

Third Annual International Women's Day Celebration Breakfast
"Global Dispatches: Eliminating Violence and Discrimination Against the Girl Child"
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Global Dispatch: Girl Child Soldiers

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Whether porters, combatants or sex slaves, young girls are on the frontlines of today's conflicts. Their paths to the battle field vary – some are abducted and tortured into submission, others are lured by the promises of education, equality, power or revenge.

“One day the rebels attacked the village where I lived. I hid and watched as they killed my relatives and raped my mother and sisters. I thought if I joined their army, I would be safe. In the army, I was trained to use a gun and I performed guard duty. I was often beaten and raped 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 everyday for many days. When I was just 14, I had a baby.”

Today, in the 30 conflicts raging around the world, there are over 250,000 child soldiers (10 – 30% are girls). Whether through force or “choice,” these girl child soldiers face daily insecurity and heightened vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation.

Participation bears serious implications for girls' physical and emotional well-being. As the instruments of brutality, sometimes committing the very worst atrocities, reintegration of child soldiers is often a complex process of community healing and atonement.

Local leaders and the international human rights community, however, have worked diligently to include girls in post-conflict reconciliation efforts and deliver the key services the girls desperately need and deserve.

2004 IPJ Woman PeaceMaker Christiana Thorpe is the founder of Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in Sierra Leone. In this capacity, she has worked some of the thousands of rape survivors and former girl child soldiers in the aftermath of Sierra Leone's 11-year war. While at the IPJ, Christiana shared the story of four young women, each abducted ten to fifteen years ago, each a survivor of rape.

One girl is now pursuing college, and a second runs her own business and employs the other two young women. All four girls now stand proud, holding their babies on their hips or in their arms. Each of their children is enrolled in elementary school. These young women have also spoken out: two testified before the truth and reconciliation commission, and a third is bringing her case in the domestic courts of Sierra Leone.

These four young women demonstrate the impact of individual, social, professional, political and judicial reconciliation. FAWE-Sierra Leone employs a comprehensive and holistic approach to reintegration and reconciliation – including psychosocial counseling, trauma treatment, medial attention, skills and vocations training, and community mediation to prepare the villages for when the girls are reintegrate back in to the community.

2004 IPJ Woman PeaceMaker Christiana Thorpe is just one woman struggling to ensure gender-sensitive programs are created for these children – and these children's children.

You can read the full narrative of Christiana's work on our Web site: peace.sandiego.edu.

While in New York, the San Diego delegation had the opportunity to meet many young girls – from Togo, Haiti, Ghana and Nepal – some of whom were former child soldiers. We also were able to speak with the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict – Radhika Coomaraswamy. The girls shared other stories of hope and courage from their grassroots settings. They stood tall behind the podiums and sang songs of overcoming violence and conflict. To echo the young girls speaking up for their rights, the special representative and delegates at the CSW shared information about the United Nation's global efforts to END IMPUNITY for those responsible for child-related war crimes.

From restoring an individual sense of dignity to community reintegration, from gender justice at the grassroots level to the persecution of gender-based violence in international tribunals – the child soldiers, the survivors, themselves are fighting for justice. We must stand beside them, as mothers, sisters, daughters and friends, (include men's relations?) on this path to healing and creating a safer world for the girl child.

For more information about the UN's strategic plan to address the needs of child soldiers please visit the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict listed in your program.

To join the global movement – visit Amnesty International's Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers Campaign.