GIRLS ASSOCIATED WITH ARMED FORCES AND ARMED GROUPS

Lessons learnt and good practices on prevention of recruitment and use, release and reintegration

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1   Central African Republic, Cameroon, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Mali, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen,

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This Technical Note provides information on the challenges that girls associated with armed forces and armed groups (GAAFAG) face during their recruitment, their period of association, and their reintegration, as well as lessons learnt and promising practices to implement gender-sensitive and gender-informed prevention, release and reintegration programmes. Very little global guidance is available to support field practitioners in designing and implementing programmes for GAAFAG. This Technical Note aims to contribute to the understanding of the specific needs of GAAFAG and programming implications. The Technical Note is informed by a desk review including grey literature and academic research, the analysis of information collected from the study of 37 armed groups and armed forces[2] and key informant interviews. Key informants included researchers, and representatives from government, UN agencies and national and international NGOs from 14 countries[3] where recruitment of girls was ongoing in 2019.

According to article 2.1 of the Paris Principles and Guidelines on children associated with armed forces and armed groups from 2007: *"A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities."*

This definition acknowledges the presence of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups. The definition is not limited to children who participate in hostilities, and considers boys and girls in support functions as equally vulnerable and victims of a human rights violation, and that their specific needs should be considered in prevention, release and reintegration programmes.

In this context, girls associated with armed forces and armed groups have been largely overlooked by field actors. The uniqueness of their experiences across all contexts, the specific risks they face, their agency, and the importance of girls' participation and empowerment are rarely incorporated in the design of programmes for children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG). This is due to several factors. The body of evidence related to GAAFAG is very limited. The lack of data on girls' association with armed actors has contributed to a misrepresentation of the problem.[4] The recruitment and use of girls is highly contextual with respect to both numbers and girl's roles and functions. Although studies estimate that girls represent 6 to 50%[5] of children associated, only a fraction of girls are formally identified and released. Worldwide, 74% of the conflicts have led to the recruitment of children by parties to the conflict, out of which 63% have used girls. Data also suggests that the likelihood of recruitment of girls increases with the length of the conflict.[6] However, based on 2019 verified data from the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on the six grave violations of children's rights in situations of armed conflict, only 8% of 4,594 CAAFAG identified in 11 countries were girls. The same year, according to the United Nations General Assembly/Security Council report on Children and Armed Conflict, girls represented 18% of the CAAFAG who were documented as released by the UN, coming from only three countries (including a large proportion from the Democratic Republic of Congo).[7]

Lessons learnt from demobilisation programmes across continents indicate that girls are less likely to be released through formal Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes. For decades, one of the key criteria to access DDR programmes was to possess a weapon, and to be able to assemble and disassemble it. Girls who played support roles such as cook, porter, "wife" or informant, rarely carried a weapon and those who participated in hostilities were frequently stripped of their weapons by commanders to limit girls' access to formal DDR programmes.[8] Although the Paris Principles prohibit such practices, they have persisted in recent conflicts.[9] Moreover, association with an armed group or armed force can carry a lot of stigma, particularly for girls.[10] As a result, girls tend to quietly and informally exit armed forces and armed groups and return to their communities where they conceal their experience from the community.[11] Girls who are included in programmes are less likely to access support tailored to their needs. Less visible than boys, but not less affected, humanitarian actors rarely account for girls' specific needs when designing and implementing prevention, release and reintegration programmes.

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2   They include 35 armed groups and two armed forces from Angola, Central African Republic, Colombia, DRC, El Salvador, Iraq, Liberia, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Uganda and Yemen
3   CAR, Cameroon, Colombia, DRC, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Mali, the Philippines, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen
4   Lindsey (2000)
5   Spellings (2008)
6   Haer & Böhmelt (2018)
7   United Nations General Assembly/Security Council. A/74/845-S/2020/525
8   Ager et al (2011)
9   Tarnaala (2016)
10   Tonheim (2017)
11   Ager et al (2011)

The unique experience of girls in armed forces and armed groups

Recruitment

The reasons girls and boys join armed groups and armed forces vary significantly based on the context, the armed actors involved, as well as community and family dynamics.

The recruitment of children, including girls, may be forced (including elements of coercion), or may appear "voluntary". This distinction may have a legal significance, depending on the treaties to which a State is party.[13] For example, the African Children's Charter (Art. 22) prohibits all recruitment of children under age 18, forced or voluntary, by armed forces and armed groups. By contrast the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict prohibits all recruitment of children under 18 by armed groups (Art. 4), and prohibits compulsory recruitment of children under 18 by armed forces (Art. 2), but permits voluntary recruitment by States under certain conditions (Art. 3). Additional Protocols I and II to the Geneva Conventions, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibit all child recruitment under the age of 15. In practice, the frontiers between the various forms of recruitment are blurred, and purely voluntary recruitment is challenging to determine, as various risk factors influence child association with armed forces or armed groups (AFAG). However, it is essential to recognise this and avoid denying the agency of girls by considering them only as passive victims. Doing so disempowers those girls who may have taken a well-thought-out decision in the context of limited options, for example to seek protection. Acknowledging girls' decision-making power is critical for their future reintegration.

Forms of recruitment

Abduction is a common form of recruitment, particularly for girls. Out of 37 AFAG documented, 49% used abduction to recruit girls, in some cases particularly targeting them, due to a perception that they are more obedient and flexible than boys. Abduction occurs in small groups and en masse. In 2014 in Nigeria, Boko Haram abducted 276 girls at one time in a secondary school in Chibok.[14]

Child marriage is another preferred form of recruitment of girls, with some girls forcibly married to fighters under the threat of releasing explicit videos or pictures that will ruin the reputation of the girl and her family. Some armed groups institutionalised child marriage as a recruitment strategy. In Syria, the Islamic State's Hisbah female police force was in charge of finding girls to forcibly marry foreign fighters under the threat of rape, abduction or destroying the honour of the girl.[15] Family members may also force girls to marry fighters to benefit from the protection of an armed group, in return for the release of a prisoner, under physical threat, or as a payment for "tax".[16]

Propaganda is also commonly used as a recruitment tool. Both adult and adolescent recruiters may disseminate propaganda when they return to their community to rest, or as a dedicated task. In Yemen, for example, it was documented that girls affiliated to a Houthi armed group were sent to schools to mobilise and recruit girls and boys.[17] Schools, madrasas and public and religious gatherings can be entry points to communicate about the ideology of the group and identify future recruits. In Iraqi Islamic State-controlled territories, educational curricula were used for indoctrination[18], which may later encourage recruitment. In addition, economic motivators such as promises of access to money, clothes, food or toiletries are used to encourage girls to enrol. Armed groups with a Marxist ideology tend to portray women combatants as heroines with the aim of attracting more female fighters. In Nepal, armed groups used books of stories of heroic female fighters targeting specifically adolescents[19] to encourage girls to join the group and fight for the cause. Other armed groups, such as those in Northeast Syria, may use videos on social media, essays on gender equality and Western-style military recruitment commercials.[20]

A close relationship with an armed fighter can also lead to the recruitment of girls. In contexts of armed conflict where girls are exposed to violence in the community, they may enter into a relationship with a combatant as a form of protection, or their partner combatant may encourage them to join the AFAG. In Colombia, 10% of the girls were recruited in the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) through their relationship with fighters.[21] The involvement of family members in armed groups also has a significant impact on girls' association. Girls may take on the role of helping their fathers and brothers involved in the group through cooking or washing clothes or other domestic chores.

Risk factors

Risk factors are environmental factors, experiences or individual traits that increase the probability of a negative outcome.[22]

Girls and boys are most often influenced by multiple risk factors which combine to increase the likelihood of their association with AFAG. Risk factors vary significantly according to socio-cultural context and therefore should be identified at the location and community level. Risk factors at the individual, family, community and societal levels of the socio-ecological framework interact with one another and influence girls' association with AFAG. It is the accumulation of risk factors and the lack of protective factors to counteract these risks that cause a specific harmful outcome, such as association with an AFAG.

13   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2019)
14   Human Rights Watch (2020)
15   Information collected from key informant
16   Ibid
17   United Nations Security Council (2019)

18   Arvisais et al (2020)
19   Mazurana & Carlson (2006)
20   Wood (2014)
21   Moreno et al (2010)
22   Benard, 2004; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992

At the individual level, the need for physical protection is a key risk factor for girls' association with AFAG. In many situations of armed conflict, girls are exposed to risks of violence, sexual abuse, harassment or abduction in their communities. In contexts such as Sierra Leone[23] and Liberia[24], being associated with an AFAG was perceived as a form of protection.

The need for empowerment and gender equality, particularly for girls who wish to participate in hostilities, may be another risk factor for association. Stories of powerful women and girls in uniform with weapons can be attractive to girls who feel disempowered in a patriarchal society.[25] Owning a weapon is perceived as a sign of power. Looking for adventure, fun experiences and wearing military uniform are also arguments raised in a few contexts such as Colombia where 45% of girls interviewed mentioned this reason.[26]

In contexts where families face extreme poverty, the prospect of access to a regular income, clothes, food or toiletries to cover basic needs can lead to child association.[27] While also a risk factor for boys, often girls focus on contributing to the family income, and some parents send their daughters to work for AFAG, as one of the very few options to earn money during wartime.

Some girls have also mentioned revenge as a driver, particularly if they have lost a close family member.[28][29] In some communities, orphans are expected to join AFAG to avenge the death of their caregivers. By so doing, girls contribute to the cause of their community, which may give meaning or purpose to their lives.[30] The desire for meaning, glory or contributing to something larger can also be a risk factor for girls to join AFAG.[31]

At the family level, poor relationships with caregivers, neglect, domestic violence, sexual abuse or forced marriage can lead girls to seek protection from AFAG. In highly patriarchal societies, girls have fewer opportunities to run away and escape violence.[32] In Colombia, 18.3% of GAAFAG reported experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse or a lack of freedom within their families as a factor for their association. Alcohol and substance abuse and mental disorders of their caregivers, as well as the absence of affection, are potent factors that influence their decision.[33] Joining an armed group is thus perceived as a solution to gain control over their life.

Separated, unaccompanied or orphaned children are also at greater risk of recruitment. In Congo, a study revealed that 45% of boys and girls associated were separated from their families at the time of their recruitment.[34] A girl who

has lost her parents may be more likely to join an armed group to seek protection.

Parents who are part of an armed force or group may encourage their children to associate with AFAG[35] to seek revenge, fight against inequalities and discrimination, or to promote an ideology they believe in. Out of 37 AFAG studied, 70% recruited girls through family or community pressure.

At the community level, the involvement of communities in armed conflict significantly influences the recruitment of girls and boys, particularly in self-defence groups. Community ties with an armed group or defence militia can lead to pressure on families to let their girls participate in the protection of the community.[36] Girls may be part of the self-defence groups while still living with their families and going to school. Armed groups can also benefit from a very strong supporting base in the community.[37]

In addition, communities lacking strong community-level protection mechanisms are more vulnerable to the recruitment of children. The community puts pressure on families to satisfy the request of the armed group in return for "peace" or protection for the community.[38]

Displaced or refugee populations are also more at risk of being recruited due to their increased vulnerability, and camps for internally displaced people or refugees may be an easier entry point to access people affected by conflict, and to recruit children, particularly when they lose their civilian nature.[39]

At the societal level, the low presence of the State in remote areas, the absence of governance structure, basic services, livelihood options and strong inequalities regarding the social distribution of wealth can leave a population at the mercy of armed groups.[40] The lack of access to education and medical services, in particular, can create a sense of isolation and increase the risk of being exposed to armed groups. This is often the case with armed groups seeking control of resources or those that engage in illegal activities such as drug trade, mining, arms and petrol trade. The lack of economic opportunities and job prospects offered by formal institutions in remote areas pushes girls to seek opportunities with armed groups instead. The marginalisation of a minority group whose rights are denied by the State can be used by armed groups to "justify" their action and recruit children to fight for a cause.[41]

Roles and responsibilities of girls

Girls, like boys, are involved in a variety of roles which are often multiple and fluid. Girls are often involved in

23   Mazurana & Carlson (2006)
24   Douglas et al (2004)
25   Mazurana & Carlson (2006)
26   Ibid
27   United Nations Development Programme (2017)
28   Ibid
29   De la Soudière (2017)
30   Bernd et al (2013)
31   Information collected from key informant
32   Wessells (2009)

33   Moreno et al (2010)
34   International Labour Organization (2003)
35   Vargas-Baron (2007)
36   International Labour Organization (2003)
37   Information collected from key informant interviews
38   Ibid
39   Save the Children (2005)
40   Jonhson et al (2018)
41   Information collected from key informant interviews

direct participation in hostilities such as combat roles and indirect participation such as support roles, and for sexual purposes which reflect gender roles and how girls are valued (or devalued) in wider society.[42] Acknowledging the specific vulnerabilities of girls is crucial, as is acknowledging the distinct experience of each individual, which can be empowering.[43]

Indirect participation in hostilities

Support roles

Among the girls associated with armed forces and armed groups in African contexts, 63% are used only for supportive roles.[44]

Support roles are often in line with the gendered roles women and girls fulfil in the society. They include a variety of responsibilities such as cooking, being a porter, washing clothes, fetching water or firewood, or looking after the children of the combatants. They also serve as spies, radio-operators, recruiters, translators, weapon cleaners, medical assistants, nurses, midwives, bursars or logisticians. In Sri Lanka, girls were taught to read maps and use a compass, how to tie knots, engage in detective work and provide relief work to civilians to gain support from the communities.[45] Based on their role, they were trained in the required skills, whether on the job or in training camps. Armed groups with a powerful ideology tend to use girls to disseminate propaganda, such as in Syria, the Philippines or in Yemen[46].

Sexual exploitation

There are no global statistics on the prevalence of sexual abuse of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups and it varies significantly based on the context. However, research shows that girls who were abducted are at greater risk of sexual abuse.[47] Based on data collected from the desk review and key informant interviews, there seems to be a correlation between the form of recruitment and the roles girls play in the AFAG. Thus, out of 18 groups who recruit girls through abduction, 78% of them use girls as "wives", or for sexual exploitation purposes. They can be sexually exploited by multiple fighters or be married to a fighter or commander. In some contexts, a girl would be designated as a "bush wife" to a fighter which can be considered as a form of protection. In these circumstances "only" one man would abuse the girl as opposed to multiple men who would rape the same girl every day. In Angola, armed groups requested girls to dance all night to entertain the troops and keep them awake, often leading to rape.[48] In some contexts such as Syria or Nigeria[49], girls could be married multiple times. If their "husband" died during combat, they would be immediately remarried to another fighter. In Mali, several fighters could collect money to contribute to a dowry which would give them "rights" to sexually abuse the girl.[50]

Institutionalisation of sexual exploitation in Syria

In Syria, the so-called Islamic State group (ISIS) abducted Yazidi girls and women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, on an unprecedented scale. Girls were sold at markets, given as presents to fighters and commanders, or held in "rest houses" for fighters. Girls as young as nine were married to fighters, while others were kept in houses or prisons and randomly picked to satisfy combatants. Islamic State institutionalised sexual exploitation by establishing rules and regulations. In a document entitled "Questions and answers on taking and capturing slaves", the armed group gave permission to its members to take as property, buy, sell or give as a gift a female captive who "can be disposed of". They evaluated the girls based on their beauty, age and virginity after a full body search. Sexual abuse was celebrated and elevated as virtuous with spiritual benefits. Tortured, beaten with electric cables, handcuffed, given electric shocks and denied food, girls could be raped as many as six times a night.

