

# 10

## ‘I Had No Idea You Cared About Me’

### Empowerment of Vulnerable Mothers in the Context of Reintegration

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#### **Abstract**

*This article reviews the literature on empowerment and situates empowerment within the context of a multi-year participatory action research study with young women and girls who were formerly associated with fighting forces and armed groups in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and northern Uganda and had children of their own during the conflict and with young mothers considered by their community to be especially vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> The authors put forward suggestions about how empowerment of this particularly vulnerable population can happen.*

## Introduction

### *Girl Mothers in Armed Groups*

As has been described in this volume by Tonheim, young women and girls have been recruited into armed groups in conflicts throughout the world. Girls and women have played a particularly large role in the context of civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa. McKay and Mazurana (2004, 14) documented the presence of girls in government or rebel groups in 38 countries where civil wars occurred between 1990 and 2003 (Mazurana et al. 2002, 103). While many girls have been forcibly recruited, like boy children, others join voluntarily, often in response to violence perpetrated against their family or community (Machel 1996; McKay and Mazurana 2004). Girls play a variety of roles in armed conflict, ranging from fighters to porters and from cooks to captive wives (McKay and Mazurana 2004, 14).

Many girls and young women become pregnant and have children during the conflict as a result of rape or in the context of partnerships formed with 'bush husbands' (McKay and Mazurana 2004; Coulter 2006). As one young woman who had been associated with an armed group in Sierra Leone reported to us, 'everyone was having babies all the time!' McKay et al. (2006) point out, these young mothers typically have not benefited from formal disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs.

Instead of going through formal processes of DDR, girls and young women with children often return to their communities or settle in new communities on their own or with a peer group (McKay et al. 2006). Some women maintain their partnerships with bush husbands, while other women use the opportunity provided by the end of the conflict to leave these relationships. While some young mothers actively choose to avoid DDR, hoping to blend back into communities on their own, others do not know that they are able to benefit. Evidence from several conflicts suggests that stigma against girls and women is so great that some choose not to go through formal or even informal DDR (e.g. NGO arranged support), hoping to avoid further marginalization.

Often the design of DDR itself is not conducive to the participation of young mothers. DDR efforts have been adult driven and out of touch with young people's perspectives, goals, and capacities. This is even more markedly so in the case of girl mothers. Formal DDR processes are designed to remove weapons from circulation, ensure force restructuring and create a durable end to hostilities, but girls and young women often do not carry arms and, despite playing a role in the conflict, are not perceived as threatening to

peace or stability. Formal DDR processes have discriminated against girls and women and have taken into account neither the gendered nature of recruited children's war experience or the unique, gendered situation of young women and mothers after exiting the armed forces or groups. 'Armed, adult male fighters,' Mazurana et al. (2002, 116) write, 'are the near exclusive priority for most disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs, significantly marginalizing all children, but girls in particular.' Even in cases where DDR policies have explicitly encouraged participation of children, such as in Liberia, where those under the age of 18 were not required to turn in guns in order to receive services, young women between the ages of 18 and 25 reported that one barrier to their participation in DDR was that they did not have weapons (Specht 2006).

When young mothers do join formal DDR processes, they often find that they are unable to participate in aspects of reintegration programs like skills training because there are no provisions for childcare (McKay et al. 2004). Young mothers also report that promises made during DDR have not been fulfilled. For example, one young mother in Monrovia, Liberia asked us: 'Will this project be like DDR, where you promise to pay our school fees and then leave after one month?'

Young women and girls who return from armed groups with children face stigmatization and marginalization from communities,<sup>2</sup> whether they go through formal DDR or return independently (Burman and McKay 2007). Young mothers are often viewed by the community as having violated community norms by having children outside the recognized societal marriage norms (McKay et al. 2004; McKay et al. 2006). They are frequently labeled as sexually promiscuous and can be regarded as 'spiritually polluted' (Denov 2007; Green and Wessells 1997; Wessells 2006). In addition, these young mothers have often developed attitudes or habits during their time in the armed groups that are considered culturally inappropriate, for example getting into fights or cursing.

