Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

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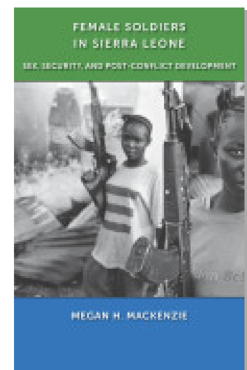

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Empowerment Boom or Bust?

Assessing Women's Post–Armed Conflict Empowerment Initiatives

As a member of the Revolutionary United Front, Kadie took part in the amputation of civilians, looted and burned property, and was subjected to multiple sexual abuses. Although she went through the DDR process in Sierra Leone, Kadie complained that the program "ended too quickly" and did not provide her with the skills or the resources that were initially promised. She recounted how pro-government forces were given priority whereas antigovernment forces were discriminated against within the DDR process. She admitted that she knew little about the process in general and felt that most of the information about it was not successfully made public. She called the program "a lie" and felt that its resources had been "directed to particular political groups." She described her current situation as "frustrating" because she felt she was "economically and socially poor" and faced public stigma and ridicule as a result of her soldier status. She described women's situation in Sierra Leone generally as desperately unequal. She reported that women are "treated with gross exclusion in decision making" and in "all aspects" of development. Kadie recommended that the program should have included education for women soldiers.

"Empowerment" has become one of the most frequently used terms in development discourses today. From the creation of water wells to microfinance programs to political awareness campaigns, development initiatives have lauded themselves as sources of empowerment for their beneficiaries. As with many other buzzwords in development, actors offer vastly disparate, and often vague, definitions of empowerment. Despite the varying conceptions of the term, empowerment is consistently associated with progressive, representative, and inclusive development policies and programs. Specifically, for many development actors, empowerment programs are advertised as proof that development approaches have evolved in response to previous criticisms of the top-down, centralized nature of such initiatives. Empowerment is meant to signal the new face of development, one

that is driven by local interests, concerned with individual concerns, and representative of community needs.

Women's empowerment in particular has become a stated goal for several major development actors, including the United Nations, the World Bank, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and a host of NGOs. Despite the empowerment boom within development, there has been little systematic analysis of possible cross-cutting themes of empowerment initiatives, the roots of empowerment discourses, or the extent to which empowerment programs indeed exhibit a shift toward more representative, inclusive, and localized development approaches.[1] In particular, for decades feminist and postcolonial scholars have been advocating for the type of marked transformation of development methods that empowerment projects claim to provide, yet there remains a need for rigorous analysis of specific women's empowerment programs.

Using reintegration programs for female soldiers in Sierra Leone as a case study, it is argued here that neoliberal ideals such as individualism, responsibility, and economic discipline have shaped empowerment initiatives to a far greater extent than considerations of local input, marginalized groups, or representation. Moreover, instead of representing a shift in development approaches, projects advertising themselves as sources of women's empowerment—including the reintegration process in Sierra Leone—are informed by liberal understandings of conjugal order and serve to discipline subjects with explicit messages about appropriate gendered social order and legitimate behaviors.

This argument is explored through a brief review of the emergence of empowerment as a central concept within dominant approaches to development. Next, the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process—particularly the reintegration portion—will be considered as an example of programs claiming to empower beneficiaries. An explanation of the DDR process in Sierra Leone will be provided and followed by a focus on the reintegration process for female soldiers. Following this description, several concerns with the organization and implementation of the DDR will be addressed. This critique is based on interview data with several Sierra Leoneans who either worked for the DDR or worked in other forms of post–armed conflict reintegration initiatives. Finally, female soldiers' own reactions and evaluations of the reintegration process are presented.

This chapter points to broader issues surrounding neoliberal, largely Western-led development. First, it builds on the critical work of scholars

such as Uma Kothari and Bill Cooke, who have pointed to development discourses as a source of reincarnation for development actors whose priorities are to gain power, stay in business, and institute a particular social, political, and gender order.[2] Second, it addresses the tension between critical, alternative, and truly local visions of development and the hegemonic status of neoliberal development with its emphasis on economic openness, individualism, and productivity. Third—inspired by the work of feminist scholars such as Christine Sylvester, Laura Sjoberg, and Cynthia Enloe—this chapter reveals how embedded notions of conjugal order and gendered norms are within Western-led development as well as the hypermasculine nature both of conflict and of post-conflict reconstruction and peacekeeping.[3]

Cynthia Cockburn has argued that there are two schools of thought in peace and post-conflict studies: those who "stand above conflict and look for rational value-free solutions" and those who "take issue" with notions of neutrality in post-conflict reconstruction.[4] This chapter is inspired by the latter premise. The aim of highlighting these wider concerns is not to convince the reader that all is lost; rather, the objective is to make the case that making slight adjustments to conventional development models or framing old policies with new discourses is not enough. Gender hierarchies and norms are deeply ingrained within dominant approaches to development; therefore, discursive dodges or shifts cannot replace radical critique and reform.

