

Pathways of Disarmament and the Challenges of Unmaking of a Girl Soldier in South Sudan

Lujang John Jangaling, PhD

Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the analysis of the girl soldiers' pathways out of violence in the rebels' camps and the identification of the difficulties as experienced by former girl soldiers as they transition from the military to civilian life. This research adopted phenomenological research approach. The source of the primary data was from interviews of 71 former girl soldiers who participated in the South Sudan's civil war in the defunct Gbudue State and who were attending vocational training as part of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program undertaken at Tindoko Interim Care Centre for Children. The 71 girls were selected through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. This study found that girl soldiers exit armed forces either through an official demobilization process or by escaping on their own (self-demobilization). Unlike the official demobilization process in different parts of the world have typically had a military-and security-oriented approach where the surrender of weapons serves as a criterion to be included in the DDR programmes, the Child DDR programs in South Sudan seek to pave ways in which former girl soldiers are reintegrated into communities by providing them with suitable programmes in their civilian lives. Though they the ex-girl soldiers successfully returned home, they were confronted with frustration as they never received what were promised to them during the disarmament stage. Finally, the former girl soldiers experienced huge challenges of social reintegration into the community as they were feared as rebels, unequally treated in the family and they perceived the child DDR programmes into different views: one group viewed the reintegration programme as a betrayal because of the hindrances of many environmental factors and they considered themselves as unequally treated in the community and the second group who self-demobilized viewed the reintegration programme as a redeemer because they received what they wanted, and they considered themselves as equally treated.

Keywords: Disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, rebels, girl soldier, South Sudan

INTRODUCTION

Children exit armed forces either through an official demobilization process or by escaping on their own (self-demobilization). Official demobilization process in different parts of the world have typically had a military-and security-oriented approach where the surrender of weapons may serve as a criterion to be included in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes (Tonheim, 2014; Milfrid, 2017; Knight & Ozerdem, 2004). While such criteria of surrender of weapons may exclude men, women, boys and girls alike, it affects more strongly girl soldiers who often have multiple roles and are only partially participating in active combat (Milfrid, 2014; Denov, 2008). The 'Child DDR' programmes in South Sudan seek to pave ways in which former child combatants are reintegrated into communities by providing them with suitable programs in their civilian lives. The problem is that the Child DDR programmes are underfunded and not fully completed and thus affected the process of reintegrating former child soldiers into communities.

Despite the presence of international legal framework towards DDR programmes, challenges still remain especially in the implementation of DDR processes that successfully tackle specific concerns of former girl soldiers in post-war environment. The former girl soldiers therefore experience problems of physical, psychosocial and trauma of the treatment in the bush, within the family and society at large. The specific requirements of these former girl combatants are often not taken into consideration during initial DDR stages, yet the DDR program is supposed to facilitate and provide former girl soldiers with reintegration assistance as they pave path of transition to civilian lives socially, politically and economically as well as in post- conflict environment (Denov, 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review indicates that when the girls are ignored by the official demobilization process, they are left to pursue the alternatives of escaping on their own. While the exclusion of girl soldiers in the official process appears to be the main reason why girls self-demobilize, many girls also fear stigmatization and prefer returning home on their own (Milfrid, 2017; Hobson, 2005; Beth, 2004). By trying to escape, the girls take great risks; being caught implies severe punishment and sometimes death (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2011). Demobilizing on your own also impacts on the return 'home'. The situation of self-demobilized child soldiers "remains particularly precarious" and these children often miss to receive official certificates of release that would make them to get access to reintegration assistance (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2011). Beneficiaries of reintegration programmes are commonly selected from the official demobilization list and former child soldiers are, thus, required to present demobilization certificates to benefit from assistance. As most programmes, do not attempt to identify and include self-demobilized children, demobilizing outside the formal process often means no reintegration assistance at all.

Girl child combatants have different needs and war experiences which differ significantly with women associated with rebels though they share element of gender oppression (Thomas & Bond, 2015; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2015). Girl child combatants might have been greatly affected due to tender ages (Haer & Bohmelt, 2018). More so, former girl soldiers experienced sexual abuses and they returned home as child mothers being impregnated by force. Even after the end of the conflicts, girls often find themselves in awkward situation: though they are united with their family members, they are often stigmatized due to insults about sexual exploitations by rebels; very often they are disowned by immediate family members and community due to atrocities, unwanted pregnancy, allegiance to rebel commanders, constructed HIV/AIDs among others (Mazurana & Phoebe, 2016). Furthermore, girl child soldiers may lack emotional or social resources to cope up with the challenges they face (Haer & Bohmelt, 2018). Finally, girl soldiers most of the times are excluded from the reintegration programs because international community remains still unaware on the recruitment of girl soldiers and the roles they perform within the armed groups (Haer & Bohmelt, 2018). Identifying issues of exclusion of girl soldiers may be crucial in DDR programming which aims in helping former girl soldiers in post- conflict environment. Since many girls are either excluded from the official process or opt to self-demobilize, their situation is particularly vulnerable.

