

REINTEGRATION OF FEMALE WAR-AFFECTED AND EX-COMBATANTS IN LIBERIA

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Introduction

With the exception of two years, from 1997 to 1999, Liberia was in a constant state of conflict from 1989 until the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in August 2003. Poor governance was the underlying and immediate cause of Liberia's civil war. In a nation with a population of approximately three million people, the protracted war claimed 250 000 lives and displaced over one million people, including hundreds of thousands who fled the country as refugees. It is difficult to exaggerate the devastation that this war had on Liberia's physical, social, political,

economic and governance infrastructures. Liberia was the classic 'failed state' in every respect. All national institutions were destroyed, or so neglected that they were completely non-functional. The central and local governments were virtually non-existent and unable to provide essential military or police security, a fundamental justice system, or even basic services like

Above: Young female Liberian soldiers comprised about 30-40 percent of all the fighting forces in the country.



Poverty and unemployment are significant challenges in Liberia. Here, Liberian women and girls sift through the earth to gather scraps to sell as building material.

water, electricity, road maintenance, and so on.

Liberia's human development indicators reflect the worsened conditions that resulted from the conflict and the collapse of governance institutions. There are no illusions about the challenges that lie ahead. Over 80% of Liberia's population is illiterate and lives below the poverty line; unemployment is estimated at, or above, 70%. Of the population, 35% are malnourished; only 28% are immunised; only 25% have access to safe drinking water; and just 36% have access to sanitation facilities. Almost an entire generation has missed out on formal primary education, learning instead to live by a warlord culture where force is the response to many of life's challenges.¹

The armed conflict that occurred in Liberia can be categorised by two main phases: the first conflict, experienced between 1989 and 1997, and the second, between 1999 and 2003. The armed conflict came to an end in 2003 with the formulation of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1509, which called for the establishment of the United Nations Mission

in Liberia (UNMIL). An interim government was put in place in October 2003, with representations from the various warring factions and civil society groups.

The civil conflict in Liberia, like many other countries ravaged by war on the continent, saw a remarkable abuse of human rights, especially against vulnerable groups such as women and girls. The consequences of the violence and human rights abuses perpetrated against women and girls during the conflict were devastating. Many suffered both physically and mentally from the harsh and inhumane treatment they endured during the war. Often widowed or abandoned, they now remain alone to shoulder overwhelming conditions and responsibilities, with little help to ease their burdens. These women have full responsibility for their children, some having had children as a result of rape.²

Even though many women and girls had no direct participation in physical combat during the war, some of them were associated with the various warring factions for one or more reasons. The reintegration

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needs of such women must be thoroughly considered, as they experience stigmatisation and rejection in their communities.

The Liberia Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) programme categorised such vulnerable females as: women associated with the fighting forces (WAFF), and girls associated with the fighting forces (GAFF). Altogether, they comprised about 30-40% of all fighting forces, or approximately 25 000 to 30 000 in number. The majority of women were forced to participate, although it is estimated that significantly more women opted to participate in the second conflict than in the first. They chose to take up arms to protect themselves from sexual violence, to avenge the death of family members,

because of peer pressure, for material gain, and for survival. Women played key roles as commanders, porters, spies, sex slaves, cooks and mothers.³

Considering the calamity suffered by these vulnerable groups during the conflict, several efforts have been made by relevant actors in the peace process since 2003 to cater to their needs, by rehabilitating and reintegrating them into mainstream life. This is a tedious process, especially considering these women's psychological setbacks and needs. In late 2005, Liberia democratically elected the first female president in Africa. When President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf came into power in January 2006, the government made significant efforts to promote gender equity at all levels of society, and placed female reintegration initiatives



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Microfinance credit programmes enable women to set up small businesses or other productive ventures.



Former women fighters in Liberia's civil war, some of them former sex-slaves for the male soldiers, learn to sew at a vocational training centre in Monrovia, as part of a reintegration programme.

high on its agenda. Since then, the government of Liberia has made tremendous strides in promoting gender issues. It is highly committed to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UNSC Resolution 1325, thus increasing women's participation in the national recovery process and making them economically self-reliant and independent through reintegration opportunities. In this article, the reintegration of the community of war-affected females is addressed independently from female ex-combatants or females associated with the fighting forces.

Reintegration of War-affected Females

Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level. It is part of the general development of a country and is a national responsibility, which usually necessitates long-term external assistance.⁴ With unemployment rates of above

70%, microcredit opportunities are allowing Liberia's low-income households to set up small businesses or engage in other productive ventures. Many war-affected women, caring for their children and with little or no vocational and educational skills, are involved in the Local Enterprise Assistance Program (LEAP), a microfinance programme supported by the Ministry of Finance. A recent study shows that the demand for microfinance has increased. Mainly implemented by LEAP and the American Refugee Council/Liberty Finance, only 11 000 clients – mostly women from various counties in the country – are benefiting from the credit scheme.⁵

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Liberia are also involved in providing business skills for Liberian women. In northern Liberia, for example, loans have been provided through the Women's Economic Empowerment project, funded by the Danish government. The project provides business management skills and microcredit support

for women to enhance their livelihood, and to help revitalise the rural economy. Women eligible for loan facilities are trained in business management skills prior to receiving the loan. The project also provides psychosocial counselling for beneficiaries affected by the trauma of 14 years of conflict. More than 1 000 women have already benefited from this opportunity in Lofa County (northern Liberia) since the start of 2008.⁶ This development is a milestone in the Poverty

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Many women associated with the fighting forces face hostilities, stigmatisation and isolation when they return to their families and communities.

