

Sealing the Past, Facing the Future

An evaluation of a Program to Support the Reintegration of Girls and Young Women Formerly Associated with Armed Groups and Forces in Sierra Leone

Alastair Ager, Lindsay Stark, Joanna Olsen,
Mike Wessells and Neil Boothby

Program on Forced Migration & Health,
Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University



ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an evaluation of a program in Sierra Leone that sought to support the community reintegration of young women and girls formerly associated with armed groups and forces. In the absence of baseline data, we used locally-derived indicators of reintegration and village timelines to conduct a retrospective cohort study of the progress of 142 girls and young women towards achievement of community reintegration following their experience of abduction. Although girls and young women in both intervention and comparison communities had made progress towards integration, the intervention was associated with improved mental health outcomes and higher ratings on some aspects of marriage quality. For those who had found the greatest challenges in reintegrating, the intervention additionally appeared to support community acceptance and inclusion in women's *bondo* activities.

KEYWORDS

abduction, conflict, girls, program evaluation, reintegration, Sierra Leone



Introduction

The involvement of children in armed forces or groups has been documented across many continents and conflicts. The number of children associated with armed or fighting forces around the world has been estimated to be as high as 300,000 (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2008). These children are often subjected to a wide variety of abuses including torture, sexual violence, drug use, and coercion.

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Yet, it is important to understand that children associated with armed forces or groups have widely varying experiences (Wessells 2007). Some children join armed forces or fighting groups for survival purposes; others are forcibly abducted. Some children spend many years with armed forces or groups; others may return home after a few hours. Some children are actively engaged in armed combat; many others take on roles such as porters, spies or cooks (Stark et al. 2009a). The broad range of conflict-related activities in which a child may engage is codified in the recently developed Paris Principles, which define a child associated with armed groups and fighting forces as

... any person below eighteen years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighter, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities (UNICEF 2007: 36).

Girls—who have been estimated to make up as many as 40 percent of children associated with armed and fighting forces (Save the Children UK 2005)—may face unique challenges, especially when reintegrating into communities following the end of a conflict. As the Paris Principles explain:

Girls face specific consequences from their time in armed forces or armed groups. The stigma facing girls is fundamentally different in kind—it lasts much longer, is critically more difficult to reduce and is more severe. Essentially, many girls will have lost their ‘value’, as perceived by the community including in relation to marriage.... In addition, a girl will often have to deal with residual relationships or feeling for her captor, as he may be both her ‘husband’ and the father of her child or children (UNICEF 2007 Article 7: 59).

Girls returning from life with armed forces thus rejoin their communities as stigmatized individuals, and are often denied necessary supports to help them attain normative markers of development such as marriage, having children, and financial independence.

Many of the complexities described above were documented in the aftermath of the decade-long conflict in Sierra Leone. While there were many factors that contributed to the outbreak of the civil war in 1991, the violence was sparked by Fodeh Saybana Sankoh, a Libyan-taught revolutionary whose mentor and military backer was the then war-

lord, Charles Taylor. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by Sankoh, deposed General Joseph Momoh, whose All People's Congress had ruled for twenty-four of the thirty-four years since independence from Britain in 1961. The RUF went on to wage one of the most brutal campaigns ever against civilians. They destroyed homes and entire communities. As one observer summarized, "I don't know how organized it was, but it was certainly systematic. There was an intent to really rip apart the communities, and it worked" (Walsh 2002:11).

One of the defining features of the civil war in Sierra Leone was the use of children as combatants. Taylor and Sankoh "created armies of child soldiers...torn from their parents, enslaved to drugs and trained to murder and maim civilians in campaigns calculated to inculcate mass terror" (Kelly 2000:A23). Throughout the conflict, children "voluntarily" took part as combatants. As one child described, "In Sierra Leone, a gun isn't just cool, it is a means of survival. There are no jobs, anyway. With a gun, you get food, respect and girls" (Smith 2000:15). With both the RUF and fighting forces aligned with the government engaged in extensive forced, under-age recruitment, many thousands of children were engaged in the conflict. Child soldiers constituted approximately one third of the rebel forces that helped to overthrow the elected government. Of these, a large number were girls (McKay and Mazurana 2004) who experienced extensive sexual abuse and exploitation.

The [rebels] perpetrated systematic, organized and widespread sexual violence against girls and women. The rebels planned and launched operations in which they rounded up girls and women, brought them to rebel command centers and then subjected them to individual and gang rape. Young girls under seventeen, and particularly those deemed to be virgins were specifically targeted. While some were released or managed to escape, hundreds continue to be held in sexual slavery after being 'married' to rebel combatants (Farah 2000:A1).

Girls witnessed the murder of family members, had their homes burned to the ground, were forcibly separated from their families, and suffered rape and sexual violence at the hands of their captors. Most served as cooks, porters, and laborers. Many also participated in the fighting where they looted, killed and committed other atrocities (Stark 2006).