Approach

This chapter develops the argument that development policies serve as a source of regulation and discipline. Drawing from Foucault's and Hansen's work on discourse and discipline, this chapter is focused on the language of post-conflict development policies in Sierra Leone and the power relationships and norms that are instituted and regulated by these policies. In addition, Jacqueline Stevens's work on the phenomenology of the natural is utilized to help understand the specific gendered power dynamics associated with post-conflict policy making and the significance of conjugal order to notions of social order and peace. As mentioned earlier, Stevens argues that normalizing or making the nuclear family seem natural renders the family as "impervious," prepolitical, and "immutable."[5] From Stevens's analysis, it becomes worthwhile to reconsider representations of the nuclear family unit specifically and conjugal order more broadly within development policy discourses as natural and prepolitical. Depicting the family and conjugal order

in this manner implies that a whole set of gendered norms and relationships are necessary, unchanging, and outside the realm of political intervention.

With an emphasis on women, this chapter is also critical of development programs that claim to represent marginalized groups. Specifically, the trend within empowerment initiatives to emphasize "local," "indigenous," or "community" knowledge must be scrutinized. Here, Uma Kothari's critical work on development policy is especially relevant.[6] Kothari points out that development actors construct notions of the "local" and represent similar terms within their policies as if they were a fixed entity. In turn, she argues that although policies purporting to represent the local or the grassroots appear to be inclusive, more often, notions of grassroots, local, and indigenous are constructed in ways that legitimize existing Western-liberal development policies and solidify the role of outside development actors.[7]

Given the growing number of policies claiming to be representative of women, gender inclusive, and a source of women's empowerment, it is crucial to investigate the motivations of these policies, what efforts have been made to represent women's needs, and what sorts of gender norms and stereotypes might be implied through these policies. Feminist theorists—particularly those who emphasize language and discourse—have argued that women's ability to speak for themselves, to describe their own needs and their own objectives, and, most important, to have their voices heard is paramount to women's empowerment.[8] From this perspective, there is much at stake if empowerment initiatives that emphasize responsibility, economic progress, self-determination, and individual liability are largely void of women's individual voices, individual accounts, or even community consultations.

Similar to the other chapters in this volume, this chapter focuses on representation and discourse; thus, discourse analysis is employed. The focus of the discourse analysis includes a brief genealogy of the growth of the use of empowerment and women's empowerment in development policy discourses. This is followed by an analysis of the manner in which the DDR in Sierra Leone was framed as a source of empowerment—especially for women. Throughout a review of the reintegration process for women, neoliberal themes and approaches are highlighted. A more general analysis of the reintegration process in Sierra Leone and the power dynamics associated with reintegration policies as well as the manner in which these policies construct female soldiers, constrain their behavior, and recast appropriate social roles for women is also presented. Interview data are then contrasted to representations of the reintegration process as a source of empowerment for women.

Empowerment and Development

Over the last decade perhaps no term has been both as generously employed and as woefully ill-defined as “empowerment.” In particular, women’s empowerment has been embraced by such a vast number of development actors that it appears to be a unifying mission within development. For example, the OECD has stated that “investment in gender equity and women’s empowerment is vital for improving economic political and social conditions in developing countries within the framework of sustainable development,” and “a focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment is a means to enhance the total effectiveness of aid.”[9] Similarly, the UN has identified women’s advancement and empowerment in decision making as an essential element of sustainable development.[10] The empowerment of people, specifically women, was also announced as the main objective of development at the Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development. The UN recognized women’s empowerment and gender equality as a Millennium Development Goal “in their own right and central to all other development efforts.”[11] The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has also categorized women’s empowerment as a major policy goal. UNDP policies related to women’s empowerment tend to emphasize individual participation, skills, and economic self-reliance.[12] Perhaps most significant is the addition of the Gender Empowerment Measure and the Gender-Related Development Index to the United Nations Human Development Index rankings.

In both general empowerment initiatives and women’s empowerment programs, the influence of neoliberalism is evident. Several of the themes linking empowerment approaches include an emphasis on the individual; economic independence as a major objective; and the focus on economic responsibility, capacity enhancement, choice, and productivity. For example, the World Bank defines “empowerment” as “the process of increasing the *capacity* of individuals or groups to make *choices* and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions that both build individual and collective assets, and improve the *efficiency* and fairness of the organizational and institutional contexts which govern the use of these assets.”[13] Similarly, although the OECD does not explicitly define “empowerment,” the term is frequently linked to other terms such as “local,” “equality,” “effectiveness,” “self-help,” “capacity-building,” and “decentralization.”[14] In addition, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recognizes economic empowerment—particularly microfinance—as a central approach to empowering women.