Reduction Strategy (PRS) that is being implemented by the government.⁷

Even though some women have been reintegrated back into society easily due to their high academic qualifications, many lack basic education qualifications and livelihood skills as a result of the long, devastating war. However, the government, along with notable partner organisations, is creating opportunities at all levels to accommodate war-affected females. An educational programme was launched in January 2007 to give Liberian women between the ages of 18 and 35 years, who were interested in joining the Liberia National Police (LNP) but did not meet the requisite qualifications, the opportunity now to do so. In early 2008, Liberia's first all-female class of police officers graduated from the Liberia Police Academy in Monrovia. The training of the 105 females, with support from UNMIL, was a significant step in achieving better gender representation in the LNP. The new female officers, prior to recruitment, completed basic police training through the special educational support programme for female candidates last December. The completion of this all-female class brings to 356 the number of females that have been recruited into the Liberian Police Force, representing nearly 10% of the force. The programme is in line with CEDAW's principles and the mandate of UNSC Resolution 1325.⁸

Many people in Liberia consider formal education to be important for reintegration. Even though there are some adult literacy programmes (ALP), the official age for primary and secondary school is from five to 24 years. From the Rapid Assessment of Learning Space (RALS) conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Ministry of Education and implementing NGO partners in 2004, the total student population in Liberia was found to be 1 007 784 students (of which 47% were female).⁹ Consequently, the adult literacy rate in Liberia remains at around 56%, according to UNICEF.

Reintegration of Females Associated with the Fighting Forces

The main local actor for the reintegration of WAFF is the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR), which works collaboratively with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNMIL and other related actors through the Liberia DDR programme. Together, their mandate is to support the socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants, to promote the social acceptance of ex-combatants into their communities and to equip them with marketable skills and formal education training. Considering gender mainstreaming, these activities are intended to reinforce and support the process of social reintegration of the



Gender equity and female reintegration efforts gained more importance in Liberia when President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf came into power.

war-affected communities to which the ex-combatants return.¹⁰

The reintegration and rehabilitation (RR) component of the DDDR programme that started early in 2005 had several options for disarmed and demobilised (DD) ex-combatants. The programme was supported by a trust fund, managed by UNDP. It ended in October 2007. The funding was completely used, reintegrating more than 70% of the total caseload. The available options included:

- formal education;
- agriculture and vocational skills training;
- apprenticeship (on-the-job training); and
- parallel programmes supported by the European Commission (EC) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).¹¹

For many WAFF, formal education was seen as taking too long, and some women without any education did not feel comfortable in the classroom, as they thought of themselves as too old or out of place to be going to school. Largely, these women opted for vocational skills training in tailoring. They felt more comfortable with this trade as compared to the other available choices, such as brick-building, carpentry, auto mechanics, hairdressing, soap making, welding, and so on.¹²

In 2007, under the UNDP-managed trust fund, 24% of the 30 106 DDDR beneficiaries that opted for vocational training, skills training, apprenticeships and formal education were female ex-combatants.¹³ In late 2007, Norway donated approximately US\$7 million for the reintegration of a remaining estimated 8 789 ex-combatants. Some 2 658 females have now been validated into reintegration programmes, which are to

commence soon. Norway has placed a strong emphasis on the high participation of female ex-combatants in the programme, and for there to be a stronger psychosocial component in this final phase of the RR component.

Challenges

The government of Liberia, along with local and international actors in the peace process, has made significant progress in promoting female reintegration. But reintegration itself is a process that should be voluntarily accepted by the targeted beneficiaries and, unfortunately, there are still many challenges associated with this process.

The socio-economic landscape of a post-conflict country is characterised by the devastation of the country's infrastructure, economy and social fabric. Essential to integrating former fighters into society is providing a mechanism for them to engage productively in a livelihood-producing activity. Initially, the labour market in a conflict-torn country will have a difficult time absorbing not only the flood of new workers looking for employment – such as ex-combatants, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) – but also in determining which markets will be successful.¹⁴

the RR process. They thereby rendered themselves more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abuse and gender-based violence, which remain major problems in Liberia.

