

Central Africa Report

Managing the battle space Women on the frontline in eastern DRC

Nelson Alusala

Summary

In the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), being identified as the wife of a rebel or militia member is tantamount to acknowledging that one is an accomplice of an enemy of the state. Yet these presumed 'wives' are forced to survive in or on the periphery of the combat zones, concealing their identity while using their affiliation to armed groups as a source of survival. This study, which was conducted in eastern DRC, shows that many of the women are less dependent on their partners than is generally presumed, and that their spousal relationships often become a survival mechanism.

THE PROTRACTED CONFLICT in the eastern DRC has taken an enormous toll on ordinary people. Women in general continue to suffer, not just as victims of gender-based and sexual violence but also because of the increased burden of fending for their families while their men are away in the war. Women 'dependants' of non-state armed combatants are particularly affected.

Talking and listening to these women and hearing how they survive and relate to their 'husbands' raises the question of whether they should be viewed as dependants of their 'husbands', as they have developed their own coping mechanisms, devoid of community support.¹

Methodology

The objective of the study was to identify how women associated with non-state armed fighters cope with their daily lives under the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions with a number of women. The first group of respondents comprised 44 wives of Mai Mai militias – 21 in Bukavu and 23 in Uvira. The second group comprised seven wives of Forces

Démocratiques de Liberation du Rwanda (FDLR) combatants, the third group was composed of three ‘wives’ of Forces nationales de libération (FNL) combatants. The fourth group consisted of one focus group with five widows of former non-state armed combatants from local militia groups operating in Luvungi and another with three widows of FDLR fighters operating between Uvira town and Lemera in the Moyen Plateau. The interviewees were between the ages of 17 years and 65 years and had been married at an average age of 14 years. All the women interviewed disclosed that their marriages were voluntary.

Non-state armed combatants

Non-state armed combatants are those who are willing and able to use violence to pursue their objectives and who are not integrated into formal state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police or special forces. These groups have a degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure and work within an organisational structure.²

They include militias, rebel groups, warlords, clan groupings, terrorists, criminals and mercenaries, whose aim is usually to undermine state apparatus. Non-state armed groups are also part of the wider grouping of conflict combatants, including governments, organised political groups, ethnic groups and civilians, all of whom regularly compete over the political authority of the state, including access to resources.³

The appellation ‘non-state armed combatants’, in the context of the eastern DRC, refers to combatants other than state military who are involved in armed conflicts either amongst themselves or against state forces (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo – FARDC). While non-state armed combatants are usually individuals fighting against the main state government, the context in the eastern DRC is slightly different.

Most members join militia and rebel groups with little (if any) intention of one day overthrowing the government in Kinshasa

Most members of militia and rebel groups join the groups with little (if any) intention of one day overthrowing the government in Kinshasa. They are local combatants interested mainly in their day-to-day survival. In other words, most homesteads own a gun or two either for the family’s protection or as a tool for alternative livelihoods (through armed raids, forced taxes, robberies, defence of mining territories and so on).

Individuals, especially men, turn into militias in the eastern DRC as a way of life – a source of income generation. The conflicts are more over the control of natural resources than they are over political power.

Women in conflict zones

In Africa, as in most parts of the world, the phenomenon of women as combatants or agents in war (whether direct or indirect) is little explored and even less acknowledged, even when their contribution is so visible. Conventional thinking is that those who perpetuate armed conflicts are mainly men, leading to the general assumption that



FOR COMBATANTS, MILITIAS
ARE A WAY OF LIFE AND A
SOURCE OF INCOME

war, be it civil or interstate, is largely an affair of men, who comprise the majority of combatants. Women (and children) are usually relegated to the lesser role of merely accompanying the men.

In eastern DRC, where rape and other forms of abuse of women are rampant, women are held in very low esteem, often relegated to the position of war survivors in perpetuity. Even worse is the fact that soldiers and policemen, whose task it is to protect citizens, are among the perpetrators of violence and injustice against women.⁴

A recent United Nations (UN) human rights report identified the main causes of injustice against women in the eastern DRC to be weak state institutions – including the national army, police and justice institutions – and persistent impunity. According to the report, these aspects, which should be at the core of SSR in the DRC continue unabated, undermining efforts to restore security in the country.⁵

The precarious situation of women in the eastern DRC is as complex as the cyclical nature of the armed violence

The precarious situation of women in the conflict zone of the eastern DRC is as complex as the cyclical nature of the armed violence. The lengthy and repetitive nature of the conflict has led to a recycling of combatants from one war to another, with a long-lasting impact on both survivors and perpetrators.

