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*A Psychosocial Approach to Understand the Reintegration Process of Female Child
Soldiers in Nepal*

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Soldiers in Nepal*

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Emory University
2012

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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Psychosocial Approach to Understand the Reintegration Process of Female Child Soldiers in Nepal

By Niharika Bhattarai

Background: There is limited research regarding the experience female child soldiers endure and how it influences the reintegration process in Nepal. Past research on child soldiers highlight the mental health issues that stem from their traumatic experiences of and evisceration of social structures. Also, past studies regarding child soldiers used a psychosocial approach to address the psychological and social problems child soldiers encounter.

Objectives: The purpose of the qualitative analysis was to examine how female child soldiers' experiences influence the reintegration process to provide evidence based psychosocial recommendations to improve their wellbeing.

Methods: We performed a secondary thematic analysis of 11 in-depth interviews with former female child soldiers of the People's Liberation Army in Nepal.

Results: Several overarching themes emerged from the interviews, including how the recruitment process, being a female in war, marriage, and education influenced the female child soldier's reintegration process and ultimately their psychosocial wellbeing. Female child soldiers stated the need for a new identity split from their child soldier identity, and community support to ameliorate their reintegration into Nepalese society.

Conclusions: Female child soldiers in Nepal encounter psychological and social problems as a consequence of their experience surrounding their time in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which influenced their reintegration process and ultimately their psychosocial wellbeing. To ensure the psychosocial well-being, female child soldiers expressed the need for community acceptance, delayed marriage and access to educational and health services to ensure an optimal reintegration process.

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Introduction

Globally 300,000 children are abducted, recruited and coerced to become child soldiers within armed forces.(MacMullin and Loughry 2004; Wessells 2005) The term “child soldier” paints a crude picture of a rifle holding boy, however it includes both males and females who work as messenger, cooks, manual laborers and sex slaves in armed forces. As defined by the Paris Principles 2007, a child soldier is: *Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks porters, messengers , spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part of hostilities.*” (Principles 2007 Pg 7)

Historically, wars were in distant battlefields and trenches; however present day wars envelop society as a whole, targeting the most vulnerable group – children. Children have become targets, perpetrators and ultimately victims of institutionalized violence, as seen in the case of Liberian children who were pushed into child soldiering due to the interaction of macro-social factors such as politics, culture and policies. (Honwana 2007; Kimmel 2007; Betancourt 2008; Vindevogel, Coppens et al. 2011). By the end of the conflict child soldiers witness the collapse or are forced into tearing their “protective fabric” apart through violent crimes, which includes the fragmenting of their family, schools and communities.(Boothby 2006) With decimated social environments, children are left without a support system, education and a childhood with their families. Children who endure such human rights violations also suffer long term psychological consequences such as flashbacks, PTSD and panic attacks. Combined, the psychosocial well-being of the child is negatively impacted as consequence of the armed conflict;

however, an optimal reintegration process allows child soldiers to become productive and constructive members of society. (Kimmel 2007)

Reintegration is a “long complex process that is as much about helping children find an appropriate social place as it is about individual rehabilitation, although that, too, is important.”(Wessells 2005 Pg 366) Since former child soldiers encounter hardships when readjusting into a social fabric while dealing with their rehabilitation needs, psychosocial support is viewed as a pertinent step for reintegration. This support enables child soldiers to comprehend their experience while integrating into their communities, and in turn become productive citizens. (Wessells 2004; Wessells 2005) Past studies regarding reintegration have detailed the obstacles child soldiers face during re-assimilation and re-socialization. From these studies, tailored strategies have intervened and facilitated the child soldier’s reintegration process, as seen 16 years after Mozambique’s child soldiers began their reintegration process. (Boothby 2006) Even with these research efforts, knowledge on female child soldiers is incomplete since majority of studies use male child soldiers as the study population. Therefore, inadequate knowledge is known regarding the female child soldier experience in armed conflict. Consequently, limited understanding is known on how these experiences influence their reintegration into the community and lastly, how to facilitate this process. (Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2012)

Nepal’s Female Child Soldiers

In 1996, a civil war between the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) and the communist’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) immersed Nepal into political violence, which terrorized the rural communities. The decade long armed conflict recruited children into

the RNA and PLA, where they functioned as sentries, cooks, spies, soldiers and messengers.(Kohrt 2010) With the ceasefire in 2006, child soldiers returned to their communities and began the reintegration process. However, this reintegration process entailed multiple unanticipated aspects (ex. facing discrimination) that were viewed by child soldiers as obstacles. Female child soldiers were a sub-population of the returning child soldiers in Nepal, who also underwent the re-adjustment process. However, limited knowledge regarding their perceptions and beliefs are regarding the reintegration process are known. Research conducted on child soldiers in Nepal heavily focuses on male child soldiers and the association between mental health and reintegration outcomes. There is a gap of knowledge regarding the perception of female child soldiers during their reintegration process, and consequently their mental health.

Research Question

To understand the demands of reintegration on the female child soldier, and how to enhance the facilitation of this process, this study proposes to explore the experiences that influenced the People's Liberation Army female child soldiers' reintegration into their communities. Questions explored are:

- What experiences did female child soldiers of the People's Liberation Army encounter?
- How could female child soldier's integration into society be improved?

Study Purpose

These questions were designed to explore the reintegration of female child soldiers into Nepalese society by identifying experiences from the pre, during and post war stages that impact this process. The intent of this study is to inform researchers and

professionals about the challenges encountered by female child soldiers in Nepal from the child soldier's perspective, using resources from child development, psychology and public health fields. Since consequences of violence manifests in males and females distinctively, understanding experiences of gender-based violence is important to provide the appropriate health care for each gender. (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation 2006) Therefore, understanding the experiences and perceptions of female child soldier's in Nepal will allow researchers to tailor health care interventions specific to needs of this sub-population of child soldiers.

Due to the limited nature of research being conducted on female child soldiers, this study expands and furthers the academic literature regarding the psychosocial needs of child soldiers to reintegrate into society. (Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008). Also, using a qualitative approach identifies female child soldiers' perspectives regarding their own needs of psychosocial care for the reintegration process. Therefore, specific reintegration strategies can be tailored to meet the needs of female child soldiers when designing intervention programs.

Literature Review

Use of Children as Soldiers

During times of warfare the health of a population is negatively affected, both of civilians and combatants alike. In the 20th century, a projected 191 million individuals died because of wars, with majority of deaths occurring in the civilian population. The legacy of war also impacts the life course of populations who survived the armed combat stage; they face long term health issues (such as psychosocial issues, disease and injuries) which are often overlooked. (Levy and Sidel 2009) The Geneva Convention of 1949 was initially geared towards limiting the effects of war to minimize the consequences of combat. This convention also attempted to provide protection to civilians and children, insulating them from war by drafting a code of conduct for states at war. In doing so, wars would be theoretically fought between militant and belligerent groups, eliminating civilian repercussions.(Abbott 1999) However, due to the changing nature of warfare in present day society, mortality and morbidity consequences faced by civilian populations are overwhelming.

