

FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS, PEACE, AND REINTEGRATION: REFLECTIONS ON THE DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION, AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMMES IN LIBERIA AND NEPAL

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In 2000, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) published its landmark resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325). UNSCR 1325 “encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration [DDR] to consider the different needs of female and male combatants.”¹ Until this point, female ex-combatants had been overwhelmingly excluded from earlier UN-led DDR programmes.² Following UNSCR 1325, female ex-combatants continue to be (structurally) excluded from UN-led DDR. Where they are included, UN-led DDR frequently reproduces gendered inequalities for female ex-combatants. In doing so, UN-led DDR misses the ‘window of opportunity’ to build on any empowerment female ex-combatants may have experienced and to contribute to increased gender equality and the building of an inclusive, positive peace.

Women and girls have fought visibly and in large numbers, often in revolutionary or anti-colonial struggles such as those in Algeria, Colombia, Northern Ireland, Peru, Sri Lanka, El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as in recent conflicts in Liberia (1989–2003) and Nepal (1996–2006).³ In these conflicts, female ex-combatants frequently experienced injuries, trauma, rape and death. However, many female ex-combatants also experience a sense of empowerment, including increased self-confidence; developing military, leadership and business skills and relative gender equality.⁴ As argued elsewhere,⁵ such experiences of empowerment stand in stark contrast to the apparent loss thereof post-conflict. Many female ex-combatants in Liberia

and Nepal continue to struggle with a lack of sustainable income, which impacts their self-confidence and mental health. Most are unable to apply the skills they acquired as combatants. Additionally, reintegration has left female ex-combatants with limited choices regarding where to reintegrate, such as going back to “traditional” female roles and gendered inequalities in frequently rural home communities or resettling in more urban environments where gender norms tend to be more lax but where they also lack a support network.⁶ To make sense of this paradox, this paper analyses the role of DDR in undermining female ex-combatants’ empowerment and reintegration in Liberia and Nepal.

DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILISATION, AND REINTEGRATION

It is important to analyse the role of UN-led DDR in undermining female ex-combatants’ empowerment and reintegration because DDR is the main peacebuilding programme to concern itself directly with ex-combatants. DDR is often one of the largest interventions by UN peacekeeping missions⁷ and is explicitly aimed at the “social engineering” of combatants into civilians.⁸ It is therefore important to analyse the gendered implications of UN-led DDR for female ex-combatants’ empowerment and reintegration, as well as the broader

- 1 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000), S/RES/1325.
- 2 Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana, *Where Are the Girls? Girls in Fighting Forces in Northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique: Their Lives During and After War* (Montreal: Rights and Democracy, 2004), 17.
- 3 Cherifa Bouatta, "Feminine Militancy: Moudjahides During and After the Algerian War", in *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. V Moghadam (London: Zed Books, n.d.); Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009); Camille Boutron and Diane Gómez, "[From Rifles to Aprons? The Challenges of Reincorporating Colombia's Female Ex-Combatants into Civilian and Political Life](#)", LSE Latin America and Caribbean Analysis, 8 March 2017; Dyan Mazurana, Angela Raven-Roberts and Jane Parpart, *Gender, Conflict, and Peacekeeping* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 183.
- 4 Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development* (New York: NYU Press, 2012); Irma Specht, *Red Shoes: Experiences of Girl Ex-Combatants in Liberia* (Geneva: ILO, 2006); Rita Manchanda, "Women's Agency in Peace Building: Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Reconstruction", *Economic and Political Weekly* 40 (44) (2005): 4737–45.
- 5 Michanne Steenbergen, *Empowerment, Reintegration, and Female Ex-Combatants: A Critical Feminist Peacebuilding Analysis of UN-Led Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Programs in Liberia and Nepal* (PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2020).
- 6 Sharon Alane Abramowitz, *Searching for Normal in the Wake of the Liberian War*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 18; Nathalie De Watteville, "Addressing Gender Issues in Demobilization and Reintegration Programs", Africa Region Working Paper Series 33 (2002), 14.
- 7 Jairo Munive and Stine Finne Jakobsen, "Revisiting DDR in Liberia: Exploring the Power, Agency and Interests of Local and International Actors in the 'Making' and 'Unmaking' of Combatants", *Conflict, Security and Development* 12 (4) (2012), 361.
- 8 Béatrice Pouligny, *The Politics and Anti-Politics of Contemporary 'Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration' Programs* (Paris: CERI Sciences Po, 2004), 6; Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), *Gender and Security Sector Reform: Examples from the Ground* (Geneva: DCAF, 2011), 21; Helen Basini, *An Imperfect Reality: Gender Mainstreaming and Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) in Liberia* (PhD Thesis, University of Limerick, 2013), 24.

peace process. This paper specifically focuses on the reintegration aspect of UN-led DDR as this is where the "social engineering" takes place. The "DD" phases can however not be entirely disregarded, as these usually set out who can and who cannot participate in the reintegration phase.

Reintegration is defined by the UN as "the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income. Reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level."⁹ It follows the disarmament (i.e. weapons collection) and demobilisation (i.e. official discharge of armed groups) phases of DDR. Taken together, the different phases of DDR are intended to reintegrate ex-combatants and to lay the groundwork for peacebuilding more broadly.

The UN has conducted DDR programmes since 1989 in (post-)conflict settings such as Nicaragua. In spite of this diversity of settings, there has been remarkably little variation between DDR programmes, which frequently contain elements of weapons collection (*disarmament*), registration of (ex-)combatants (*demobilisation*), resettlement assistance (*resettlement*), some forms of skills training and education (*economic reintegration*), and, to a lesser extent, reunification support and mediation to reintegrate into families and communities (*social reintegration*). During the "DD" phases there is sometimes a cantonment phase, where ex-combatants are gathered before receiving resettlement or reintegration support. This cantonment period can differ vastly in length: in Liberia, adult ex-combatants stayed for up to one week, whereas in Nepal, adult ex-combatants remained in cantonment for roughly five years. Cantonment is moreover used for physical and mental health screening as well as medical referrals and support.

In theory, DDR can therefore provide a potential opportunity for female ex-combatants' reintegration and wellbeing.