In the formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process in Sierra Leone, girls associated with armed groups

and forces were largely overlooked and excluded. At the time of the official demobilization, many girls were not released by their abductors or failed to come forward out of shame or fear. In addition, many girls who had been combatants could not pass the official 'weapons test' in which a child turns in a weapon after demonstrating her or his knowledge of how to disassemble and reassemble it. According to the testimony of one girl:

Many girls who were combatants during the war were not given the opportunity by their captors (bush husbands) to benefit from the NCDDR package. Some bush husbands dispossessed them of their weapons, when they realized that handing over guns to the authorities meant some compensation. Those girls who were dispossessed of their guns were not able to go through the programs designed for them, and have not been bold enough to talk. There are others who had the opportunity to be demobilized, but because they were ashamed of their roles in the jungle, they did not come forward and therefore did not benefit from the program (Bayoh 2004:13).

Another girl who narrated her experience shared the following with a reporter:

She had left the jungle in the year 2000, but was so preoccupied with her past experience that she did not see the need to seek help. She only realized that she needed help when all men who came in contact with her for relationship left her suddenly because they discovered that she had a very severe sexually transmitted infection (Bayoh 2004:13).

Only 506 of an estimated total in excess of 12,000 girl soldiers participated in the official DDR process. This estimated DDR participation rate of 4 percent compares very poorly to an estimated 18 percent for boys who had been associated with armed forces or armed groups (McKay and Mazurana 2004).

Formerly recruited girls and young women emerged from the war with both physical and emotional wounds. Many girls contracted sexually transmitted diseases during their time with armed groups and forces (Farah 2000). Girls commonly reported feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness and despair (Farah 2000; Stark 2006). Reintegration has proven extremely difficult and has exacerbated the wounds of these girls and young women. They have been stigmatized by their families and communities who perceived them as impure as a result of the sexual abuse. Returning girls were verbally and physically attacked, restricted from

mingling with family and community and prohibited from marrying. Their spiritual pollution was believed to cause misfortune, bad harvests and health problems for both the girls and the broader community.

Beginning in 2001 (as hostilities within the country began to draw to a close), Christian Children's Fund/Sierra Leone (CCF/Sierra Leone) initiated a program to support these girls and young women and to address some of the difficulties they faced in rejoining their communities (CCF/Sierra Leone 2002). The program, named *Sealing the Past, Facing the Future* (SEFAFU), began by listening to girls and community members to seek to understand what pre-existing supports could be built upon to help the girls reintegrate into civilian life (Abdul-Shereef et al. 2006). Based on these conversations, CCF developed a varied package of supports for the girls and young women, and the broader community.

One of the main supports offered was access to traditional cleansing ceremonies. These cleansings were seen as a local means of washing away the evils of wartime experiences (Stark 2006). Cleansings were led by local spiritual healers. They began with a short period of retreat from the village, during which time the girls and young women sang and cooked together. There then followed a ritual washing of each participant. The ceremonies concluded with a community-wide celebration to symbolize the re-entry of the girls and young women into the community (Abdul-Shereef 2006). Cleansings were perceived to be an effective way for former female soldiers to rid themselves of their stigmatized status, physical and psychological health problems and social exclusion.

The SEFAFU program also facilitated and paid for the medical treatment of sexually transmitted infections, with a 2002 assessment having indicated that more than 90 percent of girls and young women who had experienced abduction had contracted such infections. A further program component was the provision of skills-training and micro-credit so that girls had the financial resources to return to school, help support their own children or develop other capacities and resources. Skills-training focused on such activities as soap-making, tie-dyeing and crocheting. Loans were generally for one year, to a value of approximately seventy-five dollars US, with monthly repayments and interest at 10 percent payable. In addition to supporting activities related to the foci of skills-training, loans facilitated business activities ranging from sewing to rice-hulling and produce trading. The program

additionally involved awareness-raising activities to help the broader community better understand the situation of the returning girls. In particular, efforts were made to help community members understand that the girls themselves had suffered, since communities tended to view as perpetrators anyone who had been part of the groups that had attacked villages.

This program has been suggested as a model of good practice in post-conflict programming for girls formerly associated with armed groups and fighting forces (Stark et al. 2009a). However, despite encouraging qualitative reports from program participants (Kostelny 2008), there has been, to date, no rigorous evaluation of the impact of the program. Indeed, there were severe practical constraints on mounting such an evaluation. There was, for example, no explicit baseline data collected regarding the experience and circumstances of the participants in the program, nor were the explicit indicators of reintegration defined. Additionally, funding restrictions had resulted in the delivery of intervention components with varying completeness and in differing orders. Most challenging of all was the time that had elapsed since the girls' abductions, their return and receipt of the interventions (with the program transitioning from 2006 into integrated work on long-term community development).