With a shift to total warfare strategies in present day civil wars (compared to the post-colonial wars of Latin America and Africa), civilians are targeted by militant and belligerent groups. In turn civilians are involuntary conscripted into combat, creating a vague distinction between a civilian and a militant, rendering the Geneva Convention of 1977 obsolete. With armed combat coming to the doorsteps of homes and villages, civilian populations – especially children , are now vulnerable, exposed and recruited or forced to become soldiers.(Abbott 1999; Honwana 2008) Machel reinforces this new strategy by stipulating, “Contemporary conflicts are particularly lethal for children

because they make little distinction between combatants and civilians.”(Machel 2000 Pg 5)

With wars becoming “localistic, and centered on the perfection of a race or a tribal group,” warfare strategy has evolved to engross civilians (including children), who have become pawns between the combating armies.(Kaplan 2007 Pg 545) The theoretical underpinning used to understand the use of child soldiers states that wars have turned into internal conflicts, driven with the purpose to create utopian race-tribe states.(Kaplan 2007) Children, society’s most naïve, are targeted by army recruiters since they are effortlessly indoctrinated. Ingraining political ideals and agenda in children at young age carries the army’s political ideas into the next generation, making the political ideals multigenerational and attain longevity.(Kaplan 2007)

Today, there are multiple reasons to enlist children as soldiers. Practically, children are easier to condition into violence and are effortlessly manipulated to carry out horrific atrocities when compared to adults.(Machel 2000; Honwana 2007) Logistically, the use of children as soldiers is a historical phenomenon, being capitalized at an exponential rate due to the technological advancements of warfare machinery and the new availability of “small arms” (e.g. Kalashnikov assault rifles: AK-47 and AK-74). (Rieder and Choonara 2012 Pg 60) With this advancement, weaponry has become inexpensive, light in weight and requires minimal maintenance, enabling children of school age to quickly assemble, strip and use such machinery without much training or investment from the army. (Honwana 2008; Rieder and Choonara 2012). Overall, the use of child soldiers increasing is becoming common warfare strategy in the 21st century.

Defining Child Soldiers

Currently the estimated number of child soldiers is upwards of 300,000 across the globe. (Levy and Sidel 2009; Rieder and Choonara 2012) This number is used to estimate the number of children serving in any army at any given moment in time. Some children may perish in combat, others escape, while a few survive, but the horror within this estimation is that they are replaced. Between 2004 and 2007 there were 19 known countries to have used child soldiers, ranging from Afghanistan, Uganda, Columbia and Nepal. (2009) In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) reported 90% of the army was comprised of children, some even as young as age 4. (Rieder and Choonara 2012) To combat such atrocities, multiple organizations such as Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers and UNICEF have lobbied for international action to inhibit the use of children as soldiers and to protect them in regions of armed conflict.

However, even with an international outcry to inhibit the use of child soldiers via treaties, government and militia groups still ignore such measures and use children as battle combatants. Without any measure of accountability for armies, child soldiers are exposed to or become perpetrators of atrocities (ex. abductions, coercions, systematic rape, drug abuse, violence and genocide) that devoid them of any semblance of humanity during war time. (Machel 2000) In conclusion, child soldiers have become the vanguards of present day armed conflict and ultimately victims.

But who is a child soldier? What defines the term "child soldier"? This is an internationally debated term due to the variations in the definition of what constitutes a "child" across different cultures (Rosen 2007) However, a consensus among international human rights groups defines a child soldier as "any child—boy or girl—under the age of

18 who is compulsorily, forcibly, voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units or other armed groups.” (Machel 2000 Pg 9) Recently, the United Nations defined an internationally recognized definition of what constitutes being a “child soldier” in the Paris Principles as a child associated with an armed force or armed group (CAAFAG). CAAFAG is defined as:

“Any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part of hostilities”

(Principles 2007 Pg 7)

Besides the age of the child, it is important to understand that children part of armed forces or groups are considered child soldiers even if they have never participated in physical warfare. Lastly, children who have joined voluntarily are also considered child soldiers since their enlistment is a consequence of societal, cultural, political and/or economic pressures, rather than true volunteerism. (Machel 2000) For the purposes of this paper, the definition for CAAFAG will be the one used when referring to child soldiers.

Female Child Soldiers

Academic literature on female child soldiers is sparse. A systematic review of research on child soldiers highlighted that females only comprised one-fourth of child soldier study populations. (Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2012) Some studies did not include female child soldiers in their research samples. Some studies did not report female in their research samples. However, females are different from males since “girls often have

different experiences, roles, and supports than boys do,” when conscripted. (Wessells 2009 Pg 588) Also, research has suggested that female child soldiers have had difficulty being accepted by society and received miniscule support from the community during their reintegration into society. (Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2012) Besides these findings the current dialogue regarding female child soldiers and reintegration is limited.

Psychosocial Research of Child Soldiers

The life course of a war survivor is impacted directly and/or indirectly by armed combat which includes death, disease, injuries and/or long term mental health effects. The short term impacts and physical needs tend to receive medical attention and support due to the visibility of such wounds, while long term and psychosocial outcomes have limited support. (Levy and Sidel 2009) Even though the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers reported 19 nations and armed groups incorporating children within their ranks, there is minimal research conducted on the psychosocial outcomes for returned child soldiers. (Derluyn, Broekaert et al. 2004)

The importance of mental health issues is emerging in the academic literature in regards to the reintegration of child soldiers’ into society. Rieder specifies that “children who are either involved in or are witnesses of armed conflict are likely to experience a variety of psychological problems ranging from anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).”(Rieder and Choonara 2012 Pg 61) A study conducted in Uganda, 97% of former child soldiers reported experiencing PTSD. (Derluyn, Broekaert et al. 2004) Providing services to the former child soldiers in regards in psychological problems is an internationally recognized obligation, as stated in United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 39.(Bayer, Klasen et al. 2007)

However, even though progress is being made to incorporate mental and psychological care for former child soldiers, facilitating the social aspect of the reintegration process for child soldiers is unacknowledged in psychiatric studies. (Summerfield 2000). The difference between the two is that psychological processes, “has to do with the inner world – with feelings, thoughts, desires, beliefs, and values and how we perceive ourselves,” while social processes are external and “refers to the relationships and environment of an individual.”(Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation 2006 Pg 2) In the last three decades the relationship between psychological and social needs has been observed by relief organizations in armed conflict. To address such dependent needs, a new term ‘psychosocial’ emerged to “reflect the dynamic inter-relationship between psychological and social issues.”(Williamson 2006 Pg 4)

Combining the psychological and social needs of children in a post war circumstance creates a psychosocial support system that “helps children come to terms with their war experience and helps to reconcile the returning children with their communities.” (Wessells 2005 Pg 366) Together, this approach contributes to the reintegration of former child soldiers.(Bayer, Klasen et al. 2007) Reintegration interventions that involved the child soldier, family, and community members were identified as being “pro-family” and “pro-community” and showcased children to have positive reintegration outcomes. Such interventions incorporate the support of community members such as teachers, primary health workers to assist in the reintegration for former child soldiers. (Summerfield 2000) Lastly, from a public health perspective, the use of a psychosocial intervention to assist in a reintegration process allows for the targeted

population “to recover from war not as a recipients of aid or as patients but as active citizens.” (Summerfield 2000 Pg 234)

Case Study of Psychosocial Support during the Reintegration Process of Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

Although the cultural context differs from Nepal, understanding the reintegration process of child soldiers in Sierra Leone provides insight to similar issues returned child soldiers in Nepal are facing during the reintegration process. Sierra Leone underwent a 12 year long civil war beginning in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group, invaded the country. Research regarding the reintegration of child soldiers has been conducted thoroughly by Dr. Theresa Betancourt.(Betancourt 2008; Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008; Betancourt, Agnew-Blais et al. 2010; Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2011)

The Sierra Leone civil war was one that ignited international media frenzy due to the rebel and national armies’ use of children as soldiers, and the escalation of brutality used in warfare tactics. (Williamson 2006) Children were abducted in village raids; some were forced to kill family members (the armed group’s method to devoid the child of all emotion), while others were used as sexual slaves. The use of such techniques not only physically separated children from communities but in a social construct too, since feelings of shame and guilt were prevalent in regards to their acts during the war. Between the two warring armies and estimated 15,000-22,000 were removed from their villages and used as child soldiers. (Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008).