Among those who suffer are women associated with non-state armed combatants. In South Kivu, where this study was conducted, there are two categories of armed groups to whom the women in question are linked: the local armed groups (predominantly Mai Mai militias) and the foreign armed groups (rebels).⁶ ‘Mai Mai’ is a collective name referring to local armed groups emanating from autochthone ethnic groups who believe the land should belong to its original inhabitants. They fight against government forces and amongst themselves as well as against foreign armed groups for control over land and natural resources, particularly mining areas.

Militia groups operating in South Kivu include Mai Mai Yakutumba, Raia Mutomboki, Mai Mai Fujo, Mai Mai Kifua Fua, Mai Mai Kapopo, Force auto-défense légitime (FAL), and the Patriotes Résistants Congolais (PARECO). The combatants in these armed groups fall into two categories: those who continuously resist integration into the country’s military – the FARDC – and those who have defected from the FARDC to

re-join armed groups. Sometimes combatants oscillate from one militia or armed group to the other, the chief criterion being the profitability of the group in terms of the natural resources it controls.⁷

There are two main foreign rebel groups in South Kivu. These are the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) from Rwanda and the National Liberation Forces (FNL) from Burundi.⁸ The women associated with both categories of fighters (local and foreign) often find themselves victims of their affiliation to the combatants and are forced to follow the waves of displacement determined by the rapidly changing conflict scenarios on the ground. They frequently have to seek refugee (with their children) away from the combat zones where their ‘husbands’⁹ are based.

Efforts by the government and international community either to integrate the militia groups into FARDC sustainably or reintegrate them into society have faced enormous challenges, just as the process of disbanding and repatriating the remnants of FDLR and FNL to Rwanda and Burundi respectively continues to meet resistance from the groups.¹⁰

While both armed groups (militias and rebels) continue to engage in wars amongst themselves and against the state, economic activities within the territories under their control continue unhindered under the shadow of war. Some of the most active participants in these activities are women associated with the combatant groups.

The testimonies of these women and observation of their daily coping mechanisms made it apparent that their survival is largely independent of support from their presumed ‘husbands’, who are perpetually away in combat. According to the women, they are the wives of the combatants only as far as the children born to them are concerned.¹¹ Asked why they would still want to associate themselves with combatants, the majority said they believed their ‘husbands’ ‘... are fighting for a just cause, aimed at making their lives better [and] that one day they will come back’.¹²

Women with ‘husbands’ in active combat have learned to evacuate the battleground when war is imminent and to go back when the situation is calmer. The women interviewed for this research had left their ‘husbands’ defence positions due to imminent conflict, although they still frequented the combat zones for trade, especially to fetch minerals.

The environment in South Kivu is mainly characterised by informal trade in a wide range of commodities. The daily survival of women in general is dependent on the way they manipulate the situation in which they find themselves.

Mainstreaming gender in security sector reform

The integration of gender issues into security sector reform (SSR) is key to strengthening the security, justice and economic situation of the post-conflict state, as well as to developing ownership of the process. This can be achieved by creating an effective, accountable and participatory security sector in which all citizens irrespective of their gender, status or affiliation in society, have a role to play.

Gender in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration tends to be limited to including the interests of female ex-combatants in the programme

Gender mainstreaming can be achieved by increasing the recruitment and promotion of female personnel within SSR, preventing human rights violations and collaborating with women's organisation. At the international level, the importance of gender mainstreaming has been widely acknowledged. Some of the instruments that recognise this important aspect include the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013) and 2122 (2013).¹³

At the continental level, the African Union (AU), through its AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), obliges member states to apply the principle of gender equality and women's empowerment, including in SSR processes at the national, regional and continental levels.¹⁴ This obligation was reinforced by a decision of the Executive Council of the AU in 2009, which declared 2010-2020 the African Women's Decade.¹⁵ The AU Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform emphasises the need to include the interests of women of all categories in the planning of SSR programmes. It states:

SSR will adhere to the principles of gender equality and women's empowerment as enshrined in the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (2004), the Solemn Declaration on a Common African Defence and Security Policy (2004), the Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development Policy (2006), the African Union Gender Policy (2009), the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325(2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 and 1889 (2009), as well as to other relevant gender instruments of the RECs and of Member States. The entire SSR process will, therefore, include women-specific activities, gender awareness and responsive programming, and aim to bring about transformative possibilities for gender equity within the security sector.¹⁶

The focus of most global discussions about gender mainstreaming in SSR programmes includes ensuring female participation in the mainstream programme. Similarly, gender in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration tends to be limited to including the interests of female ex-combatants (those who participate directly as fighters) in the programme. More often, the welfare of the female dependants of non-state combatants is not taken into account, perhaps because they are not direct participants in the conflict.