Community members themselves are also recovering from the devastating effects of war, and individuals find it challenging to imagine how they can help young mothers recover, preferring to render the young mothers and their children invisible so they can focus on rebuilding their own lives. One community leader in Freetown, Sierra Leone, for example, told us: 'It is not that the parents were wicked, but they do not have enough to feed themselves much less a girl when they don't even know who impregnated her. To feed someone when they don't know who impregnated her is very hard.' In other communities, the fear of 'spiritual pollution' from girl mothers and their children also contributes to their isolation by community members (Betancourt et al. 2008).

*The Participatory Action Research Study with Girl Mothers and their Children*

The Participatory Action Research Study with Girl Mothers and their Children (PAR) was initiated in October 2006. The research began in response to a growing awareness that the needs of girls and young women who had children of their own while they were associated with armed groups were not being met (Robinson and McKay 2005; McKay and Mazurana 2004). The study seeks to learn what successful reintegration means to young mothers and what can be done to support them in achieving reintegration, as they understand it.<sup>3</sup> While a full description of the PAR is beyond the scope of this article, some background to the project will be helpful.

The study is jointly coordinated by the authors and operates through a partnership with ten child protection agencies (NGOs) working in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.<sup>4</sup> Three country-based African academics also work with the study. Each partner agency operates in two locations, forming groups of approximately thirty girls and young women who had children while they were associated with armed groups or who are considered by the community to be especially vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> Communities themselves defined vulnerability and often included young age, orphanhood, or disability. In all, over 650 girls and young women and over 1200 of their children have been a part of the study in twenty communities in the three countries.

As may be inferred from its title, the methodology and philosophy of the PAR is participatory action research. Participatory action research has been defined as ‘an approach to research that aims at promoting change; that occurs through a cyclic process of planning, data collection, and analysis; and in which members of the group being studied participate as partners in all phases of the research, including design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination’ (Brown et al. 2008). In the context of this study, the girls were located at the center, with important decisions being made by them while the agencies and organizers provided monitoring and support.

PAR emerged from Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and has been adapted to the field of development, most richly by Robert Chambers (Freire 1970; Chambers 1994). PAR privileges ‘local knowledge’ and situates the participant as the expert with respect to his or her own situation. Other core principles of PAR are respect for the local community and inclusivity. PAR is not a singular methodology, but rather a set of principles with a basket of techniques and approaches that can be adapted to particular contexts.

The structure of this PAR is different in each field site and in each country because of distinct approaches to organizing. In Sierra Leone and

Liberia, organizations collaborate but do not attempt to create a universal approach. In Uganda, the four agencies created an integrated budget and hired a research coordinator to facilitate the study in the field sites. Therefore, there is no unified history that perfectly captures the nuances of how the study developed in each site. However, a general framework for how each unfolded can be outlined.

Each country team began by identifying communities where there were likely to be a large number of formerly associated girl mothers. Once these potential field sites were identified, agency personnel began outreach to local leaders and stakeholders, specifically reaching out to elder women and midwives. The study was explained to these local community members and there were a series of engagements to assess whether collaboration between the community and the PAR would be possible. If community members were supportive of the PAR, then they helped to identify a small number of girl mothers who were formerly associated or identified as particularly vulnerable. Agency staff members then contacted these girls and young women and, over a period of days or weeks, explained the PAR. In some sites, elders recruited the full cohort of thirty girl mothers, while in other sites the initial group of girl mothers recruited other girl mothers that they knew to join the project. All participants who agreed to join the PAR went through an informed consent process according to a protocol accepted by the University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board.

After recruitment, participants were provided training on how to do research and supported in conducting research using a wide array of modalities to learn from each other, their children, other girl mothers, and community members about the problems girl mothers face in their community. They then shared what they had learned and decided upon social actions to address some of the problems they identified. While at this point all sites diverged, there was a remarkable similarity to the obstacles identified in each community, which were in the critical areas of livelihood, health, and education.

