CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Girls and women in armed conflict

Although there is increasing awareness about the role that girls and women play in fighting forces in conflicts around the world, there are still few gender-based analyses of the differential experiences of men and women who have been involved in military units. Females have been active participants in military units throughout the 20th and 21st century. In the period 1990–2002, female child soldiers were present in fighting forces in 54 countries across Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.[1] Adult female soldiers are represented in significantly more countries again. The lack of visibility of female fighters in both academic literature and in public awareness is striking. It is possibly due to the fact that cultural conceptions of 'female' as nurturing and life-giving are the antithesis of concepts synonymous with conflict, such as of aggression, violence and destruction. Yet women's biological differences through their reproductive functions means their needs and experiences within contexts of conflict are different to men's. In addition, socially constructed gender norms, expectations and socialisation patterns means that the violent behaviours demanded by war are frequently in conflict with gendered expectations of 'femaleness'. A question explored here is 'how do these biological and social factors impact on female participants in armed conflict, demobilisation and reintegration?'

Military forces are hierarchical, power-infused institutions. Women's position within the power structures of military forces varies enormously from one conflict to another. Females enter fighting forces in many different ways, including active recruitment, volunteering, abduction or gang pressing.[2] In some countries, women choose involvement in armed forces as a career. In forces such as the Israeli armed forces, women are regarded as highly competent and respected fighters. Within Africa, women have been active participants in many conflict zones. African women's participation in conflict has a long history. Cases have been recorded of female fighters in the 18th and 19th centuries in the African kingdom of Dahomey, now Benin. Mazurana et al note:

> Dahomean culture revered its female warriors as superior to male forces. Girls who trained as warriors followed a code of celibacy to keep them free of emotional ties and potential restrictions associated with pregnancy. To maintain the strength of the king's female forces, fathers were to report every 3 years with daughters between the ages of 9 and 15, with the most fit selected for military duty. Slave girls were enlisted and carried weapons and gear into battle.[3]

This is relevant to contemporary analysis in capturing the position of women in fighting forces both as warriors and forced conscripts. In the recent past, women have been involved in conflict zones such as Angola, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea and Ethiopia, amongst others. The status of women within the fighting forces of these conflict zones has differed enormously. In northern Ethiopia, within the rebel forces of the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF), women have been highly regarded and respected as fighters and Tigrean women have historically been involved in active combat. In other conflict zones, such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, females are abducted and forced into a position of sexual slavery and arguably serve as breeding machines for a new generation within the rebel community. Females within fighting forces typically perform non-combat tasks that are gender stereotypical for women in their society such as preparing food, cooking, cleaning, and being porters. In many contexts, women are used as 'comfort women' or 'wives' for sexual services. Women also participate as fighters. Females may occupy multiple positions simultaneously, such as 'fighter' and 'wife', rendering them powerful in one role and powerless in another.[4] There are no figures available to indicate how many women enter fighting forces as minors and 'grow up' as fighters.

Many accounts examining gender issues in armed groups, demobilisation and reintegration stress the physical and sexual vulnerability of females, particularly girls, in conflict zones. Issues important to women such as reproductive health issues generally receive little medical priority or attention in combat zones. In addition to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV, some accounts report many adolescent girls' menses cease because of malnutrition and trauma,[5] forced sex can result in abdominal pain, cervical tearing, and infection, and complications during child-bearing can have long term repercussions on women's and their infant's health. Little is known about the incident of abortion in conflict zones but anecdotal evidence suggests it one strategy used as a means of birth control in contexts where women may not be able to assert significant control over their fertility. Recently, research has begun

to examine specifically the issues facing girls and women post-conflict, and this raises issues regarding the importance of considering gender in demobilisation, reintegration, development and peace-building.[6]