Significance of the theme

Disarmament concept is the first step of the DDR process and occurs in the same place as demobilization, but this may not always be the case. In some cases, though weapons are not supposed to be used, stored, or even destroyed some individuals or groups may again use them. On the other hand, some groups may perceive disarmament as synonymous to surrendering, and therefore, appropriate language and viable options need to be sought to mitigate this stage. In the immediate post-conflict phase, disarmament is a vital confidence-building measure toward continuing the peace process. Over the long term, it will help consolidate peace (Cornelis, 2018).

Disarmament means small arms, ammunitions, explosives, and light and heavy weapons of both fighters

including civilians are collected, documented, collected and disposed according to the terms of agreement (United Nations, 2014). The concept of disarmament simply means that weapons are removed and managed in conflict or after conflict. This disarmament process required complete physical removal of weapons so that belligerents don't incite violence and wage war again. The process of disarmament therefore means that complete removal of weapons in the hands of fighters so that they can't incite violence and wage war again. Finally, with the absence of arms, conducive environment is created where combatants build common security and confidence in the peace process (UN, 2007).

“Micro-disarmament” means that small arms and light weapons (SALW) are collected, controlled and disposed and development of responsible arms management programs. The responsible arms management includes reducing the production, procurement, and transfer of arms and enacting regional measures to restrict the flow of weapons across boundaries (Cornelis, 2018).

Objectives of the Study

This article was undertaken with the following two objectives in view:

1. To analyse the pathways of disarmament used by girl soldiers to exit violence in the rebels' camps in South Sudan.
2. To explore the difficulties faced by ex-girl soldiers while transitioning from the military to civilian life in South Sudan

METHODOLOGY

The research is based on primary data of information and adopted Phenomenological research approach. The source of the data used in this study emanates from interviews of 71 former girl soldiers who participated in the South Sudan's civil war in the defunct Gbudue State and were attending vocational training as part of DDR programme undertaken at Tindoko Interim Care Centre for Children which was contracted by the NDDRC with support from partners. 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 SPLA IO 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 within households in Yambio, defunct Gbudue State of South Sudan. Tindoko Vocational Training Center for former child soldiers constructed by donors as part of its assistance to complete the final stage of reintegration of the DDR programme. The sample consisted of 71 females. The average age of former girl soldiers was 16.0, with an age range of 12 to 20 while average age of the same interviewees at the beginning of the 6-year civil war was 13.4.

• The Pathways out of violence in the rebels' camps

The pathways out of violence in the rebels' camps fall in two ways, through an official demobilization process and by escaping on their own (self-demobilization).

Official demobilization process

The literature on DDR process shows conceptual diversity in the reintegration component. Reintegration is considered as part of the DDR process commonly known as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration processes. However, the literature also includes another R which either represents 'Rehabilitation' (Basini, 2013) or 'Reinsertion' (Eyborstottir, 2016) or Repatriation, (Basini, 2013) both

using the acronym DDRR. The universal acceptable principles governing DDR programme with children is that stipulated in the Paris Principles of 2007. These principles define “child reintegration” as:

The process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation. Sustainable reintegration is achieved when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured. This process aims to ensure that children can access their rights, including formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm (United Nations, 2007).

The ‘Child DDR’ programmes in South Sudan seek to pave ways in which former child combatants are reintegrated into communities by providing them with suitable programs in their civilian lives. The problem is that the Child DDR programmes are underfunded and not fully completed and thus affected the process of reintegrating former child soldiers into communities. The girls revealed their frustration on the broken promises during the disarmament and reintegration process as follows:

The former girl soldiers mentioned that the international agencies and government DDR team played a significant role in motivating them to disarm and undergo current phase of the DDR programme. Informants had been promised assistance of food items and a full bag of assorted clothing if they left the camp. Other informants said that the DDR teams travelled to the camps in the bushes convinced and brought them home. They promised that they will be taken care of and all their suffering will come to an end. The International community played greater role in the release of the child soldiers and poured in funding but due to mismanagement from the government side things fall apart and it is only the International NGOs that were seen as the solution to the economic situation caused by the war.

