

A man in a dark suit stands on the left, addressing a large group of people seated on the ground in a grassy field. In the background, there are simple buildings with corrugated metal roofs and lush green trees under a cloudy sky. The scene is outdoors and appears to be a community meeting or training session.

**“I see myself  
as equal parts  
woman and  
soldier”**

Natalie Domaas,  
Maria Martin de Almagro Iniesta,  
Sylvie Imata,  
Eric Banyanga

**GENDER AND DISARMAMENT,  
DEMOBILIZATION, REINTEGRATION  
(DDR) PROGRAMMES IN THE  
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO  
AND REFLECTIONS FOR THE P-DDRCS**

## INSECURE LIVELIHOODS SERIES

The Insecure Livelihoods Series publishes independent and field-driven information and analysis on the complexity of conflict and security in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its reports are based on independent, non-partisan and collaborative research.

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Cover photo: Registration site for the P-DDRCS in the territory of Uvira in Kashatu/South Kivu. Photograph taken by Sylvie Imata, November 2023

# “I see myself as equal parts woman and soldier”

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# Summary and Key Findings

Violent conflict and its accompanying peace processes shape and transform political, economic and social dynamics, including gender relations. The international community has supported Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes, through which armed actors are supported to lay down their weapons and return to civilian life, for over 30 years. Yet they have a low success rate, especially for preventing a return to conflict and addressing gender inequalities. Armed groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have undergone four DDR processes supported by the United Nations and the World Bank. Since 2008, DDR programmes in the DRC have included a comprehensive gender strategy. Nevertheless, women ex-combatants have been continually excluded from these programmes, and in the cases where they were included, the support they have received was sub-par and left many of them to fend for themselves. In 2021, the DRC adopted a national strategy for the implementation of a fifth process, the Demobilization, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilization (P-DDRCS) programme, which has a clear community reintegration component and gender strategy.

This report investigates the experiences of former female combatants during their time in an armed group as well as their experiences after demobilizing, whether through a formal DDR process or not. The aim of this report is to gain a deeper understanding of how gender can influence the realities of women ex-combatants as they demobilize and reintegrate, as well as to develop a more thorough understanding of how gender is perceived and understood within a Congolese context in order to offer recommendations for how to successfully implement a gender strategy in the P-DDRCS.

Through in-depth interviews with women ex-combatants and public authorities in Bukavu, South Kivu Province, between June-November 2023, this report found that the most common avenue for demobilization among women is self-demobilization. The reasons for this are: i) a general lack of awareness about DDR programmes; ii) the stigma attached to being a woman ex-combatant that going through a DDR programme would reveal, which was also cited by previous studies of reintegration of female ex-combatants (Transitional International 2019: 107); and iii) a negative perception of DDR programmes in general due to the failure of past programmes, which did not provide gender-sensitive education and economic opportunities.

Furthermore, we also found that there is a lack of educational and economic opportunities within DDR programmes that can provide new skills or take advantage of existing skills. This not only makes reintegration more difficult but often results in women finding alternative means of survival via prostitution or returning to an armed group. Finally, there is a clear gap between how key concepts such as gender are framed within the official DDR policies, and how those concepts are understood by target groups.

The United Nations (UN) has been supporting Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in UN Peacekeeping Operations since the 1989 United Nations Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA). The rationale behind creating these programmes was to aid countries in the transition from civil war to peacetime by offering non-state armed group members the ability to integrate into formally recognized state security apparatuses, such as the military, or to reintegrate as civilians into society so that the central government could regain control over the use of force in an institutionalized manner (Ayissi 2021). These programmes are intended to strengthen political settlements and facilitate sustainable peace (Edmonds et al. 2009: 31). Even though DDR programmes have managed to demobilize a high number of combatants, especially those programmes in West and Central Africa, many countries such as the DRC, Mali, Haiti, and Sudan have faced a relapse into conflict and demobilized combatants have taken up arms again. The reasons for this are linked to the bureaucratic nature of setting up DDR programmes and the difficulty of DDR programmes encounter when trying to adapt to the volatile reality of modern civil conflicts. Predictable funding for DDR programmes, especially for reintegration, remains a consistent hurdle for the successful implementation of these programmes, as well as the struggle to balance the mandates of peacekeeping missions with longer term investments for stability (ibid.).

The purpose of this report is to analyse the perceptions and lived experiences of former female combatants in the DRC regarding their demobilization and reintegration processes. This will enable us to assess how the formal objectives of DDR programmes in the DRC regarding gender and gender

inclusion compare to the lived experiences of former women combatants. By highlighting discrepancies between the policy and practice of gender within DDR programmes, this report seeks to stress the importance of basing international policies in local knowledge and lived experiences in order to create more effective, inclusive and context-specific peace programming.

A purposive sampling method was used to select a total of 13 women ex-combatants from different ethnic groups and a broad range of ages (30–60) who have either reintegrated into civilian life or who joined the national military in the DRC, as well as with policymakers and local authorities that have implemented DDR programmes in South Kivu. The interviews included one-on-one semi-structured interviews with and hearing the life stories of ex-combatants. These were conducted in French and Swahili in South Kivu Province, DRC, in the cities of Bukavu and Uvira, Luvungi and Runingu (Kashatu) villages in the Ruzizi Plain, and Bunyakiri in Kalehe territory. All personal data of the interviewees has been anonymized and all names have been changed to respect interviewee’s privacy and security due to the sensitive nature of the research topic. The primary objective was to explore the nuanced experiences and rich perspectives that might be lost in a larger, more generalizable study. The data was analysed using grounded theory, which allowed for the identification of key concepts and patterns within the data. While our findings provide invaluable insights into the experiences of women ex-combatants in South Kivu, the small sample size means that more research needs to complement this report in order to fully grasp the stakes of gender issues within DDR programming in the DRC.

