

# Bandits and Prostitutes:

The Role of Gender in the Stigmatization of Former Child Soldiers

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ABSTRACT

Returning home and reintegrating into families and communities often pose significant challenges for former child soldiers, who frequently face profound stigmatization. Yet little is known about what motivates this stigma and how it differs between returning boy and girl soldiers. Through a feminist analysis of narratives from former child soldiers and their community members, this article examines how gendered threat perceptions shape negative attitudes toward returning child soldiers in CAR and DRC. The comparative analysis reveals that while returning boy soldiers are primarily perceived as physical threats, returning girl soldiers are often viewed as symbolic threats to the community's sense of ontological security. These binary perceptions, however, do not necessarily reflect reality, as girls are often involved in violence and boys also experience sexual exploitation. Instead, they illustrate how stigmatizing narratives are deeply shaped by gendered expectations to the roles, identities, and behaviors of boys and girls. Beyond advancing knowledge of the gendered nature of the stigmatization of former child soldiers, this study situates the phenomenon of stigma within broader patriarchal power structures, demonstrating how stigma serves to uphold and reinforce existing gendered hierarchies. Addressing this stigma, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that challenges these underlying hierarchies and power dynamics within affected communities.

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**STIGMATIZATION, GENDER, CHILD SOLDIERS,  
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## INTRODUCTION

Across conflict zones, the recruitment of children by armed forces and groups remains a persistent problem, with a particular prevalence in central Africa. Children are recruited for various purposes including as combatants, cooks, spies, porters, “wives” and for sexual exploitation. Some child soldiers are released as part of a peace agreement or a disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process, resulting from negotiations by an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO), or payments made by their parents. Others manage to escape or negotiate their demobilization independently (Verhey, 2003, p. 13; War Child, 2018). However, returning home and reintegrating into families and communities have proved to be a troublesome affair for many children and young adults (Akello et al., 2006; Derluyn et al., 2013; Mazurana et al., 2002; Tonheim, 2012; 2014, 2017).

Existing research demonstrates how former child soldiers often return to precarious life situations characterized by poverty, lack of opportunities and severe stigmatization (Betancourt et al., 2010; Hartog et al., 2020; Vindelvogel, et al., 2012). Stigmatization is often identified as a core obstacle faced by returning child soldiers which both impacts their reintegration and general well-being (Betancourt et al., 2010, 2019; Denov & Marchard, 2014; Tonheim, 2012; McKay, 2005). Interviews reveal that large numbers of former child soldiers consider or decide to return to armed groups due to rejection and lack of acceptance by their family and community. This is making stigmatization a significant risk factor for re-recruitment (Child Soldier International, 2017; UNSC, 2019). In addition, research indicates that community acceptance is more significant for the psychosocial recovery of former child soldiers than the level of violence and abuse they experienced within the armed group (Betancourt et al., 2010; Tonheim, 2014). To advance family and community acceptance of former child soldiers, I argue that a deeper understanding is needed on what motivates this stigma and why it is so prevalent. This entails an examination of how

stigma is closely connected to threat perceptions that are embedded within a broader system of gendered power structures.

A growing field of literature demonstrates how former girl soldiers, in particular, face stigmatization upon return and highlights the connection to established gender norms within the given society (Haer, 2018; Mazurana, 2002; Tonheim, 2017). However, it is well-documented that many boys also experience severe stigmatization when returning to the communities. Former boy soldiers have, for example, reported discriminating treatment, degradation, and exclusion after demobilization, affecting their mental well-being and life opportunities, while putting them at high risk of re-recruitment (Mukosa, 2014; War Child, 2018). Yet, there is a tendency to leave gender out of the analysis when the experience of returning boy soldiers is investigated. This omission reproduces a flawed idea of “gender” being equivalent to “women” which clouds the understanding of how gendered stereotypes and norms are not only affecting women and girls, but also men and boys. To adequately encapsulate the dynamics between gender and the stigmatization of former child soldiers, this article explores the gendered dimension of stigmatization of *both* boys and girls in a comparable analysis. This approach contributes to elucidating how this stigmatization is deeply motivated by gendered threat perceptions, produced by norms and stereotypes that function to reproduce particular gendered hierarchies.

In this article, I examine this dynamic in two selected case studies: the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). These countries have recorded some of the highest numbers of child soldiers in recent decades, with girls being recruited at rates nearly equal to those of boys. In the DRC, for example, an estimated 40% of child soldiers are girls, while in CAR, girls constitute approximately 30–40% of recruited children. These cases are therefore well-suited for studying the role of gender in the stigmatization of both boys and girls (MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8; World Vision 2019, p. 12).

To analyze the underlying motivations of the stigmatization of former child soldiers in CAR and DRC, I establish an analytical framework using the concepts of *symbolic threats* and *physical threats*. Physical threats refer to tangible threats against a group or individual's "power, [material] resources, and general welfare," whereas symbolic threats refer to immaterial threats against a group or individual's "religion, values, belief-system, ideology, morality and/or worldview" (Stephan et al., 2009, p. 258). Adding a feminist lens, I use these concepts as analytical tools to unravel how stigmatizing community perceptions are motivated by gendered understandings of acceptable behavior and identities. While the analysis reveals some overlaps and nuances, former boy soldiers appear significantly more likely to be narrated as physical threats, whereas former girl soldiers are more frequently narrated as symbolic threats within their communities, despite reality being far more complex. These differences suggest that gendered norms and expectations profoundly shape the way threat perceptions emerge and lead to stigmatization. Concurrently, they demonstrate how these norms and expectations are reproduced and enacted through the process of stigmatization, making stigma an effective tool in sustaining gendered power hierarchies.

