

## Girls as “Weapons of Terror” in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leonean Rebel Fighting Forces

SUSAN MCKAY

Women’s and International Studies and Nursing  
University of Wyoming  
Laramie, Wyoming, USA

*Girls—both willingly and unwillingly—participate in terrorist acts within the context of contemporary wars. These acts range from targeting civilians for torture and killing to destroying community infrastructures so that people’s physical and psychological health and survival are affected. Girls witness or participate in acts such as mutilation, human sacrifice, forced cannibalism, drug use, and physical and psychological deprivation. This article focuses upon girls in two fighting forces: the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone and their roles as combatants whose primary strategy is perpetrating terrorist acts against civilians. In analyses of gender and terrorism, girls are typically subsumed under the larger category of female, which marginalizes their experiences and fails to recognize that they possess agency and power.*

In the majority of contemporary wars, conflicts are internal to a nation, although often with regional and sub-regional involvement. Terrorist acts are implicit strategies used in fighting within rebel and opposition movements although all sides of an armed conflict will perpetrate forms of terrorism. Such acts include torture and killing of parents, siblings, neighbors, and teachers, looting and burning property, amputations of limbs, disfigurement of body parts such as nose, lips, and ears, and gender-specific acts of rape and sexual mutilation that can be directed toward either sex but are usually female-focused.

During intra-state wars, civilians are the most frequent targets of such terror tactics. Civilian casualties, particularly women and children, are estimated to be as high as 90 percent.<sup>1</sup> Targeting civilians for horrific and capricious acts of terror conveys powerful political and psychological messages and creates widespread fear that is characteristic of terrorism. Such actions during armed conflicts are consistent with Deborah Galvin’s definition of terrorism as “those acts and events systematically protagonized for the purpose of instilling massive fear in individuals and/or the public at large, and which are deliberately used for coercive purposes. Terrorists are those who engage in these activities, whatever form they take. Terrorism is never accidental . . . [but] is deliberately

Received 21 February 2005; accepted 22 April 2005.

Address correspondence to Susan McKay, Women’s and International Studies and Nursing, P.O. 4297, University of Wyoming, Laramie, WY 82071, USA. E-mail: McKay@uwyo.edu

aimed at the human mind through the calculated infliction of pain or loss or the threat of the same. . . . Terrorism is something done by people to other people.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, purposeful destruction of the public health infrastructure—such as through damaging agricultural lands and water systems, looting health care clinics, and destroying highways and electrical sources—jeopardizes civilians. This article argues that destroying such infrastructures also constitutes terrorist acts because of their powerful effects on people’s physical and psychological health and survival. Also increasingly common is the terrorist practice of targeting humanitarian workers who, under threat of injury and death, are prevented from providing assistance in the form of food, water, and medical care.<sup>3</sup> Thus, terrorism as it occurs during civil wars is directed against people and also occurs indirectly by targeting their community infrastructures and those who work in humanitarian relief operations to make continued civilian existence possible.

### Girls and Terrorist Acts

Although women and “females” are now more often identified as participants in terrorism,<sup>4</sup> girls’ experiences are poorly understood and only occasionally acknowledged. This is true regardless of whether they are socialized, volunteered, or coerced to participate in such acts. Also, girls’ efficacy, actions, resistance, and survival skills within fighting forces are inadequately appreciated.<sup>5</sup>

This article focuses on girls as actors within two rebel forces known for directing terrorism at civilians. Within the context of rebel forces, girls typically are characterized as victims who lack agency although recent research indicates that girls in these forces, willingly or otherwise, also participate in terrorist acts.<sup>6</sup> As members of rebel forces, many witness and participate in terrorist mutilation, ritualistic murder (human sacrifice), forced cannibalism and drug use, and physical and psychological deprivation.<sup>7</sup> After situating girls’ involvement as child soldiers in fighting forces as a global phenomenon, including their recruitment and roles, this article details girls’ participation, with a focus on their agency as fighters within rebel groups in two African countries—Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone. It draws on data gathered between September 2001 and June 2002 when the author conducted field work in both countries.<sup>8</sup>

### Girl Child Soldiers

Throughout the world, participants in armed conflicts involve children under 18 who are internationally referred to as child soldiers. These children, boys in particular, have been a focus of international attention and advocacy on their behalf, largely because of the efforts of a child advocacy consortium, the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [Coalition]. This group has systematically identified the use of girls and boys in fighting forces, published, and publicized these data.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the Coalition’s documentation, accurate estimates of the use of child soldiers are increasingly possible. Its *2004 Global Report* provides the most relevant and in-depth information on the worldwide use of children in fighting forces.