The DRC is no different from the global norm with regard to the situation of female dependants of non-state armed combatants. The country has had several DDR



THE AU SOLEMN
DECLARATION ON
GENDER EQUALITY OBLIGES
MEMBER STATES TO
APPLY THE PRINCIPLE OF
GENDER EQUALITY AND
WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

processes prior to the latest one,¹⁷ the 'Global Plan on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR III), of 2014' but none of them has incorporated the interests of the female dependants of rebels or militias, despite the high risk they pose to the success of the DDR.

Although they appear to be non-combatants as far as the wars are concerned, the activities of the women and their links to armed combatants show otherwise. The lack of proper support structures within the community only serves to make their affiliation with non-state armed combatants more harmful and their children often end up becoming militia and rebel members as that is the best they can do in the prevailing circumstances. The new rebel/militia joins the conflict and the cycle repeats itself.¹⁸

Past failures of DDR programmes in the DRC can partly be attributed to a lack of comprehensive planning, as well as to the failure of planners to appreciate the links between SSR and DDR that would allow the inclusion of indirect combatants in the programme.

Policy framework discussions of the links between DDR and SSR have concluded that a focus on security sector governance provides a better appreciation of how DDR and SSR are interconnected and helps frame an understanding that security-related issues in post-conflict contexts cannot be dealt with in isolation but need to be part of the promotion of democratic governance. DDR and SSR are related in supply and demand terms, that is, DDR provides the basis for SSR by shaping the size and nature of the post-conflict security sector through demobilising and reintegrating former combatants. Once the demobilised combatants are integrated into society the situation becomes conducive to a thriving SSR process.¹⁹

Living in uncertainty

The situation of the average woman in South Kivu (whether associated with combatants or not) is generally one of uncertainty. The economy of the province is informal and daily survival is dependent on the ability to manipulate the environment. The wives or widows of non-state armed combatants find it particularly difficult to integrate freely with the rest of the community because of the stigma associated with their links with militias or rebels.

On the one hand, they strive to conceal that identity from the public, on the other they exploit the association to gain access to areas controlled by militias and rebels in order to obtain products for trade. It is a tenuous balancing act, as expressed by one of the women:

Everyone here takes advantage of who they are and the environment around them. I deal in minerals because my

husband's battalion controls a gold mine in Mukungwe ... someone else deals in timber and charcoal because her husband controls a section of Kahuzi-Biega forest. Other women go to Bujumbura to bring merchandise ... We maximise on every opportunity to survive ...²⁰

Limited employment opportunities and persistent insecurity in the eastern DRC drive many women to the brink of survival. Their education opportunities are stifled by conflict, just as their security is threatened. Most of them continue to fall victim to rape. Their situation exposes them to the probability of further attacks and this compels them to be opportunistic in the search for safety and stability.

The situation of the average woman in South Kivu – whether associated with combatants or not – is generally one of uncertainty

One way of achieving this is to marry a 'soldier' of some sort, who, besides being a husband, is also a source of protection in case of attacks. In South Kivu, non-state armed combatants are the most common and popular of all 'soldiers'. They therefore represent the best option for marriage for most young women wanting to marry a soldier.²¹ Non-state armed combatants in the eastern DRC also represent a step above the ordinary citizen. Marrying one of them is a gamble for wealth and/or status, as they are seen as halfway to being government soldiers:

Once a combatant joined an armed group, he or she gets a rank, and this alone means a certain level of status in the community ... a wife of such individual also commands a level of respect and the dividends that come with it.²²

A non-state armed actor stands a chance of being reintegrated into the FARDC in the event of a DDR process. There are countless examples of such processes in which militias and rebels have negotiated their way into the FARDC in the hope of uplifting their standard of living. Even if the combatant is not considered for integration into the FARDC in the course of the DDR process, the DDR benefits (about US\$310 in addition to start-up kits) provide substantial capital for the family to invest in a small business. The amount increases with each additional family member who is demobilised.

Asked what other advantages come with marrying a non-state armed combatant, some of the wives of militias in Uvira stated that their decision was premised on the hope that being a wife of a militia or a rebel would provide better prospects for a good

life. Others believed that to do so would increase their personal security as well as that of their families and relatives, because the combatant would be able to defend them in case of attacks.