The article is organized in three parts. The first section establishes the connection between stigmatization, threat perceptions and gender norms. The research design is outlined in the second section, elaborating on the case selection, research material, and the ethical consideration guiding the research strategy. The last section explores how the stigmatization of returning boy and girl soldiers is produced by gendered threat perceptions within the two cases. The article concludes with a discussion on how this stigma is part of a system of patriarchal power dynamics, adding an additional layer to the understanding of effective reintegration of formerly recruited children.

## STIGMATIZATION AND THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Understanding threats and the perceptions underlying them is crucial because it forms the foundation for unraveling the complexities of how and especially why prejudices and discrimination are constructed. In social psychology integrated threat theory has been developed to explain the origins of biases and discriminatory practices, particularly within groups. The theory can be summarized through two core components: "realistic threats" and "symbolic threats" (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). In this study, I use the term "physical threats" instead of "realistic threats" because I believe the latter may suggest that symbolic threats are less real. While physical threats are often more tangible than symbolic threats, they are equally real to the individual or groups who experience them. Additionally, the consequences of being perceived as a symbolic threat are often as tangible as those of being seen as a physical threat because both perceptions often lead to exclusion or violence.

Physical threats refer to concerns related to material losses of for example resources, economic and political power, and the infliction of physical harm or death. These threats are perceived to threaten the *physical security* or even the existence of a group or individual. In contrast, symbolic threats refer to concerns about immaterial loss, such as threats against individuals or groups' values, morality, and belief-system (Stephan et al., 2009). Symbolic threats are, therefore, perceived not as threats to physical security but rather to the moral and social order. As social order is a fundamental part of how people relate to and make sense of the world, I argue that symbolic threats can be experienced as attacks against the *ontological security* of a group or individual. Ontological security defined as "security not of the body but of the self" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344), thus pertains to the preservation of one's identity, whether individually or collectively.

Events, groups, and individuals can threaten a group's ontological security by challenging its

self-understanding, including its morality, social norms, and worldview. The preservation of moral and social order is essential to maintaining a group's ontological security, as it upholds collective identity and coherence (e.g., Mitzen, 2006). Since gender norms and roles are integral to identity, gender plays a crucial role in shaping ontological security within societies – a point I will return to in the next section (e.g., Dingley, 2020). Notably, individuals or groups can simultaneously be perceived as physical and symbolic threats, with these perceptions reinforcing and influencing one another.

The social response to threats varies based on the type of threat and its perceived severity, but it is predominantly characterized by an attempt to reduce or remove the threat. This response can manifest through direct violence or through more silent forms of violence, such as stigmatization. Stigmatization is a social process in which an individual, or group of individuals, is perceived as devaluated, tainted and not quite human. This degradation is disqualifying them from full social acceptance, rendering them outsiders and unworthy of equal treatment (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2014). Research investigating why stigmatization occurs, suggests that it stems from a universal motivation to avoid danger. This displays how the production of stigmatization is closely linked to threat perceptions and can be understood through threat theory (Stangor & Crandall, 2000).

Stigmatization can be viewed as a social response to threat perceptions used by individuals, communities or societies to discipline or correct the behavior of the threatening individual or group. Within this framework, the purpose of stigmatization is to reinstate the stigmatizers' sense of physical and/or ontological security to preserve a sense of social order. This underscores the observation marked in recent stigma research, that stigma often perpetuates existing power hierarchies and social inequalities (Link & Phelan, 2014; Tyler, 2020; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Threat perceptions, and the stigmatization it invokes, are socially constructed implying that, *what*

is stigmatizing, *how much* and *for whom* is narrated within a particular context and shaped by social structures and norms (e.g., Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). As noted by Charles Stangor and Christian Crandall (2000) a person is not really stigmatized at an individual level "... but rather by the society that creates, condones, and maintains such attitudes and behaviors. ... a stigmatizer is only, by and large, repeating his or her society's norms about appropriate behavior" (p. 70). I argue that gendered norms and power structures play key roles in shaping threat perceptions, and consequently, in the production of stigmatization, notably against former child soldiers.

## HOW GENDER STRUCTURES SHAPE THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Gendered power structures are embedded in all social interactions, shaping expectations for the behavior and identity of both individuals and groups (Connell, 2002; Risman, 2004). These structures are rooted in a hierarchical differentiation between men, women, masculinities, and femininities, giving rise to various gendered assumptions and unequal opportunities (Lorber, 1994; Risman, 2004). Organized within patriarchal power structures, gender relations often privilege heterosexual men and conventional masculinity in political, public and economic spheres. Within patriarchal ideologies, femininity is typically devalued in spheres of agency and dominance, and because femininity is associated with women, both are subordinated and perceived as incompetent in public domains of politics and power (e.g., Tickner, 2001). However, while patriarchy grants men extensive privileges, it also constrains and polices their identities and behavior, punishing those who fail to conform to established masculine gender norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2015).

