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Women in armed conflicts: Inclusion and exclusion

**Asia-Pacific Human Development
Report Background Papers Series
2010/11**



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Women in armed conflicts: Inclusion and exclusion

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Abstract

The participation of women and girls in armed conflict is far more common than recognized. Women have been embracing revolts, independence struggles, and war in many countries. They are in demand for “support” roles like intelligence, logistics, food, nursing, as well as for combat, bombings and suicide missions. Their reasons for joining are many—forced recruitment, fleeing oppression or abuse at home, a desire to feel valued. They receive military-type instruction-- training on ethics and attitude, strategy, guerilla tactics and use of weapons. Traditional gender roles are blurred, there being little hesitation in using women’s services in conflict as per the demands of leadership.

Though women are fundamental to the functioning of the war apparatus and accept the same danger and insecurity as men, they face specific vulnerabilities, including sexual exploitation. Post-conflict, some “disappear” due to stigma for having stepped outside social norms. Others want participation in peacetime political processes. However, there is a policy gap in fully recognizing gender during disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. Skills acquired during conflict can be transferred to good use in peacetime, recognizing former roles. Successful reintegration of women, no less than men, into civil lives requires a better understanding of gender to enable everyone to lead fulfilled lives and reduce alienation, contributing to lasting peace and human development.

Key words: Armed conflicts, gender, human development

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP, or the UN Member States.

*This paper was prepared as a brief background paper to inform the Asia-Pacific Human Development Report, “**Power, Voice and Rights**”. The data may differ from that finally presented in Asia-Pacific Human Development Report. Readers may contact the author directly for any clarifications, queries on data, inferences, and conclusions or to engage in discussion.*

Contents

1. Females in combat
2. Varied motivations, varied roles
3. In conflict: Inclusion and equity expectations
4. Post-conflict: Exclusion and unrealised expectations
5. Way forward: Accounting for gender, strengthening assimilation

Notes

Bibliography

Women in armed conflicts: Inclusion and exclusion

“Without the cyanide we don’t go to war. Even now I don’t like jewelry. I like a black thread round my neck. I had got used so much to the thread around my neck. I feel sad when I think of what happened to me. I had the cyanide and I didn’t take it and when I go back I’ll have to face death.”

Girl child soldier in Sri Lanka (Keairns 2002)

1. Females in combat

Women and girls, along with men and boys, play active and varied roles during armed conflicts in state as well as non-state armies. Female participation in war and war-like circumstances is far more common than is generally recognized – which often surprises people. Although some gender stereotypes persist, armed conflicts, like other types of disasters, are circumstances where traditional gender-roles can get blurred perforce, both, due to loose institutional structures and the need to utilize fully all available human resources. Under these conditions, it is not uncommon for women and girls to be called upon to accept and face tasks and risks similar to those of men. While debates about the legitimacy of full participation of females in state armed forces continue, the non-state arena is of particular interest for three reasons: one, the less formal institutional structures allow greater potential to push boundaries; two, the limited mechanisms for recognition, remuneration or redress during and after conflict generate near-irreversible gender-specific issues; and three, the transformation of combatants and the skills developed have the potential to be used productively in peacetime.

In spite of a history of female pacificism, there are numerous examples of women embracing revolts, independence struggles, and war with enthusiasm. Previously in Asia, for example, women have been active participants during India’s independence struggle against the British, and more recently in Nepal’s Maoist movement, as volunteers in the Iraqi army, in the independence struggle of Timor-Leste, and in Sri Lanka’s continuing Tamil conflict. The number of women combatants in armed conflicts is estimated to range between one-tenth to approximately one-third (Bouta et al. 2005). In Sri Lanka and in Nepal, for instance, women are estimated as constituting about one-third of the combatants (Manoharan 2003; Bannon and Bennet 2004). Worldwide, women’s participation in armed conflicts is widely acknowledged in countries like Algeria, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Indonesia (Aceh), Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, Viet Nam and Zimbabwe. Between 1990 and 2003, girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries; in 38 of these countries¹ girls were involved in armed conflicts (McKay and Mazurana 2004: 21). Women are in demand for particular ‘support’ roles and also as equal participants in combat, bombings and suicide missions.