## **1.1. Gender and DDR**

Practitioners and scholars claim that large-scale violence and conflicts have the potential to disrupt the existing gender order and create spaces of a new ordering of gender to emerge (Duriesmith 2017; White 2007). Therefore, the post-war context is a site where masculinities and femininities may be discursively and materially reconfigured and the gender order reconstructed (Duncanson & Woodward 2016; Hamber 2016). Following the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security in 2000, a greater focus was put on including women ex-combatants in UN-led DDR programmes, as they



had previously been excluded from participating in such projects. This women-focused inclusion has been further institutionalized within the UN system over the years through the updated Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), which now include a module focused entirely on women- and gender-specific considerations for all stages of the DDR process (Steenbergen 2020).

There are currently six UN DDR programmes being implemented (Central African Republic, Columbia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti, Mali, Somalia) that have a minimum gender quota for Community Violence Reduction projects and have gender-sensitive eligibility criteria for DDR processes (United Nations DDR Resource Centre 2023). Unfortunately, these gender-based inclusion efforts have a record similar to the low success rate of UN-led DDR programmes overall. Research has shown that possible reasons for this low success rate of implementing gender-inclusive DDR programmes is due to: i) a lack of clarity in key definitions proposed by the international system and the country of implementation (Steenbergen 2020); ii) the obligation for conflict-affected countries to implement international gender norms while not addressing the structural causes of women's inequality and insecurity (Beckley 2023); iii) the continued assumption that men are violent and women are peaceful, therefore meaning that only the reintegration of men should be addressed and centred around their integration into state security apparatuses (de Diego Manrique 2021) and; iv) an inability to account for differences in perceptions of certain terms between the international level and the various local levels that a DDR programme may be implemented in (Baysal & Dilek 2023). However, we know little concerning the implications of DDR processes for women ex-combatants, how they understand them, and how their personal socio-economic situation changes as a result. While quantitative approaches focus on the number of women in DDR (Bastick 2017; Mobekk 2010), thereby failing to capture the relationality of gender and rarely considering masculinities, critical scholars have studied how values underpinning UN-funded DDR programmes support a Western-centric, neoliberal and expansionist project to "civilize" uneducated recipients of the global south (Elliott & Cheeseman 2004; Jowell 2018; MacKenzie 2012). However, these qualitative approaches have focused mostly on how men are taught in military trainings to behave as hypermasculine warriors, and how

they are then resocialized through Security Sector Reform (SSR) trainings to be “gender sensitive”, morally virtuous, “good” UN peacekeepers (Higate & Henry 2009; Duncanson 2009; Bevan & MacKenzie 2012), rarely focusing on interventions directed at women (see Curtis, Ebila & Martin de Almagro 2022 for an exception). In policymaking, this lack of theoretical guidance regularly results in a reformist understanding of how gender can be integrated in already existing processes and institutions.

When DDR programmes are formulated, it is not uncommon for social perceptions of gender to make their way into the mandates. These perceptions see men as aggressive, more inclined to violence, and that they should therefore be prioritized within the narrow DDR definition of “combatant”, while women are viewed as peaceful and should therefore be used as “agents of peace” (de Diego Manrique 2021; Lindestam 2005; Zalewski 2010). This contributes to an ongoing problem with gender mainstreaming in DDR programmes in three ways. First, it continues to ignore women’s abilities to commit violence and in turn assumes that women do not hold decision-making roles within armed groups. Second, it minimizes the experiences of violence and trauma that men can have in armed groups. Finally, it overlooks how both men and women who were in an armed group perceive themselves according to their own cultural values, and instead assigns them arbitrary categorizations based on Western understandings of gender where they are either “victim” or “perpetrator” but never both. Therefore, we need to critically interrogate how gender mainstreaming in DDR programmes impact women ex-combatants in order to design programmes that can achieve sustainable peace.

While it is difficult to obtain statistics on the different roles women have in armed groups, it is known that women take on a variety of roles within armed groups that go beyond the assumed role of sex, including being porters, spies, messengers, negotiators, foot soldiers, and commanders. Men also have different roles besides soldier and can act as porters, messengers, and/or spies and whose exposure to violence and possible sexual exploitation often go unaddressed, which can lead to PTSD, shame, and an unwillingness to return to their families and communities (de Diego Manrique 2021). Ignoring this reality means that rigid perceptions of gender-based roles in armed groups

can become embedded in DDR programmes. This can either happen at the higher institutional level, such as within UN and national government programming, or at the more local implementation level, such as at DDR reception centres. What emerges through this multilevel, cross-cultural, socio-political mixed reality is a catch-22 of sorts. On the one hand, higher level DDR programming decisions can include gender-based provisions designed to increase the presence and participation of female ex-combatants and women in decision-making roles in order to promote new pathways to peace and address gaps in former DDR programmes. However, when gender-based provisions are made to be a requirement in the national DDR strategy, plans for increasing women's visibility and needs can often fall on deaf ears because there is no wider local buy-in to these gender provisions. This can lead to problems at the implementation level, such as women being turned away from demobilization centres due to arbitrary disarmament requirements, and cultural beliefs concerning the roles that women can and cannot play within armed groups. The result of this is that many women unfortunately self-demobilize and rarely return to their home communities.