Age can be a determinant of sexual exploitation, although it varies significantly from one group to another. Sometimes, fighters prioritise young girls for sexual abuse while in other cases they target only girls over 15.[51]

Not all armed forces and armed groups use sexual abuse or exploitation of girls. Based on the 37 AFAG studied for this research, sexual abuse and exploitation were reported practices in 68% of them. The study suggests that AFAG with a Marxist ideology that promote gender equality tend to better protect girls from sexual violence by other group members.

Direct participation in hostilities

Girls have been reported to directly participate in hostilities in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Among the girls recruited by AFAG in African contexts, 37% have directly participated in hostilities.[52] Their roles are multiple and include surveillance of checkpoints, money extortion and combat. In some groups, girls can access management or command roles. Groups with a Marxist ideology tend to have a higher proportion of girls who directly participate in hostilities as they promote gender equality in all functions, including in fighting. Some of these groups have female-only brigades, such as the Kurdish Women's Protection Unit (YPJ) in Northeast Syria. Girls who directly participate in hostilities are trained to use weapons of all kinds.

In African contexts such as Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR), some armed

42   For more information on the distinction between direct and indirect participation in hostilities, see the International Committee of the Red Cross Interpretive guidance on the notion of direct participation in hostilities under humanitarian law
43   Coulter et al (2008)
44   Haer & Böhmelt (2018)
45   Spellings (2008)
46   Information collected from key informants
47   Wessells (2006)
48   Wessells (2007)
49   Information collected from key informants
50   Sarrouh (2013)
51   Information collected from key informants
52   Ibid

groups have used girls as guardians of religious idols meant to protect the fighters and make them invincible. In Nigeria and in the Lake Chad region armed groups used abducted girls as person-borne improvised explosive devices (used as suicide-bombers). These girls accounted for 75% of suicide attacks in Nigeria between 2014 and 2016.[53]

Age influences the use of girls in hostilities, although it seems that physical and emotional maturity are more common influences than age. In DRC, some armed groups selected only prepubescent girls to prepare talismans, amulets and totems and carry them to the battlefield. Positioned in the frontline and drugged, they served as human shields.[54] In other contexts, girls are selected to directly participate in hostilities based on their physical strength and their maturity to endure fighting. Key informants reported that most girls who directly participate in hotilities are over 14 years old.

Girls can play similar combat roles to boys, however they are also expected to play traditional gender roles. Some girls have reported endless days of work with no rest, fighting, cooking, washing and carrying heavy loads, in addition to sexual abuse during the night, sometimes by multiple men.[55] Having children brings additional chores. The more roles they play, the more risks they face. However, the experience of each girl is unique and cannot be generalised to all girls. For instance, in Eritrea, females were treated as equal to males by the armed group, all chores were distributed equally and women felt empowered and respected in their roles.[56]

Life in the armed group or armed force

Control

Keeping control over the girls in their ranks is often a priority of armed groups and armed forces, particularly when girls are abducted. The forms of control can be similar to those used for boys, however some control mechanisms are specific to girls. For instance, girls may have less freedom of movement as they perform traditional gender roles, and they experience higher feelings of exploitation and submission. In some contexts, armed groups tattooed, branded or carved the flesh of women to permanently associate them with the group.[57]

Girls associated with AFAG often experience a loss of control over their bodies through sexual exploitation, unwanted pregnancies, prohibition of sexual intercourse or forced abortion. According to the roles attributed to girls, some armed groups encourage pregnancies to create the next generation of fighters, while others discourage them because pregnancy and the presence of young children

© Diego Ibarra Sánchez. *A young female member of a Yazidi self-defense group stands guard at a check point, Iraq. — August 2016*

could interfere with the mission of the group. In Syria, the Islamic State violated Yazidi women's and girls' bodies with forced abortion and contraception.[58] They forced some of them to have an abortion at two or three months pregnant. Girls described how a doctor would sit on their stomach, intending to kill the foetus.[59] In Colombia, some girls associated with the FARC had to choose between an unsafe abortion with significant risks of mortality[60] and leaving the group to bear their child.

Personal hygiene

Association with an AFAG often entails living in the bush or in camps in isolated areas, with limited access to water, toiletries and sanitary items. Some girls reported a sense of loss of dignity during their menstruation in an environment with poor conditions of hygiene.[61]

Health

GAAFAG commonly experience headaches from beating and psychological causes, stomach ache, diarrhoea[62], scabies and skin diseases, chest pain from beatings, and malnutrition.[63] Some girls have wounds and possibly long-term disabilities because of stabbing, gunshots and other war injuries, and from carrying heavy loads.[64]

53   UNICEF West and Central Africa (2016)
54   Information collected from key informant
55   Ibid
56   Coulter, Persson, Utas (2008)
57   Mazurana, Eckerbom (2012)
58   Al-Dayel & Mumford (2020)
59   Global Justice Center: Human Rights Through Rule of Law (2016)
60   Rivilas et al (2018)
61   Information collected from key informants
62   Douglas et al (2004)
63   McKay et al 2004)
64   Information collected from key informants

The living conditions in military camps are rarely conducive to a healthy pregnancy. The lack of access to clean water and nutritious food, poor hygiene, limited access to antenatal care and medical services, and a heavy workload can have a detrimental impact on the health of the girl and their children. When looting is the only source of income, some days they have no food to eat which can severely affect the healthy growth and development of their baby. During their delivery, they rarely have access to medical facilities.[65]

Girl survivors of sexual abuse are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI). In some contexts, up to 95% of girls were tested positive for STI.[66] Unsafe abortion using local plants or other unsafe methods can have long-term health consequences.

Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Girls (and likely boys) released from AFAG may experience mental health and psychological distress such as nightmares, flashbacks, suicidal ideation and sleep disturbance, even years after their return.[67] In Sri Lanka, girls have reported feelings of brokenness, worthlessness, confusion, regret, fear and loneliness.[68] A study in Sierra Leone with females affected by war demonstrated higher rates of psychological distress compared to males. Girls showed higher scores of anxiety (80% of girls and 52% of boys) and depression (72% of girls and 55% of boys). The study highlighted higher signs of hostility, lower levels of confidence and pro-social attitudes. Experiences of killing and injuring other people during their period of association was a strong predictor of depression, anxiety symptoms and hostility behaviours for girls and boys[69] as well as current stressors such as stigma.[70] Sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe and unwanted abortion, and isolation from their families can be traumatic for girls. Some girls may have suffered from "Stockholm syndrome" and have developed attachment to their captor, who can be their husband or the father of their children.[71] A sense of shame and guilt can also affect their psychological wellbeing, while at the same time, girls may miss the sense of belonging to a group, to an ideology and the sisterhood that has shaped their identity. Girls with children born out of sexual violence face additional challenges to care for their children. (See Girls with children born out of sexual violence, p46). However, the stigma at family and community level is one of the largest sources of psychosocial distress for girls.[72]

Even when exposed to the same threats and acts of violence or coercion, each girl will be impacted differently by her experience. While one girl may be profoundly emotionally harmed and unable to function, another may demonstrate considerable resilience and capacity to recover, particularly in the context of continued support from family, friends and community members.

Assumptions that all girls are deeply "traumatised" should be avoided as this is inaccurate and is unhelpful to their recovery. Most girls have normal stress reactions to stressful experiences. They will recover if they receive support and benefit from protective factors such as supportive family and community. Only some of them experience trauma-related symptoms such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms or severe depression and require specialised mental health care. However, regardless of their experience, girls tend to face more challenges to maintain positive self-esteem and confidence in the post-conflict environment[73] due to gender norms, and need support to adjust to civilian life.

Individual and collective agency

During their captivity, most girls are able to develop individual and collective agency to exert some level of control over their life or lives, whether individually or as a group. Collective agency or collective initiatives can be powerful to help girls be agents of change. Although it is rarely documented, some reports highlight their creative thinking to overcome the loss of freedom. Being the wife of a commander can be a preferred option for girls to protect themselves from harassment and to reduce their chores. Becoming pregnant was, for some girls, a way to prevent sexual abuse. Some girls resisted sexual abuses by pretending to menstruate.[74]

In some African contexts, when they participate in hostilities, some girls developed survival strategies. Some purposely missed their target[75] to not carry the guilt of having killed someone. Other girls, boosted by drugs, would be even more cruel and violent than boys to earn their respect.[76]

Finding other girls from the same community can be, in groups where they are not isolated, a source of support. Some built friendships with girls of the same age, which served as a peer support network. In the Philippines, a girl who was not menstruating when she was captured, was supported by other girls to hide her first period. They thus protected her from marriage and sexual harassment. Multiple reports highlight how girls collectively planned an escape.[77]

The evidence available related to GAAFAG is limited. We have some indications, but we need to continue learning and to better our understanding of their needs, as this group tends not to interact with practitioners as much as boys. Understanding the form of recruitment of the girls, the risk factors that contributed to the enrolment and their experience during the period of association will contribute to improving the design of effective prevention and reintegration[78] programmes, tailored to the needs of girls.

65   Ibid
66   Information collected from a key informant in CAR and considering over 500 GAAFAG
67   Takseva (2015)
68   Spellings (2008
69   Betancourt et al (2011)
70   Betancourt et al (2010)
71   Ager et al (2011)

72   Betancourt et al (2011)
73   Ibid
74   Information collected from key informants
75   Denov & Maclure (2006)
76   Information collected from key informants
77   Spellings (2008)
78   This includes girls born or raised in captivity who may enter civilian life for the first time following their release or escape

Prevention programmes

© UNICEF/UN0239446/Gibertson. *17 years old girl and her daughter in a social center in Bangui. CAR. 2018*

Key considerations

There seems to be an under-investment in programmes to prevent recruitment, as well as much less evidence for such programmes than for reintegration approaches. In addition, most documented prevention programmes are not gender specific and focus on both boys and girls.

Based on the literature, prevention programmes seek to address what are thought to be risk factors at multiple levels, capitalise on existing community-level structures[79] and advocate for multisectoral policies to ensure access to basic community services.[80]

A thorough context analysis that aims to understand the risk and the protective factors[81] and dynamics of the conflict, focusing on gender and age, contributes to the design of a successful prevention programme. Understanding the key players, who influence the decision or the path toward child association with an armed force or group, and who may make the decision, provides valuable information to design a prevention programme.

A desk review on prevention in child protection highlights the need to adopt a multi-level approach, taking into consideration all levels of the socio-ecological framework, as well as a multi-sectoral approach. A multi-sectoral approach encourages the collaboration between organisations in various sectors, and involving communities and people.[82]

The following lessons learnt are essentially primary prevention interventions that address *the root causes of child protection risks, to reduce the likelihood of abuse, neglect, exploitation or violence against children. Some secondary prevention interventions address a specific source of threat and/or vulnerabilities of a child who is identified as being at particularly high risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation or violence, due to characteristics of the child, family and/or environment.*[83]

Lessons learnt on a multi-level prevention approach

A multi-level approach, using the socio-ecological framework, is required to address the risk factors at the individual, family, community and society levels and their interactions, because it is rarely one issue, but rather multiple issues, that drive children to recruitment.[84]

A desk review on child protection prevention approaches identified general risks and protective factors related to the recruitment and use of children in armed forces and armed groups. The enhancement of protective factors and direct interventions to address risk factors may contribute to the prevention of recruitment. The information in this section considers lessons learnt on these general risks and protective factors. However, a context and gender analysis should be conducted to identify relevant risks and protective factors to a specific context.

The table overleaf summarises general risk and protective factors.

79   O'Neil & Van Broeckhoven (2019)
80   Vargas-Baron (2007)
81   World Health Organization (2016)

82   The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020)
83   The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019)
84   Vargas-Baron (2007)

Socio-ecological framework levels	Protective factors (for boys and girls)	Risk factors (focus on girls but most apply to boys as well)
Individual levels	Children's equal access to services[85] Children's access to gender-equitable education[86] Children's access to opportunities to develop problem-solving skills, learning and adaptation[87] Children's ability to find meaning in life[88]	Physical protection as girls are exposed to risks of violence, sexual abuse, harassment or abduction in their communities[89][90] Empowerment and gender equality, particularly for girls pursuing participation in hostilities[91][92] Extreme poverty[93] Revenge, fighting for a cause[94]
Family levels	Presence of consistent and caring caregivers, kinship care or foster family[95] Caregivers' opportunities to exercise agency and judgment in the cultural context[96] Caregivers' access to income and economic opportunities[97]	Poor relationships with their caregivers, neglect, domestic violence, sexual abuse or forced marriage[98] Alcohol and substance abuse and mental disorders in their caregivers[99] Separated, unaccompanied or orphaned children[100] Parents engaged in an armed group[101]
Community level	Community's access to income and economic opportunities, as well as health, social services, etc[102] Supportive community environment and social networks[103]	Community ties with an armed group or defence militia can lead to pressures on families The community puts pressure on families to satisfy the request of the armed group in return for "peace" or protection of the community Displaced or refugee population[104]
Society level	Setting up of a national database recording the recruitment and disappearance of girls and boys[105] Implementation of national action plans to prevent the recruitment of children by armed forces and groups including laws and policies enforcement[106] Collaboration when possible with military authorities and armed groups[107] Implementation of international and regional laws prohibiting the recruitment of children[108] Implementation of international and regional monitoring and accountability mechanisms to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts[109]	Low presence of the State in remote areas[110] The marginalisation of a minority group[111]

85   Paris Principles (2007)
86   Child Soldiers International (2016)
87   Ibid
88   Ibid
89   Mazurana & Carlson (2006)
90   Douglas et al (2004)
91   Mazurana & Carlson (2006)
92   Ibid
93   United Nations Development Programme (2017)
94   Bernd (2013)
95   Paris Principles (2007)
96   Wessells (2005)
97   International Labour Organization (2008)
98   Wessells (2009)

99   Moreno et al (2010)
100   International Labour Organization (2003)
101   Vargas-Baron (2007)
102   African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2014)
103   Save the Children (2005)
104   Ibid
105   Child Soldiers International (2011)
106   Child Soldiers International (2015)
107   War Child (2018)
108   Singer (2004)
109   Johnson (2018)
110   Johnson (2018)
111   Information collected from key informant

The following interventions highlight lessons learnt on how to address risk factors at the various levels of the socio-ecological framework.

How to address individual-level risk factors

Empowerment programmes that support girls' and boys' decision-making and respond to their adolescent heightened sensitivity to rewards might have the potential to contribute to the prevention of recruitment in armed groups and armed forces. Adolescents are particularly responsive to armed groups' messages that give the promise of a reward, stimulate their empathy, their desire to support their community or to fight discrimination and injustice.[112] Social science suggests that CAAFAG are driven by prosocial interests for their community.[113] Gender-transformative programmes that address unequal gender power relations, empower girls to be leaders in their communities in positive ways and remove gender-related barriers may be effective to prevent recruitment. Initiatives such as establishing a youth first-aid brigade or youth community projects where boys and girls are engaged in meaningful activities to support their community, can also contribute to prevent recruitment.[114]

Economic assistance to prevent recruitment

In Burundi and DRC, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) and its implementing partners established a strategy to enable girls and young women to access an economic assistance programme without having to disclose their association with armed forces or armed groups. Through this approach, the programme included both prevention and reintegration target groups and provided assistance without discrimination. Thus, girls could access economic assistance without having to potentially lose social reintegration achievements.

IPEC (2007) *Prevention of child recruitment and reintegration of CAAFAG. Strategic framework for addressing the economic gap.* ILOs

Access to economic assistance to address economic risk factors such as deep structural poverty may contribute to prevent recruitment.[115] Similar to education and health services, increasing access to economic support serves both as a preventive and a response measure to avoid stigmatisation of GAAFAG and to reduce incentives to recruitment.

The preferred approach is not to ask participants in a programme to disclose their past experience of association with AFAG, but rather to target vulnerable girls, in order to promote GAAFAG's attendance and prevent stigmatisation.