Background

After the signing of the Lomé Peace Accord in 1999, international organizations and development institutions began implementing a variety of peace, development, and reconstruction programs. In particular, the DDR was initiated to help former soldiers make the transition to citizens. Following Sierra Leone's conflict, nearly 75,000 soldiers were received at more than seventy centers for disarmament.[15] The reintegration phases of the program for adults and children officially ended in 2002 and 2005, respectively; however, there is evidence that frontline workers and citizens of Sierra Leone still feel reintegration and rehabilitation are not complete.[16]

Numerous sources have described the disarmament process as a key element for achieving security and sustainable peace. Specifically, the DDR program in Sierra Leone was touted as a fundamental element of the country's transition out of civil conflict.[17] I argue that the DDR is a prime example of Mark Duffield's account of the radicalization of development, or the coalescence of development and security policies.[18] The three phases of the DDR were designed with the understanding that peace will not result merely from the removal of guns from the hands of combatants; rather, a regimented process of rehabilitation and societal reconstruction is a prerequisite for a secure nation.

In the middle of 1998, in the midst of continued violence and insecurity, the government of Sierra Leone announced it had designed a plan for national disarmament. The Sierra Leone government and the World Bank established the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) to solicit funding from the international donor community for the DDR, with the World Bank, UNICEF, the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), and the Sierra Leone government providing a significant portion of the funding. The National Committee for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration was created to oversee the three-phase process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. One of the central objectives of the DDR was to "support the short term economic and social reintegration of eligible ex-combatants."[19] The initial mandate was to target 45,000 soldiers from the RUF, the CDF, and the SLA; by the time the program finished its mandate in 2002, however, some 75,000 combatants had been disarmed at approximately seventeen demobilization centers around the country.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

The government of Sierra Leone defined disarmament as the "voluntary laying down of all weapons and ammunition by all warring parties for lasting peace in Sierra Leone."[20] After the establishment of the United Nations Observer Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) in July 1998, one of this organization's primary mandates was the monitoring of the disarmament and demobilization of ex-combatants. Especially after periods of humiliation for the UN missions in Sierra Leone at the expense of armed groups, the disarmament of combatants in Sierra Leone became tied to the perceived success of UNOMSIL and later UNAMSIL.[21] Essentially, the disarmament phase involved the handing over of weapons by ex-combatants to UN officials.

Demobilization typically involves two stages—the processing of former soldiers and the distribution of support packages or financial assistance to assist soldiers in moving toward the reintegration process. Demobilization centers were established throughout Sierra Leone, and ex-combatants were housed there for periods ranging from two to ninety days. This range was largely a result of inconsistent funding and the impact of renewed hostilities.[22] At demobilization centers, ex-combatants were given food, water, and shelter while information was collected about their involvement in the conflict and they were administered through a national identification process. Ex-combatants were given photo ID cards that were required for reintegration activities; in effect, ex-combatants had to participate in the entire demobilization process to be eligible for training and education opportunities. The demobilization process was declared over in February 2002, one month after the disarmament phase ended.

According to the NCDDR, Sierra Leone's government body directing the process, the reintegration phase of the DDR was designed to support "the social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants by engaging them in productive activities beneficial to them and facilitating their return to their families and communities."[23] The goal of reintegration programs was to facilitate the ex-combatants' social and economic reintegration into communities so that they might "participate fully in all traditional and social events in the communities without inhibitions."[24] The NCDDR described their efforts in the reintegration phase of the DDR as "support" to ex-combatants for "their resettlement into normal society."[25] There were a variety of "sensitization" campaigns to encourage communities and families to accept former

combatants into their homes and communities. However, the bulk of reintegration activities focused on training and education for ex-combatants. Depending on their age and education level, ex-combatants were given the choice of formal education, vocational and skills training, an apprentice opportunity, or a public works/job placement option.

Reintegration programs in Sierra Leone were generally focused on providing skills training for ex-combatants. As mentioned in chapter 2, vocational skills were offered in the following areas: carpentry, metalworking, auto mechanics, tailoring, *gara* tie-dyeing, soap making, hairdressing, plumbing and masonry, electrical work, computer skills, building material production, and basic construction and technology. Training lasted between three and nine months, depending on the trade. The apprentice program offered similar trades and was designed for those with limited education. According to NCDDR statistics, 39 percent of ex-combatants chose formal education, 23 percent chose skills training, 10 percent chose an apprenticeship, and approximately 4 percent chose public works and job placement.[26] In addition, 2,385 former RUF and CDF soldiers were recruited into the Sierra Leone Army.[27]

Empowerment and Reintegration

The DDR is an example of programs that advertise themselves as sources of empowerment in post-conflict situations. The UN has been a major donor to DDR processes around the world, including in Sierra Leone. In 2006 the UN released a comprehensive overview of the DDR process, including lessons learned and guiding principles of DDR. In this report, empowerment is listed as a major objective of the DDR and a direct product of capacity-building—one of the guiding principles of the report. In addition, "support to local capacity development and community empowerment" is identified by the UN as a key area of national support associated with the DDR.[28] More specifically, women's empowerment has been described as integral to gender mainstreaming DDR programs.[29]

