

Former combatants are usually dealt with through the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes. Historically the emphasis has been on the disarmament and demobilisation of male soldiers, since armed men are regarded as a potential threat to peace and security. In developing countries, however, women play multiple roles in armed conflict, including as armed combatants. Yet women who have carried arms are rarely included in DDR arrangements, and they tend to just disappear at the end of a war, deriving no benefit from processes intended to care for the needs of ex-combatants and ensure national security.

The aftermath for women warriors:

Cambodia and East Timor

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In both East Timor and Cambodia, where I conducted research with Oxfam Australia in 2005-6,¹ the United Nations (UN) played an important role in ending armed conflict, and its intervention helped shape the post-conflict arrangements in each country. Because both countries were devastated, international assistance was essential for their reconstruction. Aid donors have therefore had great influence. The question posed here is have they had any impact on women's involvement in DDR?

Cambodia

In Cambodia in the 1990s, the process of disarming and demobilising troops, including those of the Khmer Rouge, was messy, fragmented and prolonged. The Paris Peace Agreements of 1991 created the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which was supposed, among other duties, to supervise the ceasefire and arrange for the disarming and demobilising of all armed groups. However, lack of cooperation from the Cambodians meant that UNTAC was unable to carry out this task properly. Although about 36,000 fighters were demobilised by 1993, the Khmer Rouge continued recruiting and fighting. International funds were supplied for DDR which finally began in 1997 but was suspended after the coup that year and did not resume until 2000. The internationally funded programme provided handouts in 2001 to soldiers who were demobilised.² I have not been able to find any reference to women soldiers in the documentation about the official demobilisation process, although the Khmer Rouge were noted for their recruitment of women (and child soldiers).³ Female Khmer Rouge ex-combatants attempted to remake their lives in any way they could. In this respect the aftermath of fighting in Cambodia probably resembled that of most poor countries throughout history. That women were neglected did not differentiate them from most men.

Nowadays, no glory attaches to the Cambodian conflict. The whole period of the 1970s to 1990s is a bleak one in Cambodian history and there has been no celebration of victors and very little punishment of losers. Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were tried in absentia in 1979 in Phnom Penh and sentenced to death, and an international criminal trial of a few remaining Khmer Rouge leaders, long postponed, is now being held. Our interviews in rural areas suggest it is better to avoid talking about



Two ex-combatant women in Takeo province, Cambodia. Often former combatant women do not want to be photographed following the conflict, in particular if they were on the losing side. Photographs courtesy of the author.

any participation in the hated Pol Pot regime. On the other hand, most Cambodians avoid blaming people who served that government, on the grounds that they were forced to obey.

"Some people think we are not good women"

In 2005, when I asked the Cambodian staff of Oxfam Australia and their provincial government counterparts about the existence of women ex-combatants in the rural areas where they worked, most denied knowing of any. One counterpart in Takeo province agreed that there probably were female ex-combatants in the area where he worked, "but they do not want to let us know. They prefer to keep it secret as it may affect their status because people discriminate against former Khmer Rouge soldiers". Those who mentioned knowing of such women clearly regarded them as exceptional cases. At the village level in Takeo province, however, people readily acknowledged that there were women ex-combatants living in their midst. They did not hold any grudges against them, probably because any violence in which they had been involved had been committed else-

where, but also because of the widespread view that people were forced to commit such acts by the Khmer Rouge: "They had no choice" was the frequent refrain.

Our enquiries revealed no particular difficulties facing women ex-combatants in settling back into the community. Some now participated in community development projects. Two female ex-combatants we interviewed in Takeo province said they suffered no discrimination although one mentioned "there are rumours that some people think we are not good women".

In the aftermath of any war, the health problems of ex-combatants may be quite serious, particularly if they were injured during duty, or if they suffer conflict-induced trauma. The female ex-combatants we heard about or interviewed in Cambodia were in poor health. Many who were recruited as teenagers during the conflict had no opportunity to gain an education. Ill health and lack of education are, however, experienced by most who survived that period and it is difficult to warrant singling out Cambodian ex-combatants for special treatment. The fact that many of their

problems are shared by non-combatants is in some ways an advantage since it means there is likely to be more sympathy and support, which is particularly important in such matters as post-conflict trauma. In this respect the situation is very similar to that in East Timor.

