

**CHILD SOLDIERS IN SIERRA LEONE:  
EXPERIENCES, IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR  
REHABILITATION AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Problem and Justification**

The issue of child soldiers has become an increasing global concern. More than 300,000 soldiers under the age of 18 are fighting in conflicts in 41 countries around the world. The problem has been particularly serious in Sierra Leone where thousands of children have participated directly in armed conflict or have been recruited for labour or sexual exploitation among armed groups. Despite international concern about children in armed conflict, minimal empirical research has been dedicated to this problem. To fill the research gaps, this study has traced the experiences and perspectives of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone and investigated the implications of their participation in armed conflict. The research findings will be used to enhance community based programs and policies for the rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers into community life.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the experiences and psychosocial effects of children's involvement in armed conflict, as perpetrators or victims, or both.
2. To contribute to the development and/or improvement of policies and programs oriented towards the protection, rehabilitation, and community reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone.

### **Methodology**

Three groups of participants were identified and recruited as research participants: a) children formerly involved in armed conflict; b) parents/guardians of many of these children; and c) institutional stakeholders. Eighty children, 40 boys and 40 girls, participated in in-depth interviews and focus groups. To benefit from their unique knowledge and experience, 12 former child soldiers (adolescents) were invited to lead focus groups with other children. Focus groups were also used to elicit the knowledge of 32 parents/guardians, while in-depth interviews were used to obtain the insights of 40 institutional stakeholders. A community conference in July 2004 brought together all those who participated in the study. This conference, and the policy formulation seminar that followed, encouraged dialogue among these groups and facilitated collaborative development of related policies and programs.

### **Findings**

The findings of this project are comprehensive. They include information concerning the antecedents of children's participation in the conflict, as well as the nature and extent of children's involvement in conflict, with particular regard to gender differentiation, to the dialectic between the influence of structural forces and of personal agency, to the inter-relationship between victimization and perpetration of violent acts, and to children's coping strategies during the course of conflict. Findings also include evidence related to the long-term psychosocial effects and consequences of children's participation in armed conflict, and to their current and long term needs for rehabilitation and social reintegration. In addition, project findings also stem from the methodological approach adopted for this study, in particular the role of children as research participants and the collaborative cross-national working relationship involving university researchers, NGO staff, and children. The many findings of the research will inevitably guide policies and programs to assist in the healing and well-being of war-affected children, contributing to a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of national and international provisions for the protection of children's rights, both in conflict situations and in subsequent periods of demobilization and reconstruction. The research results are, therefore, relevant not only for local and national purposes in Sierra Leone, but as well for international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies concerned with children's rights.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **1) Children's Recruitment into Sierra Leone's Conflict**

The vast majority of children interviewed for this study indicated that they had been abducted or forcibly conscripted into the RUF. Although there is evidence that the RUF did attract volunteers (Peters & Richards, 1998; Richards, 1998), none of our respondents said that they had been willing to leave their families and communities to join the RUF, or that they had had a desire to take up arms before their affiliation with the rebel movement<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, none appeared to have shown any motivational interest in the putative revolutionary cause espoused by the RUF, particularly in its early days (Abdullah, et al., 1997). Instead, all our respondents revealed that they were forcibly abducted into the RUF, often under highly traumatic circumstances. Once captured, fear of the rapacious power of the RUF and their own instinctive desire to survive 'intact' compelled them to remain with the rebels. Quite simply their choices were stark – the RUF or death<sup>2</sup>.

Four boys<sup>3</sup> interviewed for this study were former *kamajor* fighters and all but one of them reported volunteering for the militia. Some boys maintained that family members encouraged them to join, while others noted that joining provided them with varying degrees of security, and basic needs such as food and shelter. Two boys indicated that they joined the movement to avenge the death of a loved one by the RUF and to protect their communities from rebel insurgents. One boy indicated that within his community, the *Kamajors* were threatening and harassing community members. He deliberately joined the RUF to ensure protection from harassment and to attain privileges.

### **2) Children's Multiple Roles during Armed Conflict**

Once captured, boys and girls were required to perform an array of roles to support the activities of armed groups, whether RUF or *Kamajors*. In most cases, children had multiple roles and were not assigned to any one task. While their duties often varied according to their age, physical strength and the circumstances of the armed group, children's duties were divided among domestic activities, sexual slavery and combat activities.

#### ***Domestic Activities***

Younger girls and boys, and those who were newly captured, tended to be relegated to a wide variety of domestic activities that contributed to the overall functioning of the armed groups. While both sexes reported being responsible for fetching firewood, water, and serving as porters (carrying ammunition, looted goods, and wounded comrades), girls reported greater responsibility for cooking, washing dishes, laundering, and taking care of younger children than boys. Failing to perform one's domestic duties in a timely or efficient manner often led to harsh punishment, and even death.

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<sup>1</sup> Given the current political climate, and fear of stigma, it is possible that children deliberately concealed having volunteered for the RUF. However, it should be noted that children openly disclosed other highly incriminating acts involving severe violence and cruelty. While we have little means to verify or corroborate their stories of abduction, disclosures of other potentially stigmatizing acts can be seen to support their claims.

<sup>2</sup> Our interviewees nonetheless did indicate that other children known to them did join the RUF of their own volition, some who were motivated by revolutionary ideals, others who hoped for material gain. This is similar to accounts in Peters & Richards, 1998 and in Peters, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> None of the girls interviewed for this study reported an association with the *Kamajors*.

## *Sexual Slavery*

Included in the 'duties' of many of the girls in the RUF was the provision of sexual services to the men and boys in their group. Indeed, all girls interviewed for this study reported being subjected to repeated sexual violence<sup>4</sup>. Gang rape and sexual assault by single individuals, sometimes using objects, were common. Sexual violence was widespread and brought debilitating physical and psychological after-effects and many girls were often forced to 'marry' individual rebels. Euphemistically referred to as 'bush marriages' or 'AK-47 marriages', this was tantamount to sexual slavery whereby girls were deemed to be the (sexual) 'property' of specific RUF males. Yet as explained by the respondents for this study, once 'married' to a male commander who held a senior rank, girls could actually benefit by access to more food, a higher social status within the group, and a degree of protection from other males. Several girls reported becoming pregnant from rape during their time in the bush. In most cases, the babies died soon after birth. A handful of girls in the sample had children in the bush that they were currently looking after.

