Similarly, large numbers of young men are recruited into conventional armies in the region, through coercion or voluntarily. These forms of participation by young men as combatants have received much less attention than young men participating in insurgency groups. While the degree of trauma and coercion involved in young men’s participation in militias and conventional armies may be far less than that found in some insurgency groups in the region, these young men may require as much assistance to reintegrate into civilian life as those involved in insurgency groups.

There has been significant discussion of the means that armed groups use to recruit and coerce young men; nearly absent is any reflection about those indigenous sources of strength which allow or keep young men out of conflict. Accounts from Mozambique found that many adult and young men tried to stay out of the conflict and that some went to great lengths to try protect their families from such violence (Schafer 2001). There is an interesting example from the town of Bo in Sierra Leone, where youth-serving organizations were able to keep young men outside RUF activity, by recruiting young men into civil defense units through local football clubs (Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot 2003). Whether because of personal convictions, the ability of their families to help them escape, fear, community mobilization, or some combination, some boys and young men are able to stay out of armed groups. These accounts may be particularly useful in understanding and building on social capital and protective factors that may prevent young men’s future involvement in armed conflicts.

Young Men Affected by Conflict, in Post-Conflict Settings, and Violence

Young men are affected by and react in gender-specific ways to conflict. One of the most telling patterns is young men’s propensity to migrate. In virtually all conflict and post-conflict settings, men, and young men in particular, are more likely to migrate than are women and older men (Cockburn 1999). Young men are also more likely to migrate to cities as a reaction to conflict, increasing the number of children and youth on the streets (again mostly a male phenomenon), and leaving them vulnerable to being recruited into new forms of violence. While this may appear on one level to be a protective factor for young men, who have the mobility to leave refugee camps and seek better livelihoods, it also means that young men are separated from their communities and families (Stavros et al. 2000). Sommers (2001b) discussing the status of young men refugees from Burundi who settled in Tanzania, found that young men who migrate from another country often become outcasts or are seen as second-class citizens in their newly adopted countries; they are sometimes acutely aware of this status and the stigma they face.

For young men involved as combatants (in insurgency groups, conventional armed forces or militias) one of the biggest challenges is returning to civilian life. Indeed, young men often face a major challenge in returning to their second-class status, and of being powerless and marginalized again due to prevailing intergenerational power differentials. Having wielded power, some young men are reluctant to return to settings where they are subordinate to adults (Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot, 2003). Similar concerns have been voiced by young men in South Africa, who participated on the “front lines” with the ANC, and now perceive themselves to be relegated to second-class status (CSVR 1998).

There is a considerable research on helping child combatants reintegrate to civilian life and the specific traumas they face. In interviews of young men in northern Uganda, reported traumas include having to cope with the consequences of being forced to rape girls, of being put on the front line as a buffer when Ugandan military approached, of being forced to kill a family member and of being forced to practice cannibalism. Some former abductees live in constant fear of re-abduction; one young man we interviewed had in fact been abducted, escaped and then was abducted again. Others fear the military; in the case of northern Uganda, boys of military age have sometimes been killed by the military who suspect them of being members of LRA, even when they are not.
Other challenges include lingering fears and prejudices by communities and families, who believe that as former combatants they may use violence again at any time. Given the stop-start process of many conflict settings, this is a reasonable fear. Among former combatants in northern Uganda, some reported that their families treated them as outcasts, and were scared of them when they returned. “When I returned [from being abducted by the LRA] my in-laws took away my wife and child. They were afraid I might kill her. Now I stay with my mother.” Others lost the chance to pay bride-price and marry, as this young man related:

I am with a woman but I have not yet married her. While I was gone (abducted by the LRA) my family gave all the cows to my brothers to marry because they did not think I would come back. A person like me has to start saving money. It takes time and it is not easy to accumulate enough.

Frustration is high for those young men in refugee camps, who are either ex-combatants, abductees or were displaced by violence. Young men we interviewed in IDP camps in northern Uganda confirmed that young men report a sense of idleness and little hope for the future, and may turn to alcohol and other substances. Many young men in camps report that they cannot get married and in the process achieve a socially recognized manhood. Said one young men living in an IDP camp in northern Uganda: “In the past, we would have the opportunity to dig [farm a small plot of land] and produce things and get married. Now we are displaced and it is very different [meaning they do not have land to dig on].” Forced settlement in camps weakens men’s ties to their land, leading to fears that others will take their land and that they will have nowhere to return.

