

Becoming SPLA IO & SSNLM Rebel: The Making of A Girl Soldier in South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Many girl soldiers who participated in the conflict in South Sudan were abducted on their ways to schools, marketplaces, gardens or at the water points. Throughout the conflict in defunct Gbudue State both Sudan People Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLAIO) and South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) massively recruited girl soldiers in their ranks and were sexually exploited. This article attempts to examine the pathway of becoming a girl soldier in the South Sudan Conflict and the roles of girl soldiers in the rebels' camps

Keywords: SPLAIO, SSNLM, rebel, girl soldier, South Sudan

INTRODUCTION

When we were coming back from the garden, the SSLM rebels abducted me with my elder sister, and they took us to the bush. In the bush, I was forced to cook, wash clothes, fetch water and I was always raped by the rebels (Respondent #29)

Political Wrangles and splits within the SPLA/SPLM: An Overview of the conflict

The Sudan People Liberation's Army/ Sudan People Liberation's Movement took up arms in the liberation struggle under the able leadership of late Dr. John Garang de Mabior. The fighters were composed with Southerners but also drawn up with members from the marginalized communities from the Northern Sudan. In the South, Dinka and Nuer were/are the two main ethnic tribes (Nyadera, 2016, 69).

As the liberation struggle was gaining momentum, its leaders first grappled and split due to differences of ideological and organizational objectives. The leadership wrangles began on the inception stage on the formation of SPLA/SPLM in July 1983 between the Anya-Nya II and the remnants of the Sudan Armed Forces, who rebelled and fought in Bor, Pibor and Ayod led by Col. Dr. John Garang de Mabior, Major Kerubino Kuanyin Bol and Major William Nyuon Bany (Nyaba, 2014, 56). These two groups with ideological differences did not agree on the objectives of the armed struggle. The Anyanya II leadership proposed fighting for the separation of Southern Sudan and Dr. John Garang's team on the other hand proposed on the liberation of the whole Sudan. The disagreement led to violent confrontation which created division within the SPLA/SPLM throughout the history (Nyaba, 2014). The political power wrangles and poor relations among the commanders resulted into the arrest and detention of Cdr Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, the SPLM/A Deputy Chairperson, along with other SPLA senior officers hailing from Bahr El Ghazal region (Nyaba, 2014, 60)

The second split was again another terrible blow to the liberation struggle due to issues on leadership style and democratic principles. The second SPLA/SPLM split happened in 1991 commonly known as the Nasir Faction versus Torit Faction i.e the gang of two Doctors (Dr. Lam Akol and Dr. Riek Machar versus Dr. John Garang and group. The Nasir faction accused Dr. John Garang of single leadership. The Nasir faction claimed to wage a war with a clear sense of purpose to achieve equality, justice, and freedom under a democratic set up (Akol, 2003, 304). The split in 1991 and the attack of Bor by the Nuer's white army as

stated by Thomas (2015,194) was memorably brutal and 'tribal' and it has contributed in its way to the vast corpus of ethnicity- first writing about South Sudan. According to Young (2016, 22), the origin of the white army began in 1991 schism within the SPLA for the dual purpose of defending Nuer cattle herds from neighbouring groups and fighting in the Second Sudanese civil war between the SPLA/M and the Sudanese government. The Nuer fighters are called white army because they dust their bodies with ash toward off insect bites and they have fought in support of their tribal leader Dr. Riek Machar during the SPLA/M split of 1991 and recent splits of 2013 and 2016.

The second split of 1991 delayed the southern quest for self- rule, as the commanders mobilized their supporters on ethnic lines to fight each other (Blanchard, 2014, 5; Koos and Gutschke, 2014; Nyaba, 1997, 67; Pinaud, 2014, 192; Akol, 2003, 297). The National Congress Party (NCP) was finger pointed to have accelerated the splits by backing the faction groups or other militias.

In December 2013, a third split was witnessed as political tensions surfaced among senior party members which resulted in the outbreak of violence, just three years after South Sudan's Independence. The belligerents were incumbent President Kiir's forces and forces of his arch-rival, Vice President (former) Dr. Machar. The planned party meeting slated for December 2013 accelerated the rivalries with open accusations against the ruling Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) party leaders. After the meeting on December 15, 2013, fighting broke out allegedly due to the Presidential guards of Tiger Division- thus the third split. It was claimed the Dinka (Kiir's tribe) forcefully intended to disarm the Nuer (Riek's tribe) and resulted into an armed conflict in Juba. The fighting intensified along ethnic and tribal lines and spread to other states, resulting in the displacement, and killing of thousands of civilians (Nyaba, 2014, 2; Johnson, 2014, 167; Greenfield, 2014; Copnall, 2014, 75; UNMISS, 2013).