Gender norms serve as important building blocks in patriarchal gender structures, delineating the expectations that apply to individuals in specific social contexts. Across cultures, men are typically socialized to associate with masculine gender norms and stereotypes encompassing attributes such as strength,

dominance, risk-taking and aggression, and assigned societal roles such as “provider” and “protector.” These perceived characteristics imply that men are more likely to be understood as potentially violent and physically threatening compared to women (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). At times, this potential for violence is not only condoned but actively encouraged, as seen in practices such as military service and the validation of male violence under the pretext of protecting “women and children” and the nation state (Enloe, 2007, p.11). The interconnectedness of “violence, power, legitimacy, and masculinity” positions men within the public sphere of dominance and leadership, where certain forms of violence are legitimized and even expected as a means of asserting acceptable masculinity (Henshaw, 2020, p. 72).

However, while societal expectations dictate that men must be capable of using violence to defend and protect, “the institutionalization of (male) power depends on the existence of something in need of protection” (Henshaw, 2020, p. 72). In that way, women’s dependency on men’s protection is constructed, forming an essential part of any patriarchal gender order. Women are commonly associated with feminine gender norms and stereotypes characterized by passiveness, weakness and obedience, while being assigned societal roles as “caregiver” and “the protected” (Moser & Clark, 2001, p. 4). In contrast to men, women are rarely expected to use violence and less likely to be seen as physically threatening, owing to their perceived physical weakness and the ‘pacifist norms’ attached to femininity. Consequently, women’s violence is considered anormal and something which requires explanation. Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry (2007) highlight how women who engage in violence is labeled as displaying: “pathological deviance from prescribed feminine norms” and that this deviation is “identified as the prime cause of their violence” (p. 37). In other words, violent women fail to conform to the feminine roles and stereotypes assigned to them by patriarchy.

From this logic, the core problem with women’s

violence lies in the fact that it grants women power equal to men, disrupting established gender norms and symbolically threatening the social order. Society, therefore, often seeks an explanation for women’s violence and preferably a means of diminishing their agency in committing it. A commonly used strategy is to sexualize women, diverting attention from their violent actions and instead portraying them as immoral and “impure.” This approach emphasizes their “sexual inferiority,” contributing to relocate them in the sphere of subordination and objectification, thereby reinstating gendered hierarchies and a sense of social order (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). This construction is termed “the whore narrative,” by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007), referring to the process of sexualization as a means to reduce women’s agency and reinforce gendered power relations.

These gendered expectations play a significant role in shaping narratives around both physical and symbolic threats, influencing who is perceived as threatening, in what ways, and why. However, while gender structures shape threat perceptions, individuals also exercise agency in shaping social structures. As Barbara Risman (2004, p. 432) observes, “social structures shape individuals, but simultaneously, individuals shape the social structure. Indeed, social structures are created not by mysterious forces but by human action.” Gender structures co-determine who is perceived as a threat and why, thereby influencing who is subjected to stigmatization. At the same time, the act of stigmatization itself, arising in response to these threat perceptions, reinforces gender structures by punishing and excluding those who deviate from gendered norms of appropriateness. In this way, threat perceptions and gendered power structures are mutually constitutive, with stigmatization functioning as a mechanism of power that upholds the gender order and the inequalities it sustains. In the following section, I empirically illustrate this dynamic by examining how gender shapes threat perceptions, leading to the stigmatization of returning child soldiers in CAR and DRC.

## METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

To analyze the impact of gendered threat perceptions on stigmatization of former child soldiers, I employ an interpretivist approach. Drawing on feminist narrative analysis (Metha & Wibben, 2018; Wibben, 2011; Woodiwiss et al., 2017), I unpack community perceptions of returning child soldiers, exploring the interconnections of narrations between boy and girl soldiers and gendered power structures. The use of feminist narrative analysis aids in understanding how gendered threat perceptions underpins the way community members' construct narratives about former child soldiers. Narratives have the dual capacity to disrupt and confirm dominant orders and perceptions. However, as Annick Wibben notes: "Narratives tend to confirm the existing social, symbolic, economic and political order. As such, narratives are always also an *imposition* and a *form of violence* in their insistence on singular meaning" (Wibben, 2011, p. 43, author's italics). In this article, I am particularly interested in examining how stigmatizing narratives confirm the dominant gender order and simultaneously co-constitute this order by insisting on singular meanings of gender roles and binary relations.

The cases of CAR and DRC have been selected for this study as these countries are estimated to have had some of the highest rates of child soldier recruitment throughout the past decades (UNGA/UNSC, 2022). As many cases of child recruitment and release of child soldiers go unreported, particularly for girls, no exact estimates exist (MONUSCO, 2015). Yet, there is evidence in both CAR and DRC that there has been a substantial recruitment of girls as well as boys. This is making these two cases particularly interesting for examining the connection between gender and stigmatization of *both* returning boy and girl soldiers.

In CAR 30-40% of children associated with armed groups are believed to be girls (World Vision, 2019, p. 12) and despite claims of the opposite in some reports (War Child, 2018, p. 10), evidence suggests that many of these girls are directly participating in hostilities (Arte Reportage, 2020; Save the Child,

2014). In DRC, the recent escalation of violence has resulted in a renewed increase in child recruitment (Ochab, 2025). The gender division among these children is yet unknown, but since the beginning of the 2000s, up to 40% of recruited children were estimated to be girls, and while most are used as cooks, porters and for sexual exploitation, many have also been involved in combat (Amnesty International, 2003; MONUSCO, 2015, p. 8). CAR and DRC are vastly different countries, yet they share similarities in terms of geographical location, conflict dynamics which are marked by prolonged civil war(s) and sectarian violence, and low gender equality rankings with both countries placed among the lowest on global gender equality indexes (UNDP, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2022). Therefore, while numerous cultural distinctions exist, it is still possible to locate broader patterns in how stigmatization materializes for boys and girls within these two countries and analyze its gendered foundation.

