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Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

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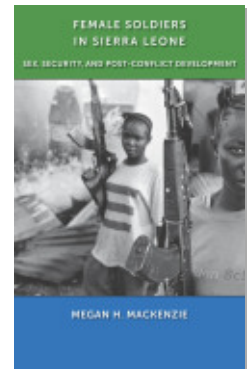
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Defining Soldiers

Tryphena, a girl soldier who was with the RUF for two years and seven months, is nicknamed Wanda-dai. In Krio, Wanda-dai means one who has tasted or nearly missed death. It also is a common way of expressing negative experiences that one managed to survive and implies that a person “went to hell but came back, or died once but is alive again.”²¹ Tryphena arrived at the Children Associated with the War (CAW) facilities with a bullet wound in the left side of her neck. It appeared to have just missed her spinal cord. She was complaining to CAW officials of pain in her throat. She gave the following account of her time with the rebels: “I was abducted during the rebel attack in 1997 and was forced to join the RUF. I was trained to fire a weapon. I was locked up in a house that was set ablaze. I tried to escape but was shot [in] the neck/throat. I was abandoned in a separate house because of the smell of my sore.” In addition to her training with, and use of, weapons, she reported destroying property and using drugs while with the RUF. Tryphena told CAW staff that she was in school before the war and that she believes her parents are alive.

Female soldiers wholly disrupt gendered binaries associated with war, particularly the contrasting image of the male warrior and female victim. Furthermore, female soldiers challenge dominant war mythologies, including the myth that women are naturally peaceful and men are naturally violent or heroic. Acknowledging that female soldiers exist requires a radical rethinking of prevailing war narratives as well as a substantial reorganization of post-armed conflict and peace-building policies. Despite ample evidence that females participated in the conflict, policy makers in Sierra Leone largely refused to acknowledge these women and girls and name them as beneficiaries, or as subjects worthy of policy attention. The resistance to recognizing female participation in war has mainly resulted from gendered norms and assumptions associated with conjugal order, including the idea that women are naturally peaceful due to their life-giving roles and the notion that men, as heads of households, are the decision makers and the sole political actors within armed movements.

Throughout the chapter I outline the resistance to acknowledging women's and girls' participation as soldiers during the civil war in Sierra Leone and the ways in which female soldiers are categorized as atypical. This chapter demonstrates that even when women participate in the activities of "high politics," or sectors traditionally categorized as security priorities such as war, they are effectively shuffled out of the public political sphere and into the domestic realm through post-conflict development policies. Female soldiers in Sierra Leone were (re)constructed as "wives," "camp followers," or "sex slaves" in order to desecuritize them, silence them, distinguish them from securitized male soldiers, and justify policies that either disregarded them or encouraged them to return to a highly gendered order.

Post-conflict programs in Sierra Leone, like similar failed programs in countries such as Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, were inadequate primarily because they were based on the assumption that women are naturally peaceful while men should be the target of post-conflict development initiatives and security reform. These policies were not only inadequate; they served as a form of violence against women and girls post-armed conflict. In this chapter I argue that recasting women and girls from political activists and major contributors to the war to helpless victims and wounded, reluctant assistants is a form of violent reproduction. In the case of Sierra Leone, the construction of females post-conflict as victims lacking agency has dismissed, isolated, and silenced a vast cohort of women and girls who participated as soldiers. In addition, this construction relegates them spatially to the private realm—well away from the attention given to securitized and politicized matters by post-conflict policy makers.

This chapter builds on the argument made in the introduction that development policies serve to construct particular gendered identities. Lene Hansen's view of identity formation is employed to critique the construction of women and girl soldiers in Sierra Leone as helpless and passive victims "associated with the war" rather than political actors central to civil war activities. Hansen argues that identities are constructed through a process of linking and differentiation. I explore how particular notions of conjugal order inform the process of linking and differentiation between *securitized* male soldiers and *naturalized* female victims in Sierra Leone.

The construction of "soldier" by post-conflict policy makers in Sierra Leone can be understood as a process of exclusion whereby the term is defined in relation to a securitized male in contrast to a presumed

desecuritized and naturally peaceful female. I argue that this construction of male soldiers assumes that men are naturally dominant and violent and defines them as securitized subjects and, therefore, as a priority for disarmament and post-conflict reconstruction programs. This is contrasted to the manner in which women and girls—even those who participated as soldiers—are characterized as either victims or naturally peaceful. These assumptions relegate females not only out of so-called security priorities and security sector reform but off the radar of “normal” post-conflict politics.