The planned 2015 elections added yet dynamism with leaders accusing each other of using ethnic patronage to solidify their support base (Greste, 2013; Nyaba, 2014, 2; Johnson, 2014, 167; Rolandsen, 2015, 87). Due to such pressures, escalation of political rivalry among senior Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) political cadres peaked, as top leaders traded accusations of corruption, lack of consultation, aimed at isolating each key rival. The President therefore dissolved the whole cabinet in July and dismissed his archrival Vice President Dr. Machar as well as other key party officials (Greste, 2013; Small Arms Survey, 2012). The political leaders who once got divided during the liberation war again repeated the same history and rebranded the same party movement into SPLM IG headed by incumbent President Salva Kiir, SPLM IO headed by Dr. Riek Machar and Real SPLM headed by Pagan Amum and SPLM DC headed by Dr. Lam AKol. These divisions by key leaders in government who keep fighting each other is clearly explained by Nyaba (2014, 29) in the following words:

The group that Garang had marginalized now surrounded Salva Kiir and were in control. In a manner similar to their own ostracism, this group singled out Garang's former coterie of confidants and protégées and thrust them to the margins until some of them threw into the towel and left the movement. In this reversal of roles, the SPLM core was now occupied by Garang- era underdogs. It was, therefore, not surprising that certain individuals close to Salva Kiir's leadership and who had heavy influence on SPLM policy engineering were outsiders and not bona fide members of the SPLM. They were known to have been hostile to Dr. Garang and the SPLM political line. The SPLM was now being managed by those who had little or no experience with its workings; these elements even took cues from sworn enemies of the SPLM and therefore committed major mistakes.

In Juba, senior opposition leaders were arrested after the failed coup de' tat led by Dr. Machar, with most denying the coup plot, including some United States officials (Greenfield, 2014). Meanwhile, forces loyal to Machar captured the two States of Jonglei and Unity, and on December 23, 2013, announced that they had full control of oil production fields in the Upper Nile and Unity States (Radio Tamazuj, 2013). The rival forces undertook major offensives in most parts of the country to gain control of territories, with civilians and foreign workers seeking refuge in the United Nations Protection of Civilians (UN POCs) sites.

Due to mounting pressure from IGAD and International Community, President Kiir in principle agreed to cease hostilities and came to table for peace talk on December 29, 2013. While they agreed to peace talk, government forces continued to retake territories occupied by rebels (Sudan Tribune, 2013). Dr. Machar was

skeptical for government's ceasefire and instead raised alarm for all those detained and suggested appropriate mechanisms to monitor ceasefire prior peace talk (BBC news, 2013). Both parties agreed to send their respective negotiation teams on December 31, 2013, to Addis Ababa.

Ethnic mobilization has remained at the centre in South Sudan's political landscape by the elite group to serve their own interests. The political elite group maintain their powers and control through the support of their ethnic groups to get rid of their opponents (Nyadera, 2016, 71). While the bond of ethnic loyalty allows those in political power to have larger share in the national cake distribution, it acts as a direct catalyse for violence. Though other factors fuelled the conflict in the country, the major cause remains a mistrust between the two ethnic groups that is Dinka and Nuer who keep turning guns against each other for the political ascension to power (Nyadera, 2016, 71).

In the Defunct Gbudue State – Yambio (Western Equatoria) compared to other parts of the country where children were recruited by warring groups; it has the highest number of girl soldiers and the 71 former girl soldiers interviewed were part of them in the ranks of both SSNLM with bigger number of over 63.53% follows by SPLAIO with 20.0%. It should also be noted that one of the reasons that led to the rampant child soldiering in defunct Gbudue State was because child soldiers formed themselves first as community defense system known as arrow boys to fight LRA, Ugandan rebels in 2011 but in 2013 when the conflict broke out, they were recruited into two armed groups i.e., SPLA IO and SSNLM to fight against government.

This article draws from a study on 71 former girl child soldiers in the defunct Gbudue State, South Sudan, all of whom were enrolled or still being enrolled for vocational training in various courses such as sewing machines, carpentry, masonry, electricity, metal work and fabrication. This article discusses the pathway of becoming a girl soldier in the South Sudan Conflict and the roles of girl soldiers in the two rebels' camps.

This article intends to answer the following questions: This article intends to answer the following questions: (1) what is the pathway of becoming a girl soldier in the South Sudan Conflict? and (2) what are the roles of girl soldiers in the rebels' camps?

The article adopts phenomenological and qualitative approach, and the empirical data emanates from the interviews of 71 former girl soldiers in the defunct Gbudue State in South Sudan. The interviews were conducted from December 2018 to February 2019 and from April to May 2019

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Instrumentalism Theory: Elite Perspective

The proponents of Instrumentalism argue that ethnic differences arise when elite group utilized them to cater their own benefits (Collier, 2006, 26). The community leaders of that ethnicity identify the elements of their cultures and use them as the instrument to mobilize the masses to defend them in power (Brass, 1979). The justification of ethnic identity of a group becomes a communal pursuit and especially when their own tribal mates in power are being protected (Kataria, 2016, 133). When members of that ethnic group perceive themselves as too weak to defend themselves even through coalition with another group, they risk being destroyed (Smith, 2006, 4). It is usually visible that some symbols of a particular group have a deeper cord with the masses than others do. This is because such symbols possess an esoteric value that even some elites are unaware but have deeper historical significance of a group and constitute an importance component of its ethnic identity (Smith, 2006, 5). Elite-manipulation theorists argue that ethnic civil wars are caused by leaders of ethnic groups who encourage conflict to bolster their waning of power. The proponents of this argument see situational forces at work, leaving political elites with little or no room to manoeuvre (Krebs, 2016). Ethnic conflict is therefore because of actor's rational activity of interest such as prosperity, power, and security (Williams, 2016, 2). The role of elite manipulation in ethnic wars, explains why some ethnically fragmented societies choose to fight or chose to cooperate rather than fight (Williams, 2016). While these arguments on ethnic conflict are plausible, they remain shallow without the emotive content emphasized by primordialism theory. The questions one can ask could be: Why is it in Africa takes it shorter

time to mobilize ethnic groups to fight ethnic conflict? What knowledge do the elite possess to utilize ethnicity effectively for their political gains? Ruane and Todd (2004, 10) argue that the feelings and mass sentiments in conflicts associated with ethnic identity are not manufactured by elites, they only recognize it and appeal to it as strategies for conserving power.

Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenological approach to research is understood in two disciplines of being a philosophy and of being a research method. From philosophical perspective, phenomenological approach describes a particular social phenomenon as experience by an individual actor's own perspective (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984, 17).

Phenomenology as being a research method helps to describe a particular phenomenon taking into consideration views of that individual who experienced the phenomenon instead of its being explained by the outsider (Merleau-Ponty, 1974, 20). This means that studies which consider applying phenomenological methods depend fully on subjective truths and understandings as perceived by an individual who experience the phenomena rather than relying on theories which are scientific in nature to describe a phenomenon (Patton, 2002, 18). According to Merleau-Ponty (1974, 25) comparing phenomenological method to other methods which are scientific in nature, the use of phenomenological research design gives an accurate result when studying phenomenon which requires experiences, understanding as it is individuals who experienced and perceived the phenomenon. In Phenomenological research methods, individuals participating in the study share their life experiences on the phenomenon (Padgett, 2008, 11).

Participants in this research were small children (former combatants) of less than 18 years old and got involved in the conflict. These participants during the time of data collection were getting reintegrated into communities after the conflict. The application of a phenomenological approach to this research uses description of experiences in reintegration as "textural description" and "structural description" of the participants' experiences during reintegration process (Moustakas, 1994, 19).

Understanding SPLA IO and SSNLM operations in Western Equatoria Region

Throughout the conflict that erupted in South Sudan from 2013- 2015, Political tensions in Western Equatoria State (former) grew up steadily, resulting in clashes between government forces and the forces of opposition leader, Dr. Riek Machar, the SPLA IO just after few months of 2015 ARCSS. This is a stronghold support area of Western Equatoria's populist Governor Col. Joseph Bakosoro, who was sacked by the President and defected from main ruling party SPLM. Following the peace agreement in August, 2015, the conflict already escalated all over the region of Western Equatoria State (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

The region of Western Equatoria State comprises of three active armed groups operating independently. The two groups share similarities with the Arrow Boys, a Community Défense mobilized Youth to fight Lord Resistance Army (LRA) and rampant cattle keepers in the State. One armed group led by Wesley Welebe in Mundri and the second group by Alfred Futuyo which became known as SSNLM. Both two groups paid allegiance to SPLA/M IO and both leaders got promoted in rank of Major Generals by Dr. Riek Machar. A final group comprises of officers who defected from SPLM- IO and signed peace agreement with government and got integrated into the national army in April, 2016 (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

Western Equatoria State remains a stronghold opposition, but every often, the armed groups retreat when are confronted by government forces. The community leaders were also divided politically and thus affected the populace since other armed groups instead aimed of punishing the local population. Also as armed groups withdrew from their positions, the government attacks civilians and they felt prey (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

The Arrow Boys initially began as voluntary community militias fighting the intrusion of Uganda LRA, Dinka and Mbororo pastoralists. The former governor of Western Equatoria State, Mr. Zamoi who is the highest ranking military officer from Zande ethnic group supported Futuyo and the Arrow Boys Movement from 2005-6 but when the clashes took place between the local and the Dinka herders in Yambio and Mundri, he was dismissed on suspicion of meddling in the local politics (Small Arms Survey, 2016). The

arrow boys' leader Futuyo recalled as a charismatic leader and though he didn't learn and undergone military security trainings coordinated the operations well under the chieftaincy of Azande local authority (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

The Arrow Boys volunteered to fight LRA for so many years without help from the government army SPLA which it looks in this community network as a threat. Before the Independence, the government allocated over two (2) million USD to support the Arrow Boys, which they rejected the money. The frustrations therefore gave a full frustration into the community grievances that they were excluded from the national cake (Small Arms Survey, 2016). As civil war spread across the country in 2014, resentful members of Arrow Boys were harassed by the security forces in State. The joint operations of Uganda People Defense Force (UPDF) and US commandos in Nzara town, disconnected LRA operations. It is in this event that Futuyo boasted in October 2013 by displaying certificate of appreciation from US 4th Battalion and 10th Special Forces (Airborne) for successful mission in Nzara and for the Arrow Boys. In spring of 2014, Futuyo the leader of Arrow Boys went to the bushes bordering Congo and established his base in Nyaka, east of Yambio and made several contacts with rebel leader Dr. Machar. Communication channel was established in Western Equatoria with full list of commanders under the overall command of Alfred Malis Sika of United Arrow Force, deputized by Welebe in Mundri with a force of over 17600 fighters (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

According to Philip, the arrow boys were established to defend the community against the invasion of Uganda LRA rebels. The LRA rebels did atrocities in Yambio by abducting children and displacing the locals. The boys organized themselves using bows and arrows in order to chase away the LRA. The government in return was supposed to appreciate them in the role they played in the protection of civilians by foreign rebels but unfortunately the grants allocated to them by the line Ministry never reached them; hence, instead of following up their money the boys instead went to the bush and joined the SSNLM rebels to fight the government (Phone Interview with Benjamin Philip, State Coordinator, Yambio, 26 February, 2019).

PRESENT STUDY

This article intends to answer the following questions: (1) what is the pathway of becoming a girl soldier in the South Sudan Conflict? and (2) what are the roles of girl soldiers in the rebels' camps?

