

Coming Home from the Bush

Female ex-fighters returning from the rebel forces in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone and the factors influencing their reintegration. A comparative study.

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Acknowledgments

Writing this MA thesis has been challenging but extremely instructive. I developed new skills and my interest in gender studies found new grounds. Creating this dissertation spiked my enthusiasm for new academic studies and further research.

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This master's dissertation encouraged me to read and discover many highly interesting researches already conducted concerning this topic. I was often even disappointed that I could not discuss all of them in detail. In the end, I hope to have captured the essence and constructed an interesting and informative academic dissertation.

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Abstract

Women have always been considered on the side-lines of war. They are the ever victim, but never the perpetrator. This gendered war narrative leads to a lack of research on the active role of women in war. This MA thesis examines the effect this has on women's journey back home after having been involved with armed forces. To understand this, two cases will be compared. The 'Lord's Resistance Army' in Northern Uganda and the 'Revolutionary United Front' in Sierra Leone have around the same time incorporated many civilians: men, women and children. Based on a systematic literature review, this dissertation studied the common factors that recur in both cases and influence women's reintegration process after having been involved with the rebels. When women returned, they stumbled upon many constraints that hampered their reintegration. Constraints were associated not only with the structural discrimination of women in their home countries and a strong stigmatization by their communities and families, but also with the incapability to consider women as fighters. The respective governments and the international community deemed it impossible to accept women as equal fighters and could only see them as victims or in supportive roles. This resulted in the development of reintegration programs that were not adequately designed to meet the specific needs of female ex-fighters, leading to their exclusion from the program. Many women had to reintegrate spontaneously without support and within the existing structural constraints. However, many showed great resilience as they had done in the bush (in the armed rebel group) and tried to create their own future.

Introduction

If we think about war, we think about a soldier holding a gun. However, we almost always picture a man holding the weapon. War is still perceived as a concept where men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. Women are portrayed as victims of (sexual) violence, widows crying over the loss of their husbands or sons, or migrants who have to pack up their children and flee from the violence. They are never themselves part of the violence because they are perceived as inherently non-violent (Cohen, 2013; Coulter, 2009a, 2009f). While a growing body of research contradicts this stereotypical portrayal and gender studies are devoting more attention to the women as actors in war (Cohen, 2013; Coulter, 2005; De Brouwer & Ruiz, 2019; Elshtain, 1995), the question might be, what then afterwards? This master's dissertation examines how gender relations unfold in a post-conflict context and how this affects female reintegration. More specifically, it aims to discover the different factors that shape or influence the process of reintegration of women who were previously involved with armed resistance.

To do this, two conflicts are studied that are comparable in terms of atrocities (Apuuli, 2004), knew strong and enlarging rebel group(s) fighting the government, and involved civilians, including women. First, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda is examined. Since the independence of the country from the British, it has been haunted by strong regional divides. The north ended up in an economic and politically marginalized position. Next, representatives from different ethnical groups constantly replaced each other by force and retaliated against the region previously in power. The regional and ethnical divide along with the militarized politics and the marginalization of the north under the reign of President Museveni led to the rise of various rebel groups. Among them, coming from the Acholi region, the LRA led by Joseph Kony (Finnström, 2008; Titeca, 2019). However, it did not take long for the LRA to turn on Acholi civilians as well; and the group became infamous for their rape of women and abduction of youth, men and women; forcing them to join their forces (Apuuli, 2004).

Second, this conflict is compared with the civil war in Sierra Leone and more specifically the dynamics of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Sierra Leone was also a part of the British imperialism which privileged an urban elite in education and encouraged unfair diamond

mining, leading to the underdevelopment of the rest of the country. Especially the youth felt that their country was for ever led by male urban elders. Corruption by Present Stevens and his self-appointed successor President Momoh and the country's economic crisis, affected the same group of uneducated, unemployed youth, leading to youth uprisings. A few of those youths later received military training in Libya, like Foday Sankoh who was ready to establish the RUF in 1991, against the corrupt government. They were even able to rule the country for a short time, but this movement too was not as black and white as it seemed and involved many attacks on civilians and abductions (Abdullah, 1994; Coulter, 2009a; Davies, 2000; Zack-Williams, 1999). Many women ended up in this rebel force and others during the war.

Even though they may not immediately be considered as such, many women were actually present within the rebel forces, or in the bush as it is often referred to. However, their roles in both rebel forces entailed more than being wives of rebels or service personnel. Many girls were actually trained in armed combat and performed tasks equal to their male peers (Annan et al., 2009; Coulter, 2009b, p. 2; Denov & Maclure, 2006). The question then, however, becomes whether these girls, coming back from the bush after having been fighters there, are treated the same as the men who returned. If it is against common conception to perceive women as fighters, does the same inability exist to perceive them as ex-fighters? And if so, what effect does that have on their reintegration process?

Women are not expected to be violent, therefore they are not researched the same in the context of war and violence. This dissertation wants to tap into that shortcoming. Through a comparative literature review it tries to answer the following research question: "Which factors shape the reintegration of former female rebel fighters?". To do this a comparative research will be conducted focussing on the differences in female reintegration processes in Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone. Both countries have experienced an important participation of women in the armed conflicts which makes them perfect to study female reintegration. As a sub-question the differences and similarities of female reintegration processes in both countries are considered. Based on preliminary reading the *hypothesis* is formulated that the way female victimization is entrenched in the international narrative on girls and war, will have an effect on the reintegration processes of female ex-rebels in both Northern Uganda and Sierra Leone.

The research is structured in two big parts. The first part is a theoretical framework which starts by delineating what is already discussed about the issue and which statements have been made to then detect what the gaps are in the knowledge. It focusses firstly on the concept 'female victimization' because this is the starting point of the hypothesis and secondly on 'reintegration' to be able to completely understand the research question. The second part consists of the analysis of the data derived from systematic literature review. The two cases will first be contextualized separately to understand their dynamics and then analysed through the analytical framework discussed in the first part, using gender analysis. To comprehend them both thoroughly enough and to be able to clearly link analysis to context, the analyses are done separately and immediately follow the contextualisation of their respective conflict. In the debates and arguments chapter at the end, the two cases are compared to answer the research question. Being well aware of the fact that it is not possible to generalize the experiences of all returned women in both conflicts, so whilst trying actively not to essentialize sex, this MA thesis adds to the knowledge on reintegration of female fighters by applying the concept of female victimization.

Theoretical Framework

This research lies within the theoretical framework of women in war as a part of the broader discipline of gender studies. To develop a conceptual framework about the experience of reintegration of former female rebel fighters, it is very important to keep in mind what Chris Coulter (2009f) reminded us of: “*there is no univocal position of women in relation to war*” (p. 4). She draws on previous research to emphasize that there is no point in trying to find a one-size-fits-all definition of the experience of women in war. Experiences differ according to many variables such as kinship, age, generation, morality, etc. She points out that no analysis concerning the experiences of women in war is possible without taking into account the local structures of the society they live in (Coulter, 2009f). “*What people tolerate in peace shapes what they will tolerate in war*” as said by Carolyn Nordstrom (as cited in Coulter, 2009f, p. 9), explains how these different variables can completely alter a person’s (post)wartime experience. Therefore, throughout the further analysis, the focus tries to be on the local continuities and their influence on the process of reintegration of female ex-combatants rather than on an abstract universal conception of ‘women in war’ (Coulter, 2009f). Chris Coulter’s narration of the experiences of women and girls who played a part in rebel groups in Sierra Leone, in her book *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* (2009), will come back often in this dissertation. She researched the reintegration of female ex-fighters and takes female victimization into account, making her results very valuable for this research.

Female victimhood

War is a man’s business. Several authors writing about women in war begin by mentioning this stereotypical gendered assumption about war (Cohen, 2013; Coulter, 2009f; Elshtain, 1995; Plümper & Neumayer, 2006), therefore there remains to be an empirical gap concerning female fighters; the fact that we immediately feel the need to specify ‘female fighters’ already says enough (Cohen, 2013). If there is any mention of women in the military it is mostly focused on cases in the West (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2013). Chris Coulter (2009f) explains that the polarization of women and men goes along the distinction of peace and war. The dominant idea of men as combatants on the frontline of the war reflects the stereotypical and gendered idea of the man as perpetrator and the woman as victim (Coulter, 2009f). This is part of a very

gendered discourse of war. Take for example, sexual violence. Even though it happens empirically, it seems almost impossible to turn the genders around in this situation, i.e. to have a female perpetrator and a male victim. Consider the photographs of Abu Ghraib prison that came to light in 2004. The U.S. soldiers were, among other human rights violations, sexually abusing the prisoners. However, one of the biggest shocks was that *female* soldiers were sexually abusing *male* prisoners. This was something that could not be comprehended (Cohen, 2013). As a response, the discourse tries to eliminate the sexual part of the act, by calling it torture instead of sexual violence brought upon men. Indeed, otherwise it would not comply with the ideals of masculinity. On the other hand, seeing female perpetrators of sexual violence is not consistent with the ideals of femininity, so we focus on the impossibility to commit sexual violence as a woman. The idea persists that sexual violence against men and women is experienced completely different, therefore it is gendered (De Brouwer & Ruiz, 2019). Eriksson-Baaz and Stern (2013) who discuss the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, explain that there is no attention paid and no mentioning of female fighters in the literature on the war. Because the focus on the violence in the DRC is only on sexual violence, female perpetrators are not presumed and thus not researched (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2013). Another example: the reason why millions of men are willing to put their lives at risk, is the fraternity. Is there no sorority then with the same colossal importance (Handrahan, 2004)? It is interesting to note that when war becomes associated with both men and women, we immediately talk about another or a more specific kind of war, more along the lines of civil wars. Nina Silber (1993) called the civil war a “woman’s war” (p. 11). In this case, the war is taken away from the frontline and becomes a constant, everyday experience for men and women. She discusses the Civil War in 1860s England and the Victorian standards that at the time determined female behaviour. She explains the contradiction and the ensuing struggle between gendered behaviour norms and the existing reality of living in a war. Coulter (2009f) also emphasizes the relevance of gendered norms and codes of conduct that exist in the everyday community with regard to women’s partaking in war and how they are welcomed back afterwards. This will come back below.

Besides the stereotypical assumption of the male nature of war, the literature also debates the victimisation of the women in it. Women are seen as solely victims (Annan et al., 2011; Coulter, 2009f). Of course, if we statistically look at this, it is still true that men remain the biggest perpetrators of war (Plümper & Neumayer, 2006). Interesting here are the different

responses to that statement. On the one hand, one can criticize that women are actually the hidden victims: The argument is that men are the combatants on the frontlines, so they are also the biggest casualties because they die at the frontline. However, this ignores the (indirect) fatal consequences for women in war zones such as health, sexual violence, living conditions etc. Thus, actually women are also very much the victims of war (Plümper & Neumayer, 2006). On the other hand, one can criticize that women are seen as solely victims. Even though men and women are actually both victims of war, women receive a socially constructed identity of 'the victim' because men are the biggest perpetrators of war. The critique here is that this portrayal completely denies women's agency as social and political actors (Coulter, 2009f). Another way of portraying women as victims rather than perpetrators is the claim that more female combatants in a war leads to less rape of non-combatants. This is an interesting assumption, which is highlighted by Dara Kay Cohen (2013). She shows the different arguments that have been presented for this claim. A traditional argument is that the presence of women 'civilizes' men and their behaviour because of the simple reason that women are less violent than men. Other arguments entail that women in the armed group represses the need of male fighters to rape, because they have either consensual or forced marriages with the women in their organization (Cohen, 2013). The agency the female fighters have in this line of thought, is thus either their so-called 'natural' tendency to be more civilized or just their bodily presence which the male fighters can use to 'get it out of their system'.

There exists a much broader debate about this concept of female victimhood within feminist literature. Claiming victimhood was long seen as necessary to expose oppression. Indeed, there can be no oppression if there are no victims who are oppressed. In the case of the feminist claims of victimhood, this would then be against some kind of institutionalized oppression by men (Convery, 2006). This became strongly criticized for different reasons: it was argued that calling yourself a victim is a strategy to deny individual failure or responsibility – a way to be seen as innocent and morally superior – which in turn leads to the emergence of a strong victim-blaming rhetoric. According to Convery (2006) such theses stemmed mostly from a conservative discourse and reached a peak in the 1990s. These discursive elements of victim-blaming were exploited from feminist concerns or debates about victimhood (Convery, 2006). Consequently, there exists a large branch of feminists who seek to move beyond the state of victimhood and attempt to deny the perpetual victimhood which women seem to be in. For example, in the discourse on war and gender, the focus is very often on the female

victim. They seem to only be a consequence of what happened to them. Hidalgo-Tenorio and Benítez-Castro (2020) explain that this type of discourse portrays women involved in war as not having a voice, the possibility to express their experiences or to say who did it to them, assuming that the agent is always someone else. In her review of a book on female victimhood, Audrey Reeves (2013) notices as well that the literature, by trying to uncover experiences of women in war, still reflects along the “*dominant representations of post-war femininity*” (p. 188). Women are systematically portrayed as victims, possibly mothers or peace brokers, but never, for example, as a female combatant (Reeves, 2013). Hence, through this stream of criticism, the concept of ‘victim’ is associated with a position of having no power nor agency. However, the importance of claiming victimhood arose from a point of view of trying to oppose the institutionalized power of men and gaining agency by acknowledging women’s position as a victim. The question then arises: are being a victim and being an active perpetrator mutually exclusive? The concept of ‘victim’ seems to be ever connected to the term ‘passive’. We consistently speak about ‘passive victims’. Resistance is the way to get rid of your passive persona and partake in active responses (Convery, 2006). This seems to be creating a paradox: resistance to the oppression releases one from one’s ‘passive’ victimhood, when in fact, victimhood was initially established as a measure to resist oppression by forming a collective identity of the oppressed? This negotiation of victimhood is a very interesting response to a deep-rooted structural constrain that will also be found in the analysis of our two conflicts.

The debate about female victimhood and defining victimhood leads to the question: how do women conceptualize their experience? Victimhood objectifies a woman’s experience in a certain sense, and even though many points of the discussion are raised, still there seems to be a gap in the literature that would concentrate more on the individual experience. As Coulter (2009f) highlighted, it is important to shift the focus from the somewhat vague or abstract woman’s experience in war – or in this case as a victim – to get an insight on the personal conceptualization of the (victim) experience in war and post-war settings. This is what Christine Sylvester (2013) tried to do. In 2013, she pointed out that feminism does not have many studies on war. According to her, feminism has always been more focused on peace. She believes that because feminism focusses only on victimhood if there is mention of the role of women in war, it delegitimizes the work and the experience of women in armed conflicts. She explains that there are many ways in which women can be part of the war labour

and not solely victims or care takers: War can create new labour opportunities through the war industry. Moreover, women can fight in wars and stop being the caretakers of the injured, but injuring people themselves. Or, they can take on roles as peace activists or leading roles in the new leadership created through the conflict (Sylvester, 2013). Women who fight in an armed conflict are also not necessarily forced into this situation. Not every female fighter was abducted and forced to take up arms, so not every woman was victimized and is only passively undergoing her role as combatant. For example, Eriksson-Baaz and Stern (2013) discover in their research on the war in the DRC that most women *chose* to join the army. These women see themselves as the active subject wanting to join and fight, they refuse to be victimized (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2013). The researchers suggest that this personal narrative of the women's motivations for joining the army may be related to the broader shame and stigma that their family or community attaches to women who become soldiers (more than men). They have to overcome more rejection than their male colleagues once they decide to join the army and therefore feel a bigger attachment to the army, or their new family. Even if their role might still be different from male soldiers – the idea of 'beautiful' women receives a role in the army (when they are, for example, looking for spies), female soldiers are treated differently once they gave birth and often still remain wives that are submissive to their husbands (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2013; Titeca, 2019) – many of these women see themselves as active agents, fearlessly choosing a life in the army (Eriksson-Baaz & Stern, 2013). The greater stigma for women was also a recurring theme when researching Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda. Previous examples highlight some important considerations of this research. By looking from a female victimization perspective to the reintegration of female fighters, this dissertation tries to uncover women's active responses. It examines women's own personal experiences and their agency, in order to overcome the stereotypical 'woman as victim' assumptions.