The Care and Protection of Children (CPC) in Crisis Settings¹ initiative was established to seek to develop field-friendly methodologies to strengthen the evidence-base for humanitarian programming in post-conflict and other situations of crisis. CPC researchers worked with CCF colleagues to develop and implement a methodology to evaluate the impact of the SEFAFU intervention in Koinadugu District, one of the target areas for CCF's work using this approach in the period from 2002 to 2007.

Methodology

Design

The research team conducted a retrospective cohort study, analyzing how well girls formerly associated with armed groups had reintegrated into their communities. The team visited communities that had participated in CCF's SEFAFU intervention and collected information

from girls who had been in receipt of SEFAFU support. The team also identified matched communities within the District that had not been reached by the SEFAFU intervention (for which coverage had been constrained by funding limitations) and interviewed girls who would have been eligible for SEFAFU support had it been available. The research examined whether the SEFAFU program accelerated the reintegration of girls into their communities by looking at the time from return from abduction to the attainment of defined reintegration outcomes.

Measures

Data was collected through in-depth structured individual interviews on six culturally specific indicators of reintegration: marriage, schooling, community acceptance (marked by invitation to community events), inclusion in *bondo* societies,² cessation of drug use, and attainment of *steady head*—the locally accepted measure of mental stability. These indicators were established as representing the perceptions of successful community reintegration by formerly abducted girls and women through fieldwork utilizing participative ranking methodology (Ager et al. 2010a). Fourteen participative discussions—involving a total of 166 girls and young women—were convened in communities across Koinadugu and the neighboring districts of Port Loko and Bombali. Using a modified form of ‘free listing’, discussions identified characteristics that girls and young women considered to be signs of having effectively reintegrated within communities following the experience of abduction. Participative ranking was then used to develop a consensus prioritization of these characteristics. This work, completed three months in advance of data collection, is more fully reported elsewhere (Stark et al. 2009b).

Data was also collected on length of abduction, age at abduction and a range of demographic variables. Experiences during abduction were noted but, given the focus of the research and the potential intrusion involved in recall of such activity, this was not a major focus of questioning.

The design required recall of the timing of major personal events by participants. The dating of such events was challenged by both the significant passage of time and the low levels of literacy amongst participants. The team thus worked with communities, in semi-structured

focus groups, to construct a local time-line of significant events from the end of the war to the period of the interviews. Focus groups included a cross-section of village leaders (chief, *mammy queen*,³ assistant chiefs, and elders), educated people (local teachers, youth group leaders and village mobilizers) and youth, including young girls. The full process was repeated in all communities in order to ensure that selected events were meaningful to the girls interviewed. Events included on the calendars were occurrences—agricultural, ceremonial, political, remarkable—that were judged memorable by a majority of the focus group members. Examples of events included “the time when the only daughter of the chief died in childbirth”, “when floods washed away the [local] bridge”, and “when the UN helicopter blew the roof off the school”. The constructed time line was then used during the interview process to locate the attainment of specified indicators as closely as possible in time. (See Table 1 for an example of one completed timeline.)

Research Setting

The research was conducted in the Koinadugu District of Sierra Leone in the summer of 2007.⁴ Koinadugu was significantly impacted by the civil war and, located as it is in the far northeast with major areas inaccessible by road, is one of the least developed Districts of the country. Sierra Leone as a whole continues to rank amongst the least developed nations with respect to such measures as the United Nations Human Development Index (UNDP 2008).

Sample

The sample comprised 142 girls—seventy-four from intervention communities and sixty-eight from comparison communities. The sample size was based upon a power calculation targeting the drawing of comparisons regarding the effectiveness of the intervention with at least 80 percent confidence, assuming an effect size of 0.30 (Bamberger et al. 2006). All participants were aged between seventeen and twenty-five years at the time of interview and had been abducted and held by an armed group or military personnel for at least twenty-four hours.

Intervention communities comprised all communities in the District where the SEFAFU program had been active prior to 2005.