Post-war reintigration of former child-soldiers in Sierra Leone was innovatively approached using the education system to reintigrate former child soldiers into society, which highlight the use of a social insitution as means of reintigration. A study

conducted by Betancourt found that former child soldiers with literacy and learning skills had less of a chance for being re-recruited into an armed force. Using community support, such as the educational programs increased “children’s confidence in their abilities and provided them with a sense of purpose in their lives.”(Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008 Pg 5) In the end, the educational programs allowed the children to identify themselves as individuals rather than soldiers, creating a personal value of self-worth. (Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008) Overall, a psychosocial approach to reintegration in Sierra Leone enabled former child soldiers to transform themselves into an active member of a community, while “their families and communities also had to see them differently, which helped establish and reinforce their own changed identity.”(Williamson 2006Pg 203)

Case Study of Psychosocial Support during the Reintegration Process of Child Soldiers in Mozambique

This case study highlights the importance of psychosocial reintegration and the long term results from such interventions. With recent end to civil war in Nepal, it is important to comprehend the reintegration process for child soldiers and how it will influence their future.

A longitudinal study conducted by Boothby on the “lost generation” of Mozambique’s child soldiers highlights the importance of psychosocial support during reintegration. The study followed 39 returned child soldiers over the course of 16 years, beginning in 1988. In 2004, the study concluded and findings reported that former child soldiers, now grown men had found a semblance of a reintegrated life by finding “realignment of individual, familial and communal relationships.”(Boothby 2006) By creating a separate identity, new relationships, and using cultural/community based

healing rituals, child soldiers were able to reintegrate. This process included efforts from the community level (sensitization programs), familial level (marital encouragement/support), and individual level (avoidance of triggers). Even though the 39 men carry a traumatic events in their past, their psychosocial support enabled them to adapt the “normative life cycle” of their cultural context, and ultimately resulted in reintegration.(Boothby 2006)

Overall, children exposed to war endure obstacles such as psychological trauma, developmental and social disruption. Having to overcome physical endangerment, along with the disintegration of their social ecology, their long term psychosocial wellbeing is precarious and requires the utmost attention from the public health community.

However, research regarding child soldiers’ psychosocial impact is limited. (Betancourt 2008; Levy and Sidel 2009; Tol, Barbui et al. 2011)

Nepal’s Peoples War and the Use of Child Soldiers

The Peoples War

To understand the reintegration of child soldiers in Nepal’s civil war, a brief background of Nepal and the Maoist uprising is provided for context. Nepal, a small landlocked country is the poorest country in South Asia, and is nestled between Asia’s superpowers, China and India. (Jordans, Komproe et al. 2010) The country is comprised of a diverse ethnic population that is dominated by a Hindu identity, but divided by an entrenched caste system within every level of society. (Do and Iyer 2010) Within this complex society, a patriarchal system is pervasive and evident in the Nepalese culture.(Aguierre 2008)

Unified in 1768 under a monarchy's rule, the nation began the fight for democratic rights in the 1950's, but with limited success. However, in 1990 King Birendra lifted the ban of political parties creating way for a multiparty system. The Nepali population's high hopes to implement necessary changes (ex. resources for clean water and electricity) dwindled when high-caste politicians affiliated with the royal family disregarded their needs. With growing dissent amongst middle class voters, a militant faction of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN, also known as Maoists) threatened violence in 1994.(Do and Iyer 2010) Then on February 13th, 1996 attacks in rural outposts by the militant faction, People's Liberation Army (PLA) ignited a 10 year civil war. Using guerilla tactics in remote regions of the country to gain land for re-distribution to the locals, along with police brutality toward Maoists supporters allowed for momentum to build behind the Maoist campaign and against the Royal Nepal Army (RNA). (Nepal, Bohara et al. 2011) In early 2006, with majority of the country and political parties under or working with the Maoist allegiance, the king abdicated his throne creating a ceasefire and an opening for peace talks. Ultimately, with the Community Party of Nepal declaring victory, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, a rebel leader known as 'Prachanda' was sworn in as Prime Minister, ending the decade long war that took the lives of 13,000 individuals and displaced 200,000 citizens.(Do and Iyer 2010)

Child Soldiers in Nepal

The civil war in Nepal was fought between the People's Liberation Army and the Nepal Royal Army; however, the individuals filling the ranks of soldiers included children under the age of 18. Between 9,000 and 20,000 children were estimated to be a part of the armies, according to the Human Rights Watch. An estimated 10% of the RNA

and one third of the PLA were children.(Kohrt and Maharjan 2009) Among the 10,000 children in the PLA 40% were girls. (Kohrt 2010) At the end of the war in 2006, both parties agreed to stop the use of children under the age of 18 as part of the peace talks which was ratified in November 2006. This included all job postings filled by children (such as soldiers, sentries, spies, cooks and porters) as defined by the Paris Principles. Overall, the war claimed the lives of 447 children, of which 55% were killed by government forces. (Kohrt and Maharjan 2009) Post war, majority of the child soldiers returned home to begin the reintegration process. (Kohrt, Jordans et al. 2008)

Reintegration into Society

In the process of reintegrating into the societies they originally left, former child soldiers face a myriad of obstacles that have negative consequences to their mental health, afflicting their psychosocial well-being. Being a former child soldiers creates a greater risk to experience psychological disorders post war. These children often face post-conflict factors such as gaps in their education and community stigma, both of which exacerbate afflictions on their holistic well-being. (Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2012) It is pertinent to comprehend the process and mechanisms that influences a child's reintegration outcome. Past studies of child soldiers highlight the importance of understanding the role of experiences and exposure to violent acts, but also to the pre and post social relationships they are positioned within to comprehend their reintegration outcome. "By revealing the patterns of socio-ecological niches occupied by child soldiers, researchers can better identify the main determinants of well-being."(Kohrt 2010 Pg 728)

Studies from Nepal regarding child soldiers indicate that conscripted children, who were exposed to traumatic events, were “associated with higher rates of symptoms of depression and PTSD, generalized psychological difficulties, and function impairment.”(Kohrt, Jordans et al. 2008 Pg 701) Female child soldier’s in Nepal showed high rates of PTSD compared to male child soldier’s and non-conscripted children. This was partly attributed this to sexually violence child soldier’s may have encountered, however due to the cultural sensitivity to this topic, researchers could ask explicitly ask about it.(Kohrt, Jordans et al. 2008) Lastly, academic literature solely regarding female child soldiers and the issues they encounter during the reintegration process is limited. (Betancourt, Borisova et al. 2012)Therefore, the goal of this paper is to discover which pre and post war factors, and wartime experiences encountered by female child soldier’s in Nepal influences their reintegration process.

Methods

Study Design

The study is a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected in Nepal during 2007. The data collection process is described as background information and for interpreting the results. The study from which the data were used was a mixed-method exploratory research study designed to understand the mental health burden and psychosocial impacts of child soldiers from the reintegration process into Nepalese society. Using two phases for the study design, the first phase explored the community's perceptions of child soldiers. Once analysis was conducted, findings were used to inform a questionnaire used to measure the mental health burden of child soldiers.

