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Kathleen Kostelny

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What About the Girls?
Kathleen Kostelny†

When discussing child soldiers and their reintegration into their communities, the focus is usually on boys even though girls are often also a part of the armed forces. I would like to ask: "What about the girls?"

Between 1990 and 2002, 36 countries had girl soldiers. In fact, in such countries as Angola, Sierra Leone, El Salvador, Uganda, and Ethiopia, between thirty and forty percent of all child soldiers were girls. While generally, girls serve in many of the same positions as boys, such as fighters or porters, many girls also have roles unique to females, such as caring for children and being sex slaves to male combatants. Furthermore, the emotional and social impact on girls is different: Many endure social isolation and are condemned as spiritually contaminated for their roles in the armed forces. Finally, policies and programs targeted at reintegrating girls into their communities have been scarce. Most Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration ("D.D.R.") programs are open only to boys and men. One girl in Sierra Leone declared, "They came and took the boys and gave them food and kits but left us—the girls—in the road. I had to walk three days to get back to my village with not even a piece of cloth to cover me, and when I got there, I was not welcome."

This presentation will use Sierra Leone as a case study to highlight some issues facing girls during the conflict and postconflict phase. After the war ended in Sierra Leone, the enormous challenge of healing the emotional and physical wounds of thousands of young abducted girls, of reintegrating them into families and communities, and of helping them obtain economic security for their survival and the survival of their children remained. After describing the situation in Sierra Leone, the experiences of girls during and after armed conflict, the impact on them, and the challenges of reintegrating them into their communities, I will present a community-based program that focuses on the girls' needs in a holistic manner.

The civil war in Sierra Leone between the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force and the opposition forces—the Revolutionary United Front ("R.U.F.")—sponsored by Charles Taylor in Liberia and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council—was one of the most brutal and horrific armed conflicts in the world. Lasting from 1991 to 2001, the war destroyed the country's infrastructure as homes were burned to the ground, roads and bridges destroyed, and schools demolished. Thousands of men, women, and children were killed, and thousands more were horribly mutilated by the forced amputations of arms and legs. The Coalition to Stop the Use of

† Ms. Kostelny is the Director of the Project on Children and Violence and a Senior Research Associate at the Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child Development in Chicago, Illinois.

Child Soldiers estimates that at least ten thousand children and youth were abducted and forced to serve as spies, porters, cooks, or combatants by the RUF during this time.

Of the children and youth who were abducted, thousands were young girls—some as young as seven years of age. Many witnessed the death of their parents, the mutilation of family members, and the destruction of their homes at the time of their capture. During their captivity, they were tortured, beaten, forcibly fed drugs, shot at, cut with knives, forced to perform hard manual labor, and deprived of adequate food. The violent sexual abuse perpetrated on these girls was the cruelest wrong. Many girls, raped in front of their parents before being forcibly taken away, were then raped continuously throughout their captivity. While some of the “fortunate” girls had only one so-called husband, the vast majority of girls who were abducted reported that they had been repeatedly raped and sexually abused by multiple men on a daily basis. Failure to comply with sexual demands resulted in physical abuse, including beating with whips and rifle butts, and even in death.

The physical consequences were devastating, as nearly all the girls had sexually transmitted diseases that went untreated. The psychological wounds were also profound as many girls experienced hopelessness, worthlessness, despair, and rage. Moreover, many girls had young children to care for as a result of being continuously raped by their abductors. Physically and emotionally unprepared for motherhood and separated from their children while forced to perform hard physical labor, the girls were not able to care for their children adequately. While the rebels sometimes played with the children, they also engaged in abusive behavior, including beatings and blowing cannabis smoke in infants’ faces. As food was in short supply and health care nonexistent, most of the children of these girls suffered severe health problems, including malnourishment, malaria, and respiratory ailments.

Along with the girls who had escaped during the conflict, the rest of the captured girls were released after the peace accord and made their way back to their communities, often with no food or clothes. However, many girls were afraid to return to their communities because of the intense stigmatization of girls who had been raped. In rural Sierra Leone, a girl who is raped is viewed as impure, contaminated, and as an abomination. She is thought to bring misfortune and bad luck not only to herself and her family but also to her community. According to the local belief system, a rape that occurs in the bush—and in the Sierra Leone conflict nearly all rapes did—will result in the failure of crops. This is because the bush, which is sacred, has been violated. Moreover, children who were born as a result of multiple rapes were believed to be “abnormal” and “sickly,” and destined to suffer “bad luck.”