## *Combat Activities*

Combat activities were a significant part of the duties of many of the boys and girls. Some girls reported that when first captured, they initially held only domestic roles. However, later on they became part of the fighting forces. For many of the girl participants, however, combat activities formed the crux of their involvement in the conflict.

Combat roles reported by both boys and girls included frontline fighting, spy missions, other forms of wartime aggression that included looting, burning villages, the deliberate killing, maiming and torture of civilians, acting as human shields, and capturing other child combatants. Additionally, boys reported responsibility for tending checkpoints as well as acting as bodyguards for adult commanders.

Approximately half of the boys and only one girl in the sample reported that during the conflict, they had been promoted to the role of a commander. As noted by respondents, the more aggressive they were seen to be, the more destruction and looting they undertook, and the more children they abducted, the higher they rose in the ranks of the RUF. Promotion to the rank of commander was deemed to be a pinnacle of success within the RUF. A source of privilege as well as pride, to be a commander meant being allowed to lead their own units of child combatants and, in the case of boys, to have sexual licence over women and girls.

### **3) Children's Initiation into the Use of Small Arms & the World of Armed Conflict**

The introduction of boys and girls into the world of armed conflict involved a process involving intense socialization, indoctrination and training. Explored here are the training processes that facilitated the initiation process.

#### *Physical and Technical Training*

All of the respondents in this study reported some form of physical and technical military training as part of their initiation into armed groups. Yet content and quality of the training varied significantly. For some children, training was cursory, especially when their group was engaged in protracted conflict and enemy attack was imminent. For others, however, training was more intense and lengthy. In all cases, it was designed to harden these children so that they could fight fearlessly and be immune to killing.

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<sup>4</sup> While girls reported that perpetrators of sexual violence were consistently men and boys, one girl in the study reported being sexually abused by a female commander. Incidentally, although boys were queried as to their experiences as victims of sexual violence, none reported such victimization and none of the girls reported witnessing sexual violence against men or boys.

### ***Drug Use, Training and Combat***

The apparent abundance of alcohol and hallucinatory drugs greatly facilitated the training of children and the transmogrification of disoriented and highly impressionable youngsters into ruthless combatants. Nearly all of the boys and girls who participated in combat activities reported that to enable them to train and fight more effectively, they were either injected with drugs, or given unknown tablets to ingest. Some children reported that drugs and/or gunpowder were placed in their food. Rarely did children know what drugs they were being administered. Invariably, however, the drugs were effective – they engendered feelings of strength and a readiness to pick up their weapons and kill. Some children reported being given drugs before every battle.

### ***Ideological Training and Indoctrination***

Children also disclosed examples of ideological training that reportedly made them more receptive to the cause of the rebels and/or the *Kamajors* and thus willing to fight. Frequently, for example, newly recruited children among the RUF were gathered together and given lectures on the necessity of overthrowing the corrupt central government. These kinds of formal indoctrination sessions, which were intended to make them more receptive to the rebel cause and thus more willing to fight, often included promises of political, social, and financial benefits that would accrue to all who fought for the RUF.

Several other factors facilitated children's socialization and indoctrination. One factor was the constant exposure to violence that rendered it as routine. As Kelman (1995) has observed about the normalization of violence, individuals who perpetrate acts of violence and torture on others as a profession frequently, over time, begin to see themselves as performing a routine job. This sense of the routinization of violence was expressed by a number of the respondents for this study. As the war dragged on, many children came to view participation in killing as simply a normative act.

Alongside routinization, the RUF appeared to invoke particular strategies that desensitized children to violence. As an example, when committing a violent act, children were forbidden to show any remorse, sadness or shame. Instead, following brutal acts of torture and violence, they were encouraged and coerced into participating in acts of celebration.

### ***Peer Mentoring***

The use of peer mentoring, particularly among boys, was an effective form of socialization that helped to overcome the shock and fear that many boys felt after their first experiences with the RUF. Mentors were peers who had been affiliated to the RUF for a period of time and were considered sufficiently reliable to serve as role models, actively persuading other children to join the RUF or to accede to its communitarian function.

### ***Solidarity and Empowerment***

Once under the control of the RUF, and as they gradually acquiesced to the RUF's culture as an inherent aspect of social relations and the basis of authority, boys and (to a lesser extent) girls came to regard themselves as *bona fide* RUF fighters. This was a significant 'arrival' point, for with their family and community relations severed, their identity became intertwined with the RUF. Indeed, on several occasions, our respondents made explicit reference to the RUF as a surrogate family.

Yet another way of enhancing group solidarity was through tattooing. Frequently done collectively, and often following a successful battle when the mood was positive, tattooing helped to reinforce a spirit of militant camaraderie. Usually portraying words and images of brutality, tattoos also reaffirmed the RUF's

ferocity as a fighting force. Incidentally, boys who were associated with the *Kamajors* reported being given brandings. Similar to the RUF, these brandings not only were used as part of the initiation process, but according to the children, were used as identification markers, and to instil a sense of camaraderie among fighters.

It should be noted that for the boys who were part of the *Kamajors*, the process of initiation brought about both a strong sense of solidarity and empowerment. The elaborate initiation process into the *Kamajor* militia was thought to protect fighters and to make them immune to bullets.

#### **4) The Culture of Violence: Children's Experiences of Armed Conflict**

##### ***Boys and Girls' Experiences of Victimization***

During their life with the RUF, violence was an integral feature of daily interaction and ranged along a continuum from verbal abuse to outrageous acts of wanton cruelty, consistently under the peril of a gun. At one end of the continuum, interviewees spoke of those with power, almost always male, exercising their authority by shouting commands and by threatening with death if they did not comply. Further along the continuum, most boys and girls who were attached to rebel groups reported being subjected to regular physical assaults, either through beatings or, in the case of girls, rape. Likewise, all child participants reported witnessing the perpetration of outrageous forms of brutality that were clearly intended as public displays of horror. While most of the worst excesses of violence on girls and women appear to have been perpetrated by boys and young men, particularly the recurrence of sexual assaults, physical violence was reportedly a currency of interaction and authority among females as well. Several girls reported being victims of severe physical violence at the hands of female commanders.