Reintegration

Discussing the stigma women have to endure when they decide to join the army, raises the question if and how this stigma remains when their job as soldier is done and they return home. Several authors agree that reintegration is a difficult process: Cohen (2013) emphasizes that committing violence breaks the ties with a fighter's previous community life. Once (sexual) violence has been brought upon the home community it becomes harder for the

combatant to desert and return home (Cohen, 2013). Chris Coulter (2009f) argues that the experiences of the women she researched differ in many aspects. All her respondents were abducted and raped by men in the rebel movement. However, while some women tried to escape, others chose to stay with the rebel group, with their bush husband and fought with them. Also, their reintegration has different outcomes connected to different local moralities. Some women are welcomed back by their family and their neighbours when they return, others are completely rejected by their own family and seen as damaged goods. She claims that there is a lack in research on the effect of local structures on the reintegration process (Coulter, 2009f).

The question then arises as to what the universal, unified definition of the concept of reintegration of ex-fighters would be. There is a great deal of literature on the concept of reintegration. First, it has been described as the action of resuming one's appropriate roles according to their gender, age, social status etc., and as a dynamic process which is influenced by a lot by societal factors (Elnitsky et al., 2017). There are, however, several authors who note that there is a lack of a clear, universal theory or definition of reintegration (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Söderström, 2013; Torjesen, 2013). Elnitsky et al. (2017) believe that there should be one common definition across all studies on reintegration, which is currently lacking. They claim that because of this gap, it is difficult, if not impossible, to correctly measure reintegration and make effective use of the research. Stina Torjesen (2013) also emphasizes that a theoretical framework to study the reintegration of former fighters is important and still lacking. She urges that more focus be placed on the ex-combatants' experience of reintegration, rather than on the structural programs facilitating it. For example: the reintegration facilitating program implemented by the United Nations, the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration). This program is meant to be a process of trying to reintegrate ex-combatants into society (United Nations, n.d.). They have to 'become civilians again' and be "*active participants in the peace process*" (United Nations, n.d., para. 1). However, as Torjesen (2013) notices, the 'R' has been the least researched part of the DDR and research still focuses on the actions having to be undertaken by the (inter)national entity, instead of the reality of the one reintegrating. Hills & MacKenzie (2017) even state that "*the R of DDR is the Achilles heel of the program, super hard to get right*" (p. 460). The DDR process will come back a lot in the analysis below as an example of international reintegration aid in general.

Besides the need for a more elaborate theoretical framework, there are also several questions in the literature about reintegration in general. First, as Torjesen (2013) mentions, the idea of 're-integration' creates a strong connotation which is not true in every case. Not every soldier is completely isolated from his/her family or community and not every reintegration is therefore *per se* a problem or conflict (Torjesen, 2013). Second, not every combatant wants to return to his or her previous 'home' situation. Reintegration means going back home. However, Podder (2012) explains that this is a normative assumption that disregards a whole range of possible struggles in the pre-war context (Podder, 2012). Third, one's personal situation can also have changed. Some might have gained resources during the war, which might alter his or her social situation (for example, men who are now able to embark into marriage) (Torjesen, 2013). Fourth, the given society might have changed in such a way that 'home' does not really exist anymore. Take, for example, the situation in Uganda. During the civil war, the population suffered big displacements as a defence mechanism of the government against the LRA which meant that the LRA returnees had to reintegrate into IDP camps (Borzello, 2007). Consequently, the concept of reintegration might need a common theoretical framework to be investigated in, but it cannot disregard that the concept has very different implications for different people. Therefore, it remains important to continue to pay attention to one's personal experience in their reintegration (Torjesen, 2013).

More specifically, focussing on the reintegration of women reveals that there can be differences in reintegration based on gender. The difference between the reintegration experience of men and women is based on different positions of power in the social structure. This should not be surprising, since "*gender is a contextual, socially constructed means of assigning roles and norms to given sex categories*" (Handrahan, 2004, p. 431). Chris Coulter (2009a) notices this as well. She discovers that there is a behavioural model to which men and women are supposed to conform which goes beyond only the gendered division of labour. In her words: "*The normative model, or set of ideas, defining what constitutes men and women is a model to which men and women aspire and against which they measure themselves, and against which they are also measured by their society.*" (p. 58). Afshar (2003) emphasizes that the idea of reintegrating back into life before conflict means repositioning women in their context of subordination in the private sphere. On the one hand, female ex-combatants have to return to their domestic role in the post-conflict context as if nothing happened (Afshar,

2003). On the other hand, once the husband or male relative soldier returns, the woman who had to fend for herself and became independent during the war, once again becomes subordinate to him. His traumas need to be healed and he retakes the place as head of the household. Moreover, if a woman is widowed after the war, she is no longer someone's woman and faces stigma and socio-economic vulnerability. This is because a woman alone, who tried to support her entire family through the war, always had and has a lower priority for financial benefits once there is peace and demobilisation than a male soldier who just heroically defended his country (de Watteville, 2002; Handrahan, 2004). Men's dominance also implies that a post-conflict environment is possible and, in effect, often more violent for women than the conflict itself was. Post-conflict settings are prone to the emergence of women trafficking, women being forced into prostitution, 'honour killings', domestic violence, and much more (Handrahan, 2004). Thus, it seems, during the conflict women become more empowered because the conflict becomes more important than the other everyday patriarchal structures. Once the war is over, however, women are forced back into their subordinate positions and often even more so than before because the national power needs strongly re-establish its dominance (Baaz & Verweijen, 2016; Handrahan, 2004). As Haleh Afshar puts it: *"Ideologies do not change during wars; they are simply suspended"* (Afshar, 2003, p. 185).

Methodology

To discover the overarching factors influencing female ex-fighter's reintegration processes in Uganda and Sierra Leone after the respective civil wars, this dissertation relied on a qualitative systematic literature review. The collection of the literature was done through a systematic review based on elaborate search strings. Afterwards, the retrieved literature was analysed using a qualitative approach. Even though the analysis was based on secondary sources, it was not a meta-analysis since the studies analysed did not all use the same research methods (Snyder, 2019). Once the relevant literature was selected, inductive coding was performed.

First of all, the data collection was done via search strings based on synonyms of the word 'female fighter' (see Appendix 1). This scheme is divided into two main categories, i.e. one about Uganda and the other one about Sierra Leone. To guarantee all the relevant literature on both conflicts was found, the name and abbreviation of the two rebel groups under investigation were included as well. Through Boolean search commands the categories were connected with (1) the concept 'reintegration', and (2) seven synonyms of 'female fighter'. The search strings were performed in Google Scholar using the UGent-access to sources and second the same 42 combinations were run through the online library of the KULeuven. A first limitation was thus that only sources could be included for which access was granted by either the University of Ghent or the Catholic University of Leuven. Other literature was found by following the sources referenced in more general articles about reintegration or about female fighters that used the conflict of Sierra Leone or Uganda as examples. Many included literature sources were based on qualitative data or combinations of qualitative and quantitative data, and all studies included very interesting literature reviews themselves. While I am aware that I am not dealing with raw data most of the time and other researchers' interpretations will definitely have been present in my data, I believe the biases are cancelled out by making sure to include as many different opinions about the same situation as possible.

The first selection of sources was made based on the title and abstract of the literature and sometimes a quick scan as well, using word searches to be sure to only include data that addresses female ex-fighter's reintegration back in either Sierra Leone or Uganda. Some titles might have been deceiving at first, because it then, for example, turned out to be a text about women in these countries that have to welcome back ex-fighters without themselves ever

having been a member of the rebels. These texts, of course, were interesting, but not relevant for this study. Next, there was a cut of date in the initial selection, because only sources that were written after the conflicts were relevant. For Uganda, this was less straightforward because the government already started allowing amnesty to returning fighters in 2000 so people could start reintegrating. However, the war was not over by then and over the next years there were many new abductions and attacks (Titeca, 2019). Because of this selection process some authors might be left out of the comparative literature analysis that are considered essential to the topic. In the case of Northern Uganda, for example, one could think about Holly Porter (2013) or Sverker Finnström (2008). Of course, these pivotal authors are consulted in this dissertation, but they did not focus specifically enough on the issue of returning female ex-fighters and the challenges they stumble upon whilst trying to reintegrate. Therefore, they are not specifically included in the analysis. Another point to note about the data collection is that the search strings were in English only. This might have left out some other interesting sources. The first selection process led to a total of 55 sources. The second selection process was performed based on a reading of all the sources and led to the exclusion of ten. Sources turned out not to be relevant because they did not discuss women or were not really from the women's perspective, did not talk about ex-combatants, investigated women's time with the rebels and not their reintegration. Finally, in the case of Uganda, two texts did not discuss the LRA but the previous civil war including the NRA.

Based on the 45 remaining sources the data-analysis was conducted through content analysis. I decided to analyse my data manually, as often only particular chapters of texts or books were relevant for this literature review. Moreover, through manual encoding it was possible to set up my own tables with all the relevant arguments, and then code these accordingly. An inductive coding of the relevant parts of the texts resulted in sixteen codes of which some were divided in a few sub-codes. I tried to use as many similar codes for both Uganda and Sierra Leone to be able to make a grounded comparison between the two civil wars. Therefore, both analyses follow the same structure. The codes were re-organized in four main categories that guide the analysis: (1) Reintegration into community/family; (2) International/Western aid; (3) Women's responses & self-demobilization; (4) Post-conflict gendered struggles. The first three are discussed separately in the analysis and the fourth is immediately incorporated in the discussion of both cases together. The coding tree can be found in Appendix 2.

Comparative analysis

Like explained above, the comparative analysis starts for each case with the contextualisation of the conflict followed by a short, detailed look at women in the rebel groups. This is followed, for each case, by the analysis based on a systematic literature review of these women after their time with the rebels to answer the research question, i.e. to see what factors influence their reintegration. In the theoretical framework a lot of attention was payed to female victimization during a conflict. Now, this concept will be used throughout the analysis to check if the hypothesis, i.e. that female victimization does have a note-worthy effect on reintegration of female ex-fighters in Uganda and Sierra Leone, fits the data analysis. This will be summarized in the final 'debates and arguments' where the clear comparison of the most prominent reintegration influencing factors is done between both cases.

1. The LRA in Uganda

1.1. History and contextualization of the LRA

The background: Historical marginalization & political militarization

The conflict of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) cannot be seen out of its context and history. The turns it took, the motivations and legitimizations all have a very deep-rooted origin. This conflict can be traced back to the British protectorate in the colonial 19th century. The civil war created by the LRA is infused with the regional division based on an ethnical marginalization introduced by the British (Titeca, 2019). The Kingdom of Buganda was created by the British at Lake Victoria in 1894. Buganda therefore represented the core; first in the sense of territory, but later it became also economically and politically apparent. The Bantu speaking South received a whole range of advantages from the British, in that they became the commercial centre and represented the political and economic institutions (Fallers, 1961; Titeca, 2019). Whereas the South got introduced to industry and the production of cash crops like plantation rubber, cocoa, cotton and coffee; the North was left with only two functions: (1) they provided the labour force to be employed in the South – leaving them with mostly

unskilled labour – and (2) they became the recruits for the army – mostly the Acholi¹ people from the North represented the big pool of potential soldiers (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999; Titeca, 2019).

This economic and politically marginalized position of the North together with the ethnical division, led to the constant militarization of politics. Every new regime that came to power achieved this power through violent coups. Once in power, it seems to have become tradition to take revenge on the ethnic group previously in power. As Titeca (2019) puts it, the country has suffered a “*spiral of political violence, largely based around ethnic and regional identities*” (p. 279) for a long time. The Acholi people had a prominent role here because of their main function as army (Titeca, 2019). From the independence of the country in 1962 onwards, violence surrounded the political sphere (*Uganda’s Post-Colonial History of Dictators and a Warning for the Future*, 2018).

After more than two decades of representatives from the South and the North violently opposing each other, in 1986 the National Resistance Movement (NRM) appointed Yoweri Museveni as president after winning the last civil war, ousting the previous president, Tito Okello. With Museveni – who is still the president of Uganda – as head of the country, all the power went to the South again and the Acholi people from the North were held responsible for the violence inflicted by the previous regime and the leadership of Okello, who was the only Acholi ever to come to power, because of their role as army (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999; Titeca, 2019). The same tendency returns. None of the governments of Uganda seem to have been able to elevate themselves above the violence, the ethnic preferential treatments and the favouring of status above development (Tindigarukayo, 1988). Political violence thus reappears (if it had ever left) and creates the sphere for the development of Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA).

The momentum of the LRA

It is important to understand that the LRA rebel group did not start its violence and upheaval in a politically stable place of peace. “*The widening gap between north and south, and the*

¹ They weren’t a unified people before the colonization made them so. ‘An-loco-li’ meant “I am a human being” (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999)

militarization of politics” (p. 7) as Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot (1999) put it, were the crucial factors opening the arena for the LRA to rise in. The tendency of taking revenge on the region previously in power also did not disappear when Museveni achieved presidency. Out of fear for this revenge and also because they were fed up with their continuing marginalized position, rebel groups rose in the Acholi region that again used violence as a reaction to power (Titeca, 2019). An important nuance here is that there was not really one reason for the war; socio-economic marginalization played a role, but also the militarized political sphere in the country and the fluctuation in power and more (Finnström, 2008).

Different rebel groups had arisen and had been defeated, among which Alice Lakwena’s ‘Holy Spirit Mobile Force’ (the HSMF). She was defeated in 1987 but was the first to take a religious approach to rebel forces. Joseph Kony followed along these lines of spirituality guiding resistance based on the spirits of the Acholi world (Doom & Vlassenroot, 1999). It is interesting to wonder how this motivator could work at the time. Doom and Vlassenroot (1999) made a very interesting hypothesis about this: *“Our point of view is that Alice represented something new (although her movement had roots in tradition). She offered hope for worldly as well as spiritual redemption in a dark hour of despair. Tradition had to be transformed to conform to the perception of an overwhelming new danger, namely the fear of extinction held by many Acholi people.”* (pp. 16-17). Joseph Kony however did not take over from Alice Lakwena. They first existed simultaneously and once The HSMF was defeated many soldiers from Lakwena joined Kony’s forces, and Kony also made use of Lakwena’s name and achievements (Dunn, 2004). The LRA’s message came down to preaching a combination of Christian and Acholi traditions (which are committed to several spirits) and reinventing it at the same time, and Kony was only the messenger of the Holy Spirits (Titeca, 2019). The LRA seemed to have legitimate claims of existence, such as, the political and economic marginalization and the fear of extinction of the Acholi people, but not much time passed until the LRA started inflicting violence upon the Acholi people as well. They started attacking and abducting civilians, forcing them to join the movement (Titeca, 2019). As a result, the conflict does not resemble a traditional civil war, since (1) the LRA did not have the full support of the civilians from where they operate and (2) they did not really show a straightforward political agenda. Indeed, the rebel group was dominantly organized around the person of Joseph Kony (Veale & Stavrou, 2007).

However, the conflict is not as black and white as it is made out to be. In 1994 peace talks began between the LRA and the Museveni government, but they failed when the president gave the LRA only one week to surrender (Titeca, 2019). Then followed various back-and-forth actions from both the LRA and the government. The Museveni government set up 'protected villages' for Acholi people as refuge although most Acholi were driven by intimidation and murder from the UPDF ('Ugandan People's Defense Forces' was the new name for the national army) to get them there. The official justification for these camps was that they were to protect the civilians from the rebels. At the same time, they were a means of separating rebels from civilians, in order to find who belonged to the rebels and who did not and to cut the support the rebels still received from the civilians (Branch, 2011; Titeca, 2019). However, the reality of these 'protected villages' was less heroic, as the infrastructures were very minimal and the inhabitants of these villages got stripped of their land and became dependent on humanitarian aid. Eventually, the action of the government to delineate the rebels, turned the civilians into Internally Displaced People (Titeca, 2019). The promised military protection was also quite an oversell, because the people in these villages remained vulnerable to LRA violence while suffering structural violence because of their government orchestrated, poor living situations (Branch, 2011; Titeca, 2019). The result was that many Acholi people kept their affinity towards the rebels and believed in their legitimacy. Moreover, many civilians also had (abducted) loved ones within the armed group which made it very hard to perceive them as horrible perpetrators (Titeca, 2019).²

Eventually it was under pressure of international NGOs and the Acholi community that the Ugandan government passed a law of Amnesty (Titeca, 2019). Finnström (2008) quotes the Republic of Uganda in explaining what this amnesty law entailed: *"According to the amnesty law, any rebel who "renounces and abandons involvement in the war or armed rebellion" can surrender to the amnesty. Individuals who are "collaborating with the perpetrators of the war or armed rebellion" or "assisting or aiding the conduct or prosecution of the war or armed rebellion" can also take advantage of the amnesty."* (p. 92). This did lead to several thousand defected LRA soldiers by the mid-2000s. They first had to go to rehabilitation programs and once they were seemed fit, they could return to society (Titeca, 2019). Interestingly, many

² Sverker Finnström (2008) sheds light on the complexity of the term 'civilians'. The distinction between civilian and rebel or civilian and combatant is not as clear as it is on paper. Civilians are often both victims and perpetrators of the war.

