The Recruitment and Use of Girls in Armed Forces and Groups in Angola:

Implications for Ethical Research and Reintegration

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One of the most significant violations of human rights is the recruitment of children,

defined under international law as people under 18 years of age, into armed forces such

as national armies or armed groups such as the opposition groups that fight government

forces in more than 20 countries.[2] This violation of children's rights takes an enormous

toll on children and societies. Although the physical damage to children garners the most

attention, extensive harm arises also from the interaction of physical, psychological,

social, and spiritual factors.[3] This damage to children weakens an important source of

social capital, particularly because children in war-torn societies are half the population.

Also, child recruitment produces damage at the societal level, enabling continuing war. In

some societies, children comprise a significant percentage of the fighting forces and

commanders are able to continue fighting by recruiting children. Often, societies suffer

damage through inter-generational fighting, as the socialization of children into fighting

and systems of social division and hatred sets the stage for ongoing cycles of violence. In

this respect, child recruitment is not only a human rights issue but also an issue of peace

and human development.

[2] Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2004* (London: Coalition to Sto the Use of Child Soldiers, 2004), 13.
[3] Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 126-153; Williamson, John, and Malia Robinson. "Psychosocial interventions, or integrated programming for well-being?," *Intervention: International Journal of Mental Health, Psychosocial Work and Counselling in Areas of Armed Conflict*, 4 (July 2006): 4-25.

Until relatively recently, the study of child soldiers was, in effect, the study of boy soldiers, as girls who had been recruited by armed forces and groups were either invisible or marginalized.[4] The emphasis on boys probably reflected the patriarchal values that pervade most societies and that systematically privilege males over females.[5] Also, the concern with boys reflected a concern over building security in the post-conflict environment, where important tasks are to stand down opposing armies, reform the security sector, and enable former combatants to integrate into civilian life. This security lens, with its emphasis on former combatants, relegated to the margins the girls who had not been fighters but had filled roles such as servants, porters, cooks, and concubines. Regarded as "camp followers," girls were typically left out of the programs of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) that boys and men participated in.[6]

Today, a new generation of research is bringing girl soldiers out of the margins, shattering the view of girls as passive followers and challenging girls' exclusion from DDR processes. Although hard figures are difficult to come by in war zones, some studies have estimated that as many as 40% of the fighters in contemporary intra-state wars are girls[7] and in particular areas, they comprise as much as half the armed group.[8] In addition, an expanding array of data indicates that girls serve in a wide variety of roles,

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[4] Dyan Mazurana, Susan McKay, Khristopher Carlson, and Janet Kasper, "Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilization, and Reintegration," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 8(2): 97-124; 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: International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, 2004), 17-20. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, ix.

[5] Mazurana et al., "Girls in Fighting Forces," pp. 98-101.

[6] Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 154-180.

[7] Graca Machel, *The Impact of War on Children* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 2001), 17; Save the Children/UK, "Forgotten casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict., November, 2005, 1.

[8] Human Rights Watch, *You'll Learn Not to Cry: Child Combatants in Colombia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003), 53.

including combatants, and are actors who make choices and exhibit significant agency.[9] In fact, I have known girls in Sierra Leone who had served not only as fighters but also as commanders who prided themselves on their toughness. And in Sri Lanka, girls are often selected for the task of conducting suicide bombings since they are more likely than boys to successfully slip through security checkpoints[10]. These data caution against the marginalization of girls, make the prevention of girls' recruitment a high priority in situations of armed conflict,[11] and indicate the need to extend to girls DDR benefits that are equivalent to those boys enjoy.

However, research on girl soldiers is still in its infancy. There is a paucity of data on the prevalence of girl soldiering and on fundamental questions such as why are girls recruited and how do the recruited girls differ from girls who had not been recruited. Also, relatively little is known about how to support girls' reintegration in situations where the levels of stigmatization are very high. At this early stage of research, it is useful to consider different country cases in an effort to move beyond monolithic images of girl soldiers and to identify even in a preliminary manner the different patterns of girls' recruitment and use. At the same time, it is crucial to analyze the complex ethical issues that attend research on girl soldiers.

This paper examines the case of Angola, which has received relatively little attention. The Angolan case is particularly interesting because it reveals that girls' recruitment is

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[9] Rachel Brett and Irma Specht, *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 85-104; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 85-106; Harry West, "Girls with Guns: Narrating the Experience of War of FRELIMO's 'Female Detachment,'" in *Children and Youth on the Front Line: Ethnography, Armed Conflict and Displacement*, ed. Jo Boyden and Joanna de Berry (New York: Berghahn, 2004), 105-129.

[10] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005), 139-146.

