of situations where girls may be victims of sexual violence or other protection cases. Local staff involved in the experience report that they have learned that the community is more hostile to girls associated with armed groups than victims of sexual violence. Over time and with the supportive care of the local NGO psychosocial network working with the centre, many girls do begin to talk about their experiences in the armed groups.

It is important to note that the special transit centre for girls in Bunia in part addressed the risk of sexual abuse of girls placed in other transit centres wherein the great majority of children are boys. Indeed there have been a few cases of sexual exploitation in transit centres and certainly this is a proven risk in any group care arrangement.

Outside of Bunia, child protection actors have, thus far, opted to place girls with 'foster' or 'transit' families. In some urgent and unplanned situations, organisations have even had to arrange for small groups of girls to stay in an NGO office or with staff. The *Cadre Operationnel Interiminaire* recognises the risk of sexual violence or abuse in 'foster' or 'transit' families. While this is a risk and adaptability to local circumstances is always important, this study recommends that programmes try to place girls in small groups in supervised 'foster' or 'transit' families.

However, more work is required to establish appropriate 'transit families' in DRC in key geographic areas. With the exception of a few areas in Orientale Province, currently, the very few transit families that are pre-identified, screened and established are insufficient. Due to the particular protection needs of many girls, this study recommends that the following features be applied for transit families for girls:

- That transit families be established with capacity for a small group of girls rather than individual placements. This will facilitate the sense of protection and support girls gain from building confidence with their peers.
- That linkages be built with local women's associations and girls clubs to meet with and advise the girls and to provide a consistent monitoring link with child protection actors responsible for the oversight of the transit families.
- Lessons learned from other countries and best practice in the field of care arrangements for children emphasises the need to keep the socio-economic level of care fairly equal to that of the child's family in preparation for reunification. This is important, but this study found that the situation of girls also requires that transit families hold a high enough social status in their community so that they can influence protection situations that may arise. For example, in situations where girls may be pursued or harassed by their former commanders or 'military husband', the social stature of the transit family can raise the level of authority and ability of the caregiver to react to and address such threats.

Transit families for girls should also be prepared to serve a variety of special protection situations for girls. Clearly, in formal or semi-formal demobilisation, some times transit families are needed for provide interim care. There may also be situations where self-demobilised girls need interim care or support in the form of family mediation before they return to family or are accepted by an extended family member. Other experiences have shown that the stigmatisation and prejudgements against

girls associated with armed groups is mitigated when they demonstrate, in terms of behaviour, they can live with families and girls in other situations, such as other separated children. Finally, the transit families established should be prepared to provide interim care for protection cases, which may include witness protection situations for girls who are willing to pursue justice processes.

The question of demobilisation documents

The establishment of a demobilisation document, '*attestation de sortie*' or '*ordre de démobilisation*', has been crucial in DDR experience with boys in DRC. A prevailing challenge for boys who escape or have been released is that they are accused of being deserters, harassed to re-join armed groups or subject to recruitment by a new armed group. Facilitating their access to a document signed by a military authority and attesting to their underage and demobilised status has often proven to be a key protection tool.

Yet the role of such demobilisation documents for girls was questioned and remains unclear from this study. For girls still with armed groups, many interviews explained that their release is more an issue of their relationship with a member of the armed group than the issue of being demobilised. As such, girls themselves often do not see the relevance of demobilisation documents.

As with so-called 'self-demobilised' boys, many discussants for this study proposed that efforts be made to identify the thousands of self-demobilised girls already in the community and to 'officialise' their status through the '*attestation de sortie*'. However, most girls interviewed do not wish to be officially identified as having been with an armed group due to ongoing personal security or social stigmatisation concerns.

Some girls fear being followed by their military commanders, 'military husband' or being accused by the community of being 'associated with the enemy'. Yet many interviewed are uninterested in the role the '*attestation de sortie*' might play in their protection. In part this is because they are more preoccupied with the fear of being reclaimed as a 'wife' rather than as a member of the armed group where a demobilisation document would be more directly relevant. In other cases, they refer to instances where the demobilisation documents of boys are torn up and ignored by some military officials.

In some interviews, in situations where security had increased, girls reported that they were becoming more "willing to be identified" and thus participate in such a documentation process. But these girls explained their interest in the demobilisation document as a means to access the reintegration support activities that they see starting to be put in place for boys.

While many doubts were expressed about the relevance of demobilisation documents for girls, a few interviews were clear in expressing the importance of such documents for girls. For example, in one individual interview, the girl explained that the '*attestation de sortie*' provided proof for her aunt and extended family that she was "reintegrating into civilian life".

In the medium term, creating a process for girls to access the '*attestation de sortie*' may 'normalise' their status and provide a tool in the event they are pursued by former commanders or other future protection needs. It is recommended that child protection programmes continue to offer to facilitate access to the '*attestation de sortie*' for self-demobilised girls, as they do for boys. This requires that child protection actors work more pro-actively to reach girls at the community level, but that this be done in a careful, discrete manner such as through the girls clubs recommended in chapter 4.

Jeanne's story

Jeanne was 13 years old when she joined one of the armed groups in the Ituri District. Jeanne joined the armed group after her father was killed and explains that many children join to avenge the death of family members.

Jeanne served for one and a half years before being given permission to leave temporarily due to health concerns for herself and her newborn son. The father of her son was a commander of the armed group but was killed in fighting. Jeanne explains that almost all girls were 'married' by force as part of their service in the armed group.

Jeanne speaks easily about her experiences and bravery during conflict. She reports that she and other girls regularly received small gifts and \$10 per month from their commander. She acknowledges that military life was easier in terms of access to food and material goods, but Jeanne wants to establish a civilian life for herself.