East Timor

Compared with Cambodia, although East Timor also suffered great poverty and destruction, more attention was paid to women in that country after 1999. In part this is accounted for by the different nature of the armed conflict there: the struggle for independence against Indonesian rule is heroic. Also, by the time of UN intervention in East Timor, international thinking on gender and conflict had developed further than during the Cambodian intervention. But progress has been slight, and the problems of identifying combatants in a guerrilla war remain.

Women combatants may learn some skills that will assist them in future life, most notably courage, confidence, contacts and leadership. In Cambodia, the ex-combatants we interviewed remembered only

their own bravery and resilience with any degree of positive sentiment when they recollected the war years. In the case of East Timor, in contrast, there is leadership value in having been an ex-combatant: they are generally highly regarded and stand a good chance of being elected to the many positions opening up in East Timor's new democratic society. However, women have been unable to share in the assistance given to some of their male colleagues who bore arms. As part of the DDR programme, some former liberation fighters have been incorporated into the new national security forces and others have received cash and training to help them settle back into society. No women have enjoyed these privileges.⁴

Unlike in Cambodia, in East Timor people at all levels were generally prepared to talk to us about women's role in armed conflict. The exceptions were some villages in Covalima, East Timor's south-eastern province bordering the Indonesian part of the island, which had been dominated by the pro-Indonesian militias: there some people resented discussing the conflict. It was a reminder that women might also

have assisted the militias, for which they could expect no favourable recognition at all. As in Cambodia, women who supported the losing side prefer to keep quiet about it.

In early 2006 we spoke with a number of East Timorese about what had happened to former female fighters. They were very conscious that there was controversy about recognition and reward of combatants. In Covalima and Liquica provinces we were told that "the condition of women who were active in the independence movement has not changed. There has been almost no attention from the government or any organisation to help them".

Maria Domingas de Santos, from the prominent women's organisation Organizacao da Mulher Timorese, told us she thought it very important that women's work in the independence war should be recognised. "They should get support for their projects or activities but not in terms of actual reward. Rewards cause discrimination because there are a lot of other factors involved such as political parties and this would cause jealousies". After all, she added "We won the war not because we shot each other but more through our referendum". Thus she emphasised how diverse the roles were of those who supported the independence struggle. In 1999 for many men and women voting proved as dangerous, and as important for independence, as bearing arms.

Gender sensitive DDR?

The UN role in both East Timor and Cambodia pre-dated a watershed in the international recognition of women's roles in armed conflicts. Resolution 1325, passed by the Security Council in 2000, dealt with women, peace and security. In relation to DDR, the important section is article 13, which 'Encourages all those involved in the planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants...'.¹

Greater gender awareness was already visible in international intervention in East Timor from 1999. This was obvious in the support the UN Transitional Authority for East Timor supplied to women to allow them to participate in the new political arrangements being made for the country's independence. It was a sign of changing times. Moreover, a Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation was established and took testimonies from many women affected by the conflict, showing a willingness in East Timor to acknowledge what women suffered and what they contributed to the winning of independence.⁵ On the other hand, there is little sign of gender awareness in the DDR process in either East Timor or Cambodia.

Implementing DDR in accordance with Resolution 1325 would be extremely demanding for countries like Cambodia and East Timor. For a start, it would seem to require that women were leaders in armed conflicts, since only leaders get a place at the peace table. The Resolution also assumes that resources are available to care for the demobilisation and reintegration requirements of all those in need as a result of armed conflict, not just the winners or armed combatants. At present only the victorious male troops are assisted and expenditure on reintegration is low. To provide resources to cover all ex-combatants, broadly defined, would necessitate a large international fund and

would have to extend over several years to be effective.⁶

Although the push for gender-sensitive DDR is now championed by the Security Council, international organisations can do little without the backing of a local women's movement to promote women's rights. In this respect there are important differences between post-conflict Cambodia and East Timor. Since 1979 there had been a mass organisation of Cambodian women (the Women's Association of Cambodia), but it was controlled by the Communist Party and did not have the freedom to pursue its own agenda.⁷ From the early 1990s, supported by foreign aid, a number of independent local women's organisations emerged.⁸ Although they addressed wide-ranging issues concerning women, none took up the politically unpopular cause of the needs of women ex-combatants. In East Timor, however, an independent women's movement had been growing since the late 1990s, and although it suffered a severe setback with the devastation of 1999, it regrouped and joined with the international community in pushing strongly for women's rights, including in relation to DDR.⁹

