

## CHAPTER 5

# CONCLUSION

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This study highlights a number of important issues. Within a small sample, it traces the movement of a group of women from a time when they were children, through their entry to fighting forces, and the impact that the militarisation and politicisation they experience in that setting has on their lives. Their identity and experiences as fighters has become central to their identity, and it is through this lens that they view and experience the civilian world. At the point of demobilisation and reintegration, they found that the values, socialisation experiences and expectations they had inculcated during their fighter years, as women, were at odds with the traditional feminine values of Ethiopian society. They had to make some adjustment within themselves in order to reduce the level of conflict they experienced with that society. However, they also refused to compromise their internalised beliefs about their competence, ability and rights to participate in an equal society. Through the analysis, we can see the influence of fighter women on the political context in Ethiopia, and the dynamic impact of women's political and military participation on a gradually evolving political system in the post-conflict years. Although women feel frustrated personally, their ongoing resistance and challenges to the social and political system means that the host society has been 'pushed' by them, as they have been pushed by it. However at an individual level, it is an unequal battle, and women struggle economically and personally within this system.

The findings in this study also give critical insight into the social and relational challenges faced by women on demobilisation and reintegration. Research on gender in demobilisation has drawn recognition to the fact that women have specific needs in demobilisation that are different to those of men. This includes a recognition of the special medical needs around reproductive health, treating women with their children as a unit, and that there may be a need of special supports to promote host community acceptance of female ex-combatants, especially if women have been sexually assaulted or raped, or have had children while in fighting forces. This suggests an 'add-on' model of addressing gender in demobilisation and reintegration. That is, there is an assumption that the needs of men and women in demobilisation programmes

can be treated as similar, with some added support to address specific gender-linked needs of women. The findings here reach a different conclusion. Women who enter a militarised social-relational world as children, as is the experience of many females in armed conflict contexts, experience their entire socialisation within the norms and values of that military context, and their constructions of what it means to be 'female' are shaped by that socialisation experience. On demobilisation and reintegration, they confront a different world, where those constructions may no longer apply or be relevant. This socialisation experience may have been empowering, as reported by women here, or oppressive and enslaving, as is common on other conflict contexts. Depending on their position within armed groups, it may place them in a power struggle with traditional gendered expectations for women in civilian society. If women's socialisation within armed groups was one of gender-related violence and abuse, it is likely that it is through this lens that women will relate to the civilian world, enhancing their vulnerability as they attempt to renegotiate the learning they have experienced within that abusive context. The point is, women's experiences become central to their identity, and the discontinuity they experience within and outside of fighting forces in terms of their gender and self-identity is most likely not experienced to the same extent as men. There has not been sufficient recognition of this in the literature on demobilisation and reintegration.

Finally, this study raises some important challenges for taken-for-granted assumptions about the impact of entering military forces as a child, and the long-term impact of being a 'child soldier'. Firstly, it must again be noted that the reported experiences of women in this study are highly atypical of that of females within fighting forces in Africa in general, where available research indicates women are highly exposed to sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.<sup>46</sup> Yet all women in this study entered the fighting forces as children, and rather than emerge with constructions of themselves as victims, they constructed themselves as having been empowered by their experiences. This exposes a tension that exists within the child-centred literature with respect to the notion of 'child participation'. There is generally a recognition of children's agency and advocacy for their right to participate in arenas that affect their lives. Yet in contexts where children may choose to participate in fighting forces, they are constructed in child protection literature as not really making a choice, as powerless or forced by circumstances and as 'victims'. There is an important reason for this, is that it seeks to protect children's safety. But a denial of the tension of demanding recognition of child 'power' in one fora while rendering them powerless in the political contexts of conflict, is a contradiction. The lives of women in this study, as those of children in Palestine,

Northern Ireland and other conflict contexts attest to the reality that children can choose to be politically active. The question then is what avenues are created for children to assert their power in this respect. The women interviewed here challenge not only their own society but commonly-accepted assumptions about children's risk and resiliency in the context of war.