This chapter begins with an overview of how women and girls have typically been constructed both within mainstream literature on war and within criminology literature. I compare how the construction of perpetrators within the criminology literature and soldiers within literature on war requires the construction of an oppositional victim. In both cases, women and girls are often constructed as the “ideal victim.” I explore the tendencies within both these literatures to essentialize both victim and perpetrator by implying that perpetrators are always perpetrators and never victims, and victims are always victims and never perpetrators. I argue that this binary is not helpful in understanding the experiences of either male or female soldiers because there is evidence that most soldiers both perpetrated atrocities and were victimized through experiences such as physical violence or abuse, sexual violence, and/or the death of a loved one.

The analysis of “ideal” victimhood is followed by a discussion of what is known about women’s and girls’ participation in Sierra Leone’s war and how these female soldiers defined themselves. Here, first-person interviews with female soldiers, interview data with local NGO staff, disarmament experts, and social workers, and child intake forms from a local organization are utilized to create a picture of women’s and girls’ participation in the war. Next, this chapter features the efforts that have been made by both local and international organizations and agencies to label female soldiers as anything but soldiers. First-person interviews with Sierra Leonean social workers and experts on post-armed conflict reconstruction and disarmament, along with data from intake forms of unaccompanied children, are utilized to demonstrate how women and girls who clearly participated in military activities were classified into categories such as “women associated with the fighting forces,” “abductees,” “unaccompanied children,” “bush wives,” and “camp followers.” These “nonsoldier” titles all assume a lack of agency and victimhood and deny the active role of females in combat.

In the final section, I consider the multiple impacts of excluding women and girls from the category of soldier in Sierra Leone. I argue that securitized subjects, such as soldiers, receive significantly more attention and funding from post-conflict policy makers. Furthermore, female soldiers serve to dislocate dominant war myths and gendered assumptions about what individuals do, and should do, during war. Ignoring female soldiers or reclassifying them into “non-soldier” categories reinforces dominant war myths and stereotypes, reproduces an inaccurate account of the war, leads to policies that discriminate against female soldiers, and sends moralizing messages about female soldiers as exceptions rather than legitimate subjects.

Moving beyond the Victim/Perpetrator Dichotomy

The literature on security and warfare gives the reader the distinct impression that “men make war, women make peace.”² Aid agencies and military and peacekeeping operations have historically based their operations on the assumption that women and children are the most vulnerable victims of conflict.³ Women’s peaceful nature and their perceived aversion to risk⁴ are sometimes described as stemming from their natural capacity as mothers⁵. In effect, roles that are depicted as natural for women during conflict are often associated with their reproductive capacities and their ability to nurture, cooperate, and sustain life. Instead of soldiering, women’s primary roles during conflicts tend to be described as “wives, girlfriends, and mothers, waiting for their soldiers to return and caring for wounded.”⁶

Across the continent of Africa, specifically, there is evidence that women have participated in civil wars, liberation struggles, organized resistance movements, protests, and political violence for decades.⁷ Despite the burgeoning research on women’s participation in armed movements, the message that “men are natural soldiers and women are not” remains prominent in many mainstream accounts of war, including the media, and government and NGO reports.

Although it is indisputable that women and girls as well as men and boys experienced trauma, abuse, malnourishment, fear, and neglect, the manner in which females are consistently and continually portrayed as victims—often helpless victims—must be critically examined. Criminology literature is useful in examining how both “victim” and “perpetrator” have traditionally been characterized in relation to women. Historically in criminology literature, the “ideal victim” has been defined as a powerless woman or girl.⁸ Esther Madriz describes the stereotypical victim as a respectable woman

who is weaker than her attacker and attacked while engaged in a “respectable” activity and at an “appropriate” time.⁹ Madriz also points out that while female victims comply with the notion of “ideal” victim, women perpetrators deviate from norms associated with so-called feminine behavior. In fact, Merry Morash has concluded that “females who do not conform to common ideas about appropriate and moral behavior and appearance for girls and women are sometimes not taken seriously as victims or are blamed for their own victimization.”¹⁰

Emblematic understandings of victim and perpetrator are not neutral but are shaped by gendered assumptions about suitable behaviors and so-called normal social order. Victim and perpetrator have become understood as mutually exclusive and oppositional gendered categories.¹¹ Thus, the distinction between perpetrator and victim encodes “appropriate” gender roles for males and females. By doing so, an entire set of norms and stereotypes that exert informal control over women and girls are sustained.¹² Within the literature on war, understandings of victims and perpetrators either obscure female perpetrators or classify them as exceptions. Furthermore, this binary between victim and perpetrator makes it equally difficult to conceive of male victims, or individuals who were both perpetrators and victims.