Some thought that by virtue of belonging to an armed group the husband would have access to territory (under the control of that armed group) from which the wives and children would derive a livelihood by accessing the resources under the militia's control. This could be a mining territory, a local market where taxes are collected, a road on which roadblocks are mounted to collect taxes, or a forest from which charcoal and timber are extracted.

From several interactions with these women it was clear that most of their aspirations were unrealistic and that they were more preoccupied with their daily survival than with future opportunities.

Coping strategies

The failure of the community to address the plight of women dependants of rebels and militias has forced these women to adopt coping strategies in an effort to survive the harsh environment in which they inhabit. Their everyday life is marked by a continuous struggle to make ends meet.

Some of the strategies they have adopted include illegal trafficking in natural resources, cross-border trade (including smuggling minerals across borders), small-scale trade, use of local (traditional) skills and taking advantage of DDR programmes to earn extra cash.

The dynamics within the society are such that the group of women who can be categorised as the 'female dependants of non-state armed combatants' is a very reserved, fearful and distrustful group, mostly owing to their fear of retaliatory attacks or arrest by state agencies or enemies of their 'husbands'. It took a few days for the researcher to make contact and interact with the affected women in order to build their confidence before they would open up and discuss their survival mechanisms.

In the eastern DRC, most individuals openly associated with a rebel or a militia group are treated with antagonism due to the suffering the inhabitants have endured at the hands of armed groups.²³ Families of known militia or rebels face a daily risk of being murdered, arrested and/or having their houses burned down. This threat is most prevalent in non-urban settings, where it is easier to identify such homes. For this reason, most combatants tend to relocate their families to urban centres away from where they conduct their armed activities. This helps to conceal the identity of their families.

In most instances, non-state armed combatants and their dependants are excluded from accessing community support systems, including humanitarian assistance. A staff member of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) explained that '... very few NGOs target families of non-state combatants ... they are seen as enemies of the state and therefore not welcome to derive benefits from anyone. They fend for themselves ...'²⁴

Illegal trafficking of natural resources

This is the most lucrative trade in South Kivu, where all and sundry converge. According to one of the women, '... all people, from traditional leaders to government authorities to local businessmen to rebels and militias as well as their wives and



FAMILIES OF MILITIA OR REBELS RISK BEING MURDERED, ARRESTED OR HAVING THEIR HOUSES BURNED DOWN

children, are involved. This trade has no known boundaries in Congo ...²⁵

The profits made by a local gold broker (middleman) based in Uvira and trafficking in minerals, are not only intended for the female dependants of non-state armed combatants but also for the combatants themselves and the FARDC soldiers supposedly 'guarding' the mines against illegal activities.²⁶ It has been reported that armed groups and their criminal networks – including Mai Mai militias, Congolese army commanders and FDLR rebels – control the trade in natural resources, especially gold, in the Kivus.²⁷

The 'wives' and/or female associates of non-state armed combatants play an active role in the transfer of minerals from mines to clients in Uvira and Bukavu.

According to a gold dealer in Bukavu, who regularly buys from Mai Mai-affiliated women before delivering the metal to contacts in the region, women are the preferred conduits for natural resources (especially gold) because they are more dependable than men: 'They always deliver and are trustable [sic] ... Personally I send some of the women to Bujumbura to deliver parcels whenever necessary, and they do it.'²⁸

The 'wives' and/or female associates of non-state armed combatants play an active role in the transfer of minerals from mines to clients

This testimony corroborates the findings of another study, which describes how illegally trafficked gold from South Kivu goes via Bujumbura to markets in Europe. The report describes how gold originating from South Kivu reaches the Belgium-based company Berkenrode by transiting through Burundi. Additional trade flows from South Kivu via Tanzania through Kigoma and Mwanza. The smugglers also trade in Kampala. The main sources of illicit minerals are the zones controlled by the FDLR and Mai Mai militias.²⁹

According to a female gold trafficker who is also a dependant of a Mai Mai combatant, the illegal trafficking of minerals comes with enormous challenges, although the dividends are often worthwhile. Claudine, a 25-year-old mother of five children aged between 3 and 12 years, told the interviewer:

Life of a rebel's family is the most difficult thing here. We live under suspicion and hardly get employment and therefore we have to fend for ourselves in every way possible. The easiest way out has been to revive our

contacts with our friends who were reintegrated in FARDC and who are deployed in mining locations. This way, they channel the minerals through us to the markets in Bukavu, Uvira and Bujumbura ...³⁰

Claudine added that at times she and her friends are obliged to undertake long trips out of Bukavu in search of gold. They often travel to Mukungwe, a distance of about 45km, in search of gold. They share a motorbike (known locally as *motard*) for a section of the trip but because of the mountainous landscape most of the distance is travelled on foot through territories under the control of various rebels and militia groups.