[11] UNICEF, "The Paris principles: The principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups" (February, 2007), 12; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 165-180.

neither incidental nor driven by convenience but owes to commanders' desire to exploit girls as resources in particularized ways that are tailored to the local context and are aimed to procure the resources needed to fight in an effective manner. Further, the Angolan case underscores the issue of girls' stigmatization and its implications for reintegration efforts. Typically, DDR supports are provided in an open manner targeted on the recipients. This approach, however, could increase the risks to formerly recruited girls who are already severely stigmatized and who wish not to be identified as formerly recruited. The international humanitarian community needs to learn how to support girls' reintegration in 'quieter,' contextually appropriate ways that likely consist of nonformal supports rather than formal, publicly announced supports. A high priority is to learn from girls how they have been affected, what their current situation is, and what supports them but to do so without increasing the girls' stigmatization. Although few roadmaps exist on how to do this, the Angolan case offers a useful model. The paper concludes with a reflection on the implications for the task of reintegrating forcibly recruited girls into civilian society.

The methodology of the research reported here is deliberately qualitative, inductive, and designed to capitalize on the richness of narrative data and a highly supportive interview process. The qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables the probing of the girls' own understandings of their war experiences and what has helped them or not helped them afterwards. By giving girls the opportunity to tell their stories, the research helps to give girls a voice and to end their invisibility. By eliciting the girls' own understandings and then inductively forming categories that embody key elements of their experience, this methodology avoids the common error of using adult defined

categories and descriptors of the girls' experience, which are then imposed on girls in structured or semi-structured interviews. Since girls' understandings of their situation often differs from that of adults, an essential first step was to listen carefully to the girls and work inductively in categorizing their experiences.

Although the qualitative approach has many benefits in its own right, the participatory approach taken here also provides a foundation for more quantitatively oriented research. The latter approach would have been premature in the context in which this research was conducted since it would have entailed identifying large numbers of girls who had been in armed groups. The infeasibility and inappropriateness of identifying large numbers of formerly recruited girls made it difficult to use quantitative methods for deriving accurate estimates of how many girls had been recruited or had experienced particular stressors and supports.

A key feature of the research methodology was its attention to the humanitarian imperative Do No Harm, which is often violated by well intentioned researchers and practitioners. In studies involving interview methodology, it is not uncommon for researchers to ask questions that trigger powerful memories and feelings. Without careful forethought about how to support girls and avoid harm, there is a risk that the interview process may leave the girls in a state of heightened vulnerability. Also, the emphasis on narrative data reduces the risks that the girls would feel objectified by being asked large numbers of structured questions, thereby weakening their sense of dignity and agency at a moment when they needed support. For these reasons, the research focuses on narrative methodology that brings girls' own views to center stage, while recognizing the limits of

self-report. The study reported below offers a potential model of how to address these ethical complexities.

Background

The recent Angolan wars, although they were punctuated with intermittent phases of relative stability, lasted forty years and had a profound impact on civilian populations, including children[12]. One significant impact was the recruitment of children by the Angolan army and even more by the opposition group, UNITA (the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). In the interlude in the fighting ushered in by the Lusaka Peace Accords in 1994, there was a DDR process in which approximately 9,000 boys were registered. However, there were no reports of girls' recruitment and accordingly no inclusion of girls in the children's DDR process overseen by UNICEF. In fact, when the author repeatedly queried child protection agencies at various levels, we were told that there are no girl soldiers. When the fighting re-erupted in 1998, the same view persisted that girls were not being recruited. Fortunately, the fighting ended with the signing of the Luena Ceasefire in April, 2002. In keeping with a wider, if worrying, tendency of many reintegration processes to exclude children, children were left out of the national DDR process, which served people twenty years of age or older and was designed mainly as part of a security sector reform effort.

Despite children's exclusion from the DDR process, there had been increasingly frequent reports that girls had in fact been recruited during the conflict. Still, an enormous information gap existed regarding the scale and nature of the problem. This information gap owed mainly to the profound stigma associated with having been recruited or used by

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[12] Christian Children's Fund/Angola, *Free to Play in Peace. Angola's War Seen through the Eyes of its Children* (Luanda, 2002), 19-52.

armed groups. So great was the stigma that most girls sought to exit armed groups and go to self-selected destinations on their own, without public attention. A high priority was to collect information in a sensitive, ethical manner since without accurate information, there were few clues about the girls' situation and what kinds of reintegration supports might assist the girls.