Without a strong domestic constituency lobbying for the rights of women in DDR, international pressure is likely to be ineffective. International donors can, of course, do much to build the capacity of local women's organisations, as they have done in East Timor, but this usually occurs after peace negotiations which have made the arrangements for DDR.

If DDR were seriously to incorporate gender, by recognising the multiple roles of women in prosecuting wars, and if DDR was applied in a non-discriminatory way to all those caught up in warfare, regardless of sex or side, attitudes to armed conflict would be transformed. It would have to be recognised that DDR should not relate to reward and punishment, but that it must be part of a wider process of reconciliation and healing. Conflict sweeps up both men and women in many capacities. Helping them to settle back into a peaceful society involves recognition of their varied experiences and needs. It would also require far greater resources than are currently devoted to DDR.

Thus thinking about gender transforms thinking about war, combat, peace, reconciliation – an excellent example of how 'gender mainstreaming', properly pursued, subverts male-dominated concepts and structures. But how realistic is it for the near future? A non-discriminatory approach to DDR is slow in coming, as is amply illustrated by the examples of Cambodia and East Timor.¹⁰

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Notes

1 My research focused on the assistance provided by Oxfam Australia to poor rural women affected by conflicts in Sri Lanka, Cambodia and East Timor. It involved interviewing staff of Oxfam Australia and its local counterparts and focus group and individual interviews in the areas where they worked.

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2 A description of DDR in Cambodia can be found in Carames, Albert, Vicenc Fisas and Eneko Sanz. 2007. *Cambodia*. Barcelona: Agencia Catalana de Cooperacio al Desenvolupament.

3 Licadho, *Child Soldiers in Cambodia Briefing Paper*. 1988. Phnom Penh: Licadho [Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights].

4 Rehn, Elisabeth and Ellen Johnson. 2002. *Women, War, Peace: The Independent Experts' Assessment on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women and Women's Role in Peace Building*. New York: UNIFEM. Joshi, Vijaya. 2005. *UN Transitional Authority in East Timor: Ally or Adversary for Women?* Medford, MA: Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University.

5 Reception, Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 2005. "Chega! Final Report". Dili.

6 Spear, Joanna. 2006. "From Political Economies of War to Political Economies of Peace: The Contribution of DDR after Wars of Predation", *Contemporary Security Policy* 27 (1).

7 Frieson, Kate. 2001. *Women, Power and Politics in Cambodia*. Victoria, B.C.: Center for Asia-Pacific Initiatives, University of Victoria.

8 Kumar, Krishna and Hannah Baldwin. 2001. "Women's Organizations in Postconflict Cambodia," in *Women and Civil War*, ed. Kumar, Krishna. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

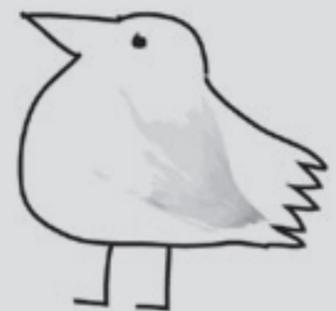
9 Cristalis, Irena and Catherine Scott. 2005. *Independent Women: The Story of Women's Activism in East Timor*. London: Catholic Institute for International Relations.

10 Nevertheless, progress has been made in the last 15 years or so. Witness the example of El Salvador. At the settlement of the twelve-year war in El Salvador in 1992, women did participate in reintegration negotiations and succeeded in ensuring that both male and female combatants received reintegration packages. Significantly, UN involvement was critical in the peace process. See Conway, Camille and Salome Martinez. 2004. *Adding Value: Women's Contribution to Reintegration and Reconstruction in El Salvador*. Hunt Alternatives Fund.

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