##### **Children's Participation in Violence**

In the face of persistent violence and threats of assault, mutilation, and death, a primary compulsion among all recruits was to survive. This meant obeying any and all commands. Yet gradually the abhorrence and fright which children experienced during their initial exposure to the RUF tended to diminish as the commonplace nature of violent behaviour gradually assumed a semblance of normality. Ironically, girls and boys who were victimized by their commanders often became their unwitting soldiers and allies. Over time, through persistent coercive persuasion that involved threats of harsh punishment and promises of material and social reward, many boys and girls who had been captured and victimized by RUF commanders eventually came to see their captors and oppressors as comrades. With no possibility for social interaction with anyone outside the boundaries of the RUF, the idea of the 'enemy' shifted imperceptibly from those who had captured and abused them to those who were perceived to be opposed to the RUF.

For some girls and boys, violence that had once been alien and frightening gradually came to be viewed not only as normal and acceptable, but also as synonymous with excitement, and even skill. Boys and girls reported engaging in extreme forms of violence both within the context of battle, as well as against civilians.

##### **Power and Small Arms**

It is important to note that many girls and boys quite candidly revealed that carrying and using light weapons gave them a sense of power and control over civilians and other combatants which at the time they relished. On the whole, the structure of the RUF mirrored the traditional patriarchal hierarchies of the region that relegated girls to lower social standing than that of most boys. Nevertheless, as many girls discovered, while carrying weapons did not alter their relatively low status *within* the rebel group, it did

provide them with an opportunity to achieve power *outside* of the group, particularly over civilians. Some girls reported feeling an increased sense of pride, self-confidence, and belonging as a result. This thrill in handling weapons may have been tantamount to experiencing a form of emancipation, however perverse, from previous relations of dependency and subservience.

It is important to note, however, that the transition from ‘victim’ to ‘perpetrator’ was not a linear one, nor is it true that all – or even most – child combatants experienced the full transition from victim to hardened perpetrator. Instead, it would appear that girls and boys within the RUF continually drifted between committing acts of violence and being victims of violence by others. The complexity of this situation often brought about much shame and confusion.

As the narratives of the children attest to, their experiences within the RUF were by no means one-sided. All of the boys and girls were subjected to brutal victimization by their captors. Yet to characterize these children solely as victims is to present a skewed picture of their lived realities. Many boys and girls also became active combatants, and in so doing perpetrated acts of violence and cruelty themselves, and experienced a common rush of power in holding and using weapons of war. This points to the complexity of children’s experiences during the conflict highlighting their multi-faceted roles where they simultaneously drifted between acts of victimization and perpetration.

### *Children’s Modes of Resistance and Solidarity*

An important finding of our study has been children’s, particularly girls, rejection of the culture of violence in unique and resourceful ways. This was generally manifested by subtle resistance to authority structures and command, and by the formation of peer relationships that helped these girls to fend off complete de-sensitization to the fear and cruelty surrounding them. Not only did such resistance serve as a means to protect themselves, but it also enabled the girls to assert, however minimally, their individual agency and power in the face of predominant structures of violence.

Girls in our sample found ingenious and creative ways to avoid victimization. Many girls were able to thwart sexual assault using the pretence of menstruation. Among our respondents as well, several girls indicated instances in which they simply ignored orders to kill during battle. Other girls recounted collective efforts to escape the RUF, all the while being fully aware of the consequences of violence or death if they were discovered. Although most respondents were unsuccessful in their attempts to escape, it was clear that they demonstrated a capacity to organize and to act collectively with extraordinary courage.

For many girls the formation of close relationships and a sense of solidarity with other girls and women proved to be an effective way of reducing their fear and warding off the threat of violence. Fostering supportive female relationships not only brought a degree of solace, comfort and solidarity, but also created a unique physical and emotional ‘space’ where males were inherently excluded.

Numerous girls who were drawn into the conflict demonstrated a spirit of volition and a capacity for independence that belied a deterministic explanation of girls as either wholly indoctrinated killers or as supine victims with no capacity to resist the circumstances imposed upon them. Instead, there appeared to be an interactive and dynamic relationship between structural constraints and individual agency. In the context of crude patriarchal authority and wanton abuse of small arms, girls often exercised forms of resistance and demonstrated female solidarity that helped to diminish the effects of outright cruelty and preserve a ‘space’ for compassion. Caught up by a vortex of often-unspeakable cruelty, they could nonetheless sometimes attain a measure of comfort and support from one another.

Some boys in our sample also undertook acts of subtle resistance. Although forbidden to show remorse for brutality that they had either witnessed or perpetrated themselves, boys occasionally sought space away from constant surveillance, either alone or in small intimate groups, so they could release their pent-up grief and fear. Other forms of 'deviance' from normative rebel behaviour included sly evasion of enforced drug ingestion, non-lethal shooting in combat, the provision of succour and assistance to 'enemy' civilians, and – similar to the girls – attempts to run away from the RUF altogether in full knowledge of the painful or fatal consequences if caught.

Overall, however, while some boys managed to preserve their sense of moral compass and demonstrated genuine courage in attempting to foil the normative brutality of the RUF, resistance appears to have been extraordinarily difficult, largely because of constant social interaction and the scrutiny directed toward those who had not yet become fully de-sensitized and committed to the rebel forces. Among all of our respondents, none recounted any form of openly organized resistance within the RUF – hardly surprising in light of its ruthlessness and totalitarian control. Once ensnared in its folds, children had very little margin to challenge or escape the culture of violence into which they had been immersed.

## **5) Post Conflict Experiences**

### **DDR Programming**

Although the DDR program in Sierra Leone has officially been touted as having greatly increased the country's security and is widely seen as a model upon which other DDR processes could be based (Women's Commission, 2002), it nonetheless appears to have paid little heed to former girl soldiers and thus has contributed to the extension of gender-based power differentiation into the current post-conflict era. Instead of being formally demobilized and sharing in the benefits of the process, the vast majority of girls were pushed aside by male combatants and forced to fend for themselves and their children. Many of these girls simply drifted to camps for the internally displaced in search of alternative forms of support. Aside from the exclusionary DDR practices, it is also extremely important to recognize that many girls as well as boys intentionally avoided the entire DDR process. Among our interviewees, girls and boys reported fear of stigmatization and criminal prosecution as their main reasons for avoidance. As a result of the realities of both exclusion and lack of information, only a minority of children in this study reported being formally demobilized. Yet even those who did go through the program expressed their disillusion with a process they felt did not meet their needs and was undermined by corruption, mismanagement and false promises. This led them to drift away from the program without acquiring any of the proposed skills or financial benefits. In addition, for the girls, the ongoing security issues and threats of sexual violence that continued in the demobilization camps impelled them to leave the program, even if the alternative meant living on the streets of Freetown.

