



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone

Megan H. MacKenzie

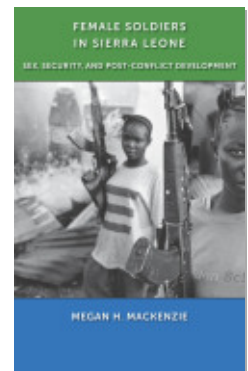
Published by NYU Press

MacKenzie, M. H..

Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development.

New York: NYU Press, 2012.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/17639>

## Securitization and Desecuritization

### *Female Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Women*

*We didn't have many girls [at the reintegration center]. I don't know what happened to the ex-combatant girls and ladies. Amongst the group that was brought to us, the [number of] girls [was] not even ten. Some of the most vicious soldiers and commanders were women. I'm still wondering what happened to the ex-combatant ladies and girls because the number that showed up [was] too small, which means that we have lots and lots of these women and girls that are not reintegrated.<sup>1</sup>*

*Saphie was conscripted by the AFRC/RUF at the age of fourteen. Her roles during the conflict included fighting, gun trafficking, acting as a "bush wife," and acting as a spy. Saphie explained why she did not go through the DDR in the following way: "I was excluded by my commander as they took my gun from me—the symbol to guarantee me to be part of the reintegration program." She heard that the program was useful and was especially envious of the \$300 disarmament payment.<sup>2</sup> Saphie also heard that ex-combatants were reunited with their parents and were given medical attention and clothing. For Saphie, the strengths of the program included the huge amount of international support; however, she felt that the program did not fulfill its promises to ex-combatants. She felt that female soldiers were deceived and were not given sufficient information about the program. She asserted that "girl soldiers were part of the 'real' people that mattered to the program." She also felt that most reintegration initiatives ended prematurely and heard about embezzlement of program funds by officials. Saphie reported that she finds her current situation frustrating as she is "just trying to survive" despite poverty.*

Lene Hansen proposes that "a critical discourse might start by challenging the key representations of identity that underpin the policy in question."<sup>3</sup> This chapter investigates the gendered assumptions that underpin policy makers' responses to the question "Why did so few women and girls participate in the

DDR in Sierra Leone?” Through a critical discourse analysis of news reports and NGO, INGO, government, and aid agency documents and policies, as well as existing literature on the disarmament process in Sierra Leone, I show how the majority of the policy responses to this question send three specific gendered messages: first, they perpetuate the notion of women as ideal victims lacking agency during war; second, these accounts of the DDR presume that the program was effective and that the problem was that women and girls were not sufficiently included in the process; third, those organizations that acknowledged the need to address women’s and girls’ specific gendered needs never asked women or girls what these needs were, implying that gender sensitivity can be achieved without speaking to beneficiaries.

In this chapter I compare these explanations with female soldiers’ own rationalizations of why they did not participate in the DDR. The diverse, complex, rational, and emotional responses to this question stand in stark contrast to the sterilized and oversimplified reports of women and girls being “left behind” or “forgotten” by the DDR. In addition, these answers show the inadequacy of current lists of “lessons learned” that local and international organizations offered with regard to female soldiers and post-conflict policy making. In turn, these stories and responses confirm the importance of speaking to women and girls rather than speaking for them.

### Engendering the DDR: Why Women Were Overlooked

As illustrated in chapter 4, the DDR in Sierra Leone was advertised as a source of empowerment for both men and women. The DDR in this country was also largely described as a success and has been recommended as a model for future programs.<sup>4</sup> Despite its praises, one of the lessons learned from the DDR has been drawn from its treatment of women and girls. As already noted, the exact number of women and girls involved in the fighting forces is unknown; however, estimates range from 10 percent up to 50 percent in various armed factions.<sup>5</sup> These numbers are not reflected in DDR statistics. Of the approximately 75,000 adult combatants disarmed, just under 5,000 were females.<sup>6</sup> The number of girls that went through the children’s DDR was abysmal; of the 6,845 child soldiers disarmed, only 8 percent were girls. UNICEF has admitted, “DDR programmes have consistently failed to attract female combatants . . . Sierra Leone was no exception.”<sup>7</sup>

Along with a growing body of research that critically examines gender and the DDR in Sierra Leone, one of the most common explanations for the low numbers of females in the DDR is the argument that women and girls

were not “real” soldiers. As mentioned in chapter 3, women and girls soldiers were often classified as camp followers, abductees, unaccompanied children, women associated with the fighting forces, or sex slaves. As a result, the low numbers of girls and women who participated in the DDR are seen as an accurate reflection of the numbers of females who were “actually” soldiers—the presumption being that other women who were with the rebels acted in support roles or were generally victims coerced into a male-dominated war.