How to address family-level risk factors

Addressing violence in the family and harmful social norms and practices that drive girls to join AFAG may prevent recruitment of girls. Thus, peace-building and community conflict-resolution programmes can contribute to reduce violence against girls in communities. Gender-transformative programmes with the aim to shift social norms to tackle violence against women and girls can also contribute to increasing their sense of safety and as a result may prevent recruitment. Evidence suggests that community intervention including messaging, collective dialogue and reflection on violence against women and girls has been one of the most effective ways to shift discriminatory social norms. Small group education activities with men and boys combined with extensive community mobilisation as well as social norm marketing have also the potential to transform gender norms sustainably.[116]

Communities Care: Transforming Lives and preventing violence programme, Somalia and South Sudan

The objective of the programme is to promote safer communities for women and girls in shifting harmful social norms that contribute to sexual violence into positive social norms that promote women's and girls' equality, safety and dignity.

The programme focuses on care and support for survivors of gender-based violence, and involves the community in collective action to prevent violence.

The result of the research in Somalia demonstrated significant improvement in social norms, particularly in the norm of protecting family honour and a husband's "right" to use violence.

Glass N et al (2019)

Addressing unsafe family environments may contribute to preventing recruitment.[117] Supporting parents through case management and parenting skills programmes to address violence against children, as well as programmes that focus on reducing family stressors and addressing parental drug and substance abuse and parental mental health and psychosocial needs, can contribute to the reduction of recruitment, in locations where it is an identified driver.[118]

How to address community-level risk factors

Community dialogues with parents and community members on the risks facing children associated with armed forces and groups may help prevent recruitment. As noted in the risk factors sections, out of 37

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112 Harper (2018)
113 Ellemers (2012)
114 Information collected from key informants
115 World Vision (2019)
116 Alexander-Scott et al (2016)
117 Vargas-Baron (2007)
118 Information collected from key informant

AFAG, 70% of them recruit girls through family or community ties with the armed group. Community dialogues with parents and community members on the dangers of recruitment, particularly for girls, and the unlawfulness of recruitment of children may be successful.[119] [120] Multiple key informants highlighted that engaging influential community leaders such as clan leaders, religious leaders, heads of women's associations, teachers and youth leaders to sensitise the population to the risk of recruitment contributed effectively to the prevention of recruitment. This is particularly relevant for community militias or self-defence groups.

A social mapping exercise is necessary to identify key "influencers" in a community, which may differ from one community to another.[121] These can be traditional leaders, religious leaders, women leaders, as well as positive role models such as families who resisted the pressure to let their girls become associated, or peers who can dissuade girls to join. Field actors can then train influencers on child protection and empower them to develop a community-level mechanism for all child protection issues, not only to prevent recruitment. Community-based child protection mechanism and case-management programmes can also identify and provide support to separated, unaccompanied or orphan children in need of care and protection.

Supporting well-established women's associations has been identified as a promising approach to prevent the recruitment of girls, in particular when they include women who themselves have been associated. Women leaders can be

trained on how to communicate about the risks of CAAFAG, particularly for girls, how to raise awareness with women, and how to prevent recruitment of girls. In Colombia, local women's associations are powerful and reactive community-level organisations. They use a community-based alert system to discover when a girl is about to be recruited, and discreetly organise her removal from the village.[122]

Dialogue with armed group on the recruitment of children

A context analysis revealed that mothers, sisters and grandmothers had a pivotal role in influencing social and cultural norm change regarding the recruitment of children. UNICEF worked closely with the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade leadership and the members and shared responsibilities in the implementation of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign.

United Nations and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (2017)

Negotiations with AFAG to stop recruitment and encourage release of children are usually conducted by United Nations agencies, however other actors can play a role when it is safe to do so, in coordination with other humanitarian actors and after a security/risk assessment. In contexts where recruiting armed groups are local militias

119 O'Neil et al (2018)
120 Manero (2019)
121 Information collected from key informants
122 Ibid
123 Information collected from key informants
124 Bouta (2005)

125 Haspeslagh & Yousuf (2015)
126 General Assembly Resolution (1991)
127 UNICEF (2016)
128 Manero (2019)
129 Information collected from key informant
130 Child Soldiers International (2016)

or self-defence groups, some civil society actors have more access to very localised armed groups. They may be better placed to share key information, such as international norms or relevant national policies about the legal age of recruitment and the various roles CAAFAG can play.[123]

This information is important to share, particularly for girls who in some contexts are not considered associated if they do not take part in active fighting. Girls recruited to be combatants' "wives" are at risk of not being identified as GAAFAG by armed forces and armed groups, but rather as dependants or civilian help as it was reported in Sierra Leone and Mozambique.[124] This means that they may not be separated from the armed actor along with boys. Localised advocacy with known AFAG can contribute to raise awareness on child rights and support armed actors to take ownership of child protection measures. When parties to the conflict are not inclined to negotiate and there are no apparent entry points for formal mediation, local actors may have a better understanding of the structure and priorities of the AFAG. They may thus identify when armed groups are more receptive to negotiation and how to alleviate potential barriers.[125] However, field practitioners shall abide by humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, and security and risk assessment must be conducted before undertaking such work so as to avoid unintended harm.[126]

How to address society-level risk factors

Living in a safe environment, free from violence and conflict is obviously determinant. Peace-building activities[127] or social cohesion programmes including youth such as community dialogues and cultural events bringing youth together[128] may contribute to a safer environment.

Access to basic services may prevent recruitment, particularly in remote locations where the State is not present and where there is a sense of despair and hopelessness among the young generations. In locations such as remote islands of the Philippines or remote rural communities in Colombia, opportunities to access quality education, whether formal, informal or vocational training, provide alternatives to recruitment.[129] Access to gender-sensitive community-based justice mechanisms and governance in dispute resolution that affects girls, may also contribute to address a feeling of injustice. Thus, it contributes to (re)build trust in the State and gives hope for the future.

Access to education, in some contexts, can serve as a protective factor for recruitment as well as promoting reintegration of former GAAFAG.[130] Some field actors have identified the drop in attendance of girls in CAR when they reach secondary school as a driver for recruitment, as well as the absence of quality and affordable education opportunities.[131] Thus, one key informant has reported that school closure during the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in recruitment in some locations. Some organisations have designed programmes to increase girls' access to attractive training programmes, such as a nine-month training in nursing or short business training that contribute to their financial autonomy.[132] The identification of training opportunities should be based on a market assessment that indicates needs in a particular sector or trade. Gender-sensitive programming addressing the barriers that girls face in accessing services and information, and promoting gender-responsive teaching pedagogies can promote access to services but also reinforce the social value and rights of girls, countering propaganda.

However, in some contexts schools can also serve as an entry point for propaganda and recruitment. In these locations, field practitioners should empower teachers, community leaders, families and girls to prevent recruitment and identify innovative communication strategies to share information with youth. (See Individual risk factors, p14.)

131 Information collected from key informant
132 Ibid

133 Vargas-Baron (2010)

Key recommendations – Multi-level intervention approach

Acknowledge girls' agency in their decision to associate with AFAG and in their experiences during their period of association and do not consider them as passive victims

Address violence in the family and harmful social norms and practices through peace-building and gender-transformative programmes

Implement gender-transformative programmes to empower girls to be leaders in their communities and remove gender-related barriers

Identify and empower formerly associated girls and women to sensitise girls and prevent recruitment and use

Promote access to economic assistance

Improve unsafe family environments through case management and parenting skills and support programmes

Sensitise families and communities to the risk factors and impact of recruitment for girls

Conduct a social-mapping exercise at the community level to identify and engage key players who influence the decisions of girls' recruitment

Provide or advocate for education and health services in remote areas for all children

Provide information to AFAG about the definition of CAAFAG, including how it relates to girls, the various roles girls can play, and the unlawful recruitment of girls

Assess the conflict dynamics to identify potential civil society actors who could safely negotiate the release

Involve girls in the design of prevention interventions for girls

Lessons learnt on a multi-sector approach

A coordinated response among government, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations involved in protection, education, health, water and sanitation, peace-building, justice, security, food, livelihood, social protection or shelter response is required in identified communities.[133] However, it is important to emphasise the shared responsibility in preventing recruitment across sectors to maximise sources of funding. This should be coupled with training in mainstream child protection for personnel implementing services for children, adolescents and their families. It should include the prevention of recruitment of girls and boys in communities at risk, and a gender-sensitive response that addresses the specific needs of GAAFAG, as well as confidentiality. Some sectors may be prioritised based on the risk factors identified during the context analysis.

Key recommendations - Multi sector approach

Establish a referral pathway and train frontline workers in safe identification and referral for sectors such as education, health, water and sanitation, food security, livelihood, education, peace-building, justice, shelter (etc)

Share the responsibility for recruitment prevention with other relevant sectors through the provision of coordinated services for vulnerable girls in locations where recruitment is prevalent
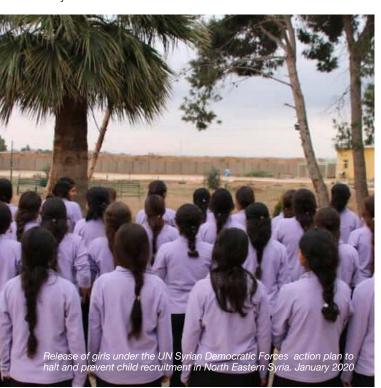
Release

© UNICEF/UN0271319/Tremeau.. *12 years old girl, formerly associated*
with an armed group was reunited with her uncle in DRC. 2018

Key considerations

Children associated with AFAG have the right to release and reintegration at all times, including in the midst of conflict, without precondition.[134] This is important for all actors to know, particularly in locations where peace agreements are being negotiated. Unlike for some DDR programmes and processes for adults, because recruitment and use of children is a violation of child rights, no formal peace or other agreement must be concluded before a child is identified or released. Accordingly, identification and release of children, including girls, shall not be delayed during negotiations for such agreements.[135]

The identification of girls who are members of AFAG and facilitating their release is extremely challenging. The first reason is due to the role girls play in AFAG. Although international norms, such as the Paris Principles, include support roles and sexual exploitation in the definition of CAAFAG, many armed actors are not aware that children in these roles are considered as CAAFAG. Girls are often not perceived as being a member of the group or force but as a dependant of members or a contributor to the logistics and functioning of the armed group.[136] Their role as the "wife" of a fighter is often considered as a traditional gender role that is not different from child marriage with civilians, and it is not understood as a violation of their rights. In contexts such as DRC, some girls, based on local traditions, have themselves endorsed the "wife" role and are not expected to leave their "husband".[137] The stigma correlated with their association strengthens this situation, particularly if they have children. In these contexts, many girls choose not to come back to their families and communities but prefer to stay with the AFAG.

Release of girls under the UN Syrian Democratic Forces action plan to halt and prevent child recruitment in North Eastern Syria. January 2020

Trajectories for girls' exits vary significantly based on the context but also based on individual experiences. Exit seems to be a combination of two processes: *desistance* (cessation of activity for the group, including support activities) and *disengagement* (disincorporation and de-identification as a group member).[138] Thus, even girls identified as released and who benefit from reintegration programmes, may have in reality not fully exited the armed force or group. Girls married to commanders or girls with children whose father is still enrolled are particularly affected. They may have desisted from the group but may not be disengaged. As a result, the so-called release process may not be a one-time event, but rather a process where connections with the armed group are maintained and weakened over long periods of time. This is particularly relevant to girls who live in communities where armed groups are still present or when their family members are associated.

Formal and informal modes of release are relevant, based on the level of dialogue that exist with armed actors and the level of access to affected communities. The identification of GAAFAG is particularly challenging in locations where insecurity prevents actors to safely access conflict-affected communities. Multiple forms of release are then supported, both formal and informal, to maximise the chances of release.

Gender-sensitive programming is essential to identify and release girls and to not reinforce gender inequalities. Girls, particularly those in support roles, are often considered a vulnerable group by humanitarian actors. However, they do not attract the same level of attention or targeting for assistance.

Lessons learnt on formal release

The military- or security-focused approach of traditional DDR programmes has been a major obstacle to girls' release,[139] with the number of girls released through formal processes generally very low. For decades, formal DDR programmes excluded girls and boys who were not taking part in active fighting. In Sierra Leone and East Timor, women and girls without a gun could not access DDR programmes as initially the *one-person-one-weapon* approach was applied. This approach was later changed to a collective approach based on a list of former combatants provided by commanders. Despite this change, again, women and girls were rarely part of the lists since they mainly fulfilled support roles and commanders did not consider them as associated with the group.[140] In numerous contexts, field actors did not attempt to identify girls through formal demobilisation process as they did not receive reports of girls' association. Based on available data, girls represent 6 to 50%[141] of the children associated with armed forces and armed groups, although only a fraction of these numbers are formally released and identified.

134   Paris Principles (2007)
135   United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (2005)
136   Coulter (2008)
137   Verhey (2004)
138   O'Neil & Van Broeckhoven (2018)
140   Bouta (2005)
141   Spellings (2008)

© UNICEF/JG Brouwer. *Former CAAFAG waiting to receive their reintegration kits with their children. South Sudan 2019*

Formal demobilisation process in the Republic of South Sudan

Until 2018, less than 1% of released children were girls. Officers assumed girls were with their relatives or were "only" playing supportive roles and were therefore protected. They did not expect girls to be combatants and did not consider that they could play other roles. Protection actors began identifying girls when some of them escaped and when child protection and gender-based violence partners were fully engaged in the demobilisation process. The presence of military child protection focal points in DDR teams has contributed to significantly increase the number of girls and boys demobilised. They play a critical role, as military officials are more respected by armed actors than civilians. They can better convey messages on child rights, particularly about the need to release girls. On a few occasions, soldiers from armed groups tried to hide girls, pretending they were their children or their wives. Child protection focal points raised the issue with the armed group's senior commanders. Female officers could then access girls, build trust with them and explain their rights and why the armed group had been demobilised.

This strategy led to an increase in the number of girls formally released from 1% to 35% in 2018 in Yambio.

UNICEF South Sudan (2019)

At cantonment sites, DDR authorities can identify girls and boys, although without a dedicated women and girls unit, very few are demobilised through that process. Commanders tend to hide girls as they consider them to be possessions. During visits to the barracks, they claim girls are their dependants – their daughters or their wives – and they do not inform them of the possibility of release. Moreover, some girls do not consider themselves as "child soldiers" or even as children, but as wives, and as a result do not believe they can benefit from demobilisation programmes. In some contexts, there is a strong social and cultural belief that a girl should remain with her sexual partner, whether she consented to the relationship or not.[142] Others do not want to be released, particularly if they have children born during their association. Some successful approaches such as in South Sudan (see the case study) highlighted the pivotal role that trained military child protection focal points can play in negotiating the release of girls. They have more authority and credibility than actors from the civil society. The handover protocols of CAAFAG (including girls) from AFAG to child protection actors should be gender-sensitive and consider the recommendations listed above.

