

‘I Can’t Go Home’. Forced migration and displacement following demobilisation: the complexity of reintegrating former child soldiers in Colombia

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This paper examines the reintegration experiences of a group of demobilised youth who were associated with various armed groups during the course of ongoing armed conflict in Colombia. In particular, the paper traces how the realities of forced migration and displacement profoundly shape and inform their reintegration experiences. Drawing upon qualitative interviews with a sample of 22 former child soldiers, the authors highlight the key challenges and impacts participants faced as a result of forced migration and displacement, particularly in relation to family, place, and (in) security. Our study indicates that despite these ongoing challenges, and within a context of ongoing war and armed violence, these former child soldiers have been able to lead industrious and productive lives through their commitment to education, employment and peer support.

Keywords: child soldiers, Colombia, displacement

Introduction

For the past 50 years Colombia has suffered the effects of armed violence, making it Latin America’s longest running conflict. It has been estimated that each year 3,500 lives are lost as a result of hostilities across the country, the majority of which are civilians (Suárez, 2000), and this continues today. Tens of thousands of children, both girls and boys, have been absorbed into the ranks of guerrilla and paramilitary armed groups

in defiance of international law. In 2004, Colombia ranked fourth for the highest use of child soldiers¹ in the world (Watchlist, 2004). This has led to declarations that ‘*the war in Colombia is a war on children*’ (Watchlist, 2004, p.8).

Colombia’s armed conflict has also led to the displacement of between 2,650,000 and 4,360,000 people, creating a veritable humanitarian crisis (Consuelo Carrillo, 2009).

It has been well established in the literature that forced migration and displacement, as a result of armed conflict, can have devastating physical, social, economic, cultural and psychological effects (Consuelo Carrillo, 2009). While forced migration and its impact have been studied extensively, much less attention has been paid to the impacts on former child soldiers, following their participation in violence. Forced migration and displacement hold a particular significance for former child soldiers in Colombia, as they are frequently forcibly displaced following their demobilisation and cannot – largely as a result of ongoing security issues due to their status as former child soldiers – return to their communities of origin. They literally cannot go home again.

Furthermore, Colombia represents an unusual background for demobilisation programmes. Most occur post conflict and not amidst ongoing violence. In Colombia, the

programme exists as a form of transitional justice, which is discussed in more detail below.

This paper traces the reality of its forced migration and displacement, and impact, in a sample of demobilised former child soldiers in Colombia. In particular, drawing on the voices of 22 former child soldiers, the paper traces how the realities of forced migration and displacement profoundly shape and inform their reintegration experiences.

It begins with a brief synopsis of the involvement of children in Colombia's armed groups, followed by an overview of the study's methodology, and then addresses key challenges and impacts participants faced as a result of forced migration and displacement, particularly in relation to family, place, and (in)security. This study traces the ways in which, despite these ongoing challenges, former child soldiers were able to lead industrious and productive lives through their commitment to education, and employment. The paper concludes with a discussion of our participants' impressive capacity to lead meaningful lives, as well as wider implications for reintegration and reconciliation.

Background

Children associated with armed groups in Colombia: recruitment and reintegration realities

The current armed conflict in Colombia involves multiple actors, including the Colombian government's National Army, or *Ejército Nacional*, guerrilla groups (the National Liberation Army or *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia or *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC-EP)), as well as a national umbrella association of paramilitaries called the United Self-defence Forces of Colombia or *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). More recently, narco-paramilitary groups also

known as *Bandas criminales* (BACRIM) are beginning to take up a prominent place in the conflict.

While there are no reliable official statistics on the current number of children associated with armed groups in Colombia, estimates range from 5,000 to 14,000 children (Watchlist, 2012). Burgess (2009) states that children comprise 30% of all members of armed groups in Colombia; while over 60% of those in urban militias are believed to be children. The ELN, AUC, FARC-EP and BACRIM have all recruited children, with FARC-EP being the most persistent perpetrators of child recruitment (Watchlist, 2012). Although the Colombian army does not appear to recruit children as combatants, the government has used children as spies and informants to gather intelligence on guerrilla groups (Watchlist, 2012).

A multitude of studies and reports have documented the profound deprivation, as well as the physical, sexual and psychological violence and abuse against children that occurs within Colombia's armed groups (Bjorkhaug, 2010; Watchlist, 2012). The United Nations Security Council *Report of the Secretary - General on Children and Armed Conflict in Colombia* (2012) provides information on grave violations against children, including the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, killing and maiming, sexual violence, abductions, attacks on schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access.