The creation of UN documentation on female ex-combatants and DDR has been a promising development. Following UNSCR 1325, there has been increased consideration among UN agencies involved in DDR for how to "consider the needs of female and male combatants".¹⁰ In 2006, the UN published a 1,000+ page document entitled the *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (IDDRS) to guide the design and implementation of UN-led DDR programmes. The IDDRS has since been updated regularly, incorporating "lessons learnt" and introducing new modules, such as those focusing on the overlaps between DDR, security sector reform, and transitional justice. Building on UNSCR 1325, the IDDRS contains an entire module on "Women, Gender and DDR" where women- and gender-specific considerations at all stages of DDR are detailed.¹¹ In spite of this, the *Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325* published by UN Women in 2015 highlights the lack of implementation.¹² The following section elaborates on the lack of implementation and the implications of DDR for female ex-combatants.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF DDR

Feminists have critiqued DDR not only for its exclusion of female ex-combatants but also for reproducing gendered inequalities where female ex-combatants have been included. Moreover, feminists have also drawn into question the concept of reintegration and its intended aims. The exclusion of female ex-combatants from DDR is well-documented.¹³ Feminist literature on DDR has frequently argued that female ex-combatants are excluded from DDR because they are reconstructed by DDR

officials as “supporters”, “dependents”, “camp followers”, “bush wives” or “sex slaves”¹⁴ As a result, female ex-combatants are “desecuritized” and attention and resources are redirected to the “real threat”, i.e. male ex-combatants.¹⁵ Female ex-combatants also disproportionately exclude themselves because they do not feel safe at cantonments or because they have “obligations to children or family”.¹⁶ Thus, women and girls are often (structurally) excluded from DDR and its potential benefits.

Even where female ex-combatants are included, UN-led DDR often reproduces gendered inequalities for these female ex-combatants. Helen Basini has stressed that in Liberia, this was the result of a lack of gender mainstreaming in the reintegration phase. Here, “women were treated largely the same as men with a program that focused solely on economic reintegration. Issues of gender equality were sidelined.”¹⁷ Kathleen Jennings understands this as a consequence not of a lack of gender mainstreaming, but rather the broader underlying assumptions in UN-led DDR. According to Jennings, “the Liberian DDR was devised and justified according to assumptions that are default male, thus causing the program to overlook women except as passive victims of conflict, or as add-ons secondary to the “real purpose” of reintegration [i.e. male ex-combatants].”¹⁸ Paying attention to such underlying assumptions calls into question the very concept of reintegration and the kind of peace it aims to achieve. Reintegration implies a “return to the same conditions as before the war”¹⁹ and for female ex-combatants to “resume the oppressive subordinate roles of women”.²⁰ If reintegration is to benefit female ex-combatants, it needs to challenge rather than reproduce gendered inequalities.

One way to analyse such underlying assumptions is to pay attention to the kind of language used and how



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female ex-combatants are narrated in gendered ways by UN-led DDR officials and documentation. Such gendered narratives are important because “language sets the framework that defines how women are seen and treated in post-conflict environments.”²¹ Laura Shepherd further stresses that “within a given discursive terrain, such as peacebuilding discourse, for example, once a particular meaning is attached to “women”, such as “agents of change” or “helpless victim”, certain policy initiatives become ‘thinkable,’ even necessary, while others are excluded.”²² Thus, how female ex-combatants are narrated reveals underlying assumptions and matters for how they are included (or excluded) in DDR design and implementation.

Another underlying assumption is that reintegration is fundamental to peace. The nature of such peace, however, remains ill-defined in the IDDRS, as well as in context-specific DDR designs. Similarly vague is UNSCR 1325, upon which the IDDRS builds. UNSCR 1325 never defines peace, but suggests that conflict-related violence against women can undermine peace and that women’s full participation in the peace process “can significantly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security”.²³ Feminists have gone much further, pushing for a positive peace, which not only contains an absence of widespread physical violence, but also the absence of structural violence, including gendered inequalities. The aim is to create a positive peace that

- 9 United Nations, “[IDDRS Framework](#)”, 2019, module 1.10, 2.
- 10 United Nations Security Council, S/RES/1325, 9.
- 11 United Nations DDR Resource Centre, *Integrated DDR Standards* (New York: United Nations, 2006), module 5.10.
- 12 Radhika Coomaraswamy et al, *Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: A Global Study on the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (New York: UN Women, 2015), 178f.
- 13 De Watteville, “Addressing Gender Issues in Demobilization and Reintegration Programs”; Vanessa Farr, “How Do We Know We Are at Peace? Reflections on the Aftermath Conference”, *Agenda* 16 (43) (2000): 23–31; Vanessa Farr, *Gendering Demilitarization as a Peacebuilding Tool* (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2002); Vanessa Farr, “The Importance of a Gender Perspective to Successful Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Processes”, *Disarmament Forum: Women, Men, Peace and Security 4* (2003): 25–35; Anders Nilsson, *Reintegrating Ex-Combatants in Post-Conflict Societies* (Stockholm: Sida, 2005).
- 14 Alexis Henshaw, “Where Women Rebel”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 18 (1) (2016): 39–60; Alexis Henshaw, “Why Women Rebel: Greed Grievance, and Women in Armed Rebel Groups”, *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1 (3) (2016): 204–19; Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 37; Nadine Puechguirbal, ‘Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Reconstruction’, in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, ed. Laura Shepherd (London: Routledge, 2010), 165.
- 15 MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, 46.
- 16 Specht, *Red Shoes*, 13ff; Farr, “The Importance of a Gender Perspective”, 32.
- 17 Basini, “An Imperfect Reality”, iii.
- 18 Kathleen M. Jennings, “The Political Economy of DDR in Liberia: A Gendered Critique”, *Conflict, Security & Development* 9 (4) (2009), 475.
- 19 Swechchha Dahal, “Challenging the Boundaries: The Narratives of the Female Ex-Combatants in Nepal”, in *Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace: Challenging Gender in Violence and Post-Conflict Reintegration*, ed. Seema Shekhawat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 185.

challenges gendered inequalities, making it a peace for all, and not just for the few.²⁴ Taking a positive peace as the aim of peacebuilding highlights that neither Liberia nor Nepal are experiencing a positive peace. For instance, sexual violence and extreme poverty remain ubiquitous in Liberia. Whilst the Maoist conflict in Nepal has brought to the fore conversations around inequalities, these inequalities persist, particularly discrimination against Dalits (the lowest caste) and Madhesi people.²⁵ Additionally, both countries have experienced violent armed clashes since the conflicts have officially ended in peace agreements, suggesting that even a negative peace remains unfulfilled.

