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Tens of Thousands of Girls Fighting on Front Lines

Tens of thousands of young girls are fighting on frontlines across the developing world, and not just serving as cooks and sex slaves to male soldiers, according to a recent study. "There is a tendency to over-classify girls in the countries where we worked as sex slaves when in fact they are more often frontline fighters," said Dyan Mazurana.

Mazurana, a U.S.-based researcher, and her colleague Susan McKay spent three years interviewing more than 300 girls under 18 in northern Uganda, Sierra Leone and Mozambique. Their study also looked at wars from Nepal to the Middle East to Colombia.

To help such girls, who are usually kidnapped and forced into service, international aid agencies must address their often-hidden presence and role as frontline fighters, the study said. In northern Uganda, children make up about 80 percent of the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, and up to half of those are girls, Mazurana said. "The majority of the girls in northern Uganda, in the LRA, are 10 to 13 years old," she said.

In Sierra Leone's decade-long civil war, which ended two years ago, 22,500 of the rebel Revolutionary United Front's 45,000 members were children, and 7,500 of them girls, the study found. A second Sierra Leone rebel group, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, had 10,000 soldiers, half of whom were children. About 1,700 were girls. The rebel groups were infamous for their brutal tactics, including hacking off the limbs of civilians and forcing children to kill their parents and fight while high on drugs. After the war, UN peacekeepers helped disarm 47,000 fighters, many of them children inured to violence.

The programme set up to help the former soldiers return to civilian life helped only five percent of the girls linked to the two main rebel groups, Mazurana and McKay found.

Girls in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Mozambique spend several weeks to as long as 10 years or more in the service of rebel armies and government-sponsored paramilitary groups, with the average stay being six years.

Source: Thousands of Girls Fighting on Front Lines by Bernard Woodall, via Reuters 3 March 2004, <<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines04/0303-08.htm>>