For the case of Sierra Leone, much of the literature and media analysis reproduces the victim/perpetrator binary by either ignoring women and girls or exclusively depicting them as victims. In some cases, the attention given to the widespread use of sexual violence by all warring parties during the civil war in Sierra Leone has eclipsed investigations into female soldiers and female perpetrators. Reports by organizations such as Amnesty International¹³ and Physicians for Human Rights¹⁴ are extremely valuable in providing rare insights into the extent of sexual violence in Sierra Leone; however, unbalanced attention to this aspect of the war has contributed to a narrow perception of women and girls solely as victims of the conflict.

The international humanitarian response to Sierra Leone’s conflict has also concentrated on female victims. There are numerous examples of internationally supported programs directed at female victims of conflict; however, few programs (in fact almost none) targeted former female combatants. Unfortunately, there are also numerous media accounts of the conflict that depict women and girls solely as victims. In a gender profile conducted by AFROL news, the only independent news agency focusing exclusively on Africa, it was reported that “women and children are however known to be the principal war victims, often submitted to rape, sexual slavery, forced labour, torture, mutilation and forced recruitment [*sic*] by the RUF

[Revolutionary United Front], known to use terror against the civil population as one of their principal war tactics.”¹⁵ Another report identified women as the “worst losers” of Sierra Leone’s war. This article claimed: “Women [are] the symbol of love, kindness, mercy and spend their life coping with sexual and mental abuses done by one or more men in countries dealing with war like situation [sic].”¹⁶

Desecuritizing Women

Gendered assumptions about ideal victims and perpetrators have had obvious policy implications. In Sierra Leone, women and girls—regardless of whether they participated in the conflict—were rarely considered a security concern and were therefore not a central priority for post-conflict policy makers. In contrast, males are equally stereotyped as dangerous, and a potential risk to peace-building and security. Programs designed to address the destruction of social networks in Sierra Leone provide an interesting example of the variance in how males and females were conceptualized by post-conflict policy makers.

NGO and aid agency documents often refer to the destruction of social networks and norms as one of the most significant outcomes of the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. Duffield argues that NGOs “often frame their projects post-conflict in terms of re-establishment of social cohesion.”¹⁷ He contends that the representation of cultural breakdown gives impetus to NGOs and funding agencies to introduce and justify “new forms of identity and social cohesion.”¹⁸ Thus, programs aimed at reconstructing social networks benefit from depictions of local or indigenous relationships and customs as eroded or collapsed.

“Idle youth” are identified as a particular concern for the social reconstruction of Sierra Leone. Similar to many other countries, “idleness” in Sierra Leone was described as a problem almost exclusively in relation to men and boys. Specific concerns included the fear that these men and boys would reorganize or “let loose” and instigate another conflict or participate in organized crime.¹⁹ The World Bank has defined the term “youth” in this context as referring to “predominantly men who are excluded, unable to provide for a family and are perceived as a potential *security threat*.”²⁰ Several presumptions are at play in this definition: first, men are seen to be naturally violent; second, it is implied that if men are left to their own devices—without the nurturing, calming, or balancing influence of a wife or a mother—they may take up arms again or join in organized crime. Certain accounts

conclude that cohorts of idle men caused the outbreak of war in Sierra Leone in the first place, and idleness could lead to another war.²¹

Although rare, policy makers have also analyzed the impacts of social disorder for women and girls in Sierra Leone. There are indications of displaced and unemployed, or “idle,” women and girls; however, these females are not characterized as security threats. Instead, the concern for this cohort is that poverty, combined with the lack of social norms and regulations, will lead them to prostitution. One account of post-conflict Sierra Leone indicated, “Because of extreme poverty, the dislocation of families and the breakdown of social structures during the war, many girls, and some boys, are engaging in prostitution and sex in exchange for economic and other benefits.”²² Another report noted that it was “particularly those displaced from their homes and with few resources [who] resorted to prostitution as a means to support themselves and their children.”²³

While there is concern that idle men will become violent, the greatest concern regarding idle women and girls is their participation in prostitution. The logic seems to be that men are naturally aggressive and may manipulate this power in desperate situations whereas women are naturally nurturing and may manipulate their bodies in desperate situations. Put another way, under conditions of collapsed or absent social regulations, men will become violent while women will become overtly sexual. The result of this moralizing characterization is that male subjects in post-conflict programming are prioritized as a security priority while women are regarded as a social concern. These characterizations sustain gendered binaries associated with war. Furthermore, this understanding of idleness implies that men and women who disrupt conjugal order by delinking from the family unit and straying from “legitimate” and productive activities are delinquent and a source of social insecurity.