Most artisanal mines operate under the control and command of FARDC, whose camps are often located close to the mines. The FARDC soldiers have a low-level involvement, opting to let the local inhabitants of the area do the mining on their behalf. The wives of non-state armed combatants frequent the FARDC-controlled mining areas to purchase gold. However, they are obliged to pay taxes to FARDC before leaving the mines or they encounter armed groups during the transportation of the minerals:

... at times we are intercepted by armed groups such as FDLR and Mai Mai who track our movements ... and have to either part with the entire 'tola' [pack of minerals, notably gold] or divide it up with them for us to be allowed to exit their territory ...³¹

According to Claudine, '... the more frequently you buy from particular mines, the easier it becomes to do future business with those who control the mine ... The relationship is either by virtue of pre-existing links between the wives of FARDC soldiers and those of militia groups, or purely business at the local level.'³² Female traffickers of gold with established connections within FARDC are able to embed themselves within the FARDC camps alongside FARDC families for several days, gathering minerals from mines within the control of those battalions.

In addition, some of the women have been sexually abused by armed groups and errant FARDC soldiers:

Once we have collected enough from our contacts in FARDC, we make our way to the market ... However, the danger is that often some of us are sometimes sexually abused or even raped within the camps.³³

Investing in cross-border trade

Mboko town is located in Tanganyika District on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. On the opposite side of the lake, in Burundi, is Rumonge beach, a much bigger and busier market for fish, timber and agricultural produce. Rumonge attracts commodities

from the Congolese side of the lake as well and this opportunity has been harnessed by a number of the women.

In February 2014 three wives of Mai Mai militia and inhabitants of Mboko, South Kivu, were able to use the money they had collaboratively saved from the proceeds of selling 'ndagala' (local name for small fish commonly available in Lake Tanganyika) to purchase a motorised canoe. They used the canoe to establish a transport business on Lake Tanganyika, transporting merchandises across the lake between Mboko (in DRC) and Rumonge (in Burundi) as well as to other destinations along the lake. As of April 2015, the trio were reported to be making an average profit of between US\$25 and US\$30 per day. When the transport business is slow the canoe is used to fetch sand from the lake to stock on the shore for sale.³⁴

The women use their familiarity with the battlefield and their association with the combatants to gain 'acceptance' into networks of 'protected trade'

In another case of cross-border trade, Jacqueline and her neighbour, Pasha, whose 'husbands' are both part of a FAL militia group in Lemera's Moyen Plateau, go to Burundi on Tuesdays, taking peanuts and beans for sale in Gatumba and return on Fridays with paraffin and sometimes *mazout* (diesel) for sale in Uvira.

The women use their familiarity with the battlefield and their association with the combatants to gain 'acceptance' into networks of 'protected trade', that is, illegal dealings in outlawed commodities and products such as game meat, marijuana, minerals, and transportation of charcoal from source to market. They act as middlemen in this trade, trafficking products between the source and the external market.

Small-scale traders

About 85% of the women interviewed in Bukavu and Uvira were involved in small-scale businesses, ranging from selling: *mitumba* (second hand/used) clothes, cell phone accessories and airtime and cereals (beans, corn, peanuts). Asked why most of them were not engaged in large-scale businesses, the women stated that they live in a state of uncertainty, often having to move unexpectedly depending on the operational bases of their 'husbands' armed groups.

One of the respondents, Beatrice, stated that between February and April 2015 she had moved with her four children from Bunyakiri to Kamituga, a distance of about 190km, because of the predatory attacks by Raia Mutomboki against her husband's defence base. The journey, which was made partly by motorcycle (paid in minerals) and partly on foot, took them five days.

Further attacks on her and the children in Kamituga, while her husband was fighting in the bush, forced her to evacuate to Uvira in early March along with three other women and their children. She soon lost contact with her husband. After three days of walking the group arrived in Uvira. With her four children and US\$15, she started selling charcoal in tins while sheltering in the market place where she conducted her business.