### **Theories of Empowerment**

Empowerment has taken an increasingly central role in development and humanitarian organizations since the 1980s (Luttrell et al. 2007). Empowerment theory was brought to development practice through the work of Freire and through the feminist critique of Women in Development. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action further encouraged the focus on empowerment, and specifically included the perspectives of youth and girls, identifying that they often experienced even lower status than women or boys (Worthen

1994). Within the development context, empowerment has been conceptualized as a process, an outcome, or some combination of the two. Although there remains little consensus about what empowerment means, development agencies, governments, inter-governmental organizations like the World Bank, and others now agree that empowerment is good. Empowerment, as Parpart, Rai and Staudt (2002, 3) have argued, has ‘become a “motherhood” term, comfortable and unquestionable, something very different institutions and practices seem to be able to agree on.’

Many definitions of empowerment focus on participation in decision-making. For example, Bystydzienski (1992) describes empowerment as a process through which a person who is oppressed gains control over her life. The World Bank defines empowerment as ‘increasing the capacity of individuals and groups to make choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes’ (Alsop and Norton 2005, 4). The UK Department for International Development defines empowerment as “‘individual’s acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and to fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society’” (Smyth 2007, 584).

Rowlands argues that empowerment goes beyond this, writing that:

Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making; *it must also include processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions (...)* Empowerment must involve un-doing negative social constructions, so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions (1997, 14).

Rowlands agrees with Kabeer who said that ‘such power cannot be given; it has to be self-generated’ (Kabeer 1994, 229). For Rowlands, at the core of the process of empowerment is a psychological process of change, including the ‘development of self-confidence and self-esteem, and a sense of agency, of being an individual who can interact with her surroundings and cause things to happen’ (1997, 111, 113). ‘Dignity,’ meaning ‘self-respect, self-esteem, and a sense of being not only worthy of respect from others, but of having a right to that respect’ is also essential to Rowlands’ notion of empowerment (1997, 113, 129-130).

While some people view empowerment as an aim in and of itself, others view empowerment as of instrumental value for increasing the effectiveness of development aid, improving governance, and contributing towards economic growth (Alsop 2005, vii). Those who write about the instrumental use of empowerment recognize its ‘intrinsic’ value. While acknowledging the importance of empowerment for individuals, Yuval-Davis also argues that ‘empowerment of the oppressed, whether one fights it for one’s own—indivi-

dual or group—sake, or that of others, cannot by itself be the goal for feminist and other anti-oppression politics' (Yuval-Davis 1994, 193). For Yuval-Davis, social change that is the product of empowerment is essential.

Many who write about empowerment write of the kind of power that is enacted in empowerment as 'power within.' While Kabeer argues that empowerment is 'self-generated,' we believe that empowerment, like power, is interpersonal and inter-relational. If, as Foucault (1980) argues, power is expressed in interactions, empowerment, as well, happens in interactions. It does not emerge from within a person without context. Empowerment can emerge as a property of a conversation or an interaction. Thus while empowerment shapes an experience from 'within,' it is still deeply relational.

Weingarten and Cobb (1995) propose that 'discursive practices' can be empowering. Their notion of empowerment hinges on recognition: a sense of empowerment can be generated through 'one person experiencing another person as accepting and elaborating what she has to say' (1995, 259). The act of accepting and amplifying another person's meaning can occur through conversation, or, as will be described later, through collective actions, such as putting on a drama.

In this manner, experiencing empowerment as an individual cannot be considered in isolation from the experience of being part of a collective. Rowlands identifies this aspect of empowerment as 'collective empowerment,' which she asserts is intertwined with personal empowerment in a circular manner: 'participation in the group may feed the process of personal empowerment, and vice versa' (1997, 115). The examples given later in this article illustrate the importance of this sense of oneself within a community allowing participants to, as Rowlands writes, 'achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone' (1997, 15).

In the context of the PAR, this process of recognition and empowerment occurs between the young women participants themselves and between the organizers or agency staff and the young women participants. In the examples we give below, we will explore how interpersonal interaction, which amplifies a person's experience and then allows for self-recognition, lays the foundation for further actions that empower and for the emergence of a psychosocial state where a woman is able to see herself as a rights-holder, and thus situate herself within a human rights framework. This position of entitlement then enables the participant to take part in further actions that empower through giving voice, agency, and achieving the fulfillment of rights claims.