Another justification given to explain the low numbers of women in the DDR was that women and girls were simply overlooked. In particular, women and girls who did not go through the DDR have been portrayed as victims left behind and neglected by the local and international community. For example, the UNICEF report on the lessons learned from the DDR cites the consideration of gender and the inclusion of girls as a major shortcoming of the programming. In fact, one of the major programs initiated in response to criticisms about the inclusion of girls and women in the DDR was called *Girls Left Behind*. According to UNICEF, this program was created to target “young girls and women who were either still living with their captors or who had been abducted (before the age of 18) and had been released or escaped.”<sup>8</sup> The program was designed to be a short-term, intensive intervention “for abducted girls and young women to ensure their protection and reintegration and to offer them basic education and skills training.”<sup>9</sup> Eligibility for this program required victimhood. Many women and girls were abducted during the war, but some also joined willingly. Furthermore, women and girls were victimized during the war, but, as my interviews show, many also gained a significant amount of power and authority as a result of their combat roles. Creating a program for abducted girls “left behind” is exclusive and perpetuates gender stereotypes about women and girls as the “ideal” victims in war.

Assuming women and girl soldiers were “left behind” also denies any agency on the part of females during the war and implies that the DDR problem with women and girls was one of inclusion, not program design or gender awareness. There is an assumption that women and girls were either victims caught up in the fray of a male-dominated conflict or were left behind by programs that likely would have benefited them in the same way they benefited male soldiers. These explanations ignore how socially constructed ideas about the roles and place of women and men during war impact policies, depictions, and our ability to accept and acknowledge violent female soldiers with agency. My interviews with local officials who worked with female soldiers and with female soldiers themselves disrupt these stereotypes of women and girls as exclusively passive victims of the conflict.

## Women Give Their Own Reasons and Tell Their Own Stories of Disarmament

My interviews with female soldiers in Sierra Leone demonstrate not only that women were actively involved in combat but also that the answer to the question “Why did so few women and girls go through the DDR?” requires a more in-depth answer than “They were left behind.” This chapter will look at some of the common themes within these answers, including confusion regarding eligibility criteria, fear of stigma, misinformation, and pride. Most women gave a variety of seemingly practical or understandable reasons for not participating in the program. No women I spoke with indicated they felt “left out” of the DDR, and very few indicated they thought the DDR would have been helpful for them.

One of the more common reasons women listed for not participating in the DDR was that they did not possess a gun at the time of demobilization. During the first two phases of the DDR, one of the requirements for entry into the process was the possession of a gun. For children, the possession of a gun was never a requirement; however, many children were not clear on this fact. DDR procedures for children defined eligibility as follows: “aged 7 or above; have learned to ‘cock and load’; have been trained; have spent 6 months or above in the fighting forces.”<sup>10</sup> Organizers of the DDR soon recognized several factors that made the requirement of a weapon dysfunctional: first, not all soldiers used or possessed guns; second, a variety of rudimentary weapons such as machetes were commonly used by rebels; third, many soldiers who wanted to participate in the DDR had escaped or left their armed group and were unlikely to hold weapons. Given that the conflict in Sierra Leone lasted more than eleven years, involved various armed factions, and erupted in several phases, each individual combatant did not necessarily possess his or her own weapon.

As a result, during the last phase of the DDR, ex-combatants were not required to hand in a weapon. Despite the change in official policy, the primary understanding of the DDR for a striking number of the women interviewed was that it was “just about men with guns”<sup>11</sup> or that it was a “gun for money”<sup>12</sup> program directed at male rebels. For example, Kadie participated as a child soldier for the RUF for five months. Her mother and husband were both killed during the war. She thought one of the weaknesses of the DDR program was that one needed to have a gun to participate. She did not know any women who participated in the DDR and said that another reason women could not participate was that they did not want to leave their

children. She felt that the DDR could have been improved. Kadie criticized the program for providing disparate resources and attention to men and women, adding, “They disarm the boys but the ladies remain.”