The rigidity in which gender and gendered roles are incorporated into DDR programmes means that there is little opportunity for ex-combatants and communities alike to adjust their approaches to reintegration based on personal experiences. The experiences of women and men in armed groups can vary based on their gender, but also on their age, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, which creates highly individual experiences that are difficult to account for when implementing DDR. Female ex-combatants can have different experiences from one another, as can male ex-combatants, which makes their needs during and after DDR quite varied, which would require a thorough understanding of individual experiences in order to tailor community-supported reintegration actions. Unfortunately, such individualization can be tricky to achieve given the UN's institutional need to have metrics to measure success, such as the number of guns turned in and how many combatants completed the demobilization process. Naturally such metrics cannot account for combatants who self-demobilized, which is a common occurrence especially for women, and assume the success of DDR programmes is a numbers game that makes evaluating long-term impact nearly impossible.

## 1.2. The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) provides an illustrative case for the above-mentioned shortcomings of DDR programmes in general and gender-inclusive DDR more specifically. As of 2019, the DRC has undergone four DDR processes, which marks 20 years of internationally supported DDR cycles in the country (Thill 2021). Since the 1999 Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, DDR in the DRC has evolved into an amorphous web of partners and programmes that do not operate on a set timeline but rather are cyclical in nature and can be triggered by a multitude of factors such as peace agreements, elections, military operations, and/or international diplomatic partners (ibid.). The first formal DDR programme in the DRC began in 2003 following the end of the Second Congo War and lasted until 2007 when it was taken over by DDR II, which ran from 2007–2011. A third instalment of DDR ran from 2013–2018 following the M23 insurgency and the signing of the Nairobi Agreement. The programme that began in 2019, called DDRC (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Community Reinsertion), has now been taken over by the P-DDRCS (Demobilization, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilization) programme, which was announced in July 2021 in coordination with the UN peacekeeping mission MONUSCO.

Although DDR programmes have been present in the DRC for two decades, a comprehensive gender strategy was not included until the DDR programme II in 2008. Even then, outreach targets for the demobilization of female ex-combatants continued to fall short due to the continued requirement within DDR programmes in general of needing to hand in a gun during the disarmament phase to qualify for the demobilization phase. This arbitrary requirement negatively affects both male and female combatants because guns are not often given to all rank-and-file soldiers, with high-level commanders often being the ones who have firearms and with lower ranking members often using machetes, and sometimes armed group members who act as porters or in other support roles do not have weapons (ibid.). Fear of stigma and being ostracized by one's family and community is another factor that prevents combatants from joining a DDR programme. This is a barrier that female ex-combatants frequently face, especially because women who were in armed groups are often perceived by local communities as “bush

wives” or sexually promiscuous, which goes against cultural gender norms and expectations (Emergency Demobilization and Reintegration Project 2012; Independent Evaluation Group 2013). The reality of who can qualify for a DDR programme and the reasons ex-combatants fear reintegration are exacerbated by existing stereotypes that cut across the WPS agenda and UN-led peacebuilding initiatives.

As one of our interviewees indicated:

There were a lot of women, about 12 of us, and we demobilised ourselves. But when we learned that to join the DDR programme, you had to have a weapon, an outfit or a grenade, we started looking for them. And we didn't have any uniforms and there weren't many weapons. What were we going to brandish? My husband and I were in the same contingent and we tried to buy a gun in the neighbourhood. We got it for 50,000 francs and we went to the DDR with it a few months later. We did this because the DDR gave us money and food every month.<sup>1</sup>

The realities of the failed DDR gender strategy in the DRC unfortunately reflect wider structural inequalities that continue to be unaddressed at both a national and international level. One reason for this failure is the lack of consultation with key groups who were most affected by the DDR programmes, such as women, community leaders, and/or successfully reintegrated former combatants (Perazzone 2016; Sharif 2018; Thill 2021). This lack of consultation and local buy-in is especially problematic given that the more recent DDR programmes, such as the P-DDRCS, have placed a larger emphasis on community-led initiatives and reintegration (Tope 2022). Given that some of the key barriers for female ex-combatants in DDR programmes is the fear that they will be judged and stigmatized upon returning to their communities, and that they are often excluded from formal demobilization due to disarmament requirements and must then self-demobilize with their own resources, it seems that building a solid understanding of the experiences that female ex-combatants had in demobilizing in the DRC is an important step in being able to contextualize how these women see themselves, and how reintegration/reinsertion can contribute to and shift this perception. In addition, the high political instrumentalization of these programmes by the

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant, Luvungi, 16 November 2023.

government, which has consistently sought to secure immediate security gains and to build a perception of statistical efficiency (number of men demobilized, number of weapons collected, number of soldiers who joined SSR programmes and others) rather than long-term peace, has inevitably marginalized further women ex-combatants' needs and has only paid lip service to the "gender" component of the DDR programmes.

In what follows, we first explain the particularities of the new DDR programme in the DRC and why a focus on gender power dynamics and gender mainstreaming is of outmost importance. Second, we offer a series of findings regarding the gendered realities of DDR, women's experiences of reintegration in the community and women's experiences in the military. Finally, we propose some concluding thoughts and recommendations for implementers of the P-DDRCS programme.