Engagement of community leaders who have access to armed groups recruiting children may also contribute to the formal release of children. In DRC, CAR and South Sudan, local community-level structures, including child protection networks, have been instrumental in girls exiting armed groups by providing information and spreading the message that their families were waiting for them. In Sierra Leone, video messages from parents were recorded in which they asked girls to come home. This approach is key in context where stigma is high.[143]

Key recommendations: formal release

Always assume that AFAG have recruited girls otherwise one could miss an opportunity to identify them. The release of girls should be included in all negotiations with armed forces and armed groups

Advocate for the unconditional release of children, including girls, at all phases of conflict irrespective of the presence of a peace agreement or other negotiated settlement

Conduct a context analysis to analyse the barriers GAAFAGs face in accessing formal DDR programmes and processes

Prohibit criteria in DDR programmes which require no-weapon-no-entry for children to participate

Work with military officials and the Ministry of Defence to issue specific military instructions to release girls and to reinforce the illegality of the involvement of girls and boys, regardless of their roles, based on the Paris Principles

Identify and train military men and women in child protection focal points in military units and DDR teams to interact with armed group leaders and train them on the specific needs of girls

Consider gender-transformative programmes for military personnel that shift harmful social norms such as small group workshops that give participants the knowledge and skills to influence gender and social norms[144]

At cantonment sites:

Conduct gender-sensitive outreach by child protection focal points to dependants of combatants to provide information and to give opportunities to girls to self-identify and be separated from the armed group, and referred to child protection and gender-based violence services[145]

Trained female-only personnel to provide health and reproductive health services, daycare for children, nutrition and healthcare for children[146]

Regulate men's access to the cantonment sites

Provide gender-sensitive non-food items such as dignity kit and baby kit tailored to individual needs, and take steps to prevent children from being separated from their mothers[147]

Provide confidential health services such as nutrition and vaccination for children to serve as safe spaces for girls with children to self-identify

Train female personnel such as health professionals on how to handle sensitively disclosure of association and sexual abuse, and have social workers available on site

Organise group sessions that focus on women's and girls' value, their right to autonomy, choice, gender equality

Train social workers to use a girl-centred approach and best-interest principle, to inform girls on the services available to support their release, including their safety

When relevant, engage male and female community members who have access to armed groups

144 Alexander-Scott et al (2016)
145 Verhey (2004)
146 The Paris Principles (2007)
147 Ward & Stone (2018)

Lessons learnt on informal release

In situations of ongoing conflict, informal release is often the only way that girls can exit AFAG. Even in situations where a formal release process is under way, it may remain the preferred mode for girls to end their association to avoid social stigma. By their own means, girls return to their communities or to other locations where they tend to hide or blend in, and rarely seek reintegration services. Girls can exit through escape, when they are informally released or sent back to their communities due to sickness, pregnancy or other factors, or when they are abandoned by armed groups, after a defeat, for example. Exit through escape is not without risk. The girls who have the will to leave, often pushed by unbearable treatment, put their lives at risk.[148] In other contexts, girls do not have opportunities to leave armed groups. In Islamic State-controlled areas in Syria, the restrictions placed on women and girls did not allow them to move without a male guardian, which severely limited opportunities to seek help[149]

Identification of girls who have exited AFAG through informal means requires great care so as to avoid exposing them to further harm. Girls may be at risk of arrest by government forces if they are identified and labelled as ex-GAAFAG; they can be a target of retaliation by other armed groups or exposed to abduction if they escaped. They can also lose the social reintegration benefits they may have patiently gained if their association is revealed.

Community-based mechanisms established in conflict-affected communities may have the potential to contribute to safely identifying girls who exit AFAG and who return to or enter new communities. Field actors can be trained to try to sensitively document and refer girls to child protection actors to receive assistance. In contexts where a specific ethnic group is targeted, such as the Yazidi population in Iraq, the community can organise itself to keep track of who has returned and who is still missing.[150] In Somalia, a traditional women and girls solidarity network helped to identify ex-GAAFAG.[151] However, a community-based approach should be adapted in communities where there are stigmas or risks, including working with respected figures and community allies to safely identify girls. Nevertheless, girls should have access to all services, whether they formally disclose their association to armed groups or not.

Non-targeted service provision is a preferred option to specific targeting of GAAFAG. Humanitarian actors are encouraged to adopt a gender-sensitive approach through the provision of services to all vulnerable girls in affected communities. They should ensure that the personnel delivering these services are female only, and that they are trained on how to sensitively deliver services to girls. This includes how to handle disclosure of sexual abuse, an understanding of their specific needs without further victimising them, how to empower girls to build on any skills they learned during the period of association, and to support them with necessary services, all while ensuring confidentiality.

Services may include gender-sensitive health and reproductive health, psychosocial support and mental health, youth clubs with gender-segregated groups if relevant culturally, providing cultural, educational and spiritual activities, livelihood training and formal and informal education. Services targeting child mothers, and single mothers[152] such as breastfeeding programmes and parenting for adolescent mothers have been identified as successful entry points to sensitively identify GAAFAG. Women's associations and girls' safe spaces are also useful means to reach GAAFAG.

Trusted and trained service providers can identify girls in contexts where girls are engaged in AFAG while still living in their communities. In this case, girls' empowerment programmes that increase their self-confidence and develop their leadership skills can contribute to disclosure. Trusted teachers familiar with community dynamics and who have identified signs of recruitment among their pupils, can safely identify and refer girls to child protection actors, following their consent.[153]

Key recommendations: informal release

Conduct a thorough gender analysis involving girls, on the risks they may be exposed to upon their exit or if they are identified within their communities as ex-GAAFAG, and identify mitigation measures

Implement gender-sensitive identification strategies, taking into account the findings from the gender analysis, to avoid reinforcing gender inequalities

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148   Information collected from key informants
149   Ibid
150   Information collected from key informants
151   Ibid
152   UNICEF Democratic Republic of the Congo (2011)
153   Information collected from key informants

Based on the findings from a context-specific gender analysis, the following approaches can be considered.

Community-level approach

Establish community-level mechanisms to safely identify girls who have informally exited AFAG

Train community actors to sensitively and confidentially document and refer girls to child protection actors to receive assistance

Consider the level of stigma and risk in a particular community and adapt the community-level approach with the involvement of allies in the communities such as community leaders or role models

Prepare the families and disseminate the message that the girls will be welcome back home

Non-targeted service provision

Adopt a broad gender-sensitive approach by providing services to all vulnerable girls in affected communities, rather than former GAAFAG

Train female personnel on how to sensitively and confidentially deliver services to girls

Engage and train women's associations and girls' safe spaces to safely identify and refer GAAFAG

Involve teachers familiar with community dynamics and who have identified signs of recruitment among their pupils to safely identify and refer girls to child protection actors, following their consent

Reintegration

Key considerations

Upon their return to their communities of origin or to other communities where they feel safe, girls face numerous challenges. The level of community acceptance and resilience varies significantly based on various factors, including the girl's actual or perceived exposure to violence and abuse, the role she may have played during the period of association, the way she was recruited and released, the safety of the girl in the community and how the families welcome them back.

The level of stigma is fundamentally different for girls. It lasts longer, it is more severe, and it is more difficult to reduce than for boys.[154] This is often because of the assumption, whether confirmed or not, that the girls have "known men" and have lost their virginity. As a result, they may be perceived as less marriageable, and as having "lost their value",[155] particularly in societies where virginity is a requirement to get married. The presence of a child conceived during the period of association, particularly if the father is considered as an "enemy", increases the likelihood of discrimination and rejection from the family and the community.[156] Their "militarised" behaviour or symptoms of distress such as depression or dissociation can be misunderstood by the family and community and lead to exclusion.[157] Social stigmatisation may have also an impact on their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing.[158] Girls who have identities as soldiers may find it difficult to transition to a civilian identity, particularly if they are unable to perform expected roles such as having money and being a good wife and mother. Girls who have participated in hostilities, who had leadership or management responsibilities, may find it difficult to return to gender-stereotyped roles and to assimilate back into a traditional society.[159]

Lessons learnt on approaches to facilitate reintegration

Gender analysis

Conducting a gender analysis has been highlighted by field practitioners as a requirement at all steps of the process, including for the reintegration of GAAFAG. When planning for reintegration, the gender analysis should focus on the factors that will influence girls' reintegration. This includes the conditions of return, formal versus informal release, their experience during the period of association, if they have children, disabilities, and the stigma they may face at family, community and societal levels. The process of reintegration is rooted in the cultural, political and socioeconomic organisation and functioning of a society.[160] Based on the findings of the gender analysis, field practitioners can develop a gender-sensitive reintegration strategy, likely taking into account discrete, flexible and non-formal reintegration processes, that can be tailored to individual needs and experiences rather than one-size-fits-all programmes.[161]

> **Key recommendations: gender analysis**
>
> All reintegration programmes for girls should be based on a thorough gender analysis to avoid doing harm and to identify ways to alleviate barriers to access services

Participation and agency of girls

Field actors rarely involve adolescents and youth in the design of CAAFAG programmes. Girls and boys tend to be considered as passive subjects, victims of recruitment, rather than as partners and actors in their own protection and development. Including the voices of girls in project design will promote their dignity and empowerment and allow the development of programmes that respond to their needs and concerns.[162] The concept of reintegration is usually based on Western concepts which may not resonate with culturally based understanding of war-related events. Girls actively interpret and give a meaning to their experiences of association and reintegration and should be consulted to inform the design of reintegration programmes.[163]

Girls can also be involved through regular feedback or accountability mechanisms to raise unintended harmful consequences of humanitarian programming. The information collected should then inform the revision of programmes and support access to services, prevention and mitigation measures.[164]

> **Involvement of ex-GAAFAG in the design of reintegration indicators**
>
> In Sierra Leone, a research team used the participative ranking method developed by Columbia University to identify a successful reintegration from the perspective of GAAFAG. The method associates key principles of focus group approach and participatory appraisal activities.
>
> During focus-group discussions the facilitators ask the participants for their interpretation of what it meant for a girl to be successfully reintegrated. A similar exercise was done with indicators of "poor" reintegration. Thus, girls identified emotional and financial support from their family as the most important indicator of "good reintegration" and no income-generating activities as the most important indicator of "poor" reintegration.
>
> *Stark et al (2009)*

154 Ager et al (2011)
155 De la Soudière (2017)
156 Monguno et al (2016)
157 Information collected from key informants
158 Betancourt et al (2010)
159 Barth (2002)

160 Tonheim (2017)
161 Wessells (2007)
162 McKay et al (2004)
163 Stark et al (2009)
164 Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (2019)

Peer-to-peer support is often underused and yet highly valuable in contexts where it is safe to do so. Empowering former GAAFAG who have successfully reintegrated to mentor or support other girls can be instrumental in the success of their reintegration.

The participation of girls requires them to have the skills and confidence to meaningfully participate. In contexts where girls (and boys) have not been asked their opinion, you may need to build their skills and reflexes to voice their opinions. It is essential to take the time to build trust, consider their attention span, offer a variety of means of expression, such as artistic or musical expression, be flexible and adjust to their needs, and to share the findings back to the participants.[165]

Key recommendations: participation of girls

Consult ex-GAAFAG before the start of the project to identify the challenges they face upon their return, what is helping them, the criteria they consider to define successful reintegration, and the support they need, to inform the design of reintegration programmes

Conduct consultations through focus-group discussions, mini workshops and online poll (if relevant), and creative exercises

Facilitate consultations with girls by trained women, in confidential safe spaces using tailored questions for girls

Promote a peer-to-peer approach, empowering former GAAFAG to be role models for girls who have recently exited AFAG

Train women facilitators on how to handle sensitively unexpected disclosures of violence and abuse, how to maintain confidentiality and how to refer safely

Avoid raising sensitive issues such as sexual abuse to discourage girls from disclosing personal experiences in group settings and without a professional caseworker present

Set up feedback and accountability mechanisms that allow access for girls in your context to provide ongoing feedback on unintended harmful consequences of the intervention

Socio-ecological approach

A reintegration programme should be holistic and consider a socio-ecological approach that interconnects individual, family, peer group, school and community-level approaches. The reintegration process is inherently a relational, social and reciprocal process in which individual change and social change intertwine. Field practitioners should assess and address individuals' needs as well as their family, community and societal environment.

Case management

Case management is an approach for addressing the needs of an individual child at risk of harm or who has been harmed. The child and his/her family are supported by a caseworker through direct support and referrals.[166] Field actors have highlighted how case management allows them to effectively identify the needs of individual girls and to discreetly provide support to girls in need and reduce the stigma associated to reintegration programmes. However, as with other services, this approach is more helpful if it is provided to address multiple protection issues in conflict-affected communities rather than specifically targeting and potentially further stigmatising GAAFAG. Field actors can holistically assess the situation of girls and their family

situations, taking into account individual protective and risk factors, in order to tailor the response to their needs, while not doing further harm. They should consider the recommendations on reintegration (See Lessons learnt on key outcomes expected from the reintegration process, p26) to develop a holistic response plan.

Using a case-management approach will contribute to the coordination of services by one focal point (the caseworker) for the child, the family and the service providers, increasing confidentiality and reducing the risk of re-traumatisation. The information collected by caseworkers throughout the case-management process can also be aggregated to analyse trends and inform programme design.

Through this approach, caseworkers are not only able to identify the vulnerabilities of girls, but also to empower them and support their wellbeing and resilience. Caseworkers can leverage each girl's strengths including any skills they gained before and during the period of association, their individual and collective agency and the coping skills they developed.

Case management should be coupled with collective- and community-level intervention, however large, one-size-fits-all reintegration programmes for girls and boys, that deny their agency and their individual needs, may increase

165 United Nations University. Centre for Policy Research – War Child (2019)

166 The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019)

challenges to their reintegration.

The risk of _over-victimising_ GAAFAG as passive victims of recruitment was highlighted by key informants. It is critical to acknowledge girls' unique experiences and their agency in the decision to join the AFAG, if relevant. Caseworkers who build trust and empower girls increase the chances of a successful reintegration.

The training of any staff member providing full child protection case-management services for GAAFAG is key, particularly in case management for child protection and for gender-based violence (GBV), including Caring for Child Survivors. A supervision mechanism for caseworkers must be in place to support caseworkers in handling difficult cases and to monitor case-management quality.

Based on research, several protective and risk factors have been identified that influence the reintegration process.[167]

Protective factors Pre-return	Risk factors Pre-return
Pre-return	**Pre-return**
• Recruitment by an armed group or armed force supported by the community or that is perceived as a "winner"	• Recruitment by an armed force or group perceived as the enemy or that has "lost" the war
• Contact with the family during the period of association	• Sexual abuse, rape, being married to a combatant
• Friendships with other GAAFAG	• Poor relationships with caregivers prior to enrolment, history of domestic violence and abuse
• Being recruited with a sibling or a family member	• Participation in hostilities
• Short period of association	• Sense of loss of control over their lives
• Perception that it was an empowering experience	• Long period of time in the group (although not in all contexts)
	• Witnessing beating or torture, violent death, being forced to kill, including family members
	• Permanent wound or injury
	• Community fear and anger
Upon return	**Upon return**
• Community and family acceptance	• Rejection from the family or loss of caregivers/ parents
• Having a source of income	• Rejection from the community
• Caring biological parents	• Poverty
• Supportive partner	• Aggressive and violent behaviour as symptoms of distress
• Supportive peer network, being in contact with other GAAFAG	• Coming back as the mother of children
• Opportunities for education	• Isolation from peers
• Cultural supports (eg, conduct of spiritual rituals)	

Key recommendations: case management

Train and support caseworkers in child protection case management, caring for child survivors, and on the specific challenges and needs of GAAFAG, based on the gender analysis

Acknowledge the individual agency of girls in their decision to join the group if relevant, their collective agency, and maximise the positive skills they learned during and after the period of association

Empower girls to take informed and safe decisions for their lives and to increase their resilience

Identify and build on protective factors to mitigate risk factors

166   Betancourt (2008)

Lessons learnt on key outcomes expected from the reintegration process

Safety and care

The safety of girls after their release is an essential part of their reintegration and of their wellbeing. In contexts where girls are at risk of re-recruitment by AFAG, or at risk of arrest, they may not feel safe in their community of origin. Alternative care and legal support may be necessary to protect them from harm and to enhance their sense of safety.

Alternative care

Most girls who exit AFAG on their own and return directly to their community do not need alternative care. Girls who are already reunited with their families after leaving the AFAG should not be separated from their caregivers and placed in alternative care to access reintegration services.

In some cases, girls may need alternative care, however field practitioners should discuss with the girls the options available, their best interests and their wishes before taking a decision.