Female Soldiers Define Themselves

In this section I review the following four central conclusions that were drawn from interviews with former female soldiers in Sierra Leone: first, that the majority of “women and girls associated with the fighting forces” define themselves as soldiers; second, these female soldiers participated in multiple and diverse roles; third, female soldiers were often perpetrators of violence, destruction, and crime as well as victims of abuses such as sexual violence, abduction, and injury; finally, these interviews indicate that the number of females soldiers was much higher than existing estimations.²⁴

Of the women interviewed in Sierra Leone, each responded positively to the question “Would you define yourself as a former soldier?” Women were quick to point out which armed group they were a part of, what rank they held, and what roles they carried out: one woman identified herself as a commander with the RUF; another woman specified that she was a soldier “because [she] was given one week training on how to fire a gun and subsequently became active”;²⁵ a young woman identified herself as a soldier because she “took part in most of the horrible activities of the evil conflict in SL”;²⁶ and several women admitted that they voluntarily joined a particular faction.

The duties carried out by this group of women were incredibly diverse. When asked, “What were your role(s) during the conflict?” more than 75 percent of the women I interviewed declared that they were involved in active combat duties. Respondents listed a variety of activities when asked what their roles were during the war, including “leading lethal attacks,” “screening and killing pro-rebel civilians,” “combatant,” “poison/inject captured war prisoners with either lethal injection or acid,” “I trained with [the AFRC] bush camp how to shoot a gun,” “killing and maiming pro-government forces and civilians,” “gun trafficking,” “killing,” “planning and carrying out attacks on public places,” “do execution on commanders of my age group,” “fighting,” “murdered children,” and “weapon cleaner.”²⁷ One child soldier, Tina, “was abducted by the RUF when they attacked Kono, precisely Koidu town.” She explained her activities during the two years she was with the RUF rebels: “I was trained to fire weapons, to be a security guard. I looted items and walked long distances on foot.” She also reported that she destroyed property and partook in drug abuse as a soldier. The variety of responses to this question indicate the range of the roles carried out by women during the war. These responses also disrupt any strict gendered notions about the roles of women during conflict. From these interviews it becomes clear that women and girls participated in all facets of war, including active combat, commanding, and military training.

In addition to combat roles, many women and girls performed what has been classified by some as “support roles.” These often include cooking, carrying war booty, food, or ammunition, spying, and taking care of the sick or children. The majority of women and girls also reported that they worked as sex slaves for either a particular commander or portions of their military unit. It should be noted that both males and females performed these support roles; however, the emphasis on distinguishing between combatants and supporters has focused primarily on female soldiers—few

organizations or policy makers have spent time debating whether male soldiers were “real” soldiers or just acting in support roles. Policy makers and academics alike seem fixated on whether women and girls used weapons and were involved in active combat. Other forms of labor and activities contributing to the war effort are classified as “support roles” and distinguished from soldiering.

The logical maneuvering that categorizes females out of the rank of soldier goes something like this: most females acted in support roles for the fighting forces rather than in combat roles. Therefore females were primarily noncombatants—and, noncombatants are not soldiers. This logic is fallacious both because of the problematic assumption that women and girls were not combatants and because it implies that the support work carried out by females during conflict does not render them soldiers. Vivi Stavrou summarizes the implications of not recognizing various types of labor during the conflict:

Not labeling the work of non-combatant women soldiers as soldiering, continues the gender discrimination of the division of labor whereby critical work that is essential for survival, is simply considered a natural extension of women’s domestic obligations and hence neither worthy of remuneration nor significant enough for women to qualify for training and livelihoods programs.²⁸

Even though the term “soldier” refers to anyone who is a member of an armed group, questions and concerns over the distinction between “combatant” and “soldier” have been raised in relation to women and girls. A review of the capacities, ranks, and services of any army reveals that a variety of duties and contributions are required for almost all combat operations; however, typically there are few who question whether male officers who fulfill support roles such as medical operations or communications are “real soldiers.” When men act as porters, cleaners, domestic help, or messengers during war, there is little debate about the extent to which they deserve the soldier title. However, there has been extensive debate about the functions of female soldiers in Sierra Leone and the extent to which their work “counts” as soldiering. While great effort was made by post-conflict policy makers to name women and girls something other than soldiers, “men involved with the military in support functions are defined as soldiers, and not as ‘men involved in armed groups or forces,’ or as men directly associated with the war;’ or as dependants of male or female combatants.”²⁹