Table 1 • Local Calendar Timeline (for Sonkabilia village)

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>
Dry Season 1998	First attack on village (just after <i>Bondo</i> initiation)
1998 to 2000	ECOMOG in Kabala Area
Dry Season 1999	UNAMSIL based in Kabala
Dry Season 2001	WaraWara Paramount Chief died
2001	UNAMSIL ‘bengalis’ come and build mosque in Kabala
Dry Season 2002	CCF build school at Kanunka
February 2002	CARE came and promised to cover wells and latrines (project not completed)
April 2002	CCF begins health center at Mamudia
July 2002	CCF completes health center at Mamudia
August 2002	CCF supplied goats to the village (all died by April ’03)
Dry Season 2003	SEFAFU started with visit from Mr. Kamar and Mrs. Shariff
Dry Season 2003	CARE brought food for work
Dry Season 2003	Big dance in village to celebrate “Unity” (a goat was killed for the celebration)
Dry Season 2003	SEFAFU Dance
May/June 2003	All mangoes spoiled (by flies)
Rainy Season 2003	Village Chairman appointed
Dry Season 2004	SEFAFU build hut in Village
Late Dry Season 2004	WaraWara Paramount Chief appointed
Rainy Season 2004	CCF supplied rice and ground nuts for planting
Dry Season 2005	Naming ceremony for chief’s child (Fanta Kamara)
April 2006	Community teacher starts
Rainy Season 2006	Chief plants almond trees
August 2006	Very poor rice harvest
August 2006	SEFAFU donors visit Sonkabilia
August 2006	Second Imam (Shako Koroma) died, followed by his daughter’s death
October 2006	Leopard killed
March 2007	<i>Fula</i> and <i>Limba</i> cow herder and farmer argue over grazing; the farmer is killed
March 2007	Federation build well in town
May 2007	<i>Mammi Queen</i> appointed

Simple random sampling was used in intervention communities, with SEFAFU enrollment lists—documenting girls who had received at least one component of the program—used as the sampling frame. Fifteen girls per community were initially invited to take part in the interview process. If girls did not attend the subsequent interview session, replacements were selected from the enrollment list by random sampling.

Comparison communities were villages that had not received the SEFAFU intervention but were in similar geographic locations within the District, of similar size and within similar proximity to towns and roads. Although Koinadugu was not a District with intensive NGO activity, girls in the comparison group were screened prior to interviews and were excluded from the sample if they had received a loan, skills-training, or medical care (i.e. key components of the SEFAFU intervention) from some other organization. However, girls in comparison communities were still included if they had received a cleansing through the efforts of their family, friends and/or community since this was viewed as a traditional coping mechanism and not an externally initiated activity. Because a sampling frame did not exist in comparison communities, census sampling was used. In an effort to avoid stigmatizing girls who had been abducted, the researchers invited all girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five to be interviewed. The girls were then individually screened on the interview day, with only girls who had been abducted asked to complete the full interview.

Procedure

All participants in the research were given the option not to participate, without negative repercussion, and were asked to provide oral consent before the start of the interview. All participants gave their consent to the interview. The interviews, which typically lasted in the order of one hour, were conducted using a structured questionnaire. Interviews were conducted in settings in which discussions could not be overheard by others. They were conducted by an interviewer and translator, who both had extensive experience discussing sensitive issues in a supportive manner.

Key demographic information was recorded and the estimated date at which each indicator of reintegration had, if at all, been (first) attained. Interviewers made use of the community calendars to estimate

such timing, with frequent cross-referencing of the time of each event for verification purposes. For girls reporting to be married, additional questions were asked on the quality of that marriage (with regard both to specific behaviors of the husband and an overall judgment of it being a 'good' or 'bad' marriage).

Participants were not pressured to share emotionally disturbing experiences. Girls were told how they could contact CCF (who had ongoing programming in the area) if they found that the interviews brought up difficult memories. All those interviewed were compensated for their time (away from agricultural or other work) with a package of rice, cooking fat and flavoring.

Analytical Methods

Analysis was based upon the elapsed time between a girl's return from abduction to the time of her attainment of each of the identified indicators of reintegration. The initial basis of comparison between intervention and comparison communities was the cumulative percentage of girls having attained each indicator after their return.

Following initial analysis it was noted that a large percentage of girls had in fact attained targeted outcomes prior to the initiation of the SEFAFU program in their community. To address this confounding factor, girls in intervention communities who had not attained the outcome variable prior to intervention were matched with girls of the same age (who similarly had not attained that specified outcome) in comparison communities. Age-matching was on the basis of age at the time of return being within two years of the proposed match. This process was completed for four outcome variables: marriage, community acceptance, *bondo* inclusion, and *steady head*. Such analysis was not completed on drug cessation because the significantly smaller pool of girls available to match on such variables rendered comparisons invalid. Analysis was completed using Excel and Stata 9.0.

Results

The baseline indicators for girls from intervention (n=74) and comparison (n=68) communities are broadly well matched on the variables of

age, length of abduction, and rates of drug use (see Table 2). There was a trend for girls from comparison communities to have spent more time away from their village following release or escape from the armed forces or groups that had abducted them. In both intervention and comparison communities armed groups linked with the RUF were responsible for the majority of abductions.