Foster families or kinship care is the preferred alternative care option based on the field research, although in some cases, Interim Care Centres (ICC) are necessary. This may be when foster families, kinship care or independent living are not available, are not in the best interests of the child for medical reasons, for example, or with the expectation of large numbers of girls released at once. In DRC, anecdotal evidence from ex-GAAFAG, and from humanitarian actors, shows that girls who went through foster families reintegrated better in their families than those who went to a transit centre.

The placement of at least two girls in one foster family has been identified by key informants as a key approach to enhance their sense of protection and form a peer support group, while experience has shown that girls placed individually in a foster family take more time to settle. Placement with another girl also seems to enhance the collective agency that girls may have experienced during the period of association. Partnerships with local girls' clubs or women's associations from the community can also enhance their reintegration into civil life.[168]

Independent living arrangements can also be considered in contexts where it is culturally appropriate, with two or three older adolescent girls in one accommodation, preferably ex-GAAFAG who know each other, or girls who have children. Identify and train a respected woman from the community who lives nearby as a mentor to provide support to the girls and regular monitoring.

Girls going through an ICC can be more easily identified as ex-GAAFAG and stigmatised and thus jeopardise their reintegration. In contexts with high insecurity, girls concentrated in ICCs may be exposed to risk of abduction by armed groups.[169] It is recommended to include multiple protection concerns in ICC such as unaccompanied girls, survivors of sexual violence in addition to GAAFAG in order to prevent stigmatisation, unless this approach would expose girls to further risks.[170]

Setting up a child-friendly and confidential reporting mechanism is critical in all forms of alternative care to allow girls to report any abuse, exploitation or any other concerns. In addition, setting up a safety plan with each girl will mitigate risks of violence, abuse and exploitation.

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168 Betancourt (2008)
169 Information collected from key informants
170 Ibid

Key recommendations: foster care and kinship care

Place at least two girls in one foster family to enhance their sense of protection and form a peer support group

Preparation and appropriate matching of the girl to the foster family

Key recommendations: supported independent living

Independent living should be considered only in contexts where it is culturally appropriate for older adolescent girls to live on their own, and where there are no security risks

Consider existing groups of friends to enhance peer network and collective agency

Key recommendations: ICC

ICC should be only considered in locations where foster families, kinship care or independent living for ex-GAAFAG are not available, are not in the best interests of the child, or with the expectation of large numbers of girls released at once

Do not require girls to transit through an ICC as a condition of accessing reintegration services

Diversify protection concerns in the ICC to prevent stigmatisation of GAAFAG, unless this approach would expose girls to further risks

Train ICC personnel on child protection, the inclusion of children with disabilities, child safeguarding, GBV and parenting skills adapted to the specific needs of GAAFAG

Train ICC personnel including security guards, cooks and cleaners on child protection and confidentiality, and monitor adherence to the signed Code of Conduct

Address the needs of girls with children, including establishing additional safety measures for the security of toddlers, adapted sleeping arrangements and a playground space with toys

Accommodate the needs of girls with disabilities through the adaptation of the physical environment to their specific needs such as visual, hearing and mobility impairments

Directly provide or invite professionals to deliver specialised services such as sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, vaccination, mental health and psychosocial support at the ICC

Useful resources

Guidelines

- United Nations (2010) *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*
- The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2019) *The Standard 19 on Alternative Care of The Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*
- Unaccompanied and Separated Children Working Group (2013) *The Alternative Care in Emergencies Toolkit*

Legal support

Securing civil documentation may enhance a girl's sense of safety and ability to move freely such as an exit certificate, a personal ID, a birth certificate, a marriage or divorce certificate. In some countries a release certificate is a requirement to access reintegration services. However, this approach is contrary to a child's right to immediate and unconditional release and reintegration and may be a disincentive for girls to seek assistance. It may also lead to other delays in accessing services and it may increase the risk of stigmatisation and discrimination of girls in their communities.

Legal support to children associated with Islamic State in Iraq

In Iraq, until 2019 Heartland Alliance International provided legal assistance to girls and boys suspected of affiliation with Islamic State. Most girls were arrested due to their status as wives, daughters or sisters of alleged Islamic State fighters. A team of two female lawyers conducted interviews with girls, provided legal consultation and legal representation at the juvenile court in Ninewa. Their intervention contributed to the release of 80 girls and boys and the reductions of sentences to one year of detention. They also provided psychosocial support, built a hall for recreational activities and a shed for family visits at the detention centre. After the release of children, the organisation monitored the reintegration of adolescents through psychosocial and legal support as well as referral to health and education actors.

Legal assistance may also be provided to girls in contact with the justice system as alleged offenders, victims or witnesses. Legal assistance should be flexible and reflect changing needs over time. Gender-sensitive legal assistance can support girls to mitigate biased or discriminatory treatments within the justice system. It may also lead to improvements in the conditions of detention if they fail to meet the minimum legal standard or if girls are at risk of being tortured to collect military information. When deprived of their liberty, girls are at higher risk of being subjected to sexual and gender-based violence.[171]

Lawyers and legal assistants should be trained in humanitarian law, international norms and treaties and national legal legislation in relation to juvenile justice, children associated with armed forces and armed groups and terrorism-related laws if relevant.

Field practitioners should apply the dual status of victims and perpetrator and girls (and boys) should be primarily treated as victims and not only as perpetrators. A specific jurisdiction for children should consider the gender specificities of GAAFAG. Gender-sensitive investigative and interview techniques must be in place and supervised as well as gender-sensitive victim and witness protection frameworks. Ongoing monitoring of impact should be conducted, including potential collateral effect on children and secondary victimisation risks.[172]

Key recommendations: legal support

Provide support to girls to access civil documentation such as birth certificates for themselves and their children, identity documents, or marriage certificates to register the birth of their children in some contexts

Provide directly, or refer to, legal service providers in order to assist girls who may be at risk or in contact with the law, as offenders, witnesses or victims, and explain the implications of their testimony

Train lawyers and legal assistants on humanitarian law, international norms and treaties and national legal legislation in relation to access to justice, children associated with armed forces and armed groups and terrorism-related laws if relevant

Useful resources

Training resources

- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2017), *Handbook on Children recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The role of the Justice System*

- United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, (2011) *Working paper No. 3, Children and justice during the aftermath of armed conflict* UNICEF

- Terre des hommes (Tdh) (2020), *Access to Justice for Children and Youth in Counter-Terrorism Contexts*

- Terre des hommes (Tdh) (2020) *Give me a chance, but a real one. How to improve the reintegration of children in conflict with the law in Middle East and North Africa*

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171 UN Committee Against Torture (2008)

172 Terre des hommes (2020)

© UNICEF/UN0337577/Htet. *Children leave together with their family after the Ceremony on the Handover of Discharged Minor to Parents or Guardians at No1 Military Transit Center in Yangon.*

Social reintegration

Based on the field research and the desk review, reintegration programmes tend to focus exclusively on individual psychological and economic reintegration to the detriment of social reintegration.[173] Yet social reintegration is often a prerequisite to ensure girls' psychosocial wellbeing and economic independence. Based on lessons learnt, field actors have identified key strategies to enhance social reintegration including the preparation of and support to the family, education and life-skills opportunities, their participation in community life and the engagement of community members.

Preparation of and support for the family

The family plays an essential role in the success of the reintegration process, however family members not responding in a caring manner may be particularly detrimental. Research in Sierra Leone,[174] El Salvador,[175] Uganda,[176] Nepal[177] and South Sudan[178] has demonstrated that support from family members is among the most important protective factors in the psychosocial adjustment

and mental health of returned CAAFAG. The presence of family and a supportive attitude upon the return of the girl is a determinant in the reintegration process. Feeling loved, cared for and protected gives girls an overall sense of emotional safety.[179] Rejection and stigmatisation from the family, and the denial of love and care by caregivers seems to have a particularly detrimental effect with deep emotional suffering. Repairing a relationship with caregivers affected by fear, judgement and mistrust is a challenging process that requires family mediation and or gender-responsive parenting skills interventions to avoid victim blaming. Research suggests that weak family ties are often associated with recidivism.[180] Re-establishing social ties with families is probably "the main guarantee for the sustainability" of the reintegration process.[181] The possibility of being reintegrated directly with their caregivers instead of distant relatives or interim care was found to be a determinant factor.[182]

The preparation of the family and partner can reduce the discrimination that girls may face upon their return.[183] Caregivers should be prepared to meet a new person who has been affected by her experience, and welcome her with

173   Tonheim (2017)
174   Betancourt et al (2005)
175   Santacruz (2002)
176   Annan et al (2006)
177   Medeiros et al (2020)
178   UNICEF (2019)
179   Medeiros et al (2020)
180   Kaplan & Nussio (2016)
181   Özerdem (2012)
182   Betancourt (2008)
183   Monguno et al (2016)
184   Information collected from key informants

her differences, particularly if she returns with a child born of sexual violence and outside wedlock. The longer the girls have been away without any contact with her family, the more preparation of the family is required. Support for parents who have been arrested due to the recruitment of their child may be adapted to prevent rejection.[184]

Similarly, girls who were in an intimate relationship before their recruitment need support to rebuild trust with their partner. A caring and understanding partner significantly influences the success of reintegration. Individual and collective psychosocial support for their partners is necessary where both the partner and the girl's concerns and fears are listened to, acknowledged and addressed. This support can be given by

a caseworker trained in psychosocial support or by supportive community leaders if culturally appropriate.[185]

Parenting skills programmes, adapted to the needs of GAAFAG, can improve family acceptance. The programme should include sessions such as communication skills, empathy, psycho-education on adolescent brain development and psychosocial needs of girls, how to positively support adolescent girls' decision-making and an understanding of their experience of association with AFAG. **Psychosocial support** can be extended to family members, and family mediation can support the social reintegration of ex-GAAFAG.

Key recommendations: preparation and support for the family

Ahead of the reunification and reintegration of the girls, caseworkers should work with caregivers and family members to discuss their hopes and concerns, identify and address challenges and barriers to a successful reintegration, and leverage resources they may already have

Re-establish social ties with family through family mediation and gender-responsive parenting skills interventions to avoid victim blaming, and shift the social value of girls

Work with partners to rebuild trust and promote a caring relationship through gender-transformative individual and group discussions and psychosocial support sessions

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Education

Formal and non-formal education contributes to mitigating the negative psychological impact of conflict[186] and supports resiliency of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. It helps to bring the GAAFAG back into civilian community life and it is often one of the highest priorities of the girls. Education is, in most contexts, also a way to prevent (re)recruitment. The lack of education opportunities and the drop in school attendance for girls when they reach secondary education are among the risk factors of recruitment.[187] In some contexts such as DRC and South Sudan, ex-GAAFAG have identified completing the formal and non-formal education cycle as a way to regain their lost social value. In DRC, Child Protection Committees have initiated literacy activities for vulnerable girls, including ex-GAAFAG. Educational attainment contributes to breaking social isolation, developing a positive identity and enhancing their sense of self-worth.[188]

Education programmes should not only target ex-GAAFAG, but all vulnerable girls in conflict-affected communities to avoid further stigmatisation and creating an incentive to join AFAG. Education programmes can also include rehabilitation of community school buildings and furniture, the payment and training of teachers, the provision of school materials and the support of school governance and management in lieu of payment of individual school fees, as this can be a more sustainable

way of supporting girls' education and reintegration.[189] This contributes to support for the entire community and avoids singling out and possibly stigmatising girls. A complementary approach is to collaborate with the Ministry of Education to enhance education opportunities in remote locations, to improve the quality of education and facilitate girls' access. This is also a more sustainable approach to the payment of individual school fees. Education programmes should take into consideration the specific needs of GAAFAG and other vulnerable girls such as adaptation to girls who are mothers.

Support to individual children can include school fees, school materials and transportation but care should be taken not to provide incentives for children to join AFAG as a way to obtain access to these supports. Education can be a powerful tool to facilitate reintegration of girls, but only if the school environment is safe and inclusive and if the teachers are sensitive to their needs.

Increasing school safety and a girl-friendly environment are essential to prevent recruitment in school and to facilitate access to girls. It includes menstrual hygiene management at school and the prevention and mitigation of sexual violence and harassment. This can be done through establishing a reporting mechanism and code of conduct for school personnel and children, conducting a safety assessment of the school with girls and boys, and putting in place a risk-mitigation plan with pupils

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185 Monguno et al (2016)
186 Windrop & Kirk (2015)
187 Information collected from key informant

188 De la Soudière (2017)
189 International Rescue Committee (2019)
190 Ibid

and school personnel.[190] Teachers can also be trained in gender-responsive pedagogies and teaching methods to promote gender equality and girls' empowerment and in mental health and psychosocial needs of girls affected by conflict. School administration should ban all weapons at school, control access to the school facilities, and establish evacuation plans and protocols.

Girls with disabilities are at additional risk of discrimination at school and in accessing education. GAAFAG may have impairments such as mobility impairment, but also hearing and vision impairments that are not as visible. Placing girls with vision and hearing impairment at the front of the classroom can help them better follow the lessons. Using visual aids with a strong colour contrast can also benefit some girls. Adaptation of the physical environment of the school, such as a school pathway cleared of hazards, large doors and enough lighting will support all children attending school.

Teachers who are not sensitive to the needs of girls, particularly GAAFAG and girls with disabilities, can reinforce discrimination and stigmatisation at school and expose girls to further abuse. Teachers should be trained to provide a safe and conducive learning environment at school for girls and boys affected by conflict. Their training can include positive teaching techniques, enabling emotional and social support, inclusion of children with disabilities, an understanding of the psychological needs of children affected by conflict, GBV, and how to reduce gender inequalities at school. Addressing the education needs of GAAFAG and other vulnerable and conflict-affected children is a collective effort. It is crucial to involve education-sector key stakeholders as well as community leaders, community-level organisations, teachers and the girls themselves.

Key recommendations: education

Promote girls' education so they can regain their social value through formal and informal education programmes such as accelerated learning programmes, catch-up classes, or basic literacy and numeracy classes

Consider combining education with livelihood opportunities to address their desire to regain social value and to provide for their families

Consider providing economic support to caregivers, including through cash transfer, to promote girls' education

Do not focus only on GAAFAG, but include other vulnerable girls in their community

Consider school rehabilitation or payment of teachers in lieu of school fees for GAAFAG

Consider childcare for adolescent mothers

Ensure a safe environment at school for girls through safety assessment, risk mitigation plan and training of teachers in gender-response teaching methodologies, positive discipline, inclusion of children with disabilities and on understanding the psychological needs of children affected by conflict

Useful resources

Training

- International Rescue Committee (2011) *Creating Healing Classrooms. A Multimedia Teacher Training Resource*

- USAID (2009) *Teacher Training Manual on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response: Doorways III*

Tools

- USAID (2013) *Checklist for Conflict Sensitivity in Education Programs*

Guidance

- UNESCO. International Institute for Educational planning. 2010 *Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction* Chapter 25, p103. Former Child Soldier

- UN Women (2016) *Global Guidance on School-Related Gender-Based Violence*

Girls' empowerment

Field practitioners have implemented girls' empowerment programmes for ex-GAAFAG and vulnerable girls with the aim of facilitating the reintegration of girls and promoting their resilience.

Life-skills sessions aim to build girls' knowledge and skills on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, GBV, civic education, positive communication, decision-making, emotions regulation, inter-personal relationships, leadership, conflict management and peace-building. Where relevant, sessions on HIV should aim to reduce HIV risk behaviours and involve local organisations and groups of young people engaged in HIV prevention.

