

CHILD SOLDIERS AND  
REINTEGRATION: THE SOCIAL-  
POLITICAL COMPLEXITIES OF  
RETURN

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Popular images of child soldiers holding guns illustrate the brutality and devastating consequences of armed conflict. Worldwide, it is estimated that between 250 and 300,000 children are recruited as soldiers to serve state or non-state armies. But what happens to child soldiers when they return to civilian life? How do they navigate their post-war identities and re-establish themselves within family and community networks? Reintegration programs designed to rehabilitate and return children soldiers back to families and communities have been implemented by a number of international NGOs and national governments worldwide. Reintegration is typically the third phase of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programs. There are now important international child specific standards incorporated into DDR practice, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). However, the programmatic focus and outcomes of such programs do not adequately account for the social-political complexities of return. Drawing on recent research in Sri Lanka and Nepal with former child soldiers from the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Elam (LTTE) and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists), this brief argues that to address the socio-political complexities of return, the child/adult distinction needs to be problematized, and a longer-term idea of reintegration needs to be adopted to account for the different life transitions and challenges that children face as they become adults. In this way, NGOs and/or governments need to continue working with child soldiers once they leave formal programs.

This brief will first provide a brief overview of children and DDR practice and the distinctions made from a policy/program perspective between children and adults, and will then outline lessons from incorporating the social complexities of return for children that might be better incorporated by future DDR and other re-integration practices.

International standards regarding child-specific reintegration have had an important impact on the worldwide practice of DDR. Three components have been incorporated into UN sanctioned DDR standards: education, psychosocial counseling, and family reunification. These child-specific reintegration standards recognize a distinct child/adult experience of conflict and post-conflict settings. Such ideas reflect global ideas of childhood that are central in framing international advocacy, research, and policy efforts to address child soldiering, and children affected by armed conflict more broadly. As a concept, childhood is considered a time-bound, transitory phase of 18 and under, and a time of innocence and protection.

The limitations of DDR are discussed extensively in research and policy literature. This includes a narrow focus on security/military objective<sup>1</sup>, a failure to consider broader political and transitional justice dynamics<sup>2</sup>, and the common exclusion of girls through the failure to implement gender-sensitive measures<sup>3</sup>. This scholarship demonstrates that

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<sup>1</sup> K Theidon (2007) '[Transitional subjects: The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Colombia](#)', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Vol 1, 66-90

<sup>2</sup> D Subedi (2014) 'Dealing with Ex-Combatants in a Negotiated Peace Process: Impacts of Transitional Politics on the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Programme in Nepal' *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 49(6), 672-689.

<sup>3</sup> M Mackenzie (2012) *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security and Post-Conflict Development*. New York: New York University Press.

DDR programs provide an important linking mechanism to informal processes of reintegration and setting up the child soldier with resources, such as education and employment training. If a child soldier is marginalized on account of gender or for other reasons, they miss out on accessing education and employment resources that can help them set up new post-war lives. DDR, therefore, can be an important variable in how initial reintegration experiences occur. My research suggests that the return experiences of child soldiers and their concomitant needs are often more complicated than a child/adult division in DDR practice. Child soldiers have not experienced typical childhoods and many already have taken on adult responsibilities, including employment and family commitments. As well, the category of ‘adult’ is problematic, especially in the case of youths, who may be only one or two years over the age of 18. My research, therefore, highlights that placing child soldiers into the category of children does not always serve their best interests, as their lives between childhood and adulthood are often more complicated and fluid as they navigate their new lives and responsibilities.

In Sri Lanka and Nepal, these tensions played out in different ways. In both countries, considerable resources were dedicated to DDR programs. In Sri Lanka, the DDR program was run by the government, and in Nepal, the United Nations led the child soldier-specific program. There are four findings from this research that could be considered in future reintegration policy and program developments.

1. The importance of the social and cultural context for returning child soldiers. In Nepal, Maoist child soldiers rehabilitated as children were ineligible for compensation packages, unlike their fellow adult combatants, and were thus termed ‘disqualified’. Child soldiers interviewed for this research felt that a distinction between children and adults was unfair and not reflective of their contribution to the Maoists, thus taking away their agency. Also, the term ‘disqualified’, which means unfit or unworthy, continues to have implications for their lives in creating significant social stigma, and limiting their employment and networking opportunities.
2. The return to family, which is an important component of reintegration practice, does not always help the child soldier. In Nepal, many child soldiers interviewed faced numerous difficulties with their families who expressed disappointment that the child had not returned with money or resources to help the families. Girls in particular faced harsh judgement for their participation. As a result, many had returned back to Kathmandu to escape the stigma and judgement they faced in their families and communities.
3. Child soldier experiences of return are not just individualistic but tied to the local socio-political dynamics shaping post-conflict settings of peace and transitional justice. In Sri Lanka, child soldiers rehabilitated as children have returned to Tamil communities that are facing state-led militarization processes, surveillance, and on-going insecurity. Returning child soldiers need to be supported by a flourishing society to contribute in a positive way to their on-going needs and development.
4. Governments and NGOs need to follow up with former child soldiers systematically over a longer term to understand the continual challenges they face in reintegration. Reintegration does not just stop once DDR programs are complete, and programs and policies need to be continually revised in consultation with former child soldiers to address their needs. This could be done with follow-up education and/or training programs. Many child

soldiers commented that the training they received was inadequate, especially given that they had missed out on substantial education opportunities.

In sum, this brief touches on the complexities of return for child soldiers in South Asia that are not accounted for in formal DDR processes. There is a need to consider a broader range of child soldiering experiences that traverse a neat child/adult distinction in post-conflict programs, and the social and cultural context which they return to. An incorporation of a longer-term perspective in policy and program design would target and provide necessary resources to child soldiers in navigating complex life challenges as they move into their adult worlds.