# The New P-DDRCS Programme

In 2022, DRC President Felix Tshisekedi signed a national strategy known as the National Strategy for the Implementation of Disarmament, Demobilization, Community Recovery, and Stabilization (referred to as P-DDRCS in French) programme. This initiative aims to foster peace, resolve conflicts, enhance security, enforce state authority, and promote economic and social development in communities affected by conflict. Unlike previous DDR programmes, P-DDRCS places a greater emphasis on the communities receiving former combatants. It strives to establish connections with broader development endeavours, ensuring that the focus extends beyond ex-combatants to encompass various groups, including women, men, boys, and girls affected by conflict within these communities. While this more community-centred approach does have the potential to address some of the implementation gaps of previous DDR programmes, especially those gaps related to gender, the P-DDRCS will have to make a conscious effort to bridge the perception gap between what is described in the MONUSCO-supported plan and how local communities perceive key concepts within the plan such as gender, peace, and reintegration. Understanding how these terms are perceived at a local level will especially be key given the DRC government's approach to using the term reinsertion instead of reintegration in the P-DDRCS. In the DRC, reinsertion is commonly used in place of the UN-used term reintegration. This is because in the DRC, reinsertion is more commonly associated with a return to society whereas reintegration is associated with being incorporated into the national army (Thill 2021: 5). This is an important distinction, as reintegration into the national army has not been a focus of DDR programmes in the DRC since DDR III (ibid.: 10). While a focus of the

reintegration aspect of the P-DDRCS seeks to address the proliferation of wazalendo (patriot) groups by having these groups become army reservists, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this report. Finally, another key element of the P-DDRCS is the decentralization of decision-making which is being delegated to provincial governors, including the territorial and local authorities. Although it has been over a year since the inauguration of the P-DDRCS, there remains limited data on the programme's progress, but there are recommendations that can be drawn for this new programme by assessing the experiences of former combatants in previous iterations of DDR.



### 3.1. Overview

In what follows, the report elaborates on three main findings:

First, women in the military who have been part of an armed group were adamant that in both structures there was no distinction based on gender, as all people, men and women, performed the same roles and faced the same dangers. Nevertheless, when questioned further, they reported specific gendered experiences within armed groups and the national military. These gendered experiences, such as sexual exploitation and pregnancy, played a role in some of the women's decisions to enlist in the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) after demobilizing. Still, the women interviewed preferred to be in the armed forces than to reintegrate into their communities as civilians, mostly due to the economic benefits and sense of accomplishment that the armed forces offer.

Second, most of the women interviewed had little to no experience of DDR programmes, and many of them chose to self-demobilize and try to survive through *débrouillardise* (fending for oneself via informal economic opportunities), by making money here and there, or by self-enlisting in the national military. Although this is not specific to women but generally applicable to the large majority of combatants who have tried to demobilize via DDR programmes, it is important to highlight that the survival strategies of men and women are very much gendered, with women often resorting to prostitution or paid care work. This was because previous DDR programmes within Congo

had been seen as a failure. Some of the women interviewed knew of other women who had gone through a DDR programme and had ended up on the street with little to no economic prospects. This became apparent as a major shortcoming of DDR programmes, which has influenced the trust in new DDR programmes, such as the P-DDRCS, or has caused any news of new DDR programmes to be ignored altogether. Third, there is a perception that the ways in which gender is treated do not address the immediate needs of women ex-combatants.

### **3.2. Women's Perceptions of DDR Programmes**

Given the history and low success rate of DDR programmes in the DRC, it was unsurprising to hear the women who were interviewed voice scepticism towards the ability of future DDR programmes to provide economic opportunities and stability. Out of the seven interviews conducted with former non-state armed group members, only one woman (Marie) had participated in a formal DDR programme, although unwillingly. Marie had been a part of the national military since the 1990s after having grown up in a military family. While her battalion was based in Kisangani, they received an order to return to the capital region of Kinshasa. However, Marie was ill during this time and was not informed of the order, so she was left behind and then forced to join the RCD (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*). Following the end of the Second Congo War, Marie participated in a DDR programme in 2005, called Commission Nationale de *Désarmement, Démobilisation et Réinsertion* (CONADER), that sought to integrate RCD members into the national army FARDC (*Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo*). Initially, Marie refused to partake in the DDR programme but was told that she had to if she wanted to join the FARDC. Even though she ended up enrolling in the DDR programme, she stated that she refused to be disarmed and demobilized because she never had the intention of leaving the army and instead refused to follow the entire procedure.<sup>2</sup> Marie observed that she later found former colleagues in Goma who had gone through the entire DDR process but who were trying to reenlist in the FARDC because the DDR programme had not given them anything or provided any assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Marie, Bukavu, 9 November 2023.

