

# **The Demobilisation and Reintegration of Child Soldiers**

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By Kurt Bangert

Dear Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen

Grace was abducted by rebels on 18<sup>th</sup> April 1994, at night, when she was only 15 years of age. She lived in captivity for three years until she escaped in April 1997.

Three days after her abduction, she was given to a military commander to be his fourth wife. He was harsh and rude. Twice he beat her until she almost died.

In December 1995, Grace had a baby girl. Despite this, she continued to serve her commander and was given a gun and sent to the war front with her baby strapped on her back. After five days in the bush, she managed to escape. Her baby cried so much until it could cry no more. Soldiers of the Ugandan army found her and brought her to a rehabilitation centre for former child soldiers run by World Vision.

Grace was given a medical check-up. She was suffering from skin rash all over her body, her legs were swollen, and she had hookworm and syphilis. Her naked baby, too, had skin rash and worms and was malnourished.

Grace had two torn dresses, was quite smelly and had not bathed for days. She was given a set of new clothes, soap to wash herself, a blanket, a mattress, a plate and a cup. Her baby received eight dresses.

Grace was still tired, fearful and for a long time suffered from nightmares about the life in the bush. She pitied and hated herself. A counsellor listened to her for

many hours. The people at the centre made her feel at home and promised to look for her parents and relatives.

Her parents were identified as living in a village called Kitgum. They were happy to learn Grace was still alive and they eagerly awaited her return.

At the centre, Grace learned tailoring, so that she could make her own living and take care of herself and the baby.

Grace is only one of some 8000 to 10000 former child soldiers abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda. She is one of many thousands of former child soldiers whose life is permanently scarred from the experiences of warfare.

One of the most urgent challenges relative to our discussion on children in armed conflict is the need to remove children and adolescents under 18 years of age from the armed forces or rebel troops in which they are currently engaged.

There are several obstacles to the demobilisation of child soldiers:

First of all, military commanders are not likely to admit having children amongst their troops. If they have children under arms, they will declare them to be older than they really are. In Africa, this is easy because many children don't know their own age.

But even if the commanders are prepared to admit having children within their ranks, they are more than reluctant to let them go unless they are forced to do so. That is no easy task, given the fact that many of these warlords are answerable to none but to themselves.

Also, commanders often resort to drastic measures to keep their young soldiers from defecting or escaping. One such measure is to force the child soldiers to beat and kick one of their peers to death, who has been caught trying to escape. In this way, the others are intimidated and are less likely to try to escape themselves.

Another inhumane measure is to have child soldiers participate in the raid and pillage of their own village and in the injuring, raping and killing of their own villagers and even family members. Thereby, these children convince themselves that they have no place to return to and consequently will stay with the army out of sheer fear, if not from conviction and submission.

But once a conflict is over, child soldiers usually do not undergo a formal process of demobilisation. More often than not, they are simply told to go home – regardless of whether there is any home left to go back to.

In her study on “Children in Armed Conflict”, Graca Machel pointed out that

*“No peace treaty to date has formally recognized the existence of child combatants. As a result, their special needs are unlikely to be taken into account in demobilisation programmes.”<sup>1</sup>*

Former child combatants face a two-fold challenge, once they have abandoned the troupes or were abandoned by the army:

1. The altered circumstances within their own village or family, and
2. Their own changed, traumatised and sometimes abnormal personality.

Regarding the first challenge: Many former child soldiers have no home to return to, some because they never had one in the first place, others because their village has been levelled to the ground and their families have fled to an unknown location; or because their parents and siblings got killed, sometimes even with the help of the child himself.

But even if the child fought in the war only to protect his own, the family may have difficulty taking him back, not only because he has blood on his hands and evil spirits in his wake. But also because the family who once lost a laughing, cheerful 13-year old some years ago, is now faced with an assertive, independent, sometimes callous and poker-faced youth of 17.

Reunification and re-integration may be particularly difficult for girl soldiers who have been raped or sexually abused; and the families – whether it be out of ignorance, disrespect or because of traditional attitudes – often add insult to injury and reject their abused daughter. Many of these girls and young unwed mothers eventually end up victims of prostitution.

As for the former child soldiers’ changed personality, not only has the child grown older, but he or she has also been traumatised without being aware of it,

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<sup>1</sup> Graca Machel, Children in Armed Conflict, pt. 49.

has adopted a distorted world view and a morbid value system often in sharp contrast to traditional family values.

While many former combatants have incurred wounds and injuries, their psychological bruises and scars run much deeper, and the deeper they run, the more difficult they are to bring to the surface, to treat them and to overcome them.

The account to which I referred earlier of Grace, along with World Vision's experience in working with many hundreds and thousands of former child soldiers in Uganda, Sierra Leone and elsewhere, highlights five basic needs of demobilised child combatants, which must be dealt with in both a compassionate and professional way:

1. Physical needs: hygiene, basic health, sufficient food and nutrition
2. Social needs: a safe and secure environment, family, friends, a home, models to emulate and leaders to follow
3. Psychological needs: coping with the traumatising, the ability to express oneself, finding one's own identity, and gaining self-respect and self-confidence
4. Educational needs: daily living skills, basic education, professional skills, a means to earn a livelihood
5. Spiritual needs: moral values, forgiveness of felt guilt, renewed trust, hope in the future, faith in a God of love and compassion, rather than one of hate and revenge.

As you prepare for the discussion group on demobilisation and reintegration, I wish to commend to you the excellent study by Judith L. Evans on "Working with Children Affected by Armed Violence".

The ultimate objective of the difficult process of rehabilitation and reintegration, which the respective group will seek to address, is to define ways and means to turn children of war into what Graca Machel has called "children as zones of peace".

Thank you very much!