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CHAPTER TWELVE

“To Be Taken as a Wife Is a Form of Death”

The Social, Military, and Humanitarian Dynamics of Forced Marriage
and Girl Soldiers in African Conflicts, c. 1990–2010

STACEY HYND

Even though the relationship was generally framed in terms of bush “wife” and “husband” or even “lover,” the actual relationships had little in common with the notions of a traditional relationship between consenting adults.

—*Republic of Liberia, Truth and Reconciliation
Commission Final Report*¹

Forced marriages have been documented within armed groups in many recent African conflicts, most notably in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, and northern Uganda. These coercive relationships, formed without the valid consent of the female and her family, encompass the forcible ascription of conjugal status and usually involve the provision by the female of domestic labor, sexual relations, and sometimes reproduction. These “marriages” are not recognized under civil or customary law. Significantly, the majority of these forced marriages occurring in modern African conflicts involve girls as so-called wives: figures for Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) indicate that 50 percent of “sexual slaves” with documented ages were fifteen or under; in northern Uganda among Joseph Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), some 27 percent of abducted girls became “bush wives,” and most were between eleven and

seventeen years old.² Forced marriage is an issue of children's rights as well as women's rights within modern warfare, and it is closely linked to the mobilization of children as combatants in African conflicts.³

This situation is a product not only of military strategies and patterns of violence but also of gendered and generational tensions within African societies. Over 120,000 children are estimated to have fought in recent African conflicts, and studies suggest that girls constitute some 30 to 40 percent of these child combatants.⁴ Surveys indicate that 2,000 to 3,000 girls were recruited into armed groups in Sierra Leone, and the LRA has abducted some 25,000 child recruits, with girls constituting around a third of that number.⁵ The figure of the child soldier has often been taken as evidence of the depoliticization and criminalization of modern warfare in Africa, of the "new barbarism" and extreme violence that apparently marks contemporary civil conflict.⁶ It is also linked to the "civilianization" of contemporary warfare, whereby ordinary civilians, male and female, have been the targets of military violence and are increasingly drawn into fighting themselves.⁷ Forced marriage, from this perspective, is part of the wider militarization of girls'—and women's—lives and labors during contemporary conflict.⁸ However, "new war" theories do not accurately depict the logics of violence behind children's involvement in warfare or the forced marriage of girls. The social, legal, and humanitarian structures that shape girls' experiences of conflict and how these are reported and tackled on a world stage also need to be taken into account.⁹

The mobilization and exploitation of children in African conflict emerge out of the crisis of the postcolonial state and the youth revolutions facing African societies.¹⁰ Marriage has proven to be a key site of social tension through which disenfranchised young men and women seek to attain adult status, on one hand, and adults look to control youth status and labor, on the other, with such struggles played out in war zones.¹¹ Socially marginalized and vulnerable children are often the first to be drawn into conflict, and girls are no exception to this pattern; some enter armed groups after fleeing potential early marriage or domestic violence at home, and others are forcibly recruited as potential wives.¹² Although histories of girls' experiences of conflict were previously marked by "silences and empty spaces," girls are now well represented in child soldier narratives.¹³ Academic studies have consequently shown that girls participate in almost every facet of military life, with many individuals fulfilling multiple positions, sometimes simultaneously: fighters, sex slaves, mothers, porters,

cooks.¹⁴ Sixty percent of girls involved with fighting forces in Sierra Leone, for instance, acted as wives, a role that involved sexual, military, and domestic labor.¹⁵ Girls' experiences in war, however, have predominantly entailed "victimisation, perpetration and insecurity," with their bodies used as figurative and literal sites of combat.¹⁶ Sexual abuse and exploitation seem to be pervasive and nearly systematic across Africa's conflicts—for both civilian and combatant girls.¹⁷ Rape and sexual violence should not, though, be read as a material fact of women's lives but as a "grammar of violence" that is shaped by particular contexts of conflict and society.¹⁸ Consequently, the questions this chapter explores regard what function the practice of forced marriage serves for various armed groups and individuals and how this type of marriage relates to other forms of sexual violence and gender inequality.