This caused Marie to question the legitimacy of the programme, saying that CONADER failed to help former militia members stay within civilian life.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the other interviews, it became clear that Marie's experience and perception of DDR programmes was not isolated. In the remaining five interviews, all of the women claimed that they chose to self-demobilize and enlist in the FARDC independently because they either did not know about DDR or did not want to return to civilian life once they left the armed group. They also indicated that enlisting in the military was one of the only avenues where they could utilize their experience and that could provide financial security. In one interview, a woman (Sara) who had first been kidnapped by the RCD in Ituri and then became a part of CODECO (*Cooperative pour le Développement du Congo*), only learned about what DDR was after she had escaped to Bukavu and enlisted in the army.<sup>4</sup> Even after learning about DDR, Sara continued to serve in the army for economic reasons, as she claimed there was no way for her to economically sustain herself in another profession.<sup>5</sup> Another woman, Grace, echoed this sentiment, as she talked about how many of her female colleagues from the armed group she was in resorted to prostitution after having formally demobilized. She observed that none of them had received reintegration assistance after demobilizing, and through prostitution many of them died due to illnesses such as AIDS.<sup>6</sup> Only one woman who was interviewed, Caroline, had managed to reintegrate into civilian life after self-demobilizing instead of joining the FARDC, but this was largely due to receiving practical and financial support from her family. She had been able to move in with her brothers in Bukavu after having left the armed group that had kidnapped her and was able to become a seamstress. Through her family's help and support she did not feel she had to enlist in the FARDC, which she says many women end up doing out of necessity, and that once she heard about DDR, she did not feel it was necessary for her because she had established a life and profession in Bukavu without making it known she had been in an armed group.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Sara, Bukavu, 27 June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Grace, Bukavu, 12 November 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Caroline, Bukavu, 27 June 2023.

The fear of being “discovered” as having been in an armed group and the stigma attached to that categorization is something that was mentioned in all the interviews and a major reason that many of the women interviewed chose to self-demobilize. Self-demobilization is when a member of an armed group chooses to leave, often meaning that they have to run away. Without the assistance of formal channels or familial support, leaving an armed group can be difficult because often the person is not near their home and does not have many resources. Many people who self-demobilize feel as though they cannot return home due to feelings of shame and fear of being ostracized or accused of crimes by their communities. This was the case of Sara, who said that she had come to Bukavu from Ituri after self-demobilizing because she felt she could not return home. Sara also mentioned that if the military were to discover that she had been in an armed group, she would face intense stigma, even though there are other women in the military who had previously been a part of an armed group as well. Even Caroline, who managed to integrate into civilian life after self-demobilizing, said that she had come to Bukavu in secret and did not want the “process of DDR to make it known that I had been in an armed group.”<sup>8</sup> Not only does the fear of being stigmatized by their community cause many women to not go through formal DDR channels, but many of them also self-demobilize because they could be accused of murder and put in prison if their previous group affiliation was discovered. This was mentioned by Caroline and was echoed by Anna, who is trying to reintegrate into the FARDC after having been accused of a crime.<sup>9</sup>

Even though many of the women who self-demobilized chose to enlist in the FARDC, this was more of a forced choice due to the lack of other opportunities and security, which formal DDR programmes could not provide. As mentioned above, the experiences of Marie, Sara, and Grace, although different from one another, share the fact that enlisting in the national military was a choice they had made because other paths could not provide stability. In Marie’s case, she had already been in the military and re-enlisted due to patriotic sentiments which were shared by Grace, while Sara had enlisted

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Anna*, Bunyakiri, 10 November 2023.

due to economic necessity. All three of the women, however, and another woman named Francine, shared that if they had not joined the military and either completed a DDR programme or had self-reintegrated into civilian life, they would have become homeless, had to work as prostitutes, or enlisted in the military at a later date, which is what they saw happen to other women they knew. This reality causes some of the women to doubt the legitimacy of past and future DDR programmes, including the P-DDRCS. For Marie and Anna, who had experience with the CONADER DDR programme, they both mentioned how the programme was seen as a failure because a majority of people who had completed it were struggling. When asked her thoughts on the P-DDRCS, Marie claimed that she does not expect anything from this new programme and that, to her, the P-DDRCS is something that only politicians can understand because, “I only know that CONADER failed and did not help militias stay civil. I remain sceptical about the new P-DDRCS, maybe it will work. But I am not a politician.”<sup>10</sup>

### **3.3. Moving Forward after Civilian or Military Reintegration**

As seen above, the decision to reintegrate into civilian life or to enlist in the national military is highly personal and dependent on individual circumstances. Very few women choose to return to civilian life, whether they participated in a DDR programme or self-demobilized. The key factor for a successful civilian reintegration after demobilization seems to be familial structural and economic support, as well as what is called *débrouillardise* (fending for oneself via informal economic opportunities), as was seen in Caroline's case. Caroline observed that her family did not want her to return to a life within a military structure, including the FARDC, after she had self-demobilized, which is why they found her a place to stay and gave her food while she settled into life in Bukavu and got a job.<sup>11</sup> Caroline became a seamstress and was able to provide for herself and her children through this job, and she noted that on occasions she would also sell goods such as fruit if she had the means to do so. While Caroline and her family were able to help her post-reintegration through material and economic means, Caroline mentioned that a large

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Marie*, Bukavu, 9 November 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Caroline*, Bukavu, 27 June 2023.

influence in her current life is being a member of the Evangelist church in Bukavu. Caroline credits much of her current situation and stability in life to the Evangelist church, which she says helped her follow a path where she can feel strong and proud of who she is, meaning that her religion is something that is very important to her. “Up until the day I die I will remain a Christian,” she said.<sup>12</sup>

Due to her own positive experiences with the Evangelist church, Caroline became an active member in the church community and now helps with outreach activities to other women who had self-demobilized and are now in Bukavu. When Caroline was asked if guarantees of anonymity in DDR programmes or NGO-sponsored programmes for ex-combatants could help more people participate in these programmes, she responded:

“I’ll give you an example. In my church, if we find women who were former combatants who are living on the street, we bring them to the pastor and help them reintegrate into the community but never tell anyone who they are or where they are from.”<sup>13</sup>

In Caroline’s personal experience, she has seen the church do more to help former combatants than any national or internationally sponsored programme. This is done mainly by providing them a safe community where they can keep their anonymity but still have a support system, and by providing them jobs such as selling fruit, which Caroline mentions is very important to the women. It was through this church-supported outreach that Caroline met Sara, another interviewee already mentioned in this report. While Sara had to enlist in the FARDC after self-demobilizing due to economic reasons and because she did not know anyone in Bukavu when she arrived, the Evangelist church was able to provide a sense of community where she was able to build trusting relationships with people like Caroline, whom she has now known for over ten years.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Sara, Bukavu, 27 June 2023.

According to the women who were interviewed, the options for moving forward after demobilizing are few, and formal DDR channels do not appear to provide helpful opportunities for avoiding stigmatization while also receiving financial support. Even though Sara was able to find community support through Caroline and the church, her financial needs forced her to enlist in the army (the FARDC) because she does not have a high level of education to pursue other professions.<sup>15</sup> Levels of education seem to have a large impact on the decision of women to join the FARDC, with Sara saying, “If a woman is not well educated that joining the military is one of the only options she has.”<sup>16</sup> A similar situation happened to Francine, who mentioned that originally, she had wanted to be a shopkeeper but that after she self-demobilized, enlisting in the FARDC became one of her only options, and that “life did not accept for me to be a shopkeeper.”<sup>17</sup> For others, such as Clothilde, it was patriotism and a sense of duty: “As Female Military Personnel (PMF), we have taken an oath to die here and never to betray the country. I have to die here.”<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of circumstance, each of the women interviewed had found ways to reintegrate into different social and economic structures after leaving the armed group they had been a part of. For most of the women, military reintegration was a forced choice brought on by economic necessity and a lack of opportunity to pursue other professions and/or education. In all of the interviews, it was the constraint agency of the individual women that mattered in deciding which of the very limited life courses to take after leaving the armed group, and formal DDR programmes did not have any large influence on this.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Francine*, Uvira, 16 November 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Clothilde*, Runingu (Kashatu), 9 November 2023.

### 3.4. Gendered experiences within military structures

A trend that emerged throughout the interviews is that the women's experiences from a gendered perspective seemed to be consistent throughout their time in both the armed group(s) and the FARDC. When asked whether there were any differences in the division of labour between male and female members in the armed group, all the women were insistent that the work and tasks performed were done regardless of sex or gender, because everyone was firstly regarded as a soldier. While describing her experience in an armed group, Caroline observed that "in the military we are all perceived as soldiers. If someone tells you to flee, you flee. If someone tells you to shoot, you shoot. There are no men and women there." The experience of there not being any gender distinctions between male and female soldiers, whether in an armed group or the FARDC, was echoed by Sara, Marie, Anna, Grace, and Francine. In each interview, when asked if such a distinction in the division of labour existed, all of the women indicated that the men and women in the armed groups of which they had been a part and the FARDC shared the same responsibilities and tasks:

"In the army, there is no difference between a man and a woman. In the training centres, we are treated the same, only the dormitories are different. You do all of the work in the same way."<sup>19</sup>

"In our army, there is no difference between a PMF (Female Military Personnel) and a man. We all equally serve the FARDC."<sup>20</sup>

Only in the interview with Anna did she mention that there is beginning to be some distinction in the jobs that male and female soldiers in the national army can do. She remarked that there has recently been some reluctance to deploy PMFs anywhere in the country, although this reluctance did not result in action being taken as PMFs are continually deployed by the national army where necessary. Anna did say, however, that in 2016 the army began refusing to recruit female soldiers in the special force's unit, *Commando*, on the basis that the training was too difficult.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Marie*, Bukavu, 9 November 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Francine*, Uvira, 16 November 2023.