To fill the information gap, a mostly Angolan team from Christian Children's Fund (CCF), led by Vivi Stavrou, organized the first systematic research on girl's recruitment in Angola. Conducted November, 2003 to July, 2004, its purpose was to learn about the pattern of girls' recruitment and the experiences and reintegration needs of forcibly recruited girls. The girls themselves preferred the term "forcibly involved girls" over the term "former girl soldiers," which might have added to their stigmatization by suggesting that their participation had been voluntary.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

The methodology consisted of focused, semi-structured, individual interviews with 40 participants from Luanda, the capital city, or Huambo Province.[13] Luanda was included because it offered ease of access to girls who had migrated from many different provinces. Huambo Province was included because it offered a means of working in a rural setting, was reportedly a place from which many girls had been abducted, and also included many girls displaced from other provinces. The age of the young women interviewed ranged from 13 to 34 years with a median age of 21 years. Although many of the participants were over the age of 18 years at the time of the interview, all had been

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[13] The methodology and findings are described in greater length in Vivi Stavrou *Breaking the Silence: Girls Forcibly Involved in the Armed Struggle in Angola*. (Montreal: International Centre for Human Rights and Development, 2005), *passim*. Both the Stavrou report and this chapter cite some of the same narrative passages, which came from a set of inductively categorized field notes developed by the team.

under 18 for at least part of the time they had spent inside an armed group. The purpose of interviewing young women of a relatively wide age range was to obtain a picture of girls' recruitment in different phases of the war.

The individual interviews included three sections: (1) life before the war and the abduction, (2) the girl's experience with the armed group, and (3) life after the exit from the armed group, including her current living situation, her future plans, and what she needed to implement her plans. A pilot study had indicated that individual interviews conducted in one setting of three to four hours yielded insufficient depth of information. Accordingly, a decision was taken to extend each interview to two days, with a total interview length of three to six hours. To match the participant's native language, the interviews were conducted in Portuguese, Umbundu, or Tchokwe.

Because of the sensitivity of the girls' situation, the researchers had more than the usual concerns about respecting confidentiality and obtaining informed consent. In some respects, these traditional concerns were only the tip of the iceburg of ethical issues since even approaching and talking with girls could have put them at risk. An essential first step was to develop a culturally appropriate, ethically sensitive means of identifying, selecting, and engaging with the girls. Random selection was inappropriate in the Angolan context.

To manage this issue, the research team decided to use a combination of a preselection process and snowball sampling. The preselection process involved talking with respected local elders, including the *soba* or traditional chief and women elders, explaining that the aim of the study was to learn from the girls in order to be in a better position to support them and asking whether and how they could be approached in a quiet manner. This

process banked on the respected position of elders, who often are effective community networkers and key sources of information pertaining to girls' well-being. Most elders agreed that the study was important to conduct and said they felt solidarity with the researchers, whose goal was not to publish papers but to guide effective reintegration supports for the girls. Rapport was also established by talking first about how the war had affected everyone, as local people had a communal understanding of their suffering. This recognition of the communal nature of the suffering made it appropriate to then explore the experiences and situation of a particular subgroup.

The elders also indicated that they knew formerly abducted girls and said that some were doing relatively well and might be in a position to talk. This process, which relied on the elders' knowledge about who was in relatively good shape, was useful simultaneously as a preselection mechanism and a means of enabling access to young people. Most important, this process is believed to have led the researchers only to people who were in a position to talk, reducing the prospects of inadvertently harming people by discussing difficult topics before the participants were ready. As the discussions with the preselected girls occurred, the girls offered that they knew other girls in the local area who might be in a position to talk. Following this snowball sampling process, the researchers identified other prospective participants in the study.

To reduce the potential for the interviews to leave the girls feeling vulnerable, the researchers avoided asking aggressive questions such as "What was the worst thing for you?" or probing topics that clearly made the participants feel uncomfortable. Also, they explained carefully as part of obtaining informed consent that it was perfectly acceptable not to answer any question or to stop discussing a particular topic for any reason or at any

time. Futhermore, in the space where interviews were conducted, there was a trained social worker present who was ready to provide psychosocial support if needed. Recognizing that traumatic memories and feelings of being overwhelmed might occur one or several days afterwards, the social worker made a "check-in" visit with each participant the day after the interview.

The issue of informed consent was tricky because in a situation of severe poverty and deprivation, there is a natural tendency for local people to think that outsiders who work for an NGO have many resources and will provide help if they are treated well. Also, local norms of hospitality augur strongly in favor of meeting and talking with people who have demonstrated respect and followed the cultural script of first meeting and obtaining the *soba's* support. Speaking in the local language of the participant, the interviewers explained their purpose, outlined how confidentiality would be protected, reiterated that the participant was free not to talk or to not answer a particular question, and took care not to make promises or imply that more aid would be forthcoming. Each participant signed an informed consent form that had been read aloud for those who were not literate. Most of the girls, particularly those in Huambo, were clearly eager to spend hours discussing their experience, current situation, and hopes.

To protect the girls' confidentiality, the interviewers and social workers were trained on the importance of confidentiality and how to protect it. Interviews were conducted not in the girls' homes but in the private offices of local NGOs or other spaces that afforded privacy, and CCF provided transportation to the interview sites. The interviews were tape recorded, but no personal identifying information was on either the tapes or the field notes for an interview, and the individual codes were locked in a secure place.