In early April she received the news of her husband's death – he and a colleague had fallen into an ambush. At the time of the interview Beatrice was planning to make a trip to Kamituga in the hope of retrieving anything her husband might have left behind,

85%

THE PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN INTERVIEWED IN BUKAVU AND UVIRA WHO WERE INVOLVED IN SMALL-SCALE BUSINESSES

but also to fetch gold for sale in Uvira. She was searching for a potential client for the gold before she could go to Kamituga.

Accounts similar to that of Beatrice, where 'husbands' were either separated from their wives or killed in an encounter with their enemies, were common. By 2015 Adèle, a mother of six, had not heard from her husband for three years. After he had been demobilised from the FARDC, he had joined Mai Mai Yakutumba as a commander of one of the bases in Misisi, Fizi territory. Before his disappearance, Beatrice's husband had introduced her to a group of wives of FARDC soldiers who controlled a gold mine in Misisi. Adèle had since established a network with the FARDC wives, from whom she was buying gold at a fairer price, which she then sells in Uvira to a contact from Bujumbura.

Use of local/traditional skills

Mama Bahati, who sees her militia husband once in two months, lives the life of a single mother. She earns a living by selling cassava flour, which she prepares by pounding dried cassava with a pestle and mortar, as there is only one flourmill in Kaberagule village, located five kilometres from her house and on the other side of a forest controlled by a rival militia group. Moreover, she could hardly afford the cost of using the flourmill, which is about 500FC (50 US cents).

Mama Bahati, who is 26 years old, has three boys and one girl (aged between one and 11 years). She does not believe that anyone else cares about the welfare of her children as much as she does. Many NGOs come to her area to offer support to the needy, she says, but because the traditional chief does not recognise her and other families who have settled in the area recently, he excludes their names from the list of beneficiaries.

The desperation these women experience leads them to take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way

Mama Bahati's father was also a Mai Mai militia, so she has inherited her mother's lifestyle and has no doubt that her children will undergo the same experience, thereby remaining within the same vicious cyclical trap.

In Makobola II village, Fizi territory, Marie-Claire, a widowed mother of six children, survives by treating injured militias and rebels. Her patients frequent her house at dusk and whenever her customer base decreases she leaves her children in the care of Mama Annette, a neighbour, to seek patients in rebel

camps or in militia villages. She is widely known in the area and is therefore not fearful:

... Some of the injured combatants are afraid to venture out of their bases, that's why I go to them ... At times they send an emissary to call me to go and treat them in the camps, especially their commanders ... they fear being attacked if they visit me ...³⁵

Marie-Claire further disclosed that whenever she visits rebel camps or militia villages she takes along cell phone airtime vouchers, which she sells to combatants. She is often paid in kind through *tolas* of gold or cereals (corn, beans, sorghum and so on).

Taking advantage of DDR programmes

Naturally, the desperation these women experience leads them to take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way. This includes representing themselves falsely as combatants whenever an opportunity for benefits arises.

A DDR III programme officer in Bukavu pointed out that because of this the DDR caseload frequently bulges beyond the programme's estimates. Despite not being combatants, most women associated with combatants are conversant with the criteria used to identify potential beneficiaries:

... they are adept at manipulating the gun, military-style marching as well as performing simple tradecraft drills that are often demanded. They also know the battalions or brigades with which they associate themselves, making it easy for them to pass the criteria for a DDR beneficiary...³⁶

This observation confirms the need for policymakers to start thinking about how to cater for the needs of women in combat zones, regardless of whether these women are combatants themselves or affiliates of combatants.

If this group of women were to be systematically identified and their needs accommodated within a defined national policy it would be the start of a process of breaking the cyclical effects of the conflict. If their needs were mainstreamed within the post-conflict policies of the country, thereby getting rid of the 'DDR culture' that has permeated society, it would help to break the cycle of dependence on false representation by 'beneficiaries' who have never participated directly in a war.

The situation is no different from that faced by combatants themselves. A UN DDR expert in Bukavu expressed concern about the growing trend towards commercialisation of DDR. According to an expert, the DDR dependency syndrome originates from the cyclical nature of the war in eastern DRC.