Pathway into atrocities and armed conflict

In December 2013, political tensions surfaced among senior party members which resulted in the outbreak of violence, just three years after South Sudan's Independence. The conflict led to the rampant atrocities throughout the country and formation of many armed groups fighting the government of President Salva Kiir. It became apparent that children experienced forms of militarization and insecurity particularly in Western Equatoria State prior their abduction by the SPLA IO and SSNLM rebel groups. Finally, the experiences of insecurity and militarization reached to the peak when they were violently forced to join the rebels and got separated from their families.

Abduction

All of the participants interviewed reported that their pathway into atrocities and armed conflict began with their experiences of abduction. From the below narratives, there was no chance for the girls to resist abduction:

I was abducted while I was coming from fetching water. While I was coming home, they rebels appeared and took me along with others. Respondent # 6

I was abducted while going to the garden. The rebels came to me and took me with them to the bush by force. Respondent #3

I was abducted on the way to school. I was going to school that morning then the rebels appeared on the road, told me to go with them in the bush. I tried to resist but they threatened to shoot me and that was how I

got myself became a rebel child soldier. Respondent #5

We went to garden at that time with my mother when the rebels were attacking Yambio by then and were targeting ladies particularly. That time we the village girls were many. They came to us and took me but left my mother. They took me and said they were registering ladies to fight but I said I can't not manage that work of soldiers, but they took me. Respondent #8

I was abducted at home. That time I was at home and then my mum went to the market. I was just preparing myself to go to school. Then, three of the rebels appeared and they told me to pack my things and go with them to the bush. I informed them my mother was not around and not ready to go with them. They grasped me forcefully by arm and took me to the bush. Respondent #13

We were in the school that time we were for mathematics lesson in the morning then from there they rebels came and pick us three girls and six boys and took us to the bush. Respondent #14

I was going to school then on my way the rebels came towards me, grasped me pointing the gun on me and abducted me, took me with them to the bush. #17

We were going on our way to Rongu with my brothers and sisters. That time we were going to the garden, then surprisingly some people just appeared to us from the bush started chasing us, some of my elder brothers and sisters ran faster and were not captured but I was captured and taken to the bush. Respondent #45

We were in the garden together with my mother collecting firewood, so all of the sudden people came at random chasing us, and they caught me, they left my mother and they took me with them in the bush. Respondent #44

I was going to visit my father and one appeared to me. One of them asked where I was going, then I replied, I am taking money to my father in the place called Sanga. One said bring the money, I refused, and he said if I don't, he will cut me. I crossed the road; another rebel appeared and said where you are going, I explained the same thing. They said from here let me jump on the bicycle and said if I shout, they will kill me. Respondent #21

I was by then going to visit my mother on the way to Remenda. On my way I met the rebels, and they captured me by force and took me. I continued crying but they took me to the bush, and they cautioned me that if I continued crying, they will kill me. Respondent #46

My father sent me with my small sister to fetch water, when we were returning from the well, another boy crossed the road ahead of us and said please bring for me water. I took the bucket of one my sister, then he said, he doesn't want that for my sister he wants mine, then another one came from the bush again and said, put the water down, he pushed my water down. He forced me to follow them to the bush, but they left my sister because she was a small girl. They jailed me in prison for a week and then after that they released me and told me we are equal and from today onward, I will be their security personnel. Respondent #27

I was at home at night collecting dishes outside to go and sleep then the rebels appeared wearing all in black uniforms, they started shooting all over. I started running away from home but unfortunately, I fell into the hand of one of the rebels who caught me up and carried me away to the bush. Respondent #66

I was captured at night. I was sleeping then the rebels broke our door and captured me that night and they forced me to go with them into the bush. Respondent #43

I was going to the garden then the rebels appeared to me on the roadside. I was riding my bicycle by then, but they stopped me and asked me where I was going. I told them I was going to the garden. They were all standing along the road, waiting for people passing by, they forced me to join them, and we went to the bush. Respondent #27

The rebels abducted me at our home at night. They came and knocked at our door and burnt our house. Those of us who were not burnt were then taken to the bush. Respondent #59

It was in the morning hours, we were at home warming ourselves around the fire then the rebels came immediately and took everybody at home, they told us that anybody who tempers to run will be shot. We all complied and went to them in the bush. Respondent #51

The SSNLM came and attacked us in the school, other children managed to escape but most of us were captured and taken to the bush. Respondent #50

We were coming from Tambura on lorry then the rebels put roadblocks and stopped the lorry and picked everybody who was in that car and taken to the bush. Respondent #49

SSNLM abducted me at home. I was with the other family members then they came and took me by force to the bush. Respondent #53

I was going to fetch water at the borehole in the late evening around 7pm then I saw people who look like normal small boys who came also to fetch water and to my dismay; I discovered those were the rebels who forced me to follow them to the bush. Respondent #64

I was captured in Maridi. I went there to help my maternal Aunt to take care of her baby. We were going to the garden, then one person appeared to us and requested me to give him some cassava he was too hungry. I replied to him that the cassava was too heavy to put down on my head. He insisted and my maternal aunt said let me give him. When I was putting down the cassava, big number of soldiers appeared and then I was taken but they left my maternal aunt. Respondent #41

They found me when I was going to the garden with other family members. It was me with my brother, and the family members. They captured me and they started raping me. When my brother saw that he ran away. Respondent #42

Following their abduction, new norms of military activities began. The girls received orders and most of them were allocated to the commanders who experienced new life i.e sexual exploitation at night. The girls had to comply and follow the rebels' rules as directed by commanders and the commanders had to increase the abduction rates with some decline in some years as explained: The year 2015 was where massive abduction of children occurred (45.88%), follows by 2014 with abduction rate of 15.29% and decline in 2016 of 11.76%. During the inception of the conflict in 2013, the rebels seemed strategizing with small number of abducted children (4.71%). During the year 2017 when the SSNLM signed agreement with the Government the abduction rate reduces to 4.71% and finally 1.18% reported to have been abducted in 2018.