The article presents a theoretical argument situated in empirical analysis by drawing on a diverse array of sources. These sources include organizational and scholarly reports, video material, UN documents and expert reports on the two cases. This material has been selected using a maximalist approach, meaning that I aimed at gathering as much material as possible from which direct stories and interviews with returning child soldiers and their communities could be derived and analyzed. This approach was guided by a feminist principle that the empirical basis for knowledge production should primarily rests on the narratives from the returning child soldiers themselves and their communities. However, a key limitation of this method is that the material consists predominantly of English-language sources, some of which were translated from French. While aiming at amplifying local voices, I was not able to include a vast range of local sources to derive these voices from.

I compiled the stories from these different sources to create a 'narrative archive.' Establishing such archives by selecting and compiling existing interviews represents an innovative and effective method of

creating unique datasets that spans different cases and extended periods of time while prioritizing individual stories and perspectives (e.g., Rose, 2023, 2024). One limitation of this approach is how using existing sources eliminates the possibility of returning for follow-up questions and sharing research results with participants. In addition, it also constrains the study to certain materials, both in terms of language and the ways in which the data is generated. Much of the existing material comes from well-established international organizations with their own agendas and, at times, opaque methodologies. However, similar challenges often arise when conducting original interviews, including accessibility issues, researchers bias and ethical challenges.

Despite these limitations, the ethical advantages of using existing sources warrant greater recognition in social sciences. Interviewing vulnerable populations, particularly marginalized children and youth in fragile environments, presents significant ethical risks including potential re-traumatization and exposure within their communities which can exacerbate stigmatization or even endanger their security (see Rose, 2024). While firsthand interviews are key for building knowledge from the voices of affected individuals, relevant material often already exists and can be analyzed to advance our collective understanding without posing additional risks to participants. None of the material used in this study contains identifying information, and the same pseudonyms as in the original sources are retained. To mitigate the risk of misinterpretation, which is an inherent challenge when analyzing secondary data, I continuously contextualized my analysis by juxtaposing the narratives with additional information on gender norms, child soldiers, and conflict dynamics within CAR and DRC.

I organized the narrative archive into two separate parts based on the gender of the children. This is not to reproduce binaries but to enable me to systematically analyze how the stigma of boys and girls are framed respectively. As such, the categorization enabled a comparison of how stigmatization materializes

for returning boy and girl soldiers across the two cases and facilitated an in-depth analysis of how the narratives underpinning this stigma align with the two threat perceptions described above. To identify the gendered meta-narratives motivating these perceptions, I investigated the narrations surrounding boy and girl soldiers and how these relate to gendered understandings of appropriate identity and behavior within the two countries.

## **GENDERED STIGMATIZATION IN CAR AND DRC**

Through the lens of threat theory, this section explores the gendered dimension of stigmatization of returning boy and girl soldiers in CAR and DRC. The two threat types should not be understood as distinct categories, but rather as overlapping and co-constitutive components, both generated by the motivation to (re)establish a sense of security, be it physical or ontological. To encapsulate this intersection and elucidate the gendered underpinnings of this stigma, the analysis is organized according to the gender of the returning child soldiers, not the two threat perceptions. Both case studies will be simultaneously analyzed and compared under each section.

### **“THE ASSASSIN HAS RETURNED:” STIGMATIZATION OF FORMER BOY SOLDIERS**

Many former boy soldiers, in both CAR and DRC, face significant stigmatization upon returning to their communities. This stigma seems particularly pronounced because the returning boys are often understood as physical threats towards the already scarce material resources and precarious security environment within their communities. Notably, these threat perceptions are depicted in two intersecting narratives: “the thief narrative” and “the killer narrative.” Together, these narratives contribute to form an understanding of returning boy soldiers as ‘dangerous bandits,’ who pose a risk to the community’s physical security, thereby justifying their

exclusion. Several studies show that girl soldiers may also be involved in theft and violence (a point I shall return to) and that boys are also frequently subjected to sexual violence (e.g., Drumbl, 2012). Yet former boy soldiers seem significantly more likely to be perceived as criminals and potential murderers, than girls. This demonstrates how the stigmatizing narratives attached to formerly recruited boys and girls do not necessarily reflect reality on the ground which is much more complex. Rather, these narratives align with gendered stereotypes that associate masculinity with agency and aggression, highlighting how societal expectations and gendered norms shape threat perceptions and, in turn, contribute to form the stigmatization experienced by the individual child in their everyday life.

