

1-1-2011

# Building Meaningful Participation in (Re)Integration Among War-Affected Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda

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## Recommended Citation

S McKay, A Veale, Miranda E. Worthen, and M Wessells. "Building Meaningful Participation in (Re)Integration Among War-Affected Young Mothers in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda" *Intervention: international journal of mental health, psychosocial work and counselling in areas of armed conflict* (2011): 108-124.

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**Building Meaningful Participation Among War-Affected Young Mothers: An Exemplar of Facilitating Community-based (Re) Integration in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and northern Uganda**

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*Acknowledgements: Funding for this study was made possible through Oak and ProVictimis Foundations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Compton Foundation, and UNICEF West Africa.*

***150 words abstract:***

When young mothers formerly associated with armed groups return to communities, they typically are social isolated, stigmatized, and marginalized thereby making (re)integration challenging for themselves and their communities. Their children face child protection problems such as neglect, rejection, and abuse. In this paper, we describe an innovative field practice -- community-based participatory action research (PAR) -- that meaningfully involved war-affected young mothers. The project took place in 20 field sites in Liberia, northern Uganda and Sierra Leone and was implemented through an academic-nongovernmental (NGO) partnership. Participants were 658 young mothers, both formerly associated and other vulnerable mothers. Within the context of caring psychosocial support, these young mothers organized themselves into groups, defined their problems, and developed social actions to address and change their situations. Project outcomes included young mothers and their children experiencing improved social reintegration and acceptance, more positive coping skills, and decreased participation in sex work for livelihoods.

***Key Words: participatory action research, war-affected young mothers, meaningful participation, Liberia, northern Uganda, Sierra Leone***

# **Building Meaningful Participation Among War-Affected Young Mothers: An Exemplar of Facilitating (Re)Integration in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and northern Uganda**

**(Short Title: Building Meaningful Participation Among War-Affected Young Mothers)**

## **Introduction**

The marginalization of girls formerly associated with armed groups and forces has been substantially analyzed by scholars, activists, and practitioners who draw attention to their discrimination and neglect in disarmament, demilitarization and reintegration (DDR) programs. When formerly-recruited girls return to communities they typically are socially isolated, and experience significant psychosocial distress which pose major barriers to their reintegration. As a result, many feel disempowered and are invisible. This is particularly true for those who became pregnant or had children because they were raped or forced into “bush marriages” and pregnancies with male combatants. Most of these girls and young mothers, the latter group whom we define as youth between 15 and 30 years of age, self-demobilize and settle near families or friends where they typically encounter stigmatization. Further, their children face numerous child protection problems such as neglect, rejection, abuse and a high level of vulnerability.

Because of child care responsibilities and extremely limited resources, these young mothers are hard pressed to improve their desperate situations. Isolated due to community rejection, lacking livelihoods, and finding survival difficult, many turn to sex work or have boyfriends with whom they trade sex for basic subsistence. Some may formally engage in prostitution which makes them additionally vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and recurring sexual violence. Others find economic livelihoods that may not serve their

best interests, such as in northern Uganda where alcohol brewing and distilling are relatively profitable and can be performed along with child care and household responsibilities but may put them and their children at greater risk of violence.

The difficulties these young mothers face have been highlighted in a number of recent studies and reports – especially within the context of sub Saharan Africa (e.g. Annan et al., 2010; Annan et al., in press; Betancourt et al., 2010; Burman & McKay; Denov, 2008; Denov, 2010; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; McKay et al., 2006; McKay et al., 2010; Veale et al., 2010; Wessells, 2006; Wessells, 2010; Worthen et al., 2010). Few psychosocial programs have yet been developed to support the improvement of their post- conflict lives. Further, existing programs typically are driven by agency and funder-established objectives rather than consulting with the young mothers who are program beneficiaries. Also, donor assistance has often excessively targeted formerly-recruited children, addressing them separately from their communities instead of looking more holistically and attending to all vulnerable groups.

The Paris Principles (UNICEF, 2007) caution against excessively targeting specific groups for assistance. Consequences of excessive targeting have been stigmatization and the development of social divisions which make sustainable change less likely. And yet, as observed by Annan and Patel, few documented experiences or assessments of community reintegration exist (Annan and Patel, 2009) nor do good exemplars exist for how to create effective and participatory psychosocial programming that addresses the specific concerns of young mothers and their children without excessive targeting.

