

A young girl is shown in profile, looking out from a doorway. She is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt. The doorway is on the left, and the background shows a large, leafy tree and a building with a wooden fence. The lighting is bright, suggesting daytime.

WHAT THE GIRLS SAY

Improving practices for the demobilisation and reintegration
of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups
in Democratic Republic of Congo

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Contents – p.1

Acknowledgements – p.2

Introduction and methodology – p.5

1. DDR support: Are we doing right by the girls? – p.11

- 1.1 Demobilisation
- 1.2 Access to reintegration assistance
- 1.3 Gender-based discrimination

2. Recruitment: how it all began – p.17

- 2.1 ‘Voluntary’ recruitment
- 2.2 Abduction

3. Life in the bush – p.23

4. Coming home at last – p.27

- 4.1 Rejection
- 4.2 Coping strategies
- 4.3 The ambiguity of the RECOPE
- 4.4 “Lost value”
- 4.5 Education as redemption in the eyes of the community

5. Paths to psychosocial recovery – p.35

- 5.1 Emotional distress
- 5.2 The need to talk
- 5.3 The role of religion
- 5.4 The role of education
- 5.5 The role of foster families

6. Those left behind – p.41

7. Interim care – p.45

8. Accessing reintegration support – p.49

- 8.1 Review of a sample of assistance interventions
- 8.2 Obstacles to the effective reintegration of girls
- 8.3 The potential of agriculture
- 8.4 Direct family and community reintegration support

9. DDR Funding – p.57

10. Conclusion and recommendations – p.61

Epilogue: What happens to the girls who participated in the research? – p.67

ANNEXE I: PRACTICAL GUIDE: To foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed groups in DR Congo – p.68

ANNEX II: Table of respondents – p.74

ANNEX III: Summary of reintegration support reported by the girls – p.76

ANNEX IV: Supplementary study of girls associated with armed groups in the Hauts-Plateaux, South Kivu – p.78

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- Bureau pour le volontariat au service de l’enfance et de la santé (BVES);
- CARITAS diocésaine;
- Collectif d’ONG locales pour le développement de base (COLDEBA);
- Commission diocésaine justice et paix (CDJP);
- Concert d’action pour jeunes et enfants défavorisés (CAJED);
- Coopérative de la patience (COOPA);
- Don Bosco;
- The International Committee of the Red Cross in DRC (ICRC);
- Programme de lutte contre l’extrême pauvreté et la misère (PAMI);
- RET International;
- Save the Children in DRC;
- Synergie des femmes pour les victimes des violences sexuelles (SFVS);
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HAUT-UELE

ITURI

NORD-KIVU

SUD-KIVU

OUGANDA

RWANDA

BURUNDI

Lac Albert

Lac Edward

Lac Kivu

Map shows Child Soldiers International research locations (South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut-Uelé provinces) © UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 21 April 2015.

Introduction and methodology

This report presents the findings of research conducted by Child Soldiers International to assess the effectiveness of release, psychosocial recovery and reintegration interventions (commonly referred to as 'DDR') for girls associated with armed groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). More specifically, it seeks to shed some light on the extent to which girls have been reached by DDR programmes, and on the appropriateness of this support where it was offered, mostly from the point of view of the girls themselves.

It is important to note that the objective of the report is not to provide an overall assessment of all DDR programmes for girls in eastern DRC, but to convey the perspective of girls formerly associated with armed groups in exploring and exposing some of the reasons why many are still not receiving appropriate assistance.

Child Soldiers International developed the framework for the research, using information gathered over 10 years of research and advocacy work in DRC¹; recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to the DRC government in February 2012²; and extensive consultations with Congolese non-governmental organisations (NGOs)³.

¹ See, for example, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [former name of Child Soldiers International], *Report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in advance of the DRC initial report on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*, 2011: <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/drc-opac-shadow-report-to-the-committee-on-the-rights-of-the-child-1>.

² In February 2012, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recommended to the Congolese government to, “[a]s a matter of priority, develop and implement in collaboration with the United Nations and child protection actors a strategy to identify and provide effective reintegration assistance to current and former girl soldiers and their children, which meet their complex medical, economic and psychosocial needs. Every effort should be made to ensure these initiatives, and any resulting programmes, do not increase the stigma and exclusion faced by former girl soldiers.” (CRC/C/OPAC/COD/1), 59th session, 2012, paragraph 49 (b).

³ During a workshop on the practical application of the CRC Concluding Observations on the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC), in the DRC, organised by Child Soldiers International in 2012, participants (including government, UN and NGO DDR actors) agreed on the Committee's recommendation on the need to develop and implement a national DDR strategy for girls. They highlighted: “Few studies have been done on the topic of girls associated with armed forces and groups. The last study was conducted in 2008.” Some surveys were also undertaken by the government body in charge of the national DDR programme (*Unité d'exécution du programme national de désarmement, démobilisation et réinsertion, UEPN-DDR*) but they remain insufficient to inform an understanding of the gaps and deficiencies of child DDR programmes in relation to girls. During the workshop, the following recommendation was made: “Initial investigations and in-depth studies on girl CAAFAG [Children associated with armed forced and armed groups] are needed: in terms of identification, demobilisation and reintegration needs.” (Translation by Child Soldiers International).

Our research team spent six weeks in South Kivu, North Kivu and Haut-Uélé provinces in January-February 2016 and interviewed: 150 girls formerly associated with armed groups⁴; 89 members of community-based child protection networks (known as “RECOPE”⁵); 12 teachers and school principals; 8 religious leaders; 14 local authority officials; and 46 DDR actors (see Annex II).

In October 2016, Child Soldiers International coordinated a post-research workshop for DDR providers in eastern DRC, including those who participated in the study. The objective of the workshop, held in Goma (North Kivu), was to present the research findings and discuss practical steps to improve DDR assistance based on what we learned from the girls. Participants unanimously agreed that Child Soldiers International should develop a Practical Guide designed to support the release and reintegration of girls associated with armed groups through concrete and mainly low-cost interventions at the community level. These interventions were shared and discussed by participants at the workshop and based on their joint experiences and good practices. We have since developed this guide (see Annex I).

The research sample

We identified the target provinces and participants for our research by mapping the areas affected by armed conflict in eastern DRC, and assessing the possibility of access to these areas by our partners. A combination of security constraints, logistical considerations and administrative challenges reduced our planned schedule of interviews from 200 girls formerly associated with armed groups across five provinces, to 150 girls across three provinces.

Most of the girls we interviewed were presented to our research team by Congolese NGOs that deliver DDR programmes in the target research provinces. Our research sample is therefore not statistically representative of the total population of girls formerly associated with armed groups in eastern DRC. However, the assistance these girls had received varied considerably: many had only had a short initial contact with the NGO, with no follow-up support.

4 These armed groups were: community-based, self-defence militia (known as “Mai Mai”), the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (*Forces Démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*, FDLR), the M23, and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

5 *Réseaux communautaires de la protection de l’enfant* (RECOPE).

Our research team conducted individual interviews with 150 girls between the ages of 12 and 20 in three provinces (18 locations) in eastern DRC (see Annex II):

- South Kivu (Uvira, Mboko, Katogota, Lupango, Minova);
- North Kivu (Nyiragongo Nord and Nyiragongo Sud, Shasha, Bweremana, Walikale centre, Walikale-Kisangani axis, Nyasi, Rugari, Rubare, Kiwanja);
- Haut-Uélé (Dungu, Nambia, Duru).

In each location, we also met families or foster families, RECOPE members, teachers and school principals, religious leaders, community leaders, representatives of local authorities, and DDR actors.

To protect the anonymity of the girls interviewed, their names are not included in the report. Similarly, in view of the sensitivity of the information shared, the locations of RECOPE members and NGOs, and in some cases the girls themselves, have not been included.

We offered small tokens of appreciation to the girls who participated in the research, such as toiletries, underwear, notebooks and pens, and flashlights. The principle behind this was not to incentivize individuals to participate in the research (the girls did not expect the gifts, and the distribution took place after the interviews), but to give a token of gratitude to those who gave us their time and contributed their personal history to the research. We also offered each of the RECOPE presidents a wind-up radio, as a gesture of encouragement for their work.

Beyond the scope of this research are the reports we received of girls associated with members of the national armed forces, the *Forces armées de la République Démocratique du Congo* (FARDC), and used by them for domestic and sexual purposes. We were unable to independently verify these alleged violations, and our latest enquiries confirmed that they are not being reported through the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on grave violations of children's rights. The instances of these reports nonetheless reinforce our concern that there are potentially large numbers of girls exploited by members of the armed forces falling under the radar of child protection actors.

Interview methods

All interviews with the girls were organised and conducted in accordance with UNICEF guidelines on interviewing children⁶, similar guidelines in the “Paris Principles”⁷, and Child Soldiers International’s ethical guidelines on research involving children⁸. All members of the research team were women, and no other adults or NGO staff were present during the interviews.

Where security concerns prevented us from accessing the girls’ communities, we put in place arrangements for the girls to be accompanied by members of their local RECOPE group to a location where we were able to conduct secure and confidential interviews. In all cases, we carried out detailed risk assessments to ensure the protection and wellbeing of the girls before talking to them.

Focus groups were held with girls in each location, after which individual interviews were conducted with a number of them, on the basis of their willingness to talk to the researchers and their specific experiences. The interviews were conducted by the head researcher, Marie de la Soudière,⁹ assisted by a Congolese interpreter throughout, and two members of Child Soldiers International’s DRC project team for the first two weeks. In some locations, additional interpreters were used.

The choice of topics and the structure of the interviews were developed by the head researcher. The interview questions were structured into three sections.

- The first section touched upon the girls’ lives before their association with the armed group: Were they going to school? Did they work? What was their family situation? How did they live before they were recruited?
- The second section called upon the girls to describe the circumstances that led to their association with an armed group. If they were willing, they had the opportunity to talk about their experience with the group: What was their role? What was their day-to-day life like? How did they manage to leave the group?
- Finally, the girls talked about returning to their families and communities, and particularly about how they were received. The

6 UNICEF, Guidelines for interviewing children: https://www.unicef.org/esaro/5440_guidelines_interview.html

7 *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed forces or Armed Groups*, 2007: <https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ParisPrinciples310107English.pdf> (paragraphs 7.25 - 7.29).

8 Child Soldiers International, *Ethical Guidelines for research involving children and their families*, 2016: <https://www.child-soldiers.org/research-policy>

9 Child Soldiers International consultant. Marie de la Soudière is a mental health and psychosocial support expert with over 30 years of experience working on the issue of the reintegration of children associated with armed forces and armed groups.

interviews were designed to highlight the kind of support the girls had received and, in the cases where assistance was lacking, we asked what form of support would be most helpful to them. The girls were also encouraged to talk about the activities they currently value, for example going to church or talking with friends, to support them in focusing upon their strengths, resilience, and the positive elements of their lives.

Individual interviews were also conducted with all other participants, with the exception of RECOPE members who were interviewed in focus group discussions in each location.



CHAPITRE LE RAPPORT SCIENTIFIQUE
III.1. Les Caractéristiques d'un Rapport Scientifique
III.2. Les Caractéristiques
III.3. La Rédaction d'un R.S.
1. L'investigation ou la Collecte des données
BIRHAKAHEKA N. les autres
op/cit. p.8, 17
BIRHAKAHEKA N. 1977, 69
III.6. LES
RAPPORTS SCIENTIFIQUES
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Focus group with the girls.

1.

DDR support: Are we doing right by the girls?

“Nobody cares about the girls.”
(RECOPE member)

Whilst not representative of all interviewees, the number of strikingly similar testimonies we received supports the assertion that current DDR programmes are generally lacking in specific provision for girls, both in terms of demobilisation and reintegration assistance.

1.1 Demobilisation

There are no accurate statistics on the number of girls who have been, or still are, associated with armed groups in DRC. What we do know is that, between January 2009 and November 2015, of 8,546 formerly associated children registered by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO), only 600 (7%) were girls.¹⁰ In contrast, MONUSCO estimates that girls make up a significantly higher percentage – 30 to 40% – of all children associated with armed groups.¹¹

These figures suggest that demobilisation efforts in DRC fail to reach most girls. The majority of the girls we interviewed told us that they had not been officially demobilised, but had escaped. Most also said they “left many girls behind” when they left the armed group (see section 6). In some areas, the girls we met told us about other girls who had left armed groups, and were not yet known to NGOs operating in the area. This suggests that efforts to identify self-demobilised girls have also had limited effect.

¹⁰ MONUSCO, *Invisible Survivors: Girls in Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2009 to 2015*, November 2015: <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/151123-Girls-in-Armed-Groups-2009-2015-Final.pdf>

¹¹ Idem.

1.2 Access to reintegration assistance

Reintegration programmes have also failed to systematically reach girls formerly associated with armed groups. More than a third of the 150 girls we interviewed (54) said they had never received any assistance, whether material, medical, psychosocial or socio-economic (see section 8). Of the remaining 96, almost half (70) had received some type of assistance from NGOs, varying from minimal to substantial. In the remaining 26 cases, there was insufficient information to be able to say with certainty whether the girls had received any support (see section 8 and Annex III).