The accounts of our interviewees confirm the findings of other studies that have highlighted the neglect and exclusion of girls from DDR programming. Among those few who were processed through the DDR process, their unique psychosocial, educational and security needs were rarely met.

Significantly, the marginalization of former boy and girl combatants is not only evident socially, but also economically. Following a decade of war, Sierra Leone is plagued with economic stagnation, high unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, and a weak civil society. With so few structural supports, most children in Sierra Leone are living in impoverished circumstances. With few viable alternatives, many male and female ex-combatants are turning to petty crime and drug use in order to cope and survive. Female combatants also reported involvement in prostitution.

In light of the harsh psychosocial and economic realities that boys and girls must contend with, there is a tendency to regard peace in Sierra Leone as largely disappointing. Following the RUF's false promises of financial and educational rewards, boys and girls have since had to deal with diminished expectations.

While forced to live with the after-effects of the war and the violence they experienced as victims and/or as perpetrators, in post-conflict Sierra Leone many girls and boys continue to be stigmatized. Unrealized expectations and promises, both in war and in peacetime, have fostered profound disillusion and dispiritedness among many girls and boys.

In reaction to such marginalization, there are indications that some children are resorting to violence as a way to express their frustration and anger. Several of our respondents expressed sentiments of burgeoning anger, particularly directed at those seen to be responsible for their difficulties. As one of our interviewees recounted, in their frustration with the DDR, children (both boys and girls acting together) organized an attack against the DDR programmers. For other children, under immense pressure to support themselves and their families, anger and violence are often directed at those closest to them.

The challenges faced by former child soldiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone are numerous and appear to affect diverse realms of children's lives. While the victimization of children was undeniably clear during the conflict, in its aftermath, children are arguably bearing a form of secondary victimization. This post-conflict 're-victimization' is most evident in the absence of support systems, viable possibilities for economic and educational attainment, and perhaps most importantly, in the powerful rejection and marginalization that children are forced to contend with amidst family and community members. Despite the presence of formal demobilization processes, reintegration programs, and sensitization programs, within their everyday lives children appear to be constantly reminded of their former status as combatants.

## ***6) Psycho-Social Effects of Armed Conflict***

### ***Rejection and Stigmatization by Family and Community Members***

In the aftermath of conflict, the majority of boys and girls formerly with the RUF reported experiencing some form of rejection and/or stigmatization by their families and the wider community as a result of their former affiliation with the RUF. These experiences were described as particularly painful and debilitating. Many children were branded on their bodies by rebel forces with the letters 'RUF' or 'AFRC'. These children continue to suffer shame, stigma and rejection as a result.

The stigma associated with former girl soldiers appears to be particularly complex. Girls appeared to not only suffer alienation as a result of their former affiliation with the rebels, but also because many of them had been victims of sexual violence. As a great deal of research and testimony has highlighted (HRW, 2003; Denov, 2003), within the context of Africa as elsewhere, women and girls who experience sexual violence are often later ostracized by their families and communities. Girls were particularly wary of the potential for community rejection. Girls were often considered 'unmarriageable' following their disclosures rape and other forms of sexual violence given the emphasis on virginity at marriage. Moreover, in societies like Sierra Leone where girls are valued primarily for their future roles as wives and mothers, and where marriage is the best option to obtain economic security and protection, being 'unmarriageable' often leaves girls them marginalized both socially and economically.

### ***Unwanted Pregnancy***

Importantly, it is not only the individual rape victim who may be stigmatized. A few girls reported that their children borne of rape were rejected or vilified by their broader family and community. Given the complex circumstances, girls also reported experiencing conflicting feelings towards their children. Some girls reported taking out their frustrations on their children by beating them.

### ***Physical Consequences***

While amidst the armed groups, the vast majority of participants reported having experienced some form of injury, often serious. During interviews, children would frequently discuss and show their scars and wounds to the research team. Many children interviewed were left disabled and continued to live with the pain and discomfort of their injuries.

Ongoing pain and severe gynaecological problems were prevalent among girls who had been victims of sexual violence. While the pain of physical injuries may be significant, the psychological consequences of these injuries are equally important to recognize. Wounds of all types became a significant and symbolic reminder of the cruelty and brutalization children endured during the conflict.

### ***Guilt and Shame***

As our interviews have uncovered, former child soldiers reported perpetrating severe acts of violence whether in the context of combat, or against civilians. Just as children reported being haunted by memories of violence they had witnessed, they were equally haunted by the acts of violence that they themselves had committed. Post-conflict, these children expressed tremendous grief, guilt and shame for their actions during the conflict.

### ***Displacement***

All of the participants experienced displacement from their homes, families and community at some point during the conflict. In the aftermath of the conflict, many children had not succeeded in finding family members. These children spoke of their profound sense of loss, anxiety, and sadness as a result of not knowing whether their families were alive or dead and many are left completely alone with no support systems or any place to go.

### ***Loss***

The theme of loss was prevalent among the children's narratives. Not surprisingly, the loss of family members proved to be the most devastating aspect of the war. Nothing could have prepared the children for the distress and grief of learning of the death of loved ones but witnessing the brutal murder of relatives and friends. Participants continued to be overwhelmed by their grief.

In the context of a decade-long civil war that ravaged and weakened the social systems, the loss of vital family members and guardians who, in the past, ensured children's well-being, as well as the devastating poverty that most Sierra Leoneans continue to live in, during and following the conflict many children have been unable to attend school. The loss of education, which is often perceived as a method of escaping poverty and marginalization, was profoundly lamented by the vast majority of respondents.

## **FULFILLMENT OF PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

### **General objectives**

- 1. To examine the experiences and psychosocial effects of children's involvement in armed conflict, as perpetrators or victims, or both.*

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, this project has successfully ascertained the unique views, perspectives and experiences of children prior to, during and following their participation in armed conflict, whether as victims, perpetrators or both. It has also highlighted the long-term psychosocial effects of armed conflict on children.