### Empowerment in the Context of the PAR

Examples from the PAR study allow for an exploration of how empowerment can happen when working with girls and young women considered the ‘most vulnerable’ in their communities (Robinson and McKay 2005). The first, lengthier story provides a window into how empowerment happens. After this story, we share several quotes from different participants that help focus on particular aspects of the processes at play.

The first author met Sarah<sup>6</sup> on the first visit by one of the organizers to her community in northern Uganda. The study was just beginning and the young women and girls gathered by our partner agency and community elders were not fully clear on what the study was about or how it would work. As in other communities, Miranda explained the goals of the project through an interpreter and answered many questions.

Sarah did not stand out during the meeting. She did not participate more or help explain the idea to those seated closest to her, as some of the other young women did. But at the end of the meeting, she came up to Miranda with a serious look on her face and took Miranda’s hand. Speaking in halting English, Sarah said, ‘I had no idea that you cared about me. You live so far away, and your life has not been touched by this conflict. Why do *you* care about *me*?’ Moved, Miranda told her that she thought her life was as important as anyone else’s life, and that she had a right to a better experience. It was clear that Sarah was not just speaking about herself and Miranda concretely, but also in an existential manner—someone like her and someone like Miranda. Miranda told Sarah that every person in the world deserved an opportunity to thrive, that we all have a right to a decent life. Sarah looked at Miranda as though she had said something profound and said, ‘Thank you.’

Four months later, we all had a chance to meet Sarah, this time in Kampala, where we were holding an annual meeting for people who work on the study in all three countries. Eight young mothers who were participants in the study were selected by their peers in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and northern Uganda to represent them at the meeting. Sarah was one of those selected. In the first day of the meeting, Sarah shared her story with the conference participants. She explained how her uncle had been caring for her, but kicked her out and told her to seek support from her father. Her father told her that it would be a waste to educate her. She was doing agriculture work in exchange for food for herself and her child when the PAR started in her community. She described how working in a group with the other girl mothers and interacting with the staff of the child protection agency running the PAR in her community impacted her life:



This study came and in the group discussions [with other girl mothers] we shared ideas, learned the stories of one another, learned how to care for our children. We have never seen a project which cares for girl mothers because they have wasted their time, they want them to get married, you are supposed to care for the child, care for the husband—ah what is this? So [the child protection agency] came and the [research assistants who work with us] came and we were very much encouraged, now we know that people are caring for us. The other ones they say you are expired—they use that language 'expired,' 'expired.'<sup>7</sup>

On the third day of the meeting, Sarah and the other girl mother representatives addressed the conference and asked for more attention and support for their communities. They lacked funds to educate their children; they sought assurance that if they attained a high school degree they would be supported at university; they wanted better medical care, gardening tools, and costumes to enhance their cultural performances. These young women asked a room full of child protection staff, UNICEF personnel, donors, and academics for the tools to help them achieve access to education, health, and livelihood.

Sarah's story illustrates the transformative impact of feeling supported and treated with respect. For Sarah, her growing understanding of herself as someone worthy of respect and her sense of dignity emerged through interactions with her peers and with those outside her community who were involved in daily operations of the PAR and in coordinating the study. The sense of recognition that she felt in sharing her story with other girl mothers and hearing their stories in return fits with Weingarten and Cobb's notion of empowerment as a discursive practice wherein a person experiences another as accepting and amplifying of her own story. In this case, peer support was validated externally by those associated with the study—Miranda and child protection personnel—who expressed caring and concern for Sarah and the other girl mothers in her community. Sarah was able to resist internalizing the pejorative labels that others used to describe her because she felt recognized as deserving of care by others. The support from those like her and the support from those outside of her community mutually reinforced one another and laid the groundwork for her participation at the conference.