In addition to the interviews with individual girls who had been forcibly recruited, the study included key informant interviews with elders, traditional healers, church workers, government officials, health workers, military personnel, and other people who were knowledgeable about war-affected girls, including forcibly recruited girls. Also, focus group discussions were conducted with three groups: female relatives of forcibly recruited girls, teenage girls, and teenage boys. The latter two groups were interviewed partly in order to obtain information about how other young people viewed the forcibly recruited girls and also to enlarge the network that could be used to identify other girls to be interviewed. Both the key informant interviews and the focus group discussions were instrumental in obtaining a community perspective on the situation of the forcibly recruited girls. This community perspective was of central importance since the local people conceptualized the war and the reintegration process as communal rather than individual in nature.

Analysis of the narrative data entailed the reading and re-reading of the interviews by multiple team members with an eye toward identifying emergent, common categories and themes. These inductively derived categories were used to code transcripts and prepare summary tables of narrative passages that illustrated particular themes. Through this process, an effort was made to identify representative passages rather than to select the most sensational or gripping narratives[14].

Key Findings

All the participants had been forcibly recruited and knew of no girls who had dcecided on their own to join armed groups. The median age at which the girls had been captured was 12 years. The recruitment of girls occurred in numerous Angolan provinces and

owed mainly to UNITA but also to the Angolan army. Although half the participants came from Huambo Province, others came from diverse regions as follows: Bie (5), Benguela (4), Lunda Norte (3), Uige (2), Kuando Kubango (2), Malange (1), Kwanza Norte (1), Kwanza Sul (1). Of the 40 participants, 31 had been abducted by UNITA, whereas 9 had been captured by the Angolan army. Five participants had experienced multiple abductions by both the Angolan army and UNITA. The number of years spent inside an armed group ranged from 2 to 18 years. Eighty per cent of the young women had children, yet most were either not married or had been abandoned by their war husbands[15].

Most of the girls offered relatively little information about their lives before their abduction. In part this may have reflected their young age at their time of recruitment and the fact that because villages were often attacked or under imminent threat of attack, families moved frequently in search of safety. Also, the captors sought to suppress the girls' memories apparently as part of a strategy of promoting a break with their previous lives and of preventing escape. As one girl said:

It is like this: there, when you are speaking, sometimes they hear what you are saying about your past, how you lived, then they say that you are preparing to escape and they control you all the time. We knew because when you talk about the past they start alert listening: these girls have a program to escape. We say that they don't like when we talk about the past.[16]

To help break the girls' civilian identity, UNITA often called each girl by a particular number rather than by her name.

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[14] Stavrou, *Breaking the Silence*, 23-24.
[15] Stavrou, *Breaking the Silence*, 25-27.

Typically, girls were abducted during and soon after raids on villages. As resources became increasingly scarce during the war, armed groups often attacked villages to obtain food and other supplies. The abduction of young children appeared to be part of a deliberate strategy of building the labor pool that the military needed, and commanders apparently preferred young people because of their compliance. Often, old people were left behind and men were killed, whereas the children were taken. Girls appeared to be preferred because of their ability to carry heavy loads long distances without making the noise that mechanized vehicles would have made, thereby reducing the chances of being detected by the enemy. To increase their control over the children, the armed groups typically separated children from their siblings and caretakers.

> On that day they separated us from our mothers—the mothers going back and we going forward. We were not allowed to look back. It was just that, to separate and to cry. The abducted girls were together for a day; there were five of us. The second day they started separating us, each one allocated to their chiefs that they called elders. Every one of us was given to a different house.[17]

Similarly, boys described UNITA's preference for the young:

> "All you old people can stay. We'll only take the young." And so they took me and my three children, my teenage sister, another brother of mine, and another; in all seven people from my house. Just like that and off. If your sister says, "I don't go" she dies right there or they make her suffer.[18]

UNITA, which was a tightly knit political structure as well as an armed group, recruited girls not only during attacks on villages but also by forcing them to join the

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[16] EM 2, Luanda.
[17] EM 4, Luanda.

JURA (Juventude UNITA Revolucionaria de Angola), a youth political organization that morphed during the war into a collective workforce consisting most of 12- to 16-year-olds. One girl described how families were forced to give their children to the JURA:

> …They had held a public meeting to say that "all those parents who had a child above nine years old, except those that were married, they could not now be with them because they had to come to, had to join with, all the JURA to help with they movement of troops." So there they became conscious that that was how it was, we have to let go of our children to help the troops.[19]

Inside the JURA, girls received political indoctrination, and some rose to command positions in which they directed the activities of other girls in the JURA. Numerous other participants told how younger children were given over not to the JURA but to the children's organization, *Alvorada* (Dawn), which allocated them to work in the houses of important people doing their housework. Men were prepared for the frontlines as soldiers, whereas most girls were not.