(young) boys were stimulated after their defection out of the armed group to join the national army to track down their former comrades (Titeca, 2019; Veale & Stavrou, 2007).

After 9/11 the LRA appeared on the U.S. list of terrorist groups. The conflict had already received a geopolitical aspect when South Sudan became involved, but in 2005 the LRA lost their support there and ran to the Garamba National Park in Congo. In 2008, Museveni attacked these camps with support from South Sudan and the DRC, which failed again. Every attack from the government on the LRA resulted in a counterreaction by the LRA, in which they abducted even more civilians because they lost members in the attack. The LRA headed into the Central African Republic as well, but remained under strong military pressure from the UPDF (Titeca, 2019). Peace talks were also ongoing in between these attacks. However, these could not proceed smoothly, because of various reasons. A first reason was Kony's fear as an arrest warrant was issued against him and other LRA leaders in 2005 by the International Criminal Court (Finnström, 2008; Titeca, 2019). Second, from the side of the government, the military disrupted or undermined several peace talks (Branch, 2011). Branch (2011) explains the claim that the war did not see an end for so long, not because of the incapability of the government to end it, but because of the unwillingness to do so because of political benefits. The arguments are that (1) the LRA was causing all its devastation in Northern Uganda as a revenge for the part the Acholi played as the soldiers in the civil war of the NRA's quest to power and that the civil war among the Acholi was a good by which they would kill each other off. (2) On a nationally level, the war in Northern Uganda helped to maintain support for the NRA government and gave Museveni legitimacy to keep expending the military (Branch, 2011). (3) In his foreign policy, the existence of the LRA allowed Museveni to go looting in Eastern Congo, way before LRA fractions were actually there, under the pretext of searching for LRA camps (Finnström, 2008). The LRA is currently at a very weak point. Kony has fled to South Dafur and many of his close leaders defected, because of the unpredictability of Kony so they say. The LRA is splintered now and is mostly focussed on the poaching of elephants in the DRC (Titeca, 2019).

The LRA and women

The LRA was notorious for abducting children, raping women and overall gender-based violence (Apuuli, 2004). About 80 percent of the LRA were child soldiers. There is some

disagreement about how many of them were girls, but roughly speaking, it is between 15 and 30 percent of them (Coulter et al., 2008). According to the explanatory article of the International Criminal Court's evaluation on the LRA insurgency, women abducted by the rebels suffered rape, enforced marriages and pregnancies and many of them tested positive to different sexually transmitted diseases. However, they also note that the Ugandan army raped a shocking number of women as well when they could take advantage of the insecure environment of the 'protected villages' and these women were threatened with death if they were to report the crime (Apuuli, 2004). However, women were also treasured goods within the LRA. Women who were taken by the rebels and brought with them to the bush became wives of bush men. Commanders had several wives, and they could decide to gift one of their wives to a lieutenant. The woman in question had no say in the matter (Titeca, 2019). Joseph Kony was believed to have a sacred power which he received from the holy spirits because of his divine purpose. Women did not dare to escape because they believed this power enabled him to always find out if his abducted rebels were even thinking about escaping, let alone making an attempt to do so. The belief in this capacity of his was enough to avoid any attempts to escape (Titeca, 2019). Through their enforced marriages and pregnancies, the women were also kept close to their husbands. This can be seen as another strategy to keep abducted women in the bush (Apuuli, 2004) or as a very pragmatic act to change the Acholi population to a new Christian one (Shanahan & Veale, 2010). In any case, forced marriages and the children deriving from them were important to sustain and reproduce the rebel force (Shanahan & Veale, 2016). Lastly the idea of 'beauty' also bared an important connotation. Beautiful women belonged to the commanders. Hence, if a beautiful woman was abducted, she needed not to be touched and brought straight to the commander. Their beauty gave them a special status, so to say, but was also the reason to take them because the abduction of girl was a very selective matter (Shanahan & Veale, 2016; Titeca, 2019). In turn this was also a way to reward loyal rebels, since the commanders could choose which woman went to which male rebel (Shanahan & Veale, 2016).

However, there are also other approaches to the dynamics of women in the LRA. In 2009, Annan et al. (2009) did research based on interviews and surveys and concluded that the mainstream approach to women in conflict needs revisiting, especially in the case of the Northern Ugandan conflict. For example, they explain that the raping done by the LRA is not that peculiar and irrational; and that the raping occurred only within the enforced marriage.

Since sex was prohibited outside of marriage, the raping of civilians outside of the bush remained uncalled for. This is something Cohen (2013) noticed as well. Only about half as much women as men were abducted and they were also released sooner than their male colleagues. They were abducted when commanders needed a wife and mostly Kony decided when more or less women were wanted (Annan et al., 2009). According to Donnelly (2018) within the LRA, gender norms were also reformed and became different than in the Acholi society. For example, Kony really valued education and being able to speak English, thus schoolgirls were preferred among the LRA men. In the Acholi society however, girls were the last on the list to receive education (Donnelly, 2018). While Titeca (2019) describes the role of women in the LRA to be either sex slaves or wives and mothers of bush men, Annan et al. (2009) say these women had more active roles than stereotypically assumed. These roles could entail supportive functions like cooks or water collectors, but women that were part of the LRA for a longer time were given a weapon and became fighters just as their male co-members. The only remaining point of difference is that once a woman had her first pregnancy she was no longer supposed to fight and returned to her role as new mother and wife of her bush family (Annan et al., 2011). There were also women groups that were very important in the peace talks between the LRA and the government (*Robinah Rubimbwa on How Women Played a Crucial Role in Peace Talks with LRA in Uganda, 2017*).

1.2. Analysis of Reintegration of Women in Northern Uganda

1. *Reintegration into community and family*

Stigmatization and rejection

To answer the research question, the factors that influence women's reintegration according to the literature review are listed here. When female ex-fighters or abducted girls came back from the rebels, they often found that their war was not over yet. Now, they had to begin the process of reintegration, which turned out to be hampered by many different factors. All the analysed authors agreed that the community and family could find it difficult to accept their girls back. Akello (2019) studied the reintegration of men and women from the LRA and pointed out that there is, in general, a societal stigma for both male and female returning rebels. However, Ainebyona (2018), Annan et al. (2013), Maina (2011) and Mazurana et al. (2017) explicitly mention that it is stronger for women. Most authors that mention a reason

for the stigma say it comes from, on the one hand, the fact that returning girls were married and divorced or had bastard children, and on the other hand, them being held accountable for the crimes the rebels committed. Atim et al. (2018) explain that often abducted citizens were forced by the LRA to attack their own villages to make a return or escape impossible (Akello et al., 2006; Annan et al., 2013; Atim et al., 2018; Mazurana et al., 2017; Veale, 2003). Akello et al. (2006) and Veale (2003) go even further by saying that once a woman has killed someone herself, the reintegration will be more difficult. This was already highlighted in the theoretical framework by Cohen (2013), and Akello et al. (2006) even add that girls could be 'legitimately' raped because of this. This relates to Mukasa's claim (2017) that women who were abducted into the LRA are re-victimized for the crimes the rebels committed.

Returning women and girls can be completely rejected by their community or highly mistreated by their family. They are stigmatized, called names and seen as a killer or as the embodiment of evil (Ainebyona, 2018). Annan & Brier (2010) noticed that many people turned to alcohol during the war, which often led to returning girls being victims of abuse by drunken family members. Accordingly, the stigmatization and abuse of these women leads to a greater trauma and shame (Maina, 2011). There are many reasons why family or community members might be unwilling to welcome them back and different authors mention different reasons or different combinations of reasons. A first reason (1) is economic tensions. In war-torn Uganda many families suffered from food scarcity. A returning women, was seen as another mouth to feed (Annan & Brier, 2010; Shanahan & Veale, 2016). As a result, greater economic agency could also reduce the stigma (Atim et al., 2018). Secondly, (2) many authors mention that cultural customs make it harder to forgive these girls (Ainebyona, 2018; Atim et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2007, 2008; Mukasa, 2017). These women survived in the bush so they had to adapt. They learned survival techniques and behaved in ways that go against the cultural norms which support male dominance in a family (Atim et al., 2018). Within the rebel groups, initially the same gender roles persisted. Women were cooks, cleaners, servants of men. Yet they were also rebels, which gave them a feeling of power they never felt before (Coulter et al., 2007). Moreover, many of them were victims of sexual violence and often had children as a result of that. Girls who lost their virginity are seen as violated and less valued for marriage (Atim et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Mukasa, 2017). This is not a problem for men because their sexuality is not an issue, not even for the male rebels who endured sexual abuse by female commanders (Ainebyona, 2018). Therefore, like Atim et al. (2018) put it: "*stigma is*

linked to broader gender discriminatory sociocultural norms and practices and changes under different circumstances” (p. S61). This stigma makes the returning girls reluctant to seek help for their sexually related health problems or report the sexual violence (Ainebyona, 2018; Denov, 2008; Mazurana & McKay, 2003). Thirdly, (3) a few authors mention that the animosity came from a feeling of unfairness because the criminals are supported by NGOs, while citizen survivors who, for example, had children by UPDF soldiers, were overlooked (Akello, 2019; Atim et al., 2018; Maina, 2011; Veale et al., 2013).

Mothers coming back with children from the bush face an even tougher reintegration. The children are stigmatized or called names, and they are scapegoated by the community. They are the symbols of the war and have “rebel blood” (Ainebyona, 2018; Atim et al., 2018; Maina, 2011; Shanahan & Veale, 2010, 2016). Maina (2011) mentions these children can be rejected by their own family and Annan et al. (2010 & 2013) believe the family is more likely to be accepting, but the neighbours can be hostile towards the children. Shanahan & Veale (2010) argue that the stigma for the children depends on their behaviour – which needs to be regulated – but that they do not carry a permanent mark. In any case, they all agree that children are an added issue (Akello et al., 2006; Annan et al., 2013; Annan & Brier, 2010; Atim et al., 2018; Denov, 2008; Maina, 2011; Mukasa, 2017; Shanahan & Veale, 2010). A first reason for this is that children in Uganda belong to their paternal clan lineage and should thus be taken by the father. Therefore families of returning women can be accepting of their own child coming back, but not of the child she brought with her from the bush (Mukasa, 2017). This ‘bush child’ is evidence of the violation of community norms and the rebel connection (Akello et al., 2006; Denov, 2008). A second reason is that, without knowledge of the child’s paternal lineage, a boy could threaten the inheritance of the land of male siblings of the rebel mother, as the inheritance of land always runs through the male line in the family in Uganda (Atim et al., 2018). Overall the community tends to hold both the children and their mothers accountable for what the rebels did (Akello et al., 2006).

Even though many authors are quite negative about reintegration perspectives back in the community (Akello et al., 2006; Atim et al., 2018; Maina, 2011), Annan and colleagues notice in 2008, for the first time, that these problems almost always fade over time. They do acknowledge that almost all female returning rebels have problems when returning, but for the majority this resistance disappears over time. These problems are according to them more

often with community members than with their own family and if it is with their family, it is usually one family member and not the entire family that rejects her. In numbers they see that 7% of returning girls have persistent problems with their family and 6% with their community. Only for 3% of the men community and family problems persist. So women are still twice as likely to have ongoing family and community problems than men, but still it is a very small percentage. The chance of having difficult family relations is bigger when the women return to extended family instead of their parents because here the aspect of limited resources plays a bigger role. They go on making a statement that most other authors like Akello et al. (2006), Atim et al. (2018), Maina (2011) and Mukasa (2017) did not share, by arguing that mothers returning with their children from the bush did not have more problems or endured more resistance from their family and community (only for 20% of ex-rebel women a child led to a problem with family members), but that the difference lies in that their problems were less likely to disappear over time. They even noticed that parents of girls coming back with children often took these children under their care, because it is customary for the parents of the mother to take the children out of wedlock of her hands (Annan et al., 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013; Annan & Brier, 2010). However, five years later, Atim et al. (2018) refer to this by saying that *“the passage of time is less of a determining factor in their acceptance and reintegration than previously thought.”* (p. S61). They argue that social and economic factors play a more important role.

How to get accepted back?

Girls are stigmatized and rejected by their community and family because they violated female gender norms, are an extra economic burden and are held accountable for the violence of the rebels. Coming back with a child who is a constant reminder of the rebel atrocities, makes it even worse. However, authors mention also different strategies girls could use to lessen their stigma and enhance reintegration.

According to Shanahan & Veale (2010), girls have to partake in shared, social activities to be accepted back in the community. Ainebyona (2018) and Atim et al. (2018) mention the possibility to undergo ritual cleansing in order to reintegrate, heal and to wash away the evil spirits that took a hold of them in the bush. They mostly talk about the ‘*Cen*’ which is an evil spirit that haunts the murderer of a person, someone who witnessed the killing or someone who saw the dead body and did something to harm it. If the returning girl is able to pay for it,

she can undergo a ritual cleansing to fully reintegrate and to get rid of the cosmological consequences of her crimes.

Another, often-mentioned option is marriage (Ainebyona, 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008; Maina, 2011; McKay, 2005; Specht, 2013). Marriage is an important cultural institution since it makes you an adult and provides you with social status, and it is needed for financial provision. However, for returning rebel women, finding a husband is not easy. The bride price goes down, but they are also perceived as unmarriageable. They are seen as 'damaged goods' because of the sexual violence they endured in the bush and the consequential loss of Acholi culture norms, and many people are also too afraid of them in order to marry them because they see them as unpredictable and aggressive. Even male ex-rebels sometimes leave their bush wife and choose a non-abducted village girl as their new spouse. Hence, the stigmatization of female ex-fighters is problematic both economically and socially. This is a prime example of an obstacle in reintegration that is not an issue for male returning rebels, but is fundamental in the challenging reintegration process of women (Ainebyona, 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008; Maina, 2011; McKay, 2005; Specht, 2013). Annan et al. (2010 & 2013) and Specht (2013) add that even when they do find a new husband, who knows of their rebel past, their situation usually does not really change for the better. Most of the time, they become the second or third wife of their new husband and get secondary treatment. It can even go so far that the husband takes away her resources. According to Gerard Ainebyona (2018), some husbands marry ex-fighters to use the money from the reintegration packages they receive and then leave them once these are spent. Some husbands are drunk or sick and financially depend on the returning woman, or they endure domestic violence no different than what they went through in their bush marriage. However, according to Annan & Brier (2010), a sidenote has to be made here. They argue that the domestic violence female ex-rebels undergo is in fact not that different from the one other women face. Overall, husbands had become more violent because, throughout Northern Uganda, traditional male roles have been under attack due to the displacement and men's inability to provide.