Debates on forced marriage demonstrate the intersection of local and global gender norms and constructions of childhood. Childhood is not a universal category but rather a historical and cultural construct.¹⁹ The twentieth century saw the imposition of middle-class Western concepts of childhood—which read children as innocent, nonsexual beings who should be protected from labor and a too rapid transition to adulthood—onto colonial and global societies, creating new globalized notions of the "child," notions that bear little resemblance to the lived realities of many African youths.²⁰ Girls, in particular, are taken symbolically as the quintessential victims.²¹ In transnational political discourses, these constructions of the child have served as a global disciplinary tool and moralizing practice, aiming to impose Western liberal norms on the developing world.²² The emergence of the girl soldier is therefore a product not only of shifting patterns of warfare and African societies but also of liberal humanitarianism and its entanglement with international political and legal discourses of rights. Historians must question how far discourses and descriptions of forced marriage have changed over the past decades and how far actual practices have shifted. Campaigns by organizations such as Child Soldiers International, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Human Rights Watch have pulled child combatants into the international spotlight.²³ Although these campaigns have crafted boys' participation in physical violence into a narrative discourse that lends weight to their accounts, girls' experiences of war are primarily recounted through narratives of sexual abuse and exploitation, foregrounding their victim status.²⁴ Following this focus on sexual violation, many commentators have argued that

girls' abduction, exploitation, and rape comprise a form of sexual slavery.²⁵ The concept of forced marriage, which combines sexual abuse with domestic labor and inverts the socially desirable status of marriage and motherhood, presents a more complicated picture of girls' experiences, highlighting the clash between local and global attitudes to girls' sexuality and sexual violence.

Testimonies drawn from TRCs, humanitarian reports, memoirs, and academic investigations form the main body of evidence here. Wider empirical research is needed on historical and contemporary patterns of girls' experiences in conflict to present an accurate comparative pattern of forced conjugality. Nonetheless, this chapter offers a preliminary discussion of forced marriage and its relationship with child soldiering in humanitarian discourses, as well as of the rationales for its practice in contemporary African conflicts. Some studies have suggested that the incidence of forced marriages in conflict seems to be highest in Africa—if this is indeed the case, then why is this so?²⁶ Is this related to patterns of warfare, structural gender violence, customary patterns of marriage, and/or histories of forced labor and slavery? Is forced marriage in conflict part of a wider militarization of female labor and sexuality driven by the civilianization of conflict in Africa? This chapter suggests that forced marriage emerges from historical patterns of structural gender violence that have shaped generations of girls' lives, as well as immediate military instrumentalities. It is molded by patriarchal desires to control girls' (and women's) bodies to impose a certain version of social order; further, it is a tactic geared toward military survival and victory.

LEGAL AND HUMANITARIAN DISCOURSES OF FORCED MARRIAGE IN CONFLICT

The prosecution of gendered and sexual offenses as war crimes or crimes against humanity is a recent development in international humanitarian law, with the 1998 *Akayesu* case at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda establishing the first conviction for rape as a war crime.²⁷ Driven by a growing focus on women's victimhood in civil war, charges of sexual slavery and forced marriage have increasingly appeared in lists of war crimes.²⁸ In 2001, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia became the first court to recognize forced marriage as a prosecutable crime in armed conflict.²⁹ Within Africa, the Special Court for Sierra

Leone recognized forced marriage as a crime against humanity in the 2004 Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) case, as described in Mariane Ferme's chapter in this volume. However, the focus has been on the gendered dimensions of these crimes, and their relationship to child combatant experience is yet to be rigorously explored. Outside the legal arena, the systematic analysis of forced marriage has been slow to emerge. The 1996 report on children in armed conflict prepared by Graça Machel for the United Nations, a foundation text in the study of children in contemporary warfare, investigated sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. But its primary focus was on rape, prostitution, and sexual exploitation during war and in refugee camps and disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) camps rather than on sexual abuse within armed groups.³⁰ There was no explicit discussion of forced marriage or sexual slavery apart from a passing reference to "bush wives," which is perhaps surprising considering that field visits for the report included Angola, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda.³¹ Nonetheless, there was sufficient international concern about the abuse of girls in coerced relationships that forced marriage was explicitly detailed in the definition of *child soldier* outlined by the 1997 Cape Town Principles:

[A child soldier is] any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes *and forced marriage*.³² (my emphasis)