This paper maintains (perhaps over-optimistically) that an inclusive, positive peace ought to be the central goal of all peacebuilding efforts, including DDR. A peace that is not inclusive creates inequalities in who benefits from such a peace and who does not. Such a peace is not likely to be sustainable either as such (gendered) inequalities are often a cause of conflict.²⁶ Moreover, the “post-conflict moment” often presents a “window of opportunity” to reimagine gendered relations.²⁷ This would overlap with the UN’s own Sustainable Development Goal of gender equality.²⁸ In short, an inclusive, positive peace is beneficial in its own right, but also because it is likely to be more sustainable and beneficial to gender equality.

FEMALE EX-COMBATANTS, EMPOWERMENT, AND DDR IN LIBERIA AND NEPAL

To make sense of this paradox of female ex-combatants’ empowerment during conflict and subsequent loss of this empowerment during reintegration, I focus on the case studies of Liberia and Nepal. To be sure, there are many cultural, historical, and ideological differences between the two contexts and respective

recent conflicts. There are however also some similarities. Both the conflict in Liberia (1989-2003) and the conflict in Nepal (1996-2006) saw the participation of considerable numbers of women and girls, estimated to be at 30-40 per cent of combatants.²⁹ The respective DDR programmes, the Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation Programme (LDDRR) and the United Nations Interagency Rehabilitation Programme (UNIRP), also had a lot of similarities in terms of programme design. The LDDRR ran from 2004-2007 and ultimately ‘reintegrated’ 101,495 ex-combatants, including 22,370 women and 2,240 girls.³⁰ It was the first UN-led DDR programme to mandate the inclusion of female ex-combatants. The LDDRR³¹ was delivered by the UN Development Programme (UNDP), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the National Commission on Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (NCDDRR). The LDDRR provided cantonment (up to one week for adults; several months for child ex-combatants under 18 years of age), education or vocational skills training, and family tracing for child ex-combatants. The UNIRP in Nepal was only responsible for the reintegration of 4,008 Verified Minors and Late Recruits (VMLRs), i.e. those under the age of 18 at the date of the peace agreement on 22 November 2006 and those recruited after this date or who missed the first verification round. These VMLRs had often spent years fighting for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and lived in cantonment alongside adult ex-combatants between 2006 and 2010. The UNIRP ran from 2010–2012 and achieved the highest female participation rate of any UN-led DDR programme to date, at 38 per cent.³² It was delivered by the UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction (MoPR).

- 20 Rita Manchanda, “Women’s Question in Nepal’s Democratic Post Conflict Transition: Towards A Policy Research Agenda”, *Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 3 (1) (2010), 10.
- 21 Puechguirbal, “Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Reconstruction”, 162.
- 22 Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, UN Peacebuilding, and the Politics of Space: Locating Legitimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 23.
- 23 United Nations Security Council, S/RES/1325.
- 24 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research”, *Journal of Peace Research* 6 (3) (1969): 167–91; Maria O’Reilly, “Gender and Peacebuilding”, in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2013): 57–68.
- 25 UNDP Nepal, *Annual Report Nepal* (New York: UNDP, 2015).
- 26 Cf. Mats Berdal and David Malone, *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000); Mark Duffield, “Globalization, Transborder Trade, and War Economies”, in *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, ed. Mats Berdal and David Malone (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000): 69–90.
- 27 Stijn Smet, “A Window of Opportunity – Improving Gender Relations in Post-Conflict Societies: The Sierra Leonean Experience”, *Journal of Gender Studies* 18 (2) (2009): 147–63; Mary H. Moran, “Gender, Militarism, and Peace-Building: Projects of the Postconflict Moment”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (1) (2010): 261–74.
- 28 United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals”, 2015, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

The UNIRP also provided skills training and education support, where both the quality and quantity was higher than in the LDDRR.³³ The UNIRP also provided more comprehensive family tracing and mediation to support the social reintegration of VMLRs into families and communities. A key difference between the two DDR programmes was the provision of “gender support” in the UNIRP, which provided additional grants, resources, and services to VMLRs who were pregnant or recent mothers. Only in the last few months of the UNIRP was additional “gender support” provided to VMLRs who were (single) fathers.

To analyse female ex-combatants’ experiences of empowerment in relation to reintegration and DDR in Liberia and Nepal, I conducted fieldwork in Liberia and Nepal in 2016-2017 where I conducted 77 semi-structured interviews with female ex-combatants, as well as officials who worked on DDR on behalf of the UN, non-governmental organisations, and the NCDDRR and MoPR. To protect my interviewees from potential harm, all interviewees remain anonymous. DDR officials are identified by the agency they worked for (e.g. LDDRR official). For female ex-combatants, I opted to use another, locally and ethnically sensitive first name. Consent was obtained in advance.

These interviews revealed that female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal experienced empowerment, although there were differences among and between these female ex-combatants shaped by age, caste, ethnicity and how long they spent in armed groups, as well as what drew them into conflict. Overall, there were more examples of empowerment among female ex-combatants in Nepal. This is due to the explicit Maoist nature of the conflict, which sought to challenge inequalities based on gender and caste. In both contexts, female ex-combatants gained

military, leadership, and medical skills. In Nepal, female ex-combatants also gained political skills through their engagement with communities where the Maoists had effectively taken over governance. Female ex-combatants in both contexts experienced a sense of self-reliance and developed self-confidence. In Nepal, the Maoists fostered a sense of “awareness” of inequalities among female ex-combatants, many of whom also developed the ability to speak up for their rights.