The RECOPE perspective

This sample of views offered by RECOPE members echoes our findings:

- *“On the whole, the majority [of the girls] have not received anything.”*
- *“Your presence has been significant: nobody cares about the girls. People come here to talk about DDR, but it’s only about the boys.”*
- *“The girls I meet never received anything.”*
- *“We have given up on the girls.”*

This report focuses on psychosocial support and community reintegration. However, it is important to make a note here about the medical assistance received by the girls we interviewed. The majority of the girls we spoke to reported that they had been subjected to sexual violence. Of the 70 girls who told us that they had received assistance from NGOs, only 34 had received a medical consultation. Of these, 23 had been accompanied to a clinic or local hospital by an NGO, while the others had been accompanied by a family member or a friend.

It is not possible to extrapolate a wide-ranging conclusion from these statistics, since our sample is not random and statistically representative. Nonetheless, our findings are of particular concern, given that our interview participants were presented to us by DDR providers. It is reasonable to assume that the proportion of girls receiving assistance would have been even lower, had we accessed respondents through other channels.

Who takes care of formerly associated girls with disabilities? Case study: Anourite, 16 years old¹²

Anourite was kidnapped by the Lord's Resistance Army ('LRA') during an attack on her school in 2008. She was 8 years old. The LRA held her captive for four years, during which time her role was to carry the babies and the group's belongings, "*like all girls too small to serve men*".

"They killed, we did not know why. We were beaten, even though we were only children. At first I said: 'I want to see my family,' and they beat me even more. So I stopped crying. I had my first period in the bush. I managed using leaves."

Anourite was physically tied to an LRA fighter during an attack by the FARDC when she was struck by a bullet in the leg: "*It was bleeding a lot. I thought: 'I'm dying'. The fighter unchained me and I lost consciousness. The FARDC found me the next day and took me to the hospital.*"

Today, Anourite has a pronounced limp. She wears a homemade prosthesis made of wood, cardboard and wire, to compensate for the shortening of her leg. The prosthesis is uncomfortably heavy, and falling apart: "*My father repairs it from time to time, adding wood and cardboard.*"

Anourite told us that she has received no support since her return, nor medical assistance for her disability.

She would like to go to school, but her family does not have the funds. Since her disability prevents her from working in the fields, she is unable to contribute to the cost of her own schooling.

1.3 Gender-based discrimination

How can we explain the lack of attention towards girls in assistance programmes? Although it is true that some girls returning from the bush keep a low profile out of shame and therefore do not come forward to seek support, we also found that NGOs and RECOPE members in some areas had made insufficient efforts to proactively identify and reach out to girls.

Discussions with RECOPE members seems to suggest that sociocultural perceptions are at play and result in some degree of inattention towards girls. They are often perceived as less threatening than boys, who are assumed to have been fighters and therefore more prone to violence, while girls are categorised as “wives,” making it easier to forget their silent suffering.

- ***“Girls reintegrate their families and that’s all. The problems are with the boys. With girls, there are not many problems.”*** (RECOPE member)

We were surprised to see that some child protection actors also found it difficult to entirely escape cultural and social norms that afford women a lower status in Congolese society, where girls are held to different standards of behaviour. Even when they agreed that girls coming out of armed groups deserve sympathy and support, some acknowledged that they were not completely comfortable with the fact that these girls “*had known men*”, and they did not feel they were entirely trustworthy.

Finally, our interviews also revealed that some DDR actors and RECOPE members do not necessarily know how to support girls returning from armed groups, beyond providing tailoring or hair-braiding classes.

- ***“It’s easier to help boys, we can offer them wood-working, masonry. These are not activities suitable for girls.”*** (RECOPE member)

Many NGOs we spoke to are aware of these problems and deplore the fact that DDR and fundraising efforts do not sufficiently take into consideration the different reintegration needs of girls and boys.



Girls formerly associated with an armed group back in school.

2.

Recruitment: how it all started

“If I had been going to school, I would not have joined.”

Two thirds of the girls we interviewed had been abducted by armed groups. The other third had joined “voluntarily”. The method of recruitment typically depended on the nature of the armed group. Local Mai Mai militia¹³, for example, attracted many “volunteer” recruits but also resorted to abductions in some instances. On the other hand, all respondents formerly associated with the LRA reported that they had been abducted, as did many girls formerly associated with the M23.¹⁴

2.1 ‘Voluntary’ recruitment

Although some girls willingly joined armed groups, they were not free from coercion: many told us that joining was their only option to escape the constant and terrifying attacks on their villages. Others joined to escape poverty and hunger.

¹³ For more information on Mai Mai militias, see Child Soldiers International, *Mai Mai Child Soldier Recruitment and Use: Entrenched and Unending*, 2010: <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/mai-mai-child-soldier-recruitment-and-use-entrenched-and-unending-1>

¹⁴ All forms of under-18 recruitment are banned under Congolese domestic law (Article 71 of the 2009 Child Protection Code – *Loi No. 09/001 du 10 janvier 2009 portant protection de l'enfant*) and under applicable international law (OPAC, Article 4.1, ratified by DRC in 2001), whether or not children appear to join willingly.

An analysis of the accounts provided by the girls we interviewed identified four main, overlapping drivers for ‘voluntary’ recruitment.¹⁵

1. Interruption of schooling: Almost half of the girls we interviewed had joined after they could no longer afford their school fees:
 - ***“I was chased out of school all the time. We heard that we could get money there; I went because I wanted to get enough money to go back to school.”*** (15-year-old girl, Rutshuru)
 - ***“I was pushed out of school because my parents could not pay, so instead of roaming aimlessly in town, it was better to go and help them in the bush.”*** (16-year-old girl, Rubari)
 - ***“If I had been going to school, I would not have joined.”*** (17-year-old-girl, Nyiragongo Sud)

Every RECOPE member we met stressed the importance of school as a means of preventing children from joining an armed group. One RECOPE member told us:

- ***“Not attending school is at the core of child recruitment.”***
2. Needing protection: Most of the girls who “volunteered” had been living in a climate of insecurity and terror due to frequent attacks and looting by armed groups. They joined a Mai Mai group with the belief that they would be protected. Sometimes, their parents had encouraged them to join, thinking that having a child in a Mai Mai group would afford the family a measure of protection against attacks:
 - ***“There were many groups that would come and attack, pillage and rape. We would have to flee all the time. So after a while I had to go to the Mai Mai for my protection.”*** (20-year-old girl, Uvira)
 - ***“The Mai Mai were doing bad things all the time. They were looting and raping. It became so frightening and impossible to live at home. To protect ourselves, me and five others, three girls and two boys, decided to join them. We walked for two days.”*** (16-year-old girl, Uvira)

Worryingly, in one area some RECOPE members were also members of the Mai Mai group and praised it at length during our focus group discussion.

¹⁵ It should be noted that these reasons are also recurring factors in the recruitment of all children, boys and girls alike.

3. Seeking revenge: Some girls told us they joined to seek revenge for the killing of a parent, or after a sexual assault or other vicious attacks on their families and communities:
 - ***“I left [to join the Mai Mai] after they raped my mother in front of all of us, even my father. I felt shame, pity, anger. One day I decided to take up arms to avenge my mother.” (19-year-old-girl, Katogota)***
 - ***“They came to the neighbours’. They took everything and killed the father. Since we, the young people, wanted vengeance, we left to join.” (17-year-old girl, Katogota)***

4. Poverty: Some girls told us that they were so poor they could not find enough to eat. They joined Mai Mai groups because they had heard they would provide for them. Some had older sisters whose boyfriends were in Mai Mai groups and would bring goods that were otherwise impossible to obtain. This was tempting for desperately poor girls living in a climate of high insecurity:
 - ***“At home we did not have enough to eat. We could not go to the fields anymore because it was too dangerous. So I and my friend thought: ‘If we go there, perhaps we will be a little better off.’” (16-year-old girl, Katogota)***

The significant majority of the girls we met bitterly regretted their decision to join. Once in the group, they were sexually abused by the very people they thought would protect them. For those whose parents had encouraged them to join, adult betrayal was even more complete. The majority urged us to advise other girls of the horrors of life in the bush, in case they were tempted to join. A 17-year-old girl in Uvira who had joined a Mai Mai group for her protection told us:

- ***“I found a lot of children when I reached [the group]. They told me: ‘You would not have come if you knew what’s happening here.’ I was raped on the first day. I was told I’d be killed if I fought back.”***

2.2 Abduction

Girls in the Kivus told us how they were abducted (by the M23, the FDLR and others) while tending their family's or other people's fields, collecting wood or water, or taken from their homes during attacks on their villages. They were frequently abducted together with friends or siblings. In the girls' testimonies, there was often a hint of anger towards adults who had been unable to protect them.

In Haut-Uélé, abduction and captivity have their own pattern. All girls were abducted by the LRA, often with parents or siblings, and many at a very young age (from 9-years-old or sometimes even younger). A girl who had been abducted when she was 13 told us:

- ***“The FDLR men broke into our house to take me. My mother said: ‘She’s too young,’ but they said: ‘We’re going to help her grow up.’”*** (17-year-old girl, Rutshuru)

The average length of their association was also much longer than that of girls in the Kivus – most spending three to four years with the LRA, and sometimes much longer. These girls were also typically more regularly subjected to and involved in brutal violence.



Focus group with the girls.

3.

Life in the bush

“Life in the bush was only suffering.”

This was a recurring complaint of the girls we met. They reported many forms of hardship during their time with the armed groups. Their suffering was both physical and psychological. Reports typically varied depending on the armed group they had been associated with. The girls told us they had often lacked food; been forced to sleep outside; and made to carry heavy loads:

- ***“We had to carry heavy loads during long walks; those who were weak and could not carry anymore were instantly killed.”*** (15-year-old girl, Niangara)
- ***“When there was nothing left to eat we became like animals, eating grass, anything we could see.”*** (16-year-old girl, Duru)

They experienced extreme fear on a daily basis and told us that they had been haunted by the thought that they may never see their families again. Many had also been very worried that if they died their bodies might never be found by their families. They stressed the pain of the loneliness they experienced while inside the armed group, like this 16-year-old girl from Dungu:

- ***“You could not talk to other children; you had to be careful. If they found you with another child, they would think you were planning an escape.”***

Most girls told us they had been repeatedly raped, often by different men:

- ***“We were treated like toys. Lucky were those who only had one man.”*** (15-year-old girl, Walikale)

- ***“Sometimes I didn’t even know the name of the man who abused me at night. I wanted to escape but saw what they did to those who tried and were caught, and I was too scared.”*** (16-year-old girl, Uvira)
- ***“I was often drugged. I would wake up and find myself naked. They gave us drugs so that we would not get tired of all of them using us.”*** (17-year-old-girl, Katogota)

Another experience that seems to have left lasting psychological scars on many girls was being forced to participate in looting and living off stolen goods. Their involvement in acts that were morally repellant to them engendered a deep sense of guilt. Both “volunteer” recruits and abductees defined some of their most unbearable moments as witnessing violent pillaging, then benefitting from the loot. They spoke of their distress at profiting from these acts of violence:

- ***“The worst moments were preparing the meals”*** [cooking with stolen food]. (Nyiragongo Nord)¹⁶
- ***“I hated the idea that I depended on pillaging to live. The worst was the suffering we were inflicting; the thefts, the intimidation.”*** (Nyiragongo Nord)¹⁷
- ***“I hated all the pillaging; that was one of the worst parts.”*** (16-year-old girl, Walikale)
- ***“It’s nothing but a miserable life. We had to go and steal from people’s fields to be able to eat.”*** (16-year-old girl, Uvira)
- ***“Our life in the bush? It was pillaging, intimidating the population, stopping people on the road to rob them. We would steal everything: crops, goats, chicken. I hated the idea that I was living off other people’s suffering. This was the worst; it was all so wrong and bad.”*** (17-year-old girl, Uvira)

The brutality of the LRA in particular has been well documented. In Haut-Uélé, where the LRA is active, girls provided unsolicited and detailed accounts of having been forced to kill while associated with the group. It was clear that most were still tormented by these events, several years after their escape:

- ***“We were forced to kill using a big stick and were told exactly where to hit. When I was ordered to kill, I trembled. They gave me a little time but if I did not manage to kill soon, they told me I’d be killed.”*** (15-year-old girl, Duru)

