

REHABILITATING Female Child Soldiers in DR Congo



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Kidnapped aged 15 by rebel militia in DR Congo, given lighter guns than the men so they could carry them and often under the influence of drugs, twin sisters Naomi and Fuhara spent three years fighting on the front line. Although the conflict in DR Congo is officially finished, continued violence in the eastern region makes it one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a young girl or woman.

The twins are now under the protective umbrella of an EU project in the region managed by War Child to help the recovery and reintegration of 800 girls affected by armed conflict.

Poverty, displacement and the breakdown of families, either killed or separated, have left children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Girls living on the streets are vulnerable to rape and sexual violence. Many are forced into prostitution to support themselves. Helping them return to school with literacy and numeracy classes and vocational training is a way of helping them find alternatives to sex work.

As well as rehabilitating former child soldiers, the War Child project sets out to protect girls at risk from being recruited or enlisted by the military – half the population of DR Congo is under 18 years old and with unemployment in the region among young people running at 95%, militia life becomes attractive.

The lives of a number of poverty-stricken girls are currently being turned round by being taught how to read and write. Given professional training so they can work as tailors, hairdressers or cooks, they should eventually be able to support themselves. The girls are also given psychosocial support, as in the case of a 12 year old accused of being a witch by her family and community and threatened with death. The project helps provide her with protection and temporary shelter, continued schooling and care from social workers and a psychologist.