Table 2 • Baseline Measures of Intervention and Comparison Samples

	<i>Intervention</i>	<i>Comparison</i>
Average age	20.1 yrs	21.4 yrs
Average age of abduction	11.6 yrs	13.0 yrs
Average length of abduction	9 months	8 months
Average time out of village after return	7 months	14 months
Those who ever took drugs	68.9%	55.9%
Non SEFAFU Cleansing	9.5%	42.7%
SEFAFU Components Percentages		
Cleansing	90.5%	—
Hospital Money	78.5%	—
Skills Training	73.0%	—
Loan	79.7%	—

Chi-square analysis of reintegration outcomes across intervention and comparison communities at the time of interview (see Table 3) suggests only attainment of *steady head* as significantly related to exposure to the intervention. There are modest, non-significant trends for higher rates of attainment of *bondo* inclusion and community acceptance in intervention communities at the time of interview, but no difference on the outcomes of drug cessation or achieving marriage. Table 4 reports responses by those married to questions regarding the quality of their marriage. On two indicators—provision of clothes by their husband and provision of medicines by their husband—girls who had been exposed to the SEFAFU intervention reported more favorable marriages.

The major positive finding from Table 3, of course, is that by the time of interviews the majority of girls and young women, whether or not exposed to intervention, had attained outcomes indicative of reintegration. In this circumstance, the key issue thus becomes whether the intervention served to accelerate the attainment of such outcomes in communities receiving SEFAFU support. Figures 1 and 2 show, by

Table 3 • Comparison Between Intervention and Comparison Group on Outcome Indicators at Time of Interview

	<i>Intervention Group</i>	<i>Comparison Group</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Percentage married	73.0% *	75.0% **	0.78
Percentage who have been invited to <i>bondo</i> events	93.2%	85.3%	0.12
Percentage who have been invited to community events	90.5%	83.8%	0.22
Percentage of drug cessation among girls forced to take drugs	98.0%	94.7%	0.39
Percentage with 'steady head'	96.0%	85.3%	0.02

Note: Emboldened values indicate statistical significance between groups

* Of these, fourteen girls were married before the war (date unknown); four of these girls ended their marriage (death or divorce) before their abduction. Time from return to second marriage was included for these four girls.

** Of these, seventeen girls were married before the war (date unknown); one of these girls ended her marriage (death or divorce) before her abduction. Time from return to second marriage was included for this girl.

Table 4 • Comparison between Intervention and Comparison Group on the Quality of Marriages made by Returnees

	<i>Provision of clothes by husband</i>	<i>Provision of food by husband</i>	<i>No beating by husband</i>	<i>Provision of medicine by husband</i>	<i>Good 'marriage'</i>
Intervention Group (N=52)	42.3%	86.5%	42.3%	75.0%	50.0%
Comparison Group (N=49)	22.4%	79.6%	44.9%	51.0%	44.9%
p-value	0.04	0.43	0.84	0.01	0.69

Note: Emboldened values indicate statistical significance between groups

way of illustration, the cumulative attainment of the outcomes of marriage and *bondo* acceptance respectively since return from the bush. The former suggests a slight trend towards marriages being secured earlier in comparison communities; the latter indicates initially similar rates of growth in *bondo* acceptance across comparison and intervention communities, but that in intervention communities then increasing.

