

WOMEN COMBATANTS AND THE DEMOBILIZATION, DISARMAMENT AND REINTEGRATION PROCESS IN RWANDA¹

Vanessa FARR

Background

Women, especially those who have been associated with armed groups, have essential roles to play in DDR processes, yet they are frequently excluded from the planning and implementation of these processes. Women ex-combatants, in particular, often make up very small numbers of the forces to be demobilized and are de-prioritized because they usually do not represent the same level of threat as male ex-fighters. They are frequently demobilized in countries where institutions are not only severely incapacitated by war but also have a history of excluding women. Even if there is a commitment to achieving gender equality in the peacebuilding period, countries newly emerging from armed conflict suffer from a lack of capacity in Demobilization Commissions, Ministries and other government organs, not to mention a scarcity of funds earmarked for the support of women ex-combatants as a special group. As a result, the needs of these women are inadequately addressed in the demobilization phase and sustainable support for their successful reintegration is lacking.

In 2000, after a great deal of women's activist's lobbying, awareness of women's exclusion from peace and security processes, in particular women associated with armed groups, began to grow. The United Nations and all other agencies involved in DDR and other post-conflict reconstruction activities passed Security Council Resolution 1325, which sets out a clear agenda for measuring the advancement of women in every aspect of peacebuilding. Among UN agencies, UNIFEM has led the way in realizing Resolution 1325 through promoting women's visibility after war, not only in national and regional instruments but also in bi- and multilateral organizations, calling for gender mainstreaming in all aspects of peacekeeping, stressing the urgency of women's informed and active participation in demobilization and reintegration processes and insisting on their right to carry out their post-conflict reconstruction activities in an environment free from threat, especially of sexualized violence.

Peacebuilding in Rwanda

Since the failure of the Arusha Accords of 1993, Rwanda has been embroiled in conflict including the genocide of 1994 and the Congo Wars of 1996 and 1998 with their concomitant destabilization of one third of the country after invasions of armed

¹ This briefing paper is adapted from a report prepared for UNIFEM on 28 August 2004 entitled *Ndabaga Association and the Needs of Women Ex-Combatants in Rwanda*.

insurgents. Parliamentary elections held in September 2003 marked the end of the period of post-genocide transition and resoundingly returned the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) to power, with women gaining an unprecedented 49% of seats in the lower house and 30% of seats in the upper house, bringing their representation to almost 50% of the total.

As a measure of its commitment to peace and reconstruction in the country and the region more generally, the country has embarked upon an ambitious plan to downsize its troops, and participates in the Multi-Country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP) for the Greater Great Lakes Region. The Rwandan Demobilization and Reintegration Program (RDRP) is being implemented in two stages under the auspices of the Rwanda Demobilization and Reintegration Commission (RDRC). Stage I took place from 1997 to 2001 and demobilized a total of 18,692 soldiers. 111 of these were women and 2,364 were children.² A re-designed Stage II, which commenced in December 2001, is still ongoing. As at the end of August 2004, a total of 20,023 people, 223 of whom are women, have been demobilized, for a total of 50,025 demobilized to date out of an anticipated total of 78,000. The total number of women demobilized thus far is 334.³

A particular challenge facing the Government of Rwanda and the United Nations Mission to Congo (MONUC) is to reinsert both refugees in camps in Goma and Bukavu and overcome armed extremists, former members of the Militia (Interahamwe) and the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR) who have fled to Eastern DR Congo where they continue both to evade justice and viciously destabilize the area. It is known that thousands of family members accompanied these Militia groups into exile and are now living in conditions of appalling deprivation and violence. Some analysts have described these women and children as “hostages and human shields.” Even if their family members manage to escape, male Militia members are being forced to stay and are “living in enormous fear” not only of their personal safety, but of that of their families who can be targeted through the Militia’s “large international network”⁴.

² The large majority of these are boys: only one or two girls have presented themselves in the camp but Chimène Mandakovic, DDRRR Officer for MONUC, says gaining the confidence of girls is extremely difficult. She is anxious that more be done to help them come forward (interview, 26/08/04).

³ Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission, Report presented at the Ndagaba Association Workshop 25-27, Kigali, August 2004; World Bank “Country Profile Rwanda” (May 2004), http://www.mdrp.org/countries/profile-rwanda_may04.pdf.

⁴ Suzanne J. Brezina. “Gender Aspects in the Demobilization and Repatriation of Rwandan Militias in Exile.” Forthcoming, GTZ.