New Home: Military Training and Roles in the rebels' camps

All of the respondents reported to have undergone some military training in the camps of the rebels. The training varied with the roles within a particular rebel camp. They confirmed the training as follows:

Yes- I was trained in military skills and participated in fighting with the government forces. Respondent #2

Yes- I was trained in military skills but did not participate in combat. When fighting was taking place, I could hide together with the commanders. Respondent #3

Yes- I was trained in military skills. When our barracks were attacked, we were helped by our commanders to escape from the fight. Respondent #4

Yes- I was trained in military skills and I did not participate in fighting government forces. When we were attacked by the government forces, we could hide in the bush. Respondent #9

Yes- I was trained in military skills. When Government troops were coming to fight us, we the girls could hide. Respondent #17

Yes- I was trained in military skills and participated in fighting with Government army. Respondent # 70

Yes- I was trained in military skills and I participated in fighting with Government army. Respondent# 71

Yes- I was trained in military skills and did not participate in fighting with Government army. Respondent #69

Yes- I was trained in military skills. I did not participate in fighting with Government army but if there was combat, they usually put us in the middle to be protected but not in front. Respondent #68

From the above observations, the girls though trained militarily to be strong hearted; they were disturbed psychologically especially when they saw dead bodies or were forced to kill fellow colleagues. Seeing dead bodies was a serious indication that they would soon also die.

Roles in the rebels' camps

The roles in the rebels' camps fall in three categories of domestic and porter work, sexual exploitation and slavery and military activities

Domestic and porter work

The girls were given domestic and porter tasks in the camps of the two rebels' groups. The tasks included cooking, shining the shoes, washing clothes and plates, fetching water and firewood. They were also

assigned to carry items such as food, ammunition, and looted goods. They had these to say:

After abduction immediately when I tried to resist, they started beating me, undressing me, and pulled me down to the bush. After that my work was to cook, wash clothes, fetch water and collect firewood.

Respondent #71

After abduction I was raped that was why I conceived with these two children. I could also carry heavy loads, cook, and fetch water and loot people property. Respondent #70

After abduction the rebels beat me and I was forced to wash clothes, cook, and spy. Respondent #69

We were badly treated because we were forced to do things that we don't want. We were forced to beat others out of our interest, they force us to carry loads, cooks and wash clothes and iron for them.

Respondent #4

I was not badly treated after abduction only that I was forced to fetch water and cook to the commander. In addition to that I and other three girls were made to be spies to go and monitor government movement under the escort of one soldier. Respondent #68

In the bush every morning the rebels who lashed me and I was forced to carry heavy loads. Respondent #66

After abduction they could beat me to be strong hearted like them and I was forced to carry guns. I saw dead bodies and to me it was very bad to see dead bodies that made me to cry as I have never seen this before, but the rebels could beat me instead to stop crying. Respondent #64

I was treated badly because I was forced to carry heavy loads and my work was a bodyguard of a woman commander. Respondent #63

After abduction we who are small girls were always forced to go and collect firewood, but the big girls were distributed as wives of commanders. Respondent #62

I was treated badly. I was forced to cook and also trained to steal people property. Respondent #60

After I was taken to the bush, I was blind folded, got beaten and I was made to carry looted goods and a gun. Respondent #58

I was beaten and forced to cook food, wash clothes and at night the commander forced me for sex. Respondent #15

After abduction they could beat me to be strong hearted like them and I was forced to carry guns. Respondent #64

The rebels treated me badly. They beat me and they told me if I cried they would kill me. From there they took me to their Boss and my work was to guard him and do everything for him. Respondent #42

When I was in the bush, one of the rebels wanted to rape me but the commander stopped him from raping me. After that I was given heavy loads to carry and was tasked to be on guard monitoring whether government troops were coming to attack them. Respondent #48

When we reached the bush at the rebels' headquarter there were daily mistreatment, every day we were paraded and given a lot of lashes. They rebels could send us to loot people properties and we carry them to their bases. I was given tasks like cooking food, fetching water, and collecting firewood. Respondent #51

When I was taken to the bush, I was handed to the commander and my work was to cook food for the rebels. They could leave me behind to cook whenever they go for a mission of attacking the government forces. Respondent #52

I was arrested when I went to the garden. They found me together with my two sisters then they arrested us and took us to the bush. Upon arrival to the bush, they gave my eldest sister as the wife of their commander. Respondent #54

After we were abducted, the rebels separated me with my father. My father was taken to different location. I was terribly beaten and the clothes I put on were removed out and I was forced to moved naked and barefooted. I was forced to do domestic work such as cooking, washing clothes, fetching water and so on. In addition to that domestic work, I was assigned with security role of going to the enemy side and monitor their movements. If government forces are coming, I could run and inform the rebels. Respondent #55

There were a lot of bad things done to me. My clothes were all removed including the shoes where I got pricked with thorns and I was really treated badly. I used to be a bodyguard of a woman rebel who was with the rebels and was senior to me. Respondent #57

Domestic work within the general context of armed groups as explained by Devov, 2010 is often regarded as peripheral and insignificant. These peripheral and insignificant roles performed by the girl soldiers contributed to the successful operations of SSNLM and SPLIO who lacked resources in form of manpower but must rely on the girls for their own success and survival.