Now feeling empowered, seeing herself as one worthy of respect and dignity, Sarah was able to envision herself as a rights bearer. With this new sense of identity, she was able to advocate for her rights and the rights of others in her situation to be fulfilled. In this manner, Sarah was not able to advocate for herself until she had undergone a transformation brought about through interactions with insiders and outsiders that enabled her to see herself as someone worthy of respect and dignity. Sarah had to feel empowered first before she could engage with outsiders in a way that might produce further support for her empowerment.

Several other short examples from the PAR will help us explore additional aspects of the process of empowerment. Miranda Worthen and Susan McKay collected the quotes below on visits to field sites in Sierra Leone and Liberia during the second year of the study. They were offered in response to open-ended queries in focus group discussions with participants about what they were doing in the study and whether they had experienced any changes as a result of their participation.

The first two quotes highlight the transformative impact of mutual sharing between girl mothers. The first refers to a drama that the young mothers improvised together about what it was like for them when they returned to their community after the war.

I thought that I was the only one that was hated. When I saw in the drama that others were also treated like that I no longer felt alone.

Our meetings have created a sense of one-ness among each other and now we share our burdens. We are each other's sisters.

Both these young mothers experienced a transformation through sharing their stories with others who had similar experiences of stigmatization and marginalization. Through working together on a drama, the first young woman had the experience of seeing her own story reflected back to her. The second young woman experienced this same 'amplification' and 'elaboration' of her story through sharing that emerged in the meetings that the young mothers held with each other. Both young mothers no longer felt isolated or alone, but understood their own experiences within the context of a broader social group.

Several participants expressed how confidence placed in them by the organizers, the agencies, and the other girl mothers involved in the PAR altered their sense of self and gave them an incentive to try to lead better lifestyles. In one community where the young mothers had decided to start a micro-credit project to support their livelihood development, one young mother put it this way:

So little ended up helping so much. The little you gave me made me want to take better care of myself. I now try to get good clothes and wash my skin and brush my hair and eat good food. The little bit you gave me made me try harder.

Another woman reported that she no longer spent her money on 'drinking and smoking' because 'from within I feel a change.' Prior to the PAR, these two young women had internalized the disrespect they felt from others in their community. Through the PAR, they experienced what it was like to be

cared for, treated with dignity, and to be relied upon, which motivated this change from within. These young women were now beginning to think of themselves as worthy of respect, dignity, and the trust placed in them.

As Rowlands describes, this emergent sense of personal empowerment and sense of connection with others in similar circumstances helps facilitate expressions of collective empowerment. This is well illustrated by another young mother who told us about a drama that her group had performed publicly for the community:

We did a drama about what it was like when we came back from the bush and people shied away from us. The drama also reflected the alienation that we felt when we came back.... We did our play to the community and they said that they wanted to join us and join in our activities. Before, others were shy of us, and now, they talk upright to us. We used the drama to bring those who were shy of us closer again.

This young woman told her story using only 'we' statements. She understood that she was not alone—others, too, had been stigmatized. Because those in her group had shared their stories and gained a sense of validation from learning that their stories were similar, the group was able to seek collective recognition for their experience from their community. The group of girl mothers as a collective enacted the story of what it had felt like to come back to the community and be isolated before the very people who had made them feel alienated. In this instance, the community *did* recognize them: community members altered their treatment of the girl mothers and now talk 'upright' to them. Ending this isolation and alienation by community members was the first step towards the young mothers gaining a full position in their community.

While some young women experience support from their families before gaining respect from their communities, for others the reverse is true. In either direction, however, feeling empowered and respected with regards to one group facilitates empowerment in other domains, as can be seen in the following quote:

My mother used to abuse me and blame me for my children, but now I make soap that the community buys, my mom sees me better.

In this instance, the young woman had experienced a shift in her relationship to her community and attributed to that shift a transformation in her relationship with her mother. Where she had once been viewed as worthless in the community, now the community recognized her soap-making skill and people engaged with her as a saleswoman, purchasing her products. Her mother, who had previously abused and blamed her, shifted her perception

after observing how community members saw her daughter and, presumably, noting that her daughter was engaged productively in supporting herself and her children. The young woman does not speak about her own sense of self worth changing. Rather, she focuses on her experience of recognition by others: when the community saw her as valuable, her mother learned to see her as valuable, too.