Armed groups often sustain themselves through looting, stealing from villages, and extorting money at roadblocks. Since child soldiers are obliged to partake in these crimes, it is often very challenging for returning boys to disassociate from the reputation of criminals (War Child, 2018, p. 14; War Child, 2019, p. 10). For instance, a 16-year-old boy from the DRC explained: “When there is a case of theft in the community, everyone points the finger at a returned *boy*, which leads them to re-join to take revenge.” (War Child, 2018, p. 63, author’s italics). Similarly, a focus group discussion on child soldiers’ reintegration in the DRC uncovered a shared perception among community members from various sites that “... many boys join armed groups with *the explicit intention of stealing* from communities – their own or neighboring communities.” (War Child, 2018, p. 47, author’s italics). The “thief narrative” helps to explain why many boys’ face harassment and arbitrary arrest by police and security forces after leaving armed groups. Already labeled as criminals, this bias legitimizes their arbitrary detention and mistreatment by authorities. As a 16-year-old boy in DRC explained, “Sometimes, they are arrested by the police on suspicion simply because they are former rebels” (War Child 2018, p. 63).

Additionally, security forces sometimes exploit these

boys, demanding bribes or favors in return for their release, thereby trapping them in a cycle of violence and corruption. In CAR, for example, reports shows that boys who escaped from armed groups operating along the border have been detained in neighboring countries such as Chad without any formal charges (Mukosa, 2014). This form of stigmatizing practices seems to be a distinct challenge faced by former boy soldiers, as very few girls in the material used for the study reported experiences of arbitrary arrest or encounters with security forces.

The perception of former boy soldiers as criminals is closely linked to the prevailing belief that these boys represent uncontrollable behavior and the potential for exceptional violence which makes them a perceived danger for society. Both cases feature instances where boys express how they are stigmatized by their community members because they are feared. For instance, an 18-year-old boy from CAR noted how reintegration and community acceptance was especially challenging because community members understand him as a dangerous: “Going back home was much more difficult than I imagined. People were *afraid of me*. I was lonely and frustrated at the fact that they judged me for having been part of the militia” (Disaster Management, 2017, p. 5, author’s italics). This fear, thereby, contributes to the stigmatization, resulting in exclusion and sometimes even physical violence against the boys, who in turn may decide to re-recruit with armed groups:

“Whenever a theft or murder is committed in the neighborhood, the first to be suspected are the former child soldiers. Those who deserted are hunted, arrested, and tortured. To escape their lot, several of them have decided to reintegrate with the army.” – Group discussion with parents of former child soldiers, Kisangani, DRC (ILO 2003, p. 54).

The tendency to associate former boy soldiers with potential murderers is particularly visible in the nicknames assigned to some of the boys within their communities.

“I was looked upon badly by the population. When I killed people in K, I was nicknamed ‘*the Assassin*’ and the name became known. People started to say that the Assassin has left the army and so now we are going to make him pay. It would be suicide for me to dare to go back there. They would *kill me*.” – “Albert,” aged 19, DRC (Amnesty International, 2003, p. 11, author’s italics).

These narratives demonstrate how stigmatization, stemming from physical threat perceptions, can materialize as physical violence or threats of physical violence against the boys, because it instills an understanding that these boys are dangerous and therefore must be excluded from society. However, there is little systematic evidence supporting the idea that former child soldiers are particularly violent or morally incapable (e.g., Boyden, 2003). Instead, these narrations depict how masculine stereotypes linked to aggression and violence impact the perception of returning boy soldiers as physical threats, because they are *expected* to behave as thieves and killers.

However, a closer examination of the stigmatizing narratives surrounding boys reveals that boys are not solely perceived as physical threats within their communities but also as symbolic threats because the imposed identities as “thieves” and “killers” conflict with two of the most valorized masculine roles: the “provider” and the “protector.” While men’s capacity for violence is essential for asserting hegemonic masculinity and maintaining their dominant social position within a patriarchal logic, this violence must be legitimized, organized, and contribute to upholding gendered hierarchies that sustain the social order. Thieves and killers disrupt this order both by undermining the physical security of society and by contradicting some of the most important masculine norms and roles which condone these gendered hierarchies (Lusey, 2016; Slegh et al., 2014).

In both CAR and DRC, as in many societies, men’s dominant position is rooted in the perceived duty and ability to serve as breadwinners and protectors of their families and communities. As a young man

in CAR explained, “... real men are seen by their capacity to buy food and drink to feed their family members” (Lusey, 2016, p. 20). Similarly, a focus group discussion on gender and masculinities in CAR revealed that most participants associated masculinity and the concept of “real men” with being a protector, “especially of their family members, peers and girlfriends and of themselves in the current political instability in Bangui” (Lusey, 2016, p. 21). In the DRC, the ideal man likewise “takes responsibility for his family,” which entails earning an income, making household decisions, and protecting his kin and community (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 33). Against this backdrop, former boy soldiers who are labeled as killers and thieves pose not only a physical threat to society but also a symbolic threat. Their perceived identity and behavior clashes with the community’s norms, values, and belief systems, ultimately undermining the society’s sense of ontological security.

While the “thief” and “killer” narratives clearly dominate the material analyzed in this study, notable discrepancies warrant further discussion. For instance, research from CAR and the DRC suggests the existence of a “hero narrative,” in which some former boy soldiers are not stigmatized but instead celebrated upon their return. These boys are perceived as having contributed to the defense of their communities – in CAR, for example by joining the anti-balaka, a “self-defense group” emerging from the majority Christian community (Plan International, 2017, p. 13), and in the DRC, by enlisting in community-based Mayi Mayi militias, originally formed in defense against Rwandan invasion (CSCS, 2010, p. 11), a conflict that has recently re-escalated.