For other participants, their intention to disarm and hope in the DDR programme was encouraged by the promises of assistance at time of disarmament. The International Organizations gave hope and promised to them assistance during disarmament.

Self-demobilization

Self- demobilization is the process in which the girl soldiers escaped home on their own from the rebels’ camps prior the official demobilization process. The roles assigned to the girl soldiers and cooperation by individual rebels acted as avenues for escaping from the rebels’ camps. There were various ways that made the girl soldiers escaped from the rebels’ camps:

The respondents mentioned something in common that when they were sent to fetch water, wash clothes of the commanders, collect firewood or to loot food items in town, then this gave them as an opportunity for them to self-demobilize until they reached home or when they were intercepted by the government forces then they were put into the vehicles and taken home.

Another way of escape was the relationship between some of the rebels and the girl soldiers. Some rebel commanders were very much sympathetic to the small girls or because they were related. Some commanders could escort them home and they ended up surrendering themselves to the government or when they escorted them closer to the vicinity of the home, then allowed the girls to continue going home on their own.

The respondents who got impregnated in the bush became helpless. Since they were unable to perform their duties, they were told to go home and deliver but must report back to their bases after successful delivery. When they gave birth, they remained home.

The fourth method of self-demobilization was at night when the rebels were sleeping. The respondents of this category mentioned that they took a greater risk at night they were lucky sometimes to have met a vehicle heading to town that managed to assist them until they reached home.

Finally, when the government forces attacked their base, this provide them a big opportunity of escape because of them were providing auxiliary duties and were kept behind when the rebels were on engagement with the government forces.

Though the girls self-demobilized themselves, upon reaching home they were taken to the reintegration centre and joined the colleagues who were officially released to undergo reintegration process. They had however mixed observations during the reintegration process

Becoming a civilian: The Experiences of transition from military to civilian life

The transition from military to civilian life became a daunting challenge couple with economic situation that hit harder the whole country. The former girl soldiers narrated their experiences on the social reintegration process, attitude, and treatment they experienced as they returned home and perceptions of the extent of their reintegration.

Desire to Gain Skills and Knowledge to Improve Lives

With fifty nine percent (59.76%) reported primary level education and sixteen percent (16.47%) in secondary school level, it's evidenced that the former girl soldiers witnessed a greater loss of education. The former child soldiers in this study expressed high expectations prior the reintegration process and they were hopeful that the DDR programme was going to improve their livelihoods through the skills and knowledge they acquired from Tindoka Vocational training center.

Every participant mentioned something about assistance to be provided by government or any well-wishers to be able to meet their basic daily needs. Clearly faced with the economic suffering, one participant stated, "The government should assist me with accommodation, food or paying my children in schools (Respondent #41). In addition, another participant also appealed for government for assistance, "Let the government provide assistance to me because I don't have anybody to assist me" (Respondent #6). One also said "I need accommodation to sleep on. Currently I stay with my sister and when the husband comes it became hard for me. They also stole my clothes I have only this one. I am therefore requesting clothes and food to be provided to me by any well-wisher" (Respondent #7). Finally, a child mother pleaded for assistance for her small baby. "I have a baby who does not walk and does not have even a father; I am looking forward to be assisted with my baby" (Respondent #4).

Furthermore, after their completion of the vocational skills training, they acquired necessary skills that made them to have fervent desires to start small businesses. One of the participants stated, "*I would like the government to assist me with money to set up my business and now that my mind is okay, I would be able to assist myself*" (Respondent #68)

Likewise, another participant reiterated the desire for employment to earn a living. *I need the government to assist me with jobs to earn money and take care of myself* (Respondent#25).

In general, the girls who returned home with bush children were faced with difficulties in getting their basis needs. This is due to the burden imposed on them as child mothers and yet there were no assistance coming from relatives or government due to the hyperinflation in the country.

Dissatisfaction with the Girl Child Reintegration Programme

Majority of the former girl soldiers expressed dissatisfaction with the reintegration programme. The reasons of their dissatisfaction with child reintegration programme were mainly centred on two sub-themes: Broken Promises and Obstacles. Most of them mentioned that they were dissatisfied with the reintegration programme because they did not receive the reintegration assistance as promised to them when they were disarmed.