While it would be wrong to suggest that female ex-combatants in Liberia experienced gender equality in the different armed groups in Liberia, to some female ex-combatants the conflict offered unprecedented opportunities to prove themselves equal to male ex-combatants and to have a military career.³⁴ In Nepal, the Maoists pushed a rhetoric of gender equality, which was often a reason why female ex-combatants joined the Maoists. Although implementation remained lacking, there were certainly improvements. There were attempts to break down gendered divisions of labour in terms of chores and security. Additionally, male ex-combatants were pushed to take an increased share of childcare responsibilities. The Maoist conflict also had an effect on Nepali society more broadly, reducing domestic violence, child and forced marriages, and opening up space to discuss gendered inequalities.³⁵

These experiences of empowerment stand in contrast to the lack thereof upon reintegration. The vast majority of the female ex-combatants I interviewed struggled with their economic reintegration as in both contexts the training or education provided by UN-led DDR had been too low in quality or quantity to secure a sustainable income. Although many female ex-combatants developed new skills, UN-led DDR provided few or no opportunities to build on these and

- 29 Enloe, *Maneuvers*; Amnesty International, *Liberia: A Flawed Post-War Process Discriminates Against Women and Girls* (London: Amnesty International, 2008), 5; Rita Manchanda, “Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalizing Gendered Narratives”, *Cultural Dynamics* 16 (2–3) (2004): 237–58; Wolf-Christian Paes, “The Challenges of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration in Liberia”, *International Peacekeeping* 12 (2) (2005), 257. These numbers remain highly debated: female ex-combatants are often relegated to ‘camp follower’ or ‘sex slave’, whereas male ex-combatants undertaking support roles are always counted as combatants. The point here is to illustrate that female ex-combatants certainly made up a substantial share of armed groups in Liberia and Nepal. The female ex-combatants interviewed for this research certainly identified themselves as female ex-combatants to me as interviewer, even if they did not always disclose this to their neighbours.
- 30 UNDPKO, [Ten-Year Impact Study on Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 \(2000\) on Women, Peace and Security in Peacekeeping](#) (New York, NY: DPKO, 2010), 22.
- 31 Liberian Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programme
- 32 Tone Bleie and Ramesh Shrestha, [DDR in Nepal: Stakeholder Politics and the Implications for Reintegration as a Process of Disengagement](#) (Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2012).
- 33 Steenbergen, *Empowerment, Reintegration, and Female Ex-Combatants*.
- 34 Specht, *Red Shoes*, 13.
- 35 Darshan Karki, “An Incomplete Revolution”, in *Garrisoned Minds: Women and Armed Conflict in South Asia*, ed. Laxmi Murthy and Mitu Varma (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2016), 150; Punam Yadav, *Social Transformation in Post-Conflict Nepal: A Gender Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2016).



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instead focused on providing training in a limited number of low-valued roles, especially in Liberia. In Nepal, female ex-combatants were also disproportionately excluded from army integration because they had had surgeries, given birth or were breastfeeding.³⁶ This lack of economic reintegration has been a blow to the self-esteem of many female ex-combatants, thereby undermining their empowerment.

Female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal also continue to struggle with their social reintegration. To support female ex-combatants in Liberia, LDDRR officials effectively silenced them by pushing them to “forget about the war” and to not “mention having been a combatant” to avoid being stigmatised and ostracised by communities.³⁷ Social reintegration into communities for female ex-combatants in Liberia therefore came at the expense of being able to voice their experiences and being able to rely on their communities as a support network.³⁸

In Nepal, the social reintegration of female ex-combatants was undermined by the UNIRP through the term “ayogya”, which translates as “unqualified”. The term was introduced by the MoPR and was used by the UNIRP in documentation and in its national awareness campaign. The term was supposed to be a technical term to denote being under the age of 18 and therefore ineligible for army reintegration. However, as a consequence of the term, female ex-combatants were understood as “incapable”³⁹ as a person and were ostracised from their communities,⁴⁰

thereby undermining their social reintegration. Much of the empowerment female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal had experienced had therefore been undermined through reintegration, to which UN-led DDR contributed. The remainder of this paper reflects on the challenges to overcome to better support female ex-combatants’ empowerment and to build an inclusive, positive peace.

EQUAL ACCESS THE UN-LED DDR

DDR and targeted reintegration programmes have the potential to support the reintegration and empowerment of female ex-combatants and the building of an inclusive, positive peace. It is therefore imperative that female ex-combatants have equal opportunities to access and to fully participate in reintegration support. Cantonment of ex-combatants, which often accompanies the disarmament and demobilisation phases, provides a vital opportunity for physical and mental health screening. This can prove especially important for female ex-combatants, who may have been subject to sexual violence (as was frequently the case in Liberia) or who sustained reproductive health problems due to inadequate female hygiene provisions during and after conflict (as was the case in Nepal). Additionally, mental health problems tend to be pervasive among former child combatants, making targeted interventions a necessary step in their reintegration.⁴¹

Resettlement assistance is also a valuable step in the reintegration of female ex-combatants. Where female ex-combatants can and want to return to home, reintegrating into families and communities can provide a support network for their economic and social reintegration, as well as for their health.⁴² Ensuring female ex-combatants have tailored resettlement assistance is particularly important where they have

36 Prashant Jha, “One Country Two Armies’ Situation Ends in Nepal”, *The Hindu*, 2 November 2012; Subindra Bogati, “Assessing Inclusivity in the Post-War Army Integration Process in Nepal”, *Inclusive Political Settlements Paper 11* (2014), 10.

37 Natasha, Interview 37, (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 13 January 2017); Jerelyn, Interview 38, (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 13 January 2017).

38 Abramowitz, *Searching for Normal in the Wake of the Liberian War*.

39 Simon Robins, Ram Kumar Bhandari and Ex-PLA Research Group, *Poverty, Stigma and Alienation: A Participatory Action Research Project with Ex-PLA Fighters in Nepal* (York: Centre for Applied Human Rights, 2016), 9.

40 Jaya, Interview 3 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 9 September 2016); Sita, Interview 6 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 10 September 2016).

41 Helen Brocklehurst, “Child Soldiers”, in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Alan Collins, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 379–92.

dependents. In Liberia, several female ex-combatants received financial support to return to their home communities, but this support was not enough to also take home their children born during conflict. Consequently, such female ex-combatants resettled in Monrovia, resulting in rapid urbanisation and an inability of the infrastructure to meet increased demand. Additionally, many female ex-combatants have lost important schooling years or opportunities to learn a trade. Access to economic reintegration support is therefore important to ensure that female ex-combatants are empowered to provide for themselves and their dependents. Lastly, DDR can provide an opportunity for female ex-combatants to demonstrate their “buy-in” to peace. Sometimes, this is done through official discharge ceremonies, such as in Sri Lanka.⁴³ An inability to access DDR and opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to peace can lead to further ostracisation of female ex-combatants and thereby undermines their social reintegration.