The RDRC and Women Ex-Combatants

Rwanda has no tradition of conscripting women into the armed forces. Nonetheless, a few hundred women voluntarily entered the resistance and are now presenting for demobilization. They are less than 1% of all combatants. Despite their small numbers and the fact that there is no unit charged with women's affairs, and although none of the Commissioners of the RDRC is a woman, the influence of women's significant participation in Rwandan politics and evidence of the government's commitment to gender mainstreaming can be seen, at least rhetorically, in the RDRC's reports and public statements. The Chairman of the Commission, Jean Sayinzoga speaks of the necessity of paying particular attention to women, and they are seen as particular beneficiaries of the "Vulnerability Support Window" (VSW) aimed at assisting the most challenged ex-combatants, with 73 out of the 111 (66%) demobilized in Stage I having accessed the fund.

The small number of women known to have demobilized thus far is, however, unlikely to be an accurate reflection of the real numbers of women associated with armed groups. The MDRP Secretariat holds that women in Rwanda are "being underreported by combatant groups at the front end of the process, and that more needs to be done to encourage women combatants to present themselves, and to properly identify and incorporate women into national DDR processes"⁵.

In addition to prioritizing women in the disbursement of the VSW, the RDRC describes several other steps it is taking to support them, including:

1. Ensuring women's needs are met in demobilization centres;⁶
2. Ensuring benefits for ex-combatants are equal, and equally accessible;
3. Encouraging implementation partners to facilitate women's participation in reintegration activities;
4. Strengthening the gender-awareness and capacity of staff;
5. Including women in community-level counselling activities; and
6. Monitoring the impact of the demobilization program on women.

Recommendations for Further Research and Networking

In interviews, women former combatants testified about their high levels of involvement in institutions from the grassroots to the very highest levels of government. A large number of those living in rural areas have been elected as women leaders in their

⁵ MDRP Position Paper. "Targeting MDRP Assistance: Ex-Combatants and other War-Affected Populations," January 2004, p.3.

⁶ In our interview, Mandakovic pointed out that there is no specialised feeding scheme for nursing mothers or small children, an omission with devastating results for child and maternal health, but one which she has had no success in correcting

local communities and participate actively in community institutions such as the indigenous justice mechanism known as “*Gacaca*” courts. They spoke in particular about the high levels of respect accorded them as women ex-combatants: they are perceived as more disciplined and peaceable than ordinary women and are often called on to resolve disputes.

Their active roles, however, belie the fact that many of them are among the poorest in their community – not only because they left school to fight, but also because, having given anywhere from six to ten years of their lives to the cause, they are far behind their contemporaries in achieving the milestones that normally mark progress in Rwandan society. That they occupy a contradictory position – as both respected leaders and peace-makers and as dependents on neighbourly goodwill – is a source of great anxiety and humiliation to most members.

The clearest means by which UNESCO could support their potential as peacebuilders and grassroots leaders, in my view, would be a) through supporting the collection of their life histories; b) by facilitating an analysis on the impact of including women in localised justice structures from which they have traditionally been excluded; c) commissioning comparative research on women’s participation in comparable structures in other parts of the GLR. These accounts will not only offer a unique perspective on why women choose to join liberation movements as fighters, but will also help us understand how they manage a return to civilian life. Acknowledging their unique stories is a means by which to restore women former combatants to full and dignified participation in their communities, and doing so in a comparative project will allow for broader conclusions to be drawn about women’s post-conflict recovery within the region.

Regional Implications

Because the DDR process in Rwanda is more advanced than in Burundi or DR Congo, the experiences of women in Rwanda offer a unique insight into how little, despite stated intentions to include them, women are effectively participating in these highly-militarised processes. How can this learning be used to prevent such exclusion as other DDR processes unfold?

Rwandan women have the advantage over their sisters in other countries in the region because they have an unprecedented number of women representatives in positions of authority and a well-organised NGO for women former combatants, Ndabaga Association, through which to air their views. UNESCO could support the extension of their experiences as leaders through the development of a regional network of women former combatants and women associated with armed groups to provide solidarity, monitor the progress of such women, and ultimately provide a comparative regional perspective on how different UN peacekeeping missions are carrying forward the suggestions of SCR 1325.

It should also be noted that, since the African Union is actively increasing its commitment to supporting regional peacekeeping missions, this may be a good time to think about how best to include women who have experience with working in armed forces and groups in future peacekeeping missions. The ex-combatants I interviewed in Rwanda feel they have both the competency and a specific interest in assisting women caught up in armed conflict. In my view there is a similar pool of talent and experience in other countries in the GLR which should be tapped into to support the redefinition of peacekeeping so that it can become ever more appropriate for Africa, and especially for Africa's women and girls. In the end, with the right support, it is women themselves who will ensure that the most vulnerable members of society will be protected and not exploited when peace processes begin.