Women and girls face specific vulnerabilities and exploitation, during and after conflict. Gender roles in these circumstances are not static. Those in charge deliberately alter some aspects to achieve political or other goals, including back-and-forth manipulation depending upon the purpose of the conflict. While female combatants undergo intense physical, psychological and emotional experiences, they also pick up a variety of skills some of which are transferable to productive civil life. Post-war rehabilitation efforts that ignore these complexities, and predominantly focus on civilians, refugees and other displaced

populations, can miss out on the special needs and enormous potential of females who have worked within the armed forces, especially non-state ones.

2. Varied motivations, varied roles

The reasons for joining non-state armies are multiple. Some women and girls are forcibly recruited, whilst others join to flee oppression and abuse at home, including forced marriages. Some join to gain better control over their lives and for their own protection. Others long to 'be someone' and feel valued. Armies can provide a career with perceptions of leadership and strength (Keairns 2002: 3). These factors are a reflection of the status of females in larger society (Brett 2002). Poverty is also a driver, applicable for males and females; access to basics like food and shelter are adequate inducements for the economically disadvantaged. Further notable motives for joining non-state armed forces include lack of education or other employment opportunities (Sørensen 1998). One incentive for recruiting women into the armed forces is their being considered more obedient and thus easier to train.

Women and girls work in many critical support roles such as cooks, porters, messengers and health workers. On top of this, women are given roles as administrators and spies, as well as handling logistics, repairing equipment, distributing propaganda and fund-raising. In some non-state armies they are also used as partners and sex slaves, as supporters, and abductees forced to act as 'wives' of male combatants (Mazurana and Carlson 2004). Not forgetting, of course, that women are themselves armed combatants, including suicide bombers - though to a lesser extent than men (Bouta et al. 2005). In some cases, like in Eritrea, the symbol of a female fighter is considered very important (Bouta et al. 2005), while in Aceh female warriors are traditionally seen as heroines of exceptional character (in contrast with the rest of Indonesia): noble, fearless and ready to die a martyr in the interest of society (Clavé-Çelikn.d.).

3. In conflict: Inclusion and equity expectations

Gender operates quite differently in the context of war. Armed conflicts and other political upheavals could present openings and power structures which are otherwise unavailable to the disadvantaged. For the poor and rural population, there are prospects for quick access to power. For females the leap is much more than males. In such settings both sexes tend to share danger, insecurity and living conditions. Where females join the ranks of combatants, they are expected to play roles similar to the men. Often access to education and training is not gender-stereotyped. Sameness, rather than difference, is advocated and promoted. As soldiers themselves are known to say: "in armies women ought to live and act similarly to men and women and men become comrades as combatants" (Bouta et al. 2005).

In liberation movements, equality, including women's rights, are well recognized and included in programmes for political change (Bouta et al. 2005). In the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for example, women cadres were included in all the units of the movement, including administration, fighting, political and intelligence. This does not, of course, mean that the LTTE recruited women primarily or even predominantly to promote gender equality or strengthen social freedoms for all. It was after the organization faced severe manpower shortages in the mid-eighties and as the only option available, women were recruited and absorbed into the organization, voluntarily or even forcibly (Manoharan 2003).

Box 1: Women Tamil Tigers in Combat Roles

While women initially performed paramilitary and support roles in the Tamil movement, after 1985 the situation changed. It is believed that by the early 2000s, three out of ten members of the Central Committee (the highest decision-making body of the LTTE) were women. Of the estimated total cadre strength of 10,000-15,000, females accounted for nearly one third. They were included in all units of the organization – combat, political, administration and intelligence. Reportedly, there was no sex-based discrimination in training and combat operations. Slogans like “equity for the nation and equality at home” were common. Since women are generally perceived as less dangerous in public places, they have been found useful in carrying out suicide attacks. Interestingly, the successful and much publicized 1991 suicide attack by a female LTTE associate on the then Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, seemed to heighten female motivation levels, encouraging women to join the organization.

Source: Manoharan 2003.