Within armed groups, the only distinction in tasks that was directly mentioned was that women combatants would be used as spies to gather information from nearby villages. This was stated by Caroline and Grace, who stated that the commander of their armed group would often send them into enemy territory as spies, which is something that “the men could never do”.<sup>21</sup> Even though women being used as spies was the only distinct reference to gendered differences within both armed groups and the national army that was mentioned, throughout the interviews it became apparent that pregnancy and sexual exploitation were common experiences that distinguished the realities of women within military structures from those of men. While Marie was describing how she had come to enlist in the FARDC, she claimed that when she was first kidnapped by an armed group during her first tour in the national army, she was pregnant but did not disclose this information to her military unit. She noted that pregnant soldiers are not sent to the frontlines, which is why she had lied, and that after she had been captured by the armed group during the fighting, she was sexually assaulted for three weeks until she ran away.<sup>22</sup> Caroline also said that sexual exploitation and assault were why she had run away from the armed groups. For Caroline, she was first taken by the armed group and forced to be a prostitute before she was able to become a foot soldier. She shared that it was only after a new commander began to sexually exploit her that she decided to run away to Bukavu.<sup>23</sup> For some of the women who joined the FARDC because of economic reasons, part of this decision was made to support their children. Caroline mentioned that she felt lucky to not have a lot of children because it allowed her to require less financial support from her family, but that for many women they have “no choice but to join the military, especially if they have many children and they need food.”<sup>24</sup> In cases where patriotic feelings partly influenced the decision to join the army, some women make the decision to leave their children with relatives, as was the case of Marie, who left her four children with her mother in Kisangani.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Grace, Bukavu, 12 November 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Marie, Bukavu, 9 November 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant Caroline, Bukavu, 27 June 2023.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Although such experiences and decisions have gendered dimensions, the women who were interviewed did not seem to consider their experiences as having anything to do with gender. During each discussion, it became apparent that the reason for this discrepancy is because the word for “gender” does not exist in Kiswahili, nor is there an appropriate translation that encapsulates the nature of the term. In some of the interviews, the women were asked what the term “gender” signifies for them. Their responses were mainly those of indifference, with Caroline responding, “This means nothing to me.”<sup>25</sup> Grace responded, “I hear people talk about gender, but I do not have a good grasp of what it is. I think that this concerns politicians more.”<sup>26</sup> These responses highlighted how gender and gendered differences are seen as something that comes from external influences such as international organizations and NGOs and are therefore not seen as particularly relevant to many demobilized women in the DRC, especially regarding their everyday lives. This revelation gave added context to the interviews and the women’s responses to other gender-specific questions such as the division of labour within armed groups or the national military, and also how they perceive themselves. For instance, when asked if she views herself first as a woman or as a soldier, Sara responded that she sees herself as being both equally. When Anna was asked the same question, she indicated that “we talk about the word gender, but our leaders don’t take it into account. Here the woman is not seen differently, she is seen like other men.”<sup>27</sup> Francine held a similar opinion to Anna; she referred to the military when asked about her thoughts on the word “gender”. “I am telling you that there is no difference between the jobs of men and women in the army. We are all equal.”<sup>28</sup> For both Anna and Francine, any question about gender as a term was approached as having to do with their experience in the military; they remained adamant that all soldiers, whether men or women, were treated the same because they all did the same tasks. For Sara, she saw herself as equal parts woman and soldier, and mentioned how within her unit she did not feel any closer to the other female soldiers simply because of their shared gender, even though there are only a small number of women in the unit.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Grace*, Bukavu, 12 November 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Anna*, Bunyakiri, 10 November 2023.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with female ex-combatant *Francine*, Uvira, 16 November 2023.

All of the interviewed women provided clear examples of their gendered experiences within state and non-state military structures. Within armed groups, some of the women experienced sexual exploitation and were originally kidnapped for such purposes before becoming foot soldiers. Most spy-related tasks were done by women combatants due to the reduced level of detection that their biological sex and performed gender offered. Within national army structures such as the FARDC, pregnancy and raising children were a contributing factor in the decision to enlist for some women. Although the interviewees remained adamant that there are no gendered division of tasks between men and women soldiers in the FARDC, there was still discrimination towards women soldiers, and some of them were excluded from certain jobs, such as joining the Commando unit, due to perceptions from higher-ranking military personnel that the training would be too difficult for a woman.

## Lessons Learnt and Policy Recommendations

The history of DDR programmes within the DRC has been wrought with logistical and operational difficulties and poor design, leaving many people who have gone through different phases of these programmes to come out the other side still struggling to readapt to civilian life. These struggles relate to the intense stigma that former armed group members face as well as the difficult economic situations former combatants find themselves in after demobilizing. According to the interviews, trust in the efficiency of DDR programmes within the DRC is severely lacking, especially because many former combatants have seen people they know from their armed groups end up on the street after having gone through a formal DDR channel. This lack of trust, particularly for women ex-combatants, has also contributed to a decline in former combatants even being aware of new and current DDR programmes that are underway, as was seen in the low awareness of the interviewees for the P-DDRCS.

**Lesson learnt 1.** The perception of prolonged failures of multiple DDR programmes within the DRC and the lack of availability of education and economic opportunities within DDR programmes have led to many former combatants choosing to self-demobilize and return to civilian life or enlist through the normal channel in the national army. This is important because national authorities and UN officials are unable to fully know how many former combatants are now enlisted in the FARDC or how many people should have been demobilized versus what the official numbers show. This reality also leaves many former combatants, particularly women, vulnerable to various forms of exploitation while they are trying to reintegrate

into civilian life, often in a place that is unfamiliar to them because stigma makes returning home difficult or impossible. Admitting to having been in an armed group is a taboo subject within the DRC that causes many former combatants to be afraid of participating in a DDR programme because it would automatically label them in a harsh manner that could lead to ostracization or possibly prison. This causes many women ex-combatants to fall through the cracks, resulting in precarious situations where former combatants could be drawn back into an armed group or where any future programmes geared at demobilization and reintegration are met with heavy resistance. Women within armed groups face added pressures related to the realities of pregnancy and childcare, as well as the risk of sexual exploitation within armed groups.