In particular, the distinction between combatant and supporter is not useful for three reasons. First, it prioritizes the use of weapons among the other forms of labor that contribute to an armed movement. Warfare does not merely involve individuals with guns. Those who use guns and kill may be the most visible and may seem to make the most impact during a conflict; however, these combatants depend on an entire network of individuals and forms of labor to operate.

Second, these distinctions offer a narrow view of the kinds of actions performed by soldiers during war. The distinction between combatant and supporter seems to be based on traditional notions of warfare as a “man-to-man” public battle featuring “legitimate” or conventional weapons. This depiction simply does not capture most civil war activity. In Sierra Leone machetes and other homemade or rudimentary weapons were just as common as AK-47s and handguns. Moreover, relatively little is known about the types of strategies that armed groups used during this civil conflict. It is clear that brutalities such as amputation, burning houses, rape, and looting were commonplace. Women I interviewed also described unexpected or unique responsibilities during the war. For example, Mariatu was recruited by the AFRC/RUF as a military scout. When asked, “What were your role(s) during the conflict?” she answered, “To caress pro-government commanders and slowly kill them by excessive sex poisoning.” Another former female soldier, Jeneba, spoke about the role of “witchcraft” or customary practices during war—particularly for the Kamajors. Jeneba explained that her role during the conflict was to “do concoctions and oracle activities in the holy shrine.”³⁰ More research is needed to extend our understanding of the various types of roles, duties, and support that contributed to the civil conflict in Sierra Leone. These responses indicate that the types of contributions and warfare activities performed by men and women in Sierra Leone were diverse and complicated.

Third, this distinction is not helpful because most of the women I spoke with participated in multiple roles, and some operated both as armed combatants and in so-called support roles. For example, Amina was abducted by the SLA during the January rebel attack on the city.³¹ She killed five people during her stay with the rebel forces and admitted to using a knife and a pistol. She also amputated the hands of a woman. While she was with the army, she also looted and destroyed property and worked as a cook and as a “sex slave.”

In addition to performing multiple roles during the conflict, there is evidence from these interviews that contradicts the assumption that female combatants were a small minority within armed groups. Several interviewees

reported that at different points in time women and girls were equal in numbers to men and may have even outnumbered men. For example, one interviewee reported that “sometimes there were more women than men and sometimes there were more men than women.”³² Tryphena, a woman who was a cook and a domestic worker for the RUF specified that she worked with at least fifty-five women. When Salamatu, a woman who was abducted by the rebel forces and later fought with them as a soldier, was asked how many other females were in her rebel group, she replied “many” and admitted that it would be difficult to know the exact number. She reported that she was abducted “at the time the amputations were on” and said “they amputated so many girls, others were killed. So the numbers become difficult to know, but there were many.” Another respondent simply added that there were “many, many” women and girls from different factions and working under different commanders.

Zainab, a young female soldier and one of the few women interviewed who went through the DDR, reported participating in the war as a soldier for two years. Her reported activities included fighting and killing. Zainab reported that there were at least a hundred women fighting alongside her in her group and that “all had guns.”³³ It is impossible to know exactly how many women and girl soldiers participated in the conflict in Sierra Leone; however, these interviews are significant in that they challenge existing perceptions of a civil war composed primarily of male soldiers and rebels, with female soldiers as rare minorities.

These interviews demonstrate the futility of binaries between “victims” of the war and perpetrators of violence, crime, and destruction. This is not exclusive to women and girls; there exist a great number of accounts of the war showing that most male soldiers were also victimized. For example, as mentioned in chapter 5, many males were forced to commit rape or to watch the rape of a family member. Also, a “recruitment” technique used by rebel forces for both males and females was to force recruits to kill a family member to prove their loyalty or reinforce their dependency on the armed movement. Most female soldiers I interviewed had experienced trauma or abuse *and* participated in some form of violent or destructive activity. In sum, these women were not *either* victims *or* combatants *or either* bush wives *or* soldiers; rather, they had diverse experiences and participated in various roles that blurred these distinct lines.