Although numerous women I interviewed admitted to carrying and using guns, several admitted they had their guns taken away from them before the DDR, and others told me they left their weapons behind when they escaped from their armed group. In some of these cases, commanders or comrades deliberately took weapons from women and girls before the disarmament process so they would not be eligible for the program. In addition, both males and females who performed support roles during the conflict (including domestic tasks, acting as spies or messengers and looters) may or may not have ever possessed a gun. Sasha was one of the women who explained that she did not participate in the DDR because she did not have a weapon. She was conscripted by the AFRC/RUF at the age of fourteen, and her roles during the conflict included fighting, gun trafficking, “acting as a bush wife,” and spying. Despite her role as a fighter, she reported that her commander deliberately prevented her from participating in the DDR: “I was excluded by my commander as they [*sic*] took my gun from me—the symbol to guarantee me to be part of the reintegration program.” For her, the strengths of the program included the huge amount of international support; however, she believed that the program did not fulfill its promises to ex-combatants. She felt that female soldiers were deceived and were not given sufficient information about the program, claiming that “girl soldiers were not part of the ‘real’ people that mattered to the program.” She also felt that most reintegration initiatives ended prematurely and had heard about embezzlement of program funds by officials. She reported that she finds her current situation frustrating as she is “just trying to survive” despite poverty.<sup>13</sup>

Many women and girls had escaped or left their armed group before the DDR was established and mentioned this as the reason for not participating in the DDR. Of the fifty women I interviewed in Makeni, forty-four had escaped from their respective armed groups. Women who had escaped from their armed group avoided the DDR not only because they did not have a weapon but also because they had returned to their families and had begun to disassociate themselves from the armed groups. For example, Salamatu explained that she did not see herself as eligible for the disarmament process because she had escaped and “wasn’t with the rebels any longer.”<sup>14</sup> Salamatu was part of a large group of students who had been captured. She was approximately sixteen years old at the time of her abduction. She did domestic work

for a rebel group under the command of “Superman,” the head rebel in the area. Near the end of the conflict she escaped and found her parents. She explained, “When I saw my parents I didn’t want to go [to the DDR], I just wanted to return to them.”

In a way, escapee women left the DDR behind because they no longer saw themselves as soldiers or no longer wanted to be connected with armed forces. It makes sense that women—some of whom had risked their lives to escape—would not want to rejoin an armed group for a disarmament process. In order for the DDR to have met the needs of the large number of women and girls who escaped from the armed forces, the DDR should have specifically targeted escapees by making efforts to inform them that they were still eligible for the DDR and that their safety would be ensured during the process.

Women also mentioned that their fear of stigmatization kept them away from disarmament facilities. There were sensitization campaigns encouraging Sierra Leoneans to accept former soldiers back into their communities in order to help the nation move forward. Sulay Sesay, an organizer with the DDR, explained: “We came up with many sensitization sessions on forgiveness—much of the information got out through discussions on the radio. We also worked with Talking Drum Studio.”<sup>15</sup> Despite these efforts, former soldiers—particularly women—faced stigma through their association with armed groups. Sesay admitted that former soldiers still faced isolation and stigmatization post-conflict:

It was not easy for us to take ex-combatants back. Some community members would tell us “don’t bring him/her here.” We had a lady who was a former RUF leader—her children were in the child welfare center in Makeni. Now she wanted to take her children and herself back to her community. So we did some advance sensitization, and each time the chief would say “don’t bring her here,” “we don’t want her here.” We eventually convinced him to accept her.

Alimatu, who was abducted at the age of sixteen, was with the RUF for three years. She stated that it was possible for her to participate in the DDR and that she was more concerned with finding her parents at the end of the war. She knew some friends who went through the DDR and said they were encouraged to forget what happened during the civil conflict. Alimatu also knew many other women who did not go through the DDR and said that most of them are “doing nothing.” She went to find her parents after the war,

and initially they resisted her return; she described having to beg her parents to accept her. Alimatu criticized the DDR for continuing to focus on men and “forgetting” women and their participation in the conflict.