The hero narrative can, thus, be explained, in part, by the specific conflict dynamics of a given time and context and, in part, by dominant masculine norms, as some recruited boys are perceived as simply fulfilling their expected male duty to protect the community and, in that way, asserting a “protector identity.” As a result, they may evade stigma, as they are not viewed as threats but rather as contributors to both physical security and the established gender order of

the community. This underscores the importance of assessing the interplay of these multiple factors when seeking to understand why some former boy soldiers face stigmatization while others do not.

### **“EVERYONE KNOWS IT’S A WHORE WHO RETURNS:” STIGMATIZATION OF FORMER GIRL SOLDIERS**

In both CAR and the DRC, girls are frequently recruited by armed groups. Some are forcibly captured and enlisted, while others join “voluntarily” for reasons similar to those of boys, such as seeking revenge, protection, financial resources, or food (e.g., Tonheim, 2017). Upon returning to their families and communities, many of these girls face severe and persistent stigmatization. This is often linked to narratives of perceived “sexual impurity” and associations with violence. Such perceptions generate stigma, particularly because they contradict gendered stereotypes of appropriate feminine identity and behavior which tend to emphasize “purity” and pacifism. Unpacking the narratives from community members, local NGO staff, and former girl soldiers reveals that their stigmatization is largely driven by the ways in which their (perceived) identity and (expected) behavior challenge the moral order of society and disrupt established gender hierarchies. As a result, former girl soldiers are primarily perceived as *symbolic threats* to the community’s ontological security rather than as direct threats to its physical security despite often having participated in violence.

Girl soldiers are often subjected to sexual violence and forced marriage in armed groups. In DRC, for example, numerous testimonies by formerly recruited girls show how a majority experience sexual violence, regardless of whether they were forcibly recruited or joined “voluntarily” (Child Soldier International, 2017). “Natalia’s” story reflects that of numerous girls in DRC who chose to enlist with an armed group due to lack of opportunities and protection. After witnessing the murder of many of her relatives and the rape of her sisters and her mother, she joined an armed group to seek protection and learn

to defend herself, but life in the armed group was not what she expected:

“It was horrible because I was only 12 years old, but I was frequently beaten and raped during the night by the other soldiers. One day, a commander wanted me to become his wife, so I tried to escape. They caught me, whipped me and raped me every night for many days” – “Natalia” aged 16, South-Kivu, DRC (Amnesty International, 2003, p. 12).

Notably, several reports from CAR include testimonies from recruited girls in both the majority-Muslim Séléka faction (now dismantled) and the majority-Christian anti-balaka militias (active 2013–present) that do not mention experiences of sexual violence, neither against themselves nor others. This suggests that sexual violence may not have been a widespread issue in all elements of these groups. Instead, many emphasized how they performed military tasks and engage in combat (Arte Reportage, 2020; Save the Child, 2014). However, the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), which continues to operate and expand into CAR, has been reported to systematically use sexual violence against recruited girls (UNSC, 2021), and many girls from different groups have also described experiences similar to those in DRC. For example, a 21-year-old woman who spent five years with the Séléka from age 16 told:

“The leader gave me to his son in marriage ... At first, he abused me because I did not want to, and [they] told me that if I was going to be defiant my husband would kill me, and I was afraid. So, I was submissive, and he took me with him everywhere.” (World Vision, 2019, p. 13).

While these abuses are clearly non-consensual and often completely contrasting the girl’s expectations of what life in an armed group would entail, community members often understand these sexual relations as consensual or at least self-inflicted. This perception is depicted in numerous narratives showing a common tendency to stigmatize returning girl soldiers because they are considered prostitutes who *chose* this path themselves. This exacerbates the depiction of them

as moral threats, with concerns that their “behavior” could negatively influence other girls in the community. This tendency is particularly visible in DRC, for example in the narrative by a 17-years old former girl soldier: “I was called a ‘prostitute;’ people would not allow their daughters to associate with me.” Similarly, another 14-years old girl explained: “Not two days goes by without neighbors making us feel we have known men... We are not allowed to associate with their daughters.” (Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 28). Some community members appear to believe that girls are explicitly joining armed groups to profit from selling sex and that this is inspiring other girls to join as well: “Girls go as prostitutes and come back to the community with lots of money, so other girls want to do the same.” – Girl aged 17, DRC (War Child, 2018, p. 51).

These narratives reflect an understanding that former girl soldiers are promiscuous and morally corrupted, and therefore symbolic threats towards the values and morality of the community. Following this logic, stigmatization is performed to reduce this threat and reestablish the gendered social order by punishing the girls for their “moral decline.” Testimonies show how stigmatization is often so severe that many girls chose to return to the armed group: “It is better to die there than come home and be rejected.” – Girl aged 16, DRC (Child Soldiers International, 2016). The UN has documented how elements of the Allied Democratic Forces in DRC use stigma strategically to deter girls from escaping. “Baluku ... ordered that the girls and women be raped *so that they would not return to Beni*. They were then raped once outside, in front of other people in the camp who laughed at them” (UNSC, 2019, p. 23, author’s italics).