In this paper we provide an exemplar of how to enable participatory self –help processes and psychosocial support combined with systematic documentation of processes and outcomes. Use of participatory methodology is well suited to promoting self-efficacy and empowerment following exposure to overwhelming events (Hobfoll et al., 2007). We discuss the methods, findings, and challenges to using highly participatory processes that are community based and young mother centred rather than orchestrated by agencies to achieve organizational or donor-defined objectives and outputs. This approach builds upon participation of young mothers as central to supporting their (re) integration within the context of their communities by recognizing the unique strengths that each brings (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Also, importantly, we wanted to understand reintegration and key aspects of psychosocial support from the young mothers’ perspectives.

Using participatory action research (PAR) methodology which we detail below, this project took place between October 2006 and June 2009 in three sub Saharan African countries: Liberia, northern Uganda, and Sierra Leone. The PAR project, an innovative field practice, was implemented through an academic-nongovernmental (NGO) partnership that brought together a team from 10 NGOs in the three countries, three African academics, and four Western academics. We worked as a team for nearly four years with low attrition among our members. Each of the 10 NGO partners selected two field sites (N = 20) that ranged from urban to semi-urban to rural for implementation of the PAR project and hired and trained field staff in participative methodology. This approach is consistent with the Machel Review’s (UNICEF, 2009) observation that

collaboration with academic institutions is a useful means of collecting the systematic evidence needed to strengthen global efforts on child protection and reintegration.

### **Study Participants**

The PAR project involved young mothers who had returned from armed groups and also other vulnerable young mothers (N = 658) in each community where our field sites were located. Approximately two-thirds of the young mothers were formerly associated with armed groups, and one-third were young mothers considered vulnerable but who had not been associated. 80% were between 16 and 24 years. These young mothers had almost 1200 children among them. A substantial percentage of participants lived in communities where they had *not* previously lived (35% in Liberia, 44% in Sierra Leone, and 21% in Uganda). In fact, many were integrating into unfamiliar communities instead of returning to homes which no longer existed or where they did not feel accepted. Others were living in camps for internally displaced people – especially in Uganda. Many of these young mothers did not know their birth dates, and verifying their ages and those of their children proved challenging and sometimes impossible.

Our original study design aimed to have an equivalent number of formerly associated (n = 15) and other vulnerable young mothers (n = 15) at each field site. However, the location of field sites with respect to the pattern of armed conflict in each of the three countries affected the demographics of participants so that some sites had a preponderance of formerly associated young mothers, whereas others were primarily composed of vulnerable young mothers – all war affected. In most sites, a mixture of both groups of young mothers occurred with about 30 participants enrolled in each of the 20 groups. Some attrition (e.g. from moving away) and the addition of new participants

occurred over the life of the project as young mothers in the community became aware of and wanted to join the PAR.

Consistent with the recommendations of the Machel Review (UNICEF, 2009) which advocated broader and inclusive approaches whereby programs providing services tailored to a specific group of children with special circumstances also respond to a wider range of vulnerabilities, the PAR consulted with and encouraged the active involvement of the young mothers in planning, implementing, and evaluating project processes and impacts within the context of community. By involving young mothers as key actors in changing their situations and building broad community support for this process, the PAR project paved the way for change in cultural attitudes and enabled social transformation that is part of effective reintegration.

The research paid close attention to ethical issues. The University of Wyoming, USA, was the lead institution responsible for fiscal and organizational oversight, assuring the protection of human subjects, and adhering to ethical standards. We collaboratively developed a set of guiding ethical principles of “Do No Harm” prior to the beginning of the study such as no research without informed consent. During each annual meeting of the PAR team, we reviewed these principles to reflect on whether we were adhering to them and to discuss difficult situations such as community jealousies and exploitation and violence that arose at some field sites (McKay et al., 2010).

Confidentiality procedures were developed prior to the study’s onset and were approved by the University of Wyoming Institutional Review Board. The consent form was translated from English into indigenous languages spoken at each site and then back translated into English to assure accuracy of translation. Because a minority of the young

mothers could read and many were unable to write their names at the onset of the study, the consent form was read in the language of the participant and followed by young mothers signing their consent form with an “X.” In the case of minors who were living with parents or guardians, these adults also signed the form.