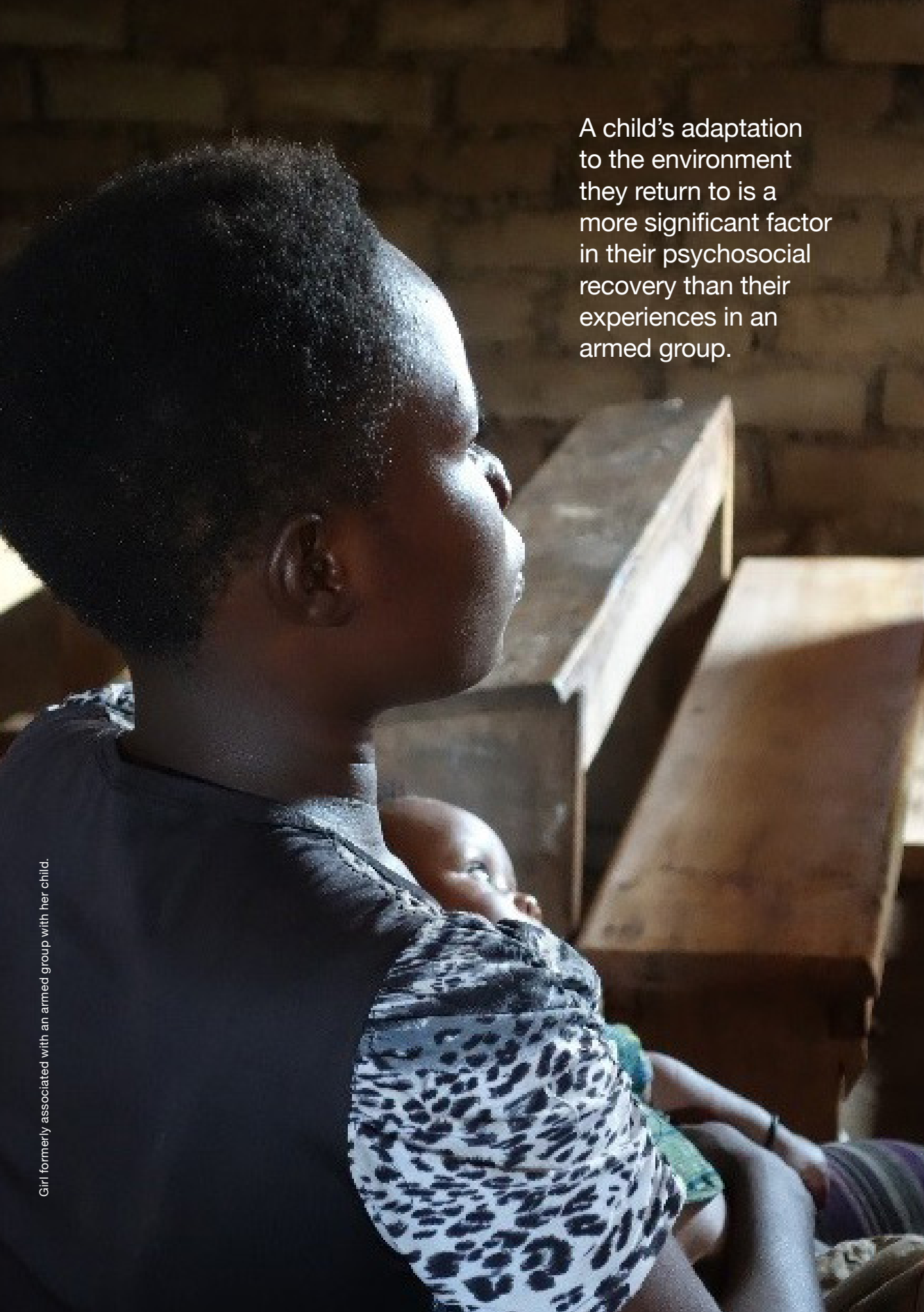
¹⁶ Focus group with girls, aged 14-17, formerly associated with the M23.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The readiness with which the girls described these experiences, unprompted, are an indication, which some of the girls made clear to us, that they have had little or no opportunity to tell stories about events that still haunt them.

Some of the girls we interviewed, particularly those associated with Mai Mai militias, were used in magical rituals, rather than combat. Many Mai Mai groups use children to perform rituals, including marking tattoos or wearing “fetishes” believed to make them immune to bullets and protect them against other dangers. The girls described in detail the different rituals, and the roles they had taken in these.¹⁸ Most believed firmly in the magical power of these rituals, as did many of the RECOPE members we met.

18 Many girls told us that they were the “guardians of the fetishes”: during battles, they kept them safe (bottled) far behind the front lines. Many were subjected to initiation rituals. For example, they cut their skin with razor blades and rubbed a ‘magic’ substance into the blood. Herbs have an important place in the rituals; they are drunk as a decoction or tied around elbows or other parts of the body. The girls also told us that before the battles the herbs are soaked in water, and the soldiers are sprayed with this liquid to make them invincible.



A child's adaptation to the environment they return to is a more significant factor in their psychosocial recovery than their experiences in an armed group.

Girl formerly associated with an armed group with her child.

4.

Coming home at last

“Some of my old friends don’t associate with me anymore. They have abandoned me.”

The girls we met had been abducted, or had joined an armed group in the hope of a better life. Instead they were physically and emotionally abused and experienced extraordinary hardships, loneliness and terror – including daily threats of death.

Yet, when they finally came home, most were met with suspicion, humiliation and discrimination, if not outright rejection, and were clearly made to feel that they were considered lesser human beings. Girls who had been abducted were blamed and rejected as much as those who had joined “voluntarily.”

4.1 Rejection

Some of the girls, especially LRA abductees, reported that their homecoming was a joyful event. Girls abducted by the LRA in Haut-Uélé were much better received by their families and communities, even those who had returned home with children of their own. However, most described how they were rejected by their families on the day of their return and had to beg for shelter elsewhere. Many who were initially welcomed saw their situation deteriorate soon after their return:

- ***“My mother refused to let me in the house. So I stayed with some neighbours for three days. They talked to my mother and she finally allowed me to come back. Now it’s ok with her.”*** (17-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Sud)
- ***“[I had to go] to a CTO [transit centre] for a month, out of caution, as my parents were so angry with me.”*** (20-year-old girl, Uvira)

- ***“My parents would not take me back. I spent two months with neighbours. After some time, it got better and I was allowed to go home.” (14-year-old girl, Walikale)***

These girls spoke of many forms of rejection: discrimination, humiliation, insults, blame, bullying – by families, friends, neighbours, or teachers. Along with the ensuing isolation, the girls overwhelmingly defined this as the source of their deepest emotional suffering. Many of the girls we talked to had returned home several years prior to the interview. For some, the situation had improved, although one could sense that the wound had not entirely healed, but many were still victimised:

- ***“Not two days goes by without neighbours making us feel we have known men... We are not allowed to associate with their daughters.” (14-year-old girl, Walikale)***
- ***“Neighbours called me ‘prostitute.’ It’s getting better but it’s not always easy, even at home.” (17-year-old girl, Bord du Lac)***
- ***“Some of my old friends don’t associate with me anymore. They have abandoned me.” (16-year-old girl, Bord du Lac)***
- ***“If something goes missing, I am always immediately blamed.” (14-year-old girl, Walikale)***
- ***“Every girl from the bush, the community points to her and says: ‘Watch out: HIV.’” (16-year-old girl, Walikale)***
- ***“I was called a ‘prostitute;’ people would not allow their daughters to associate with me.” (17-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Sud)***
- ***“At school, the others discriminate against me. They say they are afraid of me; some don’t talk to me.” (13-year-old girl, Uvira)***

4.2 Coping strategies

We identified five typical responses to the rejection (or the fear of rejection) these girls faced: anger/rebellion, self-blame, going back, staying, and exile. These reactions and behaviours, however, were not necessarily mutually exclusive.¹⁹

Anger: Some reacted angrily to the injustice of their rejection, and their community’s hostility. These girls often adopted a frustrated and non-conformist attitude that reinforced the prejudices of their communities, and furthered their exclusion.

¹⁹ It is worth noting here the case of a girl who showed remarkable resilience and courage when she gathered her family to explain her situation and convince them to give her more respect and support. (See section 4.4)

Self-blame: Others seemed to have internalised the blame and withdrawn from community life, despite longing to be included. Some tried to regain the acceptance of their community, for example by working harder in the fields, taking the blame for others, or avoiding joining in dances or socialising with boys.

Going back: Yet others could not bear the pain of rejection and decided to rejoin the armed group they had originally left. We did not have the opportunity to meet these girls, but we heard about them repeatedly through those we interviewed:

- ***“There were many [formerly associated] girls in the area, but the majority went back to the bush. They were not well accepted here, people were discriminating against them.”***
(17-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Sud)

Staying: We were told that many girls, conscious of the family and community rejection which may await them, prefer to stay with the armed group:

- ***“If we leave the group, we’re going to be targeted, rejected. So many girls accept and continue to live with their bush husband.”*** (Nyiragongo Nord)²⁰
- ***“It is better to die there than come home and be rejected.”***
(16-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Nord)
- ***“Nobody trusted me, it was so difficult at the beginning, I often thought I’d better go back to the bush because the humiliation was too much to take.”*** (15-year-old girl, Katogota)

Exile: Some girls we interviewed told us that other girls escaped, but despite their desire to see their families again, had decided to go and live elsewhere, where their past was not known.

4.3 The ambiguity of the RECOPE

RECOPE members echoed what the girls told us: families and communities are usually distrustful of girls coming out of armed groups, and tend to reject them. However, a significant number of RECOPE members believed that these attitudes were acceptable – or at least understandable. At the same time, they acknowledged that their role is to sensitise communities to be more benevolent towards girls formerly associated with armed groups.

20 Focus group with girls, aged 14-17, formerly associated with the M23.

In our discussions with RECOPE and community members, our research team found that many stressed the “negative” behaviour of girls without mentioning that they had been victims of atrocious violations:

- ***“Girls who have been with armed groups... can’t ever get married.”***
- ***“Yes, there is discrimination, but they isolate themselves, they don’t want to participate in community activities.”***
- ***“The majority of ex-associated girls have become emancipated and are frequenting boys.”***

The numerous, although often sympathetic, assertions by community members that returning girls can expect no prospect of marriage is telling of the subconscious discrimination which the girls suffer. With appropriate support, we were told that several girls had subsequently married (see section 4.5). The categorical statements thus appear to be as much (or more) a reflection of the adults’ own judgment as a reflection of reality.

The rooting of such feelings of mistrust towards the girls in the collective and social consciousness has important implications for programmes and strategies which are to support their reintegration.

4.4 “Lost value”

The girls attributed family and community rejection to the belief that, having “known men,” they had lost their social “value”. NGO staff, RECOPE members and government officials all expressed the same view. The notion of “loss of social value”, and understanding how it can be regained, is at the core of reintegration programming. The girls were clear: if they could regain social value, family and community acceptance would automatically follow.

Research has shown how stigma prevents psychosocial recovery²¹ and that acceptance by families and communities is the most important predictor of successful and long-term reintegration for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. Acceptance is essential if a child is to adapt, find their place in

21 Joanne N. Corbin, “Returning home: resettlement of formerly abducted children in Northern Uganda” in *Disasters* (Volume 32, Issue 2, pp. 316–335), 2008: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-7717.2008.01042.x/abstract> ; SWAY – The Survey of War Affected Youth, *Making reintegration work for youth in northern Uganda*, 2007: <http://chrisblattman.com/documents/policy/sway/SWAY.ResearchBrief.Reintegration.pdf> ; Theresa S. Betancourt, Jessica Agnew-Blais, Stephen E. Gilman, David R. Williams, B. Heidi Ellis, “Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychosocial adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone” in *Social Science and Medicine* (Volume 70, Issue 1, pp. 17–26), 2010: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3756934>.

the family and community and recover their psychosocial well-being. A child's adaptation to the environment they return to is a more significant factor in their psychosocial recovery than their experiences in an armed group.

The positive psychosocial impact when a community fully accepts a child returning from an armed group is *“associated with [the child's] reduced depression at follow up and improved confidence and prosocial attitudes regardless of levels of violence exposure.”*²² This is particularly relevant to DDR programming for girls, given that girls are more vulnerable than boys to discrimination, stigmatisation, and rejection upon return.

Our research has identified that, with only a few encouraging exceptions, DDR programmes do not adequately address the fundamental issue of family and community acceptance.

For example, around 20 girls said their lives were still very difficult and that they needed family mediation. Many mentioned that stronger and more sustained sensitisation of their families and communities would be helpful, identifying that this should be done by people with influence in the community. Experience in other contexts has shown that community leaders can help resolve even the most difficult situations: if a respected community member dedicates time and effort to a girl and her family, it means the girl is worthy of this attention and should also be considered worthy.

- ***“If we get some visits, perhaps the community will understand that we are just like other children.”***
(18-year-old girl, Katogota)

Successful mediation by a 16-year-old girl abducted and detained for a year by the M23 (Nyiragongo Sud)

“Being back home was hard. I felt isolated and was constantly discriminated against. Whenever something broke or was missing I was immediately blamed. So one day I decided to gather my family: my parents and my uncles and aunts as well. I told them: ‘Where were you when I was captured? It’s not my fault that I was in the bush and I suffered a lot. Why do you discriminate against me all the time? What have I done to deserve it?’ They all discussed the situation and, in the end, it worked. Everyone is nicer to me now.”

²² Theresa S. Betancourt, Ivelina I. Borisova, Timothy P. Williams, Robert T. Brennan, T. Hatch Whitfield, Marie de la Soudiere, John Williamson, Stephen E. Gilman, “Sierra Leone’s Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration”, in *Child Development* (Volume 81, Issue 4, pp. 1077–1095), 2010: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2921972/pdf/nihms-94482.pdf>.