Some girls languished in displaced persons camps, tried to fend for themselves in the capital of Freetown, or stayed in the bush, rather than face humiliation, shame, and rejection by their community. For the girls who did return to their communities, reintegration was fraught with diffi-
culties. In addition to being labeled as impure, many girls were suspected of being spies, were punished for "bad" behavior such as stealing food or prostituting—which they did to feed themselves and their young children—and were feared for their aggressive behavior. Ridicule, shunning, and even physical assault were common in communities.

Viewed as contaminated, these young girls were restricted from interacting with family and community, from marrying, and from undertaking any type of business ventures, as their minds were thought to be unstable and the communities thought their businesses were sure to fail. As young mothers, whose parents often had been killed, they were burdened with caring for sick children without social or economic support. Many returned from their captivity to the bush naked or with a single piece of cloth as their only covering and possession. They could not meet their own or their children's basic needs for food and clothing. Without prospects for marriage or employment, and lacking skills to earn a living, some girls left their communities and resorted to prostitution to feed themselves and their children.

To address the needs of these girls, the nongovernmental organization ("NGO") Christian Children's Fund ("CCF") conducted a situation analysis in ten villages in the eastern region of Sierra Leone in the districts of Tonkolili and Port Loko, where they already had a variety of projects implementing health, food security, education, and agriculture. Thus, the necessary trust had been established in these communities to address the highly sensitive topic of sexually abused girls. The situation analysis, utilizing focus group discussions with women leaders, traditional healers, and youth, found that nearly every household had at least one girl between seven and twenty-one years old who had been abducted and raped. Nearly one third of the girls were under the age of fifteen.

Furthermore, psychosocial and health assessments by a community nurse found that 91 percent of the victimized girls had sexually transmitted diseases ("STDs") such as gonorrhea and pelvic inflammatory disease. However, almost none of the girls had access to health services because the health providers and clinics were too far away, and the girls could not afford the cost of medicine to treat their sexually transmitted diseases. They also suffered from the consequences of early pregnancy and motherhood without any prenatal or postnatal care. Both they and their children were malnourished. They had birth complications from giving birth at a young age. Many of their children were born prematurely. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of girls were suffering from emotional illness, including depression, suicidal thoughts, and low self-esteem.

CCF also took inventory of the community resources for healing and reintegration. These resources—the community nurses and traditional healers who knew the situation of the girls and who were highly motivated to assist them—in turn became catalysts for developing a program to assist these girls and building community support for them.

The goal of the Sealing the Past, Facing the Future ("SEFAFU") project was to facilitate the reintegration of sexually abused girls into their com-
munities, restore hope for their future, and improve their economic security. The project had three main objectives: first, to reduce stress and enable psychosocial recovery; second, to promote community awareness of the impact of sexual violence on young girls and to change community attitudes and behaviors; and third, to provide opportunities for economic development. A holistic approach—incorporating health, spiritual, psychosocial, and economic components—was used.

First, 367 girls who had come forward to be treated for sexually transmitted diseases received medicines that were provided by the Ministry of Health and administered by nurses sponsored by CCF.

Second, because recognizing and utilizing local beliefs and practices to strengthen and heal the girls was a key component of the program, traditional healers from the community were recruited to perform purification rituals for the sexually abused girls so that they could be reintegrated into the community. In the local belief system, the purification ritual is a prerequisite to the girls regaining their right to participate in community activities, their eligibility for marriage, and the reputation of having “stable mind” in the community that would allow them to engage in business activities. The communal rituals were performed once in each community, and all girls who had been identified participated.

Although specific elements of the purification ritual varied from community to community, some common components included scrubbing the girls with papala leaves and black soap in the river. The scrubbing would produce a foam that would carry their impurities out of the body to be washed away in the river. In some communities, drinking a special cleansing mixture of boiled herbs, as well as inhaling an herbal vapor under a blanket or cloth was also part of the ceremony. The girls would sit on a mat spread on the ground with cowry shells, wearing a white cloth on their heads, and a red cloth on their hips. The traditional healers also wore special garments including a white and red head covering. The girls and healers would eat a special meal together and then dance and drum throughout the night and into the morning. Another important part of the ritual was wrapping the girls in white cloth, symbolizing purity, and presenting them to the community as “new.” After the chief and parents sat and talked together, the community then welcomed the girls back with singing, drumming, and dancing, and embraced them as “new” and “pure” community members.