All authors who discuss bush children and a new marriage agree that marital issues are as well worse when there are children from the rebels involved. Mothers are less attractive as a new wife and the new husbands often mistreat the children (Ainebyona, 2018; Annan & Brier,

2010; Atim et al., 2018). According to Atim et al. (2018), mothers are also more prone to abuse from their husbands and being abandoned. The resentment towards the children is, if they are male, usually an issue of inheritance, and overall, an extra financial concern. There is, however, some discussion in the literature on why there is unease towards the single rebel mother coming with her child to a new marriage. Annan et al. (2009, 2010 & 2013) believe that the new husbands treat these children worse because they are not his children, not because they come from the rebels. Veale et al. (2013) seem to agree when they say that there is a stigma for all young single mothers. They do note however that for ex-female fighters this stigma can manifest more in aggression. Shanahan & Veale (2010) give another explanation to understand the roots of the stigma they endure:

“In contexts where traditional support structures are under extreme stress, the economic vulnerability of young mothers may create a sense of tension within the community. Stigma may be enacted in these relationships as a result of daily frustrations and pressures, rather than as necessarily a consequence of abduction experiences themselves” (p. 127)

However, Norman Mukasa (2017, p. 356) contradicts this a few years later. He says that the stigmatization of these children and their mothers really did come from their rebel past and their being conceived out of rape. Not because of the single motherhood. In any case, to conclude this, very often female returnees are stuck in emotionally abusive marriages, but they stay because they see it as the best option for themselves and their children. Even though they receive more social acceptance, they are often repressed, stripped of rights and prone to domestic violence (Atim et al., 2018), which for some is already a relieve from the daily violence they endured as a stigmatized unmarried female ex-rebel (Ainebyona, 2018).

2. International reintegration programs

As previously mentioned, the Ugandan government decided to grant Amnesty to returning rebels in 2000 (Finnegan & Flew, 2008). However, only one in three eligible women had applied for an Amnesty certificate by 2007 and of the estimate of women in the Acholi region that stayed for more than three months with the LRA, only half went through a reception centre (Annan et al., 2008). All analysed studies agree that the official reintegration programs were not able to reach female ex-fighters as they were supposed to.

Several reasons were emphasized in the literature as to why this did not happen. One reason is the lack of clear information (Annan et al., 2008; Mukasa, 2017). Annan et al. (2008) state that a third of the female ex-fighters without a certificate said they did not know about the reintegration programs and another third said they thought they were not eligible for an amnesty certificate because they did not stay long enough with the rebels or because they did not go to a reception centre first.

The second reason is mentioned by Annan et al. (2008), Coulter et al. (2008), Maina (2011), Mazurana et al. (2017) and Mukasa (2017) and relates to what is previously mentioned: the stigma. Going to a reception centre is a very public showing of one's rebel past, hence the option of quietly blending back in disappears. Many girls had to consider the risks and decided that the certificate they would get would not weigh out the stigmatization they would receive because of it. The stigma influenced their surroundings as well, often fellow rebels, commanders or relatives discouraged them from joining disarming programs (Coulter et al., 2008). This demonstrates what McKay (2005) mentions, which is the importance of the community in the reintegration process of returning women. They can facilitate or completely jeopardize women's reintegration with their acceptance or rejection. Susan McKay (2005) reminds us of how this rubs against the individualistic Western modus operandi.

Thirdly, logistical constraints were, in different ways according to different authors, a big hindrance for reaching women. The physical distance could be too large for some girls (Mazurana et al., 2017), but there were also constraints mentioned that show that the DDR designers did not pay much attention to the female experience of reintegration. Many returning women struggled with grave health concerns due to sexual abuse, and the DDR program did not provide proper health care for them (Annan et al., 2008; Maina, 2011; McKay, 2005). Their mental health as well was not properly paid attention to. Muldoon et al. (2014) discover that the help of an official reintegration program does not lead to better mental health than demobilizing on their own. Next, the DDR designers, according to Mazurana et al. (2017), did not notice that many women had children when they came back and there was often no child-care provided in the camps. Mukasa (2017) is more positive though and highlights local responses to this issue, such as *Pader girls' Academy (PGA)* which was a religious organization that provided day-care options.

Lastly there is the very big structural constrain that results from the lack of recognition of women as 'real' fighters. Girls tend to be invisible in conflict and post-conflict narrative (Denov, 2008). First of all, Binder et al. (2008) and Maina (2011) explain how women were usually left out of the negotiations and the making of the DDR program, while women are very important in the process of peace creation. A prime example is Betty Bigombe, who was the principal peace negotiator that stood between the LRA and the Ugandan government. She inspired other female peace activists. However, if we look structurally to international programs, they still fall short. The UN implemented 'Resolution 1325', but according to Binder et al. (2008) women's experiences remain marginalized in the program itself. Their specific gendered issues seem to be overlooked because they do not fit the definition of demobilizing 'combatant'. Out of the literature came two reasons why girls could not be seen as soldiers: (1) they (also) had additional roles in the rebel force like cooks, spies, wives etc. which turns them into 'dependents'; or (2) they are stuck in the Western narrative of the girl as the perpetual passive victim. While as explained in the previous parts they are definitely capable of violent acts and turn more often than not out to be both victims and perpetrators. (Coulter et al., 2007, 2008; Maina, 2011; Mazurana et al., 2017). Therefore, Annan et al. (2009), Mazurana et al. (2017) and McKay (2005) notice that this 'women as passive victims' perspective ignores that gender roles tend to be altered within a rebel force and stereotypes disproven. For example, the poor woman who is forced to marry, sexually abused and forced to be mother, is not always that vulnerable. Women in the LRA often stated that they were more confident because of their marriage and that their children helped them to receive basic needs (Annan et al., 2009). Many women are resilient enough to turn their forced victim situation around. Also, their time with the rebels changes them. They find themselves in positions of power, they violated the expectations of hegemonic femininity, but most of all they often got empowered due to their survival (Mazurana et al., 2017; McKay, 2005). To conclude, by not seeing them as fighters, we do not see their needs as ex-fighters. Gendered assumptions and female victimization lead to a gender biased reintegration experience (Coulter et al., 2007).

3. Female ex-combatants' responses & self-demobilization

Overall, the literature seemed to agree that for one reason or another, most of the girls were excluded from official reintegration programs. This meant that they had to go immediately back to their community, or often to IDP camps where their family had been moved too, and therefore experienced 'spontaneous reintegration'. They have to create their own livelihood within the stigma. Annan et al. (2011 & 2013) however, make an interesting statement here when they argue that women just have less job opportunities in general, whether they were once abducted rebels or not. For example, in Uganda women cannot own land so they should always be in the care of a male, be it a family member or a husband. Since they cannot own the means of production, their wages are bound to be lower, also Akello et al. (2006) and Maina (2011) noticed this structural constraint. Generally, Annan et al. (2008, 2009, 2011, 2013), Coulter et al. (2008), Maina (2011), Muldoon et al. (2014) and Shanahan & Veale (2010) agree that also before the war a big gender disparity in terms of economic and educational opportunities existed in Uganda. One fifth of Ugandan women were not educated and one third were illiterate (Maina, 2011; Muldoon et al., 2014). Other authors focus then on the economic agency many women showed. Denov (2008) talked about agricultural work and petty trading, Mukasa (2017) mentioned their involvement in small businesses and according to Annan et al. (2008) and Atim et al. (2018) female returnees also took on stereotypical 'male' jobs like alcohol brewing and driving trucks. Atim et al. (2018) and Mukasa (2017) conclude that while this form of resilience helped a lot with their relationships and with their own self-esteem and feeling of empowerment, they are often still held back by the gendered structure of their war-torn country, like no proper health care and solely providing for their bush children. Denov (2008) and Shanahan & Veale (2010) mention another form of economic agency being transactional sex or prostitution to be able to survive which often comes together with sexual abuse, and they both argue that mothers coming back with bush children are at a higher risk for this line of work. Female ex-fighters coming back with children are stigmatized because of their sexual activity in the bush. They can undo their social stigmatization through economic agency. To do so, however, they are often forced to be sexually active again.

To be economically independent and to be politically aware, women want and need proper education. However, just as their limited livelihood options, women in Uganda find themselves in a clear lack of educational opportunities (Annan et al., 2013; Coulter et al., 2008). The disagreement in the literature is again about whether females returning from the

rebels find more constraints to access education than women who were never close to the rebels. Annan et al. (2008) and Denov (2008) notice that abducted citizens miss a lot of education while they are in the bush. However, Annan et al. (2009, 2011 & 2013) argue that this is not a different experience from the one girls in Uganda in general go through. Girls in general have less opportunities because of the ongoing gender discrimination in the country. The authors argue that female ex-fighters are behind in education because they spent so much time in the bush and therefore could not go to school. Hence, not *per se* the fact that they were 'female rebels' hindered their educational opportunities. It was because they physically could not attend school while being away, and therefore the same goes for male ex-fighters. It goes even further that in fact, there is not a big difference with non-abducted girls because they as well are taken out of school at an early age to get married, start working or begin have children. They do mention that coming back with children from the bush does put an extra constrain on their attempt to re-join classes. Coulter et al. (2008) agree with this statement. If the rebel father is no longer in the picture, these mothers have to provide for their children and earn an income instead of going to school. Childcare is also an issue when they want to attend school and often schools do not accept pregnant women or mothers. What's more, they carry a stigma (Annan et al., 2008, 2009, 2013; Coulter et al., 2008). Annan et al. (2013) find that only 10% of women returning from the LRA with children picked up their education again. Atim et al. (2018) mention that a small number of forced mothers choose to go back to their bush husband and the father of their children or his family, hoping to find financial support. More often, however, women decided to migrate as a response to their constraints and this claim is supported by McKay (2005) and Mukasa (2017). The anonymity is a very big asset of moving usually to an urban centre, away from their hometown, in hope of finding a new husband, an education and livelihood opportunities within the anonymity of the urban area.

Taking all these constraints into account, female ex-fighters really had to show resilience. According to the literature, they did. First of all, they showed a lot of resilience regarding their survival and often by escaping their captors in the bush. Some even managed to create very good positions for themselves within their captivity, even though when coming home this resilience is used against them and they are shamed because of it. Akello (2019) and Denov (2008) explain that they are often expected to be very aggressive as a result of their time with the LRA, but Annan et al. (2008 & 2011) state that in reality they are not more aggressive than

other women who lived through the war without being captured by the rebels. All the authors agree that female ex-fighters have to overcome rather serious distress from their time with the rebels. Annan et al. (2013) show that women coming back from the LRA have 20% more mental distress than women who lived through the war but were not abducted. Different authors highlight the different forms that this distress can take (Ainebyona, 2018; Akello et al., 2006; Annan et al., 2013; Denov, 2008; Mukasa, 2017; Muldoon et al., 2014). The distress is also stronger for female than male returnees because it was associated with the violence they endured and women in the rebel force were more directly affected by sexual abuse than men. The highest amount of distress was felt by the abducted women forced into a rebel marriage because they were continuously exposed to violence (Ainebyona, 2018; Annan et al., 2008, 2013; Coulter et al., 2008). However, Annan et al. (2013) nuance this, as they explain that the distress was caused not only by the violence these women endured, but also by the structural violence and livelihood constraints they were still subjected to. Hence, the simplistic victim position they are put in by international narratives, ignores the resilience many female ex-fighters were or are able to show during and after the conflict. They can overcome their constraints if they keep fighting the structural discrimination.

To end, what was found in the literature on reintegration of female ex-fighters after having been part of the LRA, is that there are several factors influencing their reintegration. First of all, they are stigmatized for having taken part in the rebels' atrocities and for their bush marriage and sexual activity as a result. Therefore, bringing children with them enhances the struggles. However, there is some disagreement in the literature about the endurance of this resistance. Annan et al. (2008, 2009, 2011, 2013; 2010) found that for almost all girls this disappeared over time. Ways to enhance acceptance for girls were marriage, economic stability and ritual cleansings because most of the women did not go through official reintegration programs. This was because again it is a reason for stigma, there was no health- or childcare provided, and most of all it was not adapted to female ex-fighters because women were not expected to be fighters. Girls therefore often demobilize on their own and have to find livelihood opportunities within a society that is discriminating towards them.

2. The civil war in Sierra Leone

2.1. Context of the civil war in Sierra Leone

Colonial polarization, educational bias and a mining empire

Before linking the analysis of reintegration in Uganda to the research question, now first a contextualization of the civil war in Sierra Leone will be done. Just like the war in Uganda, the conflict in Sierra Leone cannot be considered only in its active decade, and similarly the causes of the conflict are not without context (Coulter, 2009b). The country was colonized by the British and Freetown needed to become the epicentre of the British abolitionist movement. Sierra Leone became one of the biggest countries inhabiting people forcibly displaced by the slave trade (Anderson, 2020). Later on the British empire included the hinterland around the colony as well by making it into a protectorate (Whyte, 2015) in 1896 (Oyètádé & Luke, 2008) where slavery was still legal (Whyte, 2015). The then recently emancipated slaves coming from many different regions and ethnicities and now living in Freetown, received a new shared identity as they became the 'Krio' (Oyètádé & Luke, 2008). This led to a new separation between the non-natives (which were mostly Krio) in the colony Freetown who lived under great focus of the British and the native population that lived in the hinterland which was turned into a British protectorate (Coulter, 2009b). While the protectorate was placed under indirect rule, Freetown received a different treatment. By the 19th century Freetown enjoyed a flourishing trade and they had the first English university in all of West-Africa, established in 1827 (Coulter, 2009b; Oyètádé & Luke, 2008). The Krios in the end were British subjects for which they enjoyed advantages denied to the hinterland. For example, the British only provided education for the capital and neglected the protectorate. Then, in the 1930s Sierra Leone became the centre of diamond mining, and at a certain point the Sierra Leonean economy became fully dependent on mining with no regard for the export of farmers' agricultural products. Trade monopoly rose and chiefs were even paid off to make sure locals did not get involved in mining. Many revenues went to European stakeholders and chiefs gained more control because their consent was needed to start mining in their chiefdom (Coulter, 2009b).

After its independence in 1961, the hand down of power stayed within the hands of the elite and did not change much about the structure of the independent country. The British then left a big gap between both urban and rural and rich and poor. When, subsequently, the economy boomed because of the shifted focus onto mining and cash crops, the subsistence agriculture was left behind (Coulter, 2009b). Within this context, questionable governance continued. In 1967, the All People's Congress (APC) just won the election and put Siaka Stevens in power. He ruled from 1968 until 1985 with some military pushbacks which he overcame (Coulter, 2009b). Victor A.B. Davies (2000) calls it "*Siaka Stevens' personalized dictatorship*" (Davies, 2000, p. 351). During this period the country became a republic and in 1978 as well a one-party state. His reign was characterized by corruption, mismanagement, patrimonialism, illicit payments and bribes, and much more. This led the country into near bankruptcy with a big unemployed youth, violations to the law, and overall government dysfunction. New coups kept arising, he forbade all newspapers, and also violent labour unions and student demonstrations were recurring themes to his reign (Coulter, 2009b; Davies, 2000). In 1984 or '85 (different sources disagree) Stevens chooses his successor himself in a state-managed election, now Saidu Momoh continues his presidency (Coulter, 2009b; Peters, 2011b; Zack-Williams, 1999). Stevens' corrupt rule leaves its legacy in Momoh and creates grievances for the population with disastrous consequences.

In the 1960s and 1970s these consequences became visible in the awakening of the youth culture in Freetown (Coulter, 2009b). The youth in Sierra Leone was severely marginalized. Biased education was one thing, but even university graduates had a very hard time finding employment. The young, educated, male middle class came in contact with the unemployed, underprivileged youth who started to follow their lead in the student-led demonstrations. This tendency of political interest and activism grew ever more, and students started to take on different ideological agenda's such as anticolonialism, anticapitalism and pan-Africanism; but mostly their political activism was oriented towards the corruption of President Stevens. When he implemented the one-party system to their country, the youth reacted (Coulter, 2009b). In this period, everyone was 'pro-revolution', every anti-establishment idea was conveyed as revolutionary. However how 'revolution' was interpreted was different for different people (Abdullah, 2002). In the end the protesting youth could not get the rest of society involved and they remained unorganized, so they stayed in their marginalized position

(Coulter, 2009b). However, the stage was set now for 'revolution' against the corrupt state (Abdullah, 2002; Coulter, 2009b).