**Lesson learnt 2.** Many of the women who were interviewed felt as though they had limited choices for what they could do after self-demobilizing, either due to a lack of education or skill in another profession or a lack of a support network that would otherwise allow the women a safe space to process and plan for their reintegration into civilian life. Enlisting in the FARDC is one of the only ways to receive a guaranteed monthly salary, and for women who self-demobilized, enlisting in the national army without needing to disclose their past affiliations with armed groups is an attractive choice. Enlisting in the FARDC is also a choice that can be influenced by feelings of patriotism and/or coming from a family that also served in the military. The trend of self-demobilization and independently enlisting in the FARDC could also disrupt the reinsertion aspect of the P-DDRCS. It is unclear whether the community-centred approach to reinsertion in the P-DDRCS will be able to address the fear of stigma of women ex-combatants. Even in the FARDC, many of the women interviewed for this report stated that they did not want their names to appear because they were afraid that their units and commanders would find out the truth about their past and that they would be ostracized. If women continue to self-demobilize and avoid formal DDR programmes because they are afraid of the stigma they would receive, there is not much opportunity for a community-led approach to reinsertion, and former combatants will instead either resort to *debrouillardise* or to not disclosing their past while integrating into the national military. While men ex-combatants can and do face stigmatization and community ostracization,

which is a crucial point in general for DDR programmes to address, women ex-combatants are generally received more harshly by their communities because they are perceived as having engaged in sexual or other morally sanctioned activities within an armed group. Many former women combatants have experienced sexual violence while in a non-state armed group but are hesitant to come forward and seek help because they are afraid that they will be seen as not worthy of help or as “ruined”. Such a perception means that prospects for marriage and motherhood, which are crucial societal and economic markers for women in the DRC and much of the world, are jeopardized, forcing some women to secretly resort to prostitution as a means of survival. Because of the importance placed on marriage and motherhood, women who were in an armed group also go against societal norms based on traditional gender roles that see women as being more nurturing and peaceful, making it increasingly inconceivable for a woman to have been a combatant. This inconceivability can in turn seep into national DDR programming by structurally excluding women, creating a negative cycle that is in turn reinforced by the disarmament programme requirements that mainly benefit male commanders who had access to firearms, and creating unsafe environments in demobilization camps by not having a dedicated space and specialized care for female combatants.

**Lesson learnt 3.** Once they have demobilized, many women must resort to prostitution for financial security. Up until now, DDR programmes have not been able to create opportunities for demobilized women combatants to properly reintegrate on a social and economic scale, meaning that participating in a DDR programme gives no guarantees to former combatants that they will be better off after having completed a programme. The reality of this can be seen through the interviews with Grace and Francine, both of whom knew women who had gone through a DDR programme and ended up resorting to prostitution because they had no other choice to support themselves or their children. The knowledge of what happened to other women who did formally demobilize was a big contributor to many of the interviewees having self-demobilized and then enlisted in the FARDC independently. The P-DDRCS programme should therefore offer avenues for generating revenue activities for ex-combatants.

**Lesson learnt 4.** Even though the women interviewed did have gendered experiences within military structures, particularly in armed groups relating to sexual exploitation and/or pregnancy, the insistence of there being no differences between men and women within military structures reveals that gender components of DDR programming need to take into consideration how gender manifests itself within different social scales and structures in order to more actively involve target groups in the implementation of DDR.

The ambitious framework of the P-DDRCS can attempt to address some of the systemic issues that have led to the failure of previous DDR programmes, especially regarding women's participation and buy-in for these programmes.

**Recommendation 1.** Because the P-DDRCS is looking to utilize support between the international, national, and local level to address gender gaps in previous DDR programmes, the coordination between these three levels must consider how the lived experiences of women within different military structures influence their future decisions on whether to take part in the P-DDRCS.

**Recommendation 2.** To increase the level of trust in DDR programmes amongst women ex-combatants, the broad dissemination of information about the existence and practicalities of the P-DDRCS should be approached in a collaborative manner with local, provincial and national authorities. From our research, the shortcomings of previous DDR programmes have permeated into public opinion. Many of these opinions are formed not through reading about the success or failure of previous DDR programmes, but through people living through them or knowing other people who have and seeing them struggle to survive.

**Recommendation 3.** A contextualized access and needs evaluation that varies between provinces and territories should be conducted before any education and/or economic training opportunities are created. Do women ex-combatants have equal access to the rights, benefits, and resources allocated to men ex-combatants? Are the identified needs of demobilized women being met? Are there arrangements to meet the needs of women who have caregiving roles? Are accommodation, equipment, and services

designed to meet women's needs? Are women's post-reintegration transition needs met? Are rumours about and stigma of women who demobilise addressed? At what level are the provincial and national governments trying to change public opinion about former combatants?

**Recommendation 4.** Framing key concepts such as gender within DDR programmes in a relevant and flexible way for the intended communities could also help address the stigma that many women, and men, face when trying to demobilize.

**Recommendation 5.** The reinsertion of ex-combatants should be assessed on a case-by-case basis and adapted accordingly, especially when former combatants feel as though they cannot return to their home and decide to relocate after demobilizing. International and national policymakers who are involved in the creation and implementation of DDR programmes should consider how sensitivities from both former combatants and receiving communities rooted in a conflict could negatively affect the success of reintegration and have plans in place to either address these concerns before and during the reintegration process or create support paths that allow ex-combatants to move.



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# Interviews

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Interview with former member of  
non-state armed group.

Caroline. Bukavu. 27 June 2023.  
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non-state armed group.

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Francine. Uvira. 16 November 2023.  
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non-state armed group.

Grace. Bukavu. 12 November 2023.  
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non-state armed group.

Marie. Bukavu. 9 November 2023.  
Interview with former member of  
non-state armed group.

Sara. Bukavu. 27 June 2023.  
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non-state armed group.

## The Insecure Livelihoods Series