The girls who had been abducted by UNITA soldiers, whose families usually stayed nearby unless attack was imminent, were allocated to UNITA leaders. In a typical UNITA camp, there were 10 or more houses occupied by individual leaders, who each had 3 or 4 abducted girls. According to one girl,

> …thirty six lived in the houses of the elders. Everyone had three girls to work in their house, and then the others were living in a room together, their job was just to transport the material. So when they go to attack and they find material, their job was to carry the material, to take it from there to another place to keep it

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[18] Boys' focus group, Huambo.
[19] EM 14, Huambo.

there. Material, munitions, mines, bombs and sometimes guns were found and

carried by the JURA. The JURA did not go with the combatants.[20]

Apparently, the recruitment of girls occurred on a large scale, for there were many

UNITA camps at any point in time. Rather than an incidental phenomenon, girls'

recruitment was part of a deliberate, systematic strategy of exploiting girls for their labor

and also for sex, as explained below.

Whether girls were forced to join through the JURA or were abducted during raids on

villages, they endured long marches and severe deprivations. Constantly under threat of

attack by the government army, UNITA moved continuously, killing people who were

too slow and also young children who risked making noise and giving away their

location. Two women, one of whom was a key informant, described their suffering.

Suffering is lack of clothes, lack of salt, to sleep in the leaves without clothes

under the rain, sleep seated near to the fire because of the cold, blemishes on the

skin due to the dry skin. I hate my memories of the rain showers and the

walking. My children were so young and shouldn't have been walking like that,

but had to walk because you can't do otherwise, and on the back you have

another one. Life was just walking from one place to another, by day and by

night. At first you were crying, but then you had no more tears left.[21]

…Whoever is too slow the shoot; suffocated the slow children not to waste

bullets. We had to carry too heavy loads, 30 kg each or even more. We slept

every three nights, with the children on the back, in the bush under the trees.[22]

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[20] EM 1, Luanda.
[21] Key informant 5, Huambo.
[22] EM 19, Luanda.

Because of the extensive carrying of heavy loads, most of the girls interviewed had a bald spot on top of their heads. Among their many health problems were malaria, anemia, exhaustion, malnutrition, TB, and sexually transmitted diseases. One of their greatest sources of distress was their inability to participate in education, which created an enduring gulf between themselves and their peers who had not been recruited.

In view of the girls' suffering, it is not unsurprising that some attempted to escape. However, severe punishment or death was usually the penalty for captured escapees.

> There in the base where I was they caught a girl who had left a one-year-old baby behind when she tried to escape. They went after her and caught her and killed her when they brought her back. Everybody had to assist. They put a red band across her eyes and then they killed her. They did it to make the other afraid so that they would not try to escape.[23]

UNITA also exploited girls sexually in a variety of ways. The girls reported that rape was common wherever there were large numbers of troops present. In some cases, soldiers from other battalions attacked and raped girls as they worked in the fields or were collecting food or water. Inside the JURA, rape was reportedly frequent.

> It seems that was their law. In their village they would see a girl and say that she was ripe to go into the JURA. They saw her age, saw she was getting big and it was time to go. Once there she simply had to be raped… yes my sister was raped, by the other old men as well. Anyone living at the base can be raped by other men.[24]

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[23] EM 1, Luanda.
[24] EM 14, Luanda.

In addition, girls were often forced to dance all night, presumably to rouse the troops and keep them awake and capable of responding to attacks. As the girls danced into the early hours of the morning, older men pulled them into the shadows and raped them. The fact that the rapists included elder men, who were normally expected to protect young people, was particularly upsetting to the girls. Perhaps the most common form of sexual exploitation was the widespread practice of assigning girls to particular commanders, chiefs or elders, often according to their rank.

> The elder that liked me, was the big chief [the commander of the military camp]. They were three; the big chief, his assistant and a chief from another department, they used to complicate my life [she let her head fall and started rubbing her hands on her skirt. She smiled.] They forced me to sleep with them, each elder when they called me to sleep with them, if I didn't accept they sent the guards to beat me.[25]

A common protective strategy for the girls was to "marry" or associate with a particular older man. This strategy had its price since often the girls had to forego desired relationships with younger men. Also, the "husbands" frequently abandoned them.

> Yes this happened to me. If you do not accept they put a bullet in their pistol and point it at you.… In the bush you cannot complain. If you complain, they will kill you…. When you are out with the troops, if you say that you are tired and want to sleep they call you and kill you straight away. So one older man said that it is better to stay with me [marry me] and this was the father of this child. But in the end he was only lying, so last year I left him, in the month of January. He already had three wives in the village.…I thought that if I had a husband it

would possibly be better. Even though I was only a child I would put up with

that suffering. But actually he had his own wives.[26]

Through such unions, many girls became pregnant, and if their husbands left, the children were often among the most vulnerable.