However, while the challenges that these children and youth face in the context of armed groups and armed violence are significant and undeniable, the challenges do not abruptly end on exiting an armed group, but instead change shape. The difficult and complex transition from a militarised life in an armed group to a civilian life has been well documented (Denov, 2010). To ease this transition, national and international efforts have sought to implement post conflict development assistance

projects and programmes. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programming is increasingly being utilised as a means to increase security, public safety and protection, as well as promoting peace. While most DDR programmes are implemented within post conflict contexts, this is not the case in Colombia. Colombia's programme has been implemented through what is referred to as a *'peace framework'*, a form of transitional justice. So while Colombia's programming for individuals formerly associated with armed groups has been conceptualised and created within the logic and framework of a *'post conflict'* context, in reality, programming is taking place within a context of ongoing armed violence (Ruiz Serna & Marchand, 2011). As Theidon (2007, p.67) notes: *'Colombia [is] a case of great interest because the government is attempting to implement mechanisms of reparations and reconciliation in a "pre/post conflict" context, and to implement DDR on the terrain of transitional justice'*. This is a unique and important reality that holds particular implications for former child soldiers and their experiences of reintegration, and one that will be addressed further below.

Since 1999, the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) has provided assistance to former child soldiers. A total of 4,811 children were assisted through this programme between 1999 and 2011, of which 72% were boys and 28% were girls. Of these 4,811 children, 2,838 were formerly associated with the FARC-EP, 1,058 with the AUC, and 721 with the ELN (Watchlist, 2012).

A key challenge to Colombia's reintegration process is that, as a result of the ongoing armed violence and the continued presence of armed groups, children formerly associated with armed groups are, for the most part, unable to return to their communities of origin. Threats of violence and death, as well as the potential for re-recruitment, force these young people to be relocated to other areas of the country

(in mostly urban contexts) to ensure their long term safety and protection. The implications of this forced migration are numerous and represented a key theme that permeated our interviews with participants.

Methodology

This study, funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, examined the reintegration experiences of a group of demobilised youth who had been associated with various armed groups during the armed conflict. A key aim of the fieldwork was to gain not only an understanding of the youth's experiences following demobilisation, but also their reflections and interpretations of these experiences, as well as psychosocial impacts.

To be included in the study, participants were required to have been associated with an armed group in Colombia while under the age of 18 years. Participants were purposively selected with the assistance of professionals who had previously been working with these youth through the DDR (hereafter referred to as *'reinsertion'*) programme.

To explore participants' experiences of reintegration, in 2010, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews (in Spanish) with 22 respondents who had been formerly associated with an armed group in Colombia (12 male and 10 female). At the time of the interviews, all respondents were over 18 (ranging from 19 to 27 years) and living in an urban context in the province of Quindío. The in-depth interviews were audio taped with permission, and subsequently transcribed and translated into English. All our respondents had been recruited by an armed group when they were under 18 (ranging between 8 and 16 years old) and had remained with the group for an extended period of time (ranging from 3 months to 8 years). Nineteen participants (nine

females, 10 males) had been associated with FARC-EP, three participants (one female, two males) had been associated with the AUC. All 22 participants had been displaced from their communities of origin, had received support from the reinsertion programme and were living within an urban context.

As with all self-report data, the interviews with participants were invariably affected by their willingness to divulge personal information and experiences. The potential fear of stigmatisation may have prevented some participants from either openly disclosing some of their experiences or to alter aspects of their stories. The potential flaws of self-disclosure must therefore be taken into account when considering participants' stories. At the same time, given our collaboration with professionals who had been working closely with participants throughout the demobilisation process, over an extended period of time (several years), we were able to seek corroboration of participants' stories and experiences.

Analysis of the translated interview transcripts involved careful reading and annotation of the collated information so as to ascertain the meaning and significance of participants' post demobilisation experiences. Our annotations of the transcripts consisted of themes that were identified as recurring in participants' narratives. As part of the data analysis clusters of verbatim text were re-grouped according to thematic indices. These were examined again in the thematically reorganised text in order to identify broad patterns of experiences and perspectives. Through this inductive analytical process, the authors were able to discern how the realities of forced migration and displacement profoundly shaped participants' reintegration experiences. It is important to note that given the small sample size, the findings of this study cannot be generalised nor applied to the wider population of former child soldiers in Colombia.