Prior to the program, the traditional healers had talked about the need for a purification ritual but lacked the necessary materials. The SEFAFU program provided the needed resources, including the white and red cloth, food for the communal meal, and money for paying the healers. Most importantly, the program reaffirmed local practices and beliefs.

A third component of the project was to change community norms about sexually abused girls through community awareness activities. Prior to the sensitization dialogues, the topic of rape and sexual abuse had not been discussed openly and was relegated “to the edges of the village” where others could not hear. The purpose of raising awareness was to help com-
munity members talk freely about issues of sexual violence, report cases of previous or current sexual abuse, educate about the impact of sexual violence, and engage the community in supporting the girls and helping them reintegrate into the community. A key component of the community awareness activities was the development of a sexual violence committee in each of the ten communities, consisting of community leaders—both men and women—chosen by a community process.

The sexual violence committees engaged in a number of activities, including organizing discussions on the effects of sexual violence at monthly community meetings and drawing up bylaws to protect abducted girls from physical and verbal abuse, such as slapping and calling the girls "rebel girl" or kolonko (meaning "prostitute"). The committees also monitored enforcement through consultation with the chief, who imposed fines or physical punishment when the bylaws were violated.

Further, the committees organized two radio broadcasts to bring attention to the problems facing young sexually abused girls to suggest ways that individuals and communities could support the girls and to provide hopeful stories of positive outcomes from the project. Community drama and skits were also used to sensitize the communities about the impact of sexual violence and how they could help the girls towards a positive future.

Fourth, recreational activities were organized for the girls in the communities at least twice a month and were geared towards socially integrating the girls into the community by teaching them how to have positive interactions with peers. Additionally, because these girls had lost much of their childhood, the recreational activities provided them with an important opportunity to play. The girls engaged in singing, dancing, sports, local games, and handicrafts. Fifth, skills training in business management and vocational skills, such as sewing, crocheting, and needlework, was provided.

Finally, to address the girls' economic needs, the project created a loan program for income-generating activities for one hundred eighty girls selected by a community process, with the most vulnerable and needy girls receiving loans first. They included girls whose parents had been killed and who had young children to support. Often, the girls were required to participate in the purification ritual prior to receiving the loan so that the community members would feel that the girls' minds were steady for business. The girls received loans of 150,000 Leones, approximately 75 U.S. Dollars, to start up small businesses such as rice hulling, sewing, crocheting, and selling stock items such as palm oil, vegetables, cigarettes, candy, cloth, and rice. The girls repaid a portion of the loans with interest each month, and the money generated from these loans was then given to two new girls in each village every month.

All of these measures together led to many of the girls' successful reintegration into their community. Community members' attitudes and behaviors towards the girls changed from mistrust and fear to acceptance. Because the girls underwent the purification ritual, they were no longer socially isolated, and the community once again felt comfortable allowing
them to eat off the same plate with others and mingle freely, and the girls were able to marry men whom the community perceived to be of good character.

Further, the psychosocial well-being of the girls greatly improved. Many reported feeling less stress about their ability to meet their own and their children's basic needs. They also felt less shame about being perceived as unclean and no longer felt they were being ridiculed by or isolated from the community. They credited this improvement to the social support they received from other girls during workshops and recreational activities, to the cleansing rituals, and to their renewed ability to earn income. One of the girls reported:

Before I obtained the loan, I was burdened with so much stress. I had a young baby to feed and care for, but no money for food or medicine. I had no clothes for myself, but now I am happy that I can provide these things. It is a big relief. Before the cleansing ritual, so many people would ridicule me and shame me, calling me kolonko [prostitute] and rebel girl. It was too much stress. Now I have a calm mind and feel secure.

Many of the girls demonstrated hopefulness and a future orientation by talking of their desire to acquire a "profession" and learn specific skills in such trades as soap making, hairdressing, gara tie dying (a form of traditional cloth), and tailoring. While the girls were confident in their abilities to earn a living in the future, they also displayed an eagerness to obtain additional skills so that they would have an even better future. As another girl reported,

I have a good business now selling, but I want to learn a skill like tailoring so I can better my situation for myself and for my child. If I have a profession, I will have a more secure future. There are many things we want to learn—soap making, gara tie dye, sewing. We are so eager to learn these things. We want to have a profession.