In the case of Sierra Leone, empowerment was emphasized as an objective of the DDR. Before the conflict had officially ended, Francis Kai-Kai, the executive secretary of the NCDDR in Sierra Leone, described youth empowerment as a part of the peace and reconciliation process.[30] In Sierra Leone, stakeholders also described the reintegration phase of the DDR as the process whereby soldiers were stripped of their power as soldiers and "empowered" as valued citizens of the post-conflict community.[31]

There are numerous indicators of neoliberal influences in terms of the way empowerment was used in reference to the reintegration process in Sierra Leone. In particular, reintegration programs focused mainly on economic productivity. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) declared that it would help to empower citizens of Sierra Leone "in part by helping them build effective links among local councils, traditional, and national leaders, to broaden and strengthen the voice of the people."[32] However, when referring to reintegration activities, USAID narrowed its focus to "providing ex-combatants and war-affected youth with job skills and income earning opportunities."[33] USAID is also careful to mention the importance of individuals, choice, and capacity:

> USAID's democracy program in Sierra Leone equips local people, including women and youth, with the information and skills they need to participate in decision-making, tackle corruption, and contain human rights abuses with a view to end the cycle of violence and ensure security and stability.[34]

There are certainly other key terms within reintegration programs and policies in Sierra Leone that mirror broader trends in empowerment discourses. The reintegration process was lauded as a grassroots initiative directed by communities and representative of the variety of actors involved in the conflict. Phrases and words like "bottom-up," "grassroots," and "local knowledge," as well as "productivity," "efficiency," and "individual responsibility" are rife within reintegration program documents in Sierra Leone. Initial planning for reintegration programs seemed to have avoided "top-down" bureaucratic development processes. For example, the Child Protection Committees of Sierra Leone published a paper in 1998 declaring that psychosocial reintegration initiatives for child soldiers would "be adapted to local economic realities and realities and will follow as much as possible the individual interest."[35] The following was also specified in the report:

> Preference must be given to traditional occupations related to local markets and socioeconomic reality. Projects must encourage using local skills and techniques based on traditional and customary knowledge that may be improved with external support. Likewise, if vocational training programs are launched, they should be based on market assessments.[36]

In contrast, and as will be elaborated further, the implementation of the DDR was remarkably centralized and placed significant emphasis on neoliberal notions of individualism, responsibility, and economic progress. One theme of reintegration was described as "preparation of and support for former combatants in their socio-economic reinsertion and reintegration after leaving the demobilization centers."[37] The UN reported that through income-generating activities, "youth dropouts and ex-combatants will be encouraged to participate in order to redirect their energies and talents to productive pursuits."[38]

Reintegration for Female Soldiers

As already noted, the majority of female soldiers did not participate in the DDR, and women made up a very small number of the total population of disarmed soldiers in Sierra Leone. For those females who did participate, the DDR process was markedly different than for males. First, the training options available to women were highly limited, with *gara* tie-dyeing, soap making, tailoring, catering, hairdressing, and weaving as the main choices for skills training. The few reintegration programs targeting female soldiers consistently offered these same select trades. For example, UNICEF's Girls Left Behind program—an initiative directed specifically toward females—offered training in *gara* tie-dyeing, catering, tailoring, and weaving. Other local and international organizations offered the same limited training choices for female ex-combatants.

In fact, two local organizations focusing on female ex-soldiers—Children Associated with the War and the Augustan Bintue organization—had only tailoring available as a training option. These training options were limiting primarily because they tended to be more popular in rural regions and were far less lucrative than options available to males. In fact, because so many females were trained in these few trades, some communities had an overabundance of *gara* tie-dyers or soap makers, rendering the skills nearly useless.[39] These options were highly gendered and were ineffectual because they were not chosen in consultation with communities or female beneficiaries.

The trades offered to female soldiers were chosen by the NCDDR, which was advised by the World Bank, the UN, UNICEF, and other international organizations. A local market assessment was never undertaken to determine whether these trades would be useful for women and girls or for communities more broadly. When program coordinators were asked about the relevance of the trades for women, most simply replied that their organizations

only received funding to offer those specific trades.[40] Therefore, if a community organization had decided to offer basic education or skills training in another area, it would not have received funding. Other options for female soldiers included special programs created for groups identified by the NCDDR as "particularly vulnerable post conflict," including child ex-combatants, disabled ex-combatants, and female ex-combatants.[41] Within this category, programs for female ex-combatants were described by the NCDDR as "family stabilization measures" and primarily featured microcredit initiatives. The stated objective of these programs was "to provide financial support to ex-combatant families . . . in order to reduce family pressures on male ex-combatants."[42]

Reordering, Not Reintegrating

For Sierra Leone, the function of the development community in reshaping gender roles during the reintegration process cannot be overlooked. Organizations in Sierra Leone largely treated the reintegration of women and girls as a social process, a returning to normal that would either happen naturally, with time, or through sensitization—meaning talking to communities and families about the need to take women and girls back. In particular, there was great concern about the marriageability of female soldiers largely because it was assumed they had been raped or had given birth to children out of wedlock.[43] In some cases, grandmothers offered to raise the children of former soldiers so they could marry without men having to worry about supporting "rebel children."[44] Some organizations even encouraged former female soldiers to marry their rape perpetrators to avoid shame and to blend into the community.[45]