Peer-to-peer support and mentoring from older girls or ex-GAAFAG has shown a positive impact on the psychosocial recovery and the resilience of both girls who recently exited AFAG and those who play the mentorship role. Experience has shown that actual participation such as organising activities for other girls can have a greater impact in psychosocial recovery than being a participant. They heal both themselves and others.[191]

The involvement of local women's organisations with expertise in supporting vulnerable girls could be useful. These programmes should be gender specific and implemented by female facilitators for all girls affected by conflict. Through life-skills sessions, girls will regain control over their life, challenge patriarchy, build their self-esteem and confidence, enhance collective agency and be equipped with positive coping strategies. It is also a way to promote the skills they learned during their association, such as leadership, communication and logistic skills.[192]

Programmes that build girls' self-confidence through empowerment and life-skills sessions such as girls' clubs or youth clubs have contributed to improve their psychosocial wellbeing. In addition, gender-sensitive cultural, sport, artistic, or any other recreational activities for girls, contributed to boost their self-confidence, their sense of belonging and their sense of self-worth. In Nigeria, ex-GAAFAG led a radio programme featuring drama, debates and newsreading, implemented by Search for Common Ground. Girls learned new communication skills and they gained confidence in talking to a wide audience.

Key recommendations: education

Implement girls' empowerment programmes for vulnerable girls, including GAAFAG, focusing on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, GBV, civic education, positive communication, decision-making, emotions regulation, inter-personal relationships, leadership, conflict management and peace-building

Engage local women's associations and train their facilitators in girls' empowerment programmes

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Useful resources

Life skills curricula

- International Rescue Committee (2018) *Girl Shine Life skills curriculum. Empowering Adolescent Girls in Humanitarian Settings*
- International Rescue Committee (2019) *Supporting Adolescents and their Families in Emergencies* (SAFE) with specific sessions for girls
- UNFPA-UNICEF(2016) *Adolescent Girls Toolkit: Iraq*
- Save the Children (2015) *Youth Resilience Programme*

Guidance

- UNESCO. International Institute for Educational planning. 2010 *Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction* Chapter 25, p103. Former Child Soldier
- Plan International (2020) *Adolescent Programming Toolkit. Guidance and tools for adolescent programming and girls' empowerment in crisis settings*

Engagement of community members

Community engagement is sometimes treated as a tick-box, whereas meaningful community engagement and support are essential components of successful reintegration.

The identification of allies in the community such as religious leaders, local chiefs, traditional community leaders, women and youth leaders who have the power to influence acceptance of girls, can contribute to girls' successful reintegration. Community-level organisations can facilitate family mediation and promote their reintegration in giving

191 Information collected from key informant

192 190 Ibid

them access to cultural and spiritual events. In every community, a stakeholder analysis and a social mapping exercise will help to identify key "influencers" who are well respected, as well as existing support networks who can influence and promote community acceptance of girls and shift social norms while respecting confidentiality. No identifiable information about girls should be shared with community members without the consent of the girl. Some organisations such as International Alert in Nigeria have trained community leaders to organise dialogues on conflict resolution. An evaluation highlighted the positive impact on community acceptance of ex-GAAFAG and their children, the wide reach and the sustainability of the intervention.[193] However, it is critical to empower other community leaders such as women and youth to avoid reinforcing existing patriarchal power dynamics. Child Protection Committees and local community-level organisations, whose members are trained in child protection and psychological first aid, are valuable resources. They can provide support to complement case management or to maintain support when such services are no longer provided. Community volunteers can be trained as supportive listeners who regularly visit the girls, help them to problem-solve and engage other community actors as needed.[194] Girls reported that regular visits helped them break their sense of isolation and feeling of shame, and the acknowledgement of their experience contributed to ease their emotional burden.[195]

Field actors can encourage girls to attend community events, participate in community actions such as cleaning days, or volunteer at a local NGO. Finding a meaningful purpose for their life is an effective coping strategy. Cultural, ideological and spiritual resources play an important role in their resilience and reintegration.[196]

Drama-play by GAAFAG

In Uganda, Sierra Leone and Liberia, a participatory study has involved girls with children who were associated with AFAG to understand the challenges they face in their reintegration. One of the main issues highlighted was the rejection from the community. The study allowed girls to implement a small project as a group to facilitate their reintegration. Some groups started a collective income-generating activity with land provided by the committee. Some other groups decided to role-play a drama that highlighted how community members treated them upon their return, and the isolation they faced. Across all groups, girls reported behaviour change of community members towards them: they were coming forward more easily to talk to them.

Worthen et al (2011)

Mobilisation of religious leaders, particularly in locations where they are highly respected, has led to improve the sense of self-worth of girls and their community acceptance. In Iraq, Islamic State specifically targeted the Yazidi women and girls for sexual abuse and exploitation. Upon their return, girls were at risk of exclusion from the Yazidi society. Women's rights activists along with other human rights actors actively advocated to the Yazidi Spiritual Council to welcome back women and girls kidnapped by Islamic State. In April 2014, a fatwa was issued by religious leaders that preserved the dignity and the protection of women and girl survivors of rape. They declared that they could be "religiously purified" and accepted since they were raped and enslaved against their will. Unfortunately, despite ongoing advocacy, the fatwa was not extended to their children born out of rape during their captivity.[197] In Nigeria, religious leaders actively advocated for the reintegration of girls. They encouraged the acceptance of girls and their children born during captivity, based on verses of the Quran.[198] In DRC, girls found relief and support in religion practice. The engagement of religious leaders was therefore instrumental in their reintegration.[199]

A radio drama series in Nigeria

In Nigeria, Search for Common Ground and UNICEF designed a radio programme using the edutainment approach, a combination of education and entertainment, to increase community acceptance of women and children formerly associated with non-state armed groups. The radio drama series depicted the life of CAAFAG, their difficulties in reintegrating back into their communities and the socioeconomic challenges they face. Additional issues were raised due to COVID-19, their dignity and issues of social cohesion. The episodes last 15 minutes and are aired every week on local FM radio in Borno State. A round-table with guest speakers follows each episode to further discuss issues raised during the series. Community members can call to ask questions and participate in the discussion. Feedback from participants in the round-tables highlighted a positive response from community members, caregivers and community leaders. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the radio programme contributes to behaviour change such as increased acceptance of girls going back to school.

Sensitisation of the community is often restricted to few people rather than a massive campaign due to the sensitivity of the topic. Successful approaches raise awareness of the mechanisms and risk factors that led girls and boys to enrol, what the children have gone through, the challenges they face during their reintegration and how community members can support them. These sessions should create a safe space for everyone to share their opinion and find solutions collectively. In some contexts, community members consider ex-GAAFAG

193   Manero (2019)
194   UNICEF South Sudan (2019)
195   De la Soudière (2017)

196   Gustavsson (2017)
199   Rohwerder (2019)

as the enemies and as perpetrators of violence, although they were forcefully recruited. Sensitisation sessions can demystify the status of GAAFAG, contribute to raising empathy, and highlight the role the community should play to welcome them back, without "over-victimising" the girls. Consider involving girls and boys in awareness-raising activities when it is safe to do so, such as through radio shows. In contexts where the girls are perceived as "heroes", it is equally important to avoid the glorification of girls and boys perceived as saviours as it can be an incentive to recruitment.

Key recommendations: education

Conduct a social mapping exercise in each location to identify the key influencers who will shift community social norms related to GAAFAG acceptance

Identify and promote existing local initiatives of allies such as religious leaders, chiefs of villages or women and youth leaders

Empower allies such as women-led and youth-led organisations to balance community power dynamics

Engage religious leaders to promote acceptance of girls through religious ceremonies, safe cleansing rituals and in issuing statements of acceptance such as a fatwa

Train community volunteers in psychological first aid, active listening and child protection to provide ongoing support and regular visits to the girls

Encourage girls to participate in community activities to meet with peers and break social isolation

Raise community awareness on the reintegration of GAAFAG through small group sessions, highlighting the mechanisms and risk factors to recruitment, the girls' experience, the challenges they face during their reintegration and how community members can support them

Consider various channels, such as radio talk-shows, radio drama shows or plays, as well as the involvement of ex-GAAFAG when it is safe to do so, and with the consent of the girls before their information is shared

Physical and mental health

Physical health

Health needs are not always taken into consideration, beyond urgent needs. However, the experience of girls during the period of association requires specific attention for their health needs, particularly in relation to sexual and reproductive health.

A medical assessment is critical for girls and their children as soon as they have exited armed groups. Some health concerns may not be visible and may emerge over time. The medical screening should include impairments, pathologies as a result of sexual abuse, nutrition, diseases, wounds and drug and alcohol dependency.[200] During the tracing of their families, and once reunified with their families, girls should be given access to health services delivered by trained professionals. Health needs should be part of the case-management plan and include referrals to appropriate health facilities and partners, including referrals to specialised services. Field practitioners ensure that medical personnel introduce all girls to the services provided and that access to medical services is free and voluntary. No girls are coerced to undergo medical screenings against their will and no virginity tests should be performed, which have been used in some contexts.

© UNICEF/UN0185840/Tremeau. *15 years old at the Interim Care Centre in Kananga. DRC. 2018*

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200   Monguno et al (2016)

Coordination with medical actors where the girls are reunited with their families is essential. Access to medical care is provided during the tracing of family members, however it is often more challenging once children have been reunited with their families, or if the girls have been informally released. There are few success stories of provision of medical support after reintegration in DRC, thanks to the coordination of medical actors who provided support to children with sexually transmitted diseases.[201]

The training of medical personnel should include how to handle disclosure of GBV, clinical care of rape for adolescents, confidentiality, age- and gender-appropriate communication skills and referral to child protection services for girls who self-disassociate.

Discretion and confidentiality are particularly of concern to unmarried girls when seeking help for sexual and reproductive health issues.[202] Field practitioners should put in place protocols and codes of conduct for all personnel involved in medical care to ensure confidentiality for the specific needs of GAAFAG, and data protection.

Medical vouchers are not recommended by some field practitioners as girls may need to explain the motive of their visit to multiple medical staff and receptionist before reaching a doctor.[203]

Setting up a mobile adolescent health team to provide medical services to all girls in conflict-affected communities once a week was found to be a promising practice to reach self-demobilised ex-GAAFAG, particularly if the health system has been damaged during the conflict. In addition, the training of a pool of doctors and nurses in multiple hospitals allows the coverage of wide geographic areas to refer girls.[204]

Key recommendations: physical health

Provide access to medical care for all girls for sexual and reproductive health, antenatal care if relevant, nutrition, identification of impairments and dealing with addictions, including regular follow-up

Ensure that medical screening is voluntary and not coercive and that all information shared remains confidential

Train medical personnel on how to handle disclosure of GBV, clinical care of rape for adolescents, confidentiality, age- and gender-appropriate communication skills and referral to child protection services

Consider providing access to health for adolescents through a mobile clinic in communities affected by conflict

Train a pool of doctors and nurses in multiple hospitals

Useful resources

Guidelines

- World Health Organization (2017) *Responding to children and adolescents who have been sexually abused* WHO clinical guidelines

- World Health Organization (2020) *Clinical management of rape and intimate partner violence survivors*

Training

- Inter-Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crisis (2017) *Clinical management of Sexual Violence Survivors – Refresher Training Resources*

- Inter-Agency Working Group on Reproductive Health in Crises (2018) *Field manual*

Mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Mental health and psychosocial support should be provided through a layered approach from basic services to specialised services based on the levels of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) mental health pyramid of intervention,[205] from the moment of release and during the reintegration process.

Access to basic services and support from peers, family and community members, as well as humanitarian actors across all sectors treating girls with dignity, may contribute to their psychosocial wellbeing.[206]

Mental health and psychosocial interventions for adolescents affected by conflict are often not sufficiently tailored to their age and gender and do not take into

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201 Bodineau (2011)
202 Verhey (2004)
203 Ibid

204 Ibid
205 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007)

account cultural factors, gender social norms and discrimination. A study looking at Gaza, Liberia and Sri Lanka post-conflict contexts recommends identifying and integrating cultural and social determinants of adolescent girls' psychosocial wellbeing to achieve positive outcomes.[207] Understanding discriminatory gender norms, barriers to accessing services, mental and psychosocial vulnerabilities and existing services are critical to deliver age- and gender-sensitive programming.[208]

The power of collective approaches has been highlighted in multiple studies.[209] Encouraging girls to meet other GAAFAG has shown positive impact on their resilience. In CAR, Plan International has used a group reintegration approach which has demonstrated positive outcomes. Anecdotal evidence and feedback from the girls highlighted that group reintegration appears to have had a positive effect on the success of the reintegration. The girls could meet other girls who have similar experiences and form a support network in their community. The set-up of collective support mechanisms where girls can bond with each other to enhance their sense of belonging and collective identity has been highlighted as a promising practice. This lesson learnt is in line with findings from research on ex-GAAFAG in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Uganda.[210] The girls meet during regular sessions where trained facilitators acknowledge and validate their experience. In this way girls can express their feelings through various means such as art, drama, poems or photography, giving girls the ability to process their experience of violence. Experience has shown that the groups should not be too large, and the participants should remain in the same group to ensure enough trust between the girls.[211]

Peer mentors, as well as adult mentors, are another way of providing sustainable community-level support. Field actors have trained older girls or young women who have been formerly recruited or who have faced hardship and successfully overcome challenges as mentors and role models for newly released girls.

The sense of safety is a key element for adolescent girls to ensure their wellbeing. Girls returning to their homes may face abuse from family or community members. They may be at risk of re-recruitment by the armed group, at risk of arrest by armed forces or a target of retaliation by community members. Ensuring their safety at home and in their community is therefore a prerequisite for their mental and psychosocial wellbeing. This may imply family mediation through case management (See Case management section, p27) or the relocation of the girl to a safe place (See Safety and care, p29).

Cleansing and welcome ceremonies that were not harmful to the girls were very successful in promoting reintegration and lessening psychosocial distress in contexts such as South Sudan,[212] Angola,[213] Mozambique and Sierra Leone,[214] DRC,[215] Uganda[216] and Nepal.[217] Through traditional or religious rituals, girls and boys were cleared from their "sin" and as a result could not carry bad luck to the community. The ritual can include pacification of ancestors' spirits or the spirits of the people they killed.

The cleansing ritual can support the psychosocial wellbeing of girl survivors of sexual abuse and contribute to community acceptance. However, care should be taken to avoid reinforcing perceptions of GAAFAG as "sinful". The effectiveness of the rituals has mixed outcomes, and seems to be more effective with children who believe in it as well as when communities believe in spiritual purification.[218] In places where cleansing rituals are not used, encouraging welcome ceremonies where a traditional or religious leader welcomes the girl home, forgives her for the past and forgives the family and the community for not being able to protect her, can be an efficient way of promoting community acceptance and lifting any guilt the girl may feel.

In any circumstances, girls and boys should not be forced to perform rituals against their will,[219] and an assessment of potential harm should be conducted and confidentiality should be ensured.

Relief of guilt with religious leaders

In South Sudan, the acts of violence they were forced to commit, or indirectly contributed to, still haunted some girls. Many girls experienced more guilt and shame for what they have done rather for what was done to them.

"I felt so bad when thinking that we were eating stolen food, it made me feel sad. To get our food, people got beaten and killed. I felt bad all the time."

Religious leaders have the authority to relieve the ethical burden that affects girls' psychosocial wellbeing and their reintegration.

One pastor supported dozens of girls and gave them absolution through prayers.

"I explain that we are all sinners and that God is ready to forgive us all, then I give absolution. Some want to confess publicly but it can also be done individually and quietly, for yourself."

UNICEF South Sudan (2019)

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206 Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2007)
207 Samuels et al (2017)
208 Ibid
209 Worthen et al (2011)
210 McKay et al (2011)
211 Manero (2019)
212 UNICEF (2019)

213 Green et al (1999)
214 McKay et al (2004)
215 De la Soudière (2017)
216 Annan et al (2007)
217 Kohrt (2007)
218 Betancourt T (2008)
219 Ibid

Caseworkers or community volunteers can provide psychosocial support through active listening and psychological first aid. They can also be trained in age and gender-sensitive counselling to provide direct psychosocial support, or to refer girls to mental health professionals if needed and if they are available.