Although recruited girls are often abused for sexual exploitation and domestic tasks, several research reports demonstrate how girl soldiers in both CAR and DRC are frequently trained to use weapons, manage roadblocks, and are involved in combat, looting and espionage (see e.g., Arte Reportage, 2020; Child Soldier International, 2017). In CAR, recruited girls mention how they were given military ranks

involving decision-making power. “It wasn’t difficult to join [the armed group]. They took my name, gave me a uniform ... I was a corporal. If there was a problem at the checkpoint, they would ask me to sort it out.” – “Cristal” aged 17, CAR (Save the Child, 2014, p. 15). In addition, the UN mission MONUSCO has documented that 89% of girls recruited by an armed group in DRC, were directly used in hostilities by 2020 (Save the Child, 2020, p. 24).

“We were forced to kill using a big stick and were told exactly where to hit. When I was ordered to kill, I trembled. They gave me a little time, but if I did not manage to kill soon, they told me I’d be killed.” – Girl aged 15, DRC (Child Soldier International, 2017, p. 24).

Yet, despite girls’ involvement in fighting, the narrative of “prostitutes” is clearly the dominant depiction of former girl soldiers and a core reason for the stigmatization they face. This highlights a common tendency to narrate girls’ roles in armed groups as insignificant, both among community members and (former) boy soldiers. Several community members told the interviewers that no girls are recruited because they are not suited for fighting and “can’t carry a weapon” (War Child, 2018, p. 41). In fact, several boy soldiers in DRC rejected entirely that there are any girls present in armed groups, and if they are, they are only there as wives, girlfriends, and prostitutes, *not* as soldiers, according to the boys. A 13-year-old boy, for example stated: “The girls don’t join. Maybe those who are *wives* of soldiers and who live in the community, they can go whenever they want.” Similarly, a boy aged 16 told that: “The girls are not really in the armed groups here at home. The girls do not go as soldiers, but *they go to prostitute themselves* with the soldiers in the armed groups to find money.” (War Child, 2018, p. 42, p. 49, author’s italics). Comparable narratives can be found in CAR, where some boys do not seem to understand girls’ association with armed groups as a form of recruitment. “Most of the girls in the armed groups are simply there as *girlfriends* or *wives* of other boys and men who joined.” – Focus group discussion with boys

aged 15–17, CAR (World Vision, 2019, p. 12, author's italics).

These perceptions are both pointing at the complex recruitment patterns for girls, but also how the understanding of girl soldiers is deeply shaped by stereotypes about feminine roles. Moreover, these narrations also indicate an attempt to diminish girls' agency in committing violence. The capacity to use violence may be seen as an appropriation of masculinity, rendering girls' roles equal to boys, and, therefore, threatens gendered hierarchies. Men's dominant social position is closely linked to their monopoly on violence and the idea that women are too weak and sensitive to engage in combat and protect themselves or others. Girl soldiers' identity as agents of violence contests this proposition and, therefore, challenge the gender order which underpins the community's sense of ontological security. To reduce this (symbolic) threat, recruited girls are mainly narrated as "prostitutes," "wives" and "girlfriends." Sexualization contributes to restoring gendered hierarchies (e.g., Sjoberg & Gentry 2007) where women's roles always exist in relation to that of men, and not in the same capacity.

As such, the girls' involvement in violence is problematic, not so much because it is perceived as a security risk when they return to their communities, but rather because it threatens the gender order. For example, a local NGO worker in CAR told that: "The girls had worn military uniforms when they belonged to armed groups ... and that helped them feel *superior*, but now at home *they no longer have the opportunity to be big*" (Olsson, 2018, author's italics). It suggests that the deconstruction of traditional gender roles within armed groups, to some extent, empowers the girls. This empowerment challenges the gender order and, consequently, generates stigmatization of the girls as a punishment for their social deviation. In DRC, statements show that some local NGO workers reproduce sexualized narratives of former girl soldiers and link emancipation with promiscuity: "The majority of ex-associated girls have become *emancipated and are frequenting boys*" – NGO worker, DRC

(Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 30). This is depicting a tendency to understand female empowerment as a form of moral decline.

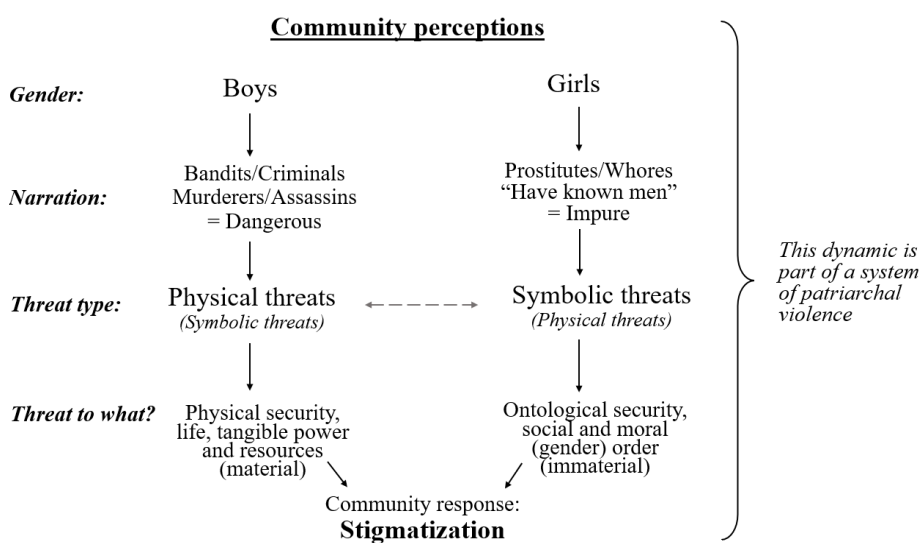
Several girls in DRC also explained that they would attempt to reduce the stigmatization by complying with feminine stereotypes such as being "*humble and obedient*," "*accepting unjust accusations*," and "*avoiding boys*" (Child Soldiers International, 2016, p. 32, author's italics). Although these strategies did not appear to remove the stigma, it did limit the level of discrimination and insults for some. None of the former boy soldiers highlighted that submissive behavior could be de-stigmatizing for them; rather they emphasized how earning an income, providing for their family or joining the security forces could help them regain social value. It signifies how the reestablishment of socially accepted gender relations, roles, and behaviors, may be a direct or subconscious objective of the stigmatization, and that it to some extent succeed.