Other authors found similar conditions in camps among Burundian refugees in Tanzania, where young men were described as seeking to “recuperate the masculinity that they perceive to have lost in the camp” (Turner 1999:1). Young men in camps frequently complain that women do not respect them; some men sense that camp administrators have become the new big men. In other cases, however, some young men seem to take advantage of post-conflict settings to question and usurp the authority of older men. Other authors have also reported on a loss of manhood suffered by men in conflict areas. Dolan (2003) writing on men in conflict-affected areas in northern Uganda reports:

Non-combatant men’s ability to achieve some of the key elements in the model of masculinity into which they have been socialized is severely reduced. Education and enterprise can no longer bring recognition or a sense of achievement. Men are unable to protect their families or property from rebels of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) or from soldiers who rape and steal. Humiliation, resentment, oppression and frustration lead to violence—sometimes directed against the self (Dolan 2003).

One manifestation of a sense of “demasculation” in refugee camps is sexual violence. Somalian young men refugees interviewed in camps in Kenya said that because they could not get married, they would use sexual violence against women. This is a serious issue in cultural groups in which premarital sexual activity is highly sanctioned and marriage is delayed because young men cannot achieve the conditions for marriage in refugee camps (Sommers 2001a).

There has been a wide range of program responses for former combatants, although many of these are exclusively for ex-combatants; those youth—male and female—who were affected by violence but not directly involved as combatants are sometimes excluded. Indeed, several authors have suggested that in many conflict settings the differences between those who were combatants and those who were victims often break down in terms of their needs and realities.

Programs that assist ex-combatants and youth affected by the violence often face tremendous challenges. In Liberia, program reviews and evaluations have highlighted the lack of jobs and educational opportunities outside their programs. Other programs have created dependency while others are too short-term, raising expectations and then leaving young men frustrated when programs end.
In terms of vocational training for conflict-affected youth, there are often mismatches between market demands and the realities of income and employment possibilities in urban and rural communities. Program reviews have found examples of young men affected by violence being trained as auto mechanics, only to return to villages where there may be only two or three cars. In other cases, young men may value academic skills more highly while immediate needs suggest they need vocational skills (Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot 2003). In some educational support programs, the young men consider themselves too old to return to school. Most programs assisting conflict-affected youth in returning to school have been short-term, providing scholarships or waivers for only a year or less. It is also clear that simply reinserting young men in school does not resolve deficits in education systems.

Furthermore, few of these programs seem to have incorporated a discussion of how gender comes into play—that is, how efforts to engage young men must also consider their desire to achieve a socially recognized version of manhood, and intergenerational tensions between groups of men. To be sure, the gender-specific needs of both young women and young men have not been incorporated into most reintegration programs, but there has been more discussion about the gender-specific needs of girls and young women.

Another lingering question, seldom addressed in reintegration programs, is to what extent former combatants are liable or should be held responsible for their actions. Peace education programs have sometimes discussed this issue, but for the most part it has not been adequately addressed. Other challenges in reintegration programs include those of involving the community, or identifying, recruiting and training qualified staff, particularly in settings where conflict itself has led to migration and disrupted community life on a massive scale.

Whether re-integration and support programs for former combatants are effective depends on numerous factors, including for example, whether the young man was forced to carry out violence against his own family or community. Reintegration programs that tap into indigenous or traditional rituals, such as cleansing ceremonies, are reported to be useful. And, while most of the examples here suggest challenges, there have been useful experiences of accelerated educational programs for young men who have missed several years of schooling (Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot 2003).

Young Men, Gang Involvement, Ethnic Unrest, Vigilante Groups and Criminal Activity

Other forms of violence are prevalent in Africa, and also clearly linked to masculinities. As Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot (2003) point out, the annual homicide rate in South Africa is nearly double the estimated death rate from conflict in Sierra Leone. Various studies confirm gang activity, predominantly involving young men, in urban areas in Africa, including South Africa, Nigeria and Mozambique. In the Western Cape Region of South Africa, 90,000 young people are reported to be members of gangs (Barker 2000b). Nonetheless, there is more research on conflict than criminal activity and a relative dearth of accurate data on criminal activity and delinquency in most of sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of South Africa (Shaw and Tschiwula, 2002).

South Africa is said to have one of the highest homicide rates in the world (as of 2004), and one of the highest rates of sexual violence in the world, with an estimated 52,733 women raped a year (South Africa Police Service 2004). Every year in South Africa, 11,000 persons die of gun-inflicted wounds. Homicide is currently the leading cause of death for young men ages 15-21. Worldwide 80 percent of homicide victims are male; in South Africa the figure is 88 percent. Furthermore, in 2002, more than

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11 There is growing research, program development and policy attention to violence and delinquency in South Africa, and considerable analysis of how this violence is linked to culturally salient versions of manhood.