Sexually Exploitation and Slavery

The girls interviewed reported sexual exploitation from the onset of their abduction throughout their stay in the bush. Since they worked as bodyguards of the commanders and performed domestic chores, the forceful provision of sexual services became part of their duty to perform- hence, they returned home with children of unknown fathers.

The girls interviewed remembered the abuses:

I was treated very badly after abduction. The rebels five of them raped me by force and I was also forced to cook for them. Respondent #67

Yes- I have a child I was impregnated in the bush. I don't know the father, the rebel who raped me. Respondent #6

Yes- I have one child. I don't know the father it was through rape by the rebels in the bush. Respondent #3

Yes- I have two children. I don't know the father. I got them through rape by the rebels. Respondent #4

Yes- I have twin. I don't know their father it was through rape by the rebels. Respondent #5

Yes- I have three children. Two I got in the bush, and I don't know the father. The third one I know the father I got married when back and I know the father in Yambio. Respondent #7

Yes- I have only this first-born child but I don't know the father. I got the baby in the bush. Respondent #13

Yes- I have one child but I don't know the father, it was through rape by the rebels in the bush. Respondent #22

I have one child – I got the husband from the bush. He was a bodyguard of commander Bereka. He got killed in the bush. Respondent #30

Yes – one child- I don't know the father of the first one it was through rape by the rebels in the bush, but I know the one whom I am carrying his baby through this pregnancy now. Respondent #38

After abduction I was raped that is why I conceived with these two children. I could also carry heavy loads, cook, and fetch water and loot people property. Respondent #70

The girls apart from being sexually exploited by the rebels through rapes, they were also distributed by force as bush wives. They became mere sexual property of the rebels SPLAIO and SSNLM which was tantamount to sexual slavery. Hence, they returned home with bush children and due to economic crisis caused by the war, they were unable to cater for themselves and their parentless children.

Military activities

Military activities formed a central role of the girls 'soldiers. The girls reported being involved in activities of spying, forceful killing, looting and physical combats Infront line with the government troops:

I was tied and thrown in jail. My work was security and sometimes we are deployed to go to town to raid food especially when there was hunger. I could go ahead, and the rebel could follow me. Whenever we reach to a home, I could first reach home request water and when they are giving me water my people the men-men referring to the rebels could immediately appear and do the looting. Respondent #24

While in the bush with the rebels, I was assigned to gather information in town. They could send me to gather information and report to them the information accurately. Other works include cooking for the rebels and doing any assignment assigned by the commanders. Respondent #53

We were five girls who were captured at the same time. When we reached to the bush, there is a place called Madebe. We spent one week there, and we suffered with hunger. We were told to go and loot food. Caution was put that if you come back bringing shoes, you will eat that shoe, what they needed was only food. One girl came back looted shoes but the rest of us brought food. She was then forced to eat the shoes, when she refused to eat, she was shot in front of us. From there we were now left four, we stayed in this place called

Lungusu. The commander was bad, if he just doesn't like you, he picks the gun and shoots you off. We stayed there until we came to Birisi where the rebel who impregnated me got killed. Respondent #41

After they abducted me, they forced me to carry heavy loads of the looted items. It was too heavy for me to carry. While I was there with rebels I was put in charge of security, I go ahead of the rebels to monitor the situation and inform them accordingly. Respondent #44

Yes, I participated in fighting with the Government army. Respondent #2& Respondent #70

The rebels mistreated me. My work was a bodyguard of the commander, cook food and wash clothes. Respondent #3

When I was taken to the bush my role was to take care of the big commander as his bodyguard. Respondent #49

When I was taken to the bush my eyes were blindfolded until I reached to the rebels' base then they opened my eyes. My immediate work was to spy around and inform the rebels on the government's activities. Respondent # 56

Although the girls were assigned to do domestic chores, they were also assigned to loot, bodyguard commanders and trained as spies. This indicates that the two rebels' groups lack military power to execute their military activities appropriately.

Trauma and Experiences of Atrocities in the armed conflict

While the participants explained that after abduction in the bush, they were forcefully given domestic tasks such as fetching water, cooking, wash clothes, shine shoes, carry loads/porters, washing plates, being bodyguards and at night were sexually raped by commanders and other male rebels; their traumatic exposure reached to climax when they saw dead bodies, killed fellow colleagues, and witnessed other atrocities. These experiences instead victimized and traumatized them more:

Yes, I saw dead bodies and was forced to kill someone. To me it was very bad to see dead bodies that made me to cry as I have never seen this before, but the rebels could beat me instead to stop crying. It was not a good thing to do by killing somebody; it was just a mind of bad people. Respondent #64

Yes, I saw people being killed. Witnessing killings to me was something too bad to remember. Respondent #3

Yes, I saw people killed. Witnessing people being killed to me was something bad and terrible. Respondent #4

I saw only dead bodies. The dead bodies frightened me a lot. Respondent #10

I did not witness people killed but I saw only dead bodies. When I saw the dead bodies, it made me cry and I got afraid. Respondent #11

Yes, I saw people killed. When they killed that person in front of me the commander told me to go outside, and it disturbs me a lot. Respondent #13