The first phase of the study used a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. In-depth interviews were conducted separately with child soldiers, family members of child soldiers (e.g. guardians and siblings), and the community health workers. Interviewing the child soldier and individuals involved in the child's life (family members and community members) created a case study of each child's experience of reintegration from multiple perspectives. This also allowed for data to be explored at the individual level and community level, allowing researchers to explore the relationships and attitudes towards child soldiers within the community. Following the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions were conducted with community health workers, women groups and non-conscripted children to capture the community's attitudes towards child soldiers. Findings from interviews and focus group discussions were used to inform the design of a quantitative survey instrument to measure the association between war and mental health status in child soldiers. The research team

included researchers from Emory University and members of the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization – Nepal, the partnering local NGO assisting in the reintegration of child soldiers. The protocol for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Emory University (IRB Protocol # IRB00000393; Approve Date 04/17/2007). No amendment was needed for the secondary data analysis reported in this study.

Study Population

The study population included returned child soldiers from the People's Liberation Army, family members of these child soldiers, and community health workers who handled the particular child's case. Child soldiers participating in the study were between the ages of 14 and 18, and were from varying ethnic backgrounds such as Tamang or Brahmin. Both male and female child soldiers were included in the study. Interviews were also conducted with family members of child soldiers and also with community health worker involved in the child's reintegration process. This was designed to capture the similarities and differences between genders regarding their perceptions of the reintegration process for the qualitative component, and to measure the differences in mental health statuses for the quantitative component. In total, the study developed 24 case studies by interviewing child soldiers, their family members, and community health workers.

Data Collection

Child soldiers were identified with help from community leaders and community health workers in each study site by asking these key informants if they were able inform researchers of former child soldiers in the community. Also, a snowballing strategy was

utilized to identify other child soldiers. This occurred by asking interviewed children if they knew other children in the area who were child soldiers in the war. Researchers used an in-depth interview guide to ask child soldiers, family members, and community health workers about their child soldier's mental health and psychosocial wellbeing post conflict. All interviews were conducted with participants separate from other individuals.

Questions regarding the child soldier's experience pre, during and post war life was discussed in the interview. Interviews with family members and community health workers were similar in nature, asking respondents to discuss the child soldier's recruitment into the army, during and post war life. Interviews were audio recorded after receiving oral consent from each participant, along with guardian consent for children under 18. Interviews were conducted by research assistants who were recruited from local health organizations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Nepali and translated into English by members of the data collection team. Child soldiers received a notebook, pencil and snack during the interview for their time and participation.

Focus group discussions were conducted to understand the Nepalese community's perception toward child soldiers. The focus groups discussions purpose was to understand the community level perception towards child soldiers by asking groups to discuss the hypothetical narrative of a child soldier, eliciting their attitudes and opinions toward the subject. Focus groups were audio recorded with verbal consent, transcribed verbatim in Nepalese and translated into English. A total of 19 focus group discussions were conducted. Focus group discussions were conducted in the communities' child soldiers were recruited from for the in-depth interviews. Groups were comprised of parents of

returned child soldiers, teachers from the local school, student's part of youth clubs, and community health workers/volunteers part of health NGOs.

Data Analysis

Selection of Data. This study reports on the secondary analysis of the data mentioned above. The research question was developed to understand the challenges female child soldiers face during the reintegration process. Therefore the research questions analyzed were:

- 1) What experiences did female child soldiers of the People's Liberation Army encounter?
- 2) How could female child soldier's reintegration into society be improved?

To explore these research questions, analysis focused on data from in-depth interviews of female child soldiers. Interviews were used to allow researchers to include varying perspectives of the reintegration process for female child soldiers. The in-depth interviews allowed for researchers to identify the child soldiers' personal stories and perceptions of the reintegration process. This enabled researchers to capture the voices and narratives to construct evidence based recommendations to facilitate the reintegration process of female child soldiers. Lastly, since the questions regarding their experience were on sensitive issues, the in-depth interviews allowed for children to talk about their experiences in confidence and without hesitation of being overheard by a third party. For the secondary analysis, the use of in-depth interviews provided the perspectives of child soldiers since respondents were uninhibited from sharing their personal experiences. (Hennink et al, 2011)

From the original data set of in-depth interviews, only interviews with female child soldiers were chosen due to the existing gap of research conducted on the experience of female children in the context of war. Any children over the age of 18 were excluded from this analysis, since these adolescents were not considered child soldiers in accordance to the 2007 Paris Principles. (Paris Principles 2007) This resulted in the selection of 11 interviews of female child soldiers for the secondary analysis.

Data Preparation and Analysis. Before the interviews were analyzed, demographic data (ex. age, caste, marital status) was extracted from each child soldier's interview and imported into an excel file to create a spreadsheet with relevant information for analytic purposes. For data analysis, data were then de-identified and exported into MAXQDA 10 software, 2010.

A thematic analysis was used to discern the themes embedded within the transcripts, utilizing an inductive coding process during analysis. Also, deductive themes were extracted from transcripts, which were informed by existing literature regarding the child soldiers' reintegration process. Using both inductive and deductive codes as the analysis technique permitted the data to 'speak for itself,' enabling researchers to understand the reintegration process from the view of a female child soldier.

Transcripts were coded with the inductive and deductive codes. Codes were compiled in a codebook, which was used as a data-management tool to label, define, and describe the codes. Codes were identified when issues were repeated across interviews or emphasized by the respondent as a pertinent topic. The development of codes was also verified by literature sources (deductive process) to provide a starting point to the coding

process, but gradually unfolded into an inductive process, since codes were based on issues emerging from the data.

The inductive codes emerged out of the data, indicating issues the respondent described themselves. Deductive codes utilized were informed by existing literature regarding the Nepalese culture or child soldiers. In-vivo codes were also developed when certain words or phrases in the transcripts had remained in Nepali to express an idea related to the Nepalese culture and were relevant to the research question. For example, the code “*man-dimag*” is the Nepalese word for heart-mind relationships, a phrase specific to the Nepali culture and does not translate into English. These three code types were used to create the codebook and simultaneously to code the data. Due to the evolving nature of code development, new codes were added to the codebook and old ones were refined when new topics emerged from the data.

The coding process involved indexing the data using codes in listed in the codebook to highlight specific segments where the relevant topic is mentioned in the transcripts. This occurred after reading and assessing the content and context of the transcripts. Segmenting and indexing the transcripts in this fashion allowed for data reduction and retrieval, which facilitated the analysis process.

Defining Themes and Thick Descriptions. The next step was linking the codes to provide insights to themes that span across or differ between interviews. The data highlighted themes that were pertinent to the study population by observing the patterns, relationships and connections between codes. This process, known as developing a thick description in qualitative research, allowed for reoccurring themes to be distinguished from the transcripts of female child soldiers. Codes that appeared in all transcripts allowed for

researchers to recognize themes that resonate within the population studied, while the differing codes highlighted divergent perspectives regarding a theme.

Subsequently, the identification of major themes was explored to answer the research question through the perceptions of female child soldiers. This process of re-contextualizing data consisted of categorizing findings from the thick description to create an over-arching view of the reintegration process. To ensure the research question was explored in the data, a subset of supporting questions emerged from the data and is listed below. They allowed for the researcher to understand the reintegration process in the context of the stages (pre, during and post war), which were defined by the child soldiers, and consequently comprehend the strategies needed to facilitate the reintegration process.

- What were the similarities and differences between female child soldiers before recruitment into the People's Liberation Army?
- How were female child soldiers recruited into the army? What were their experiences while with the army?
- What were the similarities and difference between female child soldiers after leaving the army?

Secondary Data Limitations

Interviews were often reported as being in-depth and lasting between one to two hours by the interviewer (who was recruited from a local NGO). However, some transcripts were short, and did not attain the length of what an in-depth interview typically is. This limitation possibly could have stemmed from the transcription and translation phase creating thin data. It is unknown if the interviewers were trained conducting in-depth interviews or knew how to utilize probes to question respondents.