Fortunately, there were also some positive aspects of life inside the armed groups. One of the most important was friendship and solidarity, which was an important basis for the girls' resilience.

Many [smile] my friends were really good. There, all of us abducted girls lived

as sisters, yes…we used to tell our stories: Oh! When we will find our

families…so and so…[27]

I had many friends. We ate together and did our hair together and even chose to

go to the front together.[28]

Such friendships appear to have been tolerated so long as they did not threaten to encourage the girls to escape or to rekindle their civilian identities.

Following their time in the armed group, only one of the girls was recognized as a soldier and given a one-time demobilization payment as part of an official DDR process. Apparently, their noncombatant labor had conferred little military status, and many girls were considered too young to be regarded as soldiers. Also, the DDR planners targeted benefits for men on the assumption that the benefits would trickle down to dependent girls. Most girls, however, went with their bush husbands or the elder's family they lived with to military gathering areas. Recognizing that they would be severely stigmatized,

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[25] EM 1, Luanda.
[26] EM 2, Huambo.
[27] EM 2, Luanda.
[28] EM 14, Huambo.

most girls sought to enter villages quietly and on their own, although they in some cases chose not to return to their places of origin. As one girl put it,

> My heart does not accept to go back to my village. I'll just stay here. Maybe I'll find a field, or a naca [field on the river's edge], and then I can sustain myself. When I have nothing, then I peel a potato and make porridge. That's what I give to my child to eat.[29]

This girls' testimony shows clearly the problems inherent in the term "reintegration," which is often interpreted as meaning going back to one's village of origin and to a life that existed before. Following the Angolan wars, many girls chose to go to new environments where no one knew them or where they had better hopes for earning a living. Also, some children were born into UNITA families and had grown up inside the armed group or its satellite families. For them, too, the challenge was one of integrating into a civilian social system about which they knew very little.

Chief among the reintegration challenges that the girls faced was discrimination. This included relatively indirect elements such as not being included in the welcoming and reintegration rituals that men received or being unable to matriculate in schools owing to a lack of identity documents or appropriate clothing and shoes. It also included negative comments about people who have come from the bush, the differences in the habits of people from the bush, their illnesses and their links to the damage caused by the war. As one participant in a girls' focus group discussion said,

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[29] EM 2, Huambo.

Few people in Luanda know who they are or what their experiences have been. This is because they say nothing, because there are people who are abusive about people who came out of the bush.[30]

Also, the girls lacked access to basic services such as health services due to a lack of income. Unemployment was a major problem, although girls in rural areas engaged in agriculture and those in peri-urban areas engaged in petty trading. The desire for money led some girls to seek better options in Luanda.

The suffering once we arrived in Huambo was too great. What with being pregnant, and with small children and other children, it was too much. I couldn't work. And furthermore, where we were in Bom Pastor, a person working might not earn any more than 300 KZ a month. I could see nothing for myself, no advancement, so I thought I might go to Luanda. I had a friend who was in Luanda, and she told me that in Luanda you could do business. Those little business deals would earn you money, and your children would eat.[31]

The girls, however, gave mixed reports regarding how much help they received in Luanda when they or their children became ill.

Psychosocial distress was also a challenge for many girls after they had left the armed group. As one key informant said,

The girls lived for so long with the idea that they would be beaten for everything that they cannot get rid of this fear. They have difficulties of adaptation as would anybody adapting in another society—like a fish out of the water. They do not sleep properly because they are used to being woken up at all hours. They

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[30] Girls' focus group, Luanda.
[31] EM 14, Luanda.

feel that what they want to say is not going to be accepted by other people, so

they do not speak much when they are with people of their own age. They are

frightened when they hear a loud noise, having seen so much shooting in their

lives… I think that people coming from the war need to be assisted to insert

themselves in society. It is necessary to take the idea out of their heads that they

will be spoken of badly.[32]

To help themselves feel better, the girls often turn for support to women relatives and

friends.

What has helped is talking with my mother, my sisters and my aunt.[33]

Now I visit my girlfriends, we talk and I feel well.[34]

Buoyed by this support, the girls dreamed of better times ahead. Foremost among their

hopes were to study and become literate, to start their business and be successful in

buying and selling, to obtain vocational training, and to improve their children's lives.

Like many formerly recruited children, the girls also said they wanted not to be different

but to be like other girls or young women.