Additionally, one of the objectives of DDR is to remove as many weapons as possible from circulation.⁴⁴ Although female ex-combatants may not always carry weapons in equal numbers to male ex-combatants (the same can be said about child ex-combatants), they are frequently responsible for the maintenance, shipment, and storage of weapons during conflict and therefore have a good understanding of their numbers and whereabouts.⁴⁵ Including female ex-combatants in DDR provides access to this knowledge and can contribute to a positive peace by removing weapons used to sustain armed conflict, as well as in domestic violence.⁴⁶

DDR and targeted reintegration support can therefore offer significant benefits to the reintegration of female ex-combatants. To (disproportionally)



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exclude female ex-combatants not only means that UN-led DDR itself produces discrimination, it also reproduces gendered inequalities in terms of female ex-combatants’ access to vital support such as education, skills training, and physical and mental health support. UN agencies working on DDR have themselves recognised this concern. As noted, UNSCR 1325 specifies that those who design and implement DDR should “consider the different needs of female and male combatants”.⁴⁷ The IDDRS module on “Women, Gender and DDR” stresses the need for DDR to look for and to include female ex-combatants and non-combatants in DDR design and implementation, making explicit reference to UNSCR 1325. The module also draws attention to girl ex-combatants, female ex-combatants’ support roles in armed groups, as well as potential gendered needs of male ex-combatants. The module emphasizes the need for DDR to resist and even challenge “Exclusionary power structures, including a backlash against women entering into political, economic, and security structures,” and that “Dealing with the needs and harnessing the different capacities and potential of men, women, boy and girl former fighters; their supporters; and their dependents will improve the success and long-term transformation process that is DDR.”⁴⁸ Implicitly, the IDDRS sees the inclusion of female ex-combatants in DDR as a step towards gender equality and peace. In spite of this rhetoric, UN-led DDR continues to

42 Abramowitz, *Searching for Normal in the Wake of the Liberian War*, 18.

43 Rebekkah Friedman, “Remnants of a Checkered Past: Female LTTE and Social Reintegration in Post-War Sri Lanka”, *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (2018): 632–42.

44 United Nations DDR Resource Centre, *Integrated DDR Standards*.

45 United Nations DDR Resource Centre, *Integrated DDR Standards*, module 5.10, 17ff.

46 Laura McLeod, “Configurations of Post-Conflict: Impacts of Representations of Conflict and Post-Conflict upon the (Political) Translations of Gender Security within UNSCR 1325”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13 (4) (2011): 599.

47 United Nations Security Council, S/RES/1325..

48 United Nations, “IDDRS Framework”, module 5.10, 3.



To support the empowerment and reintegration of female ex-combatants and to build an inclusive, positive peace, it is imperative that DDR (and peacebuilding more broadly) focuses on challenging rather than reproducing gendered inequalities.

reproduce gendered inequalities and undermines the building of an inclusive, positive peace (as elaborated below), suggesting that a gap between rhetoric and implementation persists.

In spite of all these benefits, female ex-combatants frequently remain excluded or disproportionately exclude themselves from UN-led DDR programmes. Due to a prevailing “one man, one gun” mentality among DDR officials, many female ex-combatants, particularly girl ex-combatants, were made to feel unwelcome by DDR programmes and were pushed to leave, while others were outright excluded by DDR officials for being female.⁴⁹ Notably, such exclusions happened *in spite of* the LDDRR mandate on the inclusion of female ex-combatants. Nor was the exclusion of female ex-combatants mentioned in LDDRR documentation; rather, my interviews suggest that foreign and local DDR officials pushed this. Cantonment was both an attraction and deterrence to participation: female commanders in Liberia saw DDR and cantonment as “unsafe” or irrelevant to them,⁵⁰ while girl ex-combatants often saw cantonment as a safe haven.⁵¹ Consequently, female commanders often chose not to participate in UN-led DDR, and while girl ex-combatants in Liberia wanted to participate, they were overwhelmingly excluded by LDDRR officials because of their gender.

In Nepal, the female ex-combatant participation rate was the highest of

all UN-led DDR programmes to date, at 38 per cent.⁵² While this is certainly a laudable achievement, a UNIRP official noted that the female ex-combatant participation rate should have been higher still as many male ex-combatants left to work in India or in Gulf countries while female ex-combatants remained in Nepal.⁵³ This left many eligible female ex-combatants unaccounted for. No follow-ups have taken place to identify why these female ex-combatants didn’t access the UNIRP. As DDR offers significant benefits for economic and social reintegration as well as healthcare, the disproportionate (self-)exclusion of female ex-combatants needs to be prevented in future programmes.

To do so, DDR and targeted reintegration support should identify and address real and perceived barriers to female ex-combatants’ equal access to DDR. The UNIRP identified such barriers early on, including the lack of support to pregnant VMLRs and VMLRs who were mothers and breastfeeding. The UNIRP adjusted and provided “gender support”, significantly improving the number of female ex-combatants participating in the UNIRP. Notably, these barriers were identified in direct consultation with female VMLRs and women’s organisations in Nepal, highlighting this as an important avenue for improving equal access to DDR.

CHALLENGING THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDERED INEQUALITIES

To support the empowerment and reintegration of female ex-combatants and to build an inclusive, positive peace, it is imperative that DDR (and peacebuilding more broadly) focuses on challenging rather than reproducing gendered inequalities. Gender equality is an important goal in many peacebuilding efforts, including in UN-led DDR⁵⁴ and the Sustainable Development Goals.⁵⁵

49 Vonyee, Interview 31 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 12 January 2017).

50 Lysie, Interview 33 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 12 January 2017).

51 Faith, Interview 40 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 14 January 2017).

52 Bleie and Shrestha, *DDR in Nepal*.

53 UNIRP Official, Interview 17 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 29 September 2016).

54 United Nations DDR Resource Centre, *Integrated DDR Standards*, module 2.10, 9.

55 United Nations, “Sustainable Development Goals”.

All too frequently, gender equality is postponed until “later”. As Cynthia Enloe has warned, “By waiting until after reconstruction — that is, until the post-postwar period — women are likely to lose opportunities for training and income, which will set them back for decades. “Later” is a patriarchal time zone.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, gendered inequalities are often a motivator for (continued) conflict. Female ex-combatants have, for instance, been involved in violent clashes after respective peace agreements because of ongoing gendered discrimination.⁵⁷ Nor is the absence of widespread armed violence enough, as women often experience a “continuum of violence” post-conflict.⁵⁸ The reproduction of gendered inequalities is therefore directly at odds with the building of an inclusive, positive peace.