- 2. To contribute to the development and/or improvement of policies and programs oriented towards the protection, rehabilitation, and community reintegration of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone.*

The many findings of the research will inevitably guide policies and programs to assist in the healing and well-being of war-affected children, contributing to a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of national and international provisions for the protection of children's rights, both in conflict situations and in subsequent periods of demobilization and reconstruction. The research results are, therefore, relevant not only for local and national purposes in Sierra Leone, but as well for international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies concerned with children's rights issues in other regions of the world.

### **Specific objectives**

- 1. To identify the factors and situations that place children at risk of participating in armed conflict, as well as those that appear to protect children against such risks.*

Through in-depth interviews with children, institutional stakeholders and focus groups with parents/guardians, the factors and situations that place children at risk of participation in conflict have been illuminated. We have learned that the involvement of children in this horrific conflict was rooted in Sierra Leone's long history of structural violence. Kleptocratic competition among the country's governing elite, combined with state-sponsored oppression and thuggery, had resulted in widespread impoverishment, the breakdown of human security, and the gradual atomization of families and communities. In these conditions of social turbulence the majority of children were easily drawn into a vortex of violence as victims and as perpetrators. Many children appear to have regarded the power of the gun as the sole means of altering their status of indigence and despair. These attitudes were facilitated by the technology and social organization of guerrilla warfare. Cheap and efficient firearms, often purchased through illicit diamond sales, were widespread. Socialization into militarized units likewise tended to foster a sense of family-like solidarity among dispossessed children. Given these widespread structural realities, all children appeared to be at risk of participating in the conflict and there was very little to protect them from abduction by rebel forces. In most cases, it was often only through chance, ingenuity, and the ability to run and hide that were many children able to avoid being captured and drawn directly into the conflict.

- 2. To further current knowledge, through the voices of former child soldiers themselves, regarding the recruitment of child soldiers (both boys and girls), the nature and extent of their involvement in armed conflict, and their means of coping during armed conflict.*
- 3. To examine both the immediate and the long-term psychosocial effects of children's participation in armed conflict.*
- 4. To identify the specific psychosocial needs of former child soldiers that are fundamental to their healing, well-being, and community reintegration following demobilization.*

These three objectives have been successfully obtained through our use of a qualitative research methodology. The use of in-depth interviews, and the emphasis on 'thick description' of the psychological and experiential worlds of war-affected children, and the transitions into and out of violent conflict that have been inherent to this world, have effectively captured the voices and perspectives of war-affected children. More specifically, in-depth interviews have enabled us to gain a deep and complex understanding of the nature and extent of children's involvement, their means of coping during armed conflict, and their psycho-social needs following demobilization (please see findings outlined above).

5. *To empower former child soldiers and benefit from their insight and experience by involving them in the study as researchers and program developers.*

The research project has significantly benefited from the active participation of children. Children were actively engaged in the design of interview questionnaires, assisted in recruiting research participants, conducted focus groups with other children were involved in the planning and implementation of the community conference to disseminate the research findings. Incidentally, these child researchers participated fully in the community conference: they were discussants at the conference and also performed music and theatre based on their experiences of conflict. Finally, following the community conference, these children were actively involved in discussions and seminars to begin to formulate policies and programs based on the research findings.

There have been visible signs of the research having positive effects on the children. Child researchers reported that they particularly enjoyed leading the focus groups with other children and formed friendships and bonds with the other children in their focus groups. This is particularly salient for the former combatants who often feel stigmatized, isolated and marginalized given their participation in conflict, as well as the rejection that many have experienced returning to their communities. The children reported learning and gaining insight from hearing the views and perspectives of their peers, and particularly enjoyed their leadership role. Importantly, for the adolescent focus group leaders, sharing their experiences and hearing those of their peers often put their own situations into perspective. As one focus group leader noted: 'When I heard the stories of others, I forgot about the difficulty of my own situation. I realized that many children are much worse off than I am and I tried to encourage them.'

On the whole, the research team was extremely impressed by the contributions and research capacity of the child researchers. They were highly engaged in the research, demonstrated great leadership, showed remarkable knowledge and skill in relation to issues of armed conflict, and were enthusiastic about the project.

6. *To encourage dialogue among children, community members, local organizations and governments to raise the profile of the situation of children in armed conflict, and to advocate ways to prevent the violation of children's rights during and following conflict.*

This objective has been attained through the community conference in July 2004. Besides serving as a forum that allowed for the dissemination of the research findings, the community conference heightened understanding of the unique experiences of former Sierra Leonean child soldiers and helped to sensitize communities to their psychosocial needs. The conference served to advocate ways to prevent the violation of children's rights during and following armed conflict. In addition, the community conference allowed diverse stakeholders (most especially the children themselves) to engage in open dialogue on policies and programs aimed at meeting the psychosocial needs of the former child soldiers and war-affected children.

7. *To involve former child soldiers, families, community members, representatives of NGOs, donor agencies, and governments in developing and improving culturally sensitive programs and policies to help in the rehabilitation and reintegration of children into their communities following involvement in armed conflict.*

This objective was achieved in the final stage of the research. Following the community conference, a final seminar was held to begin to formulate the development or specific improvements of psychosocial policies and programs to facilitate the healing and reintegration of former child soldiers, as well as to prevent involvement of children in armed conflict in the future. To ensure that the interests of each of the stakeholders are incorporated in policy and program formulation, representatives from each stakeholder

group were invited to participate in the seminar. In this way, war-affected children, families, and community members who are frequently excluded from policy making and programming that affect their lives, and who hold important socio-cultural and political knowledge related to these issues, participated actively in dialogue with participants representing the Sierra Leonean government, international donor agencies, and various sectors of civil society. This process of inter-active communication was an empowering exercise for all young participants, and has strengthened ties among those children who participated in this study with various donor and civic organizations, especially in Freetown and in Kenema.

## **PROJECT DESIGN & METHODOLOGY**

Alongside an analysis of recent reports and publications of the conflict and post-conflict situations of Sierra Leone, the bulk of the research findings have been generated from the transcripts of extensive one-to-one and focus group interviews<sup>5</sup> with former child soldiers, their parents/guardians and relevant stakeholders. A qualitative approach was particularly suitable for uncovering children's harrowing experiences as victims and participants in armed conflict, their interpretations of these experiences and their psychosocial effects. Indeed, a significant aspect of this project has been its 'thick description' of the mental and experiential world of former child soldiers, and the transitions into and out of violent conflict that have been inherent to this world (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Kvale, 1996; Atkinson, 1998). A further strength of our qualitative methodology is that it has generated knowledge and insights that will allow for the development and/or improvement of programs that aim to assist children in overcoming the trauma of wartime experiences.