... Here in the Kivus, DDR is now seen as one of the processes of war, not as a means of ending the war... because some of these militias you see were once in FAZ, FAC or FARDC³⁷ before they defected to join rebel groups. They were later demobilised from the rebel groups, only to go back ... They shift from one rebel group to another and whenever there is a DDR programme, they present themselves again ... and again. It is a business.³⁸

The absence of any support from society means that children born to these mothers grow up to follow in their parents' footsteps, either as militias/ rebels or as traffickers

From the foregoing it is apparent that the DRC lacks mechanisms to ensure a sustainable DDR process as well as to respond to the gendered dimensions of the endemic conflict in the east. Some critics of the DDR and SSR programmes point out that their failure is partly due to the fact that they fail to address social constructions relating to armed violence. These critics believe part of the remedy is to move beyond the 'weapon of war' narrative to incentivise male and female strategies, while, at the same time, strengthening the link between judicial action and gender-related social services.³⁹

Conclusion

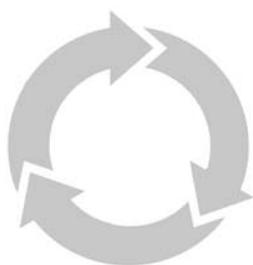
It is apparent that there are no mechanisms within the Congolese society to cater for the needs of women associated with non-state armed combatants. This shortcoming is a result of the failure of the government to integrate this group of women into its national DDR policy.

During discussions of the conflict in eastern DRC little is mentioned about the daily survival of these women associated with non-state armed combatants, whether as former combatants, survivors or widows. This forces them to rely on different types of opportunistic coping strategies, including involvement in illegal activities. The situation becomes cyclical because they raise children in the same severely constrained circumstances.

This study has outlined various coping strategies adopted by women in combat in eastern DRC. These include engaging in the illegal trade of natural resources, small-scale trading, smuggling various commodities, and reliance on traditional skills to survive. The common feature is that all the women live in fear and uncertainty about their future due to their affiliation with armed combatants.

The absence of support from society means that children born to these mothers grow up to follow in their parents' footsteps, either as militias/rebels or as traffickers of natural resources. The involvement of these women in criminal activities can only be curtailed by accommodating their needs in a clearly defined programme.

There is a need for planners of DDR programmes in the DRC to incorporate the needs of all those who suffer from consequences of the conflict, allowing them to successfully reintegrate into society in a sustainable manner. As this research has reflected, past DDR programmes in the DRC have failed dismally, leading to unsuccessful reintegration processes.



INVOLVEMENT IN ILLEGAL ACTIVITIES BECOMES CYCLICAL, AS CHILDREN ARE BORN AND RAISED IN THE SAME CONSTRAINED CIRCUMSTANCES

