

# **Coming Back from the Bush**

## ***Gender, Youth and Reintegration in Northern Sierra Leone***

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### **Summary**

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This study explores the post-war reintegration strategies of young women who had forcibly become affiliated, through forced marriage arrangements with combatants, with one of the fighting factions, during the ten years of civil war in Sierra Leone. It seeks to understand how the social identities of youth and female gender affect the course of this reintegration seen from individual life experiences. Data collection took place during a six month field work period. Instead of conceptualizing reintegration as the result of policies, this study defines it as the dynamic process that revolves around the (re-) establishment of relations between the individual and social networks, which contains - implicitly or explicitly - a negotiation over social and cultural identities. The theoretical framework connects actor orientation with the structural dimension of reintegration.

The thesis describes how reintegration is highly diversified and contextual. It is the result of individuals reintegrating themselves in a process shaped through their agency and in relation with the communities into which they reintegrate. Diversity is found in the individual life experiences of the women involved; the influence of context is reflected in the differences between reintegration in a provincial town and a rural village in the North of Sierra Leone.

In the aftermath of the war women reconsider and renegotiate and (re-) establish a variety of social relations. Their stories point out, for example, the importance of a marriage to restore their social personhood. The thesis explores the rationale behind the choice for some women to remain in their wartime marriage arrangements. Furthermore, the lack of options to return to their home communities seen by some women in the town is explained as being rooted in fear of reprisal as well as in cultural notions of their positions as daughters and adult women. Because access to assets and entitlements is embedded in social relations and exchanged by rule of reciprocity, being a member of a social network is of utmost importance for women to survive. The stories of women who reintegrate away from home reveal how this mechanism reconfirms relations with the former combatants. Data from the village shows that those women, who were granted permission to stay after the war, tend to reintegrate through existing social networks rather than to reconstruct new ones.

This thesis also pays attention to the role of the social identities of youth and gender on individual processes of reintegration. In the post-conflict discourse on male youth, their (violent) involvement in the war in Sierra Leone has been linked to their problematic position in society and it is therefore considered inherently political. Women's involvement in the war

has predominantly been perceived as relational to that of men, and therefore far less political. While the position of youth is acknowledged as a condition that has predisposed this particular group in the society for conscription, women's involvement is still seen as a result of the war itself. Youth involvement in violence during the war opens room for young men to renegotiate their position in society in the course of reintegration, but young women appear to be more likely to reintegrate themselves through reproducing existing gender related social patterns.