Results

To develop strategies to facilitate the reintegration process for female child soldiers, findings are presented in a sequence of stages. Since child soldiers explained their experiences in pre, during and post war conditions, these were created into a timeline of stages from which to present the findings. This timeline allowed themes to be individually discussed within the context of each stage and cumulatively explored in relation to the reintegration process experienced by female child soldiers.

Experiences in the Pre-War Stage that Influence Reintegration

The pre-war stage explored findings female child soldiers perceived to be issues that influenced them to enlist in the People's Liberation Army. Participants also discussed their childhood, family background and economic condition; however, the recruitment process into the PLA was a reoccurring theme that child soldiers believed to influence their reintegration process.

The Recruitment Process. Child soldiers were recruited into the People's Liberation Army via three mechanisms. The three recruitment processes are categorized as deception, coercion and voluntary entry.

Majority of the children interviewed were categorized as joining the army through deception. These children reported enlisting in the army in exchange for something (ex. freedom or a salary). They were tricked into joining with a promise of a better life by Maoist recruiters, and therefore deceived about the true nature of life in the PLA. This promise of a better life, promised by Maoist recruiters, lured children to join the PLA. Below are examples of how children were deceived into joining the army in hopes to gain something in return.

Two children were told about the adventures they would experience in the army from Maoist recruiters and promised equality. After hearing of the freedoms and equality gained as a member of the army both children enlisted. However, children were deceived since the reality of army life did not match what the child was told by recruiters.

A few children joined the PLA after being promised a salary. With a prospect of a salary children joined army to ease their financial burdens of their household, only to never receive a salary and therefore were deceived into enlisting. In such cases, children were running from home with hopes to attain a better life, but came to realize that all Maoist promises were empty, and therefore felt deceived into joining the PLA.

Others enlisted after seeing deceiving “cultural programs” put on by Maoists in their villages, which a false image of what life in the army is like. “Cultural programs” were described by respondents as Maoist events where plays and dancing activities were hosted by PLA members to recruit members. Female child soldiers reported feeling lured to join the PLA after seeing “cultural programs” and a promise of becoming artists and dancers by Maoists at such events. In actuality they became cooks, sentries, manual laborers and combat fighters, making their enlistment purpose deceptive in nature since such activities did not align with what children expected to be doing when enlisting. This misrepresentation of life in the army sold to children highlighted how child soldiers were deceived into enlisting in the PLA.

Lastly, one child received reinforcement to enlist from a family member. She was told that life in the army was a cultural and adventurous journey, when in reality life in the army was full of hardships and fear, not adventure. Below the child soldier recaps

how she was tempted into the PLA ranks with the promise of adventures by her own uncle, when in actuality she did not participate in any of the mentioned activities.

She said, “An uncle of mine, who was a Maoist comrade, appeared in the village. He started saying to us, ‘Oe, what are you doing in the village? Come with me and join our Party. You won’t have to do any of the work you do here. You will get to fly on a helicopter, and participate in singing and dancing programmes You will get to travel all the time, and you will have a lot of fun!’.”

The second mechanism used to solicit child soldiers into the PLA was through coercion. This recruitment process entailed intimidating children into the PLA. One child reported being enlisted via coercion after being accused by a town member for defamation. Below she shares how she enlisted out of fear for her life.

She said, “One day when the Maoists came to our village, Shiv¹ told them that I insulted her. Then the Maoists told me that female Maoists had to arrest me...They slapped me very badly and told me that I have to go with them and work for them. I told them that I won’t go, but they said they will beat me up if I say that. After that I got very scared so I followed them.”

The last recruitment mechanism was voluntary recruitment into the PLA. As observed in the data, this mechanism is defined as a child soldier enlisting in the army of their own free will without being deceived or coerced. This applied to one child; however, this child joined the PLA to avenge her brother’s death. Her brother was killed by the Royal Nepal Army while fighting alongside the PLA, and to honor his martyrdom she enlisted. This child did join voluntarily, but the motive behind the enlistment was to honor her brother, rather than her loyal convictions for the Maoists.

¹ All names have been changed.

Experiences in the During War Stage that Influence Reintegration

The during-war stage explored experiences of child soldiers while with People's Liberation Army. Children conversed about emotions experienced and the hardships of being a woman in the army during the interview.

Emotional Journey Endured. Understanding the assortment of emotions endured during their journey is an important aspect of a child soldier's experience, since it impacts the psyche of the child during the reintegration process. The overarching emotion that child soldiers endured in the army is categorized as living in perpetual fear. The second theme discussed was a reoccurring notion being ignored or overlooked.

Child soldiers felt a constant pressure to work on delegated tasks from fear of getting in trouble with commanding Maoists, even when their bodies were not able to handle the load. With a constant threat of being beaten, female child soldiers were terrified to be disobedient when interacting with the Maoists. Even when menstruating, female child soldiers were hesitant to request rest. In the following passage a child soldier recalls her emotions while in the army. She said, *"I did not get rest even at menstrual period. I always had to live in fear. I have seen a person was killed by our group. It made me very frightened."* In addition to living in fear from their leaders, child soldiers also reported surviving under constant vigilance from fear of attacks from the opposing forces, the Royal Nepalese Army. From being afraid of upsetting their commanders to being apprehended by the opposing army, child soldiers endured constant fear, ingraining their daily lives with insecurity.

Secondly, child soldiers reported being ignored in the army. Whether they were asking for a rest period while traveling on foot for days at a time, or seeking health aid

for an injury, they felt disregarded and overlooked by the army. A child soldier stated, *“I had worked for more than 9 months for the party although I had some health problems but they didn’t listen to me. I requested for my treatment for many times but they did not listen.”* Burdened with constant fear and being marginalized, child soldiers recount an emotional journey that caused unease and hardships.

Woman in the Context of War. This theme encapsulates the adversity faced as a consequence of being a female child soldiers in the army. Similar to the previous finding, the burden of these encounters influenced their psyche during the reintegration process. Topics such as sexual relationships/exploitations, managing menstrual cycles and marriage were discussed.

Female child soldiers recounted experiences where their gender was the cause of issues while at war. One child soldier remembered being uncomfortable with the sleeping arrangements since males and females were sleeping in the same area, which opposes the conservative Nepalese customs. According to the child soldier, this scenario allowed for sexual encounters to occur even when not consensual, alluding to rape, as seen in the following passage

“There are 8-9 members (boys and girls) in a section. We have to live and work with the boys all the time. In this way, some girls have to do sexual relation without her interest. All the members of the section won’t be good. It affects the girls.”

Furthermore, respondents mentioned the difficulty of working and training while menstruating, since they were not allowed to rest. Even though this policy was implemented to ingrain the Maoist values of equality between genders within the army, female child soldiers felt disregarded and overworked.

Lastly, some child soldiers suggested that the PLA encouraged relationships and marriages to occur. However, unlike other issues raised, child soldiers had differing viewpoints. Some child soldiers recall these relationships as consensual in nature but, this was contradicted by others who detailed their experience of being forced to marry PLA soldiers by Maoists. Another child soldier also reported instances where girls became pregnant, followed by abandonment from the male counterpart, indicating female sexual exploitation in the army.

Topics of sexual relationships, managing menstrual cycles, and marriage indicated that females were victimized. Overall, even though a few respondents didn't observe some of the described events (e.g. marriage); all were apprehensive by the presence of men while in the army.

Experiences in the Post War Stage that Influence Reintegration

These are experiences female child soldiers perceived to be issues encountered after leaving the People's Liberation Army. Since these themes occurred while child soldiers were reintegrating into their communities, they are viewed as directly influencing their reintegration process. Child soldiers reported the benefits believed to have resulted from their time with the army (e.g. feeling empowered) and also the negative consequences of being in the army (e.g. forced marriage). Lastly, child soldiers discussed factors that would facilitate their reintegration into society (e.g. the need for support and a new identity).