Understanding the impact of forced migration and displacement: the realities of former child soldiers

Internal displacement impacts on displaced communities, family and housing

Many think of displacement as a temporary problem that disappears upon return home or resettlement. . . it is often a long-term phenomenon that disrupts the lives of not only the individuals and families concerned, but also of whole communities and societies.' (Cohen & Deng, 1998, p.23)

Internal displacement has become one of the largest humanitarian crises in Colombia and has led to the displacement of between 2,650,000 and 4,360,000 people. This makes Colombia the country with the largest internally displaced population (IDP), after Sudan (Consuelo Carrillo, 2009). Almost 60% of Colombian IDPs come from rural areas, many of who have never been to a big city. The majority of displaced people in Colombia tend to be poor, indigenous or Afro-Colombian populations, living in areas of guerrilla or paramilitary influence (Lidchi et al., 2004).

Armed groups, fighting for territorial control, often stage deliberate attacks on civilians in order to depopulate an area, reduce the combat power of the enemy, extract money and/or resources and extend the armed group's control. The displacement of the population has also been perceived as a manner of controlling the civilian population through a strategy of preventing collective action, destroying social networks and intimidation.

One key economic consequence is loss of assets as people are forced to abandon land, property, livestock, crops, tools and machinery. Additionally, displaced rural populations cannot compete effectively within a labour market, farming skills are not easily

transferable into an urban environment and unemployment rates can be as high as 13% (Consuelo Carrillo, 2009). Also, as Consuelo Carrillo (2009, p.538) notes: *IDPs have to compete with the resident population for job opportunities, with the added disadvantage of being poorly educated and suffering stigma of the IDP status.*

In terms of housing, because of the lack of resources, IDPs often have to build shacks with waste materials on privately or publicly owned land, or waste ground where unhealthy living conditions place them at risk. Therefore, the social consequences of displacement are enormous as IDPs are often compelled to adjust to a new environment, of which they have little or no experience.

Within the family, research has shown that displacement often leads to domestic violence, abuse and family separation (Lidchi et al., 2004). According to Velez & Bello (2010), of those families displaced to Bogota, 47% break down as a result, with the average family size of 6.2 people prior to displacement reduced to 5.2 people afterwards.

Displacement also has a particularly severe impact on populations of indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians, who are detached and isolated from their traditional customs, territory and community organisations. On an individual level, being dispossessed from ones traditional way of life, customs, and culture may manifest in depression, fear, despair and aggressive behaviour. Escobar (2000) notes that the forced displacement of populations by armed groups has unleashed a climate of terror and has set in motion forces that have destroyed solidarity between neighbours and deteriorated social relations, as well as weakened community ties, organisational processes, rituals of integration and interrupts the flow of everyday life. This is in addition to other multiple loss that can include the death or disappearance of family, friends or neighbours, and the

abandonment of land and possessions, and environmental destruction.

Consequences of forced migration following demobilisation of former child soldiers

While the forced migration and displacement of civilians can create profound distress and upheaval, it has particular consequences for former child soldiers. These young people are in their formative years, and are recovering from living and being engaged in contexts of severe violence. Furthermore, following demobilisation they are often displaced from their families and communities of origin. All of the 22 youth in our sample were relocated to an urban context following their demobilisation to ensure their ongoing safety and protection. Below, former child soldiers explain the reasons behind the forced migration and the impossibility of returning to their home communities.

'I can't go back [to my community] because [FARC-EP] will kill me. . .the FARC has a rule – whoever leaves the institution dies – they kill you. There are militias in the community [who provide FARC-EP with information]. . .a lot of these people recognise you. . .they see you and inform their superiors. They catch you and bring you to the jungle to have the famous "war council" . . and it is 100% sure that they shoot you.' (Male participant #6).

'It is very sad because I would like to go to my community, but I can't. . .the militias. . .they are in the villages and they notice you and report you right away and people from FARC come down from the mountains [to kill you]. Or even the militia can kill you because they think you are giving information.' (Male participant #5).

'It is not that I don't want to go back [to my community]. . .I feel if I go back, I am risking

my daughter's life? (Female participant #7).