Some of the interviewees described the DDR as “shameful” and spoke about the negative effect it would have on their families. For example, Tryphena described the potential impact of participating in the DDR: “[The community] will know that you are a rebel and you will feel uneasy in the community—you will be faced with fear.” Also, some women were anxious to start a new life and to break ties with their lives as soldiers. Their association with programs designed for former soldiers meant they were continually identified with the conflict. This was not an option for women who “didn’t want people to know that [they] took part in [the] mad war.”<sup>16</sup> One woman told me she did not want to be “seen publicly as an ex-combatant” out of “fear of retaliation”<sup>17</sup> from community members or other rebel factions. Similarly, a young woman told me she had reason to believe that if she showed up at the DDR she would be killed by the Special Security Death Squad, a brutal, specialized armed group. Given the fact that the DDR took place at the dubious end of a ten-year civil war, some women and girls were not convinced that the fighting was truly over and did not want to label themselves openly at the DDR out of concern for their security.

Isatu was a female soldier who escaped from the rebel forces. She was abducted at the age of ten and cooked and did other domestic work for the rebels. She explained, “During the disarmament the rebels handed me over to some white lady, but I can’t remember her name.... Maybe the white person worked with the DDR.” She ran away from this woman and the rebel group. She was pleased with the DDR because it gave her an opportunity to escape. Isatu added, “Since the rebels were paid, that is good because it was incentive for them not to commit crimes again. But many men sold their start-up packages after the war, and that is the bad of the program.” She explained that she was happy to escape and did not want to participate in the DDR because it would mean “showing [her] face where the rebels were at the DDR.... I did not want that stigma to be with me that I went through the DDR.”

In terms of the structure of the program, one of the procedures that was linked to stigmatization was the identification process for former soldiers. During the disarmament, each soldier had his or her picture taken and was given an ID card, which made the soldier eligible for training programs, financial assistance, or start-up packages. Sulay Sesay admitted that the ID cards could be used to detect former soldiers and became a source of shame



for some individuals. He clarified, “At some points the identity cards were bad because if [soldiers] are traveling up-country and people see the identity cards they will stop them and identify them as former soldiers. So many soldiers prepared to stay in Freetown.”

Several of the women I talked to expressed unease with the identification process. Hawa believed that “many” women did not go through the DDR because they were ashamed of the photo ID card they would be issued. She said former soldiers were worried this card would continue to distinguish them as soldiers. Aminata reiterated this point: “When I heard about the DDR, I wasn’t agreeing to go through the DDR. We were ashamed of having our faces to be on the computer because they take a photo of each person that went through the DDR. I felt nervous that our photos would be kept by immigration and that we would never be able to leave the country.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition to stigmatization, escaping, and not possessing a gun, women had several unexpected reasons for not participating in the DDR. To begin with, a significant number of the women I interviewed had an extraordinarily negative perception of the DDR and did not see it as an attractive option for them post-conflict. For example, descriptions of the program included “a trap to screen antigovernment combatants”<sup>19</sup> and a program that “paid rebels” for burning houses and killing families. Some women claimed they were not convinced the program benefited anybody other than international NGOs. For example, Sonia<sup>20</sup> reported, “We were used as everything for them [NGOs/international aid community] to have and be everything they want to be in their war and political ambitions.”<sup>21</sup> The program was also described as a tactical “use of ex-combatants as tools for fund-raising” for NGO workers to “enrich themselves.”<sup>22</sup> Another woman commented, “All I saw was expensive vehicles being used by those NGOs and so much bureaucracy.”<sup>23</sup>

One prominent concern expressed by former female soldiers was their distrust of the promises made by the Sierra Leone government and the organizations involved in the DDR. Some witnessed the first phases of the DDR while they were still involved with the fighting forces and concluded that the “flamboyant promises”<sup>24</sup> made to ex-combatants were not fulfilled. This distrust also stemmed from accusations of corruption and beliefs that “funds [were] directed to families of program officials.”<sup>25</sup> These testimonies demonstrate that negative perceptions impacted women’s and girls’ decisions not to participate in the DDR. In these cases, these women did not feel left out of the process; rather, they chose to avoid it because they were critical of the program and the way it was implemented.