Yes, I saw people killed and witnessing people killed to me was something horrible. I was also told to kill someone then when I tried to refuse, they pointed the gun on me wanted to kill me instead. It was bad thing to my life. Respondent #17

Yes, I saw people killed. Someone was killed in front of me through cutting off his throat with a knife. Witnessing someone killed was frightening thing and in fact I was so afraid on that. I didn't kill someone, but I was forced to beat someone and if I refused, they were going to kill. It was bad thing to me to remember. Respondent #18

Yes, I saw killings. They gave me a gun, then I was trembling, then they took the gun from me and shot the person and another one said let me kill someone with a knife, but I refused, and one rebel wanted to beat me then his colleague told him to leave me am still small girl. The meaning was a bad memory to me. Respondent #21

Yes, I saw killing of my father. The killing kept me thinking of my father as I am now an orphan and yet I keep seeing others with parent. Respondent #25

I saw dead bodies. After seeing the dead bodies, I was also thinking the same way they will kill me like those already killed. Respondent #34

Yes, I saw killings. The picture of killings tormented me a lot and often when I think of that it disturbs me.

Respondent #41

Yes, I saw killings and I also killed two of them. They wanted to rape me by force, and I decided to shoot them. When I was in the bush, witnessing killing was something good but now when I returned home and remember those acts, I become frightened and afraid. Respondent #42

Yes, the rebels have a big hole and every night they could kill people and throw them in that hole. When I saw all those things happening, I was fearing thinking that I will also be treated the same as the people killed and thrown into the hole. I keep dreaming on those atrocities. Respondent # 49

Yes, somebody was slaughtered in front of me. It was a bad practice which I was scared of. I was told to kill somebody and that if I refused, they were going to kill me. I then took the stick and started people that person until he died. All these killings were bad practices to do. It was because of fear that led me to kill him. Respondent #51

Yes, I witnessed killings. Witnessing dead bodies was something bad and not good to see. I was given a gun to shoot someone then because of fear, I just fired and did not kill him, but someone was called to finally kill him. I was very sad on that experience of killing someone. Respondent #55

Yes, I witnessed killing of somebody. They usually collect girls to kill people. Witnessing killings was a bad exposure to me in life. Respondent #61

Yes, I witnessed killings, and I was forced to kill someone. It was not something good to do but it was due to fear that I did that. Witnessing killings and seeing dead bodies on the ground was a very strange thing to me because at home here if somebody died, he/she could be buried and mourned to. I was really not happy on that. Respondent #63

It is within this context that, though the girl soldiers obeyed the instructions given by the commanders to do the atrocities of killings, they revealed the psychological trauma that they coped up with through traditional approaches, prayers and counselling.

METHODOLOGY

Data Source and Sampling

The sample of this research consisted of 71 former girl soldiers in Yambio town of defunct Gbudue State in Western Equatoria who were undergoing reintegration process during the interviews' time. The Western Equatoria region was purposively selected for this study because compared to other parts of the country where children were recruited by warring groups; it has the highest number of girl child soldiers and the 71 former girl child soldiers interviewed were part of them in the ranks of both South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM) with bigger number of over 63.53% follows by Sudan People Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLAIO) with 20.0%. The data was collected by the researcher with full assistance of State Coordinator of National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (NDDRC) who was familiar with the locations of the former child soldiers. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted when peace agreement was signed with other rebel group South Sudan National Liberation Movement (SSNLM), another round of peace agreement with main rebel group Sudan People Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLAIO) being revitalized after dishonouring the previous agreements and fighting on going with other rebel groups in South Sudan.

The 71 former girl soldiers were selected in this study using purposive and snowball sampling techniques through Tindoko Vocational Training Center and in within households in Yambio, defunct Gbudue State of South Sudan. Tindoko Vocational Training Center for former child soldiers was constructed by donors as part of its assistance to complete the final stage of reintegration program. After getting approval, the researcher conducted interviews for the 71 female participants. The average age of former girl child soldiers was 16.0, with an age range of 13 to 20 while average age of the same interviewees at the beginning of the 6-year civil war was 13.4.

Interviews

The qualitative interview methods employed include semi-structured individual interviews, focus groups discussions. During the interviews, recordings were available. Semi-structured individual interviews were chosen to ensure sufficient time to explore the girl soldiers' situation, thus providing detailed and personal information. This method provides, moreover, the necessary flexibility to further explore issues raised by individual informants and to seek verification of whether the researcher had understood the informant correctly if statements were unclear (Vandermause, and Fleming, 2011, 367). Individual interviews were supplemented with focus group discussions led by two former girl soldiers. Focus groups were seen as appropriate because of its interactive nature which encourages participants to challenge, reaffirm, adjust, and re-develop each other's opinions (Barbour, 2007, 65). Allowing participants to share and discuss with each other is also likely to result in greater depth than what is found in individual interviews (Smithson, 2000, 116). The last reason for conducting focus group discussions was a desire to "give back or reciprocate with the participants" (Creswell, 2007, 15). Focus group discussions may benefit participants as it creates an arena for empowerment and learning (Linhorst, 2002, 208). It has also been argued that focus groups may have a social support function (Peek and Fothergill, 2009, 31; Tonheim, 2013, 33).