One of them testified as below:

I would like to request for any support to help me with my child. The social workers have even stopped coming to visit me and to ask about my horrible situation with my child (Respondent #68).

The former girl soldiers viewed the benefits for reintegration as important to them. Majority of the participants were not satisfied with their reintegration programme which according to them had given them more suffering compared when they were still in the bush.

Echoing this sentiment, participants expressed dissatisfaction of lack of peace as another challenge and the consequences of the conflict to the children: *I would like the government to pay me my school fees and also to protect us from the war because we saw young people who died in the bush. If there is no peace the war will finish young people and there would be no future for children (Respondent #64)*. Another participant also appeals to Government to bring peace. *"I would like the government to stop the war and bring peace so that we can be able to move freely. I also like the government to pay my school fees" (Respondent #61)*. One expressed happiness in form of peace *"I would like the government to bring peace; it is only peace that will make me happy" (Respondent #67)*.

One crucial observation from the participants was a continued endless conflict in the country which created suffering, fear and state of helplessness which made them as not yet fully reintegrated in the community.

Perception of the ongoing Child DDR Program at Tindiko Vocational Training

After experiencing reintegration programme and their assessment on the degree to which they were reintegrated into communities, the former girl soldiers' perceptions resulted into two categories: "No reintegration" and "Partial reintegration." One of the factors that made some participants to experience no reintegration was economic hardships. One participant said, *"I received Food and I also raised complaint to them about accommodation but not yet answered positively" (Respondent #20)*. Participants who expressed themselves not reintegrated were majorly due to the concept of accommodation and education which was captured by this participant's remark:

"I need the government to assist me with accommodation and paying my school fees" (Respondent #22). One participant also conquered to this concept as she said. *"The government should assist me with accommodation, food or paying my children in schools" (Respondent #41)*.

In addition to that, the current reintegration seems not really fulfilling the dreams of the participants. One has this to say: *"Government can assist me with education. This tailoring thing here at Tindoka cannot help me much in future. It needs education to help me much in future" (Respondent #19)*. Another participant also comments *"I plan to go and finish my senior 4 and I appeal for assistance from the Governor's Office to help me" (Respondent #14)*.

There were negative cases on the theme of perception of reintegration and especially from the respondents from the four focus group discussions. While bigger number of former girl child soldiers reported partial or

no reintegration, while some of them reported that they were fully reintegrated were positive about the reintegration programme. According to their perceptions on reintegration program one sub- team emerged fully Reintegration. One respondent from FGD3 stated *“The child DDR programme is perfect because when we were in the bush, we don’t get training, food or other good things. Now when we returned, they provided us with food and give us training on tailoring (Respondent #1, FGD #3, Former girl Soldiers). Another respondent from FGD #2 also felt that the reintegration programme is progressing well.*

The child DDR programme that we are currently experiencing with this sewing of machines is progressing well. We come in every morning, and they teach us how to sew properly (Respondent #1, FGD #2, Former girl Soldiers). In the same group one commented “The DDR is good because when we were in the bush, we don’t have food but now we can eat, even we don’t know how to sew clothes but now we can sew clothes by ourselves through the DDR program (Respondent #2, FGD #2, Former girl Soldiers).

Another respondent from FGD#4 shared her experience on the reintegration program. *“My experience is that the DDR programme provided us with soaps and other essentials in our lives” (Respondent #3, FGD #4, Former girl Soldiers). In the same group one of them also stated “The child DDR programme since we came back from the bush it is ok. It also helps us to be given things like bicycles and clothes and it still ongoing well (Respondent #1, FGD #4, Former girl soldiers).*

The different views on the satisfaction of reintegration arose due to child parental responsibility. The returned girl soldiers without children were easily welcomed in the community without discrimination and considered themselves as fully reintegrated and were happy with the DDR program compared to those who returned with bush children who faced harassment, insults, and discrimination by the neighbors, and they perceived themselves as partially or no reintegrated in the community.

Family and Community daily Treatment

Family and community daily treatment demonstrated the degree of acceptance or rejection. Majority of the former girl soldiers felt accepted in the communities and received equal treatment despite the economic challenges they faced. This finding of community acceptance has similarities and relationship with the previous study in Sierra Leone that studied factors that helped in the recovery of former child soldiers traumatized by war. Betancourt et al; (2010) study found out correlations between the following elements: improvement in the community acceptance and confidence, prosocial attitudes and reduction of depression and another association between school retention and greater prosocial attitudes. In this study, former child soldiers who felt accepted in the community experienced positive attitudes and interacted freely with family members and the communities but consequently, they perceived themselves as partially reintegrated due to their reciprocal relationships between themselves and their communities.