Just as women’s war experiences have been overlooked until recently,<sup>10</sup> girls’ presence in fighting forces has received even less exposure. A long history exists of women’s participation in fighting forces, some of whom were girls—such as Joan of Arc who was 16 when her military career began in 1428.<sup>11</sup> Also, until recently and largely because of the emphasis placed on the girl child at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference

on Women,<sup>12</sup> girls have been subsumed under the larger categories of “women” or “females” so that their presence in fighting forces has been shrouded, and girls have been widely perceived as lacking agency in perpetrating acts of terror.

Some of girls’ invisibility can be related to culturally specific definitions of who is a girl and who is a woman. For example, in some African countries where the Western cultural notion and rite of passage of being a teenager do not exist, pubescent girls are considered to be women after initiation rites. In contrast, in contemporary Western societies, females are normally thought of as girls younger than 18 years of age. The definition, found in the Cape Town Principles, commonly accepted by the international community, is used in this article for defining a child soldier.

. . . any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. Girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage are included in this definition. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.<sup>13</sup>

### *Global Involvement*

Throughout the world, from Colombia to Kosovo/a to Chechnya to Israel and Africa, girls are actors within fighting groups.<sup>14</sup> Between 1990 and 2003, girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries. They were present in 38 armed conflicts in 13 African countries, 7 countries in the Americas, 8 countries in Asia, 5 countries in Europe, and 5 countries in the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> Most of these armed conflicts were internal to the country although, in some cases such as in Macedonia, Lebanon, Uganda, and Sudan, girls also fought in international conflicts.

Country-specific cases provide examples of girls’ involvement in some of these fighting forces. During Cambodia’s civil war, girls were used by both governmental forces and the Khmer Rouge. A 17-year-old girl taken as an orphan into the Khmer Rouge when she was 2 years old reported that, together with a group of 300 to 500 girls, she was given military training from the age of 5. Provided with guns and uniforms, they became active soldiers when they reached 14 years of age.<sup>16</sup> In the PKK, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, a 14-year-Syrian national fought as a female guerrilla against the Turkish army. She received military and political training in Iraq. According to a report of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, “In 1998 . . . more than 10 percent of the PKK’s total number of child soldiers were said to be girls.”<sup>17</sup> In Asia, approximately 900 to 1,000 girls fought in the northeastern state of Manipur, India, constituting 6–7 percent of the total number of child soldiers fighting there. In Nepal, Maoist insurgents have used girls extensively in what they call “the People’s War.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in Sri Lanka, Tamil girls have been recruited into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since the mid-1980s. In LTTE, girl fighters participate in grueling training and in fierce fighting.<sup>19</sup> According to government sources, because girls are less suspect than boys and less often subjected to body searches, girls in Sri Lanka have been chosen to become or forced to be suicide bombers at as young as 10 years old.<sup>20</sup> Of the LTTE fighting forces, 40–60 percent are estimated to be under 18 years of age, most being girls and boys ages 10–16.<sup>21</sup> However, these data lack precision and have been critiqued as needing reliable, field-based estimation.<sup>22</sup> In Colombia, 6,000 boys and

girls are estimated to be involved in armed groups. Again, although reliable statistics are unavailable, girls in Colombia are thought to constitute approximately 20 percent of children in guerrilla groups and 15 percent of children in paramilitary groups.<sup>23</sup>

In military forces in Ethiopia, Israel, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Colombia, girls have been highly respected and regarded as fighters. In Eritrea, where females comprised one-third of fighters, Veale<sup>24</sup> studied 11 former female participants. The girls' ages when recruited into the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) averaged 12.68 years, with the youngest 5 years old and the oldest 17. On the average, these girls spent 11.6 years as fighters, with a range of 4 to 18 years. In Liberia, older girls and young women in Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) were reported as particularly fierce fighters who commanded respect from their male peers. A female commander reported that her unit entered combat clad only in undergarments due to beliefs that their appearance would intimidate enemies and strengthen their magical protection.<sup>25</sup> The terrorist elements of surprise and invoking fear as well as violating cultural taboos are strongly operational in this strategy, which has also been used by women as a form of nonviolent protest.<sup>26</sup> Ellen S., a fighter and commander of girls for LURD, said that during attacks, girls and boys were captured for the force. She described how they would enter battle wearing yellow or brown T-shirts inscribed with the initials LURD. Ellen S. also wore ammunition around her chest and carried an automatic weapon. She related how she terrorized captured enemies, "if my heart was there, I would bring them to the base for training. But if my heart was bad lucky [sic], then I would kill them right there."<sup>27</sup>

These data indicate that girls globally are actors in fighting forces, often because they were forced to participate, but they also volunteer for ideological or pragmatic reasons.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of their rank and situations in a force, girls participate in acts that terrorize civilians in countries where they fight. Perpetrating violence and torture become normal and routine within a culture of violence that pervades every aspect of daily routines and activities.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Recruitment***

Although the idea of children freely choosing to join a force is a contested one, girls may volunteer—meaning that they were not physically forced, abducted, or otherwise coerced. Some girls volunteered or were coerced into a force. Other entry points included being born of an abducted mother or captured by another fighting force. They may enter a force for ideological reasons, to fulfill a compulsory obligation, escape poverty, and/or seek opportunities such as employment or sponsorship in school. They also join because of untenable family situations such as sexual abuse and overload of domestic work, and to find protection, join with other family members, and seek adventures.<sup>30</sup> Some girls find new freedoms and capabilities, with fewer gender restrictions and opportunities to exert authority that have not been previously possible.