The stories of two female soldiers help illustrate this point. First, according to the child intake forms at CAW, Saphi was a former child soldier who arrived at a children’s DDR facility with deep machete wounds on the side

of her head. Saphi divulged that she was a child soldier with the SLA and that she killed, looted, partook in drug abuse, and was raped. She described how she came to be with the SLA: "I was abducted and forced to join, but if I resisted I would have been killed. In my presence my brother and friend were killed so I joined them." Second, when Fatima was found after the war, she knew her father was dead but did not know where her mother was or if she was alive. Fatima said that she had participated in "all major experiences" while with the RUF. She said she was a combatant fighter who had participated in killings, looted and destroyed property, and was "used for sex" by other rebels.

Beyond Followers and Sex Slaves: Engendering Representations

A variety of titles were constructed to avoid calling women and girls soldiers, including "camp followers," "abductees," "sex slaves," "domestic slaves," "girls and women associated with the fighting forces," and "vulnerable groups associated with armed movements." One of the facilitators of the DDR program admitted, "Women were just seen as camp followers even though some were active combatants and some went through military training."³⁴

Rachel Brett is among those who have argued that disarmament organizers were unable to see past the participation of females in roles such as sex slaves, "wives," and domestic workers, to recognize their participation as combatants, killers, looters, and performers of amputations.³⁵ Similarly, focusing specifically on the disarmament process, Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana argue that having "DDR processes planned and implemented by military officials has resulted in a bias against those the military does not consider 'real soldiers' (i.e. men with guns)."³⁶ Mazurana and Khristopher Carlson have also determined that in Sierra Leone there was an "over-classification of girls and young women abducted by the RUF, AFRC, and SLA as 'camp followers,' 'sex-slaves,' and 'wives' by some within the international community and the Sierra Leone government."³⁷

In fact, even major international organizations that helped oversee the DDR process have been reluctant to name women and girls as combatants. The Girls Left Behind program, designed to benefit women and girls who should have been included in the DDR, makes little reference to the title "soldiers."³⁸ In an hour-long interview with Glenis Taylor, a senior director at UNICEF Sierra Leone, she never used the term "soldier" to refer to women and girls who fought and lived with armed groups. Instead, she identified

them as “girls with the fighting forces” and “girls who were involved with the fighting forces.”³⁹

Original, unpublished correspondence I discovered at the offices of Children Associated with the War (CAW) demonstrates the reluctance of the Sierra Leone government to acknowledge female combatants. The below letter was written by CAW’s director to the NCDDR, asking if some child soldiers could be retroactively included in the disarmament program. The following is an excerpt:

We would be grateful if you could please facilitate the retroactive demobilization of child ex-combatants in the Peacock farm and Waterloo communities in the western area following an assessment carried out by the above program through its outreach program of activities. Discussions emanating from our assessment reveal that all of these children had left their guns and ammunition with their commanders in their various operational areas, but are resolved to settle down with their families and parents to rebuild their lives. It is therefore worth knowing that child combatants, particularly girls, are unwilling and most times reluctant to register with NCDDR due to social factors as they sneak into communities of origin without having gone through the DDR process. In this connection we forward a clear list of child ex-combatants that have been sensitized and have expressed their willingness to be formally registered with the DDR unit.⁴⁰

It is important to note that CAW’s records indicated that almost half the girls interviewed had participated in a variety of combat roles during the conflict. A selected review of the duties reported included killing and looting, being “introduced into the use of weapons and guns,” possessing an AK-47, amputation, and using a knife and a pistol. The following reply from Dr. M. S. Tejan-kella, the disarmament and demobilization manager, to CAW’s letter demonstrates that, despite evidence indicating that girls were active combatants, the NCDDR was unwilling to recognize them as such:

Dear Sir,

Regarding the retroactive demobilization of child ex combatants.

I refer to your letter dated 1 March 2001, requesting for retroactive demobilization of child ex combatants of the Peacock farm and Waterloo rural communities. I wish to inform you that DDR cannot retroactively demobilize these children as they have proved to be camp followers and

abductees and not combatants. We regret any inconvenience this decision may cause.

Children Associated with the War retained all the intake forms for child soldiers, abducted children, and unaccompanied children who were brought to its centers over the course of the war. It was unclear what distinguished “unaccompanied children” from “abducted children” and “child soldiers” because most children had similar stories and had participated in similar activities during the war. Both “abandoned children” and “unaccompanied children” seemed to be defined in relation to their disassociation from the family unit. These categories imply that the children were abandoned or left unaccompanied by family members. As such, the two categories of children are seen as problematic not because of their experiences or roles during the war but because of this separation from the family unit. Most “unaccompanied children” were girls.