At the beginning I was treated differently because they said I was having bush life mentality but now they have changed their thinking and they treat me well. The example was that when I first came, I was wild beating my younger brothers and sisters but now I’m relating well with them (Respondent #4).

When asked how they were treated by their parents in relation to your brothers and sisters who did not join armed groups, a quite number of participants expressed feelings of not being received and treated equally to the rest of their brothers and sisters who did not join armed groups. One sub- theme emerged unequal treatment. One participant stated, *“I received different treatment compared to my brothers and sisters because the family members give me more things than the rest” (Respondent #45). To others different treatment relates to parental obligation of paying school fees. One participant said, “There is a slightly different from the brothers and sisters who did not join armed group because my parents paid their school fees and other requirements but to my side they did not” (Respondent #66).*

Interpersonal relation also mentioned as unequal treatment witnessed by former girl child soldiers. One stated: *“There is different in relation and sometimes I will just feel like going back to the bush and join the rebels again”* (Respondent #17).

One area of no equal treatment is from former friends who disown the former girl child soldiers as rebels. One said: *I am not treated well with my other members of the community and especially my best friends who now disown me thinking I am a rebel and maybe coming to abduct them* (Respondent #67). Fear of associating with the former girl soldiers traumatized them more. One participant expressed *“They are treating me bad. Sometimes they keep insulting me that look at this rebel who came from the bush”* (Respondent #50). Another also said the same on the level of fear demonstrated by the brothers and sisters about her: *I am treated equally with my brothers and sisters but other still fear me that I am a rebel, and I may influence the rest negatively* (Respondent #56). Finally, the bitterness in them also makes them feared. One participant commented *“They treated me well, but they feared me because the time when I first came from the bush my mind was not good. If anyone talks nonsense to me, I will just beat him/her and I feel like to kill”* (Respondent #42).

Environmental factors and behaviors of the parents made the former girl soldiers unequally treated in the family. One of them said *“Yes there is a difference in treatment from my maternal aunt. If she got drunk, she could abuse me and everybody at home including even my dead mother. The way she keeps insulting me about my life in the bush reminds me of my experiences as a child soldier”* (Respondent #68).

Finally, participants expressed warm reception and good relation. One negative case emerged i.e., Full family and equal treatment. *I feel accepted by my family members because anything I request; they provide to me including paying my school fees* (Respondent #70). One of them also stated: *“I received equal treatment by my parents in relation to our brothers and sisters who did not join armed groups”* (Respondent #5). Acceptance to the family and good treatment creates jealousy from the rest of the family members. One of the participants mentioned. *I feel accepted by my family members, but some are still not in good term with me because my daddy takes care of me well and the rest are jealous on that”* (Respondent #69). Another participant stated: *“I receive equal treatment with my brothers and sisters who did not join armed groups. If I feel disadvantaged I will just think that because of my being in the bush with the rebels”* (Respondent #11). One participant felt that if she is badly treated at home she would just escape from home. *We are equally treated well but if I am treated badly I will just escape from home*(Respondent #10).

Two factors explained the views of the girls that made them as unequally treated at the family level. One is the environment where the guardians or parents always drink a lot and shout at them and being taken care of my relatives after losing both parents who might not be able to cater for all the dependents frustrated them more. The group that felt equally treated was those who self-demobilized as were initially kept in hiding for fear of government to have knowledge on them prior the reintegration program. Here, everything was provided for them, and they considered themselves equally treated.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, young girl soldiers leave the rebel bases through formal channels of release or demobilization or escaping on their own. The former girl soldiers in South Sudan reported the influence of external motivators that made them to hope for after the return home. The external motivators mentioned include the International NGOs, their colleagues and the reintegration assistance (counselling, scholarship, clothes, food, and vocational skills training) promised to them prior to disarmament or received upon arrival home/reception centre . Participants in this study some of them said they self- demobilized themselves through escaping from the armed groups while others were officially disarmed when DDR authorities promised reintegration assistance such as scholarship, resettlement basic needs but at the end when getting

reintegrated into the community, they were faced with daunting economic challenges.

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Author:

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ORCID iD: Lujang John Jangaling <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2598-4654>

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AUTHOR

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