Hopefulness about the future was also demonstrated in the majority of girls making "cash boxes" to save a portion of their income for the future. The girls were saving for such special items as shoes, to buy additional materials to expand their businesses, and to insure a secure economic base for the rainy season during which business is usually slower.

Many of the girls also attended formal and informal schooling. They did not see this as an interference with their business, as they went to school during the day and engaged in their business activities after school, on the weekends, and during holidays. They were hopeful that their schooling would help them in their future business ventures, saying that it was a good idea to have an education because it would make them better businesswomen. They understood that if they wanted to have a successful business they would need to know how to read, write, and perform basic calculations.

The overwhelming majority of girls reported increased self-esteem as a result of both the cleansing rituals and the ability to engage in small business activities. As some of the girls reported,
I was called *kolonko* (meaning prostitute) before. Now I am respected and held in high regard in my village because of my business accomplishments. I can buy food. I save money in my cash box.

We had been ashamed of what had been done to us. We arrived naked from the bush, without any means of support. Now we are respected members of the community.

In the bush we had not been treated as human. We ate anything... even dogs if we could find them. When we returned, we kept to ourselves because we were ashamed. But now I can mingle with everyone. I have respect because of my business.

After the cleansing rituals the girls were no longer viewed by community members as prostitutes, thieves, delinquents, and spies. Community members reported a decrease in negative behavior—such as swearing, aggressive and violent behavior, drug use, stealing, and disrespect for elders—and an increase in positive behavior—such as showing respect for elders, helping with chores at home, and engaging in community activities. While some behavior change was immediate, most change occurred gradually over a period of several weeks or months. The girls reported:

Before we would curse at our parents and have bad behavior. But now we show respect.

Before I would go off on my own and not listen to anyone. I help with all the chores at home. Everyone is very pleased about this.

I smoked cannibas and would curse at everyone. We would fight among ourselves. Since the cleansing we have good behavior.

While there were still significant health problems, the girls' health had improved as a result of the treatment of STDs, as well as from the ability to buy food and basic necessities. As the girls reported,

I came from the bush with swollen feet from walking far distances with no shoes. I had a swollen belly because I had so little food. I am better off now and not sickly.

I had gonorrhea and suffered terrible pains. The nurse gave me medicine and now I am much improved.

The project strengthened the community by recognizing and respecting local practices, by sensitizing the communities to the impact of sexual abuse, and training community members to monitor and evaluate well-being indicators in their communities. The sensitization activities conducted in all the communities not only raised awareness about sexual violence and its impact, but helped communities understand that they play a significant role in helping the girls. Thus, if more girls return to this community or if sexual abuse of girls were an issue again, community members would know what steps they could take to guide the girls towards a positive future.

The Sexual Violence Committees are sustainable programs that can continue sensitization and education activities, and monitor the condition...
of the girls and the implementation of bylaws to protect the girls from emotional and physical harm. Since the bylaws were established and fines imposed, committee members, community members, and most importantly, the girls themselves have noted a dramatic decrease in verbal and physical abuse. For example, in one village, after two people were fined for ridiculing the girls, the offensive behavior completely stopped.

Finally, the microcredit loans were very successful, and almost all the girls were able to repay their loans each month. The girls reported feeling empowered by their improved economic situation—they are able to buy clothes, to provide their family with food, and to save some money each month for the future.

While the project has been very successful, particularly for girls who had the cleansing ceremony and obtained loans, challenges remain. First, girls who had not received microcredit loans were frustrated and eager to become self-sufficient. While the community process selected those girls most in need, all girls lacked food for themselves and their children. Because of the large number of girls still waiting, some girls will have to wait more than two years before they can obtain a loan at the rate at which current creditors are paying back their loans. Of the nearly eight hundred girls in the ten communities who have been identified as formerly abducted, sexually abused girls, only one hundred eighty girls have received loans.

Second, some community members are jealous of the girls' success. For example, parents are now dependent on their daughters for economic help. While they are grateful for the help, they feel that there is an imbalance when their daughters are in a better position to provide food for the family than the parents.

In conclusion, this case study highlights some of the different needs girls have and presents a model—with successes and challenges—for addressing their needs in a holistic manner. Yet, in Sierra Leone, thousands of girls who were released after the peace process have not received any assistance. These girls are also in need of reintegration, psychosocial healing, and a means of providing basic necessities for themselves and their young children. Outside of Sierra Leone, in the more than thirty countries where girls are in conflict situations, policies and programs to address the special situation of girls are urgently needed.