Women were given few choices in their reintegration process: silence or stigma, limited training or nothing, isolation or marriage, stigma or motherhood, ostracism or returning to their families. Each of these choices was seen as an opportunity to hide their identities as soldiers and to "blend in" "naturally" to the community and family unit. Jaqueline Stevens argues, "To 'naturalize' is to express the necessity of a form of being or practice, to make something seem impervious to human intention and immutable."[46] Understood this way, naturalizing the process of reintegration for women and girls in Sierra Leone effectively desecuritized female soldiers and justified the limited attention given to them. By encouraging women and girl soldiers to return to their "normal places" in the community, any new roles or positions of authority they may have held during the conflict are stripped from them,

and any opportunities to rethink and reshape gender stereotypes and hierarchies are destroyed.

Normal women become defined primarily as victims of the war while women and girls who were soldiers, who were perpetrators of violence and destruction, who volunteered to participate in conflict, or who were empowered by the conflict become categorized as deviants. Lene Hansen posits that "the positive value ascribed to 'women' is preconditioned upon women's acceptance of the subject position bestowed upon them. If 'women' were to be constructed, or construct themselves, as less motherly, less caring, and less publicly passive, their supplementary privilege would in all likelihood be suspended."[47] Post-conflict conjugal order in Sierra Leone reinforced age-old stereotypes about peaceful women and the natural place for women in society, thereby erasing violent women and girls as legitimate subjects. Thus, for women and girls, the return to normal entailed conforming to, and participating in, a distinct form of conjugal order; the return to normal also involved a process of denying or hiding any activities, desires, or plans that did not conform to perceptions of conjugal order.

Problems with Programs from an Organizational Viewpoint

Many local experts I spoke with in Sierra Leone were quick to point out the weaknesses in the DDR program—particularly in terms of its ability to empower women. The two main limitations mentioned related to the skills training portion of the program and the manner in which women and girls were included in or excluded from the DDR. In terms of skills training, one of the weaknesses identified was the fact that there were very few options for ex-combatants to choose from. Not every reintegration program for women offered each of these trades; many organizations offered training in only one of these options. For example, former girl soldiers enrolled in CAW's reintegration initiative had one option—tailoring. The small number of trades often meant that there was an overabundance of women trained in specific areas, thereby diluting the marketability and worth of their trade. Small communities like Makeni, in central Sierra Leone, for example, might graduate a hundred females from training in *gara* tie-dyeing. If even half of them want to remain in the community, they will be competing with fifty other women trained in the same skill.

This leads to a second concern with the training options, which was that little research was done to determine the regional or local appropriateness, usefulness, or market demands for the skills. Sulay Sesay, a coordinator for

the DDR, admitted that although a market assessment would have been useful in determining more appropriate and lucrative trades for women, this was never conducted: "At some point we thought we should have done a market survey of some of those trades we had chose[n]. . . . Then we realized that after training the opportunities for income generation were too few."[48]

Another criticism of reintegration programs was related to the length of time they were offered. When the DDR was first established, several reintegration training options were meant to be offered for a year. Later this was cut to nine months, then to six months. In the final stages of the disarmament process, some training programs were offered for a mere six weeks due to a shortage in funds and pressure from donor organizations to wrap up the process.

Both Glenis Taylor, a director at UNICEF Sierra Leone, and Abu Bakar Sesay, a social worker in Makeni, noted that a few years after the peace agreement was signed in Sierra Leone they were compelled by their donors to begin concluding their war-related reintegration programs regardless of whether there was still demand for these initiatives. Abu J. Conte, a program manager for child protection services in Makeni, noted that most of the child protection programs he was associated with were funded as "post-conflict" emergency initiatives and that current programs had to be reframed to donors as development activities: "We were working on a range of child protection actions—the DDR, interim care centers. But all those were within the context of emergency phase, now we are moving from emergency phase to developmental phase." Glenis Taylor also reported that her office was under pressure to alter its programming: "[Donors] are now saying that the war is over … it is now five years since it is over … it is now time to move away from [any] war associations."

Abu J. Conte and other local experts noted that this shift did not reflect reality on the ground as many of the "emergency" programs were still in process and/or were still necessary. For example, near the end of the children's disarmament process in 2005, Abu Bakar Sesay noted, "The community reintegration program is over this December and there are still children that need the education. So for many children their education will end. It is very sad. It offloads the responsibility for school fees to the parents and people can't afford it."