Girls may be gang-pressed, meaning they are physically coerced into a force when they are in places such as schools, discotheques, and markets or simply walking along a road or snatched from their homes. For example, during the war in Mozambique (1976–1992), the Frelimo government force recruited and gang-pressed girls to fight in the war against Renamo rebel forces. Frelimo recruiters arrived with buses at schools where they asked girls to volunteer for the military. When few agreed, girls were forced onto buses and taken to a military base where they met with other "recruited" girls and began military training.<sup>31</sup> Girls also joined Frelimo because of the promise of new and emancipatory

roles, to escape rural areas and expand traditional gender roles, and in hopes of improving their educational and career opportunities. In the Renamo force, most girls were abducted but some were recruited. Others joined because they felt discontent over Frelimo socialist policies, wanted to be with family members, or because they were lured into the force with the promise of educational opportunities.

In many rebel forces, notably in Africa, girls have entered rebel forces involuntarily, usually by abduction. Also, cross-border abductions have occurred in both Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda and other countries. Between 1990 and 2003, girls were abducted in 12 African countries, 4 countries in the Americas, 8 Asian countries, 3 European countries, and 2 Middle Eastern countries.<sup>32</sup> In some countries, boys and girls are taken from orphanages, as reported in Sri Lanka where the LTTE purportedly runs its own orphanages and uses these children as fighters.<sup>33</sup>

### **Roles**

Girls' and women's participation within fighting forces are key because they carry on supportive tasks that maintain the fighting force. Also, they are fighters, which can mean being sent to the frontlines as cannon fodder, sometimes with their babies drugged and strapped on their backs. Girls also conduct suicide missions, provide medical care, and serve as mine sweeps.<sup>34</sup>

Colombian ex-girl soldiers who joined a fighting force as teenagers were taught how to care for and use guns, conduct military maneuvers and communications operations, and serve as bodyguards for commanders.<sup>35</sup> As such, girls' roles are multi-faceted and vary according to the force in which they are enrolled, their ages, and how gender is constructed within the force, such as whether girls are viewed as "equal" to boys (even though power differentials inevitably exist) or are treated as slaves and servants.

In some forces where girls serve primarily as combatants, sex is consensual or forbidden, and severe punishment directed to sexual perpetrators was reported in Colombia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup> In many African fighting forces such as in Angola, Mozambique, Northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone, primary roles for pubescent girls are providing sex and being "wives" who give birth to children who are raised within a rebel force to be fighters.<sup>37</sup>

Regardless of whether they primarily are fighters or serve as spies, porters, or "wives" of rebel-captor "husbands," girls typically hide their involvement in terrorist acts when they come out of a force because they are reluctant to acknowledge roles that violate broader community and gender norms. They often feel shame, even though they acknowledge that they would have been killed had they refused to participate. Therefore, a veil of secrecy continues to surround their acts and experiences within a force. Only recently have researchers focused on deconstructing their experiences and expanding the scope of their inquiry about child soldiers to include girls as both perpetrators of terror as well as terrorism's victims.

### **Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone**

#### ***The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda***

Since 1986, the LRA, which is led by Joseph Kony, has waged a war of terror in Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan against the governmental Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF). The primary victims have been the Acholi people whose community infrastructures have been shattered. Thousands of people have been displaced, often in

camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). Today, they continue to live in terror of surprise LRA attacks in these highly vulnerable camps and in villages throughout Northern Uganda. In the main, the LRA force consists of abducted children from Northern Uganda and Southern Sudan with 80 percent of the force estimated to be children. Girls are thought to comprise one-fourth or more of child soldiers although actual numbers of children abducted into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) are imprecise.<sup>38</sup> Children are also born into the LRA, fathered by rebel commanders. These children may grow up in the LRA to become fighters. When they are taken into a force, girls (and boys) are immediately subject to intensive abuse and torture and many are killed or die because they are unable to cope with the harsh circumstances of rebel existence.