While those who were critical chose to avoid the program, other women were prevented from participating in the DDR by their parents, their husbands, or their commanders. Francis Lahai was confident that many women had been thwarted from the DDR by other members of their armed group:

One thing I noted about the DDR program, even though it had done so much work ... the number of children it addressed really was very small—particularly the girls. Most of the girls were not disarmed because when they were abducted they were taken to the bush [where] they became combatants as well as sex slaves to the commanders, and during the disarmament and the DDR program these girls were prevented from going to disarm because they were already wives of the commanders.

Edward Anague from CEDA confirmed that some women and girls were prevented from participating by their families or husbands: “The families threatened [former soldiers] and said that if we went through they would be harmed or arrested.”

Mamsu was another female soldier who was discouraged from participating in the DDR by her family. She gave the following account: “I was deterred to reintegration facilities because my parents thought I will later be targeted.” Mamsu identified as a soldier “because I was an ammunition and arms carrier and was a conscript to do spying.” When asked about her roles during the war, she listed the following activities: “I was a spy and murdered children, I was a combatant, I was a bush wife to many male fighters.” Mamsu reflected that the DDR “would have been useful if what was proposed for the reintegration process was implemented to the letter practically without exclusion or bias...[and] if the packages of reintegration were directly given to us women soldiers.” She complained that “very few girls were given consideration to go through the reintegration process even though we were the tools of the war used by both pro-government and anti-government forces.” Mamsu also felt that female soldiers were treated differently than males because “the boy soldiers were considered rude and more dangerous to security.”

Esther provided the following account of her life during the war: “I took part in the mad war in Sierra Leone when I was recruited for a special body unit by the Kamajors.” She listed her combatant activities as spying, toting looted property, being “used as target for ambush,” and being used as a cook and sex slave for commanders. When asked why she did not participate in the DDR, Esther replied, “The Kamajors prevented me because they have a

taboo that they do not touch or come close to women but it was a lie to fake self-praise.” Esther admitted she did not know the details of the DDR, but she had heard of the foreign involvement and the large amounts of money directed through the program. She expressed frustration at how females were treated in post-armed conflict Sierra Leone: “All of us were combatants but treated as housewives and sex slaves.”

Pride was an additional theme in the responses to questions about the DDR. Several women I interviewed indicated either that they had “better plans” for themselves than the DDR or that they felt the DDR was somehow “below them.” For example, one woman told me she avoided the DDR because she had been promised by the head of the Civil Defence Forces that she would be given “a lucrative house and educational support”<sup>26</sup> if she remained with the forces. Theresa told me she had money from the war and did not need the handouts offered at the DDR. A few women had made plans to go on missions in the Ivory Coast and Guinea or had hoped to travel to South Africa with the Executive Outcome Forces—an armed group from South Africa. These women were not left out of the DDR but had charted courses they saw as more attractive than participating in the process.

Some women even reported that they felt they were “above” or “beyond” the DDR due to their status or the power they held. One woman explained to me that she thought her “looks would carry [her] a long way”<sup>27</sup> and that she did not need the resources offered by the DDR. Another informed me that she was “too popular”<sup>28</sup> to go to the DDR and that people would recognize her and target her and her family. After reading numerous accounts of the oppression and victimization of women during and after the conflict, I was not expecting to hear the pride women associate with their role as a soldier. For some women who had achieved higher ranks within the warring factions, the notion of attending the DDR with lower-ranking soldiers was insulting. One woman explained, “I was not convinced to see myself parade before people I had authority over for years.”<sup>29</sup> Several other women mentioned their disapproval of the “segregation within the command ranks” at the DDR.<sup>30</sup> The lessons learned from the DDR in Sierra Leone do not account for these shifts in power that occurred during the civil war (and numerous other wars) and the difficulty women had with losing this power.

It is possible to catalogue the previous categories of answers for why women did not participate in the DDR; however, it should be noted that the answers the majority of women gave to this question were complex and included more than one reason. Glenis Taylor of UNICEF gave an account of

the complexity and diversity of reasons for why women may have avoided or chosen not to participate in the DDR:

We had an interim care center for girl mothers before peace was declared. A lot of them were ex-combatants who didn't go through the DDR and so the reasons they gave were stigma and another was fear of being a burden on their family. They said they have never been to school, and they don't have any skills and "now I am going back with an extra mouth to feed. I know times were tough before and now I'm going back with an extra mouth and I don't want to take my parents through that." Another thing, for some of the girls there were cases of girls leaving the center and returning to the bush. They said "oh in the bush we can get three meals a day—when you come home it is just one meal a day." Some were the wives of commanders and had a certain status and could give orders and so some of them found it difficult to fit in. I know about one or two found it difficult to settle down after—they were used to being showered with gifts and privileges so for some of them they are used to quick money and so they found it difficult to focus and settle down to learn a skill.