### **Child Participation**

Child participation is a cornerstone of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, in practice, participation has been difficult to achieve beyond involving children minimally. Rarely have programs used highly-participatory processes that place decision making and leadership in the hands of young people to support their sustainable reintegration. Yet, the Paris Principles (UNICEF, 2007) recommend that girls and women participate in program development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The Principles note that a key to successful participation is the development of strong networks of peer support that bring young people together to “solve problems, develop social competencies appropriate to civilian life, and define their roles and responsibilities in their community” (UNICEF, 2007).

Meaningful child participation is difficult to develop within programming as was evident in a 2009 inter-agency review of 160 evaluation documents about community-based groups working on child protection and well being (Wessells, 2009). Only a small number of programs achieved genuine child participation and enjoyed improvement in child protection as a result. Child participation was usually low to moderate and often overridden by adults – especially male adults – who dominated meetings and decision making. Children wanted more voice and influence in decision making. The report

underscores how the idea of child participation, while embraced as desirable by the international community, is rarely implemented except at a token level.

Also, different child protection agencies mean different things when they use the term “participation.” It may mean giving children information about what is planned by the agency, as in a process of light consultation, membership in a committee, speaking during an agency-directed focus group, and/or answering a questionnaire. We consider these forms to be on the low end of meaningful participation. Promoting higher levels of participation, therefore, should be understood as a learning process that requires training and mobilizing adults to respect children’s views and give them opportunities to help make decisions and increasingly participate in society in age-appropriate ways. Even more unusual is participation that gives female children voice. We learned that facilitating decision making by young mothers involved a highly-challenging paradigm shift from agency-centred to young mother-centred processes.

### **Community-Based Participatory Action Research**

To enable meaningful participation, we took the approach of community-based PAR. The core of PAR approaches is that groups of people -- in this project young mothers -- organize themselves and define the social problems they face, develop and implement a plan for addressing these problems, and evaluate what they have accomplished. They do so within the context of caring psychosocial support and guidance in decision making by field staff. Fundamental to the collaborative process between the young mother participants, field staff, NGO partners, academics, and funders were two key elements: an empowering approach to partnership that was collaborative and equitable, and the sharing of power to address social inequities (Israel et al., 2008).

PAR embodied specific principles that include the following: enables high levels of participation, is cooperative and engages community members and researchers in a joint process in which both contribute equally; entails co-learning; develops local systems and builds local community capacities; is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives; pays attention to issues of gender, race, culture and class; and achieves a balance between research and action (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Fundamental to this project was feminist participatory research's emphasis on the importance of 'voice' – of having girls and young women speak to their own experiences and reality and understanding of power relationships and the importance of structural transformation 'as the ultimate goal of an integrated activity combining social investigation, educational work, and action.' (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008, p. 10). A key outcome was to contribute to policy and practice recommendations.

### **The PAR's Genesis**

To lay the groundwork for this project, two conferences (May 2005, October 2006) were held at the Rockefeller Study and Conference Centre in Bellagio, Italy, and a third meeting took place in Freetown, Sierra Leone in December 2006. We placed considerable emphasis on learning PAR methodology through extensive discussions and role playing. Once the implementation phase began, we met in Kampala, Uganda annually from 2007 to 2009 to assess progress and findings. At two of these meetings, in 2007 and 2008, we were joined by young mother delegates who came from each of our project countries and were selected by their peers. At the third meeting in September 2009, we invited government, UNICEF and other officials from Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda to work with the team in identifying learning and to plan for dissemination

of findings. At the three Uganda meetings, representatives from the Oak Foundation and Pro Victimis Foundation -- our key funders -- were also participants in our discussions.