As a result of these very real fears, all of our participants were compelled to relocate following demobilisation and ultimately reintegrate into a new community, within an urban context. The implications of this forced migration has had a powerful impact on their long term reintegration, particularly in relation to family separation and support, place, and ongoing (in)security. These themes are explored further below.

Forced migration and separation from family

Research has shown that family and/or community support is undeniably critical to conflict affected children's long term wellbeing and successful reintegration following demobilisation. It has further been suggested that living with parents may be a critical factor in children's recovery from the scourge of armed violence (McKay & Mazurana, 2004). In this study, 17 of 22 participants were not living with their families of origin following demobilisation, but were instead living on their own or in foster family situations. For six participants who did report living with family, in all cases, participants were living with one family member as the other family members were displaced. Displacement from family was thus a key theme that permeated all interviews.

'The most important thing in my life I would say is that I don't have my family. It has been 8 years [since I saw them]...The guerrillas are still there and so is the paramilitary. It's complicated because I am in danger [if I return]... At times it's hard, because the truth is, I am alone here in [city]. While I have my job and I'm healthy...money and all that is not happiness. Sometimes I think about my family and wonder what they might be doing...It is something that I constantly think about...' (Male participant #13).

One participant reported being abducted by FARC-EP, aged 12, from Venezuela. Following demobilisation, he was unable to return to Venezuela, because of the presence of armed groups patrolling the Colombian/Venezuelan border.

'I can't go home...at the border, the [militia] can report you... They take pictures of you [crossing the border]...and keep the recordings...I had two friends who crossed the border and they both got killed [by FARC-EP], so I was scared...It has been very hard because I spent three years without seeing my mother and I wanted to be with her...to be with my family...[The programme] arranged a meeting with my family in [place]... They paid for my mother to come [from Venezuela] with my two brothers, an uncle and a cousin. We ate really good food, remembering when we were all at home. But it was hard. I hadn't seen her in so long and I knew that [after that visit] she was going to be far away from me again and we were not going to see each for a long time.' (Male participant #11).

An important factor that accompanied the anguish of being separated from family was the uncertainty concerning their whereabouts and/or wellbeing. In spite of the efforts of the reinsertion programme to locate the families of former child soldiers, the majority of participants had no knowledge where their families were living, or even if they were alive or dead.

'I escaped from the [guerrillas] and [my family] never saw me again... I don't know anything about my family... When I was in the programme in Bogota, my mom called... She told me that [the guerrillas] had killed my brother. I continued communicating with her by phone at that time. Then one day during a phone call, my mom said "I can't call you again" and I said "Why?" She said "because [the guerrillas are threatening me, I can't call you again]"... It has been 8 years that I've had no information.' (Female participant #2).

'I haven't been able to contact [my mother] in years. My brother tried calling her but someone else answered. . . so right now, I don't know anything about her. . . I wonder what is happening and I am so worried.' (Male participant #8).

'Two years ago, the Red Cross searched for my family. . . they asked me for a map and directions [to where my family lived]. . . I spent hours trying to remember those places. . . but it was a long time ago. . . I was only 12 when I left [home]. . . They couldn't find my family. . . I felt very sad. I have many friends [who] were able to find their families. So I had great hope that if they found my friends' families, why wouldn't they find mine?' (Male participant #14).

The isolation and loneliness that resulted from family separation was explained by the participant quoted below.

'My dad died while I was in the programme. I don't have a brother or a cousin. I am alone. Alone. I lost contact with my family since joining the guerrillas when I was 12 years old. I was in the group for three, almost four years. Since I left the group, I haven't been in contact with anybody [in my family]. . . I want a son because I want someone who will accompany me. Do you understand? So I don't feel so lonely. . . I see fathers sharing their love with their sons. . . I want it, I want it already.' (Male participant #15).

Ten participants had, following their demobilisation, lived with a foster family. Opinions of the foster family experience varied, as shown below.

'The foster families are good homes, but I have always said that [foster families] are all after the money [government compensation they receive for fostering children]. The families who accept you, what they really want is to have you not as their children, but the financial assistance.' (Female participant #19).