Benefits of Being in the Army

Training and Empowerment. During their time as child soldiers, young women in the army were involved in multiple trainings. Child soldiers received combat and political training, from assembling weaponry to reading biographies of communist leaders. When

asked about the benefits from their time in the army, a variation of responses were reported. Some child soldiers unequivocally discussed being an empowered female as a favorable outcome; while others did not reveal notions of empowerment as a result of spending time in the PLA.

Those who felt empowered discussed speaking eloquently, gaining knowledge from the political trainings, and learning self-defense tactics as direct result of being part of the PLA. This underlying theme is imperative since it highlights the benefits of being a child soldier. Below is an account of a child soldier's gains of being in the PLA, resulting in empowerment and confidence.

She said, "While staying in a party, I learnt that males and females are equal; how to speak in front of others; about party's political ideology; should not discriminate the people on the basis of their caste; warfare skills, using weapons and exploding the bombs; took trainings; became hard-working and sincere; increased my self-confidence."

Another description of empowerment is described by a young female's change in perception regarding societal gender norms, which was based on the political education provided by the army.

She said, "There are lots of do's and don'ts that exist in our society, like women should not go to public gatherings. Society considers women who go to the places where men are as bad women. Women should stay at home and do only housework. But, I learned that all those ideas are wrong and we women must learn that men and women are equal."

Furthermore, empowered female child soldiers were not only involved as trainees, but some advanced into leadership roles such as section commander, district leaders and women mobilizers (a leadership position for women to recruit and empower other women) within the army.

However, other children did not feel empowered as a benefit of being in the army. They reported gaining technical skills such as assembling machinery and weaponry, which was considered to be “good” and not a “*boring experience.*” Notions of self-confidence, discussion of gender equity, or ability to speak for one-self did not emerge among these respondents. Therefore, these child soldiers did not perceive female empowerment as a benefit from their experiences in the army. For these children, topics discussed as gains from being in the PLA were strictly related to military based technical skills.

Disadvantages from Being in the Army

Unlike the previous section, there are multiple negative consequences from being in the army, as identified by the female child soldiers. These post war repercussions of being in the army outweighed the benefits according to child soldiers. Each of the following ramifications did not occur to all children; however a pattern specific to each issue was noted. These topics included discussions regarding marriage, discrimination and loss of an education.

Avoiding Marriage. This topic directly relates to the reintegration process, since female child soldiers’ reintegration process was possibly defined by their marital status. If the child was married, marriage was the one event that ensured hardships for the child’s reintegration process. Staying unmarried was a perspective that all of the female child

soldiers favored; however, not all children were able to avoid it. Being forced to marry as a consequence of being a female in the PLA was observed in two child soldiers.

Unmarried child soldiers conversed about marriage as an unfortunate event friends or siblings experienced within their home communities. In fact, some children mentioned joining the army to avoid being married off by their parents. Marriage was an event unmarried child soldiers discussed as an event they avoided, if it was discussed during their interview. One child soldier stated, *“People used to come to ask my hand in marriage, even when I was very young. And even a mention of marriage would give me a headache; I hated it! That was probably why I would often be lost in strange thoughts. I wanted to avoid marriage anyhow.”*

However, two child soldiers were forced into marriage. One child was forced to marry a soldier while in the PLA, compelling her to immediately leave the army and move into her in-laws household (as Nepalese custom dictates); the other child was married by her parents after returning home. Patterns were observed between child soldiers experiencing forced marriage. Both children stated they were too young to marry, however their requests were ignored and the marriage procession continued. Also, the wedding was a surprise to both children since they did not know about the event until they were escorted to the ceremony. Lastly, both the children married suitors who they were not acquainted with. Below is scenario described by the young female who was forced to marry in the army, highlighting the involuntary nature of her circumstance.

She said, *“I don’t know him and I haven’t seen him but he has seen me... I denied accepting his proposal without knowing about him... Commanders of the party told me something about him and told me to accept him and marry with him. Again I denied*

marrying with him telling them that it is not the time to marry in this age but they forcefully, let me marry with him. On that day, there was a function, I was not aware, what was happening but the program was conducted for our marriage...The party itself had made plan so I had to marry with Mr. Anup². I was so surprised and shocked to this incident. I could not call my own parents in my marriage.”

As a result of marriage, both child soldiers encountered excommunication from their communities. They shared experiences of being ignored and shunned by family members and the community. In the case where the marriage was forced by her parents, the child had even contemplated committing suicide. Overall, marriage was an event that all child soldiers opposed, and viewed as a negative consequence of being in the army.

Facing Discrimination. On return from the war, child soldiers were confronted with unwelcoming home communities. Typecast as a Maoist, returned child soldiers were often harassed by their community members. This issue was perpetuated by the stigma of being a female child soldier. The discrimination female child soldiers faced within their communities stemmed from dishonoring their immediate families, creating fear within the community members, and from upsetting the gender norms of society.

Bringing shame to the family was an issue observed among children, especially those who were married. In the case where the parents married off the child soldier, marriage was viewed as a solution to counter the dishonor of having a Maoist daughter. In the other marriage case discussed earlier, the child soldier brought the shame to her in-laws house, even though she was forced to marry the PLA officer and had no control over the marriage.

² All names have been changed.

A collective fear of being perceived as aiding and abetting Maoist child soldiers by the opposing army was another reason the community members harassed child soldiers. Some community members were worried about being killed by the Royal Nepal Army since they were associated with the child soldiers from the PLA, and thus insulted these children to protect themselves. Others blatantly badgered the children by calling them “*Maoist*” to their faces or behind their backs as echoed by a child, “*I tried to join school again, but people teased me saying that I was in the Maoist group.*”

Lastly, female child soldiers reported greater discrimination when comparing themselves to male child soldiers. This bias was believed to stem from the Nepalese gender norms, in which females are viewed as “*second class citizens.*” Unlike the male child soldiers in the community, just being a female child soldier was reason enough to warrant the community’s abuses, delaying their reintegration process. One female child soldier states, “*Males counterparts on the other hand were easily forgiven able to continue with their lives, according to a female child soldier I think, for boys it is not that bad. They go to India and do some work and run their lives. Our societies forgive them for their mistakes, but for the girls it is the other way around. They also point their finger at the character of the girls. Instead of encouraging girls, the society tries to demoralize them and put mental pressure on them just because they are girls.*”

To overcome the stigma some of these children moved to another region or lived with a relative to gain a fresh start in a new community. Others mentioned that the discrimination faced was an initial reaction from the community when they first returned home, and was no longer an issue. Overall, there were multiple reasons why children faced community stigma such as dishonor, community fear, and upsetting the gender

norm. Even though gradation of discrimination encountered varied with different children, all child soldiers came across some form of stigma upon their return home. *Education for the Future*. Education is a central topic that was constantly raised by child soldiers. Education was discussed in the pre and post war context, however to discover the relationships between education and reintegration this theme was solely explored in the post war setting. This issue explores child soldiers' perceptions of having lost their education and the barriers that inhibit them from attaining further education.

The loss of their education was viewed as the most damaging outcome from their involvement in the armed conflict. As one of the child soldiers mentioned, "*The biggest thing that I lost after being there is education. My goal of getting higher education could not be completed.*" This topic was discussed as regret and a consequence of being part of the army.