Interestingly, the majority of the unaccompanied girls reported working with or for the armed groups in some capacity. Most worked as cooks, and almost all listed one of their “noncombatant” duties as “sex service.” This information further complicates the distinctions between combatant, noncombatant, and “supporter.” Clearly these girls were doing work that helped sustain the armed movement. Further analysis of the distinctions that were made not only between combatant and supporter but also between particular forms of labor is required. A gendered hierarchy seems to exist whereby “masculine” or male-dominated roles such as carrying arms and looting property is prioritized over domestic forms of labor such as cooking. Furthermore, there has been little analysis of how sex slavery was used as a means to enhance troop morale and thereby sustain armed conflict. If sex and rape were central to compensating and motivating male soldiers, it cannot continue to be classified as irrelevant with reference to soldiering activities. Data from the intake forms for several of the girls identified as unaccompanied children are included here to help illustrate these points:⁴¹

Esther arrived at CAW at the age of sixteen with a bullet wound on her left foot. Both of her parents were reported dead. Esther told social workers, “I was abducted by the RUF and was taken away. I was a cook and also raped each and every day. I witnessed a lot of horrible things like killing, maiming, and beheading of innocent civilians.” During the eight months

she was with the RUF, her “noncombatant roles” included acting as a gun carrier and a cook and performing sexual services.

Lovetta was sixteen and had no disabilities at the time she was brought to CAW. She was in school before the war, and her parents were thought to be alive. She told social workers, “I was caught between the crossfire during the January invasion and was taken away by Captain Armstrong of SLA. There I came to identify a group called the small boys club, since I was taking care of the food and belongings.” She was with the SLA for ten months, recruited at fifteen. On the intake form her “noncombatant roles” were listed as “cook” and “sex service.” The final section of the form notes that Lovetta looted, was raped, and partook in drug abuse.

Fea was sixteen when she arrived at CAW. It is reported that “she came impregnated from the bush” and “she’s not well.” Fea explained to CAW social workers that she was operating a small business before the war. The social workers recorded the following details about Fea: “She was abducted by the AFRC/RUF rebels during their retreat from the city under heavy ECOMOG guns.” Fea told social workers that her mother is dead and her father is alive. Her “noncombatant roles” were listed as “cook” and “sex service.” Fea answered yes to both of the following questions: Did you rape? Were you raped?

Isatu arrived at CAW with fragments of an unknown material in her left hand. She was seventeen. Isatu knew that her father was dead but believed her mother was still alive. Isatu described how her mother fell ill during the war, and Isatu was forced to find medicine for her. While looking for medicine she was caught by the SLA and was “seriously sexually harassed.” She stayed with the SLA for nine months. Her “noncombatant roles” were loading guns, carrying supplies, cooking, and performing sexual services.

Social workers at CAW noted of Salamatu, a seventeen-year-old girl, that “she looks well.” She worked as a tailor before the war, and her parents were thought to be alive. She gave the following account of her capture into the RUF: “When the rebels attacked mile 91 with heavy firing we were compelled to escape but were later captured by the RUF. I was abducted at the same time I saw the killings of people. My children were sick in the bush.” Like many of the female unaccompanied children, Salamatu’s

“noncombatant roles” were listed as “cook” and “sex service.” She also reported being raped while with the rebels.

Marie was also seventeen when she reported to CAW. She was reported to be anemic, and social workers recorded that she “doesn’t look well.” Marie described her abduction by the RUF: “I was abducted while trying to escape from the rebels at one of the hospitals since I was sick.” She also noted that she “cooked for the combatants” and “saw killings being done.”

Fatmata is a seventeen-year-old who arrived at CAW with bullet wounds on her left leg. She was abducted by the SLA during the January rebel incursion into Freetown and remained with them for nine months. She noted that she had been raped by a famous commander called Rambo and added that she experienced pains after being raped. Fatmata also witnessed two rapists killed before her. Her “noncombatant roles” were documented as “cook” and “sex service.”

Kadiatu was only nine years old when she was taken to CAW. She told social workers she did not know where her parents were and that she was abducted by the RUF “when they attacked Kono.” Kadiatu was with the RUF for one year and eight months. During that time her “noncombatant roles” included fetching water, making beds, and assisting in cooking.