Interviews conducted in CAR and the DRC on local understandings of gender relations and perceptions of masculinity suggest that patriarchal power structures are widely viewed as essential for maintaining social order and stability. As one man in the DRC explained: "Women in Congo can never have an equal position to men. If so, they may start to dominate us, and that would be *the end of everything*" (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 38, author's italics). Similarly, another man from a military camp in the DRC stated: "Give our power to women? If we ever accept gender equality, it will be *the end of the world*" (Slegh et al., 2014, p. 38, author's italics). Comparable views are expressed by men in CAR, emphasizing the perceived necessity of maintaining patriarchal gender roles for the social order. As one interviewee asserted: "God created men as leaders, and they should stay that way" (Lusey, 2016, p. 26). Another reinforced this belief, stating: "It's an obligation! It's the man who leads, commands, and decides everything" (Lusey, 2016, p. 26, author's italics).

While perceptions of acceptable gender relations

clearly vary in both CAR and DRC, these statements demonstrate how maintenance of gendered hierarchies is not a trivial matter, but an existential question forming the foundation of many people's ontological security. This understanding contributes to explaining why threats against the gender order – although symbolic – are responded to with such severe stigmatization as that experienced by returning girl soldiers. The gendered narratives shaping the stigmatization of former boy and girl soldiers, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The role of gender in the stigmatization of former child soldiers.



## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This study explored how boy and girl soldiers are perceived differently by relatives and community members upon their return from armed groups, highlighting the significant role played by gender in the stigmatization experienced by former child soldiers. By analyzing stigmatizing narratives through the lens of threat theory, the study identified the key motivations and gendered assumptions that shape societal perceptions of returning boy and girl soldiers. It demonstrated that while boys are often perceived as physical threats to their communities or as failing in their roles as providers and protectors, girls are more frequently labeled as prostitutes and seen as symbolic threats to the moral order of society. This is despite girls' involvement in military tasks and the

diverse forms of victimization experienced by boys, including sexual violence.

As such, these binary understandings do not necessarily reflect the lived realities of boys and girls in armed groups, rather, this study elucidates how such perceptions are shaped by gendered expectations surrounding the roles and behaviors of boys and girls. The analysis thus illustrates how the stigmatization of returning child soldiers is deeply influenced by pre-existing gender norms while simultaneously reproducing these norms to uphold a sense of social order. This study not only contributes with a deeper understanding of the gendered nature of stigmatization of *both* boy and girl soldiers – a topic that has received limited attention in academic and policy discussions – but also situates the phenomenon of stigma within a broader framework of patriarchal violence.

As demonstrated in this article, patriarchal violence does not merely sustain male dominance; it also condones and perpetuates a

system of gendered inequalities with broader implications for communities as a whole. The purpose of this violence is to protect the gendered power structures in which it is embedded, and stigmatization contributes to this purpose by disciplining people whose identity and behavior are perceived to threaten established gendered hierarchies. Consequently, the gendered stigmatization of former child soldiers' functions as an instrument to sustain and reinforce the existing gender order, thereby maintaining the community's sense of ontological security.

These findings provide two key insights. First, in order to address the stigmatization, it requires challenging the gender norms that produce this stigma both at a community and family level. While support for returning child soldiers, such as income-generating

activities and education, can significantly empower returning children and help restore some of their perceived 'lost social value,' these measures alone are insufficient. Destigmatization must be understood primarily as a community-based effort, as stigma is a relational phenomenon. If initiatives focus solely on enhancing the social value of returning child soldiers without addressing the norms that motivates the stigma, its root causes remain intact. Thus, the challenge of reconstructing acceptable (gendered) identities will persist whenever a child returns from an armed group. To effectively mitigate and prevent stigmatization, the gendered threat perceptions driving these biases must be addressed within communities. This calls for further research into how culturally sensitive interventions can reshape normative perceptions of acceptable feminine and masculine roles and behaviors in different contexts. The findings of this study support existing research that points at how tackling stigma not only strengthens reintegration processes and improves the well-being of returning children but also reduces the risk of re-recruitment.

The second insight is primarily theoretical, highlighting how the temporal dimension of stigmatization against former child soldiers extends beyond the war/peace dichotomy. The patriarchal system of violence in which this stigma is embedded operates across conventional distinctions between war and peace. To maintain gendered power structures across different contexts, patriarchal violence continuously

adapts and travels between wartime and peacetime. This dynamic underscores that the stigmatization of former child soldiers is not merely a consequence of war but is sustained by deeply entrenched gendered power structures that exist independently of armed conflict. Addressing the foundation of this stigma, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that challenges these underlying hierarchies and assumptions in both wartime and peacetime.

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