Rural to urban migration, due to the protracted civil war and the search for better socio-economic opportunities, is a result of the high level of centralisation within the country. This has significantly slowed down regional or rural reintegration initiatives, which has in turn hampered some vital market demands, such as agricultural and vocational skilled labour, in rural Liberia and the nation as a whole. The recent preliminary results of the national population and housing census, conducted by the Liberia Institute for Statistics and Geo-Information Services (LISGIS) in March 2008, revealed that of the approximately 3.5 million total population of Liberia, more than a million (or a third of the population) live in Monrovia and its environs (or Montserrado County, home to the nation's capital). This has created significant competition for the limited available resources. More than half a million of Montserrado County's population are females, with a very large youth population. With most of these females unskilled and unprepared for long-term economic

SOCIETAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN AND GIRLS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FIGHTING FORCES POSE A THREAT AS WELL. A KEY DETERMINING FACTOR IN A GIRL OR WOMAN'S SUCCESSFUL REINTEGRATION IS WHETHER SHE WAS ACCEPTED BACK INTO HER COMMUNITY

Many WAFF feared the stigmatisation associated with being labelled as a WAFF, and decided that the risk of being associated with the process was higher than any benefit they might receive from it. They therefore chose not to participate. Others were out of the country, too ill to participate, or simply did not know where and when it was happening. Others still feared that they would not be able to travel abroad in the future.¹⁵

Societal attitudes towards women and girls associated with the fighting forces pose a threat as well. A key determining factor in a girl or woman's successful reintegration is whether she was accepted back into her community. Initially, in communities, there were many hostilities towards female combatants and WAFF. They were considered aggressive, and looked down upon by the community – including their own families – particularly if they came back from the war with children. Their return was sometimes seen as an additional burden for their families, and was not always welcomed.¹⁶ As a result, many WAFF did not go through the DD process, and could therefore not go through

reintegration, teenage prostitution as a means of survival has increased. It has also created more room for sexual exploitation and abuse in the capital city and urban Liberia.

Conclusion

Reintegration is a very broad process, and many factors are involved in preventing the reoccurrence of armed conflict. The second Liberian armed conflict, which began in 1999, was believed to have escalated as a result of not considering all the factors involved in the proper reintegration of affected populations from the first conflict. This then created more room for further recruitment. Even though Liberia is now making headway in promoting gender-sensitive reintegration, there are still some lapses and challenges encountered along the way, and security is still highly dependent on the presence of UNMIL.

Recently, the Liberian government has made progress in ensuring that women participate in policy-making at all levels, particularly in the development of

the PRS and county development agendas. Statistics of women's participation from the Ministry of Gender shows that over 10% of active police officers are women, and they occupy 23 of the top positions in the Liberian National Police – including that of the Inspector General. In total, 14 of the 94 members of parliament are women, as well as five of the 15 county superintendents, and two of the five members of the Supreme Court. There are also five female senators. In addition, women head the ministries of Trade, Commerce and Industry, Foreign Affairs and Gender, as well as the president herself being a woman.¹⁷ However, there is still the need for more female participation in the security sector and other private and public sectors.

Even though the government of Liberia, along with other partners, is making some progress in the reintegration of women and girls into mainstream society, many females remain traumatised and find it difficult to reintegrate into their various communities. This increases their dependency on their male counterparts which, in turn, increases sexual exploitation, abuse and gender-based violence.

Due to the psychosocial and economic setbacks encountered by most females during the conflict in Liberia, and since reintegration is a voluntary process, the programmes implemented by the various actors need to be tailored to the specific needs of this vulnerable group. When reintegration programmes are voluntarily accepted and accessed by female beneficiaries, this group will become economically empowered. This will also help to reduce the incidence of gender-based violence and self-dependency on male partners and spouses. Reintegration is a long-term process, and its goals of gender mainstreaming can only be realised over time with robust implementation and the elimination of gender biases. Other underlying factors such as decentralisation, the rehabilitation of private and public institutions, the restoration of basic social services and creating a peaceful and guaranteed atmosphere for investments, should also be prioritised by the government to achieve the long-term goal of reintegration for all. ▲

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Endnotes

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- 2 Amnesty International (2008) 'Introduction' in *Liberia: A Flawed Post-War Process Discriminates Against Women and Girls*, London: Amnesty International, p. 5.
- 3 Ibid., p. 5.
- 4 Pugel, James (2007) 'Identifying the Dimensions of Reintegration' in *Deciphering the Dimensions of Reintegration in Post-Conflict Liberia*, p. 7, Available at: <jimpugel.googlepages.com/DecipheringDDR_pugel_july2007.pdf> Accessed on 2 August 2008.
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- 6 UNDP Liberia (2008) 'Lofa Women Receive More Loan, Complete Business Management Training' in *Development Update*, Vol. 2 No. 2, Liberia: UNDP, p. 10.
- 7 The PRS is a long-term programme implemented by the government. It involves in-depth research and surveys on key issues to ensure that adequate data and information are obtained and analysed in drawing conclusions on identifying the poor, locating them, understanding their expectations and developing appropriate strategies and programmes that are most effective in addressing poverty. Liberia is presently in its interim PRS stage, which comprises four pillars – focusing on national security, economic growth, good governance and rule of law, and rehabilitating infrastructure. Republic of Liberia (2006) 'Confronting the Data and Information Crisis' in *Breaking with the Past: From Conflict to Development*, p. 93, Available at: <http://sitesources.worldbank.org/INTPRS1/resources/LIBERIA-IPRSP> Accessed on 12 August 2008.
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