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## Soldiers With Dolls and Blue Hair Gel Rape and Despair Turn Liberian Girls Into Armed Fighters

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TUBMANBURG, Liberia -- In an abandoned building up a muddy footpath strewn with trash, Rachel Wesseh, 15, twirled her doll's brown hair and watched nervously as a 28-year-old man who described himself as her boyfriend inhaled a long puff of marijuana.

He leaned against the window and picked up her gun. He claimed he was Rachel's "man in charge." Theirs is not a love story amid war. Rachel had frowned and turned silent when he walked into the room. Later she whispered that she didn't like him. She didn't want to explain why.

Rachel is a soldier. She became one about two months ago, just days after her mother was raped. She took the fighting name Disgruntled.

"I was hurting so deeply. So I became a fighter. What was I doing with my life here, anyway? I had nothing," she said quietly on a recent day, a sparkly silver-and-black scarf tied around her hair, purple polish smeared on her nails, a Kalashnikov assault rifle slung over her shoulder. "They can take my old ma and rape her. I need to fight the enemy. I need a gun."

More than 14 years of fighting in Liberia has made rape as common as looting or gunshot wounds. Robbed of their dignity, forced to flee their homes and left emotionally dazed, some young women decided to pick up weapons. They joined government or rebel forces to avenge family members raped or killed by the other side. Some said they took up arms simply to defend themselves. But once they became soldiers, many teenage girls found that they were still being raped -- by their commanders and fellow soldiers, according to health workers and the girls. Many expressed a desire to go home after last week's peace agreement ended fighting in the capital, although not in the countryside. The men in charge of their units ordered them to stay.

"They join sounding brave and to avenge atrocities. But in many cases, what they experience as soldiers is far worse than what they saw in the bush," said Edward S. Grant, a Liberian psychiatrist. "The whole population, to begin with, is completely traumatized. To be frank, how will these girls be our nation's leaders and mothers?"

Grant said it is almost impossible for girl soldiers to return home. Friends and relatives shun them far more than they do boy fighters, calling them rebel wives. "They are viewed as spoiled," he said.

A staggering number of women and girls have been streaming into clinics saying they have been raped, health care workers report. Aid workers estimate that one in six women or girls were raped during the final convulsive waves of fighting this summer around the capital, Monrovia.

Rape is common because of the number of drugged and drunk young men roaming the countryside with guns, said Mayalan Keita-Brown, head of the Association of Female Lawyers in Liberia, an organization founded several years ago to try to prosecute the growing number of rape cases. She said that only one case was tried all of last year, and the man who was jailed now roams the streets, one of the many criminals who escaped from prison during the war.

Keita-Brown said that young female soldiers are extremely vulnerable. "I have a 17-year-old daughter, and for me this would be the worst thing that could happen, having her become a fighter," she said, sitting in a cramped apartment in Monrovia. "Throughout the whole war, I kept begging her, please stay indoors. Don't go out or talk to anyone. Don't let anyone take you as a soldier."

Cpl. Tayo Poopoola, a Nigerian soldier and member of the West African peacekeeping team that is policing Monrovia, said it broke her heart to see the girls with guns. "It's not like these girls are joining to protect their nation, learn some skills and get a bit of scholarship money," she said. "They are being taken at small ages and being used, even if they think they are tough."

Rachel, who is sharing a former YMCA community center with several other girl soldiers and the men who say they are their boyfriends, has had enough. "I miss my ma, " she said, looking down. "I told my commander, 'The war is over now. I want to go home.' He said, 'No, wait.' " And so she does, in this room with the man, Isaac Koffa, whose nom de guerre is Survivor.

As he smoked marijuana, she sat on a mattress on the floor, quietly playing with her doll, Princess. Also propped up on the bed were a stuffed teddy bear and a Beanie Baby mouse with floppy ears. There was big jar of blue hair gel and a plastic headband with hearts.

Rachel said that her mother, who used to sell imported lotions and sodas in the market and now lives in a camp for displaced people on a rubber plantation 30 miles southwest of Monrovia, had wanted her to be a teacher or nurse. In her first years attending a church school, part of the only functioning school system in the country, her favorite subject was math.

Her mother couldn't read. Rachel can't, either. She had trouble concentrating in school after moving around to avoid fighting. She skipped school a lot and felt depressed.

"I lost all my friends. I didn't know anyone," she said, slapping her hands together and turning her palms upward, as many Liberians do for emphasis. "I was suffering because I

was shy." Eventually her family settled in Monrovia, living at first in the swollen displacement camps. Rachel's mother told her she didn't have to go to school.

When fighting broke out in the capital this summer, they fled to a camp at Harbel, the sprawling Firestone rubber plantation. Rachel said she hated the camp.

Her mother was raped there one night two months ago, next to an open latrine. Without the privacy to weep, Rachel crouched over her bruised, crying and bleeding mother. "I just didn't know what to do with myself," Rachel said.

Her mother didn't know who attacked her, but Rachel suspects it was one of the government soldiers who frequent the area.

Two days later, a local rebel leader asked her to join the Women's Artillery Commandos unit of the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, or LURD. Rachel recalled feeling angry. She was also humiliated, frustrated, depressed and desperate. She said yes.

A woman known as Black Diamond heads the unit. She has told local radio that she became a fighter to combat rape, and that she was raped three years ago. LURD is the larger of the two main rebel groups that have been fighting former president Charles Taylor's forces for control of Liberia. It claims to have as many as 1,000 female fighters, although numbers on any side are difficult to verify.

Rachel said her mother didn't want her to fight, but Rachel told her it would be better for the family. Besides, she wasn't doing anything. She was told she would make some money, although she's never been paid.

She learned how to fire a gun and handle security. "Always protect your commander," she stated, as if repeating the notes from a school lesson. "Always fight your enemy and don't be scared."

She has a friend, Zoe Fahnbulle, 15, who joined the unit for similar reasons -- a close member of her family was raped, she had nothing else to do, other girls were doing it.

Rachel served under Gen. Iron Jacket, a man known to keep 300 boy and girl soldiers as his bodyguards. Rachel was one of them. She said she also fought on the front line in a battle for Monrovia in which hundreds of people were killed. "I looked my enemy in the eye," she said. "I didn't like thinking I killed people. But they kill me. They hurt my ma, my family. I had no choice to face my enemy."

She described feeling torn about being a soldier. In some ways, she said, she liked it because she got to eat rice and meat when both were hard to come by. And fighters got both respect and loot. Rachel said she once stole some jeans, then felt guilty and gave them to a friend.

But she didn't like living around so many older men. Her home now is the floor of a YMCA, and it's packed with male soldiers. "I want to go home," she said as she sat on her mattress. "I do. I would hug my mom if I did. But I have to be here for now."

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