'The first foster mother. . . I had her for two long months. . . There was a boy living there, it was the woman's son. That boy would get fruits and jellies while my daughter didn't receive anything. I didn't say anything because I thought my daughter didn't have the right to have these things. When I learned that my girl had the right – that all the expenses for the girl and for me were supposed to be covered – I began to claim it. The woman didn't like it and we had problems. . . One day, I prepared to leave. . . I was planning to ask to be changed [to another foster family] because I didn't want to stay there. When I did talk to the woman, she said: "you can't leave" and I said: "I am leaving, I'm going". . . So her husband screamed: "Mary, please do me a favour and kick this guerrilla [guerrilla girl] out of here". He insulted me. . . it got to me and I began to fight and I insulted him also. I told him: "you do me a favour, respect me" and I insulted him. He came towards me to hit me. I stopped in front of him and said: "Hit me! Hit me! Lay a hand on me!" He lifted his hand but did not hit me. His daughter came behind me to hit me. When I was about to leave through the door, she pushed me. I hit her and I escaped. . . that night I stayed in a park with my daughter. . .' (Female participant #12).

For those who had positive experiences living with a foster family, it nonetheless failed to compensate for the loss and separation from their families of origin.

'I love my foster family but they don't fill the emptiness with regards to my family.' (Male participant #14).

Forced migration and place

The concept of 'place' holds profound importance for displaced populations. Relph (1976) conceptualises 'place' as organised around three key elements: physical setting; activity; and meaning. As a physical setting, place can be understood as a geographic centre, site, or location of events. Place can also

be defined by the activities and social interactions that occur within a particular location (Fullilove, 1996). The third element of place centres on meaning, which Relph (1993, p.36) suggests is the most challenging of the three elements to grasp, yet it is of key importance as *'place is above all a territory of meanings'*. The theme of place, whether as a physical setting, social interaction, and/or meaning, consistently emerged during interviews. Participants lamented their inability to return *'home'*: a symbolic place that embodied togetherness, individual and family growth and accomplishments, memories and deep personal and familial connections with land and territory.

'I don't know if I can go back to my community. . . my mother definitely cannot. It is depressing, knowing that my mother cannot see the fruits of what she constructed on her native land. It is very painful.' (Female participant #21).

'What does it mean that my family can't go home? Really sad. Imagine. [My mother] is very sad. . . she cries about this. This past week she almost killed herself. She banged her head on the wall. She was on the floor hitting her head.' (Female participant #1).

Feld & Basso (1996, p.11) note that *'as people fashion places, so, too, do they fashion themselves'*. In a similar vein, Bhabha (1994, p.1) suggests that identity is produced in spaces and places, becoming *'the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation'*. Although participants were living within a new urban context, their sense of place attachment continued to be inextricably linked and tied to their communities of origin. As such, being torn from their places of origin had profound implications.

'My grandparents are there, I grew up there, and I was born there. So it is very sad for me

not to be able to go there, and be at peace there.'
(Male participant #5).

Scholars have pointed out how places of origin are closely connected to cultural practices, symbolic meanings, significant memories, and vital rituals that shape people's identity (Feld & Basso 1996; Escobar, 2001). In Colombia, much of these meanings and practices are lost on relocation, leaving a sense of loss, detachment, and dispossession for all who have had to leave their places of origin.

Continuing insecurity, ongoing migration

Despite having been displaced and forced to migrate to a new context and community, relocation did not always assure nor guarantee participants' security or safety. Due to ongoing death threats, participants frequently had to flee and relocate multiple times, often under dangerous circumstances and urgency.

'I had a neighbour who would say [publicly] that I was a guerrilla. Guys in the neighbourhood [who were in the militia] began to send me anonymous and threatening letters. . . I would burn the letters. . . One day they broke my window. . . I knew I had to move. . . The house was provided for me by the government. . . but I left the house and rented it out. . . I did not want to go back because I did not feel safe.' (Female participant #2).

'I settled in [city]. . . but some people [from the armed group] went there. . . looking for me. . . they were going to kill me. The FARC has people dressed as civilians in charge of intelligence work. . . They killed one of my friends who had been hanging out with me a lot. . . I was working in the workshop when I heard the shots. His brother warned me: 'they are coming for you as well. . . leave because they are coming for you'. . . All of a sudden, I had to leave. Imagine. The same night I packed and called a very good friend of mine. . . He

helped me. In order to be safe, I went somewhere else and I am okay there. (Male participant #15).

The fear of being recognised by members of a militia or an armed group represented a continuous struggle. The participant quoted below explained that even as he made his way to our interview, he made sure to avoid being recognised.

I came here today camouflaged...I brought this hat, and these dark sunglasses. (Male participant #15).