In describing the PAR's implementation, we outline key steps of the project as it occurred across all sites. Because of different site characteristics (e.g. urban, semi-urban, rural) and cultural contexts, each country team developed somewhat different approaches to implementation. Throughout the implementation phase, the project coordinators (McKay, Veale, Wessells, and Worthen) remained in close contact with team members and each other through e mail, phone, periodic site visits, and meetings with country teams. Similarly, at the country level, PAR team members worked with and communicated with staff at the PAR sites and visited these sites to collaborate with project personnel and girl mother participants. A key reason was to ensure that agency staff had a firm grasp about the participatory nature of the program and had established effective working relationships both with the girls and the communities where they lived (Onyango & Worthen, 2010)

Also, country teams met on a regular basis to assess progress of the PAR. When in-country academics joined the PAR in its second year, they worked for the duration of the project with in-country NGO partners and directly with young mother participants. One of their primary responsibilities was to bring forth their data in their meetings with young mother representatives from each field site and to oversee measurement strategies such as a survey that we describe below. In February of 2009, African and Western academics met in Dakar, Senegal to analyze project findings to date and work on methodological issues.

### **Methodology of the PAR**

Initially the ten NGO partners identified communities where a substantial number of young mothers lived. Next, agency partners began working with these communities through local leaders and stakeholders – both men and women – such as district officials, a local child protection committee, opinion leaders, birth attendants, and faith representatives (Onyango & Worthen, 2010). At these meetings, explanations of the PAR were given, ethical principles were discussed, and characteristics of young mothers to be recruited as participants were described. Also, communities were invited to participate and begin work with agency field staff. Among activities of community members were identifying and recruiting vulnerable young mothers in the community, facilitating community meetings, and serving as advisory committee members.

Community members, in cooperation with agency field staff, then began identifying young mothers who were formerly associated or particularly vulnerable. In the process, parents or caretakers were also consulted – often at their homes. After the PAR was explained to the young mothers, they were asked to join the project. At many sites, after the initial group was organized, participants became instrumental in enrolling other community girls in a snowball process. Once enrolled, a key organizational component at each site was for young mothers to come together in regular meetings facilitated by agency field staff.

The emphasis from the onset was on group support so that young mothers could learn to trust each other and work together. In constructing this first phase, considerable time was needed so that young mothers' groups developed cohesion and came to share their problems without pressure to move quickly into broader project objectives. By creating this space, the stage was set for a participatory framework because participants

began to grow together, developed a sense of ownership of the project and greater self confidence, and realized that they had responsibility for the success of the project because ownership and control were in their hands. Many sites held trainings in matters such as parenting, reproductive health, how to do research about their problems, literacy, and human rights.

Community advisory committees (CACs) were established at each site and played a critical role in involving the community from the onset. Young mother participants often selected community advisors. In some sites, CAC members revolved until advisors whose interest in the project was related to possible compensation gave way to those with primary concerns for supporting the girls in their initiatives, sharing the wisdom of their experiences, and serving as liaisons with the larger community. The CAC members interacted with the young mothers in a variety of ways. Some joined the young mothers for regular meetings whereas others held separate meetings or individual consultations with the young mothers to discuss plans and concerns. Involvement of agency personnel and CAC members was critically important in supporting young mothers' decision making.

Importantly, group development was not linear but an iterative process with many detours along the way. Initially, the field site coordinators organized the meetings and explained their purpose along with ethical considerations such as confidentiality of what was said, written, and recorded. Conflict resolution was sometimes necessary as formerly associated and other vulnerable girl mothers learned to cooperate and trust each other. Gradually, participants took on more responsibility such as deciding where and when to meet, rules for the conduct of the meetings, and whether they wanted other

people such as parents, boyfriends, and husbands to attend. As the group process unfolded and group unity solidified, girls identified the challenges they faced and engaged in self-reflective inquiry. They then began to focus upon their problems and how to overcome them. Over time, these meetings became a rich source of nonformal psychosocial support.

Agency partners and field workers learned that a key to facilitating young mothers' empowerment was that they relinquish power and control and have confidence that, with guidance, the young mothers could make sound decisions. They came to understand the importance of transparency in facilitating participatory processes -- such as sharing details about available resources and constraints of the project. For many partners, this represented a paradigm shift from usual ways of working with beneficiaries.

### **Young Mothers as “Researchers” of their Problems**

In the PAR sites, young mothers worked together to learn to gather data such as by participating in focus groups and identifying problems young mothers face in their communities. They described key areas of concern and barriers to their reintegration which included stigma, their own marginalization, and perceived lack of social support from family and community. The young mothers targeted livelihoods, health, and education as critical areas for social actions.