This shift in the late 1990s was driven by a confluence of emerging concerns about child rights, child soldiering, women's rights, and sexual violence in international political, humanitarian, and human rights discourses, alongside the aforementioned developments in international humanitarian law and the prosecution of gendered war crimes. Graça Machel's 2000 review on children in armed conflict notably engages more explicitly with questions of forced marriage than its predecessor had, and a growing number of humanitarian and feminist studies have highlighted sexual violence and forced conjugality in Africa's wars.³³ But despite these discussions, forced marriage and sexual slavery have, until recently, been surprisingly sparsely reported in general accounts of conflict, and most frequently, they are referenced as symbolic markers of the "barbarity" of

African conflict rather than analyzed in detail. Part of the problem is the compartmentalization of humanitarian discourses and campaigns—one recent report on forced marriage and gender inequality in postconflict South Sudan barely mentions the country's long-running civil war and its impact on gender relations and incidences of sexual violence.³⁴ The issue of forced marriage also presents a complexity that existing humanitarian and legal narratives struggle to account for effectively. As this volume argues, existing legal debates have focused on whether these offenses are better prosecuted under existing crimes against humanity such as sexual slavery or under a new heading such as forced marriage, without fully analyzing the experiential differences encompassed within these terms.³⁵ Moreover, international humanitarian norms and postconflict reconstruction are both highly gendered and based around an idea of conjugal order that seeks to return girls and women to the “correct” spaces and family structures based on liberal norms. In such structures, marriage is supposed to be the solution to girls (re)integration into society, not the problem.³⁶ Forced marriage corrupts and perverts the social institution of marriage, creating a form of conjugal disorder that threatens society. Although international humanitarian discourses have brought the issue of forced marriage to a global audience, there is much that still needs to be done to contextualize and facilitate understanding of the rationales underpinning this practice, as well as the wide varieties of girls' experiences that have been categorized under this heading.

FORCED MARRIAGE AND THE LOGICS OF VIOLENCE

In order to combat forced marriage effectively, we must analyze it as a social and military, as well as legal, category. It has been suggested that the militarization of girls' labor and sexuality can be read as part of the civilianization of contemporary conflict. But women have always played a significant role in African warfare, as victims, fighters, logistical support, and commentators.³⁷ With conceptions of marriage, consent, gender roles, and women's rights shifting over time, it is difficult to historically trace the category of forced marriage. Yet as Sierra Leonean legal expert Joko Smart notes, “There was, in the olden days, marriage by capture. . . . Such a wife was, however, regarded as a slave.”³⁸ Early colonial militaries also awarded captured women as wives to their African soldiers, including forces in Sudan, Uganda, and the Congo Free State.³⁹ Forced marriage is

not simply a tactic of barbaric new wars; rather, it is a result of particular “logics and modalities of violence,” with contemporary conflict bearing striking similarities to precolonial patterns of total economic warfare in terms of its appropriation and exploitation of female labor and bodies.⁴⁰

Forced marriage is neither a straightforward form of sexual violence nor a substitute for rape: some groups, such as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) of Sierra Leone, use mass and gang rape as well as forced marriage, whereas others, such as the LRA, do not systematically use rape as a military weapon against their opponents.⁴¹ The institution of forced marriage is about power, the enforcement of masculine control, and the logics of violence within an armed group rather than simply about sex. In some conflicts, the evidence suggests there is an instrumental use of forced marriage by senior commanders and leaders of armed groups. Forced marriage appears to function as a tactic of warfare to terrorize populations, maintain discipline, and secure the necessary labor and logistical support to sustain the war effort, especially for nonregularized, mobile forces. As well as tearing apart local communities, the abduction and forcible marriage of young girls also quickly increases the numerical strength of an armed group, as girls tend to be more vulnerable and less able to escape after abduction.⁴² In Angola alone, some thirty thousand girls may have been abducted during the civil war.⁴³ The RUF notably increased its coercive recruitment of so-called wives after it was nearly wiped out in 1993.⁴⁴ According to Zoe Marks, within the RUF marriage was promoted as an antidote to the destabilizing effects of mass and gang rape on the armed group: “marriage” allowed men a socially legitimate form of sexual access, at least in the eyes of the RUF, and aimed to prevent competition between fighters for women.⁴⁵

