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Intersectionality in Gender-Responsive Formerly Armed Actor Reintegration

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In recent years, gender-responsive approaches to peacebuilding and reintegration have gained traction in both research and practice, and programs now more often acknowledge the specific needs of female formerly armed actors (FAAs)—that is, both combatant and non-combatant women and girls exiting armed organizations.[1]

What remains insufficiently addressed is how gender relates to other dimensions of identity—such as race, ethnicity, religion, class, caste, age, ability, armed group background—and how these intersections shape women's social, economic, and psychological reintegration trajectories. By collapsing intersecting identities into a single "female" category, mainstream programming tends to homogenize their needs, agency and individual backgrounds, constraining policy choices.

This research brief makes the case for an intersectional lens on female FAA reintegration by highlighting several key dimensions shaping women's and girls' transition experiences out of non-state armed groups. It highlights how intersectional sensitivities serve to reveal assumptions embedded in current practice and refocus attention on the differentiated risks, barriers and capacities that shape outcomes—thereby enabling more equitable and durable results.

Armed Group Roles

Many reintegration programs cast female FAAs exclusively as victims and passive participants. Though armed groups disproportionality harm women and girls, they can also hold diverse, overlapping roles within them—combat, command, intelligence, logistics, political work, as well as sustaining a variety domestic or operational tasks. Both "combatant" and "support" roles carry substantive responsibilities that develop distinct capacities and can coexist with experiences of victimization.

Women FAAs from Nepal's Maoist People's Liberation Army, for instance, served as fighters, commanders, and administrative and logistical staff, defying prevailing gender norms. Yet post-conflict assistance largely redirected them into traditionally female trades such as hairdressing, sewing, and beauty therapy, rather than mapping and leveraging their leadership and organizational experience from the conflict.

Additionally, experiences differ between women and girls who voluntarily joined armed groups and those who were coerced into them, which influence their post-conflict identities and social adaptation preferences.

Life Cycle

Like their male counterparts, women who were mobilized as children or adolescents often enter adulthood with significant educational gaps that translate into lower earnings and weaker labor market attachment. Girls in particular face heightened stigma related to deviation from traditional norms and their (assumed) victimization through sexual violence.

Evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo and other contexts suggests that, for younger female returnees, schooling is valued not only for job prospects but also for re-establishing their perceived social worth, mitigating stigma and indicating a return to normalcy more than vocational training alone.

In other settings, adult women returning from armed groups instead prioritize marriage, rebuilding ties with natal and affinal families, and assuming domestic roles. This can be to secure readmission to community life, but also out of personal choice, often placing these steps ahead of further education or paid work.

Motherhood and Caregiving Responsibilities

Caregiving responsibilities—whether childcare, or elder support—impose time and mobility constraints that training and employment schemes don't accommodate. Heightened challenges their children face, such as school acceptance or cognitive development difficulties, may further add to this strain. Meanwhile, for many female FAAs, reintegration support is a narrow window of opportunity; missing it through inability to participate closes future livelihood pathways.

In Sierra Leone, pregnant and nursing girls used to be systematically excluded from schooling and vocational training programs during reintegration. Only programs operated by Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) and the Progressive Women's Association—which accommodated pregnant trainees on-site—achieved participation among this cohort.

Gender-based Violence

Gender-based violence—including forced marriage, sexual slavery, and forced pregnancy—can expose survivors to a dual stigma as "wives of the enemy" and "impure"; many fear losing their children if they seek separation, and their children often lack social/legal recognition and basic rights.

[1] 'Formerly armed actor' is used as a catch-all for individuals reintegrating from armed organizations, based on overlaps in individual experiences; whether someone personally bore arms is rarely, on its own, determinative of their classification and eligibility for established reintegration programming.

Fear of precarity and community rejection leads some to remain with armed groups. Standard screening frequently misses these vulnerabilities, leaving women legally and socially tethered to abusers with no clear pathways to separation or custody.

In the Lake Chad Basin, for instance, women and girls returning with children born during Boko Haram affiliation face intense stigma that narrows livelihood options and makes them avoid accessing formal support altogether. In Northern Uganda, child-tracing initiatives by the Women's Advocacy Network have secured paternal clan recognition, enabling children born through armed group abductions to access land and education—removing a core reintegration barrier for mothers. Yet, acceptance highly depends on community norms, customary/statutory law, and family willingness.

Ethno-religious identity

Female FAAs from minority faiths or ethnic groups may face deeper mistrust and are often expected to display visible conformity to dominant norms as proof of willingness to reintegrate.

Muslim women integrating into European communities from Syrian ISIS camps, for instance, have faced pressures to remove the hijab, as a condition of perceived deradicalization. While in some settings, female FAAs may pragmatically accept such conformity, minority ethno-religious status or the perceived transgression of ethnic division lines can also impede successful reintegration entirely for others.

Ethnic hierarchies can already shape these outcomes while women are still in the armed group. Within Al-Shabaab, Kenyan women and women from minority clans are reported to be more vulnerable to coercion, abuse and exploitation. This disparity persists through reintegration: weaker social networks and geographic displacement leave them facing greater obstacles to exit and reintegrate, harsher treatment by authorities, and often more severe psychological trauma.

Social Networks

Social networks—intersecting with ethno-religious identity, GBV victimization, and other factors—can co-determine which women have easier access to reintegration support or be accepted by their communities in the first place.

Where access is mediated through ex-commanders, party bosses, or religious and clan figures, women's eligibility, referrals, and reputational clearance are routed through family ties and patronage rather than transparent criteria. This brokerage may outweigh service records, with loyalty and risk histories narrated, and sometimes reinterpreted, by those gatekeepers.