In addition, in our discussions with the girls, we explored the different avenues through which they could recover their “lost social value”. Being “humble and obedient”, “working hard”, “accepting unjust accusations”, and “avoiding boys” were all cited by the girls as ways to keep themselves out of trouble but not necessarily to become accepted – but these were not behaviours which all girls were willing or able to follow.

On the other hand, training for income-generating activities was seen by all girls as value-giving. Similar value was attributed to the possession of reliable means for a livelihood such as livestock, farming tools and seeds. Unfortunately, these opportunities had been limited (see section 8). Finally, most girls asserted that going to school was the best way to regain “lost social value”, a place in society and a chance at a normal life, including marriage.

4.5 Education as redemption in the eyes of the community

Consistent with interrupted schooling as the most frequently cited reason for a girl to join an armed group (see section 2.1), the majority of the girls we interviewed expressed a strong desire to go back to school, including girls as old as 18, and some currently in vocational training. Their overwhelming desire to go to school extended beyond their need for an education: it was seen as a way to erase their past, take on a positive identity, and achieve redemption in the eyes of the community:

- ***“I have to go back to school. I do not know how to do it, but I have to study.”*** (15-year-old girl, Walikale)
- ***“A woman who has not studied has no value.”*** (14-year-old girl, Walikale)
- ***“If we could go to school, the community would be nicer to us, we would get some consideration. That would help a lot.”*** (18-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Sud)
- ***“In church, those in the youth group tell me: ‘You don’t study, you have nothing to say.’”*** (14-year-old girl, Walikale)

Some girls register for school even when they are unable to pay the fees. Many told us how they keep trying to join classes even after they have been turned away, or when financial support provided by NGOs has run out: they are repeatedly sent home but stubbornly sneak into the classroom again, conscious that school may be their only hope to stop community discrimination and be “like the others”; their greatest wish.

RECOPE members confirmed the potential for education to counter rejection and discrimination, telling stories of previously estranged girls receiving marriage proposals the day after they obtained their diploma:

- ***“It’s difficult for these girls to find a husband, but if a girl has a school diploma, then there’s no problem.”***
- ***“There should be enough funding to help all the girls go back to school. It would help them forget the past. They would also be better accepted by the community.”***
- ***“To give them some social value, the girls should be in school.”***
- ***“When they have either an income-generating activity, or are in school, there is a big difference. It gives them value in the eyes of the community. Otherwise they don’t have a place in the community.”***

From the perspectives of both the girls themselves and RECOPE members working to support them, education serves as the gateway for girls formerly associated with armed groups to be accepted by their families and communities. This acceptance is crucial for the future of the girl.

The challenge nonetheless remains that school fees remain unaffordable for most families. In some cases, girls told us that their parents had refused to pay for their schooling because they had “known men”.

- ***“When I came back, my parents said that since I had known men, they would not pay for school anymore.”***
(17-year-old girl, Rutshuru)

In other cases, indicative of broader gender-based discrimination, families prioritised their sons’ education.



A girl formerly associated with an armed group.

5.

Paths to psychosocial recovery

“Today is the first time that someone is asking me about what happened.”

Ending stigma, discrimination and rejection is essential for successful reintegration, but it is not enough. Meaningful and sustained psychosocial support is needed to help the girls recover from their harrowing experiences and overcome their current predicament.

However, where girls did receive help, the emphasis had been on trying to get them into a vocational training programme and/or help them start an income-generating activity (IGA) (see section 8). With a few exceptions, regular emotional support had largely been missing as a systematic component of DDR assistance to girls, although it was another one of the overwhelming desires of the girls we interviewed.

5.1 Emotional distress

At least half of the girls we met demonstrated a level of emotional distress. Some of this distress originated from the suffering and violence inflicted upon them by the armed group (see section 3). It also came from anxiety created by the secrets they harboured relating to acts of violence which they had been forced to commit.

In Haut-Uélé in particular, LRA abductees appeared to continue to be burdened by unprocessed traumatic experiences from the time of their association with the armed group. This group of girls had typically suffered a much longer time in captivity, abducted at a young age by a particularly brutal armed group. They recounted these experiences, unprompted, in vivid detail. They also spoke of the difficult time they had in adjusting to life at home: they had trouble trusting anyone, were startled at any sound, and were haunted by past images and thoughts. Several mentioned they sometimes felt deeply changed by their experiences and did not like the person they had become. Worryingly, some told us they were thinking of going back to the bush, like this 15-year-old girl from Dungu:

- ***“Sometimes I think it would be better if I went back to the bush.”***

In the Kivus, however, it is important to note that most girls were more visibly upset about being rejected by their families and communities, and by the loneliness they were experiencing as a result of this rejection. This appeared to play a stronger part in their emotional distress than the memory of their experiences in the bush. They expressed this in different ways, through words of anger or sadness.

5.2 The need to talk

Despite these provincial differences, over three quarters of the girls we met told us they longed to have someone to talk to about their past and present experiences. They felt that their suffering had not been sufficiently acknowledged, or in some cases, was not even fully known to their families. Only a few girls said their families had acknowledged their suffering; the rest had never had a chance to talk about their experiences.

The girls told us that they felt forgotten – a feeling reinforced by the isolation in which they lived, due to the rejection from their communities or the girls’ self-imposed social withdrawal stemming from guilt and shame (see section 4.2).

All the girls we met craved positive attention; even a simple acknowledgement of their suffering – past and present – would ease their emotional burden. Some told us that the simple fact that we listened and cared made them feel better, and asked if we would come back:

- ***“Today is the first time that someone is asking me about what happened.” (16-year-old girl, Duru)***
- ***“One day in church, there was an announcement that a group wanted to meet the children under 18 who had been with an armed group. I was happy to see that someone was thinking about us.” (17-year-old girl, Bord du Lac)***

A few girls had received regular RECOPE visits and the opportunity to talk to someone on a regular basis. RECOPE members talked about the difference this had made to these girls. They said that when they could make visits (which were rare due to lack of transport and staff), trust and affection were rapidly rebuilt between the girls and their families, and the girls “calmed down” (their words) and seemed more content. The few girls who were given the opportunity to talk to RECOPE members on a regular basis told us how valuable and comforting this had been:

- ***“If I did not have the [RECOPE] president’s advice, I would have gone back to the bush.” (17-year-old girl, Katogota)***
- ***“We walk two hours to go to the office. We see sometimes a man, sometimes a woman; it helps a lot with our bad thoughts.” (17-year-old girl, Katogota)***

From the girls’ accounts of the RECOPE visits, it would seem that being listened to regularly, compassionately and without judgment, would give them great comfort and could help them move forward.

5.3 The role of religion

The majority of the girls we interviewed said that practicing their religion provided a vital source of solace and hope for them.

Religion provided the girls with support on different levels. On a spiritual level, the girls said, knowing that God forgives their sins and loves them provides them with great comfort, particularly at a time when their communities reject them. They also said they take solace in confiding in God when there is no one else to talk to.

On a psychosocial level, places of worship provide spaces in which to create social relations and bonds around values of charity and tolerance. The girls felt they gained social value by going to church or to the mosque, particularly when they participated in youth group meetings, or a church choir. The girls who participated more actively in these religious groups seemed to derive the greater psychosocial benefits:

- ***“Some of my old friends don’t associate with me anymore, but it’s good at church. I am happy when I am there. However, I rarely go because I don’t have appropriate clothes.”***
(16-year-old, Bord du Lac)
- ***“I like going to the mosque. I meet other children and they give me good advice on how to behave.”***
(17-year-old girl, Nyiragongo Sud)

At the same time, the church-going community was not always entirely benevolent towards the girls. Some girls told us that church-goers “who knew of their past” were whispering as they passed by, or turning their backs on them.

It seems important, then, that DDR programmes engage religious leaders more systematically in the psychosocial recovery of girls formerly associated with armed groups. The religious leaders we met did not indicate that they felt any particular responsibility towards these children, neither in meeting with them nor in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation within communities.

5.4 The role of education

In addition to helping girls recover their “social value” and thus promoting community acceptance, research shows that schooling mitigates the effect of war and trauma on children affected by armed conflict. This is because school provides a structured environment in which distressed children can regulate their emotions; it allows them to develop a new and positive identity, and a sense of self-worth, through the acquisition of knowledge. The structure of school life promotes a sense of purpose, and offers opportunities for socialising with peers, breaking social isolation. A 16-year-old girl in Walikale said to us:

- ***“Studying carries hope of a better future.”***

Worthy of note, however, is that whilst the girls generally reported forming friendships in school, a few mentioned that stigmatisation and discrimination persisted, from students and teachers:

- ***“At school, others discriminate against me. They say they are afraid of me. Some don’t talk to me.”*** (16-year-old girl, Uvira)
- ***“At school, some people call us ‘HIV carriers’.”*** (Nyiragongo Nord)²³

It was also reported that some schools refused admission to children formerly associated with armed groups. These reports suggest that there is more work to be done in sensitising both teachers and students.

5.5 The role of foster families

The girls we interviewed who had spent time in care with foster families (pending family tracing and reunification) were unanimously positive about their experiences. The foster families we met were equally positive, saying that even when the girls’ behaviour had been difficult at first, this had rapidly improved. The foster families talked about the girls with great concern and affection. Many girls remained in contact with their former foster mothers, even when they had only stayed with them for a few weeks.

All the DDR actors we interviewed told us that children from foster families fared much better when reunified with their families than those from transit centres (called “CTOs”²⁴).

- ***“We see fewer reintegration problems with children who have spent some time in temporary foster care compared to those who have been in a CTO.”*** (NGO respondent)

However, we were concerned by testimonies stating that in three locations, girls were taken from their homes by DDR actors and placed in a foster family or in a CTO, weeks or months after they had already returned home. None of them understood why this was needed and they were not able to object (see section 7).

We did not investigate in depth the impact of temporary foster family care on successful reintegration, and the mechanisms through which children were placed with foster families. Nonetheless, the testimonies we collected emphasised the positive value of such support. Further research on this intervention should be conducted, to guide present and future reintegration programmes.

²³ Focus group with girls aged 15-18, Nyiragongo Nord.

²⁴ Transit and Orientation Centres (*Centres de transit et d’orientation*).



Girl formerly associated with an armed group.

6.

Those left behind

“Please, I beg you, do everything you can to get back the girls left behind. Sometimes we hear such terrible news.” (20-year-old girl, Uvira)

Although the exact figures are unknown, anecdotal reports and available statistics (see section 1.1) suggest that many girls remain associated with armed groups, and are unable to access recovery and reintegration support. The girls we met told us about others who had lived with them in the bush, ranging from “a few” to 25 or more. These estimates were higher in areas where the LRA operates.

It has been documented that girls are more vulnerable to becoming trapped within armed groups than boys.²⁵ It is therefore imperative to devote more effort to reaching them.

However, the demobilisation components of DDR programmes seem to be severely limited when it comes to girls. We learned from NGOs that much is being done to demobilise children: including through sensitisation of armed groups and the dissemination of messages in the areas where they operate. Yet, although hundreds of children have since returned home as a result of these campaigns, the majority have been boys.

Many of the DDR actors we interviewed admitted that the messages used for advocacy with armed groups were not sufficiently gender

²⁵ The numerous challenges that hinder the demobilisation and auto-demobilisation of girls, and which do not apply to boys, have been documented. Girls are often perceived to be “wives”, rather than child soldiers, and as such they are often concealed during identification visits. They are more closely supervised than boys, and get fewer permissions to leave the military camp. If the girls have children, their escape is more difficult. If they have given birth under poor sanitary conditions, they may suffer illness or injury that would hinder their escape. Furthermore, shame and fear of rejection prevent some girls from making themselves known.

sensitive. On this basis it would be appropriate to adapt these messages, particularly to convey to armed group commanders that the use of underage girls for sexual or domestic purposes is a crime under national and international law.

DDR actors also advised of the need for many more facilitators working to sensitise armed groups and girls associated with them, including girls formerly associated with armed groups themselves. Some NGOs suggested that girls formerly associated with armed groups could bear witness to the benefits of civilian life by testifying on the radio and calling on girls still in the bush to escape.

As a final consideration, and as noted above, the fear of rejection by families and communities deters many girls from leaving armed groups (see section 4.1). It therefore seems imperative to first conduct wide-ranging sensitisation activities across the communities where large numbers of girls have been recruited, to prepare them for the girls' return. DDR actors advised us that the government's Division of Social Affairs, in collaboration with RECOPE and community leaders, are best placed to advocate on the girls' behalf to ensure they are supported and assisted when they come home. Messages should then be sent out to the girls, assuring them of a welcome return.

GENERALE

3. LEER PRINCIPES D'INT

D'ENSEIGNER
 l'élève
 ou l'enfant
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 de connaissances
 et de compétences
 qui lui permettent
 de résoudre des
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A girl formerly associated with an armed group back in school.

7.