After training in military tactics and use of weaponry, girls participate in front-line combat, with some holding command positions within the LRA. They engage in terrorist acts that create widespread fear, such as attacking their own families and neighbors, abducting other children, and killing civilians. Girls also perform support roles within the military bases such as raising crops, selling goods, preparing food, carrying loot, moving weapons, and stealing food, livestock, and seed stock.<sup>39</sup> They fetch firewood and water, cook food, climb trees to spy, transport ammunition, participate in guard duty, and fight during ambushes.<sup>40</sup> Younger girls are servants to commanders and their "wives," and they work continuously.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone*

Sierra Leone's 11-year war began in 1991 and officially ended in January 2002. The war pitted the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and pro-government civilian militias such as the Civil Defense Forces (CDFs) against the rebel RUF force. Gross human rights violations were committed by all sides. The RUF was especially culpable because of its extensive abduction of children and adults and of terror tactics that resulted in country-wide fear. These included attacking villages, destroying community infrastructures such as schools, homes, and health facilities, and perpetrating atrocities such as severing hands, arms, feet, and legs, cannibalism, and ritual murders.<sup>42</sup> The war was waged throughout the country, including trans-border regions. Girls fought on all sides and comprised an estimated 25 percent of the child soldiers in all forces, with child soldiers estimated to constitute one-third of all fighters. An estimated 8 percent of the total forces, both adults and children, during the Sierra Leonean war consisted of girls although their use and numbers varied between forces. For example, within the Revolutionary Unit Front (RUF) rebel group, girls are estimated to have constituted at least one-third of all child soldiers and approximately 16 percent of the total RUF force.<sup>43</sup>

In Sierra Leone, girls' roles within the RUF were similar to those within the LRA. They were fighters, cooks, domestic laborers, and also porters, "wives," and food producers. They cared for the sick and wounded, passed messages between rebel camps, served as spies, and some worked in diamond mining for their commanders or rebel-captor "husbands."<sup>44</sup> Ramata Y. was taken into the RUF when her mother and father were killed by the RUF. In the rebel force, she fetched water, cooked, and was a "wife." Ramata Y. reported that girls were trained to use guns. They killed people, stole property, and looted and burned houses.<sup>45</sup>

### *Victim, Perpetrator, or Both?*

In the two rebel forces, the LRA and the RUF, most girls entered because they were abducted. Researchers studying 32 girls who were in the RUF force in Sierra Leone

found that all were abducted, often by children their own age who threatened them with death.<sup>46</sup> Sophia R.'s story is a typical one. At age 11, she was captured at school and spent the next 9 years in the RUF. She was immediately "disvirginalized" by many men. Her leg was tattooed with the letters "RUF." In the RUF Sophia R. was a "wife," but she also learned to use a gun and was given combat clothes. She was introduced to cocaine, which emboldened her to fight. She explained that the cocaine enabled her to destroy and "cause bad havoc."<sup>47</sup> Dorothy G. was 13 years old when she was abducted by the LRA. She was taken to Sudan and taught how to work a gun and to be a spy. She climbed trees to see when the Ugandan army was coming. She was also given as a "wife" and used for sex. She said that if a girl refused sex, she was beaten or killed.<sup>48</sup>

Given the realities of the almost-ubiquitous experience of girls being abducted into the rebel forces in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, a tension arises in explaining the paradox whereby victims of terrorist violence subsequently become perpetrators of similar violence. However, discrete categorization as "victim" or "perpetrator" fails to underscore the complexities of shifting roles and experiences such as the seeming paradox of girls becoming allies with individuals who were responsible for abducting and victimizing them and who continue to sexually abuse them. Or, a girl who has never felt herself to be efficacious might experience the lure that can occur from the power of carrying a gun and defying traditional gender roles.<sup>49</sup> This dialectic has parallels with the 1970s abduction of Patricia Hearst who later became an actor in the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) and then came to be viewed as a perpetrator instead of a kidnapped and terrorized victim. Similarly, differentiating victim and perpetrator roles of girls is problematic because of the fluid roles and situations within a force and changes that can occur over time for impressionable children who are socialized, often for many years, into a culture of violence that encouraged perpetration of terrorist acts as a fighting strategy.

Girls in the Northern Ugandan and Sierra Leonean rebel forces have been victimized because they have been forced, at the threat of their lives, to participate in terrorist acts such as killing friends or family members and torching homes. Yet they also demonstrate resiliency, agency, and ability to resist—although usually not successfully—their oppressors. Over time, as they continue to participate in terrorist acts, some become combatants, spies, and communications personnel who hold key responsibilities within the force. Nevertheless, they remain relatively powerless within a force and coerced to participate. Except for the most powerful girls who hold commander status or are commander's "wives," girls are subjected to abuse from men and boys and, in some cases women, because of their low status and traditional gender roles.