More so than this, female ex-combatants often experience empowerment in ways that might have been limited for them prior to conflict based on their gender. As noted, female ex-combatants frequently develop (non-traditional) skills, including leadership and military skills, as well as midwifery, first aid, and business skills. DDR can build on and transform these skills, benefitting female ex-combatants’ reintegration and building their self-confidence. In Nepal, female ex-combatants also experienced relative gender equality in the PLA, where productive and reproductive roles were consciously assigned with the aim of challenging gendered inequalities.⁵⁹ As such, peacebuilding efforts can build on the empowerment female ex-combatants already experienced.

Nonetheless, there often remains a gap between rhetoric and implementation in the pursuit of gender equality. UN-led DDR has, at times, even undermined this goal. On paper, the LDDRR provided equal opportunities for female ex-combatants; however, in practice, LDDRR counsellors

pushed female ex-combatants into roles the counsellors deemed gender-appropriate, regardless of the wants, abilities, and empowerment of different female ex-combatants.⁶⁰ As a result, many female ex-combatants trained in few, low-paid skills, such as hairdressing, cosmetology, tailoring, and soap making. The ability to earn a living off these skills was further diminished as most female ex-combatants resettled in Monrovia, resulting in an oversaturated market. Moreover, pregnant women and girls and (single) young mothers were frequently excluded from economic reintegration support or couldn’t access it due to the lack of childcare or provisions for pregnant women during training.⁶¹ This has left some of the most vulnerable ex-combatants (e.g. girl mother ex-combatants) without support to provide for themselves and their children.

Acknowledging and addressing the gendered needs of female ex-combatants had markedly improved in Nepal, where it soon became apparent that many female ex-combatants had married in the long cantonment period and had children. To improve access for and retention of female ex-combatants, the UNIRP introduced “gender support”, i.e. support for female ex-combatants’ reproductive health, breast feeding, pregnancy, and maternity leave. This allowed them to develop or improve skills for their economic reintegration and enabled them to balance productive and reproductive roles. Only in the last months of the UNIRP did male ex-combatants also receive “gender support”, much of which was pre- and post-natal support to their non-combatant wives.⁶² Little consideration was given to the gendered needs of male ex-combatants, such as those in intercaste marriages or male ex-combatants who were single parents. Nor did “gender support” address female ex-combatants’ other gendered needs in reintegration, such as a double stigma of having been a female combatant

- 56 Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 215.
- 57 Dyan Mazurana and Kristopher Carlson, *From Combat to Community: Women and Girls of Sierra Leone* (Cambridge: Women Waging Peace, 2004), 26; Deepak Kharel, “[Discharged Ex-Maoist Fighters Arrested](#)”, MyRepublica, 8 November 2016.
- 58 Cynthia Cockburn, “The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace”, in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, ed. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 357.
- 59 In practice, complete gender equality in the PLA remained a myth, but progress was certainly made. See Kailash Rai, “Heroic Tales: Memoirs by Maoist Women”, in *Political Change and Public Culture in Post-1990 Nepal*, ed. Michael Hutt and Onta Pratyoush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 213.
- 60 Teewon, Interview 36 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 13 January 2017).
- 61 Fanta, Interview 52 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 25 January 2017); Ciata, Interview 54 (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 26 January 2017).
- 62 Transition International, [Independent Evaluation of the UN Interagency Rehabilitation Programme \(UNIRP\)](#)

and presumed sexual activity in armed groups.

In order to address this double stigma, the UNIRP attempted to mediate with families of female ex-combatants, yet little was done to address stigma at the community-level, resulting in many female ex-combatants being ostracised or leaving. In Liberia, LDDRR officials actively encouraged female ex-combatants to remain silent on all their experiences of conflict.⁶³ This is especially problematic for women and girls who may have had traumatic experiences during the conflict such as sexual violence, and who could use a support network to help them work through these issues. Indeed, little support was provided to survivors of sexual violence because LDDRR officials “only knew if reported”⁶⁴ Notably, this lack of support happened in spite of LDDRR officials across the board insisting that female ex-combatants were used as “sex slaves” and “bush wives” against their will. Little medical support was provided to these survivors and the counselling aspect was geared toward silencing them, leaving them to deal with any trauma on their own. This situation was even worse in Sierra Leone, where female ex-combatants were pushed by DDR officials to marry their rapists “to avoid disgracing their families and communities”.⁶⁵ By reproducing gendered social norms, DDR fails to support women’s empowerment and reintegration and can even adversely impact their wellbeing and enable a “continuum of violence”.

How DDR is implemented has implications for gender equality, for female ex-combatants’ empowerment and reintegration, and for peace. Where female ex-combatants are pushed into low-valued and low-paid roles, gendered inequalities are reproduced along economic lines. In Liberia, this has left many female ex-combatants without sustainable income and some have been forced to enter sex work

as a result, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and diseases. Pushing female ex-combatants into low-valued roles also misses the opportunity to build on empowerment female ex-combatants have gained. For example, enabled by the self-confidence she developed as a combatant, one interviewee, Kalpana, now runs her own business. Kalpana highlights that such endeavours can be extremely empowering, as before she had to ask her husband for every bit of money, but:

“these days I have money and I can give [it] if my child asks. So, I have that capacity. I feel happy. Even if I want to go somewhere, I don’t have to ask for travel expenses. I can take out from my pocket as much as I need. I am able to show my skill. People know me.”⁶⁶

In Kalpana’s case, her economic reintegration provides her with further empowerment in the form of independence and self-confidence.

CHALLENGING GENDERED NARRATIVES

As noted above, it is important to pay attention to gendered narratives by UN-led DDR officials and documentation as these reveal underlying assumptions. In particular, it highlights that female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal were often understood in their relation to men, i.e. as wives, mothers, and daughters.⁶⁷ Such gendered narratives are shaped by the age and marital status of female ex-combatants.