When Jeanne was released, she went to live with her aunt and 10 year old sister. Her mother and younger sister had moved in with the aunt during the conflict, but her mother has since returned to her native village.

Jeanne bravely struggles to establish a civilian life and avoid being compelled to rejoin the armed group. 'Emissaries' of the armed group visit her often, but she pleads that her son is still ill. She knows that she would be forcibly re-recruited if more active conflict broke out again. Indeed the regular visits from the 'emissaries' caused her aunt to refuse to continue to shelter her and her sister. Over the past couple of months, Jeanne has started renting a place for her and her sister to live on their own.

Despite these difficulties, Jeanne has proven herself admirably resourceful. With some help from an uncle and some of her savings from money she was given during her service in the armed group, Jeanne was able to get some training in tailoring. Now she has organised a small atelier with two other girls. They rent the space and sewing machine. Jean manages the receipts from their work to save enough money for these expenses and hopes one day to save enough money to buy her own sewing machine.

In our interview, we learn that Jeanne is not aware that it is illegal for armed groups to recruit children less than 18 years old, nor of child demobilisation efforts. Her viewpoints underscore the delicate and tenuous protection situation for girls associated with armed groups. Jeanne explains that part of her goal to save enough money to buy her own sewing machine is to use this as a basis to request an official release document from the commander of her armed group. Jeanne believes that if she can present the evidence of having her own sewing machine to the armed group, they will accept her return to civilian life as official. When we explain that there is a process wherein child protection organisations can facilitate obtaining an '*attestation du sortie*' for her, she explains that an '*attestation*' from the government, as compared to her own group, would not be recognised and fears that it would further endanger her in terms of the reaction of the 'emissaries' and the armed group.

Jeanne reports that she knows of four other girls from her unit and others in her neighbourhood that have been temporarily released or have escaped. She explains that girls still in armed groups are not informed about DDR, but that if women's groups and other girls would organise to travel to and speak with these girls, many would flee. Jean further explains that the girls would want to avoid staying in a transit centre because it attracts attention from community members; rather the girls would want to find their own discrete way to rejoin family and establish civilian lives.

Conclusion

The issue of gaining the release of girls associated with armed groups and supporting their reintegration is highly complex as it is more entwined with socio-cultural conceptions and attitudes than procedures seeking the demobilisation of children. While some actions in the formal DDR process will improve the degree to which girls are released, this study found that the majority of girls will be reached through broader, community-level efforts. Thousands of girls are already back in their communities in a physical sense but need support to address the other ways they are isolated, stigmatised or marginalised by their care-givers and neighbours. More pro-active work with girls at the community level will best identify how to support the particular reintegration needs of girls and extend the degree to which girls still in armed groups can be informed of their options to leave.

Annex I - Summary note on armed forces and groups

This study did not attempt to ascertain estimates of girls in specific armed groups and it is beyond the scope of this study to provide information on the different armed groups. Indeed the conflict in DRC has often featured complex, evolving alliances, splinters and mutinies between armed groups and even amalgamation of foreign and local groups. This note offers a brief overview of the main armed forces and groups as they may be referenced in the study.

In addition to the armed forces of the DRC (Forces Armées Congolaises or FAC), other governments, or ‘States parties’ in more legal language, that have been involved in the DRC conflict include Angola, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Following the transition process agreed at the end of 2002, the national army of DRC is now the FA RDC - Forces Armées République Démocratique du Congo.

The main international, non-State armed group mentioned during the study is the FDLR (Forces Démocratique pour la Libération du Rwanda), often referred to as “Interahamwe”. These are armed ethnic Hutu opposition groups that include elements of the Interahamwe and ex-Forces armées rwandaises (ex-FAR), as well as new recruits. Towards implementing the DRC peace accords, MONUC has been leading a special effort to convince FDLR forces to disarm and repatriate, but most remain hidden in the interior of the Eastern Provinces and continue to attack and harass local communities.

Nationally, the main non-State parties, or armed groups, have either been allied with the government or with Rwanda and Uganda. Groups named in the 10 November 2003 Report of the Secretary General on children in armed conflict²¹ include the MLC (Mouvement National de Libération du Congo) and the three splits of the RCD (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie) -- the RCD – Goma and their associated local defense forces, RCD –K/ML (Kisangani/Mouvement de Libération), and RCD – N (RCD National). Other groups operating in the Eastern Provinces and named in the Secretary General’s report include: Forces armées populaires congolaises (FAPC), Mai-Mai, Mudundu-40 and Masunsu’s Forces. Mai Mai is a term referring to traditional warriors, but the various armed groups referred to as Mai Mai are in the majority newly formed. The various Mai Mai groups are referred to by the name of their commander or geographic area of operation, for example: “Tango 4” or Mai Mai – Fizi.

The conflict in the Ituri District of the Orientale Province has been fuelled by a number of the parties noted above, but has also featured localised, ethnically-based armed groups who are also named in the 2003 report of the Secretary General. These include FIPI -- Front pour L’Intégration et Paix en Ituri, FNI -- Front nationaliste et intégrationniste, FPDC -- Force Populaire pour la Démocratie du Congo, FPRI -- Front populaire pour la réconciliation de l’Ituri, PUSIC -- Parti pour l’unité et la sauvegarde du Congo and the UPC -- Union des Patriotes Congolais.

21 A/58/546 - S/2003/1053.

Annex II - References

During this study, internal reports of SC the NGO Group were made available to the consultant, including quarterly and other reports to the MDRP. More publicly available documents referenced that may be of interest to the reader include:

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