<div align="center">**Comparative Perspective**</div>

It is valuable to consider these findings in comparative perspective, discerning both

their similarities with data from other situations in which girls have been recruited and

the unique aspects of the Angolan situation. Five similarities are prominent. First, the

recruitment of girls is not incidental or something that occurs on a small scale but is

systematic and widespread. This observation fits with the increasing reports that

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[32] Key informant 2, Luanda.
[33] EM 1, Luanda.
[34] EM 11, Huambo.

worldwide, girls are a significant part of most armed forces.[35] There are no precise

quantitative estimates of how many Angolan girls had been recruited, but based on the

triangulated reports obtained in this study, it seems likely that they numbered in the

thousands.

Second, the Angolan data support the view that abduction is one of the primary means

of girls' recruitment. Girls' abduction into armed groups is visible in many regions,

including in countries such as DRC, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka[36]. Third, the

Angolan case adds to an already expansive array of exemplars showing that most armed

groups sexually exploit girls. Although some armed groups such as those in the

Philippines and Sri Lanka strictly prohibit the sexual abuse of girls,[37] a conspicuous

feature of the global pattern is that most armed groups sexually exploit girls, and some

exploit boys as well. Fourth, the recruitment of Angolan girls as a means of exploiting

their labor fits the global picture in which girls often serve as domestic servants, porters,

and laborers.[38] Fifth, the stigmatization faced by the Angolan girls who had been

abducted reflects a wider pattern wherein formerly recruited girls are stigmatized.[39]

The case of Angola also departs from the global pattern in numerous respects. The

most unusual feature was the very high levels of stigmatization of formerly abducted girls

and their associated attempts to remain invisible as they exited armed groups and entered

civilian society. In the author's experience in over 15 conflict-torn countries, it is

exceptional to have a situation of widespread recruitment of girls occur with a rather

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[35] Mckay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*, 21-26; Save the Children/UK, "Forgotten Casualties," 1; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 85-106.
[36] Mazurana and McKay, *Girls in Fighting Forces*, 105-108; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 85-106.
[37] Yvonne Keairns, *The Voices of Girl Soldiers: Summary* (New York: Quaker United Nations Office, 2002), xx.
[38] Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 85-106.
[39] McKay and Mazurana, *Where are the Girls?*, *passim*; Wessells, Child Soldiers, 165-180.

complete lack of awareness among highly concerned and vigilant child protection actors. This rather total invisibility of girl soldiers probably does not result from the recruiters' suppression of information alone. More likely, it owes to the girls' efforts to conceal their experiences and situation due to fear of unusually strong stigmatization. An important question that warrants additional research is why the girls' level of actual or perceived stigmatization was so great as to enable this unusual level of invisibility of the formerly abducted girls.

Also, the roles played by the Angolan girls who had been recruited were unusual in several respects. One unusual role was the all-night dancing plus sex that the girls were demanded to provide. Also unusual was the low percentage of girls who were combatants. This observation is unlikely to be an artifact of the selective sampling of the girls since the boys and key informants from many areas agreed that overwhelmingly, the girls had not been in combat roles. Most likely, commanders valued Angolan girls for their labor capacity and sexuality more than for their fighting ability. This situation is unusual because in conflicts such as diverse as those in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Colombia, and Sri Lanka, girls have served regularly in combat roles.[40]

Also somewhat unusual was the highly singular mode of girls' recruitment. Virtually all the participants in this study had been forcibly recruited in one manner—abduction— and they said that this had been the only means through which other girls were recruited. Although abduction is a key means of recruitment in African countries, it is often mixed with forms of recruitment in which girls decide to enter armed groups. In the armed conflicts in Mozambique and Ethiopia, some girls were abducted into armed groups, whereas other girls decided to join armed groups to liberate their society from oppressive

regimes or to achieve greater equality with men[41]. This mixed pattern of recruitment is also visible in countries such as Nepal[42] and Sri Lanka. As Jo Becker points out in her paper in this volume, the LTTE often recruits girls forcibly in Sri Lanka. Yet other girls apparently join the LTTE because they succumb to the political propaganda and believe that they are fighting to help liberate Tamil people from oppression.

The reliance on forced recruitment may have reflected the relatively the low levels of support for UNITA by civilian populations outside UNITA's immediate sphere of control. Not uncommonly, people living in areas ripe for attack by UNITA were also subject to attacks by the Angolan army. To survive in such an area, people often learn to avoid taking sides because allegiance with one side may invite attack by the other side. It remains for future research to determine whether it was this factor, weak propaganda methods, or other factors that made forced recruitment the sole means available to UNITA for recruiting girls.

Overall, this research helps to point out that methods of recruitment are highly contextual and varied. It is too simplistic to talk about "girls' recruitment" as if it occurred in the same manner in all situations. Methods of recruitment vary according to cultural norms, armed groups' situation and objectives, and levels of civilian support for the fighting. Ultimately, universalized images of "girls' recruitment" are as questionable as are universalized images of "the girl soldier."