The “wives narrative” in both contexts appears to have been introduced by local DDR officials, and had severe implications for female ex-combatants’ economic and social reintegration in Liberia and Nepal. As Megan MacKenzie writes regarding Sierra Leone, “The implicit assumption [...] is that female soldiers are married, that they wish

63 Natasha, Interview 37, (Peace Island, Monrovia, Liberia, 13 January 2017).

64 LDDRR Official, Interview 61 (Monrovia, Liberia, 7 February 2017).

65 MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, 11.

66 Kalpana, Interview 70 (Koholpur, Nepal, 29 April 2017).

67 Steenbergen, *Empowerment, Reintegration, and Female Ex-Combatants*.

to stay married and that their primary objective is to support their husband, who is presumed to be the principle wage earner.”⁶⁸ Consequently, female ex-combatants’ economic reintegration is seen as supplementary to their husbands’ and female ex-combatants are therefore restricted to low-valued roles such as soap-making, tie-dying, and sewing.⁶⁹ The “wives narrative” also meant that UNIRP officials failed to provide any support or referrals to married female VMLRs who were suffering from (intercaste) marriages that had been pushed by the Maoists. This was because UNIRP officials see divorce as a taboo, although divorce was and is legal in Nepal. Female VMLRs in such marriages remain vulnerable to abuse by their husbands and parents-in-law. Some female VMLRs have even been killed as a result.⁷⁰ The “wives narrative” by DDR officials has therefore had dire consequences for female ex-combatants’ economic and social reintegration in Liberia and Nepal, as well as for their wellbeing.

Female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal were frequently narrated as mothers by local LDDRR officials and local and international UNIRP officials, as well as UNIRP documentation. To the best of my knowledge, there was not a single mention of female ex-combatants as mothers in LDDRR documentation. However, the “mothers narrative” in Nepal had very different implications for female ex-combatants’ empowerment and reintegration. The recognition that female VMLRs in Nepal were pregnant or had had children translated into the provision of “gender support”, as noted above. This enabled female VMLRs to fully participate in economic reintegration support. By contrast, LDDRR officials note that “most women [combatants] became single mothers” and that it was common for girl ex-combatants to arrive at cantonments with their babies.⁷¹ Rather than translating into concrete support for these young mothers, girl



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ex-combatants who were mothers or pregnant were treated as a problem. Either they were directly turned away⁷² or they left due to the lack of childcare.⁷³ Where they were able to participate, they were actively excluded by LDDRR officials from economic reintegration support such as education, because “people do not want [their] kids to associate with girl mothers.”⁷⁴ The LDDRR therefore reproduced gendered inequalities in terms of who could and who could not participate in economic reintegration support. To make matters worse, LDDRR officials considered it necessary to take “girls away from their bush husbands, because who would accept them?” This was done irrespectively of whether these relationships were healthy and consensual or non-consensual.⁷⁵ These girl ex-combatants who were mothers or pregnant were consequently left with few options for their economic reintegration and were further stigmatised and ostracised by the LDDRR, families, and communities for being girl mothers.⁷⁶ The gendered narrative by DDR officials of female ex-combatants as mothers therefore had vastly different implications for the reintegration of female ex-combatants in Liberia and Nepal.

Another key difference between how female ex-combatants are narrated by DDR officials in Liberia and Nepal respectively is their status as victims. In Liberia, female ex-combatants were narrated by LDDRR officials and documentation as victims of conflict, regardless of how they entered and participated in conflict. By comparison,

- 68 Megan MacKenzie, “Empowerment Boom or Bust? Assessing Women’s Post-Conflict Empowerment Initiatives”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22 (2) (2009), 213.
- 69 Christopher Hills and Megan MacKenzie, “Women in Non-State Armed Groups after War: The (Non)Evaluation of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration”, in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military*, ed. Rachel Woodward and Claire Duncanson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 461.
- 70 Saferworld, *Common Ground? Gendered Assessment of Needs and Concerns of Maoist Army Combatants for Rehabilitation and Integration*, (London: Saferworld, 2010), <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/502-common-ground>.
- 71 Implementing Partner, Interview 48 (Monrovia, Liberia, 19 January 2017); LDDRR Official, Interview 49 (Monrovia, Liberia, 20 January 2017).
- 72 LDDRR Official, Interview 61 (Monrovia, Liberia, 7 February 2017).
- 73 Implementing Partner, Interview 46 (Monrovia, Liberia, 19 January 2017).
- 74 LDDRR Official, Interview 61 (Monrovia, Liberia, 7 February 2017).
- 75 LDDRR Official, Interview 61 (Monrovia, Liberia, 7 February 2017).
- 76 Funmi Olonisakin, Karen Barnes and Eka Ikpa, *Women, Peace and Security: Translating Policy Into Practice* (London: Routledge, 2011).



It is imperative for UN-led DDR to work together with female ex-combatants on their reintegration and to challenge oversimplified narratives in UN-led DDR documentation and among local and foreign DDR officials.

armed groups. By failing to recognise and listen to the political motivations for female ex-combatants' participation in armed groups, the UNIRP as well as the MoPR inadvertently introduce gendered biases in whose voices are listened to and whose grievances are addressed in the broader process of building an inclusive, positive peace.

male ex-combatants were narrated as threats to communities and peace.⁷⁷ Notably, the 'female ex-combatants as victims narrative' stems directly from the earlier DDR programme in Sierra Leone, much of which was simply "copy-pasted" into the LDDRR, to the point where in some LDDRR documentation, "you saw Sierra Leone written in it".⁷⁸ Female ex-combatants are discursively stripped of their agency and consequently "desecuritized".⁷⁹ They are excluded from DDR and seen and treated as a lesser priority *because* they are simply considered passive victims, rather than active threats to peace.

To ensure that gendered inequalities are not reproduced, DDR efforts must ensure that female ex-combatants have full access throughout the DDR programme. Tailored "gender support" provided to both male and female ex-combatants should help in addressing gendered barriers to their economic and social reintegration, including physical needs, childcare needs, and supporting female ex-combatants to access non-traditional roles by working closely together with trainers and potential employers. Mediation and sensitisation with families and communities can further assist the social reintegration of female ex-combatants. To identify the context-specific gendered barriers, it is imperative to conduct ongoing evaluation and consultation with women's organisations and advocates and, most importantly, with female ex-combatants themselves. More so than this, it is imperative for UN-led DDR to work together with female ex-combatants on their reintegration and to challenge oversimplified narratives in UN-led DDR documentation and among local and foreign DDR officials. Such gendered narratives shape the ways in which UN-led DDR is designed and implemented, reproducing gendered inequalities in the process and undermining the building of an inclusive, positive peace.