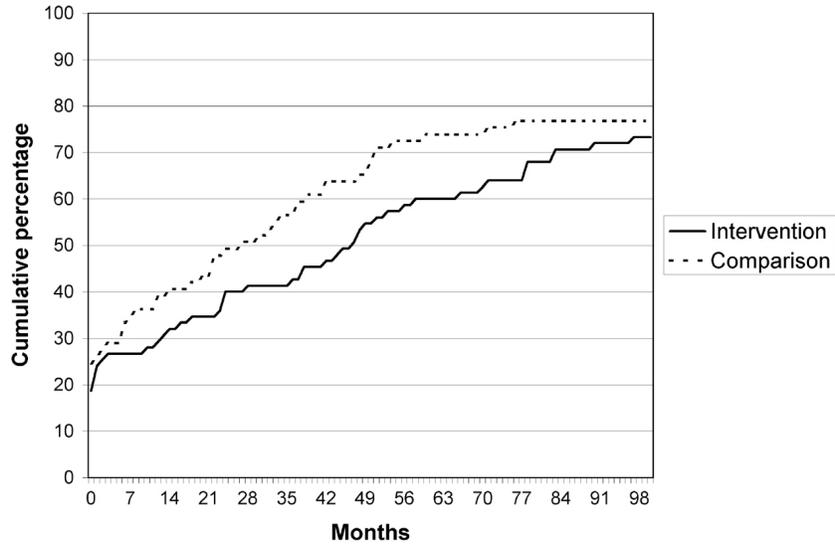


Figure 1 • Time to marriage after return from bush

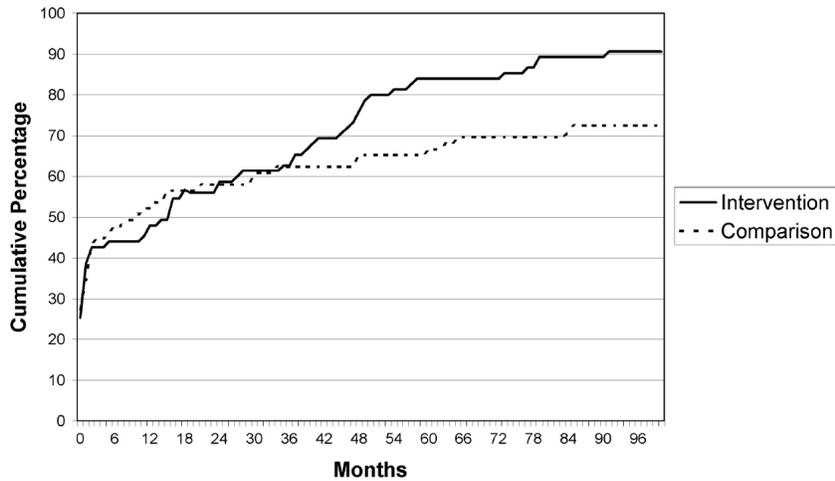


Figure 2 • Time to *bondo* acceptance after return from bush

However, these are complex trends to interpret given that analysis is taken from the point of arrival back in communities and because the SEFAFU intervention was delivered at different points of time in different communities. A major consequence of this is that many girls reported having achieved one indicator, or more, of reintegration *before* their exposure to SEFAFU. For example, 63.5 percent of girls in

SEFAFU communities had been married at some point prior to the intervention; 70.3 percent reported re-engaging with *bondo* activities before exposure to the program. Although these indicators had been suggested by young women and girls as appropriate measures of community reintegration there is some ambiguity in using them as a measure of intervention effectiveness.

As noted in the methodology section, analysis therefore proceeded, for each outcome indicator in turn, by removing from the analysis respondents who had attained that outcome before being first exposed to some element of the SEFAFU intervention. Of the remaining girls in the intervention group, each was then matched with a girl of similar age from comparison communities who had also not attained that outcome prior to the matched girl's first exposure to SEFAFU. Because of the very small number of girls who had not stopped their drug use prior the SEFAFU intervention (10.2 percent), matched comparisons were not possible on this outcome variable.

The sub-samples produced by this matching procedure were found to be broadly comparable on baseline factors, though there was somewhat greater variation than with the full sample (see Table 5). The

Table 5 • Comparison of Baseline Indicators for Matched Pairs of Girls from Intervention and Comparison Communities

	<i>Matched on Marriage</i>		<i>Matched on Bondo</i>		<i>Matched on Comm Accept</i>		<i>Matched on Steady Head</i>	
	<i>I</i> (n=25)	<i>C</i> (n=25)	<i>I</i> (n=20)	<i>C</i> (n=20)	<i>I</i> (n=20)	<i>C</i> (n=20)	<i>I</i> (n=14)	<i>C</i> (n=14)
Average age (yrs)	18.7	19.0	20.6	21.0	19.4	20.2	20.6	20.9
Average age of abduction (yrs)	11.0	13.0	11.7	12.0	11.8	13.7	12.6	11.2
Average length of abduction (months)	8.2	8.0	8.3	11.0	8.2	11.3	7.6	12.5
Average time out of village after return (months)	4.0	19.0	5.1	23.2	8.4	13.5	3.8	18.5
Those who ever took drugs	72%	48%	80%	55%	65%	55%	86%	79%
Non-SEFAFU Cleansing	12%	68%	5%	30%	5%	30%	7%	36%

greatest difference between groups was again on the time spent away from their village following release or escape. After developing matched samples for each outcome variable, chi-square analysis was completed. This indicated significant impact of the intervention for all indicators except for the outcome of marriage (see Table 6).

	<i>Matched on Marriage</i>		<i>Matched on Bondo</i>		<i>Matched on Community</i>		<i>Matched on Steady Head</i>	
	<i>Int</i>	<i>Comp p-value</i>	<i>Int</i>	<i>Comp p-value</i>	<i>Int</i>	<i>Comp p-value</i>	<i>Int</i>	<i>Comp p-value</i>
Percentage Married (at interview)	38%	66%	0.37					
Percentage who attained <i>bondo</i>	80%	35%	0.01					
Percentage who attained Community	75%	45%	0.0006					
Percentage who attained Steady Head	93%	29%	0.0005					

Note: Emboldened values indicate statistical significance between groups

Discussion

The effect of conflict on children has become a major humanitarian concern in the management of complex emergencies and in post-conflict situations. However, significant gaps continue to exist in provision for some of the most vulnerable children. This article presents an evaluation of one program seeking to address this gap for girls and young women formerly associated with armed groups or other fighting forces. Establishing a body of research on the best practices to address the needs of children and youth in and after conflict is essential, both in providing the best care and in securing future support and funding for these activities and programs. This requires the development of research methodologies suited to the constraints and uncertainties of real world humanitarian situations.