Abu J. Conte, a program manager for a child protection program in Makeni, Sierra Leone, also contended that there were various reasons for the low number of women and girls who participated in the DDR. He specified that "some [women and girls] were taken from families and schools. [Some] came back with babies, some felt they were a part of the business of war. Some melted into the communities, some were afraid to go back to families, some stayed with captors, some stayed alone."

Although there were some common themes to the answers, many women offered multifaceted answers to the question "Why did you not participate in the DDR?" For example, Mabintu, a former member of the RUF who once poisoned captured war prisoners, told me she did not participate in the DDR for several reasons: "I had no gun to qualify me to disarm . . . I was not used to public gatherings . . . Not to bring negative stigma to my family." Similarly, Marion was recruited by Ulimo Johnson in Kailahun as a special "body" unit used to plan and carry out attacks on public places. She described the DDR program as "not clear" and added that she did not participate because her commander told her to refuse and that her commander had a mission in the Ivory Coast. Similarly, Isha joined the AFRC in her early teens. She reported that she burned public and private premises as well as living pro-government forces. Isha refused to go through the DDR, claiming,

“I cannot trust the program.” Isha also mentioned her fear of the stigma that would be cast on her and her family if she publicly participated in the DDR. For her, the DDR was merely “information propaganda and money-making.” She claimed that “boys had more support” because they were feared while females were not. Jamalitu offered an even more complex story. She reported that she was recruited by the CDF to “do concoctions in the holy shrine.” She listed the following reasons for not attending the DDR: “I was warned not to appear; rather the devil will consume me.... I feared the demon of protection during the war will consume me and my family and all CDF.”

Isatu, a former rebel, also told me her family was “not happy to see their daughter in that [DDR] camp.” She added, “Even when the rebels captured me, the family was not happy about that, so when my family saw me they took the weapon from me, asked me to give the weapon back to the husband that gave it to me, and I didn’t go to the disarmament.” Isatu also shared that she knew of a fire at a DDR center that had been started by rebels: “The rebels started the fire while people were learning.” It destroyed the whole center and made her feel nervous that it was dangerous to attend the DDR. “I heard that there were many sewing machines being sent to a program so it should have been so helpful, but I heard about the fire and then was afraid because the rebels were misbehaving.”

These interviews indicate the complexities associated with women’s decisions not to go to the DDR. Programs for female victims of the war, abducted girls and women, and girls left behind were developed in the absence of women’s own accounts of what roles they took up during the war, how they perceived the DDR, and why they did not participate in the DDR. Although women’s choices to participate or not were made in extremely constrained circumstances, by ignoring women’s accounts of why they made these decisions, useful lessons to be derived from the DDR become buried. The decisions that female soldiers made in relation to the DDR should be seen as political decisions and must be taken into account when considering the effectiveness and impact of the DDR.

## Conclusion

Sierra Leone’s disarmament process should not be hailed as a success or exported as a model for other countries without accounting for women’s and girls’ own depictions of their roles and experiences during the conflict. The negative impacts of the DDR in Sierra Leone on women suggest that there is

a need to reconsider the positive association of reintegration and reconstruction with progress and development.

Attention to women's and girls' experiences would produce a more complicated understanding of women (who can be both victims and aggressors/agents) and of conflict (as consuming the entire society and extending beyond the official time lines of war). Complicating our understanding of females and the conflicts they participate in would inspire different kinds of questions and policies post-armed conflict. For example, this analysis demonstrates that it is crucial to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate female former combatants on the terms of their needs and their experiences in the conflict if the society is to transition from conflict to peace. Another important realization is that the needs of former female combatants cannot be determined solely by understanding the ways in which they have been victimized; it is also important to consider the ways in which they have participated in the conflict.

*This page intentionally left blank*