Being forced to relocate multiple times often rendered participants' successful reintegration into a new community precarious, fragile and uncertain.

I still live with that fear...that [the armed groups] are looking for me, that they will kill me? (Female participant #2).

Stigma and discrimination from community members was another powerful theme that pervaded participants' post demobilisation experiences.

Life here is very hard. One goes out in the street and [people] look at you and say: "look at the guerrilla"...people who know [that I was in an armed group] treat me badly and say that I will be a terrorist, a guerrilla...' (Male participant #8).

I cannot live safely in any community or village, city. One remains very alert, on the defensive. People do not accept us [former child soldiers] easily. We have been displaced. You can never say that you have been displaced because you are the weird one in the city, or the weird one in the community. That affects you in terms of employment and emotionally, as well? (Female participant #7).

Ongoing stigma and fear of retaliation meant that forced migration did not occur

only once, after participants' initial exit from an armed group, but instead represented an *ongoing and recurring reality*. The challenges associated with having to repeatedly start anew, find new employment, form new relationships and resettle in a new city are numerous.

I had to move to another city because it wasn't safe and I had to leave town. It's terrible to have to start over like that because you finally reach a certain level [of comfort] and then have to start over again – somewhere where no one knows you...you don't know anyone, you don't know the city. Starting again from zero...it is very hard, but we [former child soldiers] are doing it. We have to fight. (Male participant #22).

Laying down roots and navigating adversity

While it is important to acknowledge the challenges and difficulties that former child soldiers (both young men and young women) face following demobilisation, it is also equally critical to acknowledge and recognise their capacity and ability to overcome adversity. Participants made valiant efforts to lead productive lives, becoming positive contributors to their new communities. Despite separation from family, from places of significance, and ongoing insecurity issues, participants were committed to (re)building their lives by investing in education and employment.

Education and employment

At the time of interview, 14 of the 22 participants were pursuing some form of education. Areas of educational focus varied, and included primary and secondary school as well as vocational training. The majority of participants had little or no previous education before their association with an armed group.

'When I was 11 years old they [family] sent me to study, but I already knew how to read and write a little bit. Because there was no paper we used to write with sticks on plantain or coffee leaves. [I was] in school for half a year. . . and left because we did not have enough pencils or notebooks and they would always ask for things.' (Female participant #7)

As part of the reinsertion programme, all of the youth were provided with some form of education. Many of them were completing their elementary or secondary school and, at the same time, had vocational training in accounting, computers, nursing, business management, dressmaking and/or hairdressing.

'I studied dressmaking. . . studied grade school at night and graduated from high school at 19. . . I took many courses: a technology course, a cooking course, a beauty course, a massage course and a business planning course. . . While in the armed group everything was negative, but once I got out there were many more things because they give us an opportunity to study.' (Female participant #4).

At the time of interview, 18 of the 22 participants were engaged in numerous forms of employment, including coffee picking, retail, sales and nursing assistance. Other participants were making their living through small businesses, ranging from food and variety stores to catering initiatives and mechanic shops.

'I have a shop. I sell dried food and sweets. . . I got [the shop] because I behaved well and had [previous] experience with stores and shops.' (Male participant #13).

'I am a motorcycle mechanic, [the programme] gave me a small project and. . . I started studying [motorcycle mechanics]. . . After a year, they helped me start

[my own] workshop. . . I worked there for three years. . . When I found out that I was being threatened, I had to leave [my shop]. Now I have [a new shop] in [city]' (Male participant #15).

Eight of the participants were associated with a coffee roasting and marketing social enterprise jointly financed by various nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). The motivation to succeed and the engagement of the youth in the business were evident.

'I want to see the business develop, that [the coffee enterprise] succeeds, so tomorrow it can generate more jobs for those who need work. . . I want to see it positioned within its brand, I am working hard to be the sales manager. I want that position, I would like to receive training on institutional negotiations and on the administrative part.' (Female participant #18).

It is important to note that participants had demanding schedules. Twelve participants were working and studying simultaneously. Despite their busy schedules, they were committed to working hard and investing in their futures. Moreover, nine of 10 of the female participants had children, with the majority being single mothers. These young women were often balancing the pressures of work, school and raising their children, often with minimal financial or emotional assistance. Childcare, or lack thereof, represented an ongoing challenge for these young women who were struggling to improve their plight and provide for their children.