In many sites, one of their first actions was to develop dramas and songs that contained rich details about their lives in armed groups, their present situations, and the challenges of being young mothers of children who were also stigmatized by their communities. As community members gathered in large numbers to listen and watch the girls act out the difficulties they faced, these dramas became a catalyst for interacting

with each other. When communities better understood these challenges, they began to lend both emotional and practical support. Notably, early social actions usually were undertaken with little or no monetary support because funds were small, and the PAR process initially needed to develop and become durable within the context of the community. This approach shifted the responsibility to the young mothers to change their situations by using their own resources as well as engaging community members in seeking available resources ( e.g. farm land) or those who would teach them skills such as hair plaiting, bookkeeping, or sewing and to help young mothers to identify livelihoods which would be sustainable within their communities. Also, as the PAR project developed, young mothers at some sites engaged in social actions for the benefit of the community – for example, cleaning in the community and sponsoring activities such as picnics. These actions contributed to community well being, reduced jealousies, facilitated young mothers’ sense of belonging, and fostered a sense of acceptance and respect for the young mothers by their communities.

When small funds became available, young mothers began developing social actions that emphasized livelihoods. They planned budgets for consideration and approval by partner agencies. Choices of livelihoods varied by sites – for example, rural sites were more likely to engage in agricultural activities and group livelihood schemes such as farming ground nuts or cassava, soap making, selling food, gara tie dyeing, and rearing goats. Several groups hired teachers to provide literacy training. Urban groups began petty trading businesses funded through micro-credit or micro-grants. A few groups staggered projects depending upon the season of the year – for example, alternating agricultural work with marketing projects -- so their income was more

consistent. In many sites, young mothers used funds or income earned through petty trading or small businesses to pay for skills training and/or school fees for themselves and their children. Young mothers also allocated group funds for emergencies such as medical crises and gifts to families suffering bereavement. Some provided small loans, including to new participants.

### **Data Gathering**

Young mothers were charged with keeping their own data – such as meeting minutes, photos of their activities, and the words of poems or dramas. Young mother representatives from each site came together periodically in their own countries to meet in a rotating fashion with in-country academics who facilitated workshops. The young mothers shared experiences, contributed data from their sites, and participated in trainings. Also, country academics were responsible for overseeing the gathering and organization of demographic data and administration of a survey (described below) which was developed in partnership with the young mothers, agency staff, and academics.

. Other sources of data about the PAR came from yearly team meetings in Kampala, monthly reports by each agency, regular field visits to the sites by the four PAR organizers, and ethnographic evaluation of selected field sites in each country. To analyze the ethnographic data, interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, and field notes were compiled into analytic notes and findings and exchanged among the four organizers. Data were examined thematically and consensus reached about key PAR findings. The draft report of findings was shared with field staff and young mother participants for discussion and to incorporate their views on the resultant analysis.

Finally, international child protection experts reviewed the PAR project findings and recommendations and provided feedback.

To construct the survey, in the second and third year of the PAR, participants engaged in an elicitive process with their peers, local academics, research assistants and community advisors to generate their own indicators of successful reintegration. These lists were then shared with the organizers, who compiled them and ranked the frequency of each indicator. The lists of indicators were remarkably similar. In total, 47 items representing 20 categories were catalogued by the organizers, staying as close to participants' own words as possible. These items were then presented to focus groups of participants to test for face validity and for them to rank the importance of each indicator. This process was conducted in all three countries to assure that the indicators selected were coherent across countries and make adjustments in wording according to cultural understandings. Based on the ranking of the indicators and questions within each category, a pilot survey was then developed comprised of 19 indicators with space to give narrative information in addition to answering each question on a three-point scale (yes, sometimes, no). The narrative space allowed organizers to analyze how well participants understood the questions. The pilot was tested in at least two field sites in each country. Using the results from the pilot, a final survey was created with twenty questions and at least one specific qualitative "probe" per question. Close contact with organizers and a narrative survey guide ensured that the survey process was similar in each country. Surveyors visited each field site to meet with each participant in private in her home community. A total of 434 participants who registered in the project at its onset completed the survey (58% in Liberia, 77% in Sierra Leone, and 58% in Uganda). The

discrepancy from the total project N can be explained by attrition over the three years of the PAR, being unable to locate participants on the days the survey was implemented, and not including new participants to the project. Data were entered locally, then cleaned, and analyzed using epidemiologic methods in Stata version 10 (StataCorp, College Station, Texas).