Interim care

“As soon as my mother found out where I was she came to get me. We did not want to be apart.”

As a matter of course, children separated from armed groups and waiting for family reunification are placed in interim care within a foster family or a CTO. Both can provide good opportunities for psychosocial support and preparation for reintegration. However, we are concerned that interim care had been used unnecessarily and inappropriately in the case of many of the girls we met.

Of the 25 girls we spoke to who were placed into care, 21 had been transferred there *after* they had already been reunified with their families.²⁶ In a particularly worrying case, which is most likely an exception, two illiterate girls taken from their family were still illiterate a year later, when they left the CTO. One girl said she was not happy to leave her family but said she had *“no choice but to obey.”* It seems no assessment was made as to what the girls and their families wanted. Other girls we met had similar experiences, both in foster care and CTOs:

- ***“Two years after I had returned home, someone from the centre came to talk to us and said that I should go to the centre where I would receive training.” (18-year-old girl)***

²⁶ For the 21 cases we documented, the average period of family reunion before placement into transit care was 6 weeks.

- ***“I had been home for a month. I was doing well at home. People came to talk to my parents. They said that I had to go to a centre to detraumatise me. I had no choice. I stayed one year in the centre.”*** (15-year-old girl)
- ***“I only stayed two weeks with the [foster] family because as soon as my mother found out where I was she came to get me. We did not want to be apart.”*** (17-year-old girl)

Using CTOs in these circumstances seems counterproductive, especially in the face of limited funding. CTOs are expensive to run. Working with families and communities to support the reintegration of girls may prove to be a more efficient use of funds.

A 21-year old girl, aged 17 when she came back home

“I was reunited with my family who greeted me with joy and tears, since they had lost hope and had already performed the mourning ceremony for me. At that time, the NGO gave me two T-shirts and a skirt. The following year I went back to school. My mother paid the fees. Then another NGO put me in a sewing training. At the end, they gave me a sewing machine, a roll of poplin, scissors, a tape measure, oil for the sewing machine’s engine, and a box of needles. Then one day a social worker from another NGO came to talk to my mother and told her that the centre [a CTO] could take care of me. Two days later, I left for six months and continued my studies.”



Handwritten text on the wall, including:
UR 22
KIP 25
MAB 44
MIK 13
UR 21
KIP 25
MIK 18
MAB 44
UR 83
KIP 24
MAB 43
MIK 47
MAB 45
MIK 20
MAB 45

A girl formerly associated with an armed group working as a seamstress.



8.

Accessing reintegration support

“I wanted to go back to school so I asked them [the NGO], but I was told there was no budget for that so they put me in a tailoring course.”

Of the 150 girls we met, just over a third (54) told us they had never received any assistance from DDR actors. Our questions revealed that this meant they had received no material, medical, psychosocial or socio-economic support. This included five girls who had been promised assistance by an NGO but never received it. Of the 150 girls, 70 had received some level of NGO assistance, varying from minimal to substantial (see analysis in section 8.1 and Annex III).²⁷

We recognise that no broader-ranging conclusion can be drawn from these statistics, as our sample was neither random nor statistically representative. Nevertheless, our findings remain of concern because most of the girls we interviewed were introduced to us by DDR providers. This suggests that the proportion of girls who received reintegration assistance would have been even lower with a broader sample. In addition, what the girls said about the nature and usefulness of the support they actually received remains highly significant.

²⁷ We were not able to collect sufficiently detailed information to draw any conclusions for the remaining 26.

8.1 Review of a sample of assistance interventions

We analysed the sample of 70 girls who told us they had received some form of reintegration support. Types of assistance included: tailoring or hair-braiding classes; help with setting up a restaurant or small vending business; the provision of livestock; support for an Income Generating Activity (IGA); counselling; receiving visits from RECOPE or NGO members; payment of school fees; and the provision of personal kits, including items such as clothes and soap (see Annex III).

These initiatives had a varying level of success, according to the level of planning and follow-up:

- **22 girls were offered tailoring training, some with the provision of a sewing machine:**
 - > 3 of these girls established a viable business after the training, although they generate a minimal level of income from this activity: *“I have completed my training and I am a seamstress, but I only earn 2.000 Francs [approximately \$2] a week because there are so few clients.”* (17-year-old girl)
 - > 9 girls had their training courses cancelled. One said the trainer had told them: *“The NGO is not paying me anymore. There will be no more training. Go home.”* (16-year-old girl)
 - > 1 girl dropped out of the course; 2 more never took up tailoring; at the time of interview, 3 girls were still in training.
 - > 4 sewing machines broke soon after the end of training. 1 machine was stolen.

- **5 girls received livestock (a total of 7 pigs and goats):**
 - > None of the girls managed to derive a regular income from the livestock initiatives.
 - > 5 animals died soon after the girls received them. 1 animal was stolen.
 - > 2 girls sold their animals (1 live goat and 1 dead pig) and started businesses with the profits. 2 more dead pigs were sold to start businesses, which unfortunately failed.

- **7 girls received school fees for approximately a year:**
 - > All these girls told us they were very grateful to receive educational support. However, 2 of the girls discovered that the fee-paying support had ended when the school suddenly sent them home.

- **At least 9 girls received visits from RECOPE or NGO members:**
 - > The girls who recalled these visits spoke of how they valued them and were relieved to have someone to talk to when they had problems. The visits also reassured them that they were not forgotten.

In summary, of the 40 girls participating in vocational training and small business ventures,²⁸ only 12 (less than a third) reported success in generating a stream of income from these initiatives. (Although three girls remained committed to ongoing training courses.)

²⁸ These include: tailoring or hair-braiding classes; help with setting up a restaurant or small vending business; the provision of livestock; and support for an IGA.

8.2 Obstacles to the effective reintegration of girls

As is often the case with DDR programmes across the world, the activities chosen to provide reintegration support for these girls seem to have been pre-determined with insufficient individual or contextual analysis. Several failings can be identified:

- Market studies were not always conducted: Some RECOPE members were clear about the limited prospect of success in tailoring in their part of the country: *“Five girls were trained... and each received a sewing machine. But in the end... no client.”* The same applies to many trades, particularly when the number of trained girls in one particular location is high.
- Some girls did not have the capacity to take on the training and/or business: They did not have the specialised skills or available time needed to succeed in the chosen activity. Some girls, for example, had no knowledge of how to care for animals. Others told us that they had to drop out of training because they had to help their families in the field or at the market, or had to care for younger siblings. Several girls were illiterate.
- Girls were not sufficiently consulted: In most instances, tailoring was the only option given to the girls. Several said they would have preferred to go back to school: *“I wanted to go back to school so I asked them, but I was told there was no budget for that so they put me in a tailoring course.”*
- Support arrived very late: Assistance was sometimes offered a significant time after the girls had left the armed group, often as a result of fundraising constraints (see section 9). Of the 5 girls trained in hair-braiding, 1 was offered training after 2 years and the other after 3 years. One girl started tailoring training 2 years after she had returned home.
- Promises were broken: Of the 22 girls offered training in tailoring, 9 had their training cancelled. Another 18 girls told us they had been promised training or an IGA but there was no further contact after that. The majority of the 18 had received some in-kind support (clothes and/or shoes, soap, sugar and pans) and were told someone would return, but no one ever did.
- Support was inconsistent: We observed inconsistencies in support given to girls in the same location. In some places, some girls received training, and/or were taken to a CTO, while others in the same area only met an NGO once and there was no follow-up. In some cases, the girls were registered and received a kit of clothes, but did not receive any medical check-up.

Example of an unsuccessful vocational training Case study: Merveille, 18-year-old girl

Two years after her return home, Merveille was approached by an NGO to move to a CTO, where she would receive vocational training. She left her sister's house and stayed in the centre for six months while learning tailoring. *“After that, I went back to live with my sister again.”*

About the training, Merveille told us: *“They gave me a sewing machine, an iron and other sewing supplies. I used the machine for a few months but then it broke and I never used it again.”*

At the time we met her, due to the lack of follow-up support, Merveille had not been able to make a living out of the tailoring training she had received.

Whilst delivery of vocational training had not achieved its intended aims for the majority of the girls we spoke to, it is possible that the special attention dedicated to the girls during the training, the opportunity it gave them to socialise with other girls, and the improved social status they derived from learning a trade, were all beneficial psychosocial by-products of the overall process, and offset some of their disappointment.

8.3 The potential of agriculture

Limited income-generating opportunities in conflict-affected regions is a problem that has vexed DDR actors for many years, and requires more thinking. At the same time, rural environments in regions as fertile as eastern DRC offer promising opportunities for expanded and improved agriculture and animal husbandry.

Despite ongoing insecurity in some of the areas targeted by our study, all the girls we met, regardless of whether they were in school or had a small business in parallel, told us that they were working in the fields with their families. Many also worked as day labourers in other people's fields. A large number of girls we interviewed said farming tools and seeds would be the most useful form of support for them. They also wanted sheep and goats:

- ***“Our neighbours have sheep and goats. We would love to have some.” (Nyiragongo Nord)***²⁹

It is therefore highly likely that, in a significant number of cases, the strengthening of girls' and families' existing capacities in farming and animal husbandry would provide them with sustainable economic opportunities and raise the quality of agricultural and pastoral production in the regions of reintegration, thus benefiting the entire community. Crucially, this would also give girls a higher status in their communities.

Nonetheless, time and investment is needed to rehabilitate agriculture and animal husbandry in areas that have been devastated by armed conflicts, where fields have been neglected, animals stolen, and agricultural tools pillaged.

²⁹ Focus group with girls aged 15-18, Nyiragongo Nord.

8.4 Direct family and community reintegration support

It is important to note the reports we received of families, churches and RECOPE members taking their own initiative to help girls back into civilian life and promote their psychosocial wellbeing, at least initially. We received four accounts of aunts who had committed to train their nieces in tailoring, and five accounts of fathers who had started small businesses for their daughters.

Although the majority of families failed to support their daughters' businesses, approximately 20 families contributed towards the costs of their education. Such initiatives must be encouraged and publicly praised.



Girl formerly associated with an armed group.

9.

DDR funding

“We know that 273 children left armed groups in 2015, [but] we are still waiting for [funds].”

DDR actors we met told us that funding for child DDR had either stopped (in some areas since 2014, in others more recently) or was so low that they could only reach a fraction of children formerly associated with armed groups in their area. One leading NGO told us that they had received a list from an armed group of over 300 such children but could not assist them. Another had identified 109 children but only had funding to assist 19 of them. Other NGOs had similar complaints:

- ***“A Mai Mai group wanted to release children but we could not take them; we did not have enough funding.”***
- ***“[There has been] no DDR support for the last 3 years; only some follow-up in 2014.”***

Other NGOs and RECOPE members told us that they wanted to conduct campaigns to promote the release of children but lacked basic resources such as paper, transportation, boots to wear during the rainy season, and megaphones. They also said that “sous-RECOPE” members (RECOPE members living in remote villages) were willing to conduct such campaigns and meet with armed groups but they needed training and sensitisation material first.

This funding situation is not entirely new and has led to unusual situations where girls who had already been home for months, and sometimes for a year or longer, were suddenly re-identified as having been associated with an armed group, and eventually benefitted from vocational training, and personal kits (see section 8.2). In the worst cases, girls were sent to a CTO or a foster family after already having been home.

An NGO coordinator told us: *“It’s in the Action Plan³⁰ [demobilised] children have to receive assistance, but we can only do it when we have the funds. So yes, even if it is a year or more after they left [the armed group], we approach them when we have enough funds.”*

To avoid such situations, we suggest it would be appropriate to move away from an “all or nothing” approach to DDR where activities only start when significant resources are in place (and often without the necessary analysis of the needs of the children and the context in which they live), and instead explore ways of providing more immediate and less expensive assistance. While such assistance would not replace a comprehensive package of DDR support, it would at least have the potential to provide significant improvements to the daily lives of girls formerly associated with armed groups, at the time when the support is most needed.

30 Signed by the DRC government and the UN to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against children by the FARDC in 2012.



Girls formerly associated with an armed group in a literacy & numeracy class.

10.

Conclusions and recommendations

The accounts of the girls formerly associated with armed groups whom we interviewed can be expressed in the following principles, which are the expression of their basic needs and rights, and which reflect the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Paris Principles and other programmatic guides:

- 1. Girls are able to leave armed groups regardless of their type of association with them, and without fear of rejection or stigmatisation.³¹**
- 2. Girls define their individual aspirations and are fully involved in developing strategies to realise them.³²**

³¹ “All actors should endeavour to work together in accordance with their mandate and respective working modalities to develop a coordinated advocacy strategy with the objective of securing the release and reintegration of children, including a particular focus on girls. Such advocacy should take place at all stages of a conflict, based on continuous monitoring and information collection. It should take place with all those responsible for the recruitment and retention in armed forces or armed groups, communities from where the children were recruited and / or to where they will be released or eventually integrated and with the children themselves.” The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.8. See also §7.23 -7.24.5.; “States Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons within their jurisdiction recruited or used in hostilities contrary to the present Protocol are demobilized or otherwise released from service. States Parties shall, when necessary, accord to such persons all appropriate assistance for their physical and psychological recovery and their social reintegration.” OPAC, 2000, Article 6.3.