'My children are 2 and 6. . . I pick coffee to earn a living. . . Oh [childcare]. . . is a real problem, because I did not have someone to leave [my children] with. . . there is a children's centre and the lady is my friend, and she would take care of them during that time.' (Female participant #2).

Conclusion

Opposing stereotypes, defying challenges and building a future

Our participants, like those in other contexts of ongoing armed violence, were faced with forced migration following demobilisation. At a time when youth were in need of the support of their families and communities, particularly given their difficult histories and experiences of wartime victimisation, our sample of former child soldiers were compelled to reintegrate into a new community. Furthermore, they were frequently alone and isolated, which posed unique challenges to their overall development, sense of wellbeing and safety. In this sense, 'reintegration', as referring to the return to 'normal' community life and restoring a sense of belonging is a misnomer, as many former child soldiers are being reintegrated into an urban context that is unfamiliar, contributing to their sense of displacement and isolation.

The bulk of international news reporting has tended to 'pathologise' children formerly associated with armed groups (Denov, 2010). Yet, the youth in our sample have been challenging prevailing stereotypes, and despite significant challenges after exiting an armed group, were actively navigating the post demobilisation terrain within the context of an ongoing armed conflict. Participants were deeply committed to bettering their lives through education and employment. In contrast to media depictions of former child soldiers as threatening, dangerous, and a 'lost generation', our data demonstrates that in spite of profound challenges, former child soldiers seek to actively rebuild their lives in with the absence of violence.

Additionally, many former child soldiers continue to carry the guilt of their actions in silence as they avoid, with good reason, the possibility of being identified. One important aspect of the reintegration process is the opportunity to find spaces where the

challenges and realities of displacement, isolation, stigma and reintegration can be discussed and instances of reconciliation can occur, particularly among family members, and communities. Government at all levels, communities, the private sector, and NGOs can independently and collectively work to facilitate such spaces. The reconciliation process requires a neutral and secure arena where multiple actors (former child soldiers, families, communities, victims of forced displacement, victims of kidnappings, adult ex-combatants, etc.) can safely exchange experiences and realities. While former child soldiers, such as the ones in our study, may not be able to immediately return to their communities of origin post demobilisation, such encounters can lead to significant instances of reconciliation that reinforce the social fabric, encourage inclusion and diminish stigma. This will ultimately ease some of the many challenges associated with displacement and its consequences.

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¹ A child soldier is defined as: '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' (Paris Principles, 2007. p. 7).

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A call from MSF Amsterdam: it's time to implement staff care

There have been many lively debates over the necessity of staff care support within nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). These are usually characterised by an overall agreement on the need for this type of care. Important guidelines for NGOs working in contexts of violence mention staff support explicitly (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007), and specific guidelines on the implementation of a staff care system (including quality criteria) exist (Antares Foundation, 2012) (See also www.antaresfoundation.com). However, few NGOs actually implement staff care, making those with a functioning, comprehensive staff care system rare. At best, some level of support is offered in case of a serious incident, however, even this is missing in many organisations. The need for staff support have become increasingly clear, with reports of substantial psychological problems among NGO staff (e.g. Cardozo et al. 2005). Particularly good research on the mental health problems among national staff was done recently (Ager et al. 2012). This study reports very high levels of anxiety, traumatic stress and depression among the national staff, who continue to live in this highly emotionally charged environment. In the case of expats, leaving does not mean they also leave their memories behind. Recent research shows high levels of emotional distress among a group of returned expatriate staff, which can continue for quite some time after the mission ends. Although these studies use questionnaire evaluation, rather than clinical diagnostics, to assess mental health condition, it still clearly shows the impact of the humanitarian work on staff.

What more information is needed for NGOs to develop a (basic) staff care system? This was my thought when I read the Aid Workers Security Report published recently (Stoddard et al., 2014). In 2013, 251 (compared to 2012= +48%) incidents involving 460 (+66%) aid workers were reported. This figure is, in reality, likely to be higher as many incidents remain unreported. A staggering 155 (+121%) aid workers were killed, 171 (+49%) injured, and 134 (+47%) were kidnapped. Expat staff is targeted less: 87% of the incidents involved national staff. Working for NGOs has become increasingly dangerous. As risk and stress levels increase, the need for a professional staff support system also increases. What more is required? The commitment of management teams of NGOs, as well as donors, to seriously consider staff needs for support. If there is no basic staff care system in place, then it is time to implement staff care services.

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