### **Key Findings**

The meaning of social (re)integration for young mothers was that they and their children felt accepted, respected, and included as contributing family and community members. Key elements of social reintegration that young mothers identified were being responsible, respected, and taken seriously, and participating in reciprocal support relationships within the community. They described successful reintegration as being involved in actively improving their lives, showing good mothering and self care skills, and demonstrating behaviours consistent with community and gender norms. When these changes occurred, community acceptance increased, and stigma and discrimination decreased. In some communities, a key element of psychosocial reintegration was through young mothers' initiatives that helped mitigate jealousies and positively changed the community's spirit – for example, by bringing the community together for picnics and through service to the community to reciprocate for the support received from advisers and leaders. For the three countries, participation in the PAR overwhelmingly resulted in better relationships with the broader community with 89% of young mothers reporting they felt more supported and respected by their community, 5.5% responding “sometimes,” and only 5.5% answering “no.”

To facilitate social reintegration that is community based and highly participatory, communities were involved from the outset and took ownership of the process. From the beginning and throughout the PAR, participatory processes benefited from slow, consultative engagement at all levels of the community. Extensive community dialogue, involvement and ownership were essential to motivate influential community members to support young mothers' reintegration. PAR staff engaged in dialogue with community leaders, including women elders, talked with families of participants, and discussed with young mothers the issues the young mothers faced.

Community advisory committees provided a crucial link between the young mothers' groups and the larger community and encouraged the young mothers by offering pragmatic advice, helping manage conflict, and giving psychosocial support. Importantly, community advisors played crucial roles in responding to and managing jealousies which emerged in all three countries and were manifested in a variety of ways. A key lesson learned is that jealousies and other negative unintended consequences cannot be allowed to happen without recognizing their occurrence and developing appropriate responses such as by giving a community drama or through family visitation.

Groups for young mothers were instrumental in providing psychosocial support for positive coping and social reintegration. Group processes formed the bedrock of social reintegration. Within the group, formerly associated young mothers and other vulnerable young mothers in the community learned to talk with and listen to each other in respectful ways, manage conflict, engage in collective problem solving such as ways to reduce stigmatization and improve community acceptance, and give support. These behaviours, in turn, generalized to their families and communities. Although some

groups initially were characterized by mutual distrust, they gradually became cohesive as participants worked together, prepared food, met each others' families, and socialized. young mothers shared their problems and moved to a common purpose and collective responsibility.

Young mothers' groups were fostered by organizing, structuring, and expert facilitation by agency staff, whose ongoing aim was to shift decision making to the young mothers. Participatory processes necessitated shifting control and ownership to young mothers themselves. Agency staff invested significant time in organizing and facilitating young mothers' groups and providing psychosocial support. They identified capacity building needs and introduced training in a timely and appropriate way.

Many agency staff found the shift to PAR challenging. As staff supported young mothers' empowerment, the girls then began to drive the process and make their own decisions about the use of resource. They realized they had real power to make changes in their life conditions. With this transition, young mothers began experiencing both individual and collective empowerment.

Young mothers' group work facilitated their reintegration through increasing their strengths and improving their capacity to be seen and heard in communities. Young mothers' emotional and behavioural problems were reduced over the project's lifespan. Girls wanted to be effective mothers but before the project lacked the livelihoods needed to enable their children to go to school, access health care, and utilize community supports. 83.3% of young mothers reported that they could take better care of their children than before they joined the project, and 81.3% of participants reported that they could now speak in public more easily than before the PAR. Across the three study

countries, 87 % of young mothers reported that their health had improved compared to before the project. No significant differences occurred according to whether participants were associated or not associated or by country. In a number of the sites, health education programs in which content was developed to address health priorities identified by the girls led to behavioural changes such as better self care and care for their children.

However, the majority of young mothers lacked sufficient access to primary health care, and the cost of health care impacted the progress many were making with livelihoods.

Unwanted pregnancies remained a challenging issue for many young mothers.