Enter RUF

After the student protest in 1978, a whole variety of men (women were not asked) were recruited to go to Libya for academic and military training. Among them was Foday Sankoh, trained by the rebel leader Charles Taylor (Abdullah, 1998; Coulter, 2009b). Foday Sankoh crossed the border into Sierra Leone on March 23rd, 1991 with around a hundred people joining his armed group, and officially starts the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) decade long 'revolutionary' attack on the state. However, at the start of this decade of the civil war, the political climate had changed. In the 1990s, the hype of being a leftist revolutionary, which was popular in the 1970s, shifted to a more war-weary attitude. The outcome of the 1996 election were respected and considered fair, and more students choose to join the national army to fight the rebels instead of supporting their goal to create democracy (Coulter, 2009b).

So from where did the RUF initially gain their legitimacy? Scholars state different factors as the most important cause of the conflict (Bøås, 2001; Peters & Richards, 2011) or some try to summarize all possible causes (Coulter, 2009b; Davies, 2000; Zack-Williams, 1999). In the end there are many possibilities and it is very difficult to decide which ones are noteworthy. Here a few are listed, but keep in mind that almost all of them are related to one another in some way. First, the youth was marginalized. The strong bias in education left many unemployed and the country's hierarchy led by male elders made them continuously too poor to achieve a lot (Abdullah, 2002; Coulter, 2009b; Peters, 2011b). Second, there is the corruption of the government (Coulter, 2009b; Zack-Williams, 1999). Patrimonialism is often given as big factor for the war (Murphy, 2003; Peters, 2011a) connecting to all the others. Archibald and Richards (2002) explain that in the 1980s there was a "*general crisis of patrimonialism*" (Archibald & Richards, 2002, p. 355). In the case of the mining business for example this meant that when there was a decline in this economy, young people could not find a patron anymore to pay for their school and first job and eventually this system started to collapse (Archibald & Richards, 2002). The Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting in 1980 is said to be one of the biggest examples of the mismanagement of the government. This event hosted by Stevens was the pinnacle of decadency. As a way to impress other presidents, up to \$200 million was spend,

which meant serious cuts in other branches (Coulter, 2009b; Peters, 2011b). This was an event only for the educated, urbanized elites (who were usually the pro-government ones); showing the deep urban-elite bias that was completely drenched into the everyday society – which can also be listed as a cause of the conflict (Coulter, 2009b). Third, while the IMF was before the event already trying to limit government spending (Peters, 2011b), after the meeting the country witnessed a complete financial disaster for which they needed to rely on IMF money (Abdullah, 1998; Zack-Williams, 1999). Austerity measures hit mostly the youth and the more opposition was voiced to the seemingly biased measures, the more repressive the measures became (Coulter, 2009b). Clearly the economic factor cannot be left out of the list. The bankrupt society and the unfair economic preferences are factors that could really have struck a nerve among many citizens. A final factor that seems noteworthy to mention, is the (un)involvement of international actors. Even though at first the international community wanted to stay out of the country's conflicts (Davies, 2000), a lot of international actors also made money of the unstable country. The diamond trade which was mostly controlled by the government always needed investors. They all had an interest in keeping it in the hands of the elite and chiefs, and definitely out of the hands of the local youth (Coulter, 2009b; Ndumbe & Cole, 2005). What about ethnicity? Chris Coulter (2009b) and Clotilde Asangna (2017) clearly state that according to them, different than in many other civil wars, like the Ugandan one, in the Sierra Leonean war ethnicity did not really play a role, neither did religion.

Every of these factors listed above implies that the RUF had a very strong political agenda. However, both the government and international humanitarian organizations did not believe so, and focussed on all the violence and the atrocities they committed instead. This way they kept them in a sort of exotic sphere and therefore also did not feel inclined to send help (Coulter, 2009b; Davies, 2000). As well on the fact if they can be seen as intellectuals was debate. Above we clearly saw that they arose from a student movement and according to Coulter's research (2009) new recruits still had to be educated first with regard to their ideology and their goal to achieve democracy. They also had their ideology written down in their *'Footpaths to Democracy: Towards a New Sierra Leone'* so they really started with a political agenda. However, by the time they entered Sierra Leone as a noted rebel group, they seemed to have lost touch with this intellectual background and as well with civilians rooting for them (Abdullah, 1998; Coulter, 2009b).

When they first entered Sierra Leone in 1991, the capital did not feel too threatened because they were still in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country, and the RUF could find willing recruits in these regions who were also done with the APC. However, the atrocities they started committing made sure that even if people did not like the APC government, they were still not in favour of the violent rebels (Coulter, 2009b; Davies, 2000). Their fight went on for several years while at the same time other forces staged coups on the government (Coulter, 2009b; Utas & Jörgel, 2008). With every forced retreat, their violence seemed to heighten until it became a true guerrilla warfare. Eventually, with a lot of lobbying from the population, in March 1996 elections were held, putting the SLPP, who made up the government before the APC, back in power under Tejan Kabbah (Coulter, 2009b; Utas & Jörgel, 2008; Zack-Williams, 1999). The Abidjan peace accord of November 1996 failed when both the rebels and the national army kept fighting, by this time the U.N. started getting involved (Coulter, 2009b; Davies, 2000). A year later the government was overthrown by the military coup of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) who let the RUF join them in their ruling of the country. This period of rule was by the capital seen as a period of occupation and many people had to flee or be internally displaced. As a result, the peacekeeping force of the Economic Community of West-African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) came in to restore peace and reinstate President Kabbah, by using force. The ECOMOG was put on a pedestal by the citizens and once Kabbah was back in 1998, the rebels became their antagonist and were completely demonized and shamed, while ECOMOG actually also committed a lot of human rights violations. The credibility and righteous political agenda the RUF once might have had, was now completely gone. In 1999 the Lomé peace accord was signed by warring leaders and afterwards the U.N. send missions to the country to instal peace. Finally the Abuja I and Abuja II peace accords were signed in respectively 2000 and 2001 and on January 18th 2002, President Kabbah officially declared the war to be over (Coulter, 2009b; Utas & Jörgel, 2008; Zack-Williams, 1999).

Women in Sierra Leonean's civil war

The Sierra Leonean conflict is marked greatly by a preferential treatment of one group over the others, mostly the Krio people in Freetown. This discrepancy was no different for the women in colonial Sierra Leone. Krio women had more independence than native women (Coulter, 2009b). All women, however, remained subordinate to men. The privilege of

education was almost exclusively given to boys because girls had to help at home and prepare for their biggest job, i.e. finding a husband, and in general Sierra Leone remained a country ruled by male elders (Coulter, 2009b; Smet, 2009). Female discrimination was common in Sierra Leone and of course existed in the pre-conflict context as well. In Sierra Leone's 1991 constitution Article 27 does prohibit discriminatory laws, but this is not applicable to marriage, divorce and inheritance. In these areas customary law, and religious and cultural traditions still dominate the narrative. Consent of a girl to have sex is not required according to customary law, neither is her opinion in what happens to the perpetrator. The family of the victim settles this and often enough the girl ends up forced to marry her attacker. Early and forced marriages are also not frowned upon, just as female genital cutting (Smet, 2009).

Like the LRA, the RUF forcefully coerced both men and women to join the fighters in the bush (Hirsch, 2001). Mazurana and Carlson (2004) performed a study for the Women Waging Peace program of women in the Sierra Leonean war and estimated that there were approximately 7500 female soldiers part of the estimated 45.000 total RUF soldiers (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004) and Coulter (2008) estimates that 10 to 30% of the whole rebel group consisted of women (Coulter, 2008). Even though the government did its best to deny it, women and girls did also have military roles in the CDF (Kabbah's army) and were just like the women in the 'uncivilized' rebel forces, subject to sexual abuse and witness to all sorts of atrocities. It is safe to say that most of the women in the RUF were abducted (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004; Sesay & Suma, 2009). However, there were also some who joined out of free will and this could be for several reasons. Some already had a family member in the rebel group whom they wished to follow; others believed the rebels would provide them with protection, or that overall, their basic socioeconomic needs would be better met in the bush than in their impoverished home town (Sesay & Suma, 2009).

Women had many different roles in the armed group. However, the role of women is usually disregarded and underdiscussed in the history of conflict. They are only seen as migrants, slaves, wives or mothers. In the Sierra Leonean and the Ugandan conflict, this seemed to be no different (Coulter, 2009a). Contrary to common assumption, a big group of the women in the Sierra Leonean civil war was also trained in armed combat, usually under the responsibility or under the command of their bush husband. Although they were usually in lower ranks than most of the males, they still held a gun and even killed civilians. Some even became leaders of

other combatants or even commanders (Coulter, 2009b; Denov & Maclure, 2006). This role of fighters that women took upon themselves gave them the feeling of having more control over their own lives than the sexual abuse, domestic captivation or even death that otherwise described a female life. In some cases, female fighters were even feared more because they were taught of being braver and even more brutal than the male rebels, which will be highlighted again below (Coulter, 2009b; Doerr et al., 2010). Another challenged assumption is women's part in sexual violence. According to Denov & Maclure (2006) sexual violence could also be done by women to other women, although in much fewer cases (Denov & Maclure, 2006). Also Dara Kay Cohen (2013) puts forward evidence based on interviews with former fighters in Sierra Leone, that female RUF members were involved in gang rapes as well as their male colleagues. She argues that it cannot be denied that the female fighters are subjected to the same commanders and the same pressure within the force, so it should not be that big of a surprise that female combatants commit the same crimes as male combatants do (Cohen, 2013). Fonday Sankoh had also put in his message that women and men, according to him, are equal as revolutionaries and therefore also equal as fighters (Coulter, 2009a).

Besides fighters, other roles for women could be cooks, porters, messengers, spies, nurses, technicians or food producers. Another very common role was being a wife to one of the rebels. Again the wives of commanders were more precious and therefore more guarded than the wives of a regular soldiers (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). A bush wife is responsible for the household of her bush husband. She has to carry his possessions, cook, wash his clothes and satisfy his needs. While he is away a bush wife has rather substantial responsibilities because when she is the wife of a commander, she can send troops on attacks or missions and decide on the distribution of weapons, food and looted items; and she can be armed herself. She is constantly in the presence of bodyguards who protect her from attacks and at the same time keep her from running away (Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). She is called his 'wife' because she really belongs to the rebel husband and needs to be loyal to him. In turn her husband if he is high enough in rank, will protect her from (sexual) violence from the other rebels (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Mazurana & Carlson, 2004). A final very important and very underacknowledged role of women during the Sierra Leonean war is their part in peace creation. Even though women were excluded from peace talks, both the Lomé one in 1999 and Abidjan in 1996, they still could have quite some political influence. For example there

were women's groups that really put their effort in negotiating with both the government and the rebels to be able to get the elections in 1996 (Coulter, 2009a).

2.2. Analysis of Female Reintegration after the Sierra Leonean Civil War

1. *Reintegration into community and family*

Stigmatization and rejection

Coming back to the Sierra Leonean community after the experiences with the rebels was referred to as a 'disappointment' for many female ex-fighters by Coulter (2005, 2009e). Many girls were stigmatized, socially excluded or even ostracized by their community or family. They could be verbally abused or physically attacked by community or family members. Some lost their rather elevated role they received within the rebel force or were left by their rebel husband (Coulter, 2005, 2009e). There was consensus in the literature about community members and/or family members finding it very difficult to forgive returning girls for different reasons. Women were stigmatized because of their attachment to the rebels. They were also shamed because they were said to have violated the social standing of their families and the traditional gender roles of their community. They had behaved aggressively and had been sexually active in the bush, thus they had strayed from conventional female behaviour. On the one hand they were 'defiled' because of the sexual activity they had endured in the bush (of which a child from their rebel husband is usually explicit proof) and, on the other hand, their 'rebel behaviour' was perceived as the exact opposite of the 'traditional' cultural ideals, leading to their rejection. They behaved like men, abnormal and aggressive. They smoked, used drugs and offensive language, and were even accused of killing the animals of neighbours. They were now deprived of the higher position they received within the rebel force because it did not fit with traditional female roles. People were suspicious of them (Coulter, 2005; Coulter et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009c, 2009e; Denov, 2008; Gaffney, 2014; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; Mazurana & McKay, 2003; McKay, 2005; Smet, 2009; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008).

In general, they were 'bush-like': "*they were wild and seen as non-humans*" (Coulter, 2005, p. 12). Therefore, additional to the misbehaviour, they were also feared by the community because it was believed that their time with the rebels changed them. They were dangerous

by association. The independence that they had to gain to survive, had now become the reason they were feared and stigmatized. Even the children they sometimes brought with them were feared for what they could become. The longer their time with the rebels, the greater their stigma and the more they were feared. Because of this fierce rejection, some girls just did not go back to their community and saw life with the rebels as the only option they had left (Coulter, 2005, 2009e; Cullen, 2020; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; Smet, 2009; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). Coulter (2005), Cullen (2020) and Hills & MacKenzie (2017) made the comparison with male ex-combatants and believe that their experiences were not the same. Men were feared as well, but more often than female returnees they did get accepted back into the community. Overall, female fighters stumbled upon more difficulties trying to reintegrate and were stigmatized more for having been a rebel.

However Coulter (2005, 2009e) and Holt-Rusmore (2009) nuance this view of the struggling female experience, arguing that returning female abductees were usually rejected only by some members of the family and not the whole family. Some were even immediately accepted and were not held back by stigma (Coulter, 2009e). Different regions could provide different experiences as well and urban areas gave more uncertainty, but also more prospects through anonymity (Coulter, 2005). Holt-Rusmore (2009) even claims that in general, the community was quite accepting. She states that community norms were broken on such a big scale because of the perpetual violence all through the country, that ex-fighters could reintegrate more easily. According to her, the shift in gender relations was so omnipresent that no one really knew what to expect from one another: there had to happen a renegotiation of social relations anyway. Humphreys & Weinstein (2004) argue that women did not find more struggle when reintegrating into their community than men did. They saw only that more women had difficulty returning home because they came from the RUF instead of the other fighting groups, and overall the RUF abductees were apparently more difficult to accept back. The latter research, however, was a general study about the experience of men and women reintegrating back and there was not much attention paid to female ex-fighters specifically.

[How to get accepted back?](#)

In any case, Coulter (2005, 2009e, 2009c) also examines what the female ex-fighters could do to facilitate their reintegration. First of all, she finds, conforming to culturally and morally accepted gender roles can help in diminishing stigmatization. They had to be 'tamed' and

'domesticated'. They should adapt to the ideal of womanhood which includes subservience, self-restraint of emotions and hard work. Attitudes that thus fit the 'village life'. If there was an argument somewhere, people quickly blamed returning girls because they were expected to show this behaviour. *How* they behaved was thus a very important factor in whether or not they got accepted. Returning women could often have spontaneous outbursts. They were judged because of these. Some were medicated in order to sedate them. Actually, such an outburst was probably a lingering effect of the drugs they had to use in the bush. Solomon & Ginifer (2008) also notice that conforming themselves was very difficult for a lot of girls, but Coulter (2009e) goes even further by saying that some girls just never got accepted because they could not or would not conform to their society's expectation of them. Different girls, according to her, felt themselves that they had changed too much. They therefore, moved away, with the knowledge that they would never get accepted back home. However, Coulter (2009e) also attempts to demonstrate the perspective of the community members who imposed these cultural norms. She explains that those people felt resentment towards the rebels for all the violence of the war. They wanted their lives to return to the way they were before the war and therefore attached more value to the 'traditional' social customs and way of life. Specifically, this meant that if a girl conformed back to the way she was, and the war or the rebels were not too obvious in her behaviour, then people would not constantly be remembered of the horrors when they saw her and they could move on.

