

Girl soldiers: Hidden faces of war

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Almost half of the world's 300,000 child soldiers are girls. But despite efforts to raise awareness about their needs, little is being done, according to the international group Save the Children.

"When people picture conflict they think of men in bloody combat, but it's horrifyingly girls who are the hidden face of war," says Mike Aaronson, director general of Save the Children UK.

The group has expressed concern about the lack of interest paid to girls returning from war in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Sudan and Colombia.

"The demobilization process of the international community is not catered to girls' needs," he added.

Traditionally, child soldiers have been boys but girls are increasingly being used on the front-line.

Their roles include that of sex slaves, combatants, wives, cooks and porters. Girls as young as 10 can be recruited into the armed forces. Child soldiers are used because they are cheap, easily manipulated and can be used as spies.

Formal rehabilitation programs put in place by the international community are under-funded and not catered to girls' needs, says Save the Children.

Lack of resources restrict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) to children who can show evidence of being experienced in using a weapon. Save the Children attribute this to "gender discrimination, poor program design and a lack of funding for the DDR process." As a result, girls are left on the margins.

Save the Children spokesperson Laura Conrad says that girls sometimes come back pregnant and with sexual diseases.

"Girls might have been sexually abused. Reintegration needs to be tailored to other needs, mental and physical."

Conrad says that girls are often ignored because people haven't been aware of the numbers of girls involved and their unique experiences. "Girls are not seen, are not visible, quite often doing behind the scenes work."

They are invisible because few enroll in formal demobilization processes. When funds run low, donor countries want to see those with guns removed from public view, which normally means adults and boys.

In a report entitled "Forgotten Casualties of war: Girls in armed conflict," the group says: "One of the common misunderstandings in countries where a DDR program for children exists is that a gun or some proof of military life needs to be submitted in order to access the benefits of DDR."

The role of combatant was described as the main function by close to half the female child soldiers in 2002, involved with armed groups.

Often when a conflict ends, military officials do not allow girls to leave through formal demobilization processes -- they leave by the back door, the report says. Many military commanders claim that the girls are their wives, forbidding them from being released.

For those that choose not to go through the formal demobilization process due to the stigma attached, they find alternative methods back to civilian life -- often engaging in sex work in areas away from home. But the whereabouts of many girls is unknown.

Some girls may not want to be released, because of the social stigma that is attached upon their return to their communities, says Save the Children.

Many are unable to make the transition because their communities do not trust them and do not want other girls to be corrupted. Their families fear that their husbands may come looking for them.

Rosie Jordan, another Save the Children, spokesperson, adds: "Girls often do not go through the formal demobilization process as they can publicly be identified as former soldiers. And some may have babies and may be seen as unfit for marriage in their communities.

"There is a stigma to these girls when they go back to their families, so the last thing they would want to do is come out as they are scared. Save the Children works with them to bring them back to their families, to be children again."