Boys' experiences are both similar to girls and also differ as an effect of gender. As young children taken into a force, boys may carry out domestic tasks, be porters, and participate in terrorist acts. Although some boys are thought to experience sexual abuse, little is known about the extent of sexual violence perpetrated against boys by male and female commanders in a force; its occurrence is thought to be much less widespread for boys than for girls. Boys also may be forbidden to sexually approach girls and women until they attain rank, such as a commander, within the rebel force.<sup>50</sup>

### *Girls' As Fighters and Resisters*

Children abducted into the LRA before 2002 who spent time in Sudan were given long and formalized military training. Since 2002, training has been sporadic, and some of the youngest abductees are not trained at all. Others are trained but not given uniforms or weapons.<sup>51</sup> In 2003, ex-LRA children told Human Rights Watch researchers that they

were forced to participate in beatings or trappings of other abductees. Susan A. told of being forced, along with three other girls, to beat and kill civilians in villages and internally displaced people camps.<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth B. was 12 when she was abducted into the LRA and was in the force for 2 years. Her father was killed trying to protect her from abduction. She described how another girl in her group was asked to beat somebody they [the LRA] wanted to kill. When the girl refused, she was killed. Elizabeth B. now becomes annoyed very quickly; when she's angry, she feels like killing somebody.<sup>53</sup> Another girl, Alice R., was abducted into the LRA when she was 17 years old. When Alice R. crossed into Sudan with the LRA, she carried guns and was subsequently trained to be a soldier. Although allocated to an army commander to be his "wife," she was also a fighter.<sup>54</sup> Janet M. was 15 when abducted into the LRA and spent most of two and one-half years in southern Sudan. Her story is one of resistance to participating in violence and terrorist acts although ultimately she became a fighter. Initially, she received training in Sudan after which time she was to be "allocated" to a commander to be his "wife." Because she was young and feared sexual abuse, she deceived her captors by saying she was [sexually] infected. Janet M. was next taken for a medical examination. When a report was given that she was not infected, angry commanders ordered her killed. Kony, the LRA commander, intervened to spare her life because, he said, her actions showed she was wise and tricked people. She was then given to another commander but refused sex with him. Beaten for six months as punishment, she was sent to fight the Dinkas in southern Sudan. While fighting the Dinkas, she looted property and foodstuff; even minerals were taken. When she escaped the LRA, she was in advanced pregnancy, evidence that despite her resistance she was subjected to forced sex.<sup>55</sup>

In Sierra Leone, girls also received military training. Many girls who were with the RUF reported that although they learned to cock and load a gun, they did not participate in combat.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that girls do not view themselves as combatants, and few would self identify as perpetrators of terror unless they possessed and used guns or held commander rank within a force. As in Northern Uganda, training could be intense and lengthy and consisted of how to use guns, engage in physical training, and to kill.<sup>57</sup> Grace J. said that she was trained "on barbed wire." Trainees were put into a kind of cage and told that if they managed to escape, they were perfectly trained. Grace J. escaped whereas many others died during training exercises.<sup>58</sup> Arlene N. was trained to hold onto a gun but did not handle [carry] a gun. She explained that most girls were trained, and some participated in terrorist acts such as shooting and killing, stealing properties, and looting and burning houses.<sup>59</sup> Christine P. was young when she was abducted. She stayed with the RUF throughout most of the war. When she was abducted, the RUF force encountered her mother, in advanced pregnancy at the time, and her father walking along the road. The rebels tied her father's hands behind his back. Her mother was given a heavy load to carry that she threw away because of its weight. The rebels then caught her mother, slit open her abdomen, took out and killed the unborn child, and killed both her father and brother.<sup>60</sup> Her story provides insights into the types of terrorist acts perpetrated by the RUF, and in which girls participated.

Margaret C. recounted that she was trained and took part in fighting. Within the force they would "kill and eat." In the jungle they ate humans and reptiles; if she refused to eat, she would have been killed. She described a terrorist ambush when a woman was killed, and they [commanders] told them to eat this woman. So they opened the upper part of the body, cooked it [presumably the heart] and threw away the other parts of the body.<sup>61</sup>

As noted by Denov and Maclure,<sup>62</sup> routinization of violence through training and

everyday experiences, such as these girls had, helps those who perpetrate terrorist acts to see themselves as effectively performing a job. Mary J., an ex-combatant in the RUF, explained that over time she came to view her role of killing as normal and to understand that overcoming the enemy was part of her job. Killing without a reason showed commitment and willingness to work with other rebels. She was not allowed to show remorse, sadness, or shame whereas brutal acts of torture and violence were encouraged and celebrated.<sup>63</sup> Girls also have reported that by carrying small arms, they gained power, status, and control and they felt pride, self confidence, and a sense of belonging.<sup>64</sup> Also, when girls hold positions of power, such as being a military commander, feelings of pride may become more salient than identifying oneself as a victim.