Accordingly another strategy to reintegrate in the community and family that was noticed by several authors, is secrecy. Returning girls tried to keep their rebel past a secret so it could not be used against them. They tried to silently blend into the community, or decided to move away to Freetown to start over with a new identity (Coulter, 2005, 2009e; Doerrer et al., 2010; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; MacKenzie, 2009). Wanting to keep their experiences a secret is also a reason given as to why many girls decided not to join official reintegration programs, but this will be discussed in the next part. Their 'response of silence' was driven by the stigmatization they had received for having been part of the rebels and for having been sexually abused. Several authors point out that having endured sexual violence, having been a bush wife and especially bringing back 'bush children' are important reasons for great shame (Coulter et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009e; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014). Doerrer et al. (2010) even call it a *double stigma*: (1) they are associated with the rebels and (2) they lost their virginity. Girls in general rarely reported sexual violence, according to

Coulter (2009e) and Mazurana & McKay (2003). They explain that it was customary to settle these kinds of 'issues' between the family of the victim and the perpetrator in front of a chief or in a customary court. MacKenzie (2009) contextualizes this, explaining that even after the war, the violations that women endure are seen as belonging to the private and domestic sphere and were overall best kept quiet. Coulter (2009e) explains that: "*the way people in the communities interpreted war rapes, was grounded in pre-existing notions of rape and sexual morality*" (p. 236). Virginity means value for girls. A girl has to be a virgin to be of interest for marriage and the husband pays for this with the bride's wealth. Therefore, raping a virgin is a major crime, as the girl then becomes 'virginated' which means that she lost her virginity and is now 'damaged' or 'spoilt' and less marketable. Rape of a non-virgin girl is not really seen as rape because rape within marriage is legitimized. Once a girl is 'virginated' she is therefore at bigger risk of sexual assault (Coulter, 2009e). Accordingly, Alleyne-Green et al. (2019) notice that returning girls were bigger victims of intimate partner violence. They became re-victimized (Alleyne-Green et al., 2019) because they had been sexually violated. Within the bush marriage as well, the initial 'virgination' was perceived as rape and afterwards it fell under the institution of 'marriage' (Coulter, 2009e).

Marriage was actually a third way for returning women to negotiate their reintegration into the community, according to Coulter et al. (2008), Coulter (2009e), Denov (2008), Doerrer et al. (2010), Atim et al. (2018), and Mazurana & McKay (2003). The authors were, however, unanimously rather pessimistic about this. Ex-rebel girls were rejected by their families but also on the marriage market they became personae non gratae. This was the case because they had been sexually active with other men, but also because the potential husbands and their families feared them, saying they were aggressive and unpredictable (Coulter et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009e; Denov, 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010). Marriage was a very important cultural institution that could provide social status, economic security, access to land and protection. Not being married puts a girl at risk and adds to the stigmatization (Atim et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008). Marriage facilitates reintegration because it is the culturally preferred trajectory for girls, it makes them honourable and it 'keeps them busy'. An interesting point of comparison that Coulter makes in her book of 2009, is that marriage is an aid to their reintegration that does not exist for men because it is the female dominant trajectory that perceives women as acceptable once married. Because of the importance of being married some NGOs encouraged female ex-fighters to marry their bush husband

(Coulter, 2009e; Mazurana & McKay, 2003). Other girls saw this as the better option themselves. Some really wanted to because they were loyal to him and loved him for saving their lives, or because they lived with relative wealth and status in the bush. Others stayed out of fear and because they saw no other option in the impoverished communities (Coulter, 2005, 2009e). Also when the bush husband returned from the bush some girls wanted to officially marry him because of their attachment to him or for the assurance of a husband and economic support. However according to Solomon & Ginifer (2008), male ex-combatants were poorly reintegrated as well, which made a secure livelihood difficult. Mazurana & McKay (2003) warn that these captor husbands were not always the best option and that the girls actually needed help getting away from them. According to Coulter (2005, 2009e) girls tried to make their bush marriage formal by asking their parents, but even though they wanted marriage for their daughter, the fact that it was prefixed by 'bush' made them reject it. However, Coulter (2009e) and MacKenzie (2009) nuance this slightly: Some female ex-combatants did find good new husbands and some have families who took their children so the girls could focus on finding a new husband.

From the community itself, there were some organizational structures which tried to encourage female ex-fighters' reintegration. Different authors highlight that women in the community played important roles (Holt-Rusmore, 2009; Mazurana & Carlson, 2004; Sesay & Suma, 2009). According to Sesay & Suma (2009) 55% of their female respondents said women in the community helped them reintegrate, contrary to the 20% and 32% that said they got help from traditional leaders and international aid workers, respectively. Women provided guidance, resources, childcare clothing or food. Interestingly, Denov & Maclure (2006) note that women also helped each other to resist the sexual violence within the RUF by developing close relations and creating spaces where men were not welcome. There were also several women/local organizations in the community that helped reintegrating former fighters by providing additional vocational training, child care, counselling, health programs, or advice on generating income (Holt-Rusmore, 2009; Sesay & Suma, 2009) because a woman who is a financial asset to the family rather than an extra burden is accepted more easily (Coulter, 2009c; Holt-Rusmore, 2009). However, it is also noted that these local organizations and programs were insufficiently acknowledged and thus received little resources and support from international aid programs (Mazurana & Carlson, 2004; Sesay & Suma, 2009).

2. International aid programs

The UN installed a DDR program in Sierra Leone which took place from 1998 until 2003. There was also a Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Coulter, 2009c; Cullen, 2020). In this thesis the focus will be mostly on general reintegration programs and camps and the DDR, as was the case in the analysis of Uganda. According to the United Nations' factsheet (2005), in total of all the armed groups 75.490 people were disarmed and demobilized of which 4.651 were women and 6.845 were child soldiers with 506 of the latter being female (peacekeeping.un, 2005). Therefore it was seen as a success story and used as an example in other countries like Liberia, Burundi and Haiti (Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Leff, 2008; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). However, Mazurana & Carlson (2004) argue that up to 30% of all fighters were, in effect, women. Hence, female fighters were clearly not reached properly by the DDR. Women were underrepresented in the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration program in the Sierra Leonean civil war because of structural gender biases and because of their own choosing.

Some girls were displaced or just escaped, making it impossible for them to join (Coulter, 2005), but there are also more structural constraints brought up which withheld women from partaking in reintegration programs. The first is related to the stigma we already discussed above. Going to a DDR camp is very publicly stating one's (former) rebel association (Coulter, 2005, 2009c; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009; Sesay & Suma, 2009). This is seen in different lights by different authors. Some say girls found it unfit to call themselves rebels because they did not voluntarily join the rebels or wanted nothing more to do with them (Coulter, 2005; Gaffney, 2014; MacKenzie, 2009). The focus can also be on a girl's surroundings. Coulter (2005, 2009e) noted that family members were ashamed and discouraged their daughters to go. Gaffney (2014) noticed that girls played valued roles in the rebel groups and other authors as well add that therefore their bush husbands or commanders often did not want to let them demobilize (Coulter, 2005; Coulter et al., 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014). Some authors even argued that the public aspect of DDR was dangerous because if a girl was able to escape, marking herself as rebel by going to DDR could lead to retaliations of the rebels in her community or exclusion and abuse by victims of the rebels (Coulter et al., 2008; Gaffney, 2014; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). In this context, Gaffney (2014), Hills & MacKenzie (2017), Holt-Rusmore (2009) and Mazurana & McKay (2003) talk about

'sensitization' campaigns of NGOs to encourage the community to forgive returning girls. However, Mazurana & McKay (2003), Hills & MacKenzie (2017) and Gaffney (2014) argued that the problems and judgements were too deep-seated, and that the 'sensitization' was not extensive enough. Holt-Rusmore (2009), on the other hand, sees it as pitfall that these campaigns focused on girls as victims, while the community perceived them as actors in the conflict. Coulter (2005, 2009c) Gaffney (2014), Hills & MacKenzie (2017) and MacKenzie (2009) add, as a last aspect of the stigma that returning girls feared a lasting rebel identity through the pictures that were taken of them at the centres. Families and bush husbands used this fear to keep them from going. They were afraid that their pictures would be kept and would later be used to prosecute them as rebels or to keep them from ever leaving the country or getting a job. Coulter (2009c) referred to this as one of the biggest reasons that could hold them back. The women believed especially that they should not tell their story to white people because they believed they would convict them. This is, interestingly, the opposite of the Western belief that sharing the trauma is healing and will facilitate forgetting. These girls feel that sharing will lead to conviction and exclusion from their community, and will be a continuing remembering (Coulter, 2009c).

A second reason for why DDR possibly failed women was brought up only by Gaffney (2014) and MacKenzie (2009). They say that some girls judged the program themselves. Coming from a feeling of proud they perceived DDR as below them. They did not want to be associated with rebels from a lower rank in the DDR camp, they did not need their handouts, or they believed their looks and popularity or their money and status from the rebels would get them far enough.

Third, as part of a more often mentioned gendered constrain of the DDR, there was a lack of understanding of the DDR and a lack of trust in the foreign organizations and the government (Coulter, 2005; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009; Sesay & Suma, 2009). We saw above that the feeling of antipathy towards the government had already a legacy in Sierra Leone and remember the educational biases and the resulting illiteracy for many women. As a consequence, necessary information did not reach them (Coulter, 2009c). Resulting was the often-mentioned confusion about the weapon-test in the DDR in Sierra Leone. In Mazurana & Carlson's (2004) study, 46% of the females who did not join the DDR said this was because they lacked a gun to hand in. In the first and second phase

of the DDR adults were required to turn in a weapon, in the third phase adults could in group turn in a weapon so soldiers without one could also apply. Children, however, were never required to turn in a weapon. Still, Gaffney (2014) noticed that DDR officials seemed to be confused and frequently asked for a weapon even though they were not supposed to. Therefore, the argument that women lacked a weapon and therefore did not join DDR, often returns in the literature. Coulter (2005), Coulter et al. (2008), Denov (2008), Denov & Maclure (2006), Gaffney (2014), Hills & MacKenzie (2017), MacKenzie (2009), Sesay & Suma (2009) and Willibald (2006) explain that many women had or shared a weapon, but it had been taken away by commanders. This was definitely the case when DDR installed 'cash for weapons' because then the commander could receive the financial benefit. Gaffney (2014) explains that children did not get money for weapons by the DDR, so the rebels had no incentive to let these girls go. On the other hand, Doerrer et al. (2010) and Humphreys & Weinstein (2004) state that women just did not own a weapon, respectively arguing that they either had other roles in the force or did not see themselves as soldiers. However, more authors seemed to agree that women did have or used weapons, but just not like the DDR expected them to.

Fourth, many authors agree that the DDR did not live up to their promises for girls. Mostly the vocational training they offered was gender biased and not sustainable. The trainings for girls were too short and lacked the right materials and they provided only a limited variety of skills. The skills that were provided for girls were not successful income generating and only the 'gender appropriate' ones, like gara tie-dying, hair dressing and weaving (Coulter, 2005, 2009d; Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). Coulter et al. (2008) and Doerrer et al. (2010) do find a positive consequence of the trainings, being that they helped with trauma healing more than generating sustainable livelihoods. It kept girls busy and gave them more self-esteem because stigma was associated with not being able to contribute to the household and through these trainings, they got self-sufficiency and revived the sense of power they gained with the rebels. Even though it had many flaws, Coulter (2009c) says the training programs of NGOs were very desired because the livelihood opportunities in the country for women were limited. However, it was not easy getting in there. They needed support from their family and the right contacts and had to tell their war story which goes against the impulse of hiding the rebel trauma. Chris Coulter (2009c) discovers that these girls had to negotiate their victimhood and had 'suffered' more than their competition for the spot. In the end, most girls

could not make anything of their vocational training but some authors find out that the presence of UN peacekeepers in Freetown did open a market for prostitution (Coulter, 2009d; Coulter et al., 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Nduka-Agwu, 2009).

Fifth, the DDR was biased against girls through logistical aspects of the program. Apparently, the camps were not separated by gender so women feared being stuck with their captors or violent men from other forces, neither the bathroom facilities were adapted to female hygiene needs (Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020; Doerrer et al., 2010; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Sesay & Suma, 2009; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). This is something the DDR could have easily dealt with according to Coulter (2009c) but did not. Coulter (2009c) and Gaffney (2014) even add that the program was also not adapted to pregnant girls or young mothers and did not realize the dire need of health care for women who endured sexual violence and received STDs and other physical and physiological problems as a result. Lastly it is known that the camps were divided between adults and children, but Gaffney (2014) and MacKenzie (2009) argue that this was based on western notions of adulthood while in Sierra Leone passing from childhood to adulthood is done through cultural ceremonies and experience and does not necessarily align with the Western 18 years threshold.

Sixth, just as for the DDR in Uganda one of the most problematic points that come back is women not being accepted as real combatants. We argued that female rebels could have different and plural roles, but these supportive roles made them non-eligible for DDR support (Coulter, 2009c; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014). They were over-classified as 'dependents' or 'camp followers' according to Coulter et al., (2008) Solomon & Ginifer (2008) and Mazurana & Carlson (2004). One can wonder if the international aid is more stereotyping than the rebels (Coulter, 2009c). Like discussed above, at first wives or other soldiers without their own weapon could not disarm. Later, however, bush wives could participate in the DDR, only if they were accompanied by their 'husband' or captor who could vouch for her (Coulter, 2005; Denov, 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Sesay & Suma, 2009). Or Coulter (2005) adds, he just abducted another girl to pose as his wife so he received the money. The gender-neutral approach the DDR took according to Leff (2008) seems to be more a gender-biased approach. It is interesting that Western war narratives do not recognize female fighters because women are expected to be the ever peaceful victim, Cullen (2020) notices, while local stereotypes were also challenged by the violence of women. The reaction here, according to Coulter

(2005), was to see women as even more cruel and dangerous fighters than male ones because they challenge the common conception.

There is some disagreement in the literature. Humphreys & Weinstein (2004) argue that there is not a big difference in experience of DDR for men and women, while Willibald (2006) believes the difference lies in entry difficulties, but disappear inside the camps. Coulter (2009c) and Sesay & Suma (2009) on the other hand argue that girls are excluded from the DDR and this results in prostitution, crime, and also marginalization of the next generation when their children are excluded. Or, a return to the bush. MacKenzie (2009) notes that none of her respondents said they felt left out by the DDR which according to her goes against the common notion, and structural constraints are greater causes for lesser female participation.

3. Resilience and spontaneous reintegration

As a result of the poorly adapted official reintegration program, according to different authors, many women choose for spontaneous reintegration without formal assistance (Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020; Denov, 2008; Mazurana & McKay, 2003; Sesay & Suma, 2009). These authors offer different ways by which women reintegrated themselves. Some went back home, others could not overcome the stigma and moved in the hope of finding livelihood opportunities (Coulter, 2009d; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; McKay, 2005). Their migration was filled with uncertainty, according to Coulter (2009d), because there was no farm to fall back on. Holt-Rusmore (2009) and Solomon & Ginifer (2008) note, however, that it brought female ex-fighters together. In Freetown, bush wives rejected by their family often co-habited in groups of five and made contributions to the household budget together (Solomon & Ginifer, 2008) and different women were members of political participation groups like women's rights conferences (Holt-Rusmore, 2009). Their being together worked, like it did in the bush and like it could do in the DDR camps, as a surviving mechanism and even, according to Holt-Rusmore (2009), as an opportunity to reject traditional roles and structures. In the end, different authors believe that many girls react with great resilience and not as passive victims (Denov & Gervais, 2007; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; Sesay & Suma, 2009). For example, a lot of women engaged in petty trading. The new feminine ideal of becoming a famous market woman erupted, but social relations and statuses are needed to become this (Coulter, 2009d, 2009c).

The post-war context was, however not perceived as generous towards women. Coulter (2009e, 2009d) explains that women already face social, educational and economic marginalisation. They cannot access credit nor land and are only deemed appropriate for informal work. For ex-combatants, the traditional trajectories of marriage or farming are also usually off the table. It is even worse for women coming back with rebel children if they are the sole providers. Even women who did go through vocational training mostly ended up having to sell the materials they received because they were not able to make a living out of it. Several authors notice that ex-combatants often enter prostitution and sex trade, very often in Freetown where there are UN peacekeepers. There was the 'girlfriend business' as well, where a girl has several lovers who give her food or money. This was more culturally approved than prostitution but still shameful. Sexual activity was seen as shameful, but if it was needed to provide for a family it was silently overlooked (Coulter, 2009e; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008; Mazurana & McKay, 2003; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). Education is another way to overcome the stigma and to be able to create their own economic opportunities. However, here as well structural violence limits them according to Coulter (2009d), Coulter et al. (2008) and Doerrer et al. (2010). It was unusual for girls to continue their schooling after having had children, there were no schools for adults, and it was unsafe at schools. There were no adequate sanitary supplies, nor many female teachers, and older ex-combatant schoolboys formed a treat for harassment. Sesay & Suma (2009) notice that some girls joined militias or other rebellions because they had nothing to lose. These were all new forms of survival techniques which female ex-fighters had to invent on their own within great structural discrimination towards them, just like they did when they survived in the bush.