³² “1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. 2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.” Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 12; “All stages of programme assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation activities to prevent the association of children with armed forces or armed groups, secure their release, provide protection and reintegrate them into civilian life should include the active participation of those communities concerned, including children. The views of children in particular, as well as the families and the communities to which children return, should always be sought.” The Paris Principles, 2007, § 3.14.

3. **Families and communities welcome back their girls and actively support their reintegration.**³³
4. **Girls are invited and encouraged to participate in social and religious activities in their community.**³⁴
5. **Girls benefit from supportive listening on a regular basis and have the opportunity to talk about their experience should they want to.**³⁵
6. **Access to education is made possible to all girls.**³⁶
7. **Girls are supported to develop viable income-generating initiatives, when needed.**³⁷

33 *“The stigmatization of children associated with armed forces or armed groups is one of the greatest barriers to reintegration and girls may be particularly ostracised. Children are frequently perceived initially as troublemakers prone to aggressive behaviour or criminal activities. The preparation of communities and on-going support to communities needs to address these perceptions and to help communities understand that the children are primarily victims.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.39. See also § 7.37-7.44.

34 *“The development of strong networks of peer support through youth groups or other community based programmes such as girls’ clubs can allow young people to work together to solve problems, develop social competencies appropriate to civilian life and define their roles and responsibilities in their community.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.75.0; *“Psychosocial support should focus on identifying and addressing any obstacles to the ability to develop an appropriate social role and engage in culturally expected social relationships.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.74.

35 *“Children should be allowed the opportunity to talk individually or in a group about their future or about past experiences, if they wish to do so. There should not be an expectation that children have to “open up” and counselling should not be forced on them. Most children benefit from a sensitive combination of traditional approaches and opportunities for supportive conversations.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.75.5.

36 *“States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity [...]”* Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Articles 28 -29; *“Education, vocational and skills training and / or opportunities to support their own and their family’s livelihoods are essential elements for reintegration. Reintegration programmes should allow and encourage access for all groups, including children who need child care facilities. This support should be free, available on a part time as well as full time basis, and include informal as well as formal assistance. Children who participate should receive food whilst they are there and the hours should be flexible to allow for other commitments. Approaches to providing support of this kind should be adapted according to the child’s age, experiences, and circumstances.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.77.; *“[...] However, as the gender context may not support girls’ attendance at school, in addition to carrying out certain domestic chores (walking long distances for water and firewood etc.) this may increase their vulnerability to recruitment and requires additional interventions to enrol and retain girls in school.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 6.3.

37 *“Provision should be made for relevant vocational training and opportunities for employment, suitable for the needs of all girls and boys including those with disabilities.”* The Paris Principles, 2007, § 7.83. See also §7.83.0-7.84.

8. Girls receive long-term follow-up support.³⁸

9. The community is willing and able to prevent the recruitment of girls (and boys).³⁹

What the girls ask for is already reflected in existing guidelines. Yet, for various reasons, these principles are not always fully implemented. Based on the girls' accounts, insufficient and sometimes misguided use of funds seems to be one factor. The lack of analysis of individual and contextual circumstances is another.

The full acceptance of a child by their family and community is the foundation upon which the other elements of the reintegration into civilian life rests, and without which psychosocial wellbeing cannot be fully recovered. The goal of achieving acceptance must be at the centre of reintegration programmes for girls formerly associated with armed groups. The voices of the girls we met were clear: supporting community acceptance was not sufficiently prioritised by the DDR actors who facilitated their reintegration.

The girls told us about several ways they felt they could regain their "social value" and overcome stigma. Essentially, their wish was simply to be like all other girls in the community: to be part of community life, to have friends, to have someone to talk to, to be listened to, to be valued and respected. Perhaps there is a major lesson to be learned from this: when community rejection is the main obstacle to girls' reintegration, rather than marking out returnees from the other girls in the community with vocational training or other types of specialised assistance, should we not support and promote their inclusion into existing community activities?

The vast majority of girls we interviewed, including those who were attending school, worked in the fields. Even in unsafe areas, agriculture and animal husbandry remain the main source of income and part of daily life for the majority of the population, including girls formerly associated with armed groups. It is clear that insecurity in some areas limits the agricultural development achievable in times

³⁸ "Monitoring and follow-up of children are essential to ensure long term reintegration, the protection and upholding of rights and benefits, to prevent re-recruitment, and to identify and respond appropriately to children who experience serious difficulties with reintegration. In order to be effective, the community, including children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups and other children affected by armed conflict, should be involved in planning the criteria and process for follow-up. Local capacity should be supported or developed to provide long term monitoring, support and intervention if children are felt to be at significant risk." The Paris Principles, 2007, § 9.0.

³⁹ "Effective prevention of the unlawful recruitment or use of girls and boys includes safe attendance at schools, prevention of family separation and early identification, protection and reunification programmes for separated children. Viable alternatives to joining armed forces or armed groups should be available for children, including adolescents. This will include educational and vocational programmes, income generating activities, and access to livelihood opportunities. Child protection mechanisms must be in place, including raising awareness on children's rights. [...]" The Paris Principles, 2007, § 6.3.

of peace. However, it seems important to do whatever is possible to strengthen existing activities by improving agricultural and pastoral technical knowledge and providing the required tools and seeds.

The girls and RECOPE members cited education as the most effective way for girls to regain their “social value” in the eyes of the community, followed by mediation and sensitisation by a well-respected community member. The combination of (a) agriculture and animal husbandry support, and (b) education, with (c) support from community leaders when mediation or sensitisation is needed, is the essence of what the girls we spoke to asked for.

We recognise that donor support is increasingly over-stretched, as thousands of children continue to desperately need support. Yet it is also true that some DDR programme approaches – such as the prolonged use of costly CTOs or the introduction of new trades – need to be rethought. This would reduce costs without jeopardising the quality of support for children. In any case, it is still possible for DDR actors to achieve a great deal, immediately, and with little or no funding – focusing on mediation and community acceptance, supportive listening, and strengthening existing economic activities in agriculture and animal-husbandry.

The voices of these girls formerly associated with armed groups will help us to do our job better. By promoting the recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child to the Congolese government in 2012⁴⁰ and 2017⁴¹, we will continue our advocacy on the need for a national DDR strategy specific to girls, and accompany our national partners in their tireless work of providing DDR assistance to children associated with armed groups.

40 *“As a matter of priority, develop and implement in collaboration with the United Nations and child protection actors a strategy to identify and provide effective reintegration assistance to current and former girl soldiers and their children, which meet their complex medical, economic and psychosocial needs. Every effort should be made to ensure these initiatives, and any resulting programmes, do not increase the stigma and exclusion faced by former girl soldiers.”* (CRC/C/OPAC/COD/1), 59th session, 2012, paragraph 49 (b).

41 *“Develop and implement in collaboration with the United Nations and child protection actors a strategy to identify and provide effective reintegration assistance to current and former girl soldiers and their children, which meet their complex medical, economic and psychosocial needs, ensuring that these initiatives, and any resulting programmes, address the stigma and exclusion faced by former girl soldiers.”*(CRC/C/COD/CO/3-5), Concluding observations on the combined third to fifth periodic report of DRC, 2017, paragraph 48 (h).



Girls in classroom.

Epilogue:

What happens to the girls who participated in the research?

Child Soldiers International undertook follow-up visits with all the girls who participated in the study in order to present the research findings; to explain how their testimonies had contributed to the development of the Practical Guide (see Annex I); and to assess what they thought about them. We hope that our joint recommendations, in the form of the Practical Guide, will ensure the provision of more appropriate assistance for all girls associated with armed groups in DRC.

With the help of our partners in North and South Kivu, and thanks to public donations – especially Jodie and John Eastman’s generous contribution, we have developed pilot projects to build literacy and numeracy skills and support the formal education of the girls who contributed to the study, along with other vulnerable girls in the same communities. These projects aim to support their education and reintegration, while enabling us to carry out a small-scale evaluation of the role of education in preventing re-recruitment and promoting community acceptance of girls formerly associated with armed groups.

ANNEX I : Practical Guide To foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed groups in DR Congo

Summary

Objectives

This guide proposes practical interventions to help DDR actors respond to the needs of girls formerly associated with armed groups in eastern DRC. It is a collection of ideas and experiences compiled from Child Soldiers International's partners in DRC. Therefore, many of the interventions are not new, but they are not necessarily known or systematically used. Users of the guide are strongly encouraged to share any useful comments or experience they may have to enrich and complement it.

It must also be noted that the guide does not intend to provide definitive guidance on girls DDR: it presents practical recommendations to circumvent some of the current difficulties faced by DDR actors. It should be used to complement current international standards (such as the *Paris Principles*) and not replace them.

As limited funding continues to present a major challenge, the guide places a strong emphasis on interventions that are inexpensive and can be carried out by community members – building on existing community resources.

A. The ultimate suffering: Rejection from family and friends

It is well established that stigmatisation prevents psychosocial recovery, and that family and community acceptance is the most critical factor for the successful reintegration of children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups.

Community acceptance must be at the heart of reintegration programmes. How?

A1 Sensitise key community members

Sensitisation sessions can be organised by DDR providers and other child protection actors (at government, NGO and community levels) for community members including families of former child soldiers and their neighbours; community leaders; school teachers and students; youth associations; etc. Sensitisation should begin as early as possible, preferably before girls return to the community. Sensitisation sessions should discuss the likely psychological and social impact of the girls' experiences and stress that they do not deserve blame.

A2 Organise welcome ceremonies for returning girls

The purpose of such interventions is to invite a welcoming gesture on behalf of the family and the community, and to emphasize their responsibility to care for their child. The ceremony can take different forms and be as simple as a shared meal. To be effective it needs to be carried out by a respected member of the community. It is never too late to organise a welcome ceremony.

A3 Create “Community Reintegration Groups”

These groups must be composed of at least one influential community member, families of girls formerly or currently associated with armed groups, as well as girls and young women who have successfully reintegrated in the community. Their mandate is twofold: (1) Conduct sensitisation (see A1); and (2) Promote concrete actions by influential community members to foster acceptance and respect of the girls. (E.g. Priests could use their sermons to urge their congregation to be more charitable towards returning girls.)

A4 Identify self-demobilised girls who have not received any assistance

Child protection actors (at government, NGO and community levels) should endeavour to identify self-demobilised girls, or those abandoned by armed groups, who are less likely to have received assistance. To this end, they could ask for the help of other girls formerly associated with armed groups, who could more easily reach out to them.

B. How can a girl regain her “lost value”?

The majority of respondents in our study agreed that girls returning from the bush had “lost their social value” because they had “known men”. However, they shared many suggestions on how girls could regain a positive role and identity, and therefore be more accepted by their communities.

Help girls identify and acquire a positive and valued status within their families and communities. How?

B1 Involve girls in activities organised by and for the community

If a girl receives a specific task to accomplish, or is invited to join a group activity, especially if the initiative comes from an influential person in the community, it can greatly contribute to promoting a change of attitude from her family and community. These activities may be recreational or they can be of public interest. (E.g. The village chief could ask a girl to help decorate a room for a community event.) One must never give up on a girl who refuses to join such activities, as she is likely to refuse out of fear of exposure to criticism. This type of intervention requires very little or no funding and should be prioritised.

B2 Help all girls formerly associated with armed groups to return to school or to attend literacy and numeracy classes

Education is another effective way for girls to regain their social value and achieve a form of redemption in the eyes of the community. All the girls we met wanted to learn but faced many difficulties, including lack of funding and stigmatisation. This intervention proposes creative ways to facilitate the girls’ return to some form of formal learning. (E.g. Arrange free enrolment in exchange for material and financial support to a school.) Enrolment efforts need to be accompanied by sensitisation to foster support from parents, teachers and students. (See A1.) All illiterate girls should receive literacy and numeracy classes. (See B3.) Such classes can be set up at a very low cost using classrooms out of hours, and hiring volunteer teachers.

- B3 Provide girls with relevant vocational training and help them develop viable IGAs**
Activities which enable girls to contribute to the family's income and give them more economic independence, also greatly contribute to restoring their social value. However, these interventions will only improve a girl's status if she can manage her business successfully. This requires a rigorous preliminary assessment. (E.g. Is the market not saturated? Are the parents supportive? Does the girl have the required literacy and numeracy skills?) Therefore these activities are to be considered on a case-by-case basis according to the girls' personal and family circumstances, and without necessarily excluding girls who are in school or who attend literacy and numeracy classes. NGOs are best placed to implement these interventions, but they can rely on RECOPE and Community Reintegration Groups for monitoring and follow-up.
- B4 Strengthen the girls' capacity in agriculture and animal husbandry**
Revenues from agriculture and animal husbandry can also considerably improve the girls' financial independence and give them a valued role in the community. These activities should be considered for all girls who live in rural areas and already have some practical experience of these activities. Strengthening the girls' capacity in these activities will not simply amount to giving them tools and animals: to ensure a profit and increase their social status, it is essential to provide the girls with ongoing advice, encouragement and technical support. NGOs are best placed to implement these interventions, but they can involve community-based child protection actors.