### *Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)*

Despite recent and increasingly robust data detailing girls in fighting forces,<sup>65</sup> the international community, governments, and militaries continue to ignore and deny the extent of girls' involvement and offer inaccurate and reductionistic explanations for their presence. Pervasive gender discrimination in war-affected countries such as that existing in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, perpetuates the notion of girls solely as victims, most notably "sex slaves," and as having lesser agency in perpetrating violence and terror than boys. Girls, therefore, are not thought of as ex-combatants or as having held responsible positions within the rebel force. A consequence of "not seeing" girls as actors and perpetrators is that girls are seldom included in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs. Instead, boys and men are privileged in receiving DDR benefits, which typically include opportunities to enroll in skills training, attend school, or participate in rehabilitation programs. For example, in Angola, despite recognition that large numbers of girls were abducted into Angolan fighting forces, thousands of boys were formally demobilized although no girls were.<sup>66</sup> In Sierra Leone, 6,052 boys passed through DDR whereas only 506 girls did.<sup>67</sup> Reflecting the reality of their situations and without negating the knowledge that they also experienced sexual and other forms of gender-specific violence, girls should be recognized as serving in capacities that parallel or are complementary to those of boys.<sup>68</sup>

### *Community Responses to Girls' Return*

Community members often react with hostility and fear to girls coming back from a rebel fighting force. This is understandable because these girls were among those who either witnessed or perpetrated acts of terror against community members and profoundly violated community norms of behavior.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, returning girls are often provoked, stigmatized, and poorly accepted by community members and at school, if they attend.

Girls returning with children conceived and born in a rebel force are especially stigmatized. The presence of these children makes explicit, regardless of forced maternity, that they have violated traditional gender norms that mandate girls should be virgins before they marry. Further, their children often are of unknown paternity or their fathers are rebel-captor "husbands." One effect is that some girls do not marry. Others eschew marriage because of the horrific sexual and other violence they have experienced from boys and men and their lack of trust of them. This resistance to marriage can be construed as a radical act in some African societies, where marriage is perceived as mandatory to avoid being viewed as a social outcast.

Consequently, many girls leave their communities because they are poorly accepted, unable to adjust to community life, cannot marry, or find no way to secure an economic livelihood. Additionally, gender discrimination, such as the long hours girls must work at home or notions such as education, is more important for boys and affect returning girls' ability to attend school or learn skills such as a trade. Returning girls also often experience gender-specific effects that reduce their life choices and span, such as sexually transmitted diseases resulting from forced sex within a force.<sup>70</sup>

### *Thinking about Girls in Rebel Forces and Terrorism*

Terrorism, as construed in Western minds, is usually closely equated with 9/11 and similar episodic and unexpected acts that rivet the world's attention because of the magnitude of their effects. Girls and women are only occasionally seen as actors in these scenarios. Yet, history says that women, too, are involved although usually with limited visibility. Within the context of rebel wars in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, as discussed in this article, girls' presence in these forces is pervasive and, as such, they routinely witness and experience violence and participate in terrorist acts. Their involvement is not isolated but occurs throughout the world, although with distinct experiences according to the force.

For some girls, often taken into the LRA at young ages and for relatively short periods, if they survive they may be young enough to avoid full participation as terrorists in the force; instead they are first assigned to domestic work and serving as porters. Yet, they are inevitable witnesses, which has its own traumatic effects. In both Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone, large numbers of girls spent years in a force, and many grew into motherhood and adulthood within this context. They have literally lost their childhoods and are socialized into a culture of violence where terrorist acts become normal. Further, their children are socialized into this same violent culture. When these girls, often now women, escape or the war ends, they are ignored, stigmatized, and refused DDR benefits. Most go directly back to their communities, if these still exist, find relatives to stay with, or migrate to urban areas. Life does not continue as "normal" despite the changed circumstances of their lives. All are traumatized and often display inappropriate social responses or behavioral deficits. For example, community members in a village in Sierra Leone told about how returning girls would steal and kill neighbors' chickens and that some girls emotionally withdrew; others were belligerent and hostile—behavior that is consistent with the culture of violence in which they spent so much time. Yet, these same girls have been victimized and forced to participate in terrorist acts. This understanding must permeate initiatives to help them.

These girls can never "go back" to being innocents because they have experienced what most people cannot imagine, and they also have gained strengths from their survival. The challenge, therefore, is to empower them to use these strengths and to expand cultural definitions of gender to enable these strengths to be harnessed. Yet, so long as girls remain invisible within the programs and policies of international, national, and local groups, these steps will not be taken. One, then, must ask what the future may bring to these countries when girls become women after such socialization. How will gender roles be (re)constructed given their experiences and those of boys? What will happen to their children? Very little is known about the latter except for sporadic reports of "war babies" whose development shows aberrations and whose social adjustment is poor.