Gender issues in demobilisation and reintegration

In an analysis of demobilisation programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, Kees Kingma has defined demobilisation and reintegration as "a complex process in which basically each of the ex-combatants has to find a new civilian life, and re-establish *roots* in society" He makes a distinction between social, political and economic reintegration. *Social reintegration*, he argues, is the process through which the ex-combatant and his or her family, feel part of and accepted by the community, *political reintegration* refers to the process through which the ex-combatant and his or her family become part of decision-making processes, and *economic reintegration* is the process through which the ex-combatants household gains its livelihood. In short, "The long-term objectives of the reintegration process are to enhance economic and human development and to foster and sustain political stability, security and peace."[7]

In general, there is a significant lack of attention to gender issues in official demobilisation and reintegration programmes in post-conflict contexts.[8] For example, one disarmament and demobilisation programme in Mozambique gathered no data on how many women were linked to soldiers and what subsequently happened to women linked to the rebel movement.[9] In Angola, thousands of boys were formally demobilised compared to zero girls, even though there was systematic evidence that large numbers of girls had been abducted and forced to be part of the Angolan armed forces.[10] Furthermore, in Liberia, the plight of girls in the rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia was ignored in demobilisation programmes as the rebels did not readily release girls. Male combatants left the rebels and demobilised, leaving girls to fend for themselves.[11] In circumstances where females have been demobilised as part of national disarmament and demobilisation programmes, De Watteville[12] has argued there has been little attention to or understanding of the specific issues facing female ex-combatants. This includes issues such as identifying women, targeting women as 'family units' with their children and partners rather than merely as individuals, addressing female health needs and sensitisation to the particular issues of discrimination and difficulties of community acceptance. She highlights that it is often not possible for women to return to their communities of origin, particularly if they have children or have been repeatedly sexually abused and stigmatised. Women also face different challenges to men in

economic reintegration because of lack of education, training, skills, and lack of access to credit and childcare facilities. Women frequently face institutionalised discrimination because of the lack of rights to inherit housing or property, thus leaving them socially and economically vulnerable. Many female ex-combatants prefer to resettle in cities rather than to return to rural communities of origin as the socialisation they have experienced as part of a military unit makes it difficult for them to accept to return to traditional gender roles in a rural community.

There is very little empirical information to draw on which gives any accurate reflection of how successfully female ex-combatants reintegrate. A survey conducted by GTZ interviewed 128 ex-combatant wives in Uganda. It found that community resistance to the women was resolved either by women leaving during the first few months, or if they stayed, of women being finally accepted.[13] Issues impacting upon acceptance include whether or not women were involved in committing atrocities. De Watteville also refers to the impact of demobilisation on women in the host community, an issue that is rarely examined. Demobilisation is frequently characterised by the return of a large number of men to the employment market, which can push women to more marginal jobs. This impacts on their socio-economic position by creating a negative demand for women's labour. Demobilisation can also have broader repercussions for women:

> Unemployed, demobilized young men, socialized to violence and brutality during war, are more likely than other to form gangs, particularly in urban areas and can pose a constant threat to the security of women and children. The threat of men in the army generally involves instilling an aggressive masculinity, generally linked to misogyny. This can include visiting prostitutes as a demonstration of male virility and forcing women to cook and clean for them.[14]

She notes that domestic violence of men against women and women against children increases in war-torn countries. Furthermore, for women who were combatants themselves, their emancipation can trigger domestic violence. Female ex-combatants may also find that they reject the values and patriarchal gender roles of their home community. In some conflicts, a desire to participate in the revolutionary process is a key part of women's motivation to become engaged with a rebel movement.[15] In such cases, they identify broader political liberation with the liberation of women but "unfortunately, in many cases when peace comes female ex-combatants see the cause for which they fought—their liberation—being forgotten."[16]

This monograph seeks to examine the process of engagement, demobilisation and reintegration of female ex-combatants who entered military units as youth (those younger than 24). Many demobilisation and reintegration programmes overlook issues of gender, and often render women and their particular experiences in returning to communities invisible. Women and their constructions of self and their social/economic/political world are presumably changed as a result of their experiences as combatants. Yet they often return to a society where women are still tied to traditional roles. This study sought to examine whether the changes wrought in female ex-combatants' self-view and world-view placed them in either a respected/empowered position, or in a position in conflict with broader society. It focuses on women who entered fighting forces as youths, that is, less than 24 years.

