

### 3. WAR AND GENDER ROLES FOR GIRLS

*“The culture of machismo, of men’s culture, men’s world, is very strong in our country. What is happening with the armed groups is an extreme version of that.”*

Colombia workshop

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*Child's Drawing: My Mom & Dad*

Every culture has a definition of gender roles and the proper behaviour for males and females. Traditionally girls and women have been assigned duties and privileges linked to the home and care of the family. Built into this has been an assumption of selfless dedication to others’ needs. Punishment for girls who challenge this ideal can be very harsh.

But there is a growing movement of young female activists who are pushing these boundaries. By word and deed they are questioning gender roles in their societies. Girls are increasingly assuming leadership positions in their schools and communities. Parental attitudes are also shifting as more families recognize that their daughters deserve an education. A girl’s destiny is no longer invariably tied to the home.

Wars interfere in this process in ways that both accelerate and diminish possibilities. As activists have noted, the treatment of females in wars is often a perversion of their peacetime roles. One example of this is the Burmese military’s systematic rape of female refugees. But the other side of today’s gender roles, the fight for change, is also demonstrated here as Shan Nation young women have lead an international campaign against these violations.

Not all females can be human rights activists or community workers. But all should have the opportunity to participate fully in their lives. For many this “right of participation” is denied because of structural, social and psychological obstacles, ones that separate girls from their confidence, skills and capacity to interact with others. In the following pages we would like to explore these issues while also recognizing that change is occurring, largely through the dedicated struggles of young women activists.



Girls in Karenni refugee camp

## PUSHED BACK INTO THE HOME

Inside conflict situations there is a tendency for parents to revert to traditional gender roles in the treatment of their sons and daughters. This may be to ensure their children's security or perhaps it is to establish some predictability inside the chaos of war.

Girls are removed from school for their protection or because sons have priority in families with limited means. Parents insist that their daughters are required to care for younger siblings and to help with household chores. As either one or both parents are frequently absent, this entails a long list of duties.

Even when there is no immediate danger girls complain that their parents are overly strict. For instance, in refugee camps boys are given much greater freedom than girls. These claustrophobic situations are notorious for their gossip and disagreements amongst people. Girls describe how their every move is closely monitored, as parents fear the censure of their neighbours. This vigilance increases with adolescence:

*"When I was 13 or 14 I became a woman. I was no longer a child. Then everyone started to talk about how I had to be careful, that I could get pregnant so easily. So if I wanted to go somewhere I had to ask my father and there would be so many questions. They didn't allow girls of that age to go out in the night time, you cannot go out."*

Karen refugee girl

If war assigns domestic roles for girls, boys experience the direct opposite. They are often sent out at an early age to secure paid work to help support the family. Neither option is ideal as both support gender stereotypes but for girls the result is a harsh narrowing of their lives. Outspoken behaviour is frowned upon in a world where females are expected to demonstrate quiet deference to male authority.

But other influences are also at play. Today's civil wars are a jangle of movement and influences. Young people are exposed to new ideas and role models. For example, in the refugee camps on the Burma-Thai border many internationals teach at the schools. As noted in this quote by a refugee youth, their presence is appreciated by students eager to learn about young people in other countries:

*"Now we can say to our parents that things are different, that things do not work the same way anymore. We want to compare ourselves to the international youth."*

Girls often chafe under the restrictions imposed by their parent, rebelling against a home life whose violence frequently mirrors that of the outside world. But what are the alternatives? Colombian teens express their frustration with these limitations:

*"We are refused, we are excluded. We are not allowed to participate. Females are almost invisible in our society."*

The most typical escape route is through the promise of romance and the arms of a man. If these relationships begin well they most often end badly. Unplanned pregnancies are common. For any girl it can be hard to accept the responsibilities of motherhood before she is emotionally ready. In traditional societies, even during war times, single parenthood comes with a shame that is hard to remove. Parents are aware of this. Their answer is to limit their daughters' movements as much as possible, to keep them at home.