A rights-based framework, which uses the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* as its point of reference and views children as active participants in their own development, guided this research. Accordingly, children were not viewed as passive research subjects whose lives are solely subject to observation and analysis by a group of professional researchers. Instead, these children were viewed as 'experts' and their individual experiences, voices, and participation were sought out, and promoted throughout the research process. This was especially important for girls whose circumstances are often obscured from common knowledge, particularly in the context of armed conflict. During the first phase of the project, to ensure their participation in the study, former child soldiers assisted in the development of research tools and were invited to lead focus groups and later, through informal seminars, to respond to the researchers' initial analysis and interpretation of the data. During the second phase of the project, all the children involved in the research were invited to participate fully in a planned community conference that focused on the issues that confronted them and on ways to facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration.

### **Research Sample**

To gather information on child soldiers in Sierra Leone, three groups of participants were identified and recruited for the research. These were: a) 80 children/youth formerly associated with armed groups; b) 32 parents/guardians of many of these children; c) 40 institutional stakeholders (representatives of the Sierra Leonean government, donor agencies, local community leaders, and former adult ex-combatants). The child respondents, all of whom had been under the age of 18 years before the end of the conflict, were identified and recruited for the study with the assistance of NGO partners in Sierra Leone who had close ties with community inhabitants. At the time of research fieldwork, all participants were between 14 and 21 years old. All of the 40 girls and 36 of the boys had been abducted by the RUF and remained under their control for a period ranging from a few months to 7 years. The remaining 4 boys were part of the

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<sup>5</sup> During the process of data collection, many children expressed an interest in drawing their experiences of armed conflict. In response, children were given crayons and paper and encouraged to draw images of the conflict that were significant to them. Although the artwork was not used as preliminary data, it was used as supplementary and supporting material.

*Kamajor*<sup>6</sup> fighting forces. Interviews and focus groups with children, parents/guardians and stakeholders were conducted in the 4 regions of Sierra Leone: north, south, east and west.

Importantly, the youth researchers were extremely helpful in recruiting potential participants. In many cases, some children initially refused to participate when first approached by the research team. However, when the youth researchers explained to potential child participants the objectives of the project and clearly laid out issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, their fears were greatly allayed and they agreed to participate.

### ***The Research Team***

The entire research team consisted of 16 individuals: eight Sierra Leonean researchers (five males and three females), two Canadian researchers (1 male and 1 female), and twelve adolescent researchers (six males and six females) who had been part of the RUF fighting forces during the conflict. The adolescent researchers were selected by the adult research team on the basis of the earlier contact between NGO staff and war-affected children, their evident interest in the project, and their maturity. Besides our conviction that adolescent researchers would enhance the richness of the discussions and therefore the quality of the data, we were keen to involve a group of children in a purposeful activity that could prove to be educational and empowering.

Once the entire team was established, the project leader (Denov) conducted in-depth research training workshops with the team. This included separate training sessions for the adolescent researchers. Preparation for and participation in the research training sessions was extensive, involving several sessions. However, in reality, research training was ongoing throughout the project and the entire research team engaged in open dialogue and consultation concerning the daily challenges of the research. The initial training sessions focused on the goals of the research, on interview techniques with children, on gender and cultural aspects of interviewing, on ethical issues, and on the potential challenges they were likely to face (or were facing) in the field. Important knowledge was garnered in the course of the research training sessions with regard to the Sierra Leonean youth. Initially, the research team conducted research training sessions with a mixed group of boys and girls. However, during one training session, girls remained largely quiet and visibly intimidated, while the boys appeared to take over the discussions. Following this, training sessions were conducted separately and girls were found to be more active, engaged, and at ease. This aspect of gender sensitivity is crucial to the successful promotion of the rights and voices of girls.

As part of the training, young researchers undertook mock interviewing and mock focus-group discussions as a way to hone their new skills. On completion of their training, NGO researchers and adolescent researchers embarked on fieldwork that lasted from May 2003 to February 2004.

Traveling together, the researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with participants. The majority of children and youth in the study were interviewed twice. The first set of interviews was conducted in the child's native language (either Krio, Mende, Temne, and Limba) by the adult Sierra Leonean researchers. These interviews explored children's life histories and recruitment into armed conflict, their experiences and coping strategies, as well as the long-term effects of participation in war. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed and translated into English. Several months later, Denov and Kemokai

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<sup>6</sup> The *kamajors* were local game hunters who were used as scouts during government army patrols as early as 1991. From 1993, in response to continued attacks of the RUF and the inadequate protection of the rapidly expanded and undisciplined government army (the SLA), local communities began to organize civil defense groups to protect their villages. Drawn from the hunter tradition known in the South and East as *kamajo* and in the north as *tamaboro* and *kapra*, the *kamajor* movement was more or less organized as a guild to fight against the RUF (Muana, 1997).

conducted a second round of one-to-one interviews with the same boys and girls. These interviews were likewise audiotaped and transcribed.

Focus groups were conducted with the same 80 child/youth participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to explore the psycho-social needs of children in fighting forces, to assess what they themselves deemed important for their well-being and healing, and how this could best be achieved. Focus groups were led and facilitated by the adolescent researchers. Similar to the earlier round of interviewing, all focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and translated into English. Once the focus groups were completed, the adult research team solicited feedback from the adolescent researchers on their experiences and perspectives on the focus group discussions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The safety and protection of all participants, most especially the children, was an essential aspect of this project. Prior to involvement in the study, all potential participants were given a summary of the research goals, and what would be required of them as participants. No interview or focus group was conducted without obtaining the full and informed consent of participants. For children under 18 years old, their own consent and that of a parent/guardian had to be obtained. A written consent form was provided to each participant. However, in some cases, parents/guardians and their children/wards would only give verbal consent and would not put anything to paper. For those who were willing to participate in the project but were unwilling to sign a document, and for those who were illiterate, the consent form was read to them, after which they were given a copy to keep.

Prior to the interviews, we emphasized to participants that they could refuse to answer any question during the interview, and that at any sign of discomfort, we were prepared to halt the interview. With participant's permission, the interview would be recorded on audiotape and later transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed, the tapes would be destroyed. The participants were assured that all information gathered for the research would remain confidential and used for research purposes only. Participants were also guaranteed anonymity.