In Aceh, Indonesia, for example, female ex-combatants with kinship links to former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) leaders were more likely to receive compensation packages and party backing for local office, while peers without such ties, despite comparable combat or organizational roles, were sidelined.

Policy Implications

The examples provided in this research brief illustrate just a few relevant dimensions; other critical intersections include disability, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. While such disadvantages tend to compound more acutely for female FAAs, they also call for more differentiated approaches for men.

Intersectionality raises the stakes for gender-responsive programming: moving beyond superficial, partial inclusion of female FAAs to a more inclusive, equitable approach that addresses structural inequalities, recognizes diverse needs, and builds on women's existing capabilities. Several precedents demonstrate this potential:

In Rwanda's Phase 65 project**,** allocating 30% of the budget to a variety of women-specific needs—including targeted support to breastfeeding mothers and assistance navigating banking access—enabled 439 women (54.7% of beneficiaries) to participate in cooperative income-generating activities of their choosing, while also working with evaluation criteria disaggregated by these requirements.

In Colombia, the FARC's reincorporation framework encouraged women's participation in collective productive projects, acknowledging their leadership roles within the group as well as the special situation of women with ethnic backgrounds. In response to approval and funding delays, female FAAs organized joint ventures, backed by the UN Verification Mission and UN Women, that helped establish a platform to channel international funding to women-led projects.

In the Philippines' Bangsamoro region, female ex-combatants of the Bangsamoro Islamic Women Auxiliary Brigade (BIWAB), many of whom are caregivers from low-income rural households not eligible for the combatant Normalization track, were supported to form cooperatives and trained as Women Peace Facilitators by the UN.

However, these innovations are ad hoc and seldom embedded within a holistic intersectional framework across entire programs and project cycles.

The table below presents a **non-exhaustive set of gender-responsive reintegration policy dimensions** that would benefit from a comprehensive, integrated intersectional approach, with illustrative programmatic scenarios and their accompanying rationale.

Policy Dimension	Programmatic Scenario	Rationale
Assessment and Differentiation	Intake and profiling capture each woman's role in the armed group (combat, command, logistics/intel, political/support), age at mobilization, caregiving/legal status, exposure to GBV, disability, ethnicity/religion, location (rural/urban), disability and legal status of dependents. Use this profiling to route her into relevant services.	Gender alone does not predict needs or assets. A 28-year-old former commander with no children requires something very different from a 19-year-old abducted at 12 with a toddler and a coerced "marriage." Treating them as a single category risks embedding inequity into programming.
Equitable Program Access	Design independent intake and referral systems: digital or community-based self-registration options; clear, publicly available eligibility and selection rules; rotating third-party audits of referral pathways; and independent grievance channels. Field teams should conduct proactive outreach to women without social or political connections to ensure their inclusion.	Female FAAs' access to reintegration support is often mediated through family, clan, or political gatekeepers who control referrals and benefits. This transparency helps surface excluded women and ensures that support reflects vulnerability and capacity rather than proximity to elites or patronage.
Skills and Education Pathways	Provide life cycle–responsive education re-entry options (accelerated learning, literacy support, certification) paired with market-linked vocational training, apprenticeships, and placements tailored to individual backgrounds. Where applicable, place women in roles reflecting conflict-acquired skills rather than default tracks. Family-centered psychosocial support (joint counseling, peer groups) should engage spouses and kin.	School attendance promotes social restoration and signals community acceptance, often addressing stigma in ways that skills training cannot. Flexible, dual-track approaches (combining education and livelihood pathways) are more cost-effective than duplicative, especially for younger returnees. Some female FAAs may prioritize family-based reintegration support alongside personal advancement.
Program Flexibility and Access	Design delivery around practical constraints: on-site childcare; transport stipends; shorter modular sessions; pause-and-re-enter options; mobile/hybrid delivery; and linkage to health, psychosocial, and legal services.	Caregiving, trauma, and conflict-related health issues make standard programming inaccessible for many female FAAs, especially young mothers and survivors of sexual violence. Without flexible access, those with the highest barriers are the most excluded.
Community and Cultural Belonging	Run stigma-reduction and dialogue with community gatekeepers (religious/traditional leaders, elders, women's groups) that address contested identities—inter-ethnic relationships, "children of the enemy," religious difference, perceived "immorality." Frame this as communities shifting norms around acceptance, not women changing identity.	Targeting the specific norms driving rejection addresses concrete barriers without asking women to conceal or change immutable identities, reducing the personal strain of reintegration. Acceptance conditioned on conformity alone tends to be unsustainable.
GBV-Responsive Reintegration	Embed confidential screening for sexual violence, forced marriage, and coercive unions; provide survivor-centered case management; legal aid for separation/custody/registration; safe psychosocial support; and referral pathways that do not force public disclosure.	Survivors often remain socially or legally connected to abusers, fear losing children if they leave. Shame and anticipated rejection can keep them from entering DDR/reintegration at all. Ignoring this could mean the most at-risk women never formally demobilize and those who do face significant psychological and cultural hurdles.
Monitoring, Learning, and Adaptation	Track who is getting in and benefiting, disaggregated by screening criteria. Measure not only income or job placement but also school re-entry, documentation for children, perceived stigma, safety, social acceptance, and mental health/wellbeing where applicable. Use findings to adjust programming for excluded or lagging subgroups.	Aggregate success rates can mask selective inclusion. Disaggregated analyses often show that gains are concentrated among the easiest-to-serve subgroup (e.g. adult women from the majority ethnic group without dependents), while more vulnerable ones see limited progress. Making this disparity visible enables reallocating resources toward cohorts facing the highest barriers.