Child soldiers cited multiple barriers inhibiting them from attaining an education. Limited family income was one reason averting child soldiers from attending school post war. The following quote depicts the situation that one of the female child soldier's encountered post-war in regards to continuing her education. She said, "*My parents told me 'Look daughter, we are very poor, we have no money to buy educational materials so you have to leave your school and take care of brother and sister'.*"

Another education barrier among child soldiers was sentiments of being academically incompetent compared to their classmates who had continued their education during the war. Feelings of incompetency stemmed from having lost months or even years of education due to their involvement with the PLA, delaying their reintegration progress.

Child's Soldiers Perceptions on How to Facilitate the Reintegration Process

Child soldiers believed that there were multiple ramifications from being in the army, as discussed in the previous section. However, child soldiers identified recommendations to facilitate their reintegration process while conversing about their attitudes towards benefits and losses of being in the army. The first recommendation was the need to create a new identity, while the second was the need for a support system.

Creating a New Identity. The concept of creating a separate identity from that of a child soldier was observed among female child soldiers as a favorable means to reintegrate. Children did not perceive themselves to be child soldiers but community members did. Respondents frequently identified themselves as daughters, sisters, and friends and only brought up their role as a child soldier when probed by the interviewer. Some children strived to create a new identity for themselves, while others accepted the identity of being a child soldier.

The children who made efforts to forget their child soldier identity hoped that society would encourage their re-adjustment. Even if communities did not detach the Maoist persona from the child, the child's self-perception was disconnected from the child soldier identity. On the other hand, a majority of the child soldiers were unable to create a different identity due to community stigma and/or accepting their place in society as God's will. One child soldier stated, "*Society does not try to understand my feelings. The god has written such fate on me.*" Another child soldier mentioned, "*Nowadays, I have no more friends, and the friends of childhood do not talk with me. My life is useless.*" This passage highlights the child's perception of herself, and how creating a new identity would allow child soldiers to reintegrate into society.

The Need of a Support Network. Upon the child's return home, they faced multiple challenges; however, the support system in place either alleviated the child's troubles or exacerbated them. Support was defined at the household level, to understand what immediate support child soldiers were receiving when returning home.

Children with support from their families had easier transition during the reintegration process. From brotherly protection when Maoists attempted to re-recruit the child soldier, to parental support in providing shelter, food, and clothing, these child soldiers had a support system to rely on. Child soldiers also emphasized the support they got from within the household over any other form of support (ex. community support). One child stated, "*My parents are helping me. They are providing food, shelter. They love me very much.*"

Contrary to this experience, a few child soldiers have reported receiving limited support from their immediate families. Of these children, two were married and living separate from their maternal homes. The households in which they were forced to marry into provided limited or no support. In fact, these children encountered constant criticism and denunciation from their in-laws for being a Maoist. One of these child soldiers was receiving food and shelter from her maternal home, since her husband and in-laws had abandoned her. Therefore, through these experiences child soldiers stipulated the need for a support network to continue their reintegration process.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of former female child soldiers in Nepal, to provide insight on how to improve the reintegration process. Returned female child soldiers from People's Liberation Army encountered multiple challenges from recruitment into the PLA, while in the PLA and in the post war stage, which influenced their reintegration into society. The results of this study showed that female child soldiers faced discrimination, psychological issues and loss of an education and support network while trying to reintegrate into the community. Female child soldiers' encountered these psychological and social issues as a result of their participation in the armed conflict. To address these issues to facilitate the reintegration process for female child soldiers, the cumulative finding of this study suggest a psychosocial approach towards reintegration is needed, since it integrates "the dynamic inter-relationship between psychological and social issues." (Williamson 2006 Pg 4)

This study found that female child soldiers expressed the need for community acceptance to ensure an optimal reintegration process. Former child soldiers reported discrimination from friends, teachers and neighbors after returning home, which impeded their ability to reintegrate successfully into their community. Friends and neighbors often called child soldiers derogatory names in public, while teachers perpetuated the stigma by denying the child to enroll at school, both of which inhibited the child soldiers from reintegrating. Therefore, to overcome this barrier community awareness and sensitization programs need to be instituted. Through sensitization programs community members can come to terms regarding their fears and misunderstanding towards child soldiers. Similarly awareness programs can inform the community of the hardships child soldiers

faced and how accepting and forgiving such children will aid their reintegration. Through these programs community members can begin to view child soldiers as children.

Additionally, community awareness programs will help to sensitize the community to understand the mechanisms of recruitment into the PLA (deception, coercion or volunteering) were influenced by societal pressures (e.g. poverty and arranged marriages) pushing children to enlist. Community members will then be educated on the vulnerability of children to recruitment after constantly being exposed to a “culture of violence, the desperation for food, the need for security or the drive to avenge the deaths of family members.”(Abbott 1999 Pg 516) Hence, societies will comprehend that “the unavailability of alternative means to fulfill their basic needs often compels children to volunteer for participation in conflicts.”(Abbott 1999 Pg 516) This is desired in order to shift the blame and stigma currently placed on child soldiers and turn into support from community members. Through such sensitization campaigns, the community can learn to treat former child soldiers in the same way as non-conscripted children in the community, allowing former child soldiers to create an identity separate from that of a child soldier.

The creation of such an identity allows for child soldiers to personally visualize themselves melding back into society as child and community member. A reintegration study of child soldiers from Sierra Leone reported on how community support allowed for children to reintegrate, achieving a “moderate to high level of functionality upon returning to civilian life.”(Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008 Pg 13) Therefore, creating a supportive environment within the household and community through educational programs is necessary to facilitate the reintegration process of returned child soldiers.

However, being both a child soldier and a female in Nepalese society doubled the discrimination during the reintegration process. Returning from the army after learning about gender equity, most female child soldiers found it difficult to assimilate back into a culture where they were viewed as “*second class citizens*,” due to their gender. Similar findings were also reported in a study of child soldier reintegration in Nepal (Kohrt 2010). Therefore, educational programs need also to contain gender equality components to enhance the reintegration of female child soldiers.

It is also crucial to encourage the delay of marriage of female child soldiers in post-conflict scenarios. Since society viewed female child soldiers being “impure” after returning from the PLA, marriage of the child was seen as solution for families to keep their honor intact.(Kohrt 2010) However, in combination with all of the previously discussed obstacles to reintegration, dealing with the pressures of marriage in the post war stage proved to be detrimental to the child’s reintegration process. Furthermore, according to cultural customs in Nepal, a female is expected to live in a new household with her in-laws after marriage. In this case, a female child soldier is detached from any recognition of her pre-war life and family structure. A child soldier’s detachment from their family unit is known to be detrimental to their mental well-being. (Machel 2000) From a lack of familiarity and a missing support network in their in-laws households, married child soldiers felt alone, lost and even suicidal (indicating mental unrest). This consequently exacerbated heart-mind issues and in turn constructed a poor reintegration process. Therefore, community awareness regarding the benefits of delaying marriage needs to be communicated to Nepalese societies to ensure a positive reintegration process for female child soldiers.

Another obstacle child soldiers faced during the reintegration process was attaining an education. After losing months or years of education from being in the PLA, child soldiers were delayed in their basic education compared to non-conscripted children. Therefore, providing means (ex. paying school fees or providing materials) for child soldiers to continue their schooling is another community necessity to ensure the child soldiers reintegration. Additionally, attending school allows child soldiers to interact with the community and form a semblance of a daily routine. This creates relationships and connection between child soldiers and the community while receiving an education and assisting in the decrease of psychological difficulties and increase of social behaviors. (Jordans, Komproe et al. 2010)

Besides a formal education, providing vocational training is also beneficial to child soldiers. This ensures that child soldiers attain feasible skills which will attract job prospects, making them productive members in the community. A study in Sierra Leone found that, “both school and skills training were seen as important by former child soldiers participants, in part because they were seen as enhancing their future employment prospects, but equally important was their visible participation in structured learning helped alter the way that they were regarded by community members.” (Williamson 2006 Pg 198) Hence, educational programs will enable returned child soldiers to secure a future, while building community ties.