### **THE GUN AND THE SAUCEPAN: GIRLS' INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED GROUPS**

At a workshop in Colombia youth described the recruitment procedures of the armed groups:

**How do boys join the army?**

*"It is easy. The army will take you when you are a teenager and teach you how to kill. They tell them, "Everyone is a guerrilla, Kill everybody."*

**And if boys want to join the guerrilla?**

*"If you want to be part of that all you have to do is go to Sumapaz and there you are. You say, "I want to be here." They say, "Fine" and give you a gun and train you."*

**And for the girls?**

*"They can join too. It is easy for them too. All they have to say is, "I want to stay. I can cook and wash the clothes." So they tell you, "Fine, you can stay." It's easy."*

It isn't always this clear-cut. More girls are assuming combat roles, though it is hard to see this as progress. These young women function inside a hierarchical macho world where capacity for violence is a main criteria for success. Former girl soldiers from Colombia complain that the double standard still exists, even inside rebel armies. They are often expected to be sexually available. They feel they are given even less liberty or freedom of movement than the boy recruits. A common reason for joining - to escape violence in the home - is just replaced by



*Former girl soldier with her baby, Uganda*

*“As girls coming back from the bush we often hear our neighbours whispering about us. They keep whispering, “See that girl who was with the rebels. She is a killer. She killed people and see there she also has a LRA baby, LRA children too.”*

*It is different for boys and girls when they are coming back. The boys come back without children. But us, we all have children from our time with the rebels. They are our children, you cannot leave this child, she is yours. But if you want to make a new life, start a new life with a man, you will always suffer because of this child. And the child will suffer too, because of you, because of your past in the bush.*

*It is harder for girls. And it is hard. Because people will say things to you and that thing will live with you. It stays in your heart. And when you are suffering, when you are depressed, you will always think about those things. A boy just forgets but a girl is not made that way. And people do not let a girl forget. It is impossible for a girl to brush that thing off.”*

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**Armed groups appear immune to international “blame and shame” campaigns and care even less for the effect their actions have on their victims.**

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another kind of violence, one governed by military rules and a very strong macho culture. These girls compared the two worlds as follows:

*“With the guerrilla you have no freedom. In the community you actually are freer and women and girls are treated with more respect. There, no. They want girls to be maids and they don’t worry about the harm that they do to you. The men want to rape the girls often. They hurt your mind, your body and your spirit.”*

Both boys and girls who leave the FARC or paramilitary in Colombia endanger their lives and the lives of their families. If they are able to escape, families will often send their daughters away to work as domestics, burying them inside a home where they cannot be seen and identified. Of course, this was the very situation they were trying to avoid in the first place, except now they are working for strangers and are separated from the love and support of family members.

### **SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS**

Sexual violence against girls and young women is a horrible part of war. Every conflict has its stories of troops attacking women and girls, of raping them at will. In the past girls were partially protected as battlefields were removed from village life. But these boundaries no longer exist. International human rights groups try to enforce some basic codes of decency, but to little avail. Armed groups appear immune to international “blame and shame” campaigns and care even less for the effect their actions have on their victims.

In 1993 a Liberian warlord told his troops, “Where there are any little girls, they should be raped.” This statement no longer shocks – rape and sexual assault have become regular weapons of war. Even young girls recognize this:

*“We couldn’t do anything because if we did they would have killed the whole family...the soldiers and police raped 12 year old girls whenever they felt like it.”*

Refugee girl, El Salvador

In addition to the “rape sweeps” of villages, troops or armed groups will hold girls in detention, using them however they want. The Shan Women’s Network has documented the Burmese military’s use of rape and sexual violence. During the war in Angola, Human Rights Watch reported that girls and women were raped by the armed forces as punishment for not following orders.

All rape victims share feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. They feel dirty, ashamed and angry. They suffer two pains – the pain of the physical violation and the ache in their heart at being violently “interfered with”. War adds another dimension: The horrible realization of the public and callous way they are used by these men. To be routinely rounded up and corralled into a station to serve troops’ pleasure is extremely degrading. It demonstrates in the strongest way that you have no rights.



*Drawing by Safy, Cambodia*

***“ Peace is to live with dreams for dignity and to have the possibility to dream.”***  
**Cely, Angola**



Poster Created at Colombia Regional Workshop

*“In this picture you can see a female with a speaker and also carrying a baby. That is because we always have two roles and both are important to us.”*

Rebel forces are increasingly using teenage girls as “wives” of the commanders. A “wife” of an officer is completely owned by that man. In addition to sexual services, she must be loyal and responsive to his every demand. This can range from meal preparation to backrubs; participation in battles to providing a bath. Girls who are kept for any length of time are likely to become pregnant.