Specialised mental health support is usually needed for a small percentage of the population and should be implemented by personnel trained in clinical care.

Specialised mental health service providers may consider the FORNET approach (Narrative exposure for Forensic Offender Rehabilitation) which has been implemented with GAAFAG in DRC.[220] Field actors have recommended extending psychosocial counselling to family members, including caregivers, siblings, and partners to provide a holistic response and ensure a supportive home environment.[221]

Key recommendations: mental health

Prioritise collective approaches to build a sense of belonging and collective identity

Train peer and adult women mentors in their community to be role models

Provide collective empowerment, life skills and recreation opportunities to rebuild their self-confidence

Ensure that girls feel safe in their families and in their communities

Engage religious leaders to relieve their sense of guilt and shame

Provide psychosocial counselling through trained caseworkers and community volunteers if relevant

Extend psychosocial support to caregivers and partners

Identify girls who need additional support and refer them to specialised mental health care

Useful resources

Training

- Jordans M (2003) *Training Handbook on Psychosocial Counselling for Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances: A Trainer's guide*. Third edition. UNICEF Nepal
- Save the Children (2018) *Children's Development and Wellbeing E-learning* (Available in English, French and Arabic)

Report

- Samuels F, Jones N (2015) *Rebuilding adolescent girls' lives: mental health and psychosocial support in conflict-affected Gaza, Liberia and Sri Lanka*. Synthesis Report. ODI Rebuild Consortium

Guidelines

- UNICEF (2018) *Operational Guidelines on Community-Based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Humanitarian Settings: three-tiered support for children and families*
- IASC (2007) *IASC Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings*

Financial self-sufficiency

Girls, particularly those with children, face social pressure to generate an income and be economically self-sufficient.[222] Financial stability and security is a consistent request to reintegrate into their family and community, fulfil socially important roles, enhance their sense of self-worth and be respected. The lack of economic opportunities may lead to survival sex or staying in abusive relationships.[223]

However, too often, livelihood support is limited to vocational training that provides them with skills but does not necessarily result in stable income generation. Some evaluations of livelihood projects have demonstrated positive psychosocial outcomes of these interventions, but more rarely effective financial self-sufficiency. Some participants have reported increased self-confidence and being able to better cope socially.[224] In some contexts, these projects seemed to have had more positive

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220 Rojant et al (2019)
221 Monguno et al (2016)
222 Verhey (2004)

223 Coulter et al (2008)
224 Ibid

© UNICEF/UNI285720/Ryeng. *At Tindoka vocational centre former CAAFAG, including girls are taught tailoring, carpentry, brickwork, metalwork, electric work and plumbing. Yambio, South Sudan 2020*

outcomes in "trauma healing" and as a "pro-social activity" rather than in providing long-term financial stability.[225] [226] The lack of expertise of child protection actors,[227] of market assessments, business-management skills, access to financial resources[228] and professional networks have largely contributed to this situation. National DDR programmes that offer pre-determined trade options for vocational training, limited to a few stereotyped gender roles, with no business-skills support are often expensive, too short and could be more efficient. These programmes rarely account for the market ability to absorb new labour, the wishes and interests of adolescent girls, their existing capacity and skills and existing local or family resources they may have access to. Moreover, children and girls in particular, are often not included in the design of such programmes.

A gender analysis of roles, perspectives of girls and access to and control of resources and benefits is the first step. The analysis can include an assessment of the capacity of girls to commit to long-term training or to access land. It should also identify gender-specific barriers to economic stability and additional challenges that GAAFAG may face, including girls who have children or girls with disabilities.[229]

Child protection actors should refer children to livelihood actors and train them in how to work with CAAFAG, or child protection actors can be trained by livelihood actors to deliver quality programmes. In DRC, the International Rescue Committee Economic Recovery and Development team has trained the child protection team in market assessment, business skills and mentoring of children in vocational training.[230]

Professional field actors in livelihood for youth should encourage girls to express their choices and interests, including when those choices break from the dominant, patriarchal gender norms. They can guide girls to identify an occupation that suits them through a vocational orientation, discussion with professionals, encouraging them to consider a large spectrum of options and assessing the market opportunities and the availability of materials locally. Some girls have gained skills during their association that can be leveraged through their economic activity. For instance, some girls have cooked for large numbers of people and learnt how to manage the logistics of a camp. Other girls involved in propaganda may have developed public speaking skills and learnt how to use social media.

Some girls may choose traditional female trades, such as tailoring or hairdressing because they do not know about alternatives. Vocational counsellors can discuss options with the family or partners to overcome family resistance to less traditional trades. However, if girls are encouraged to explore non-traditional trades, the project should include a gender-transformative approach in the community.[231] It is critical not to do harm in exposing girls to further risk of stigmatisation. Some girls may feel empowered by their period of association, but they should be prepared to challenge gender roles in post-conflict

225 Coulter (2004)
226 Sevenants (2019)
227 UNICEF Nepal (2008)
228 Mazurana & Eckerbom Cole (2012)

229 International Labour Organization – International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (2010)
230 Information collected from key informant
231 Ibid

© UNICEF/UNI285720/Ryeng. *A social worker holdring a former GAAFAG son outside the classroom in Tinkoka vocational center in Yambio. South Sudan 2020*

settings, sometimes with the help of family members. In Nigeria, a young girl survivor of Boko Haram sexual violence from a conservative community benefited from financial literacy training and an economic empowerment kit to produce and sell bean cakes. However, that community frowns on girls going out in the public space, for such businesses are perceived negatively as they are exposed to men. Older and married women traditionally do this work and the girl did not feel that she conformed. As a result, she handed over her business to her aunt who in turn shared the profit with her.[232]

Non-traditional female trade

In Syria, a girl benefited from vocational training, qualified in electronics and opened a shop. The community did not accept her in this role and refused to buy from her shop. She finally asked her brother to interact with customers while she ran the business behind the scenes.

Basic business-skills training to teach girls how to keep accounts and handle money should be coupled with all vocational training. When possible, an entrepreneurship training is preferable, including rights of women entrepreneurs and financial and business skills. The final output of the training should be a detailed individual business plan. Experiences in implementing livelihood projects highlight the importance of including a module on

separating family affairs and business, and how to resist pressure from family, partners and friends. Girls earning money may affect the family power balance, particularly with their partners, which may lead to intimate partner violence.

Girls with children face an additional barrier to committing to training. The provision of childcare and adaptation of the training hours will allow girls to continue with household chores and training requirement.[233] In CAR, Plan International has provided childcare to girls to facilitate their access to training. In one of their projects, up to 50% of the girls had children. They set up a daycare centre where trained community midwives cared for the children.

Livelihood support in CAR

In CAR, Plan International provided livelihood support to girls who were associated with armed forces and armed groups. Options were limited to five or six selected trades based on a market assessment and the availability of materials, which can vary from one community to another. Thus, girls were trained in soap-making, bread and cake baking, motorbike mechanics, tailoring and hairdressing, and some opened a cafeteria. Plan International identified master craftsmen, trained them in child protection, on communication skills and on how to interact with CAAFAG. Each craftsman then signed a child-safeguarding protocol before receiving children. Girls with children could access daycare centres while they were attending vocational training. In addition, the girls benefited from small business management training, functional literacy, life skills and sexual and reproductive health education.

Economic subsistence during the training, particularly for girls with children, allows them to attend longer and better-quality training without the pressure to provide for their family. Alternatively, field actors should explore the provision of several progressive skills training phases to allow girls to prioritise short-term training opportunities and continue building their skills overtime to access better job opportunities in a second phase.

Field practitioners are encouraged to support girl entrepreneurs through various means such as a long-term and sustainable mentoring approach with established businesswomen in their community, giving them access to micro-credit opportunities and traditional savings and loan associations, and encouraging girls to form or join networks of young female entrepreneurs. In countries where it is relevant and safe, consider using social media to connect them with each other and/or to promote their business.

Livelihood support and gender equality in Iraq

In Iraq, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) worked with Yazidi young women who were kidnapped by Islamic State. They conducted a vocational orientation and screening process based on women's business ideas. These included trades such as knitting, yogurt-making, sewing clothes, beauty care, making wedding music, and artistic painting. They each received training in business management skills, materials to start their business and support from counsellors to navigate the market. The business success rate reached 70%. This initiative was coupled with activities that promoted gender equality. For instance, young Yazidi women organised gender-equality awareness raising and advocacy events. In addition, NPA organised peer-support groups for men and women separately to discuss GBV issues, gender norms and physical and emotional violence against women and girls. The combination of the two initiatives contributed to create a more protective environment for girls and young women survivors at home and in their community. Additionally, young women could benefited from GBV case management, mental health counselling and material support.

© UNICEF/UN0149465/Sokhin. *Boys and girls formerly associated with armed groups participate in a ceremony to mark the creation of a vocational training and rehabilitation centre in Central Africa Republic, 2017.*

Key recommendations: self sufficiency

Conduct a gender analysis, focusing on the roles, access to and control of resources and benefits, as well as the length of training they can commit to

Involve professional livelihood actors to implement such programmes or to train child protection actors in delivering quality and sustaining livelihood programmes

Avoid large one-size-fits-all programmes. Tailor the support to the capacities of the girls, her access to resources and the needs of the market in her community

Build on the skills that girls learned during their period of association

Provide childcare to allow girls with children to attend training

Provide a combination of financial literacy and business skills with a mentoring approach and access to micro-credit

Encourage girls to challenge traditional female trades, coupled with gender-transformative intervention to shift social norms, particularly at the family level, to avoid exposing them to further harm

Useful resources

Guidance

- International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) (2010) *Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups. How-to Guide on Economic Reintegration*. International Labour Organization (ILO)

Study

- Skills and Employability Department (2010) *Study on the Reintegration of Children Formerly Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups through Informal Apprenticeship. Case studies of Korhogo (Ivory Coast) and Bunia (DRC)* ILO

© UNICEF/UNI111124/Connelly. *16 years old girl, former GAAFAG in an Interim Care Center. DRC 2010*

Girls with specific needs

Survivors of sexual abuse

Key considerations
Sexual abuse is often correlated with physical and mental health needs. Girls are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and genital injuries, which can lead to disabilities. Sexual abuse can have a psychosocial impact, frequently causes severe stigmatisation, and will shape their experience of reintegration. Many girls face community and family rejection, some may be disowned by their family and ostracised by their community. This situation may increase the risk of poverty and sexual exploitation, and girls may resort to sex work to survive [234]

Lessons learnt
Community rejection is common in numerous locations, although not everywhere. In some contexts, such as South Sudan, some girls did not seem to face social stigma. The community members, supported by religious leaders acknowledged that girls were raped and that it was not their fault.[235] Similarly, in Iraq, the Yazidi women and girl survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation have been accepted in their community following a fatwa released by the religious leaders. [236]

Girls who are survivors of sexual abuse may hide their experience due to feelings of shame, stigmatisation and taboos around sex that prohibit discussion about their sexual abuse. As a result, many girls are reluctant to seek specialised services.

GBV services can be integrated in other services that are less sensitive, such as women's and girls' centres or youth clubs. In addition, personnel interacting with GAAFAG should be trained on how to handle disclosure of sexual abuse in order to provide an appropriate first response. As a standard practice, GBV response services are tailored to the specific needs of younger and older adolescent girls from their release and through the reintegration phase. Response services include medical care, mental health and psychosocial support, safety and legal support and can be provided in close coordination with child protection actors. This includes the set-up of clear GAAFAG survivors Standard Operating Procedures between GBV and child protection actors.

Anonymous access to services can be explored to increase girls' comfort in seeking services. The use of a biometric identification system is a solution to protect clients' identity and privacy, which could be piloted for survivors of sexual abuse in locations where there is internet access. The system allows for automatic linking of records of patients without any ID cards, using biometric identifiers such as an iris scan or a fingerprint. This system has been used successfully in Kenya[237] and Myanmar with HIV-positive patients in rural and urban settings and has provided an anonymous and confidential service to a highly vulnerable population.[238]

The operational context for survivor services should be well understood by the programme team including any possible mandatory reporting at medical service points, and its potential implications for the safety of the survivor. It is advisable to ensure that medical personnel are provided with training on survivor-centred approaches, including how to handle a GBV disclosure with adolescents, how to speak with survivors, how to conduct clinical rape examinations and special considerations for adolescent survivors and child survivors. It can also include a reminder on their obligations as medical practitioner to any mandatory reporting that may be in place in that setting, in order that they can advise the patient accordingly, prior to the triggering of any process she may not be aware of. It is recommended in all settings where clinical management of rape is provided that rape kits with Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) are pre-positioned for use and replaced regularly even when not used, according to their expiry dates. Regular refreshing of referral pathways to or from GBV or child protection actors is advisable as well as on confidentiality and data protection.

GBV and child protection caseworkers should be fully trained in case management for child survivors of sexual abuse. Their training includes direct psychosocial support as well as informal emotional support through peer

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234 Mazurana & Carlson (2004)
235 UNICEF South Sudan (2019)
236 Rohwerder (2019)

237 Njoroge et al (2020)
238 Microsoft (2020)

groups and recreational activities. (See section on Case Management, p27.) Psychosocial support should take into consideration the stigma, discrimination and isolation girls may face. Field actors may consider safe religious and traditional welcome ceremonies when culturally relevant and should recognise that addressing stigma requires community-level approaches. (See section on Psychosocial Support, p38.)

Legal services should be made available for survivors who want to seek justice against the perpetrator(s). Programmes can ensure that legal service providers are trained in survivor-centred approaches, the best interest of the child principle and how to conduct age- and gender-sensitive interviews. Caseworkers can support survivors throughout such proceedings which can be re-traumatising for survivors, including psychosocial support and safety plans.[239]

The abuse and exploitation of girls by male members of the same armed group (ie, intra-party violence) is not explicitly addressed in International Humanitarian Law and International Criminal Law instruments. However, in 2019 the legal case of the Congolese warlord Bosco Ntaganda contributed to the jurisprudence and allowed prosecution for sexual violence, including sexual slavery against children by members of their own group.[240] The International Committee of the Red Cross's updated Commentaries to the Geneva Conventions also consider that the fact that a crime was committed by a member of an armed force or armed group against a member of their own party shall not be a ground on which to deny the victim protection.[241] In 2020, for the first time in Iraq, the court charged and found guilty an Islamic State fighter for participation in a terrorist organisation and the rape and abduction of a Yazidi girl, thanks to her testimonies.[242]

When cooks contribute to psychosocial support

In DRC, Caritas runs *Interim Care Centre (ICC) or Le Centre de Transit et d'Orientation* for girls and boys formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups. It organises, among other services, individual listening sessions to provide psychosocial support. However, some children, particularly girls seemed to better trust cooks to share their stories. Antoinette is one of them, nicknamed "la mama", she listens to the girls while they peel tubers or sort beans together. This is a less formal environment where girls feel more comfortable to talk. Thus, some disclosed experiences of sexual abuse in the armed group and pain in their genitals since. The facilitators in the ICC were not informed of this situation. This experience has led Caritas to train all the cooks in their ICC in how to handle disclosure of sexual abuse and traumatic experiences.