Local experts like Edward Anague (director of CEDA, an organization focused on inclusive approaches to post-conflict reconstruction) and Rev. Hassan Mansaray (director of Children Integrated Services [CIS], an

organization working with war-affected children) argued that abbreviating the training programs resulted in several undesirable outcomes. First, former soldiers were not sufficiently adept at their trade and were unable to support themselves with the limited skills passed on to them. Anague explained that former soldiers

> need something that creates employment for themselves. If you train [an ex-combatant] for only 6 months she can't even fix a button. What can you call that person? Not a seamstress . . . . You need to change [*sic*] by removing the person from the horrible environment and give them something meaningful so that the person can see it as a legitimate option. It is a long-term process. It is not a crash course. It is not about $1,000 given to ex-combatants. If you want results it has to be more than a six-month program. NGOs and organizations are pressured to produce "results" [by donors], but it doesn't amount to anything.

Without skills training that has value in communities, former soldiers are forced to find alternatives for survival. In impoverished and war-torn communities, these options are limited. As Anague concluded, female ex-combatants need to know that they have a future in a particular trade, otherwise they will "turn their backs" on work and turn to something more lucrative such as prostitution.[49] He lamented that "some of the training was a waste of time for the ex-combatants. Before they even start the training they have to be comfortable and know that their future rests on the training they will receive. Some of them…they can make more money as sex slaves." Isha Kamara, a social worker who has worked with former female soldiers for years, confirmed that a large number of these women and girls are "roaming about the streets" because of lack of opportunities and that many turn to prostitution for survival.[50]

As mentioned earlier, DDR was meant to be a key element in ensuring that ex-combatants find alternative sources of income and ways of contributing to their community so that they would not take up arms again. The failure to offer training programs that fully prepared ex-combatants to sustain themselves economically resulted in ex-combatants returning to communities with no viable source of income and perhaps disappointed or disillusioned with the promises made by the local government and the international community regarding their reintegration. Thus, the prospect for long-term peace is called into question if the DDR did not even prepare soldiers for basic trades. Anague gave his perspective on the inadequacies

of the reintegration process and warned of the potential dismal long-term consequences:

> I thought it [the DDR] was staying for ten years…it should have been a long process. When you have war for eleven years you need twenty-two years to reverse that. This is 2005, things take time to get back. The gun is under the table, it has not been destroyed. The people who will take the gun out are the neglected ex-combatants who have been neglected and who have been used to living by the gun. They feel deceived, maltreated, targeted. If you want to reform a person…you need to reform all because it is these neglected people who will take up arms again and reproduce children who will be raised to learn that war is the answer.

In addition to problems with the structure and focus, reintegration programs were criticized more generally for failing both to attract women and girls and to address their reintegration needs. Mameh Kargbo, a staff member of Cooperazeone Internazionale (COOPI), described the DDR as prohibitive to women and girls. She argued that the low number of women and girls who participated in the DDR was due to "oversight" and "the gender aspect of it." She gave the following account of the DDR:

> The mandate didn't spell "men only," but here in Sierra Leone we have a gender problem, you know, boys have more access to resources that will help them to excel than girls. So in institutions where they just leave things open the boys will grab most of the things…the structure made was mainly for men. One of the criteria was to go with guns—many of the girls were pregnant, and you have the culture where girls are not expected to be in that situation and so they find it difficult to show up. The sensitization was not much [to allow] for girls to show up. The DDR was mainly a male issue. The reason why the girls didn't come through…had to do with culture, some were pregnant, some had babies, and the perception of the DDR as a man issue. There was little sensitization that girls should have come too.

Kargbo went on to say that most pregnant women who presented themselves at the DDR were turned away and sent to humanitarian organizations like his.

Glenis Taylor from UNICEF admitted that during the planning stages of the DDR for children "the focus was just making sure that children were

protected through the process—we weren't paying particular attention to the girls and their needs. That was a lesson learned looking back. We realized that there was not enough attention—at the time of planning we didn't think about all these needs." She went on to report that

> the demobilization process was mostly done by men. In fact some of the girls were deliberately given the wrong information about the DDR. For the children you didn't need a gun to demobilize—you just had to walk up. But some of them didn't know that, they thought you had to have a weapon. For some, the commanders deliberately kept [girls] in the dark because they didn't want to lose them.

Abu J. Conte noted another consequence of a gender-blind DDR. He commented on the problems associated with having a single demobilization center for both men and women as well as the proximity of adult demobilization centers to child demobilization centers. He described this as a particular problem for young women and girls. He explained, "There was a problem in keeping the girls in the demobilization camp. There were men coming and saying these were their wives and they want to take them out of the camps. For future programs, we recommend keeping a reasonable distance [between these groups]." Francis Lahai, the focal point for the Street Children's Task Force in Freetown, reached similar conclusions about the inadequacies of the DDR in meeting the specific needs of women and girls. Speaking specifically about disarmament for children, he recommended:

> For any organization wanting to replicate the DDR in Sierra Leone, they should not only target those child combatants that go for disarmament. There are many more that still remain and due to circumstances are unable to come for disarmament. They could check within households of commanders and those who were trapped in sexual relationships. Otherwise they are leaving a large number of children unattended.

