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## Drawing on the Psychosocial Working Group's conceptual framework

This intervention is closely related to key concepts of the PWG's conceptual framework. For instance, the project seeks to enhance human capacity by enabling the girls, ex-combatants and other youths in the villages to learn new skills and engage in income-generating activities. It takes account of and promotes local culture & values by facilitating the traditional cleansing rituals for girls who have been victims of sexual violence. The rituals also improve the girls' spiritual well-being, as well as their social standing in the communities. The social ecology of the community is addressed

through encouraging the joint activities of the abducted girls with other young women in the village and through involving the ex-combatants in construction work. This facilitates social contact between the young people and creates the possibility of re-building trust between different groups. The PWG framework proposes that psychosocial well-being is improved through fostering these three areas of life, and the intervention provides an example of how this can be achieved.

## Who are the PWG?

The membership of the Psychosocial Working Group comprises five academic partners (Centre for International Health Studies, Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh; Columbia University, Program on Forced Migration & Health; Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma, Solomon Asch Centre for the Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict and University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Centre) and five

humanitarian agencies (Christian Children's Fund; International Rescue Committee, Program for Children Affected by Armed Conflict; Medecins sans Frontieres - Holland; Mercy Corps and Save the Children Federation). The work of the group has been supported by a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation. Further details at: [www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial](http://www.forcedmigration.org/psychosocial) and [www.qmuc.ac.uk/cihs](http://www.qmuc.ac.uk/cihs).

# Child Soldiers

## Fatmata's story

Fatmata is a 14-year-old girl who had been abducted by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone's brutal war. She had seen her parents killed and her village destroyed. Her captor took her as his 'wife', meaning that she had to provide sex and cook and clean for him on demand. A refusal to do so was punishable by death. Fatmata never fought but carried heavy loads for the RUF. Eventually, she contracted HIV, became pregnant, and transmitted HIV to her baby.

When the war ended she returned to her home village with her baby. She reports that her biggest problems are the lack of money to pay for food or medicines and also the stigma she feels as an unmarried woman who has a child. In her words, to be unmarried in Sierra Leone is worse than death, as others look down on her. She has little formal education, no job skills nor other means of earning a living. The situation is complicated by the presence of her former captor in the village, creating ambiguity about whether he can be regarded as her 'husband'. While her family support Fatmata in saying he is not her husband, other members of community are less clear about this.

Fatmata has not been feeling well. She says she has a "heavy heart" which is a local way of saying that she feels constant and profound sadness. She asked herself repeatedly "What will happen to me and my baby?" According to local tradition, Fatmata is spiritually impure because she has been raped and this is seen as contributing to her feeling unwell.



Photo: A. Raper/Jesuit Refugee Service

## Psychosocial intervention

To support girls who have been victims of sexual violence, such as Fatmata, the Christian Children's Fund has initiated a project in Sierra Leone that takes a three-pronged approach:

- Firstly, traditional healers conducted the necessary cleansing rituals that will relieve the girls of the spiritual impurity that accompanies rape. These rituals involved the whole community, making the spiritual cleansing of the girls 'official' and thereby helping the reintegration of the girls into their communities.
- Secondly, a skills training programme was started for all girls and young women in the village. With small loans available to those completing the programme, this has enabled girls and young women to start their own income-generating activities. At the same time the

girls participated in group discussions with other young mothers, enabling them to support each other in facing their problems.

- Thirdly, civic works projects were conducted with returning fighters, who were mostly young men. Villages selected a project such as rebuilding a school or building a health post that would benefit children. Former combatants co-operated on the construction with youth who had not fought. As they worked, the community members saw the ex-combatants in a new light as they now had a positive role as constructive citizens. They were paid for their work, enabling them to earn a living. Subsequently, ex-combatants and other village youth received skills training and took part in income-generating activities.