C. Direct psychosocial support: the importance of supportive listening

All interventions mentioned in this guide so far are examples of psychosocial support since they automatically and positively influence the girls' social relationships and psychological wellbeing. However, there is another type of intervention which can more directly address their emotional distress: it is called "active listening".

Dedicate more time to active listening in order to support girls formerly associated with armed groups. How?

- C1 Identify and train community members who are willing and able to provide regular listening without judgement**
RECOPE members, teachers, or religious leaders, might be the best placed to provide this support, but a "listener" can be any sympathetic person in the community that the girl trusts and who can demonstrate an interest in her concerns for a few months or more. At a minimum, the listeners should be trained on the basics of active listening. (I.e. To meet the girls regularly; listen to her with empathy and interest, without pushing her to talk or passing judgment; to never make promises that are hard to fulfil; and to treat all conversations confidentially.)

D. RECOPE: On the front line of reintegration efforts

With a child protection mandate, and as members of communities affected by child recruitment, the RECOPE are best placed to promote and support the reintegration of girls coming out of armed groups, and to negotiate their release. However, their capacity is often extremely limited.

Support the RECOPE, which are on the front line of reintegration efforts. How?

D1 Invest more systematically in providing training and follow-up support to RECOPE members, as well as in recognising their work

Strengthening the capacity of the RECOPE and sub-RECOPE (on which the RECOPE rely on in the most remote areas) is the responsibility of all: government, UN and NGOs child protection actors. More members should be mobilised to join the RECOPE and sub-RECOPE, especially women. At a minimum, members should receive regular training and follow-up visits, and be equipped with sufficient resources (for transport, communication and stationery) to be able to negotiate the release of girls held by armed groups and provide adequate support to those that have returned.

E. The girls left behind: Can we do better to release them from armed groups?

Demobilisation interventions are regularly and successfully conducted by UN and NGO actors, as well as courageous members of affected communities. However, they mostly result in the release of boys, despite the fact that there are large numbers of girls associated with armed groups.

Make systematic efforts to identify and demobilise girls associated with armed groups. How?

E1 Encourage and train communities to engage with armed groups in order to advocate for the release of children, including girls

Actors specialised in the demobilisation of children should encourage, train and support communities to engage with armed groups. Trainings should convey the fact that the use of children for domestic or sexual purposes is a grave violation punishable by law. The sub-RECOPE are particularly well placed to negotiate the release of girls and should be targeted in this type of intervention. (See F2.)

E2 While the girls are still in the bush, sensitise the communities about their suffering and their vital need for understanding and support (See A1)

All communities affected by child recruitment should be sensitised, regardless of whether girls have started to return. When communities are prepared for the girls' return, that message should be broadly disseminated with the hope that it reaches the concerned children. DDR actors and other child protection actors who are in contact with communities are best placed to carry out these interventions, but they must work with community child protection structures where they exist.

F. Preventing recruitment and re-recruitment

Two-thirds of the girls we interviewed told us that they had been abducted, but a third had decided to join an armed group themselves. They gave us four types of reasons to explain their decision: interrupted schooling; need for protection; desire for revenge; and poverty. In many cases, family problems and the influence of peers also played a role. Prevention strategies must take this complexity into account and target all actors and factors that contribute to the recruitment of girls at the community level.

Promote and strengthen community efforts to prevent the recruitment of their children. How?

F1 Sensitise communities to prevent child recruitment in the first place

Communities that support child recruitment should be identified, after which regular group discussions can be set up to disseminate information on the prohibition of child recruitment (even for the purpose of self-defence), and the long-term harm it inflicts on children, particularly girls. (See A1.) Children could also be sensitised and become advocates within their families and communities. UN and NGO actors working on DDR, in collaboration with government child protection agencies, are the best placed to carry out these interventions, which must involve community-based actors such as the RECOPE.

F2 Inform armed group commanders about the prohibition on child recruitment and corresponding penal sanctions

This intervention necessitates an initial mapping of armed groups that recruit and use children. This should be done by UN, government and NGO actors in DRC. Engagement with armed groups can then be conducted by all DDR actors, including at the community level. These actors should convey the message that the use of children for domestic or sexual purposes is a grave violation punishable by law. They can seek advice and sensitisation material from organisations such as Geneva Call and Child Soldiers International.

F3 Sensitise communities and donors on the importance of education in preventing recruitment

Many of the girls we interviewed had joined an armed group because they could no longer attend school for financial or other reasons. DDR providers, in partnership with community child protection structures (RECOPE, sub-RECOPE, Community Reintegration Groups) should therefore sensitise families and communities about the preventive role of schooling. Child protection actors should also educate donors on the role that education plays in protecting girls from recruitment, and advocate for them to fund education programmes. (See B2.)

F4 Promote children's active participation in community life, particularly that of out-of-school girls

In some cases, out-of-school girls told us that they joined an armed group because they had nothing to do during the day. In addition to promoting school enrolment (see B2 and F3), community-based child protection actors should therefore encourage seemingly idle girls to participate in community activities that are within their reach and where they can be useful and/or learn (see B1.) (E.g. Invite girls to take on small responsibilities in village associations, or ask them to organise games for younger children in the community, while helping them to carry out these activities.)

The full version of the Practical Guide to foster community acceptance of girls associated with armed groups in DR Congo is available at:
<https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/practical-guide-on-community-reintegration>

ANNEX II: Table of respondents

Girls formerly associated with armed groups	150	RECOPE members	89
Nyiragongo Nord	18	Nyiragongo Nord	10
Nyiragongo Sud	6	Shasha (Masisi, Bord du Lac)	3
Shasha (Masisi, Bord du Lac)	2	Bweremana (Bord du Lac)	2
Bweremana (Masisi, Bord du Lac)	6	Masisi Nord	12
		Masisi Sud and Centre	12
Walikale Centre (Walikale territory)	3	Walikale Centre (Walikale territory)	4
Walikale-Kisangani axis	6	Walikale-Kisangani axis	3
Nyasi (Walikale territory)	4	Walikale-Goma axis	6
		Walikale-Bukavu axis	5
Rugari (Rutshuru territory)	4	Rugari (Rutshuru territory)	2
Rubare (Rutshuru territory)	5	Rubare (Rutshuru territory)	2
Kiwanja (Rutshuru territory)	21	Kiwanja (Rutshuru territory)	6
Katogota (Uvira territory)	13	Katogota (Uvira territory)	5
Katogota (Sange, Lupango)	10	Lupango (Sange, Uvira territory)	4
Uvira (Mboko, Fizi territory)	9	Uvira (Fizi, Fizi territory)	4
Minova (Kalehe territory)	8	Minova (Kalehe territory) Kalungu, Numbi, Murambi, Minova axis	4
Dungu (Haut-Uélé, Dungu territory)	18		
Niangara (Haut-Uélé)	9		
Duru (Haut-Uélé)	8		

Foster families	12	Local authorities	14
Goma	4	Goma	4
Goma (Masisi Sud, Centre)	2	Dungu	2
Goma (Masisi Nord)	3	Niangara territory	1
Kiwanja (Rutshuru territory)	3	Bweremana	2
Families	4	Nyiragongo Nord	1
Nyiragongo Nord	2	Kalehe/Minova territory	1
Dungu	2	Walikale territory	1
Teachers / School principals	12	Rugari (Rutshuru territory)	1
Masisi Nord, Sud, Centre	4	Rutshuru territory	1
Luofu (Beni territory)	1	UN and NGOs	46
Primary school director, Kiwanja	1	Goma	28
Secondary school principal, Kiwanja	1	Rutshuru	2
Uvira	4	Nambio (Niagara / Haut-Uélé territory)	1
Minova	1	Niagara (Niagara / Haut-Uélé territory)	1
“Artisan master trainers“	1	Dungu (Haut-Uélé territory)	4
Walikale Centre	1	Duru (Haut-Uélé territory)	1
Religious leaders	8	Minova	1
Kiwanja (Rutshuru territory)	1	Bukavu	2
Uvira (Uvira territory)	1	Sud Kivu	1
Baraza North Kivu	1	Uvira	1
Dungu (Haut-Uélé, Dungu territory)	3	Hauts and Moyens Plateaux (Fizi territory)	2
Bubandana (Kalehe territory)	1	Uvira / the plains of Ruzizi	2
Kalehe (Minova territory)	1		

ANNEX III: Summary of reintegration support reported by the girls

Type of support / Number of beneficiaries	Successful	Ongoing	Interrupted	Unsuccessful	Notes
Tailoring training and equipment 22	3^a	3^b	10^c	6^d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Girls sew and earn money from it. One bought a machine; the other paid for the training with money from the sale of a goat. b. One girl started training 2 years after she left an armed group. She walks 4 hours a day to the training. Two girls do not attend regularly as they have to help their families in the fields and/or vending. c. Funding for training suddenly ran out and 9 girls did not finish the training. One girl dropped out. d. Four girls never started sewing as the machines broke; reason why the others are not sewing is unknown.
Hair-braiding classes 5	3^a	-	2^b	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The training was offered 2 and 3 years after the girls left an armed group. b. The girls dropped out.
Baking/ restaurant business 4	2^a	-	-	2^b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. One girl has clients and opens her restaurant once a week, on market day. b. What happened is not entirely clear.
Small livestock 5^a	2^b	-	-	3^c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Five girls received 7 animals. Of these, 5 died. b. None of the girls managed to raise the livestock but 2 girls sold animals and started successful IGAs with the money: 1 live goat was sold to pay for tailoring classes for one girl, who now earns an income from sewing (see above), and 1 dead pig was sold to start a successful business. c. One animal was stolen. With money from the sale of 2 dead pigs, 2 businesses were started, but later failed.

Small vending business 4	2^a - - 2^b	<p>a. The girls are successfully vending.</p> <p>b. One girl's family consumed the goods given (sugar) to start the business. The other had her goods stolen. They told us of other girls who never managed to start a business as the food given was eaten by the family.</p>
Counselling and IGA 7	0 - 7^a -	<p>a. The girls received counselling for 2 weeks and were told they would receive training and/or support to start an IGA after the counselling sessions, but the NGO never came back.</p>
Payment of school fees 7	4^a 1^b 2^c -	<p>a. Two girls had their school fees paid for 2 years; two others had their fees paid for one year.</p> <p>b. One girl is receiving ongoing support.</p> <p>c. Two girls were sent home when financial support suddenly ran out without warning.</p>
Follow-up visits 9	9^a - - -	<p>a. Nine girls reported regular visits by child protection actors. It is likely more girls received such visits after their return home but the majority had come home several years prior and may not have remembered this.</p>
Minimal personal goods (kit) only 12	<p>Kits were modest, and their contents varied, but included items such as clothes and/or shoes, soap and sugar, etc. Three of these kits were school supplies. Most girls were told they would receive more support (such as training, IGA) but there was no follow-up.</p>	
Interim care 25	<p>Fifteen girls went through a CTO and 10 were hosted by a foster family. The average stay in a CTO was 4 months (as short as 1 month to as long as 1 year). In foster families, 4 girls stayed 1-3 weeks while 4 girls stayed 2-3 months. One girl was first placed in a foster family for 3 weeks, then reunified with her family, then 10 months later was taken to a CTO.</p>	

Note: It is likely that additional support was given, as the majority of the girls we interviewed had left an armed group several years previously, and may have forgotten details of assistance and follow-up.

Number of girls we interviewed: **150**

Number of girls who had received no DDR support: **54**

Number of girls who had received at least minimal DDR support: **70**

Number of girls for whom there was not enough information to ascertain the level of DDR support: **26**

ANNEX IV: Supplementary study of girls associated with armed groups in the Hauts-Plateaux, South Kivu

Context

During a follow-up mission to North and South Kivu in October 2016 we learned that a group of girls formerly associated with self-defence militias in and around Minembwe in the so-called Hauts-Plateaux area (South Kivu) appeared to have been systematically neglected by DDR programmes.

In November 2016, Child Soldiers International's Research Assistant spent a week with these girls and members of their communities in Minembwe centre, and in the surrounding locations of Madegu, Kakenge, Kahwera, Ilundu and Ibumba, where several Mai Mai groups clash regularly. In total, she interviewed 55 girls formerly associated with armed groups, a family of one of these girls, three DDR actors, two religious leaders, three village chiefs, two locally elected officials and a manager of a local mining operation.

Across the locations of Minembwe centre, Madegu, Kakenge, Kahwera and Ilundu we met 20 girls, all of whom were from the Banyamulenge ethnic group and were formerly associated with a Banyamulenge Mai Mai group called "Gumino", under the commanders Tawmbi or Nyamulenge.

In Ibumba we met 35 girls. Most of them were from the Babembe and Bafuliro ethnic groups, but a handful were from the Nyindu, Bashi and Hutu ethnic groups. The girls in Ibumba were formerly associated with one of two Bafuliro Mai Mai groups, one named "Kazadi" after its General,⁴² with its headquarters in Kijombo, and another named "Nyamushoshu" with its headquarters in Kagembe.