Across the three countries, two-thirds of young mothers reported they were able to prevent unwanted pregnancies. Yet, a quarter of participants became pregnant even when they did not want to do so. The most common explanations for why they thought they had difficulty preventing pregnancy were that they could not afford birth control, oral contraceptives failed, their husbands or boyfriends did not support their using any form of birth control, or they did not have knowledge about how to prevent pregnancy.

Children of young mothers showed improved well being, which facilitated their social reintegration. The children of young mothers achieved increased acceptance and belonging within the family and by members of their communities. Young mothers reported that they were better mothers, and their children's health status had improved. In some communities, they became role models for others who imitated their behaviours. Approximately 80 % of participants across the three countries reported that they were better able to take care of their children compared to before the project had begun. Further, four-fifths of survey respondents reported that the health of their children had

improved compared to before the project. Those reporting that their children's health had improved also said they were better able to care for their children.

Stress arose from the complexities of gender relations. While some young mothers reported supportive relationships, the majority did not experience their boyfriends/husbands as supportive of them or their children. Supportive relationships with male partners and fathers involved both economic and emotional support. Across the three countries, only a third of young mothers reported that their boyfriends or husbands were supportive of their children. In the three countries, young mothers reported conflict with their boyfriends and husbands. They left boyfriends or husbands because of domestic violence and/or discrimination against their children not conceived with their current partner. Many young mothers with unsupportive partners reported being abandoned. Regional differences were also seen, with a third in West Africa reporting their male partners unsupportive of their children and over three-quarters in Uganda reporting the same. In Uganda, alcohol use by male partners frequently was a problem.

Young mothers in all three countries were ashamed to speak out about domestic violence. They reported that increased economic security from their livelihood initiatives and support from their peers in the group facilitated their leaving abusive partners. A key learning about gender relations occurred as agency staff included consultation and advocacy with husbands and boyfriends and with other family members. This facilitated many young mothers to participate more fully in the PAR and reduced conflict at home.

Young mothers developed tools to address sexual exploitation and violence, often with the support of group members. However, shame was still a barrier to seeking help.

Sexual exploitation and violence was endemic across all three countries. During the project, young mothers reported that they or their children experienced sexual violence, including rape. In some instances, participants turned to the group for support. Most cases of sexual violence, however, were probably not reported because of a pervasive culture of silence and imperviousness to doing anything to change cultural attitudes towards sexual violence.

In the survey, 86.8% of participants said they knew how to report and get help if someone tried to sexually force them. Most young mothers said they would report to the police although some would report to their family, the chief, or an NGO. Effectively addressing sexual exploitation and violence is a formidable challenge and one in which this project had limited impact. One approach might be to develop community-based PAR with the goal of developing constructive steps towards attaining women's human rights and gender justice.

Participation in sex work decreases as young mothers gain confidence and self respect and develop alternative livelihood strategies. Prior to the project, young mothers at almost all of the field sites reported engaging in transactional sex or having boyfriends to gain economic support. Late in the project when the survey was administered, 83.1 % said that girls in the project *did not* engage in transactional sex and 9.4% said “yes,” girls engaged in transactional sex. Community members often stated that young mothers were doing far less sex work. Nearly all young mothers reported that PAR participants engaged in sex work less than they had before the project began. A key learning from the project was that when young mothers have sustainable livelihoods, sex work was much less likely to be used as a survival strategy.

### *Challenges to Using Highly Participatory Processes*

The success of this project was dependent on the capacity and engagement of field level staff who used a deeper, slower facilitation process. Also, our donors valued processes that improved the lives of young mothers and de-emphasized pre-established outputs. Another key factor was that the project had commitment and institutional support from our partners. Also, the PAR was often introduced within existing project supports and in contexts where the agencies and their record of working on psychosocial reintegration of children were already known.

Our project's mantra was "If it doesn't come from the girls, it's not PAR." Highly participatory processes were field driven and decentralized and did not originate at agency headquarters. The level of participation by young mothers was much greater than what NGOs typically achieve and what donors are familiar with and expect. Even experienced NGO staff found it challenging to master the skills and approaches necessary to support the highest levels of participation. Capacity building took substantial time and occurred at multiple levels such as with field staff, agency partners, donors, and young mother participants. Therefore, engaging in PAR means a commitment to staff development, supervision, modelling of participatory processes, and continued dialogue about the research.