Similarly, in Nepal women who joined the Maoist Army were full of a new liberation vocabulary and enjoyed new-found confidence, inducing ordinary village women to question traditional gender roles (Bannon and Bennett 2004). This did bring about some positive changes amongst the women, giving them a feeling of greater power and confidence. In fact, it was found that women tended to become “masculinized” rather than their presence “feminizing” the army. They wore combat-outfits, discarded all jewelry and cropped their hair.

In Aceh female soldiers received military-type instruction including physical training, training on military ethics and attitude, strategy and guerilla tactics, and use of weapons like AK-47, M-16, grenades and pistols. They also received lectures on ideology, ethics and military attitude, strategy and guerilla tactics. After a formal ceremony they officially became Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) *Inong Balee* (literally *Free Aceh Movement Widows*). The Inong Balee worked in both, women’s units and mixed-gender units (Clavé-Çelikn.d.). The resistance movement was dependent upon women’s networks and courier duties, indispensable to the fighters (Scott 2003).

Circumstances that females face however, can take on some contradictory forms; while their work is part of the backbone on which war is carried out, some of it tends to be trivialized when combat is prioritized over all else. Female participants are fundamental to the functioning of the war apparatus - armed action cannot be carried out in the absence of intelligence gathering, transporting supplies and arms, logistics, food, resistance, nursing facilities for the wounded, etc. Their combat and suicide bomber roles are sometimes seen as occasional or temporary. Moreover, female soldiers are not expected to look forward to rewards like authority or political power. Being required to perform roles as supporters and ‘wives’ can undermine women’s bodily autonomy. Where the soldiers are still girls, traditional norms of respecting older males further bury their contributions and expose them to severe conditioning needed for the overall success of the war. Child soldiers (both sexes)

do not have access to education, hence, the benefits of transformation are negated to an extent (Barth 2002; Farr 2002; Clavé-Çelikh.d.).

Nevertheless, women and girls are not passive victims - many do expect and create change, resist abuse, demonstrate discipline, resilience and a variety of skills (Keairns 2002; Denov 2007). Some women, like those in the Inong Balee, have demonstrated that they do not want to disappear but want to continue to take part in shaping their lands and culture and be included in the peacetime political process. In Timor-Leste it was women activists who contributed to bringing women's efforts to the table (Scott 2003). Whilst many of the skills acquired can later be transferred to good use in peacetime, there is a policy gap in recognizing and leveraging such capacity of female combatants.

4. Post-conflict: Exclusion and unrealised expectations

"I just want to forget everything because I really feel like dying inside when I remember my experiences in the movement. So when I just don't want to remember the experiences, I take a breather and go outside. I just want to forget...or else I'd go crazy."

Aida (cited in Keairns 2003a: 59)

There are a number of challenges that a peace process brings to societies in post-conflict phases. Both female and male ex-combatants face many issues in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), but females face very particular disadvantages. The immediate rationale behind DRR programmes is to bring normal security back. Longer term social considerations tend to take a back seat. In particular, gender dimensions are neither well enough understood nor explicitly recognized in each phase.

Disarmament. Benefits of DDR programmes tend to be given to those who hand over weapons. It is far more common for men to be combatants than women, who are often non-combatants or are required to enact the occasional combatant role. Consequently, weapons are controlled by a male-dominated hierarchy, and fewer women have arms to lay down than men. For example, in Timor-Leste more than 10,000 male ex-combatants registered for DDR assistance, but women ex-combatants who had carried arms and occasionally fought were excluded (UNIFEM 2004; Niner 2008). This restricts their opportunities in benefitting from rehabilitation programmes. Moreover, female combatants are not directly regarded as a threat to security because of which there is less of a focus on them in identification of programme beneficiaries. As females, much more than males, expect to face stigma from their societies for having stepped out of the bounds of relatively rigid and mostly rural communities, they hesitate in participating openly in disarmament. Often this is due to experiences of a past marked not only by deprivation, but also torture or rape. Their ambiguous relationship to weapons is a complicating factor adding to social withdrawal and psychological stress. For males holding weapons is culturally accepted and considered 'manly', as in many parts of Africa (Kingma 1996). That could also complicate handing over of arms, more so when arms-related civilian work (guards, private security) is available to men post-conflict.