To summarize, girls returning from rebel forces in Sierra Leone were just like in Uganda stigmatized by their community and/or family because of their 'unwomanly' behaviour in the bush and because they were deemed even more violent as female rebels. Therefore, to get accepted back it was very important to either hide a rebel past or conform back to culturally accepted norms and marry, like is deemed appropriate for a woman. Women's specific needs were also not noticed by DDR programmers: DDR could enhance stigmatization for them and did not provide the right info. Moreover, camps were not separated according to gender and the program lacked overall sustainable outcomes for women. These constraints were related to the fact that the DDR did not expect girls to be soldiers nor in need of reintegration support.

Many girls reintegrated on their own and did this by migrating, trying to create new livelihood opportunities (like prostitution), grouping together with other women or even becoming politically active. While the international community sees them as victims and the local community judges them for being actors in the conflict, the literature sheds a light on the approach of female ex-combatants as survivors of gender discriminatory contexts.

3. Debates and arguments in comparing Uganda and Sierra Leone

“The brutality of the LRA is legendary. The only other comparable organization with tactics of similar kind was the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of the late Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone. At the height of its insurgency, the RUF would attack villages, hacking civilians to death, while those who would be abducted would have their arms and limbs hacked off. The LRA has used similar tactics on civilians. In order to terrorize the population, the LRA uses body mutilations, cutting off the arms and hands, ears, lips, and buttocks of villagers suspected of sympathy with the government” (Apuuli, 2004, p. 402)

Both civil wars left their mark by real cruelty. Many people in the countries were displaced and thousands of men, women and children had been abducted into or voluntarily joined the different armed forces. However, there are a few interesting differences between the two rebel groups that I want to highlight. The Ugandan war found its roots in gross regional divisions and discrimination together with a history of militarized politics (Titeca, 2019). For Sierra Leone, division existed mostly in urban versus rural context, together with a corrupt government and a marginalization of the youth co-incident revolutions. The issue of ethnicity and religion were less present here than was the case in the Acholi region of Uganda (Coulter, 2009a). This might be seen as a reason why in Uganda citizens support for the rebels seems to have been higher than in Sierra Leone as can be a conclusion from the contextualization of both conflicts explained above. In both countries eventually many civilians were targeted by the rebels, but also both rebel groups (the LRA and the RUF) consisted of many women that defiled traditional gender norms by holding guns and fighting alongside men. Both rebel groups seem to be less discriminating towards women than the international war narrative is, as they did not exclude them (Annan et al., 2009; Coulter, 2009c). Foday Sankoh said that he perceives men and women as equal fighters and also Joseph Kony challenged traditional gendered expectations by preferring girls to be literate and having had an education (Coulter, 2009a; Donnelly, 2018).

Differences and similarities between reintegration in Uganda and Sierra Leone

Since this is not a quantitative research we are not interested in whether more or less female ex-combatants were able to socially reintegrate, opted for spontaneous reintegration or had

to migrate because of rejection by their family, etc. What is interesting here, is which factors that facilitate or hamper the reintegration of female ex-fighters come back regularly in the literature, and how this is different for both the countries. We already discussed the biggest agreements or disagreements in the literature. Here, I want to highlight the most interesting points of both cases for comparison.

Community stigma and questionable ritual cleansings

Considering returning girl's reintegration in the community the same tendencies can be noticed. Social reintegration is, in both cases, really toughened by stigmatization (1). For both countries, the literature saw that stigmatization was, on the one hand, mostly because of the association with the rebels' violence, which made girls dangerous by association, and on the other hand, through their violation of cultural gender norms/roles (Atim et al., 2018; Coulter, 2005; Coulter et al., 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Mazurana et al., 2017; Mukasa, 2017). The latter is interesting if we compare it to the situation of male ex-rebels (Annan et al., 2013). They were also held accountable for the violence of the rebels, but they were not judged for breaking traditional values. For one, their sexuality is not as much on display (Ainebyona, 2018) as for women. Second, males do fit the definition of being violent (Coulter, 2005; Cullen, 2020; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017). In both countries women's social and economic security also depends on their stigma because they are not marriageable if they are stigmatized for being/having been violent and sexually active (Atim et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Mukasa, 2017).

Marriage (2) is, in both countries, valued greatly for girls. Based on Coulter's (2009c) conclusion thereof we can note that marriage is for a girl in Uganda and Sierra Leone a necessity to get access to resources (Ainebyona, 2018; Atim et al., 2018; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008; Maina, 2011; McKay, 2005; Specht, 2013) and therefore also a necessity in her reintegration, and does not carry the same importance for a man's reintegration process. However, it is also only for a woman a straight-forward solution to reintegration struggles because once married she fits again within the culturally accepted female life (Coulter, 2009e). The children (3) female ex-rebels bring with them are in Uganda and Sierra Leone an added issue to the reintegration, while this is usually not an obstacle for men coming back (Ainebyona, 2018; Atim et al., 2018; Coulter, 2009e; Coulter et al., 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Maina, 2011; Shanahan & Veale, 2010, 2016). It remains important to note

that several authors also highlight possible social reintegration trajectories without difficulties and rejection. For Sierra Leone this were mostly Coulter (2005 & 2009c) and Holt-Rusmore (2009) and for Uganda Annan et al. (2008, 2009, 2011 & 2013) and Annan & Brier (2010) where the most often returning voices stirring this debate in the literature.

An interesting difference between the two countries in their community reintegration is the concept of ritual cleansings (4). In the analysis it is discussed that for Uganda this existed and was often called upon to help girls get rid of their stigma and heal, so they can reintegrate (Ainebyona, 2018; Atim et al., 2018). For Sierra Leone, Park (2010) mentions that NGOs did their best to help the community-based reintegration, but traditional cleansing from within the community was necessary. Therefore, NGOs would financially support these ceremonies so they could help former combatants reintegrating. Keep in mind that this research was based on interviews with NGO staff, not really with community members themselves. However, Coulter noticed already in 2005 and 2009, these 'ceremonies' did not exist, or at least not like they were in Uganda. Such as with sexual assault before the conflict, problems of returning girls were settled through religious leaders or 'mamy queens'. Therefore, she warns us of having to be sceptical about the all of a sudden arising 'traditional' ceremonies, that did not exist before they could receive money for their existence (Coulter, 2005, 2009c).

A DDR process at different paces, but with same blind spots

This difference makes us turn to the discussion points concerning the international aid in both countries. The overall consensus about both cases is that they were not able to reach women as they were supposed to. Coulter (2005) argues that almost in all countries where women play a big part in the fighting forces, women do not officially demobilize, unless there are specific measures taken for them. The UN did install the '*Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security*' with several objectives to in general take into account the female perspective (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), n.d.). This was installed in 2000, when the reintegration programs in Sierra Leone were already running for two years and according to Coulter (2005) and Coulter et al. (2008) it also had little effect on the following years of the DDR. It remained a gender discriminatory program. In Uganda the Amnesty law was established in 2000 as well. There had already been several DDR initiatives before that and there came even more afterwards ("*Overview: DDR Processes in Africa*", 2007), and when the DDR agreement was signed for Uganda at the Juba peace talks

in Sudan in 2008, it was agreed on in point 2.14 and 2.15 that they would take into account Resolution 1325 and the 'special' needs of women (*Agreement on Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration*, 2008). So we might expect the resolution to have some more effect here. However, Binder et al. noticed already in 2008 that it still fell short, and throughout the literature research, more or less the same constraints towards female's participation come up as for Sierra Leone. The common constraints or reasons for female ex-fighters not to join are, for one, the stigma that comes from the public announcing themselves as rebel in a DDR camp (Annan et al., 2008; Coulter, 2005; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009; Maina, 2011; Mazurana et al., 2017; Mukasa, 2017; Sesay & Suma, 2009). The only noticeable difference here is that for Sierra Leone the literature notices a fear of girls for having their picture taken because they believed this could have negative repercussions later on (Coulter, 2005; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009). Second, the problem of a lack of information about the reintegration programs also comes back in both cases, but a difference here is that it is more often mentioned for Sierra Leone and here additionally a lack of trust in the government and international institutions at that time comes up (Annan et al., 2008; Coulter, 2005; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; MacKenzie, 2009; Mukasa, 2017; Sesay & Suma, 2009). Third, different logistical constraints are highlighted. In Uganda and Sierra Leone the DDR lacks adequate health care for the violence these women went through in the bush, and adaptations for young mothers (Annan et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009c; Gaffney, 2014; Maina, 2011; Mazurana et al., 2017; McKay, 2005). The literature concerning Sierra Leone also noticed that women did not want to join the reintegration camps because these were not separated by gender and they feared violence from the men that stay in the same camps (Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020, p. 202; Doerrer et al., 2010; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Sesay & Suma, 2009; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). The final structural discrimination that appeared in the reintegration processes in both countries was that the international community was reluctant to consider women as soldiers, but this will come back in the last part of this discussion in context of revisiting the hypothesis.

There were two critiques on the DDR in Sierra Leone that did not come up as explicitly in the literature about the Ugandan DDR program. One was something that is very note-worthy for this dissertation because it discusses the female experience and defies female victimization. Many girls experienced a certain feeling of pride because of their time and their positions as

soldiers. MacKenzie (2009, p. 255) even calls it an “arrogance” that women displayed. This led to their unwillingness to join the DDR because they thought it was below them (Gaffney, 2014; MacKenzie, 2009). Another difference is the heavily emphasized insufficiency of the vocational training programs in the DDR in Sierra Leone to provide women with a sustainable livelihood issue (Coulter, 2005, 2009d; Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020; Doerrer et al., 2010; Gaffney, 2014; Hills & MacKenzie, 2017; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). This is something that did not appear in the same way in the literature about the DDR in Uganda. Even though it was noticed that this was very much needed in Uganda as well because women faced severe educational and economic marginalization in the society (Annan et al., 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013; Coulter et al., 2008; Maina, 2011; Muldoon et al., 2014; Shanahan & Veale, 2010).

Sustaining their own livelihood in a gender discriminatory context

After discussing the differences in the social reintegration and the DDR experience of returning female fighters, which are both still mostly dominated by other people’s reactions and structural constraints, we now turn to their own responses and resilience. For both countries, spontaneous reintegration seemed to be a common trajectory, which is not surprising if we take into account the amount of girls that were not reached with official reintegration programs (Coulter et al., 2008; Cullen, 2020; Denov, 2008; Mazurana & McKay, 2003; Sesay & Suma, 2009). Even though both in Uganda and Sierra Leone there is a deep-rooted discrimination towards female livelihood independence, such as, for example, their inability to own land as a woman, female ex-fighters still showed economic agency, because they had to. Mostly, they ended up in the informal sector, but working also helped with healing by creating more self-esteem (Coulter, 2009e; Denov, 2008; Mukasa, 2017). In Uganda, the job of alcohol-brewing erupted for women because more people turned to alcohol throughout the war (Annan et al., 2008; Atim et al., 2018). However, structural violence still really toughened their economic independence. Therefore, different authors argued that abducted women are not necessarily worse off than the non-abducted women who lived through the war. They are both stuck in a poverty-stricken, war-torn country where many people were displaced, the legal system remains to be corrupt towards women and gender-based violence lives on before, during, and after the war (Annan et al., 2009; Annan & Brier, 2010; Coulter, 2009e; Coulter et al., 2008; Maina, 2011). Girls are expected to become wives and mothers who work at home rather quickly, but their stigma of ‘rebel’ took this option away for many while still being stuck in a society that only really allows this traditional

trajectory. Several women turned to prostitution in both countries. Mostly mothers coming back with bush children had no other choice to survive (Coulter, 2009e; Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008; Mazurana & McKay, 2003; Shanahan & Veale, 2010; Solomon & Ginifer, 2008). Only for Sierra Leone it was mentioned that prostitution was enhanced by the presence of international peacekeepers (Coulter, 2009d; Coulter et al., 2008; Doerrer et al., 2010; Nduka-Agwu, 2009). Nduka-Agwu (2009) even mentions that some UN peacekeepers abused their position by asking for sex in return for only 1 US dollar.

It is important to note that this research is done based on literature review, so the claims made in this dissertation are based on the literature found and reviewed. Possibly other important and relevant sources were missed out on because of limitations explained in the methodology section. However, to conclude from the analysed literature, many women did take their future into their own hands. They migrated to complete uncertainty hoping to find more opportunities to provide for themselves and their children. They went to live together with other female ex-rebels to share the experience and they continuously fought the cultural constraints (Atim et al., 2018; Coulter, 2009d; Holt-Rusmore, 2009; McKay, 2005, 2005; Mukasa, 2017). Defying both the cultural expectations of them as docile wives and the international narrative of them as peaceful victims, they had to create their own definition and their own space in a male led post-conflict society.

Female victimization in reintegration

In our theoretical framework, we argued that there is not really one definition for reintegration. Annan et al. (2009) state that *“at a minimum, reintegration implies rejoining, and being accepted by, family and community, as well as building a livelihood”* (p. 13) However, in all aspects of this sentence there are structural and cultural gender biases that hinder a female returnee in her reintegration. The post-war sphere is made for men. Official reintegration programs see men as the combatants who fought and need help demobilizing, and see women solely as passive, vulnerable dependents. For example, many male former rebels in both Uganda and Sierra Leone were offered a position in the national army and got paid for this, but female ex- fighters never even got this chance (Coulter, 2009c; Mukasa, 2017). Men are soldiers, so we seem to know what to do with them, while women in armed groups are more of an anomaly. We only know women as victims so they can only be treated

as such. Poor, vulnerable, agency-less victims, or if not victims then still definitely not fighters. Take for example this extract out of a paper on clinical social work practice in Northern Uganda of Bragin et al. (2015): *“how do poor, vulnerable, conflict-affected women respond to being asked about the meaning of psychological and social well-being?”* (Bragin et al., 2015, p. 352). Or notice how Solomon & Ginifer (2008) refer to women in armed forces: *“women associated with the fighting forces (WAFF)”* (p. 4). Why can they only be ‘associates’ or ‘dependents’? Such stereotypical assumptions persist, while we know that women could definitely also be fighters as highlighted above, and that both in the LRA and in the rebel forces in Sierra Leone gender roles were heavily challenged and reformed. MacKenzie (2009) describes the experience of female fighters as depoliticized and de-securitized, which results in women’s reintegration not being seen as a security issue. They are thus expected to naturally return to the ‘normal’ which is a social process, so no specific attention is needed. Their victimization keeps them from being treated as fighters equal to male ones.

Many of them were abducted into the forces and forced into marriages or violence, so they mostly were victims indeed. However women who survived their time with the rebels, came back more resilient and more empowered because they held certain positions and received rewards within the rebel groups that traditional gender roles would never allow them (Coulter et al., 2008; Denov, 2008). Moreover, women who stayed behind when the men of the house went out to fight both in Uganda and Sierra Leone had to take on the role of providing for the family and became heads of the households (Binder et al., 2008; Maina, 2011; Smet, 2009; Specht, 2013; Veale, 2003). However, by homogenising African women into the perpetual victim role, all the aspects of their resilience are not acknowledged. Stijn Smet (2009) argues that this cultural relativism misses the opportunities that the post-conflict sphere holds for improving gender relations. Even though DDR programs might have the incentive to promote women and gender equality they fall in the neo-colonial dichotomization of the West as modern and women in Uganda and Sierra Leone as one generalized traditional group in dire need of saving by the West. Also for the community, the DDR falls in an individualistic Western perspective. As Holly Porter (2013) and Chris Coulter (2009e) argue, respectively for Uganda and Sierra Leone, an individual perpetrator punishment or victim support is not as important for the community as a restoring of ‘traditional’ social harmony, which is the reason for the high degree of attention that is put by the community on conforming to ‘traditional’ cultural norms.