We applied an identical methodology to that used during the January-February 2016 research, based on focus groups and individual interviews with girls and community members. The lead researcher provided close support to the research assistant before and during her mission to the Hauts-Plateaux.

Post-demobilisation follow-up

The 20 girls formerly associated with the "Gumino" Mai Mai had been with the group for periods ranging from one to three years. All but one had been demobilised by MONUSCO and local NGOs, together with other children. Most returned home in 2014, with the exception of two girls who were demobilised in 2016.

42 "General Kazadi" died in 2014 but the group is still active.

Seventeen⁴³ of these girls told us that, since their return to their communities, they had received no follow-up contact or reintegration support. Members of their communities provided similar testimonies:

- ***“Since 2014 to today, we have not once seen the faces of those who brought us out of the bush because they have not returned, not even for a day.”***
(17-year-old girl, Kahwere)
- ***“Since the massive demobilisation of children in 2014, there has been no support for children and their families. Organisations once involved in the children’s release just brought them back from the bush to their respective communities. After that there was no follow-up or other interventions to make them forget the difficult situations that they experienced in the bush.”*** (Local official)

The 35 girls we interviewed in Ibumba who were formerly associated with the “Kazadi” and “Nyamushoshu” Mai Mai groups had spent between six months and five years in these groups. Nineteen escaped, six were demobilised by MONUSCO and local NGOs, and two were released after village leaders sensitised the armed group. We could not gather sufficient information to report on the demobilisation of the remaining eight girls.

Most of this group were demobilised or escaped in 2014 and 2015. They all reported that they had received no reintegration support or follow-up after they were demobilised.

Recruitment

Of the 55 girls interviewed, 14 told us that they had been forcibly recruited while at home or working in the fields during attacks, often with other children. However, the majority (41) left to join Mai Mai groups after being influenced by other young people and adults from their communities.

- ***“I knew of the movement long before [I joined], since the adults talked about it and knew their location.”*** (17-year-old girl, Ibumba)
- ***“I saw young people and other adults join Kazad’s men to secure the community. Sometimes I saw the village elders come together when the group had problems. They said that everyone had to be behind them to fight the Banyamulenge.”*** (16-year-old girl, Ibumba)
- ***“The elders said that the group was there to avenge the Banyamulenge people against the Babembe and Bafuliro. The neighboring families had already sent more than 12 young people to join the group and this is where the idea of leaving came to me.”*** (16-year-old girl, Kahwere)

In an area frequently attacked by other armed groups, several girls told us that they had joined the Mai Mai for their own protection and that of their families, or to seek income and means of survival.

All the girls told us that they were shaken by how badly they had been treated at the hands of the Mai Mai. In many cases, they belonged to the same ethnic group as the members of the Mai Mai group, and had assumed they would be cared for by them.

43 The remaining three reported that they had received follow-up visits from the NGO which had demobilised them.

Life in the bush

As in other areas in the Kivus, most of the girls associated with the Mai Mai groups in the Hauts-Plateaux were given several roles. Most performed hard labour such as constructing huts for the commanders, collecting firewood, fetching water or working in mines. They were given responsibility for domestic tasks, including cooking, laundry and childcare. Some were issued with weapons to intimidate people during looting. In addition, the Mai Mai trained many of the girls for combat, using knives and firearms.

- ***“For four days I learned how to handle the weapon and on the fifth day I had to fight against the government [FARDC] who came to attack the camp. I was shooting in disarray since I had not mastered anything yet. I could not hold the weapon properly because it weighed more than me. After that, I fought twice during the hunting of Banyamulenge cows which were to be pillaged during the festive season. I was scared at first, but little by little I got used to it. With time it became a habit and I could fight like any other person.”*** (17-year-old girl, recruited at age 14, Ibumba)

Consistent with many other areas of the Kivus, a significant number of the girls in the Hauts-Plateaux were involved in rituals, and carried “fetishes” to ensure the protection of combatants.

Just as the majority of girls associated with Mai Mai groups interviewed in other parts of the Kivus, the girls in the Hauts-Plateaux were shocked by the violence and maltreatment they suffered at the hands of the Mai Mai group. Those who joined to defend their ethnic group, out of curiosity, to seek protection or to obtain an income, told us that they quickly regretted their decision.

- ***“It was a life of suffering. I served as a woman to several men who did not care about my age and all of it through intimidation because I could not do anything.”*** (16-year-old girl, recruited at age 13 with the hope of becoming an officer, Kahwere)
- ***“I saw adults murdered when they did not obey the orders given. I saw women giving birth without any help, and afterwards they were chased away because they could no longer serve any purpose.”*** (16-year-old girl, recruited at age 10, Ibumba)

As for the majority of girls formerly associated with armed groups who we met during our first study, the girls in the Hauts-Plateaux reported repeated sexual abuse by different men as a part of everyday life.

The girls left behind

The girls we interviewed told us that they had seen many children in the Mai Mai groups and how many are still associated with them. UN actors confirmed that the Hauts-Plateaux of Minembwe is an area very difficult to access, with few active DDR providers.

- ***“There were other children, about 60, girls and boys, and all were in poor health.”*** (16-year-old girl, Ibumba)
- ***“There were other girls who had already found husbands and could not leave.”*** (19-year-old girl, Madegu)
- ***“There were other girls who had refused to leave the bush because they no longer represented proper women in society.”*** (17-year-old girl, Madegu)

- ***“Many of the friends I used to play with are still in the bush. I had to look for new friends.”*** (17-year-old girl, Ibumba)

As with girls in other areas in the Kivus, all the girls we spoke to in the Hauts-Plateaux wanted to discourage their peers from joining Mai Mai groups. They pleaded with us to help other children still associated with armed groups:

- ***“because their place is with their family, not in the bush”*** (15-year-old girl, Ibumba).
- ***“I discourage other girls who think that life is better in the bush to change their minds, because it is a certain death. I also call on child protection organisations to try and help children who are still in the bush to leave”*** (17-year-old girl, Kahwera).

Coming home at last

In contrast to other areas we visited in the Kivus, most of the girls we interviewed in the Hauts-Plateaux, were accepted by their communities after their return. The majority told us that life had resumed its normal course. This acceptance seems to be influenced by the community’s support for their Mai Mai group, which seems more prevalent in the Hauts-Plateaux than in other communities with Mai Mai groups we visited.

- ***“The community had no problem with us since all the children had left to join Gumino.”*** (19-year-old girl, Madegu)
- ***“When I arrived at my father’s, life resumed as normal since it is a phenomenon [the recruitment] known to everyone, and nobody mocks the other.”*** (16-year-old girl, Ibumba)
- ***“My mother welcomed me with tears in her eyes, since she thought I was already dead.”*** (17-year-old girl, Ibumba)

Nevertheless, despite an overall positive reception, we received reports of some exceptions to this trend. Some Banyamulenge girls reported rejection by their communities, and just as girls in other areas in the Kivus, told us of their “lost social value”. Girls and community leaders in the Hauts-Plateaux also told us that several girls had to “change their address” to avoid stigmatisation.

- ***“The girls in the bush are not well respected. They no longer have any value. Some move elsewhere to regain their value and others stay due to lack of means. Their situation improves gradually but in the beginning it is always difficult to bear the stigmatisation.”*** (19-year-old girl, Kakenge)

In other cases, girls may be welcomed on their return, but because their communities refuse to accept criticisms that damage the popular heroic image of their Mai Mai groups, they will not acknowledge the girls’ grievances.

- ***“Before I heard parents and other community members talking about the group, saying it was for the benefit of our ethnic group, and parents were sending their children to join. Now I know that they are wicked. The community is happy with the group and supports them through compulsory contributions per family.”*** (18-year-old girl, Madegu)

The few girls who came home with babies reported indifference, or sometimes hostility, from their parents towards their babies, even though they themselves had been welcomed with kindness.

- ***“My parents were indifferent to the child, saying he was not their blood.”***
(18-year-old girl, Madegu)

Another girl in Kakenge, who returned home while she was pregnant, was rejected by her family, but her neighbours and village leaders helped pay for her maternity needs. After giving birth she went back to her mother, who finally welcomed her.

These examples illustrate the complexity of social factors which impact on family and community acceptance for girls who return home pregnant or with children.

Barring these notable exceptions, overall most communities in the Hauts-Plateaux appear to have fully accepted the girls that returned and provided significant support. Village and religious leaders in the areas we visited were involved in reintegration efforts, particularly through family mediation activities.

- ***“In the family it was not easy at first, but thanks to the advice from the elders and servants of God [pastors], my parents changed their behavior towards me.”***
(18-year-old girl, Kahwere)

A 17-year-old girl from Madegu told us that she had to stay with an aunt after leaving the armed group because her parents no longer wanted her. Her aunt solicited the help of a pastor, village elders and close friends of the girl’s father to mediate. Her parents, who had great respect for the pastor, accepted his arguments and welcomed the girl home.

The need to talk

Although many of the girls we spoke to were accepted by their communities, the majority of them still felt a strong need for someone to talk to, especially a woman. This echoes the reports we heard in all other locations visited in the Kivus and Haut-Uélé during the first study.

- ***“Girls like us need people to talk to about our situation. The religious in Minembwe are men; we cannot talk about intimate issues with men as we do now. We had lost hope that there would still be people who would care about and listen to us.”***
(18-year-old girl, Madegu)
- ***“Thank you for listening to my problems. It gives me back the joy of being back in the community.”*** (18-year-old girl, Ibumba)
- ***“I am very pleased to see that there are still people who care about our situation. Sometimes we find ourselves alone without moral support. Thank you. She is a woman who came to us and gave us time to talk about our situation among women. Since our return no organisation or group have met us for such an interview.”***
(19-year-old girl, Madegu)
- ***“People do not take care of girls nor boys. Yet they have experienced problems and need people to talk to about their problems.”*** (17-year-old girl, Ibumba)

Access to education

Of the 20 girls formerly associated with Mai Mai “Gumino”, 19 had been in school before their association. Due to a lack of resources, or in some instances a lack of will on the part of parents, none of them had been able to return to school after demobilisation. The majority nonetheless wanted to do so:

- ***“My wish is to return to school to become responsible one day and help others who have experienced problems like me.” (18-year-old girl, Kakenge)***
- ***“I would prefer to go back to school to be valued like other girls who are studying.” (17-year-old girl, Madegu)***
- ***“I want to go back to school to forget the past.” (16-year-old girl, Kahwera)***

In comparison, only 6 of the 35 girls formerly associated with the “Kazadi” and “Nyamushoshu” Mai Mai groups had been in school before their association. None of this small group had been able to resume their studies. 24 had never been to school and were illiterate. The majority of the illiterate girls told us that they were eager to learn to read and write.

Conclusion

The almost complete absence of follow-up contact by DDR actors for the majority of girls after their demobilisation is surprising. Nonetheless, we were encouraged to see local initiatives by religious leaders, village leaders and other members of the community supporting the reintegration of these girls. Given the limited accessibility of the area and the lack of DDR actors, it seems crucial to revitalise efforts to demobilise and support girls (and boys) associated with armed groups in the Hauts-Plateaux of South Kivu. The community support of local Mai Mai groups also seems to require increased community awareness-raising to prevent the recruitment of children.

Many girls associated with armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) suffer extreme hardship – both while in the ranks of those armed groups and after they come home. However, programmes that support their release, recovery and reintegration are too scarce and often underfunded. As a result, only a small percentage of girls leave armed groups and an even smaller number receive any assistance.

Following extensive consultations with DRC-based child protection partners in 2012-2015, Child Soldiers International travelled to eastern DRC in early 2016 to understand these issues from the point of view of the girls themselves. In collaboration with our partners, we conducted interviews with 150 girls formerly associated with armed groups, as well as local authority officials, community leaders and members of community-based child protection networks.

This report presents the findings of this research, revealing that community rejection remains a major obstacle to the successful reintegration of girls formerly associated with armed groups. Many of the girls we talked to struggled with stigma and discrimination, sometimes years after their return home. Essentially, they simply wished to be like other girls: to have friends, to have someone to talk to, to participate in the life of the community, and to be loved and respected. However, our research identified that, with only a few encouraging exceptions, assistance programmes did not adequately address the fundamental issue of family and community acceptance.

Interviews conducted with the girls and members of their communities suggested several ways in which the girls could potentially overcome this stigma and regain the acceptance of their communities. These findings were presented and discussed during a workshop held in Goma in October 2016, with a view to identifying practical steps to improve assistance to girls. Participants unanimously agreed that Child Soldiers International should develop a Practical Guide designed to support the release and reintegration of girls associated with armed groups through concrete and low-cost interventions at the community level. This guide is available as a standalone publication and is summarised at the end of this report.

Child Soldiers International was founded in 1998 and works to achieve a global ban on child recruitment in law and practice. To achieve our goal, we seek to strengthen and uphold national and international laws, provide technical support to governments, support and equip child protection actors, and build community resistance to child recruitment.

Cover photo: Girl formerly associated with an armed group.

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