The final two quotes illustrate how this sense of empowerment (with respect to self, other girl mothers, community, and family), can enable young mothers to take actions that will further empower them, particularly with respect to structures to protect human rights. The young women focus on how prior to the PAR, they would not have availed themselves of the supportive structures within the community. With their new self-respect and their shifted role within the community, however, they are able to use these structures, which led them to feel further empowered.

Before the PAR came, I was not considered worthy in the community. If there was fighting and I was walking nearby, someone would automatically blame me even if I was not at fault. Now if the community sees me in conflict or if something is stolen, they do not blame me. They see me taking care of myself and they see my business is going well and so when I complain of something, they listen to me and believe my side of the story.

My boyfriend beat me when I wouldn't loan him money. But we went to the chief. Before he wouldn't support me and now he wants my money. We decided to separate. He took one of our children and I kept the other one. I am not happy that we're separated, but I was not going to give him my money and I was not going to tolerate him beating me. Before I wouldn't have gone to the chief because I didn't have confidence because I was provoking people in the community. But now I know my rights, I stand like a woman so I can go to the chief.

Both of these women report that they would not have previously had their perspectives believed by the community or the chief, or even availed themselves of these resources for judgment and arbitration. However, now that they believed themselves worthy of respect and experienced respect from the community, they were able to protect themselves from continued violations in the form of theft and domestic violence. Although the same structures for addressing conflict in the marketplace or in the home were in place prior to the PAR, the young women were effectively excluded from using these structures because of their marginalized status. Feeling entitled to respect, dignity, and rights, and believing that others validate their entitlement, allowed them to engage with the structures that protect them.

## **Conclusion**

Practitioners should be cognizant of the level of (dis)empowerment among the people they are working with, be they formerly associated young women or any other vulnerable population. Programs should be designed to meet the particular capacities and needs of the population, understanding that in some instances, targeted work to facilitate empowerment will be necessary before further work on development or human rights will be able to take root and reach its potential.

In our experience, when the population that is being engaged with has repeatedly had their rights violated, empowerment is a necessary starting point. The examples above demonstrate some of the ways that participants experience empowerment through interactions and establishing relationships that foster awareness within a person that she is worthy of respect and dignity. These empowering interactions occur within groups of girl mothers, and between girl mothers and outsiders, including study organizers, agency staff, community members, and family.

This new sense of self worth has been an essential starting point for participants in the PAR to envision themselves as deserving of human rights like access to education, livelihood, and healthcare, and as entitled to protection against rights violations like sexual violence. Once the young mothers in the PAR feel entitled to their rights, then they create opportunities to feel empowered through their personal and collective struggle to attain fulfillment of their rights, whether these actions happened at the intimate level of a woman and her boyfriend or at an international conference.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, we refer to 'girl mothers' and 'young mothers.' We use the term 'girl mother' to refer to individuals who either became pregnant or had a child before the age of 18. At the point of joining the PAR, some of these 'girl mothers' were over the age of 18, and thus are also referred to as 'young mothers,' meaning individuals between the ages of 15-30.
- <sup>2</sup> See also the contributions by Emeline Ndossi and Fiona Shanahan and Angela Veale in this book.
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- <sup>4</sup> In Liberia partners are Save the Children, UK, Touching Humanity in Need of Kindness, and Debey Sayndee at the University of Liberia; in Sierra Leone partners are Christian Brothers, Christian Children's Fund, Council of Churches in Sierra Leone, National Network for Psychosocial Care, and Samuel Beresford Weekes at Fourah Bay College; in Uganda partners are Caritas, Concerned Parents Association, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, World Vision, and Stella Nema at Makerere University. Without the dedication of these partners, the study would have been impossible. We also wish to acknowledge the remarkable girl mothers who participated in this study, who are too numerous to be thanked individually.
- <sup>5</sup> The decision was made to not exclusively recruit formerly associated girl mothers because of concerns that focusing on this population could further stigmatize them (Robinson and McKay 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> Not her real name.
- <sup>7</sup> Verbatim transcripts from day one of Kampala meeting, October 2007.