If we look back at the hypothesis stated at the beginning of this MA thesis, we see that indeed female victimization has an influence on the reintegration of women formerly involved with the LRA and the RUF. They are not acknowledged by the international community as soldiers and thus miss out on proper assistance that would have created a sustainable future. However, there are more, and often more deep-rooted, structural obstacles which toughen their process. The “*hyper-masculinized ‘post-conflict’ space*” (p. 456), as Hills & MacKenzie (2017) call it, creates the structural violence which marginalizes women on social, economic, educational, and electoral ground through traditional gender roles as part of a paternalistic society. Women are, for example, not allowed to report sexual abuse by their own husband and cannot own land while they need economic independence to reduce their stigma (Annan & Brier, 2010; Coulter, 2009e, 2009d; Gaffney, 2014). However, they often turn out to be more resilient than the female victimization perspective expects them to be. More women remained in income-generating jobs than was the case before the war, and single mothers took up their kids and moved to an uncertain future in urban centres to get a chance in building up their future and that of their children (Atim et al., 2018; Binder et al., 2008; Coulter, 2009d; Smet, 2009; Specht, 2013). Still, the international community renders girls invisible. More importantly, however, they make *women’s resilience* invisible. On the one hand, we should acknowledge the structural constraints of their society, while taking into account the trauma the society lived through. And on the other hand, we should acknowledge their agency. The post-conflict space where there had been already a shift in gender roles (Holt-Rusmore, 2009), should be looked at outside of the stereotypical Western victim perspective to realize the potential of female ex-fighters.

Conclusion

War is indeed still seen as a men's business and this resonates in the reintegration process of former rebels. In a rather elaborate literature review, this perspective of female victimization within reintegration of women came up for both countries. Women are not expected to play the same (fighting) roles as men do in rebel forces, so there is no attention paid to their specific needs to reintegrate. Both within the local community and from the international aid programs different issues came up that toughened women's reintegration, but do not apply for men and therefore are not taken into consideration.

The stigma is a big one. While men also face stigma when coming back from rebel forces, women were stigmatized twice because they also lost their sexual integrity which was deemed highly important for women and not so much for men. Both communities also feared female fighters heavily because they are perceived as even more cruel than male fighters. Other problems women face more is their health which is gravely affected by the sexual violence in the bush, and the already discriminatory society that is constantly constraining on women in general. Girls are expected to rather quickly become wives and mothers who work at home, but their stigma of 'rebel' took this option away for many female returnees while still being stuck in a society that only really allows for this traditional trajectory. It actually goes in circles: They are stigmatized for being rebels and having been sexually active. They can reduce this stigma by either following the traditional female trajectory, or becoming an asset to the household. To follow the traditional trajectory, they would need to marry, but their stigma makes them unmarriageable. To become an economic asset they should provide income, but structural constraints make it impossible for them to own land or resources to do so. Often the only surviving technique to get income seems to be prostitution or transactional sex. This would lessen the stigma because they can provide, but then they are sexually active again which was one of the reasons of their stigmatization in the first place.

Then there is the international aid which is put in place to help returning rebels to reintegrate, but because women are not acknowledged as fighters and only as victims or 'associates' of the force, these programs are not made with attention to their specific needs. Women also lacked a seat at the table when the design of for example the DDR program was done. An interesting observation from Chris Coulter (2009c) was that this led international aid programs

to seem more stereotyping towards women than the rebels, because for both the LRA and the RUF we discovered that women could really have fighting roles within the force or hold weapons. They might have other functions as well and suffered a lot of (sexual) violence, but they are definitely not only defenceless victims. This over-classification as Mazurana & Carlson (2004) call it, of female ex-fighters as 'not-real fighters' can have grave consequences. The DDR camps provide no specific health care or child-care for them nor are they able to really help women to a sustainable livelihood afterwards. The camps in Sierra Leone are even considered dangerous because of the presence of men from their and other rebel forces.

What I want to emphasize with this dissertation is that it is time to break out of gender stereotypes. Female victimization is outdated. Women are resilient. Even though most women were indeed made members of the rebels by force, it should not be ignored that they did survive this (forced) period in the bush. It needs to be acknowledged that their reintegration is not equal to male ones but is equal in importance. The 'home' we saw in our title is often not home anymore. Podder (2012) explained that the home situation, or an ex-fighters own situation, might have changed and we see this for many women in both countries. Their households were often brought upside down because the family had to move or the man lost his dominant position because he could not be the breadwinner anymore. Women themselves have changed as well, they became empowered because they were soldiers and some even commanders. Re-integration expects them to turn back to 'normal', but what if 'normal' doesn't exist anymore or what if they don't fit in their previous 'normal' anymore?

To conclude the research question. Many different structural factors, like their economic marginalization and stigmatization, influence women's reintegration, but the inability to perceive women as fighters also gravely hampers their process. Taking into account that every story of every (abducted) woman is different, I want to end by stating that women are capable of much more than gendered (western) stereotypes expect them to be. They can very well be actors, showing resilience in light of structural constraints, and they are not perpetual victims in a men's world.

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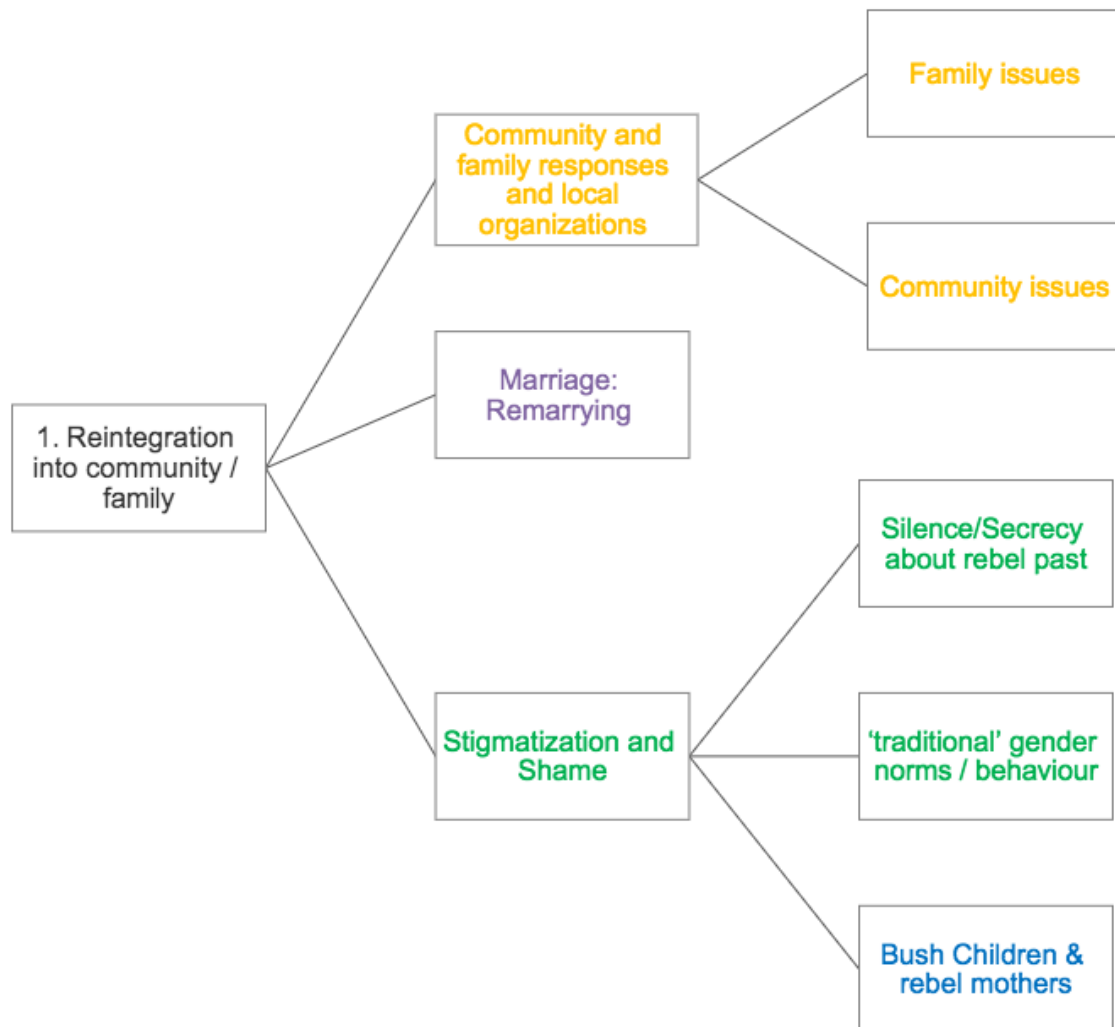
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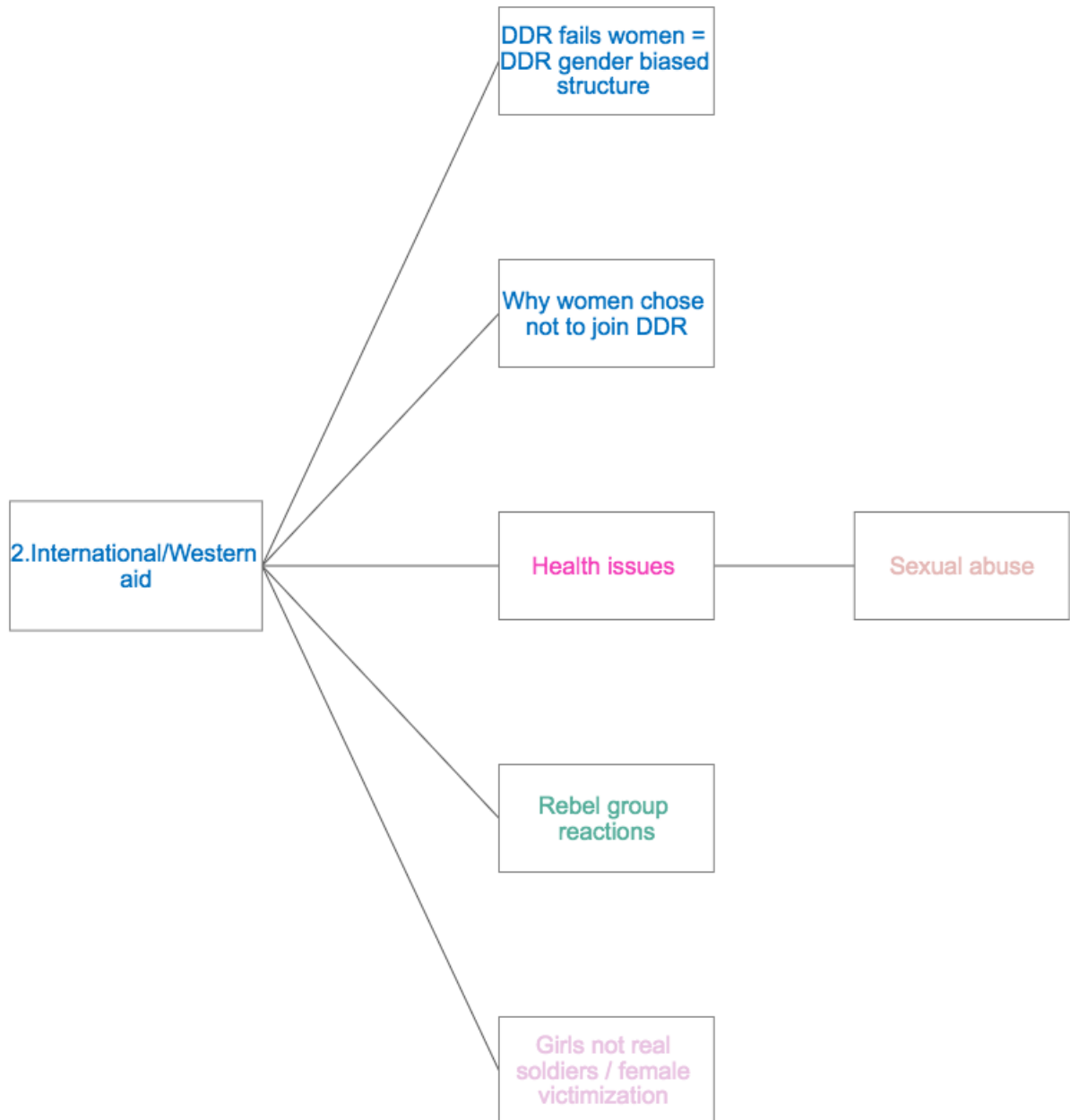
Appendix 1 – Search Strings scheme

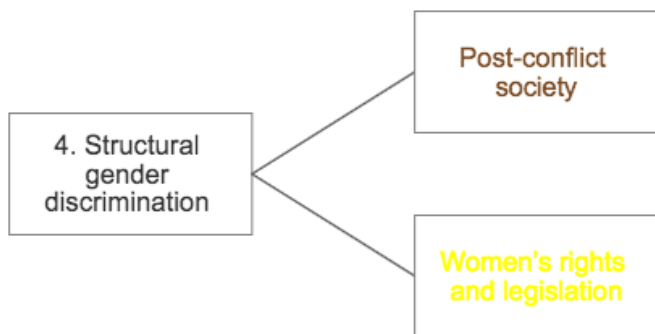
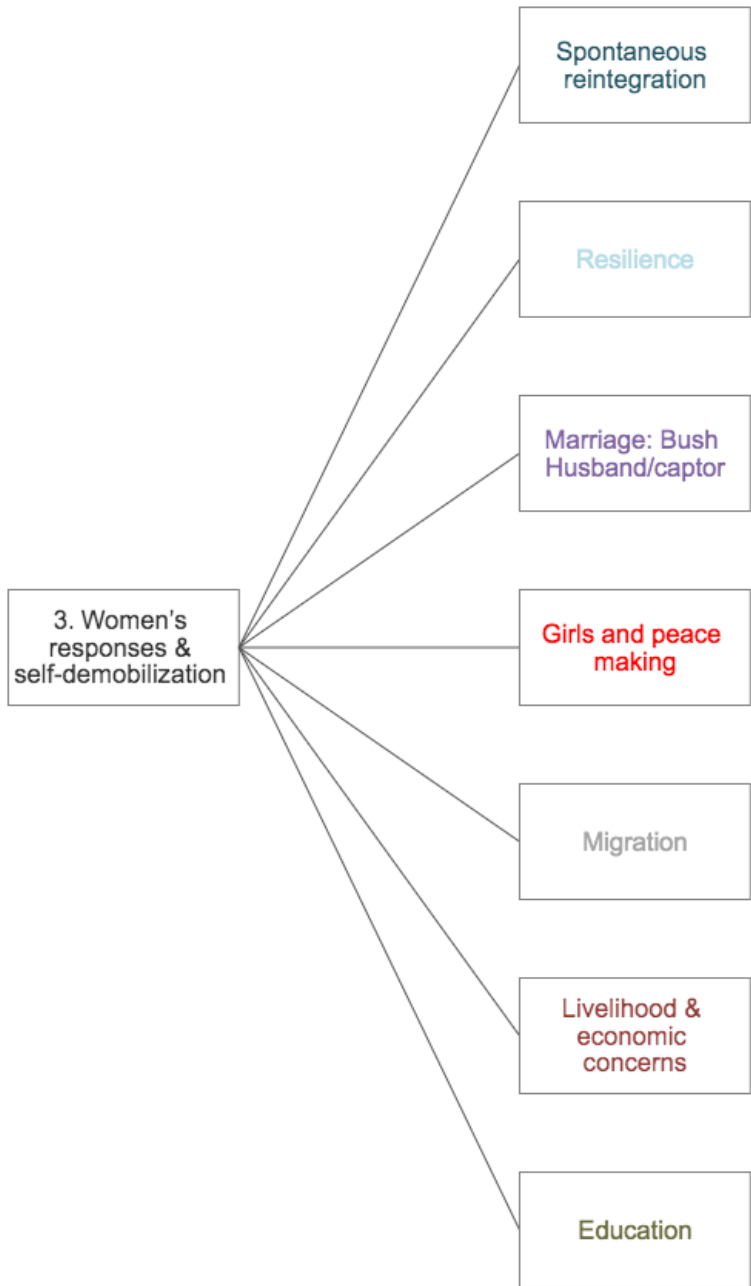


Appendix 2 – Codes and coding tree

1. Uganda







2. Sierra Leone