Notes

- 1 This paper reflects the findings of a study conducted in the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in April 2015. The names used for the women are pseudonyms in order to protect their identity and dignity.
- 2 See, C Hofmann and U Schneckener, 'NGOs and Nonstate Armed Combatants – Improving Compliance with International Norms', *Special Report 284*, United States Institute of Peace, 2011.
- 3 See, C Raleigh, A Linke and C Dowd, 'Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED)', Codebook Version 2. Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2012.
- 4 See, E Harsch, 'Security reform key to protecting women', 2010, www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2010/security-reform-key-protecting-women
- 5 See, 'Report of the United Nations Joint Human Rights Office on Human Rights Violations Perpetrated by Soldiers of the Congolese Armed Forces and Combatants of the M23 in Goma and Sake, North Kivu Province, and in and around Minova, South Kivu Province, From 15 November to 2 December 2012', www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/CD/UNJHROMay2013_en.pdf
- 6 Militias are armed groups created for a specific purpose or during a specific period. They are usually associated with an ethnic group and armed by, or allied with, a political elite with the objective of acting towards a goal defined by these elites or by larger political movements. A rebel group is a political organisation whose goal is to counter an established national government by violent acts. For a detailed discussion of militias and rebels, see, see, C Raleigh, A Linke and C Dowd, 'Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED)'.
- 7 Author interview with a local Mai Mai leader of FAL in Kiliba, South Kivu, 10 April 2015.
- 8 For more details about the FDLR and FNL presence in the DRC, see, 'Final Report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC', S/2015/19 of 12 January 2015, paras 46-87.
- 9 The words husband and husbands have been put in quotation marks because not all the women are formally married to the combatants whose children they have borne.
- 10 For a detailed explanation of challenges to the integration or demobilisation of armed groups in the DRC, see, 'Final Report of the UN Group of Experts on the DRC', S/2011/738 of 2 December 2011.
- 11 Author interview with women associated with non-state armed combatants in Lemera's Moyen Plateau, South Kivu, 12 April 2015.
- 12 Focus group discussions with the women in Luvungi, South Kivu, 11 April 2015.
- 13 See 'Gender and Security', www.dcaf.ch/Programmes/Gender-and-Security
- 14 See, 'Seventh Report of the Chairperson on the Implementation of the AU Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA)', EX.CL/729(XI).
- 15 See, 'African Union Report on Implementation of Previous Decisions of the Executive Council and the Assembly', EX.CL/Dec. 487 (XIV).
- 16 See, 'African Union Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform', Article 16 (j), www.peaceau.org/uploads/au-policy-framework-on-security-sector-reform-ae-ssr.pdf.
- 17 For a detailed discussion of past DDR processes in the CRC, see, A Kolln, 'DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo', www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/DDR-in-the-DRC-by-Andre-Kolln.pdf
- 18 Author interview with a local DDR outreach staff responsible for civilian disarmament, Uvira, 15 April 2015.
- 19 See, 'Linkage Between DDR and SSR', Outcome paper of the Second International Conference on DDR and Stability in Africa, Kinshasa, 12-14 June 2007.
- 20 Author interview with a rebel's wife on the outskirts of Kahuzi-Biega Forest, South Kivu, 12 April 2015.
- 21 This was disclosed by wives of militia groups during a focus group discussion in Luvungi in South Kivu, 11 April 2015.
- 22 Author interview with two dependent wives of militias, Plaines de la Ruzizi, South Kivu, 10 April 2015.
- 23 Author interview with the head of a local NGO in Bukavu, South Kivu, 9 April 2015.
- 24 Author interview with local NGOs field staff, Bukavu, 8 April 2015.
- 25 Author interview with a wife of a militia, who traffics in gold. Uvira, 11 April 2015.
- 26 Author interview with a local informal gold dealer in Uvira, 12 April 2015.
- 27 See, 'From Child Miner to Jewelry Store – The Six Steps of Congo's Conflict Gold', <http://enoughproject.org/reports/child-miner-jewelry-store-six-steps-congos-conflict-gold>
- 28 Author interview with a gold dealer in Bukavu, 10 April 2015.
- 29 See, 'From Child Miner to Jewelry Store'.
- 30 Interview with Claudine, a Mai Mai FAL combatant's dependant, Lemera, South Kivu, 12 April 2015.
- 31 Author interview with a female gold trafficker in Makobola II, South Kivu, 14 April 2015.
- 32 Author interview with the woman dependant of a non-state armed combatant, Bukavu, 16 April 2015.
- 33 Author interview with a female gold trafficker in Makobola II, South Kivu, 14 April 2015.
- 34 Author interview with two of the three women operating the canoe business, Mboko, 14 April 2015.
- 35 Author interview with Marie-Claire, a traditional healer who also treats armed non-state combatants, Makobola II, South Kivu, 14 April 2015.
- 36 Author interview with MONUSCO DDR field staff, Uvira, 15 April 2015.
- 37 FAZ (Forces Armées Zaïroises), FAC (Forces armées congolaises) are former names of the Congolese army, which is now FARDC (Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo).
- 38 Author interview with a MONUSCO DDR official at the DDR transit centre, Bukavu, 16 April 2015.
- 39 See, R Smits and S Cruz, 'Increasing Security in DR Congo: Gender Responsive Strategies for Combating Sexual Violence', 2011. <http://africacenter.org/2011/11/increasing-security-in-dr-congo-gender-responsive-strategies-for-combating-sexual-violence/>



About the author

Nelson Alusala is a research consultant at the Institute for Security Studies. He holds a PhD in political sciences from the University of Pretoria. He previously worked for the United Nations Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and has also undertaken research on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration in various contexts in Africa, including in Mozambique and Liberia. He remains engaged in similar initiatives in the continent's Great Lakes region.

About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies is an African organisation that aims to enhance human security on the continent. It does independent and authoritative research, provides expert policy analysis and advice, and delivers practical training and technical assistance.

Acknowledgements

This report has been made possible with support from the government of Australia. The ISS is also grateful for support from the other members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the governments of Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United States.

ISS Pretoria

Block C, Brooklyn Court
361 Veale Street
New Muckleneuk
Pretoria, South Africa
Tel: +27 12 346 9500
Fax: +27 12 460 0998

ISS Addis Ababa

5th Floor, Get House
Building, Africa Avenue
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Tel: +251 11 515 6320
Fax: +251 11 515 6449

ISS Dakar

4th Floor, Immeuble Atryum
Route de Ouakam
Dakar, Senegal
Tel: +221 33 860 3304/42
Fax: +221 33 860 3343

ISS Nairobi

Braeside Gardens
off Muthangari Road
Lavington, Nairobi, Kenya
Cell: +254 72 860 7642
Cell: +254 73 565 0300

www.issafrica.org