Many agency partners had to change from using a predominately directive style to one emphasizing listening, dialogue, nondirective advising, and strong facilitation skills. In some partner agencies, directors or high-ranking national staff showed low levels of engagement with the project, possibly because of the relatively small money involved, the large size of some partner organizations, and an emphasis on projects that support

agency visibility and viability. For some agencies, this was a “small project” and factors other than effective community-based programs were driving how agencies defined their priorities. This marginalization of the PAR project within organizational programming priorities suggests that substantial challenges exist to using this approach, especially within large agencies that are accustomed to working in a different modality and are driven by donor money, timelines, and prescriptive specificity such as pre-determining expected outputs and quickly “going to scale.” Prescriptive specificity makes it difficult to achieve highly participatory processes (or even lesser levels of participation) as a primary goal of community-based work, especially when donors and/or agencies have limited interest in participation as a core programming value and approach.

Fundamental challenges of a highly participatory approach include the length of time needed to enable full participation, flexibility required, and initial openness needed about uncertain outcomes. Although all partner agencies were impressed by the low costs and sustainability of the outcomes of the PAR, the contrast between the timeframe of PAR processes and other NGO activities can make it difficult to adopt highly participatory processes into other ongoing work. Also, a key difference between the PAR methodology and other projects had to do with the way that funds for young mothers’ social action were managed. Agencies are used to writing proposals and budgets with each line item specified. Donors typically require agencies to specify in advance exactly how they plan to use each dollar requested. The PAR project began with money set aside for each agency with open and unspecified budget lines allocated to young mothers’ social action. Later, the young mothers decided, with counsel from field staff and community advisors, how to spend the money on social action. Thus a measure of

flexibility and faith was required that funds would be used wisely which was initially a challenge for many agency partners. Also, it required that field staff have excellent skills in guiding and supporting the young mothers' decision making, especially as they developed plans for livelihoods.

### **Limitations**

In reporting these findings, some distinctions of this study limit our ability to generalize to other contexts. The project was conducted months and, in the West African cases, years following participants' active exposure to armed conflict. The relatively high levels of accessibility to young mothers, political stability, and trust by communities in the project enabled the young mothers to engage in group support and livelihood activities. In areas torn by active or very recent conflict, the PAR methodology as developed for this study would not be feasible because of security concerns. Also, the slow and time intensive methodology of the PAR is likely ill suited to the highly fluid context of many conflict or early post-conflict settings.

Another important limitation of the PAR was the absence of comparison groups so that some of the improvements the young mothers experienced may have derived to a lesser extent from participation in the project and more fully to changes in the wider political and economic arenas.

The PAR deliberately set out to support highly vulnerable young mothers in the community. Despite findings that showed very positive changes for the cohort we studied, PAR should not be construed as an all-purpose methodology to be used with all children formerly associated with armed forces and groups or with all vulnerable young mothers. When PAR isn't feasible for some of the reasons we outline above, we

recommend that diverse, inclusive, and flexible approaches be incorporated that give children authentic voice and agency in their own lives and which involve communities from the onset as a key element in facilitating (re)integration.

### **Conclusion**

PAR is a long, slow decentralized process that requires substantial attention to its ongoing development in the field. Close mentoring by a caring facilitator, cultivation of young mothers' agency, and development of relationships between young mothers, community-members, and agency focal people were critical to the success of the PAR project. Centrally, young mothers – both formerly associated and other vulnerable young mothers in the community – became researchers of their own situations. They subsequently were able to garner their own resources and those of their communities to move them from being marginalized young mothers to contributing and respected members of their communities. For our study participants, this was the true meaning of social (re) integration.

Although PAR may not be appropriate in all contexts, this innovative field practice is well suited to promoting self-efficacy and empowerment of vulnerable populations. The method can achieve multiple aims, allowing for research to assess the situation of young, war-affected mothers and their children, while simultaneously cultivating individual and collective empowerment and fostering durable improvements in living conditions and wellbeing. We therefore encourage the adoption of PAR approaches in future programming with this largely neglected population of young war-affected young mothers and other vulnerable groups.

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