Caritas (2020)

Key recommendations: girls as survivors of sexual abuse

Work with religious and community leaders to reduce the stigma associated with sexual abuse

Provide coordinated child protection and GBV services from release to reintegration tailored to the needs of adolescent girls including medical care, psychosocial support, safety and legal support

Ensure that a clear Standard Operating Procedure is set up between GBV and child protection actors

Train medical personnel in survivor-centred approaches, including how to handle a GBV disclosure, speak with survivors and conduct clinical rape examinations for adolescent survivors and child survivors

Ensure that rape kits with PEP are available

Provide psychosocial and emotional support through peer-support groups, recreational activities, counselling sessions and safe religious or traditional cleansing ceremonies

Make available legal service with trained lawyers and legal assistants

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239 UNICEF GBViE Helpdesk (2019)
240 ICC Appeals Chamber, Ntaganda, Judgment, 2017, paras. 2 and 51
241 International Committee of the Red Cross, Commentary on Geneva Convention I, 2016, CA3, paras. 460 and 547
242 Rubin (2020)

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Useful resources

Training

- International Rescue Committee – UNICEF (2015) *Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse Training*
- GBV IMS Steering Committee (2017) *Inter-Agency Gender Based Violence Case Management Training*

Guidelines

- World Health Organization (2017) *Responding to children and adolescents who have been sexually abused* WHO clinical guidelines
- International Rescue Committee (2012) *Caring for Child Survivors of Sexual Abuse: Guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings*
- UNICEF GBViE Helpdesk (2019) *Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups and GBViE Programming*

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© UNICEF/UN0272589/Holt. *Three weeks old baby sleeps in their home. His mother was recruited to an armed group at age 14. Yambio. South Sudan 2018*

Girls with children born out of sexual violence

Key considerations

Communities and families often stigmatise children born of wartime sexual violence and their mothers associated with AFAG. These children have less access to community resources, family protection and education and livelihood opportunities.

The registration of children's birth and their citizenship is often a challenge. In some contexts, national laws forbid mothers from passing their nationality on to their child, or obstruct children's access to civil documentation. In Iraq, women and girls face difficulties registering the birth of their children born as a result of conflict-related sexual violence. The government of Iraq does not recognise marriage and birth certificates issued by the Islamic State, when they have them, and girls are reluctant to publicly expose their experience as it is considered deeply shameful. Hundreds of children born out of rape were taken away from their mothers and scattered in orphanages in Iraq.[243] As a result, most women and girls were coerced or forced to abandon their children[244] with likely long-lasting mental health and psychosocial impact for the children and the mothers.[245] These abandoned children, some of them stateless, are vulnerable to trafficking or to recruitment by armed or criminal groups.[246] [247]

Building a respected social identity is often a struggle. The children may have the ethnic identity of two groups, but they rarely fully belong to either.[248] In many contexts, families and society are unable to distinguish children from the conditions of their conception. Their father may represent the enemy and as a result their identity is tainted with the violent acts their father committed, even years after the end of the war.[249] Children with physical traits from another ethnic group, such as a different skin colour, are particularly exposed to rejection.[250] Children may carry the identity associated with the AFAG, which brings shame, humiliation and stigma.

The mother-child relationship can be significantly

243 Rohwerder (2019)
244 Arraf (2019)
246 Agence France-Presse (2019)

247 Guterres (2019)
248 Hogwood et al (2017)
249 Rohwerder (2019)

affected by the girls' experience of sexual abuse and exploitation. Survivors of rape and sexual assault represent the largest group diagnosed with PTSD and depression which can interfere with their ability to parent.[252]

Severe distress can affect mother-child attachment, lead to aggressive parental behaviour and affect the physical and emotional development of the child.[253] Unresolved traumatic experiences from the mothers can be transferred from one generation to the next.[254]

The perception of girls towards their children varies significantly. In Nigeria, most girls expressed willingness to keep their children and showed affection to their children.[255]

Lessons learnt
Based on the literature and experiences from field practitioners, GAAFAG with children need additional support, including psychosocial support, access to health services and economic support. Field actors emphasised that psychosocial and health support should target the mothers as well as the children. Safehouses, anti-stigma campaigns, when relevant, and engagement of the community to support girls and their children can facilitate their reintegration.[256]

Community engagement to reduce stigma can promote acceptance. Promising experiences involved religious and community leaders who have the power to influence social acceptance.[257] In Nigeria, community members perceive girls and their children as "hyenas among the dogs" and they consider the children as "bad blood". They fear that if they accept them, the armed group JAS will come back to kill the girls. The involvement of religious leaders had some positive results. Some of them use verses of the Quran to address community rejection.[258] In Bosnia, a fatwa issued by religious leaders portrayed women survivors of rape as war heroes. This approach was found to have some positive impact on family and community reactions, although women and girls still faced discrimination and stigmatisation. In Uganda, local leaders organised round-tables to share the experiences of girls during their captivity, and spiritual leaders have spoken against cultural norms representing these children as symbols of misfortune or taboo.[259]

The relocation of mothers and their children to towns away from their villages may be considered to reduce stigmatisation. In Uganda, girls found greater anonymity in urban centres. People in their neighbourhoods were less likely to know about their experience with armed groups which facilitated their reintegration.

Economic support to enable girls to provide for their children is key to helping them regain social acceptance.

Peer-support groups with other girls and young women who face similar circumstances can strengthen their psychosocial wellbeing. This can help reduce shame and increase their sense of belonging. The use of contextually appropriate art-based methods and cultural activities such as song, dance, and storytelling can help girls who are stigmatised to build trust and friendship.

Integrated mental health, psychosocial and health interventions for GBV survivors as well as education opportunities should address both girls and their children's needs. Advocacy for community acceptance of children born of sexual violence will contribute to making them feel like a valued member of their community. Training of teachers in how to prevent and address bullying can improve their comfort at school.

Group counselling or parenting skills support for the girls to build attachment with their children and to promote positive parenting practices can contribute to the healthy development of children born out of sexual violence. Mothers should have the opportunity to express safely their nuanced and ambivalent feelings towards their children in individual and group settings. Literature from Rwanda indicates that a strong mother-child relationship promotes a sense of hope despite social marginalisation. It also highlights that maternal love can increase self-acceptance, which is a step towards healing themselves.[260] Mothers indicated that they felt overwhelmed by their adolescents' behaviour and how to communicate with them. Support for disclosing the identity of their father is crucial. Research and lessons learnt from Bosnia and Rwanda has shown that although it was difficult to hear, most children stated the importance of knowing the circumstances of their conception and who their father was. Some children expressed anger and shame, particularly boys. Yet, it helped them to know more about themselves, build their identity and make sense of their personal history. However, the timing and the manner of the disclosure is decisive and can affect its benefit. Field practitioners can draw guidance on disclosure processes from experience in disclosing HIV status to children, and disclosure of adoption.[261]

The need for childcare should not disadvantage girls with children in accessing training, educational, or other opportunities. Childcare is also essential to break social isolation and allow them to meet with their peers.[262] Daycare should be integrated into all GAAFAG programme design.[263] In CAR, War Child UK encouraged girls with babies to come to the child-friendly spaces and bring their children. The girls then take turns babysitting, allowing the other mothers to join other activities.

250 Sarrouh (2013)
251 Reid-Cunningham (2009)
252 Van Ee et al (2012)
253 Cohen et al (2008
254 Atkinson et al (2010)
255 Monguno et al (2016)
256 Rohwerder (2019)
257 Ibid
258 Monguno et al (2016)
259 Rohwerder (2019)
260 Denov & Khan (2019)
261 Hogwood et al (2017)
262 Takseva (2015)
263 Reach Verhey (2004)

What shall I tell my child? Mothers' group counselling

In Rwanda, SURF (Survivor Fund) provided support to women who had raised children in the communities where they experienced sexual violence. The mothers faced challenges as their children were growing up. Adolescence is a crucial time in identity formation and children asked question about who their father was.

SURF provided support through a six-month-programme with 12 sessions for groups of up to 10 mothers. Two trained counsellors facilitated each session and focused on:

- Psycho-education about symptoms of severe distress and triggers for severely distressing or traumatic memories
- Psycho-education about parenting, the responsibilities of parents and the rights of children
- Child development, adolescence and natural adolescent behaviour. (Mothers were often mis-attributing natural adolescent behaviours as a sign of concern because of the violence of their father)
- Disclosure to their children

The organisation designed the sessions with a local understanding of severe distress, and took into consideration the cultural meaning of marriage and having children as a rite of passage. They also offered individual therapy sessions when needed.

Civil documentation for the children is essential to ensure their citizenship rights. Exclusion, stigmatisation and the lack of institutional mechanism to allow these children to integrate into the societal fabric can contribute to foster the cycle of marginalisation.[264] In countries where legislation perpetuates gender discrimination and contributes to statelessness, advocacy campaigns can contribute to change the law.[265]

Transitional justice and the recognition of the experience of girls as survivors of sexual abuse post-conflict can contribute to reconciliation and foster community acceptance.[266] Gender-sensitive community-based justice mechanisms, truth commissions, ritualistic commemorations, reparation and other forms of social repair may contribute to better community acceptance.[267] In Liberia, young mothers made and sold soap as a livelihood. Yet they recognised that some people were too poor to buy the soap, so they gave it to them of their own accord. This was a turning point in their social acceptance, and people who lived in the urban slum saw the girls as giving back and not concerned only with their own wellbeing.[268] However, this can only be done in contexts where there is no to further risk of stigmatisation and exposure to retaliation.[269] In contexts where children are abandoned by their mothers without any coercion and rejected from their families and communities, field actors should consider how to work with authorities to find longer-term family-based care arrangements in order to minimise institutionalisation, and prevent their recruitment to armed groups and criminal gangs or to prevent risks of trafficking.[270]

Key recommendations: girls with children born of sexual violence

Involve community leaders who have the power to influence social norms to reduce the stigma on girls and their children

Consider relocating girls and their children in other communities when they are exposed to violence in their community

Encourage peer-support groups of mothers

Provide health, psychosocial and education services to the mothers and their children

Implement parenting skills session to mothers to improve mother-child attachment and promote positive parenting practices

Set up childcare to ensure girls are not disadvantaged in accessing reintegration services such as education or livelihood opportunities

Provide support to access civil documentation for children such as birth certificates

264 Serri (2017)
265 Rohwerder (2019)
266 Drumbl (2012)
267 O'Neil et al (2018)
268 Information collected from key informant
269 Ibid
270 Serri (2017)

Girls with disabilities

Key considerations

Association with armed forces and armed groups can cause **long-term impairments or disabilities**. This may be due to sexual violence which can cause injuries such as fistulas with incontinence, or severe distress which can be associated with impairment in functioning.[271] In Iraq, 40% of the Yazidi women and girls who experienced sexual violence during their captivity experienced dissociative disorders. They also experienced higher rates of dissociative seizures, somatisation disorders, depression and anxiety disorders compared to women who had PTSD but who were not sexually abused and held captive by Islamic State.[272] Girls can also face combat injuries, including sensory problems such as hearing impairments due to landmines and gunshots. Girls in porter roles can have lower limb and back pain, and some girls may have drug and alcohol dependency.[273] In Sierra Leone, 27% of girls and boys reported being injured, or developed a disability following their association with armed forces and armed groups. The psychosocial impact was the second highest for those who experienced permanent wounding or injury.[274] However, the focus should not be only on war-related injuries. Some girls may have had pre-existing disabilities that are less visible.

Girls with disabilities may face triple discrimination

because of their gender, their association, and their disability. Their disability may create additional barriers to accessing reintegration programmes because of limitations in physical mobility, communication capacities and because of isolation. They are also at greater risk of abuse and exploitation, particularly sexual exploitation, if they lost their caregivers or other protection networks, and they are less likely to report incidents. In Iraq, Yazidi girls with dissociative symptoms faced increased physical abuse as their caregivers did not understand their behaviours were symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Girls with disabilities are also more likely to be excluded from peer activities that would help them develop social and support networks, break isolation and enhance their protection from violence. They often lack information about the services available, and physical and financial access.

They may face negative attitudes from family and

community members who consider that there is no hope for girls with disabilities and do not believe they are a priority, or that they have a voice that should be heard.[275] Girls with newly acquired disabilities following their association may not be able to fulfil roles expected of them and may perceive themselves as a burden. This can influence their self-esteem, their power and status in intimate-partner relationships and other personal relationships.[276] Humanitarian workers may also consider girls with disabilities as targets of charity and protection rather than active participants and agents of change in their community.[277]

Lessons learnt

The identification of less visible impairments may be difficult as girls may not spontaneously disclose them. Field practitioners should consider using the *Washington Group* set of questions during initial assessments in order to identify them sensitively. If impairments are identified, they can refer them to a medical specialist for a comprehensive assessment.

Mapping of existing services and referral to appropriate specialised services based on a comprehensive medical assessment is essential.[278] This includes surgery, physiotherapy, psychotherapy, medical treatment and medical equipment such as crutches, wheelchairs, glasses, hearing aids or prosthetics. However, lessons learnt highlight the importance of including both GAAFAG with disabilities as a result of war, and other children with disabilities from conflict-affected communities, in any project. Additional support can be provided, where available, such as access to a school for deaf or blind pupils or to specialised services and benefits provided by the Ministries of Social Affairs, Education, Health or Labour.

© UNICEF/UNI40783/DeCesare. *18 years old, former GAAFAG after a swim. She lost her foot in a landmine explosion. Colombia*

271 NICEF (2018)
272 Kizilhan et al (2020)
273 Grover (2010)
274 Betancourt (2008)
275 Rohwerder (2017)
276 Pearce et al (2016)
277 Rohwerder (2017)
278 Ward & Stone (2018)

The training of personnel involved in GAAFAG programming on disability inclusion will help support sensitive and responsive services to girls. In addition, field practitioners are encouraged to work closely with families and caregivers to support and strengthen healthy relationships and balance power dynamics between caregivers and the girls and other family members.[279]

Social inclusion and access for girls with disabilities should be considered in the design of reintegration activities for GAAFAG. Girls identify themselves first as daughters, sisters and friends, and want to be included in the same activities as their peers. Field actors should not make assumptions about what they can and cannot do or what activities are more suitable for them. They should involve girls with disabilities in planning and decision-making on matters that affect them.

Support for parents to understand their children's behaviour and capacities will reduce the risk of physical and emotional abuse. Parents can access support through group counselling or parenting skills programmes that include sessions for parents of girls with disabilities or impairments to create a safe and supporting family environment.

Advocacy to decision-makers and community awareness raising should focus on the inclusion of children with disabilities in decision-making processes and highlight their capacities to contribute to the community and to the society.[280]

Key recommendations: girls with disabilities

Use the Washington Group questionnaire to identify less visible impairments

Map existing services to refer all girls with disabilities in communities affected by conflict

Train all personnel involved in GAAFAG programming on disability inclusion

Promote social inclusion and remove barriers to accessing services

Provide support to parents through group counselling for parents of girls with disabilities or through parenting skills sessions

Advocate for the inclusion of girls with disabilities

Useful resources

Guidance

- UNICEF (2017) *Including Children with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action in Child Protection* booklets on General Guidance, Child Protection, Education, Health and HIV/AIDS, Nutrition and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). (Available in French and Arabic)

- E Pearce, K Paik, OJ Robles (2016) *Adolescent Girls with Disabilities in Humanitarian Settings*

- Women's Refugee Commission, UNICEF (2018) *Guidance on Disability Inclusion for GBV Partners in Lebanon: Outreach, Safe Identification, and Referral of Women, Children and Youth with Disabilities*

- Women's Refugee Commission, UNICEF (2018) *Guidance on Disability Inclusion for GBV Partners in Lebanon: Case Management of Survivors & At-risk Women, Children and Youth with Disabilities*

Tools

- Handicap International (2005) *Disability Checklist for Emergency Response*

- Washington Group/UNICEF (2016) *Module on Child Functioning: Questionnaires*

Additional key resources may be relevant to inform programming for GAAFAG.

- The Paris Principles (2007) *Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*

- *The Paris Principles Operational Field Handbook on Prevention of Child Recruitment, Release and Reintegration (forthcoming)*

279 Pearce et al (2016)

280 The Paris Principles (2007)

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