There were, of course, potential risks to consider. Participants were asked to share potentially traumatic and painful events, which could evoke varying levels of distress. Those who were still suffering from the trauma of war and its related effects could experience heightened anxiety by speaking about it in detail. Individuals who were coming to terms with their experiences could have been afraid to reopen old wounds. An additional problem may have arisen if participants feared reprisal, stigmatization or marginalization, as a result of sharing their stories. The entire research team discussed these issues on an ongoing basis throughout the research process and it was foremost in our minds. Sensitivity and awareness of the potential for re-victimization was therefore crucial when conducting these interviews.

A key indicator of the trust and close relationships that have been established between the research team and participants is that many of the participants, particularly the children, continue to visit and socialize at the offices of the Sierra Leonean research team at Defence for Children International, Sierra Leone. The children continue to use the local NGO offices as meeting places to see and visit with the adult researchers, and other child researchers and participants. Moreover, the participants and their families have warmly received the research team on subsequent meetings, official or otherwise.

## **RESULTS AND DISSEMINATION**

### ***Information Sharing and Dissemination***

The following is a list of dissemination activities emanating from the research project.

***Publications:***

Denov, M. & Maclure, R. (in press) "Engaging the Voices of Girls in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Conflict: Experiences and Perspectives in a Culture of Violence". *Anthropologica*.

Denov, M. (under review) "Wartime Sexual Violence: Assessing a Human Security Response to War-affected Girls in Sierra Leone" *Security Dialogue*.

Denov, M. & Maclure, R. (in press) "Girls and Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone: Victimization, Participation and Resistance". In Farr, V. and Schnabel, A. (eds.) *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons*. Geneva: United Nations University Press.

Maclure, R. & Denov, M. (in press) "'I Didn't Want to Die So I Joined Them': Structuration and the Process of Becoming Boy Soldiers in Sierra Leone". *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*.

Denov, M. & Maclure, R. (under review) "Turnings and Adaptations: Militarization, Life Histories and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

Maclure, R. & Denov, M. (under review) "Educational Renewal and Gender Equity in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone: Limitations and Prospects." *Peace and Conflict*.

***Conference Presentations by the Research Team:***

'The Making and Unmaking of Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone'. Paper presented at the Research Initiative on Small Arms, Columbia University. New York, July 9-11, 2005

'Understanding Child Soldier'. Paper presented at Modern War Crimes Division, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa, Canada, March 23, 2005

'Girls and Small Arms in Sierra Leone.' Paper presented at the International Studies Association Conference. Honolulu, Hawaii, March 1-5, 2005.

'The Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers'. Paper presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Human Security and Peacebuilding Consultations, Ottawa, Canada, January 19-20, 2005

'Youth and Reconciliation'. Paper presented at the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) Reconciliation Expert Network Meeting, Ottawa, Canada, October 13, 2004

'Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Experiences, Implications and Strategies for Rehabilitation and Community Reintegration.' Community Conference held by the Research Team to disseminate the research findings. Freetown, Sierra Leone, July 1-3 2004.

'Girls and Armed Conflict in Sierra Leone: Victimization, Participation and Resistance.' *Gender Perspectives on Small Arms and Light Weapons*. Conference held in Capetown, South Africa, February 29-March 3, 2004.

'Peace Education in Sierra Leone: Challenges and Implications for Former Child Soldiers.' Comparative and International Education Society Annual Conference. March, 2004.

‘War-affected children in Sierra Leone.’ Presentation at CIDA, Child Protection Unit, November 3, 2003.

### **CAPACITY BUILDING**

This project has been an important contribution to the capacity building of all partners involved in the research. For the Sierra Leonean partners, the project has provided essential institutional reinforcement through the much-needed provisions of computer equipment, and other research tools such as tape recorders, office supplies, and other supplies to supplement their ongoing work with Sierra Leonean children.

The project has also helped to strengthen the applied research skills of the Canadian and Sierra Leonean researchers. While the researchers at the University of Ottawa have had extensive experience conducting research, the unique context of Sierra Leone, the challenging nature of the research topic, as well as the involvement of children as researchers, has provided an important learning environment and reinforced much needed research skills. For the Sierra Leonean partners, who had less experience in conducting applied research, the training workshops, active involvement in all aspects of the research – from the review of project conceptualization, selection of research participants, formulation of interview guides through the processes of data collection and analysis to final reporting – have strengthened their research and evaluation capacity. More specifically, the research has provided members of the organizations with specialized knowledge and effective skills that can be used to work closely with war-affected children. Members of the organizations report that since their involvement in the project, they have greater capacity and confidence to conduct research with children while ensuring that they are not encroaching on the rights of children or compromising the objectives of the research.

For DCI-SL, the research project has enabled the organization to improve its administrative abilities and extend its area of operation. Prior to the research, DCI-SL offices were located only in Freetown. Through the increased resources from the project, DCI-SL now has an ongoing presence in the eastern region of Kenema, and in Bo, in the south where additional volunteers and staff have been recruited. Given the increased poverty and marginalization of children, particularly in the eastern regions as compared to those in Freetown, this growth is much needed and welcomed.

### **PROJECT MANAGEMENT**

Overall, the management of the project has been quite successful. While, at times, the international nature of the research and the distance and difficulty communicating with partners on a regular basis presented a challenge, most of the parties involved worked hard to ensure ongoing collaboration and consistency among the other organizations. There was some level of difficulty maintaining close communication and agreement with parties from FoC, which may have impacted on the quality of the data received from this organization. Given the distance between partners and less than optimal dialogue with FoC, it was also challenging at times to enforce deadlines and the timely receipt of data. The interest and dedication in the project of DCI-SL was clearly demonstrated by the quantity and more importantly, the quality of the data received from this organization. The management of the project has also been successful largely as a result of the fact that each researcher and organization brought a unique set of skills that ultimately contributed to the overall functioning of the team and the quality of the research. For example, the Sierra Leonean partners played a particularly active role in the management of the project during the early phases of the research, specifically in the identification and recruitment of participants as well as during the first round of data collection, transcription and translation, and in the organization of the community conference. In turn, the Canadian partners played an active management role in organizing and implementing the research training sessions, collecting the second round of data, as well as data analysis.