By contrast, female VMLRs in Nepal were clearly narrated as threats by UNIRP officials, as a "human bomb: if not diffused in time, they will go off in your own yard".⁸⁰ As threats, female VMLRs therefore needed to be "diffused" through economic and social reintegration support provided by the UNIRP. Nonetheless, female VMLRs were considered "indoctrinated" much more so than their male counterparts by the MoPR.⁸¹ Female VMLRs were therefore narrated and treated as "other other": dangerous unlike non-combatant women, yet lacking the political agency of male ex-combatants. This "female VMLRs as threats" narrative had implications for female ex-combatants' empowerment and reintegration. Rather than engaging the political motivations that drew and kept female VMLRs in conflict, constructing female VMLRs' participation in armed groups as a result of "indoctrination" simply requires female VMLRs to be rescued from the grip of indoctrination by demobilising

77 Jaremy R. McMullin, "Integration or Separation? The Stigmatisation of Ex-Combatants after War", *Review of International Studies* 39 (2) (2013): 385–414; Jaremy R. McMullin, *Ex-Combatants and the Post-Conflict State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013).

78 Implementing Partner, Interview 50 (Monrovia, Liberia, 20 January 2017).

79 Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, "Youth", in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty (London: Routledge, 2013), 131; MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone*, 86.

80 UNIRP Official, Interview 19 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 1 October 2016).

81 Security Sector Reform Official, Interview 9 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 18 September 2016).

POLITICAL REINTEGRATION

While economic and social reintegration support form vital aspects of the process of turning ex-combatants into civilians, neither of these aspects are directly concerned with addressing the frequently very political motivations for ex-combatants' participation in armed groups. The aim of political reintegration is to provide ex-combatants with peaceable means to address the multiple grievances that pushed them to join armed groups in the first place, including discrimination based on gender, caste, religion, ethnicity, age, and region. Political reintegration can be narrow in scope, focusing on "becom[ing] a full part of decision-making processes"⁸² by voting, running for office, or participating in referendums. The Democratic Progress Institute identified other forms of political reintegration and addressing of grievances among former prisoners from Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. These ex-combatants contributed to "community organisations, housing associations, neighbourhood regeneration projects, youth diversionary projects, community education projects and many more types of organisation."⁸³ Political reintegration can thus be understood as the integration of ex-combatants into civil society, giving them a stake in peace and benefitting society more broadly. Moreover, political participation and participation in civil society can contribute to gender equality by giving female ex-combatants access to and a voice in roles and spaces they may have previously been marginalised or excluded from.⁸⁴ In short, political reintegration has the potential to address female ex-combatants' grievances and to contribute to gender equality and an inclusive, positive peace.

While feminist and critical scholars have been advocating for political reintegration for two decades,⁸⁵ political reintegration

support to female ex-combatants has been provided to a very limited extent in DDR. In Nepal, implementing partners began providing support to transform female ex-combatants into 'agents of change'. One female ex-combatant explained that this training was helpful, and that "we learned to take the present generation forward in different aspects and the role of youth in making the state."⁸⁶ Depending on the context, women generally may have had little access to civil society and political participation prior to and during the conflict,⁸⁷ making political reintegration an important opportunity to address such gendered inequalities.

Political reintegration has the potential to build on female ex-combatants' empowerment. For example, where they gained leadership and political skills as well as self-confidence, female ex-combatants can utilise this empowerment to become community and political leaders, as many female ex-combatants have done in Nepal. Moreover, female ex-combatants in Nepal overwhelmingly joined the conflict to end gender- and caste-based discrimination. Providing political reintegration support can assist female ex-combatants in ending such discrimination by guiding them in setting up civil society organisations or linking them to existing ones. Especially the latter can potentially build bridges with non-combatants and therefore contribute to an inclusive, positive peace.

Notably, political reintegration support should be provided not instead of but *alongside* economic and social reintegration support. This is because successful economic, social, and political reintegration rely on mutual success; conversely, unsuccessful economic, social, and political reintegration can undermine each other. If female ex-combatants are unable to make ends meet due to failed economic reintegration, they are unlikely to (be able to) prioritise

82 Kees Kingma, "Assessing Demobilization: Conceptual Issues", in *Demobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Development and Security Impacts*, ed. Kees Kingma (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 28.

83 Democratic Progress Institute, *DDR and the Complexity of Contemporary Conflict* (London: Democratic Progress Institute, 2012), 43.

84 cf. Aili Mari Tripp et al, *African Women's Movements: Transforming Political Landscapes* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 162; Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "The Relationship of Political Settlement Analysis to Peacebuilding from a Feminist Perspective", *Peacebuilding* 4 (2) (2016), 152f.

85 Kingma, "Assessing Demobilization: Conceptual Issues"; Farr, *Gendering Demilitarization as a Peacebuilding Tool*; Alpaslan Özerdem, "A Re-Conceptualization of Ex-Combatant Reintegration: 'Social Reintegration' Approach", *Conflict, Security and Development* 12 (1) (2012): 51–73.

86 Jaya, Interview 3 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 9 September 2016).

87 Yadav, *Social Transformation in Post-Conflict Nepal*, 41.

88 NGO Official, Interview 8 (Kathmandu, Nepal, 14 September 2016).

89 Laura J. Shepherd, "Sex, Security and Superhero(in)es: From 1325 to 1820 and Beyond", *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13 (4) (2011), 511.

participating in civil society. In contrast, successful political reintegration can aid in social reintegration. For example, NGOs outside of the UNIRP have provided training to female ex-combatants and non-combatant women to improve their political participation, which reduced tensions and created new friendships.⁸⁸

For political reintegration to be successful, peacebuilders must make efforts to prevent a triple burden of productive, reproductive, and political/peacebuilding labour, as female ex-combatants otherwise simply do not have the time or energy to participate in civil society.⁸⁹ It is therefore imperative that peacebuilders help challenge gendered divisions of labour, such as supporting fathers

to take on their share of childrearing and homemaking responsibilities and ensuring that female ex-combatants' productive roles are not physically or structurally restricted to low-paid "female" roles. As discussed, it is further important to conduct ongoing evaluations with female ex-combatants and women's advocates and organisations to identify and address barriers to female ex-combatants' reintegration. Doing so can contribute to the building of an inclusive, positive peace by providing female ex-combatants with peaceable means to address grievances and to build bridges with non-combatants in the process.



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