However, solely relying on education to facilitate the reintegration process is insufficient in assuring the psychosocial well-being of former child soldiers.(Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008) To assure an optimal reintegration process, being able to access health services is also a pertinent feature for female child soldiers. These health services

should include mental and physical health facilities to treat the physical ailments and psychological turmoil children endure.

Returned child soldiers encountered living in perpetual fear, insecurity, and loneliness on a regular basis. All these emotions fed into the Nepalese construct of heart-mind interactions which in society is viewed as mental instability. (Kohrt and Harper 2008) Therefore, additional counseling services are required for returned female child soldiers to treat for anxiety, depression or PTSD in a culturally specific context. A study by Bayer et al. found that Ugandan and Congolese returned child soldiers with PTSD had feelings of revenge and hate. Bayer et al. further hypothesized that these emotions were catalysts for children to become involved in violence again, creating cycles of violence in the child's life time. (Bayer, Klasen et al. 2007) Since constant exposure to war is viewed as a "threat to children's mental health," it is pertinent to provide access to psychological care to female child soldiers in Nepal to prevent further deterioration of child soldiers mental health. (Levy and Sidel 2009 Pg 131) However, since the main barrier in receiving health care is accessing and affording care, recommendations to create counseling programs tailored specifically to child soldiers are necessary. This will provide access for female child soldiers to deal with their mind-heart issues.

Furthermore, culturally specific norms dictate that it is acceptable to have a troubled heart. However, when presenting with mental health issues, it is something to be ashamed of and reason for discrimination. (Kohrt and Harper 2008) Yet, since heart and mind issues often present themselves together in female child soldiers, a mental health awareness campaign needs to be incorporated into the educational programs for the

community. This may decrease the stigma for female child soldiers seeking mental health services, enabling them to access the required care for their psychological problems.

Overall, returned child soldiers require long-term psychosocial interventions to facilitate the reintegration process. Even though post conflict emergencies tend to solicit a high volume of international medical volunteers to aid in the recovery process; it is important for the reintegration process to include community members as key supporters of former child soldiers. The community needs to be actively involved in reintegration efforts by providing psychological care and social support in order to facilitate psychosocial reintegration process. (Betancourt 2008)

Based on the child soldier's experiences, a psychosocial approach that involves the community will prove to be crucial to the reintegration process. Multiple studies stress the importance of incorporating the child soldier, family, and community members to ensure an optimal reintegration process. Studies have indicated that the community's role of providing acceptance, and promoting cultural rites of passage and activities (e.g. schooling) for child soldiers allow for the child to reintegrate into society. (Boothby 2006; Honwana 2007; Wessells 2009; Vindevogel, Coppens et al. 2011) Therefore, the psychosocial strategies in Nepal should take target both the community and the child soldier to facilitate the child soldier's reintegration into society. Educational programs regarding community sensitization/awareness are required at the community level to reduce stigma and delaying marriage of child soldiers. At the individual level, providing educational and health services to the child soldiers will be instrumental in assisting the reintegration process. Educational services (e.g. schooling or vocational training) will ameliorate the reintegration process since it assists child soldiers to build community ties,

and learn competencies to support their families, while creating a sense of self-worth for the child soldier. (Betancourt, Simmons et al. 2008). Health services are necessary to address the immediate physical and long term mental ailments that inflict child soldiers.

Public Health Implications

The evidence from this study suggests that female child soldiers in Nepal encounter psychological and social problems as a consequence of their experience in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which influenced their reintegration process and ultimately their mental health. Female child soldiers confronted these issues as a result of compounding obstacles such as community stigma, change in family units (as seen in married child soldiers), lack of educational and health services. All issues were a result of limited community support available to child soldiers. Therefore, public health interventions need to address such issues by foremost educating the community regarding the stigma child soldiers endure from society. Once community members are able to support and understand the dilemmas child soldiers face, then the community will be able to facilitate in decreasing the burdens from other compounding issues.

Another important implication from this study suggests that marriage has a debilitating consequence on the mental health of female child soldiers during the reintegration process. Married female child soldiers' mental health was exacerbated by social issues such as "stressful conditions or daily stressors, such as...isolation, inadequate housing, and changes in family structure and functioning," while living in their in-laws household. (Miller and Rasmussen 2010 Pg 8) Since delaying marriage will allow for female child soldiers to reintegrate with limited social issues and a recognizable

family structure, there is a definite need for delaying marriage of returned female child soldiers during the reintegration when designing public health interventions.

Moreover, health services should be made available to female child soldiers to receive care for their mental health needs. With limited access to such services and community stigma, female child soldiers are unable to deal with the '*mind-heart*' issues they are facing as a result of their experience from the PLA during their reintegration process. Therefore, these issues can manifest as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), impairing the mental health of children at a young age. Thus, necessary to provide psychological care service to returned female child soldiers during their reintegration process.

There are a number of important results from the study that need attention; and taken together, these findings support the use of a psychosocial approach to facilitate the reintegration process of female child soldiers. From a public health perspective, since female child soldiers endured traumatic experiences and an evisceration of their support structure while in the army it is important to meet both their psychological and social needs to guarantee their mental well-being. (Kimmel 2007; Rieder and Choonara 2012) Using a psychosocial approach provides a holistic means to decrease mental health issues by understanding the child soldier's relationship between their psyche and community during the reintegration process. This ensures that female child soldiers in Nepal are able to reintegrate into their communities with limited psychological and social consequences. (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation 2006)

Future Research

To comprehend the complex process female child soldiers undergo during the reintegration process, further research needs to be conducted. A qualitative research study designed, collected and analyzed solely to understand the female experiences during reintegration would add to the limited academic literature regarding female child soldiers in post-conflict environments. Also, conducting this study would provide a comparative perspective when contrasting findings of the reintegration process to the existing literature regarding male child soldiers. Secondly, to understand a holistic perspective of female child soldiers in Nepal, female children who enlisted in the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) need to be incorporated into future research. This will provide an accurate view of the reintegration process for all female child soldiers in Nepal. Currently, with a gap of evidence-based research on female child soldiers from the RNA, a complete understanding of the reintegration process is unknown. Consequently, interventions to facilitate the reintegration process will not be evidence-based or specific to the entire female child soldier population in Nepal.

Study Limitations

This study has limitations. First, female child soldiers from the Royal Nepal Army were not included in the data analysis, and therefore findings may not represent all female child soldiers in Nepal. Secondly, due to the differing experiences child soldiers encounter and the diverse regions that child soldiers come from, the findings of this study are not generalizable to child soldiers from different regions (e.g. children associated with Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army). Lastly, an inter-coder reliability agreement test was not conducted, potentially introducing some interpretation bias.

Conclusion

The use of psychosocial strategies to facilitate the reintegration of female child soldiers in Nepal can provide a holistic approach to ensure the mental well-being of children affected by armed combat. Within this process, child soldiers have the potential to create a new identity, attain education and receive community support. Using this approach, female child soldiers can establish a productive and optimistic future, leaving their soldier identities behind. For public health implications, using a psychosocial approach provides an innovative mechanism to bridge multiple disciplines (ex. social work, psychiatry and public health) to develop interventions that are tailored to the health needs of child soldiers. Lastly, understanding the psychosocial well-being of child soldiers allows us to comprehend the important dynamic relationships within a community and how to utilize such relationships to facilitate the reintegration process of female child soldiers.

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