All of these factors inevitably reflect the importance and value of the close partnership that has emerged and developed over the past two years. The research could not have been successfully completed without the commitment, effort and contribution of each of the three organizations. We are extremely pleased with the partnerships that have developed and hope that we can continue to work collaboratively in the future.

### **IMPACT OF THE PROJECT**

- The voices of former child soldiers are at the centre of the research findings. As such, not only has this enhanced common understanding of the plight of these children, but it has highlighted their resilience and unique coping strategies during periods of great duress. This engenders an appreciation of these children as potential active participants – not passive subjects – in the formulation and development of policies and programs designed for their benefit.
- By eliciting the knowledge and perspectives of other key stakeholders, and subsequently bringing them together in a community conference, the research has fostered mutual reflections on the situations and needs of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone, and – perhaps more importantly – dialogue and collaboration among the stakeholders vis à vis the development and/or improvement of specific policies and programs oriented towards meeting the psycho-social needs of war-affected children.
- The research is likely to contribute to greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in national and international provisions for the protection of children’s rights, both in conflict situations and in subsequent periods of demobilization and reconstruction. The research results, therefore, are not only relevant for local and national purposes in Sierra Leone, but as well for international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral aid agencies concerned with children’s rights issues in other regions of the world.
- The research has been demonstrated to be beneficial to those children invited to participate in interviews, focus groups, and the community conference. Besides being an educational experience, the methodology and results of the research have served to validate their own experiences and perspectives, and contributed to their self-esteem, and sense of empowerment.

### **CHILD PROTECTION POLICY AND PROGRAMMING IMPLICATIONS**

Implications for child protection policy and programming include:

- The engagement of children as research participants, as opposed to conventional passive research ‘subjects’, has been enormously beneficial to this study, and has been documented. The participation of children serves as an example for child-oriented research projects in other domains and in other countries. In addition, it serves as an example for social assistance programmes, and for forums of policy formulation. Given the experience of this project, it is clear that children are capable of engaging as participants in policy discussions and programme interventions, and that in turn, policies and programmes are likely to benefit from such participation.
- The wealth of evidence obtained in this project can potentially help to inform and enhance organization and composition of programmes of reconstruction and reconciliation. Likewise, the perspectives of children and the activities that emerged during the course of this project (focus groups, drawing, acting, writing, and music) are useful pedagogical exemplars for peace education programmes that are being developed by international agencies and the Ministry of Education in Sierra Leone.

- The attention to gender differentiation, and the unique perspectives, experiences, and roles of girls during and after the conflict, serve as the basis for girls' advocacy groups and for the development of 'affirmative action' initiatives that will take into account these different perspectives and experiences and hopefully facilitate greater female involvement in public discourse and decision-making.
- The continuing vulnerability of former child soldiers, and the socio-economic stresses that they confront, should speak volumes in terms of the need for education and for investments that will facilitate economic growth and foster job opportunities that are of vital need for social reconstruction and the integration of former child soldiers as genuine citizens.
- The results of this CIDA-sponsored study will hopefully contribute to the discourse of children's rights in Canada and the need for greater international activism by the Canadian government and by Canadian citizens' groups on behalf of child soldiers and other populations of exploited children in Africa and in other parts of the world.

### **OVERALL ASSESSMENT**

The project has plumbed both the depths and the heights of the human condition, and of children's realities during savage civil strife. The benefits of the study can be viewed on several dimensions:

- By eliciting the voices of children in peer-conducted focus groups, the study has revealed the scope of terror and harm that can be inflicted on children. Evidence from the research has revealed the complexities that characterized the antecedents of child soldiery, and the perspectives and actions of diverse groups of children caught up in violence both during and after major civil strife such as that experienced in Sierra Leone and in many other countries. Our hope is that this study will contribute to increased public and scholarly attention to the past and ongoing plight of marginalized children in Sierra Leone and in other conflict-ridden countries.
- Involving the children in all levels of the research project not only empowered them and gave them a voice, but enriched the experiences and insights of the research team by allowing the researchers to develop relationships with the participants and access to their lives and histories that may not have otherwise been possible. The view taken in this research of children as active agents in their own lives is not only in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child but was also demonstrated by the research participants themselves in the telling of their stories. This research provides a model for others to follow which can clearly benefit all parties involved.
- The partnerships that formed the basis of this project proved to be fruitful and rewarding. While much rhetorical attention is paid to the need for, and value of, collaborative research in developing countries, actual partnerships as exemplified in this project are relatively unique. This project collaboration involving researchers in a northern university, national NGO staff in an African country, and groups of African children has proved to be enormously beneficial, both in a professional sense and in personal (inter-cultural and inter-generational) ways.
- The study has generated insights concerning not only gender differentiation in Sierra Leone, but as well the differentiated notions of childhood. As childhood is a social construct, so 'outsider' perceptions of children who have experienced the effects of child soldiery need to be critically and constantly assessed and re-assessed.

- As the project will undoubtedly have an influence on the University of Ottawa researchers' teaching, the results and insights generated by the study will hopefully extend to students, especially those who are interested in social service work and social science research.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

One important recommendation that we have for CIDA would be in relation to the issue of follow-up. This project and the Child Protection Research Fund as a whole have been working to promote and encourage the active participation of children in the research process. In the context of this project, this approach has engendered particularly close relationships between the researchers and many Sierra Leonean children, whether researchers or study participants. Moreover, these children have, sometimes under great personal risk, shared their intimate knowledge and experiences with us. One of the dangers of a project like this is that trusted relationships develop yet given the realities of research funding, upon completion of the project, the researchers 'close up shop' and there is little room or capacity to follow-up with many of these children who so generously donated their time and perspectives. This could potentially contribute to and perpetuate children's feelings of exploitation. In light of the vulnerability and the precarious social, economic and psychological state of many of these children, we would have liked to have had the opportunity to continue to follow-up with the children in the months following the completion of the project. We would recommend that following the initial study, a fund be made available to researchers to enable them to return to the community in question for follow-up. This would foster greater long-term trust and send a more positive message to children that the researchers are truly engaged in the problem at hand.

A second related recommendation would be for CIDA to ensure that its own policies and program initiatives draw upon the conclusions, insights and recommendations that stem from research projects that the agency has funded. It is our hope, therefore, that there be an opportunity to connect the results of this study to CIDA programming in Sierra Leone.