In addressing these questions, within the countries of Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone much depends on empowering communities to work with these girls and their

children. Because community is so central to the health and well being of people in these two countries, Western-style individualistic approaches are usually inappropriate—including psychotherapeutic approaches that diagnose children as having PTSD. A key strategy in working with these girls is to enlist the leadership of women elders to talk and listen to their stories and assist them in learning or re-learning normal behavior. These girls also need practical assistance. High priority must be given to their obtaining primary health care including, importantly, reproductive health care. They must be given opportunities to go to school or learn a skill and to participate in activities that foster healing, if they are to be empowered to become citizens in a culture of peace.

So long as these girls continue to be hidden from the world's attention and even invisible within their own communities except to be stigmatized and provoked, their strengths will not be realized. By calling their situations to attention within broader discussions of gender and terrorism, one step can be made in the right direction toward addressing the injustices they have experienced and advocating for international action on their behalf.

## Notes

1. Barry Levy and Victor Sidel, *War and Public Health* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); United Nations, *Women, Peace and Security* (New York: Author, 2002); UN. (2004, June 14). *Renewed commitment to decision action for protecting civilians in armed conflict needed now more than ever, security council told: Emergency relief coordinator Jan Egeland urges new Council Resolution supporting further measures to improve civilian protection*. Security Council 4990th Meeting. Press Release SC/8122. Available at ([www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc8122.doc](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2004/sc8122.doc)).

2. Deborah Galvin, "The female terrorist: A socio-psychological perspective," *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 1(2) (1983), p. 20.

3. UN, 2004.

4. See for example, Karla Cunningham, "Cross-regional trends in female terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 26 (2003), pp. 171–195; Sharon Pickering and Amanda Third, "Castrating conflict: Gender(ed) terrorists and terrorism domesticated," *Social Alternatives*, 22(2) (2003), pp. 8–15.

5. For further discussion, see Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, *Child soldiers: What about the Girls?* *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 57(5), (2001, September/October), pp. 30–35; Dyan Mazurana, Susan McKay, Khristopher Carlson, and Janel Kasper, "Girls in fighting forces and groups: Their recruitment, participation, demobilization, and reintegration," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 8(2), (2002), pp. 97–123; Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War* (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2004).

6. For further discussion, see Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, "Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone: Victimization, participation, and resistance. In V. Farr and A. Schnabel, eds., *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, in press). Yvonne Keairns, October 2002, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers* (New York and Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office); Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

7. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

8. This study's co-investigators were Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana. It was funded by the Canadian International Development Agency's Child Protection Research Fund and implemented in partnership with Rights and Democracy, Montreal. The study examined the presence and experiences of girls in fighting forces and groups within the context of three African armed conflicts—Mozambique, Northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone. Also, funding was contributed for Susan McKay's research by the University of Wyoming Graduate School Research Office, the

Women's Studies Program, the Office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, the International Studies Program, the Provost's Office, and School of Nursing, and the Office of International Travel.

9. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [Coalition]. *Child Soldiers Global Report: Global Report on Child Soldiers 2001* (London: Author); McKay & Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*.

10. Susan McKay, "The effects of armed conflict on girls and women," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5 (1998), pp. 381–392; Elizabeth Rehn and Ellen Sirleaf, "Women, war and peace: The independent experts' assessment of armed conflict on women and women's role in peacebuilding" (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women [UNIFEM], 2002); Indai Sajor, "Common grounds: Violence against women in war and armed conflict situations" (Quezon City, Philippines: Asian Center for Women's Human Rights, 1998); UN, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Report of the Expert of the Secretary-General, Ms. Graça Machel* (New York: Author, 1996).

11. Linda DePauw, "Battle cries and lullabies: Women in war from prehistory to the present" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

12. See UN. *Beijing Platform for Action* (New York: Author, 1995).

13. United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF]. (1997, April 30). *Cape Town Annotated Principles and Best Practices*. Adopted by the participants in the Symposium on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, organized by UNICEF in cooperation with the NGO Sub-group of the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Cape Town, South Africa, p. 1.

14. Coalition (2001); Mazurana et al., "Girls in fighting forces and groups"; McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

15. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

16. Coalition. (2000, May). Asia report: Executive summary, Child participation in armed conflict in Asia. Available at ([www.child-soldiers.org](http://www.child-soldiers.org)).

17. Coalition. (2000). Girls with guns: An agenda on child soldiers for "Beijing Plus Five." Available at ([www.child-soldiers.org/reports/special%20reports](http://www.child-soldiers.org/reports/special%20reports)).