Since there are very limited publications on qualitative study on former girl soldiers' experiences and how they perceived the process of reintegration, the researcher developed the interview guide to explore the perceptions of former girl child soldiers on the reintegration program. The psychological risk of participants related to their bush life experiences that could have occurred during the interview was minimized since the whole interview process was conducted in the premises of the ongoing reintegration process where interviewees could be monitored and receive medical attention as required. It took approximately 40 minutes to an hour to interview an individual respondent. The interviews for the 71 were recorded and the verbatim responses transcribed and entered into NVIVO 12 Plus for data analysis.

The perspectives of the former girl soldiers, the story they tell about their return home, is the major area of interest of this study. The research design is inspired by phenomenological thinking, consequently qualitative in nature, and aims at describing the world as experience by the former girl soldiers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, 18). The underlying principle of qualitative interviewing, as with phenomenology, is one of respect for people's knowledge, values, and experiences.

Field Work

The fieldwork includes three locations in Yambio in the defunct Gbudue State-Centre of Trauma Counselling (CTC) (urban), Akorogbodi (semi-urban), and Tindoka (rural/village). Data collection took place from December 2018 to February 2019 and from April to May 2019. During this period, the researcher mostly carried out his research in the established child Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program in the defunct Gbudue State and with the help of the respondents whom he employed others as his research assistants, it helps to build trust to their fellow colleagues queuing for interview.

All the individual interviews were conducted in English, Arabic and Zande in collaboration with the interpreter. Venues were chosen to give privacy to research participants. Individual Interviews took place in a room made available through the Matron of Centre of Trauma Counselling (CTC), while other individual interviews and focus group discussions in two locations (Akorogbodi & Tindoka) took place under the trees. Individual interviews with former girl soldiers lasted between 40 and one hour. Since the focus group sessions gathered all the girls at once, the researcher tried to conduct most of the individual interviews on the same day in order to not having to ask them to come back another day. This was viewed particularly important for the girls who have children and live far from the venue of focus groups and interviews. This could, however, have made them more tired during the individual interviews, and, thus, potentially have impacted on the richness of that data.

The girls interviewed were asked about their abduction experiences by the rebels. Out of the 71 girls interviewed, two (2) stated they had joined 'voluntarily', while the majority had been forcefully conscripted. Sixteen (16) girls participated in military fights with government forces. Majority of girls performed roles of fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking and were sexually exploited and abused. The girls experienced rape throughout their life in the bush. As a result, eight girls become child mothers.

Four focus groups were organized and were conducted once in December 2018. The groups were made of and facilitated by former girl soldiers and consisted of between five to six participants. To ensure the natural flow of the focus group discussions it was deemed important that Arabic, Zande local language and English were languages used. The researcher was present guiding the actual discussion. Losing control of how the group discussion developed was seen as a small loss related to how interpretation back and forth from Arabic, Zande to English during the discussions would fragment and negatively affect the natural flow of the conversation.

Permission was first obtained with full consent from each participant. Informed consent is one of the central norms in ethical principles guiding research with human beings. Information was also shared orally, the reason being to avoid embarrassment of illiterate respondents if having problems reading written information. Before agreeing to participate, the former girl soldiers were informed about reason of study, and how the results would be used and disseminated.

It was made clear that the research results would be shared with reintegration programs in defunct Gbudue State, South Sudan. It was emphasized that these potential improvements would not have a direct impact on the girls' personal situation, but hopefully be beneficial for future girl soldiers returning 'home'. Anonymity of information provided by respondents was considered an ethical prerequisite. Without being guaranteed anonymity many respondents would be reluctant to talk openly about their lives and opinions. Although the girls and other child mothers in the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were encouraged to keep the content of the conversation within the group, the researcher could not guarantee that any of the girls would talk to others about what they had heard. This is the very reason why some scholars argue that focus groups are inappropriate when researching sensitive topics (Krueger and M. A. Casey, 2009, 20).

Data Analysis

The method used to analyse the data in this study comes from a revised version of Van-Kaam phenomenology method of analysis presented by Moustakas. In adherence to the requirement of this analysis method, is the use of a Moustakas' step calls horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). As the requirements of this step, the researcher read all the transcripts and treated all the data having equal value and meaning. After reading all the transcripts, the next step in Moustakas method is the process of condensing the data and identifying what he terms invariant horizons or meaning units (Moustakas, 1994). The identified invariant horizons or meaning units were those responses the researcher got from the participants to be relevant to our research questions.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this article is to examine the pathway of girl soldiers into the South Sudan conflict and the roles they played in the two rebels' camps. To a greater extent like other parts of the world, the girls were abducted and after abduction were assigned similar logistical roles. Participants of this study explained that after abduction in the bush they were forcefully given domestic tasks such as fetching water, cooking, wash clothes, shine shoes, carry loads/porters, washing plates, being bodyguards and at night were sexually raped by commanders and other male rebels. Those girls who were sent by the rebels to spy in town decided not to return to the bush

RECOMMENDATION

Findings from this qualitative study among former girl child soldiers in the defunct Gbudue State, South Sudan explain the significance of the involvement of donor community in supporting realities of the presence of small girls within rebel groups. The girl soldiers performed tasks different to boys as they experience sexual violence, harassment and so on. The girl soldiers experienced forced bush marriage endangering them to reproductive sexual related issues including early pregnancy and child motherhood. Unfortunately, when wars ended and following their release, the lives of girl soldiers never improved. Though back to the community they face difficulties related to their gender roles as they reintegrate back to community. Government and international community should therefore ban recruitment of girl soldiers into armed forces and should also make sure they are supported as they restore their lives in the communities.

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