The way in which child and adult disarmament were disaggregated also disadvantaged some girls and women. This division was informed by the international legal distinction between child and adult rather than Sierra Leonean understandings of these categories. Joseph Momoh, founder of Children Associated with the War, illustrated the gap between local perceptions of "child" and "adult" and Western legal definitions. He explained that

for many ethnic groups in Sierra Leone there are cultural ceremonies that mark the passing from childhood to adulthood. For most ethnic groups in the country, ceremonies take place within separate male and female secret societies.

These groups are responsible for educating members about cultural traditions, histories, and skills and trades deemed essential for survival and success within the community. There has been growing scrutiny of women's secret societies because some ceremonies marking a female's transition to adulthood, or *bondo* ceremonies, include female circumcision. *Bondo* ceremonies were disrupted during the civil conflict; as a result, there was some confusion as to the status of women and girls in their communities and their eligibility for the DDR. Momoh explains:

> Some girls that were around the age of sixteen would feel strange going through the DDR because they were not seen as adults because they didn't go through ceremonies but they didn't see themselves as children because they had had sex and some had children. . . . You can have a baby but if you haven't gone through the ceremonies you are not considered mature enough to have a child and you are still considered a child. A mother is someone who has gone through the ceremonies. . . . If you give birth to a child you are not an adult and you cannot carry out adult responsibilities so that is why some parents don't want to send their girls through the DDR because their girls had babies and it was shameful.[51]

At the end of the war twenty-eight of the fifty women I interviewed would have been under the age of eighteen and therefore defined as a child according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These women would have been eligible for the children's DDR; however, a surprising number did not see themselves as children either because they were already mothers or, because of the loss of parents, some had taken on adult roles for a number of years.

Even when the failures of the DDR program were acknowledged, there was little effort to alter the program to better attract women and girls or to meet female beneficiaries' needs. When Rev. Hassan Mansaray with CIS was asked if the local and international organizations understood that the DDR was neglecting women and girls, he replied, "People realized it." He went on to explain, "NCDDR was a very big organization. Too big, and when it has focused its attention on one area it is very difficult for you to turn its attention to another area. It had a lifetime for the commission to complete. . . . so

it is like an elephant, it is difficult to turn an elephant's attention to you when it has focused on another area."

Women Assess Their "Empowerment"

Personal interviews are rare within research and scholarship on female soldiers and the DDR. Moreover, to my knowledge, there have been no interviews with female soldiers about the notion of empowerment or their perception of DDR in relation to empowerment. Given the excessive use of empowerment in development and that DDR is framed as a source of empowerment for ex-soldiers, it seems valuable to ask both beneficiaries of the program and those who should have been included in the program for their assessment of the empowerment potential of DDR.

Of the seventy-five female combatants interviewed for this book, only a handful went through the DDR. Many of those who did not participate had formed opinions about the program based on their own knowledge of the process or on family members' or friends' experiences. For example, when asked about the DDR, Sadie, who did not go through the process, reported, "I know a lot of them [that went through the DDR], our neighbors. They didn't help them at all—nothing! They are in the streets."

When I asked the women who did participate in the DDR if these programs met their needs, some of their responses included the following: "Not me at all,"[52] "No, it just added salt into injuries,"[53] and "I was grossly disappointed by the way I was treated and the premature and abrupt way the program was ended."[54] These women had much to say about the weaknesses of the reintegration portion of the DDR. Several were convinced that reintegration funds were directed "to families of program officials."[55] Others mentioned corruption, misdirection, and mismanagement of funds as a weakness of the program.[56] One woman described the last phase of the DDR as "witch hunt reintegration" due to the stigmatization that resulted from being associated with it.[57]

Another respondent claimed that combatants were misinformed about the DDR process, and in some cases certain beneficiaries faced discrimination.[58] Fatima, another former combatant who was recruited as an arms bearer for the RUF, admitted that the program was useful; however, she also noted that "the small amount of money I received when I surrendered with my weapon could not keep me going."

One former soldier in particular, Sarah, fought against pro-government forces and took part in looting, burning civilians and public premises, and

maiming civilians. Sarah participated in the DDR but concluded that the program was poorly organized and did not distribute resources evenly to former combatants. She reported she was "grossly abused even by program officers" at reintegration facilities. She also noted, "We were treated as public nuisances and ridiculed." Sarah felt the program ended far too quickly to be of use for her, and she considered her current situation to be far worse than before the conflict: "Now I live with war stigma and trauma." Sarah argued that the situation for women in general has not improved: "In our community decision making is not an active ingredient in the life of women . . . they are nothing but property . . . even the affluent struggle to take part in decision making."

Mary participated in the war as a soldier for two years; her activities included fighting and killing. When she went to the demobilization center, she was held for two months and given a small amount of money; however, after the program she could not find her mother and discovered that her father had died during the conflict. Mary noted that she had been counseled "not to do bad" but argued that rather than such advice, she needed assistance to help raise children that she gave birth to as a result of relationships with rebels. She noted that men had the advantage of being able to leave behind their children while women were left to care for them.