This research encountered significant conceptual and methodological challenges. In contrast to the tendency of research and practice to rely on indicators developed by external actors, this research used indicators of reintegration suggested by the girls and young women themselves. However, one of the indicators—participation in *bondo* activities—raises a welter of questions and unresolved issues. On one hand, Sierra Leonean girls view participation in *bondo* as essential for their well-being and as an expression of their womanhood, and to not participate is to lack a sense of identity and belonging (Ahmadu and Schweder 2009; Stark 2006). On the other hand, participation in *bondo* may entail Female Genital Cutting (FGC), a practice that contradicts international human rights standards and that most Western humanitarians regard as a significant child protection issue. In accepting participation in *bondo* societies as a participant-identified indicator, we were not tacitly accepting the legitimacy of FGC but were recognizing its perceived importance to the girls and young women. During the course of the SEFAFU program, CCF/Sierra Leone had taken steps not to condone the practice of FGC by, for example, insuring that resources used for traditional cleansing ceremonies would not be used for such purposes. This approach, working respectfully with local cultural beliefs and practices but signaling clearly issues that contravene international human rights standards, appears to be emerging as the most promising long-term approach to addressing harmful traditional practices (Mackie and LeJeune 2009).

The methodological challenges faced were no less formidable. The research approach used to evaluate the SEFAFU program was by necessity innovative to overcome the constraints noted earlier regarding the lack of pre-determined indicators, the lack of baseline information regarding integration and the length of elapsed time since abduction, return and intervention. While the use of local calendars and participative ranking to define local measures of reintegration addressed such concerns, there remain methodological constraints that need to be addressed in advance of interpretation of findings. The most critical of these constraints are with regard to the matching of intervention and comparison communities, reliability of recall, and confounding factors related to the attainment of outcomes before exposure to intervention for significant numbers of the sample.

First, although there was an attempt to select comparison communities that matched the intervention communities in terms of cultural and linguistic context, physical geography, size, proximity to towns and roads, there was clear difference between the communities with respect to the time that girls had spent away from their villages following release or escape from their abductors. If this difference reflects different conditions operating in comparison areas that further restricted opportunities for integration, this would be a source of bias in the design, artificially favoring outcomes in SEFAFU communities. There is, however, no clear evidence for this, and it is possible to see such time away from the village as a further symptom of challenges in reintegration rather than a cause of such difficulties.

Second, there are obvious challenges asking girls about what they experienced up to eight or nine years previously. The local calendars were found to be an effective method for identifying public occurrences with respect to which the date of personal events and experiences could be estimated, but the accuracy of these estimates is obviously likely to decrease with time. Such compromise in the estimation of the timing of events introduces a source of insensitivity that could result in an underestimation of the effects of the intervention. It is unlikely, however, to be a significant source of bias, given that conditions constraining recall were similar for girls in the intervention and comparison samples.

Third, as discussed earlier, interpretation of rate of attainment of reintegration outcomes (such as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2) is constrained by some confounding of outcome variables and exposure to

the intervention. A significant majority of SEFAFU girls interviewed had achieved targeted outcomes before exposure to any element of the program. This confounding is addressed with the matching procedure adopted, but at the cost of excluding large numbers of girls from this subsequent analysis. The population represented in these matched comparisons no longer represents a random selection but rather a targeted one, based upon failure to attain a specific outcome. As such, the findings of impact should be taken to reflect changes in girls who were experiencing *the most difficulty* in achieving targeted integration outcomes rather than *the general population* of formerly abducted girls. Given that the girls who had not achieved targeted outcomes prior to the intervention were actually in the minority, this is a major constraint on interpretation. However, it is a constraint with positive operational significance, given the objectives of the program to reach and support the most vulnerable girls.

Acknowledging the caution suggested by these constraints, the current study nonetheless suggests some important findings related to the experiences and support of formerly abducted girls. First, there is clear evidence that over a period of years the majority of girls who have experienced abduction—whether or not receiving programmatic intervention—achieve outcomes that they themselves associated with reintegration. In no way belittling the suffering associated with conflict experiences of this nature, this supports a growing literature on the resilience of children and youth in such contexts (Boothby et al. 2006). The policy and programming implications of such findings are that interventions may be appropriately conceived as the means of accelerating existing processes of community healing and recovery rather than serving as the major driver of such processes (Ager et al. 2010b).