Demobilisation. Changing over from a conflict situation to peace includes the formal downsizing, disbanding or discharging of troops, generally under time pressure. Combatants who have been previously mobilized through a long period of marshalling, organizing, training, and equipping are assembled, disarmed and provided pre-discharge briefing and resources to encourage transition to a new life as quickly as possible. Demobilization of non-state armies becomes particularly critical in post-conflict circumstances, say, once a peace accord is accepted, one of the parties is defeated, or political circumstances change. In spite

of women soldiers now on the agenda of demobilization planning, in moving towards peace and attempts to prioritize stability over all else, demobilization tends to focus on males as the 'default'. Females are seen as less disruptive than males. It is often assumed that their interests are automatically taken care of as part of 'families', as kin to male combatants. Females are commonly excluded from decision-making in demilitarization (Farr 2002). Their security at the cantonment stage, need for autonomy, including independent bank accounts, separate resettlement packages, their needs as war widows, female soldiers, combatants' wives, and supporters are distinct and cannot be addressed by simply adding the words 'male' and 'female' to planning documents. Demobilization camps where men and women are housed, if prolonged, can become sites for gender-based sexualized violence. Women are often not even asked to report, given the complications in defining combatant status, for example, when females do not continuously wield weapons but are used for specific and limited combat operations. Even when recognized, they are often at lower levels in hierarchies and over represented in troops that are dismissed, reducing their negotiating power (Farr 2002). They are sometimes sent to refugee rather than demobilization camps once they change from military attire to feminine clothing, which excludes them from benefits and counseling. Even though woman warriors have traditionally been valorized as exceptional in some cases, the actual experiences of deprivation and exploitation faced by female combatants result in disappointment, compounded by their non-recognition as combatants, but rather as widows or supporters.

Reintegration. This phase brings its own set of challenges for female ex-combatants. While reintegration is difficult for males and females, special issues arise for females. Three distinguishing factors, not faced by males, operate as barriers for females: (a) the undervaluation of their combat-related duties, (b) their own disinclination in reintegrating into societies where gender relations and patriarchy remain relatively rigid after the women have undergone intense transformative experiences, and (c) a reluctance by the pre-existing civil society to fully accept women who have lived 'different' lives combined with women's fear of living in stigma.

For those expecting to continue to play an active role in shaping the future of their societies a serious problem is a downplaying of their roles and risks they have faced. Even when females have faced the same risks as males, lack of recognition of their part in liberation struggles is hard to stomach in peacetime. Women's realization that in reintegrating into post-war society, they are expected to limit their spheres of activities to traditional female-specific 'support' roles is difficult to accept. The case of Namibia, for example, illustrates the seemingly widely held perspective that women, after war, will return to the domestic realm of home and family: "men appreciate women who cook for them and they respect women who fought in the war with them, but after independence they did not really consider women as part of the liberation struggle" (Shikola 1998). Female combatants often have to face the consequences of rape, real or presumed sexual activity, pregnancy, domestic violence, fear, and negative stigmatization of being ex-combatants who have killed and generally lived lives outside of conventional social norms. Many opt not to return to their communities, preferring to live in relative isolation or even relocate to be in exile (Bouta 2005). There tends to be an avoidance or fear of reintegration.

5. Way forward: Accounting for gender, strengthening assimilation

“There is one more unknown than the soldier, it’s his wife.” (Karamé et al. 1999)

Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes (DDR) aim to facilitate the smooth assimilation, back into political and social life, of men and women involved in armed conflicts. Many of them have been in conflict situations for years, some their entire life. The challenges faced by combatants have strong gender dimensions that are yet to be fully understood and accepted by the larger society. Particular circumstances of female combatants have been neglected for a number of reasons, as seen above. How can these phases and programmes better respond to gender-specific concerns in post-conflict settings to strengthen assimilation of all and provide opportunities for women as much as men to lead as fulfilling lives as possible?