The road back home for these girls is very complicated. To have been sexually active outside marriage, even under pain of death, is to have transgressed a norm for proper female behaviour. Many have sexually transmitted diseases, another cultural taboo.

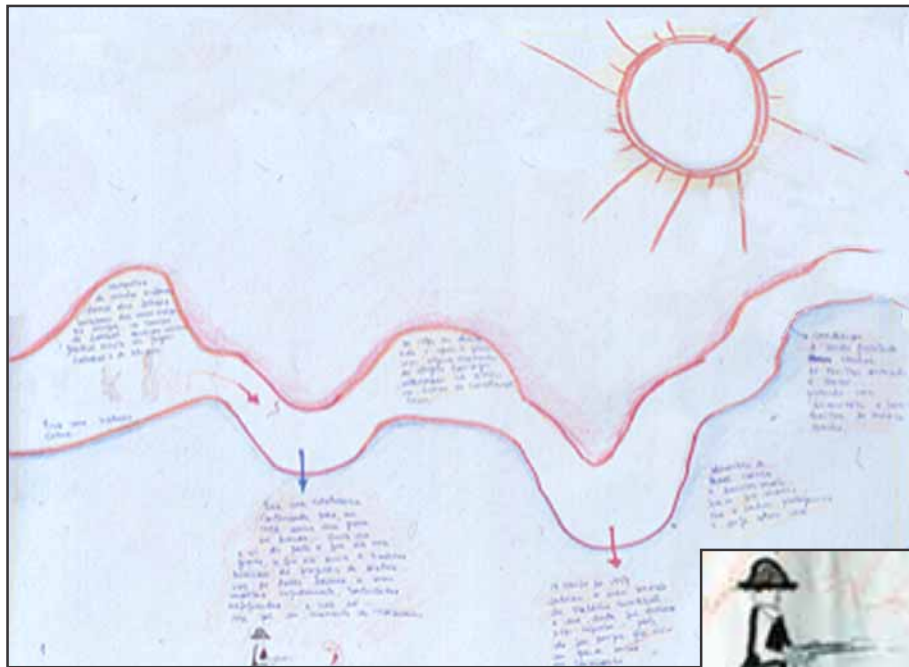
Those who are pregnant or have children carry constant reminders of their intimate relationship with the enemy, something that can be hard for others to accept and warps a girl’s standing in her community. The usual roles for females inside traditional society – that of wife and mother – become the basis on which she isolated or shunned by her world.

## **WORKING FOR CHANGE**

Even harsh situations contain possibilities for change. At a recent peace conference in Asia a speaker urged young women to seize the opportunity provided in the post-conflict period. She said this was the chance, while all was fluid, to challenge gender stereotypes and traditions that suppress women. She also maintained current peacebuilding practices often fail because they are organized around male win/lose approaches to power. In her view these interventions might stand a better chance for success if women were not consistently shut out of the process.

The good news is that young women are beginning to knock at this door. They are demanding that their views and participation be respected. Like all pioneers and agitators they suffer from criticism. Their opinions are vigorously scrutinized and frequently rejected. They need to be strong in the face of limited support. But still they continue in their commitment to social justice that includes the active and equal participation of all citizens, both females and males.

Many female activists stress the need for young women “to be able to participate in a positive way for themselves and for other females.” This is a critical first step, one that requires that girls recognize the dynamics of their situations and are supported to make positive decisions that include disowning of guilt. But even more importantly, it means that wars are no longer fought on the backs of females, a demand that increasing numbers of young women are demanding in their calls for equal justice.



Drawing by youth from Angola



## **JOURNEY OF MY LIFE, YOUTH FROM ANGOLA**

*“In my childhood there were happy days. I remember best my friends, especially the ones on the football field. As a little boy I really liked to play football and to study. I had a quiet childhood.*

*Then there was the war in 1992. Never before had I seen war so close. I heard projectiles exploding really close beside me. I saw people killed who were so close to me. For me this was a year of a lot of confusion and trouble.*

*After that, despite the war, there were some happy moments. Then on March 19, 1995 my brother died of cerebral malaria. I will never forget that. He was my big brother and a counsellor for me. In November 2000 I got very sick and I almost died. But God protected me and now I am still alive.*

*Now I would say that I am a normal adolescent, with many ambitions and dreams. I want to be an architect and composer of music.”*