When I asked both those who went through the program and those who did not how to improve the disarmament and reintegration process for women, the respondents' suggestions included providing lucrative jobs, education, and psychological support; ensuring information gets to female combatants; and having more local input into the process. Women consistently called for ongoing assistance with finding work as well as the desire for "not just a job, but a good job."[59] Referring to programs that trained women in tailoring and offered to buy them sewing machines, one interviewee explained that homeless women will still "need a place to put these machines."[60]

A common suggestion for improving programs was that education should have been provided for free and for all female soldiers.[61] For example, Catherine, a former soldier who "had an AK-47" and destroyed property and "gained a wealth of military tactics" while with the Sierra Leone Army for one year declared that she felt she was on the right track while in the army and has no remorse. Her desire, in terms of reintegration, was to be given access to formal education.

One woman claimed that a "sense of belonging" is a significant need for reintegrating soldiers; another argued that girls had to be given more priority in future programs.[62] Many women described their current situation as desperate and, in most cases, worse than in the wartime period. For example,

Zainab reported that in Sierra Leone "women are considered not capable to give and have job opportunities as they are just good to be wives cooking and giving birth to children."[63] Another woman described how women in Sierra Leone are "meant to be seen, not heard."[64]

Evaluating Empowerment

The success of reintegration programs in empowering women has been limited, at best, for several reasons. First, these programs offered women inadequate training options that were highly gendered and largely nonlucrative. The lack of market assessment meant that trades were chosen for females based on gendered ideas of what women should do in the marketplace rather than an assessment of trades that would allow them to make money and succeed in the marketplace. The small number of trades also meant that there was an overabundance of women trained in specific areas, thereby diluting the worth of their trade.

Second, the reintegration process for female soldiers was not inclusive or representative. Despite the fact that the planners and initiators of the DDR in Sierra Leone advertised their intentions to include local knowledge and focus on indigenous values and trades, the direction for the reintegration process came almost entirely from above. That is, the main funding partners for the DDR—the World Bank and the UN—dictated what trades would be funded, the duration of the programs, and which soldiers were eligible. The World Bank and the UN—two organizations claiming to be "gender mainstreaming," inclusive, and concerned with "the local"—dictated that women soldiers should be trained as *gara* tie-dyers, seamstresses, caterers, soap makers, and weavers. This meant that even if local organizations wanted to offer alternative options for skills training, they would not be eligible for funding from either of these major organizations. "Local knowledge" about what skills were valued or needed was never really assessed or taken into account during the reintegration process in Sierra Leone. Instead, it was constrained and shaped by the biggest funding parties.

Third, microcredit initiatives, which were designed to empower former female soldiers, were not designed to give women economic independence; rather, they assumed, and required, a nuclear family structure. Microcredit programs, although highly lauded in many development contexts, represented the "return to normal" for women in Sierra Leone in a very specific way. The explicit goal of the microcredit programs was to give women

the means to provide financial support for their families in order to reduce family pressures on male ex-combatants.[65] The implicit assumption of this objective is that female soldiers are married, that they wish to stay married, and that their primary objective is to support their husband, who is presumed to be the principal wage earner. This program is a prime example of the disciplinary potential of empowerment programs, which impose conditions on participants based on Western-liberal gendered notions of the nuclear family.

Conclusion

The DDR, which should have been a source of change and opportunity for female soldiers, failed women on a number of fronts. First, it failed to attract and include many female soldiers. Second, even for those female soldiers who did participate, the DDR was a source of social restriction rather than empowerment. It was neither directed by local actors nor responsive to women's input. Instead, by choosing highly gendered training options, the DDR for women carried explicit messages about appropriate gender role, and emphasized social reintegration—all in the name of empowerment.

Development actors in Sierra Leone made little effort to understand the motivations and experiences of women and girls during the conflict. In turn, initiatives designed to address women's and girls' needs and to "empower" them post–armed conflict were ill informed at best. Moreover, there has been little investigation into the possibility that war was empowering for female soldiers—despite evidence that, in some cases, female soldiers had more access to resources, more social freedom, and more political power during the official war than during the so-called pre- and postwar context. Empowerment can neither be identified as a legitimate objective nor praised as a sign of progress within development approaches in the absence of dialogue between development actors and the beneficiaries of empowerment programs.

Empowerment initiatives for female soldiers did not respond to obvious needs; rather, they encouraged and regulated women to participate in and comply with established social and economic relationships. In addition, empowerment discourses serve to discipline subjects according to specific neoliberal notions of progress and social order. As a result, rather than offering the potential for change, inclusion, and representation, programs designed to empower female soldiers conveyed explicit messages about the

social and familial relationships that are "normal" at the same time as they off-loaded responsibility for development from development actors to the individual. In this way, the boom in empowerment projects for female soldiers has been a bust in terms of offering real possibilities for change and representation.