The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000 aims to remove barriers to equal participation (UN 2005) in peace building. The 2004 UN Secretary General’s report on women, peace and security to the Security Council says: “Resolution 1325 (2000) holds out a promise to women across the globe that their rights will be protected and that barriers to their equal participation and full involvement in the maintenance and promotion of sustainable peace will be removed. We must uphold this promise.”

It is vital to include all female ex-combatants irrespective of how they describe themselves or their revealed roles in armies. The overwhelming focus on male ex-combatants in rehabilitation and re-integration should be corrected to include those identified as wives and dependants. The example of Liberia is of interest where female supporters were identified as ‘women associated with the fighting forces’ rather than ‘camp followers’ so as to be included in the DDR process; women represented 24 per cent of those demobilized (UN 2005).

Drawing on the 1325 (2000) resolution women’s groups and other CSOs working on conflict and peace can galvanize efforts to raise awareness among media, governments, parliamentarians, ex-combatants and the larger civil society of the human and economic costs of conflict. This can provide a basis for discussions to include women and civil society. It can also be used by national and local women’s organizations as a tool for advocacy and training. After the adoption of this resolution Gender Advisors have become the norm in peacekeeping operations.

In some post-conflict countries women’s share of parliamentary positions at the national level tends to be significantly higher than the global average of 16 per cent. In Nepal, for example, the share of women in parliament increased from 5.9 percent in April 2003 to over 33 percent in April 2009. In the case of Timor-Leste however, the share increased from 26 to over 29 percent for the same period (IPU 2003 and 2009). Social consensus around ideas of equality and wider participation in nation-building has contributed to affirmative measures and legislation, reducing male-female gaps in a relatively short time. There have also been other factors like fewer men available to fill the positions after a devastating war. The higher presence of women in law-making positions can be leveraged through orientation training for all first timers to strengthen explicit recognition of gender issues among legislators.

A number of female ex-combatants supported by women’s movements have taken active steps to get included in rebuilding their societies, even though such cases are few and far between. Some members of the *Inong Balee* for example, have organized to have their voices heard through the formation of the Acehnese Women’s League (Liga Inong Aceh – LINA) in

2006 to help female combatants get what they are entitled to in the reintegration process (Clavé-Çelikn.d.). Self-help of this kind needs to be supported through policy.

Special emphasis should be given to women's specific psychological conditions. Conflicting and changing roles and expectations, abduction, abuse and deprivation in the prime of their life, followed by a devaluing of their work should be taken into account in counseling and other support programmes. It is important that assistance is provided in safe settings that the ex-combatants can trust.

Orientation is also useful for both male and female colleagues. On top of this, efforts should be made to include families as far as possible. Moreover, providing attention to individual women, as well as group counseling could provide enormous dividends.

The specific physiological and health related concerns of the women arising from sexual abuse, transactional sex, domestic violence, pregnancies, child bearing, abortions and miscarriages etc., also require special attention in reintegration efforts to restore physical health.

Complementarily programs that include building of support groups as well as market skills could include social mobilization, educational activities and financial support. The ex-combatants already have experience and skills used in conflict conditions that include self-confidence, organization, logistics, capacity to work under stress, driving, nursing, etc. These can be leveraged and re-oriented towards peace-time activities that are income generating and complemented by financial support.

Programmes should be conceptualized and developed with direct inputs from key stakeholders. Working very closely with existing local civil society organizations, formal and informal women's networks and, most importantly, with ex-combatants themselves can yield good results. It is the ex-combatants who can help in better identification of those who can fall through the cracks, and also help in identifying the different rehabilitation and reintegration needs. The identification of roles undertaken, different capabilities, and recognition of different needs of women can help in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of DDR programmes.

For the individuals themselves, as well as for the communities, successful reintegration of women and men into normal civil lives can contribute to enabling all individuals to lead productive and fulfilled lives, reduce disaffection and alienation, thus contributing to lasting peace and human development. Many of the capabilities and skills built in conflict phases without material reward can be used in peace time for remunerative and social development work. Although the size of the problem is not the same in Asia Pacific as in Africa, its intensity is severe because of strong patriarchies. Policies that are based on an explicit understanding of the different dimensions of the problem have a far greater probability of success.

Notes

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