Mabintu was nicknamed “bad girl.” At seventeen, she arrived at CAW with no injuries or disabilities. She gave the following account of her time with the RUF forces: “I was captured when I on holiday to [see] my mother. After that I became a maid servant to a female commander, a Liberian . . . I witnessed so many atrocities like the extraction of human heart after they had been killed.” She was with the RUF for four years and ten months before she escaped. Her “noncombatant roles” included acting as a maid and looting. She reported that she did not know where her mother was, but that she knew her father and her uncle were dead.

This information indicates that most unaccompanied girls worked in some capacity for armed movements and therefore should be classified as soldiers. This information confirms the argument that women and girl soldiers were reclassified into various categories distinguished by their vulnerability. There is no doubt that girl soldiers—and boy soldiers—were vulnerable and

faced serious risks during and after the war; however, categorizing girls as “unaccompanied children” rather than soldiers obscures their contribution to the conflict. Not only were their contributions to the conflict ignored, but girls were denied the post-conflict resources and attention directed at other former child soldiers. A great deal of resources were directed toward child soldiers post-conflict; therefore, those children who were classified as unaccompanied children were disadvantaged because they were not eligible for the same reintegration opportunities as child soldiers.

The Consequences of Losing the Soldier Title

The manner in which male and female soldiers have been categorized post-armed conflict has had several interrelated impacts: first, stripping women and girls of their titles as soldiers by distinguishing them from “true” or “real” combatants depoliticized their roles during the conflict; second, as development grows ever more concerned with people and issues identified as security concerns, depoliticizing the role of women and girls during the conflict meant that they were not targeted as primary beneficiaries for post-conflict programs and reintegration initiatives; third, deprioritizing and depoliticizing females has meant that the reintegration process for them has largely been seen as a social rather than a political process, a “returning to normal” that would happen naturally, or at least privately. In effect, this categorization removes women and girls from policy discourses, absolves policy makers from addressing them as a category, and reinforces gendered assumptions about acceptable and normal roles in conflict.

In post-conflict Sierra Leone, international organizations, NGOs, and aid agencies have funding, networks, and influence that garner them significant positions of power in comparison to Sierra Leone’s shaky government. As a result, these organizations possess the ability to selectively securitize issues and determine their priority. Given the radicalization of development, or the increasing attention to security as a major factor in development, NGOs and aid agencies have a particular stake in designating a societal phenomenon a security concern requiring immediate attention. Due to the escalating emphasis placed on security by development actors and governments, securitizing an issue is an effective method for garnering funding; it indicates that an urgent response is required and that addressing this particular issue is central to stability and peace.

The radicalization of development in Sierra Leone has meant that issues understood as traditional security concerns, including disarmament,

unemployed men, and male soldiers, have been given significant attention in the post-conflict context. Moreover, matters relating to women, including sexual violence and female soldiers, continue to be categorized as domestic, social, or private matters. Male soldiers continue to be securitized post-conflict, in contrast to the “naturalization” and domestication of women. Post-conflict programs that assume women and girls are victims lacking agency have dismissed, isolated, and silenced a vast cohort of women and girls.

Conclusion

The Copenhagen school describes security as a political category resulting in the prioritization of particular issues or events as significant over “everyday politics.” In the case of post-armed conflict Sierra Leone, one of the political forces operating on the selection of security concerns is gender. In this case male former combatants are securitized while female former combatants are marginalized. The reluctance by international aid agencies, the United Nations, the World Bank, and other international organizations to name female soldiers as soldiers rather than “females associated with the war,” “dependents,” or “camp followers” ignores and depoliticizes their roles during the conflict. In addition, this construction relegates them spatially to the private realm—well away from the attention given to securitized and politicized matters.

The relationship between notions of “stability,” “peace,” “victim” and “violent,” “threatening,” “conflict” to presumptions about femininity and masculinity must be unpacked in order to illustrate how security discourses not only continue to discount the role of women and girls in otherwise securitized activities but also contribute to the reconstruction of “normal” female subjects as benevolent, nurturing, or victims in contrast to violent and aggressive males. Women and girls have been victimized during conflict; however, they have participated in violence out of coercion and, in some cases, out of choice.

What this analysis does make clear is that the time has come that the voluntary participation of women and girls in traditionally male dominated activities such as war can no longer be overlooked. In Sierra Leone, the effectiveness of post-armed conflict programming, an inclusive transition from conflict to peace, and gender equality post-armed conflict have been compromised because of this omission—an error that will be repeated so long as reconstruction programs remain blind to the needs of women not only as victims but as participants in conflicts around the world.