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[40] Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 85-106.
[41] Angela Veale, *From Child Soldier to Ex-fighter: Female Fighters, Demobilisation and Reintegration in Ethiopia*. ISS Monograph No. 85 (Pretoria: Institute of Security Studies, 2003), xx; West, "Girls with Guns, xx.
[42] Human Rights Watch, "Children in the ranks: The Maoists' use of child soldiers in Nepal," (February, 2007), 23-25.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

The Angolan case presented above highlights the importance of ethical sensitivity in conducting research with formerly recruited girls and in organizing reintegration programs to support them. Often researchers assume that formerly recruited boys and girls are in similar situations and to apply the same research approach to both. This is ill-advised because girls experience a fundamentally greater degree of stigmatization than boys do and face other gendered risks such as those associated with pregnancy. For these reasons, the methods that are appropriate in working with boys may harm girls. Sensitive research should be tailored specifically to girls and be cautious about using methods such as predetermined random sampling or interviews that could prematurely end the girls' anonymity. Stigmatization is a sufficiently widespread problem to warrant considerable caution in the design and conduct of research on formerly recruited girls. Indeed, it is beneficial to attend to the girls' well-being before, during and after the interviews.

This research outlines a potentially useful model for protecting the girls' well-being before, during, and after the interview. Its first step was to select the participants by working through community networks of trusted informants who can identify whether girls can talk, which girls are in a position to participate, and where and how to conduct the interviews in a girl friendly manner. Next, the interview session had present a trained social worker or other person who can provide psychosocial support if necessary. After the interview, the social worker also made follow-up visits to the participant for purposes of psychosocial support. Whether this model is necessary in all settings is debatable. In countries such as Sierra Leone, for example, most girls seem to be able to discuss their experiences without excessive distress, and some are quite eager to tell their stories, in

part to help prevent other girls having to suffer what they had endured. Although ethical supports in research need to be tailored to fit the local context and may not need to be as stringent as those developed in Angola, researchers should aim to err on the side of caution and to go beyond a minimalist approach to respecting the Do No Harm principle.

The ethical sensitivity of research activities is also an issue because the presence of researchers often raises expectations in unrealistic, unintended ways. In situations of severe poverty and deprivation, it is natural for war-affected people, including girls, to expect that outsiders who come and ask questions will provide much needed money and material supports. This creates an unspoken gap in expectations. On one hand, the researchers expect only to collect scientific information and make no promises about future support. On the other hand, the participants may experience raised expectations about future supports. Long delays in the provision of support or the lack of follow-up support inevitably creates frustration and feelings of exploitation and abandonment, wich only add to the suffering of the girls and their communities. To address this problem, researchers should work to manage local peoples' expectations and, more important, to connect their research with practical action and steps that will assist formerly recruited girls. One way to achieve this is by partnering with an international NGO or other agency that seeks to support girls' reintegration.

The findings outlined above also have significant implications for practice, which also encounters significant ethics issues, including those related to stigmatization. The following are key steps toward supporting formerly abducted girls in an ethically appropriate manner.

- Design and conduct assessments in ways that minimize stigmatization and protect the girls' anonymity to the extent that they desire to remain unseen.

- Tailor programs to address girls' specific needs, avoiding the tendency to create a single set of reintegration supports for formerly recruited girls and boys.

- Use a participatory approach that strengthens girls' sense of agency and enables them to define which supports are most useful and the appropriate implementation schedule.

- Develop integrated programs that support not only formerly abducted girls but also other at-risk children. Avoid the reverse stigmatization that can result from supporting only formerly recruited girls, who may be better off than other vulnerable children in the community.

- Working through local networks, build community supports that will decrease the burden of stigma that the girls encounter and encourage collective acceptance of the girls.

- Take a holistic approach, recognizing that the girls need support in areas such as health, education, livelihoods, and psychosocial support.

- Make the work flexible and long-term so that it adjusts the girls' changing circumstances.

At a policy level, too, there are specific steps that ought to be taken to support formerly abducted girls in a more effective manner.

- DDR processes should take into account the distinctive, gendered needs of girls.

- Recognize the diversity of girls' age, experiences, and current situation, avoiding a one size fits all approach to DDR.

- Organize nonformal reintegration supports for girls since girls often prefer these and are frequently denied access to formal DDR programs.

- Conduct national campaigns using media such as radio to reduce the stigmatization of formerly recruited girls.

- Provide flexible, long-term funding to support girls' reintegration.

A significant long-term challenge is to interweave research, practice, and policy in constructive ways that increase girls' protection and prevent their recruitment and re-recruitment by armed forces and groups. A particularly urgent need is for applied research on the impact of different program approaches. This research, which should include participatory action research, could help to guide future supports for girls and provide the empirical foundation needed to construct policies that protect girls' rights and well-being. This paper will have succeeded if it invites even a few researchers to accept the challenge.

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