Against this background of a general trend towards reintegration, the SEFAFU program had demonstrable impact in intervention communities (compared to comparison communities) in establishing *steady head* amongst girls and achieving positive marriage outcomes. *Steady head* was the most subjective and psychological of the outcomes mapped in this study, and our finding thus supports the role of such interventions in fostering mental health and emotional well-being in conflict-affected populations. This is potentially valuable evidence in support of the approach to such concerns commended by the IASC Guidelines of

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC 2007).

As noted, exposure to SEFAFU was also associated with improvements in the rated quality of marriage, with SEFAFU girls who had attained marriage reporting higher quality of marriage partnerships than girls from comparison communities on the criteria of their husbands' provision of clothing and medicine. The basis for this difference is uncertain, but suggests that exposure to the SEFAFU interventions either supported girls in effective negotiation with their husbands over key resources or reduced social stigma that may be a barrier to accessing such resources. Given the vulnerability of young women and girls in post-conflict settings (Boothby et al. 2006; Conklin and Meier 2008; Stark 2006) this is an important finding.

Also, for the girls and young women who had not achieved reintegration outcomes by the time of exposure to SEFAFU—those, it may therefore be assumed, who had experienced the greatest obstacles to reintegration—the intervention was associated with subsequent improvements in *bondo* engagement, community acceptance and acquisition of *steady head*. The SEFAFU intervention appears, therefore, to have been an effective means of overcoming the personal or community obstacles that had previously served as a barrier to such outcomes.

The findings of this research are thus an important addition to an evidence-base regarding programming in conflict and post conflict settings as the data suggest that interventions such as SEFAFU have the clear potential to improve the lives of girls. Given that the SEFAFU initiative involved a wide range of components, including traditional cleansings, other community events, health screenings, trainings and loans, it is not possible to say which of these elements proved most effective in supporting attainment of reintegration. Indeed, it may have been processes incidental to such specific activities (e.g. engaging in discussions with girls, raising the profile of their needs within communities etc.) that were most significant in creating change. Systematic investigation of the impact of discrete elements and processes involved in interventions is an appropriate next step in strengthening the evidence-base informing programming. However, by whatever means, against a backdrop of wider community recovery, there is clear evidence that exposure to the intervention impacted mental well-being and mar-

riage quality and, amongst the most vulnerable girls, further supported *bondo* engagement and community acceptance—all outcomes that girls themselves had suggested as indicative of ‘doing well’ back in their community.

The study also illustrates the potential for conducting rigorous evaluations in humanitarian settings which often present major constraints on the timeliness and comprehensiveness of initial data collection. Despite the initial lack of clear indicators of reintegration and pre-intervention measures of the circumstances and adjustment of girls and young women, the study design allowed for post-hoc measurement that enabled a clear comparison to be made between those who had received the intervention and those who had not. While promotion of thorough baseline assessment is strategically important for effective programming, the development of flexible evaluation designs that can accommodate the constraints of humanitarian settings remains crucial for the strengthening of the evidence-base for child protection and related interventions (Bamberger et al. 2006; Ager et al. 2010b). The major challenge with the current design was the complexity of the interview protocol and subsequently required statistical analysis. It was not possible to train local staff in the use of the interview protocol because of its complexity and the limited time frame available. Further, the requirement for analysis by a statistical matching procedure further removed implementation of the research from within the capacities of the collaborating NGO. Although this does not influence the validity of findings, it does signal the difficulty of establishing such evaluations as a routine aspect of humanitarian work with typically pre-existing agency capacities. Major capacity development, involving intensive training as well as ongoing support and supervision, is required to make such methodologies accessible as a routine program evaluation tool.

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Alastair Ager, PhD, is Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health working with the Program on Forced Migration & Health. He served as the Research Director of the Care and Protection of Children in Crisis Settings (CPC) initiative.

Lindsay Stark is completing her doctoral studies at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. She was formerly Project Manager of the Care and Protection of Children in Crisis Settings (CPC) initiative and works with the Program on Forced Migration & Health. Joanna Olsen is a recent Masters graduate of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and School of International and Public Affairs. She is currently working with Catholic Relief Services.

Michael Wessells, PhD, is Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health with the Program on Forced Migration & Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. At the time of the study he also served as Senior Child Protection Specialist for Christian Children's Fund.

Neil Boothby, EdD, is Director of the Program on Forced Migration & Health at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University.



Notes

1. The Care and Protection of Children (CPC) in Crisis Settings initiative aims to create an evidence base for policy formulation and programmatic intervention and to pilot new assessment methodologies to address child protection concerns. See www.cpcnetwork.org
2. These are women's traditional initiation societies.
3. Traditional female community leader (also called *mammi queen*)
4. Research was also conducted in Port Loko, a province northeast of the Freetown peninsula where SEFAFU was first implemented. This data is not reported here given cultural and contextual differences identified during the course of this work, including local sensitivities to discussing *bondo* activity.

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