Terms such as 'youth', 'minor' and 'child' are often used interchangeably, and frequently overlap. The term 'youth' generally refers to individuals aged 16–24 years, although it is culturally relative. In Ethiopia for example, the term 'youth' can refer to males up to the age of 30 years if still living with family.[17] The term 'minor' and 'child' are often used synonymously to refer to individuals under 18 years of age, or in some legal contexts, 'minor' can refer to children aged 14 years or under. A number of international protocols exist which prohibit the recruitment of individuals under 18 years of age in fighting forces. The Optional Protocol To the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for example, advocates ending the recruitment of children and youth under 18 years for participation in armed forces. ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child also advocate against the use of children as soldiers. A commonly accepted definition of a 'child soldier' is:

> Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than as purely family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.[18]

To a large extent, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which fuelled much protective legislation for children, has been widely criticised in many non-Western contexts for its highly protective language; its notion of childhood as a period of vulnerability and dependency; and a lack of recognition of cultural variation in what constitute appropriate economic roles for children.[19] Thus while the debate about cultural differences in some areas, e.g. child

labour, has been very rich, discussion about other issues, such as the political lives of children and their participation as members of fighting forces, has been poor. Partly this is due to a number of taken-for-granted assumptions. These include assumptions that children are apolitical, that active political involvement is inappropriate for children, and that in cases where such involvement occurs, children are passive and exploited victims (as they do not have the cognitive capacity to chose) or have been forcibly conscripted. The question of 'choice' in recruitment of minors, particularly female minors, is highly contested.[20] Mazurana et al. argue that the options for girls are so limited in many conflict zones, that a decision to volunteer as a fighter represents no choice at all. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, it is claimed that the choices facing youth are "to join the military, become a street child, or die."[21] They argue frequently girls enter fighting forces because they provide food, shelter and a sense of security. This is a difficult issue to explore in research with minors in armed conflict as there are significant ethical problems. Any statement by them of their political position, their motivation or feelings about their recruitment, or their activities as fighters could be used against them if the information was used in another context. However it is a reasonable issue to explore with women who entered fighting forces as minors, that have been demobilised and reintegrated and are in a position to reflect on these issues as adults, as is the case in this paper.

To this extent, the information presented in this paper on female ex-fighters in Ethiopia presents some challenges to the accepted orthodoxy. It was not the intention of this research to reflect on issues relating to child soldiers; the focus of the research is on the reintegration experiences of female ex-combatants. However, it quickly emerged that all the women in this exploratory study had joined the fighters as children. This research contributes to existing literature as a presentation of the perspective of women who had voluntarily joined fighting forces as children. Though interviews, they reflect on the impact that that experience has had on their lives as women, as family members and as members of society. It should be noted from the start that the sample here is small and does not claim to be representative of any group beyond the individual voices it gathers. The voices therefore are those of eleven women who were fighters in a highly specific context, that of the rebel forces of the Tigrean People's Liberation Army who overthrew the Government forces of Ethiopia's dictatorship government in 1991. The sample was a sample of convenience and it was not possible to engage in random sampling. All lived and worked in Addis Ababa, in Government jobs, most as lowly paid as janitors or office assistants. An effort was made to trace women who had fought on the side of the Derg, i.e. the Government forces and it was not possible to do so in the time

available. As is common in history, the voices therefore are those of the victors. However this does not negate the experiences of these women, and the challenges they present to some of the accepted thinking on the issue of the reintegration of female ex-combatants in general, and on assumptions about the impact of being a 'child soldier' in particular.

Specifically, this study sought to:

- identify gender specific issues facing young women in demobilisation and reintegration;

- explore the impact of having been an ex-combatant on women's social relationships (children, husband/partner, extended family, community); and

- explore how being part of the military impacts of self-concept, challenges the traditional role for women in Ethiopian culture and the impact of this on reintegration experiences.