18. Coalition. (2000, May). Asia report: Executive summary.

19. Keairns, October 2002, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers* (New York and Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office).

20. Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [Coalition]. (2000). *Girls with Guns*; Cunningham, "Cross-regional trends in female terrorism."

21. Coalition. (2001).

22. This observation was written in an unpublished draft document (2000, July) by Ken Bush who has worked extensively on the issue of child soldiers in Sri Lanka. *Stolen Childhood: The Impact of Militarized Violence on Children in Sri Lanka*.

23. Erika Pérez, *Girls in the Colombian Armed Groups, A Diagnosis: Briefing* (Germany: Terre de Hommes, 2001).

24. Angela Veale. (2003). From child soldier to ex-fighter, a political journey: Female fighters, demobilisation, and reintegration in Ethiopia. Monograph No. 85, Institute of Security Studies, South Africa.

25. Human Rights Watch, *How to Fight, How to Kill: Child Soldiers in Liberia* (New York: Author, 2004, February). Available at ([http://hrw.org/reports/2004/liberia0204/6.htm#\\_Toc61673969](http://hrw.org/reports/2004/liberia0204/6.htm#_Toc61673969)).

26. Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay, *Women and Peacebuilding* (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 1999).

27. Human Rights Watch, *How to Fight, How to Kill*.

28. Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Geneva: ILO and Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004); Pérez, *Girls in the Colombian Armed Groups*.

29. Denov and Maclure, "Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone."

30. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*; Keairns, *The Voices of Child Soldiers*; Paez, *Girls in the Colombian Armed Groups*.

31. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

32. Ibid.

33. Coalition, 2001; Mazurana and McKay, *Child Soldiers*.

34. Mazurana and McKay, *Child Soldiers*.

35. Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers: Colombia* (New York, Geneva, and London: Quaker UN Office and Coalition, 2003).
36. See for example, *ibid.*; Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Child Soldiers: Angola* (New York, Geneva, and London: Quaker UN Office and Coalition, 2003); Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Child Soldiers: The Philippines* (New York, Geneva, and London: Quaker UN Office and Coalition, 2003); Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Child Soldiers: Sri Lanka* (New York, Geneva, and London: Quaker UN Office and Coalition, 2003); Veale, *From Child Soldier to Ex-fighter*.
37. Keairns, *The Voices of Child Soldiers*; McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*; Veale, *From Child Soldier to Ex-fighter*.
38. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
39. *Ibid.*
40. Interview conducted in Northern Uganda by Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay on 26 November 2001.
41. Human Rights Watch, *Stolen Children: Abduction and Recruitment in Northern Uganda*, 15(7A) (2003, March), pp. 1–24.
42. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Interview conducted in Sierra Leone by Susan McKay on 11 June 2002.
46. Denov and Maclure, “Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone.”
47. Interview conducted in Sierra Leone by Susan McKay on 31 May 2002.
48. Interview conducted in Northern Uganda by Dyan Mazurana and Susan McKay on 26 November 2001.
49. Denov and Maclure, “Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone”; V. Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Youth and War: Young People as Participants and Victim* (Phoenix, Arizona: The Oryx Press, 2000).
50. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
51. Human Rights Watch, *Stolen Children*.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Interview conducted in Northern Uganda by Dyan Mazurana & Susan McKay on 27 November 2001.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Interview conducted in Northern Uganda by Dyan Mazurana & Susan McKay on 28 November 2001.
56. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
57. Denov and Maclure, “Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone.”
58. Interview conducted in Sierra Leone by Susan McKay on 6 June 2002.
59. *Ibid.*
60. Interview conducted in Sierra Leone by Susan McKay on 11 June 2002.
61. Interview conducted in Sierra Leone by Susan McKay on 6 June 2002.
62. Denov & Maclure, “Girls and armed conflict in Sierra Leone.”
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*; McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
65. *Ibid.*
66. Mazurana, McKay, Karlson, and Kasper, “Girls in fighting forces and groups.”
67. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
68. Coalition, 2000; Keairns, October 2002, *The Voices of Girl Child Soldiers* (New York and Geneva: Quaker United Nations Office); Isobel McConnan and Sara Uppard, *Children, Not Soldiers* (London: Save the Children, 2001); McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
69. Elise Fredrikke Barth, *Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies: A Comparative Study from Africa*. PRIO Report 3/2002. Available at ([www.prio.no/publications/reports/female\\_soldiers](http://www.prio.no/publications/reports/female_soldiers)); Susan McKay, Mary Burman, Maria Gonsalves, and Miranda Worthen, “Known but invisible: Girl mothers returning from fighting forces,” *Child Soldiers Newsletter*, 11, 10–11. McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*
70. Coalition, 2000; McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*

Copyright of Studies in Conflict & Terrorism is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.