In northern Uganda, forced marriages have been an integral aspect of Joseph Kony’s attempts to discipline and develop the LRA, described as an effective tool for building control and discipline in an “ideologically committed (essentially charismatic) armed force.”⁴⁶ Analysis of the group suggests that coerced relationships have been highly regulated and controlled by the LRA’s top leadership, with senior commanders selecting wives for themselves based on their physical and educational attributes, drawing on cultural norms that encouraged polygamy by powerful men as a marker of high status. Commanders have then dictated the “marriage” of remaining girls to lower-ranking fighters.⁴⁷ The LRA is a highly mobile force that cannot rely on popular support from within its locales.⁴⁸ Thus, discipline was

essential to the operation of mobile units, and it was maintained through the screening and socialization of recruits, harsh punishments, strict codes of behavior, and a puritanical creed. The centralized distribution of wives assisted discipline by acting as a system of privilege and remuneration within the group.⁴⁹ Wives were distributed as compensation and status markers for soldiers in the absence of material goods, and families were fabricated to create bonds among soldiers while fostering dependence on the LRA.⁵⁰ Children born of these relationships would then themselves become fighters for the group. On a more prosaic level, the recruitment of wives facilitated the provision of essential logistical support and domestic services, such as portage, locating food and water, and cooking, to keep the group functioning. The selection of sexually inexperienced adolescent girls and “virgins” also served the purpose of limiting the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, which became a concern after a number of senior commanders died of HIV/AIDS.⁵¹

In addition to immediate military instrumentalities, the political economy of forced marriage must also be considered. With historical structures of child labor, domestic slavery, and forced/coerced labor in many areas of Africa, both gender dynamics and labor patterns can predispose armed groups toward the use of sexual slavery and forced marriage.⁵² As Meredith Turshen argues, the “control of women’s productive labor is one of the gains from rape and abduction in civil conflicts,” not just for the armed group but also for the individual “husbands” involved.⁵³ Young men who are unable to pay bridewealth and find legal marriage partners may also be attracted to insurgency as a way of gaining access to women. Recent research from Sierra Leone has highlighted that “woman damage” (adultery) became a divisive issue in agrarian communities in the years preceding the conflict. Poorer young men who were unable to enter into formal marriage contracts, due to an inability to pay bridewealth or because polygyny limited the availability of girls, would often enter into “girl friend” relationships with the young wives of elder men. The elder in such an arrangement would then demand labor from the paramour; if this was not paid, he would take the paramour to court and sue for “woman damage.” In this context, the RUF’s practice of forced marriage offered young men a new source of marriage partners, allowing them “to break free from a restrictive customary institution.”⁵⁴

During the Rwandan genocide in 1994, thousands of Tutsi girls endured forced marriages to Interahamwe members. A 1996 Human Rights

Watch report described these girls not as wives but as “captives, looted possessions of the militiamen, held in slavery.”⁵⁵ In some instances, Rwandan militias used these forced relationships to disguise rape as sanctioned intercourse between husband and wife; the purported marriage was then used to legitimate the seizure of land, which was a significant point of tension during Rwanda’s civil war due to the high population density.⁵⁶ A wife’s labor, however, varied according to her status and where she was held. Though some females were forced to farm and cook, others were “women of the ceiling” and were hidden to avoid being targeted by other Hutu *génocidaires* (persons who committed genocide) and to provide sexual services for their captors. One girl, “Nadia,” who was eleven years old at the time of the Rwandan genocide, recounted how her family was hacked to pieces in front of her before she was taken as a wife by one of the militiamen. “He only came to rape me, he never brought any food. He came about five times. He would say, ‘lie down or I’ll kill you.’ So I was afraid. I would just go to the bed.”⁵⁷ For many wives in Rwanda, the relatively short duration and the static nature of these marriages limited the domestic services entailed and meant that sexual violence dominated their experiences. In other testimonies from former bush wives, the interconnection of their sexual and domestic labors is clear. Grace Akallo, one of the 139 Aboke schoolgirls infamously abducted by the LRA in October 1996, recalls in her memoirs how Kony gave her to one of his commanders, “a man older than my father. His eyes were so hard that my sweat made a pool. He seized me and forced me to bed. I felt like a thorn was in my skin as my innocence was destroyed.”⁵⁸ But Grace’s account of her captivity appears to suggest that what affected her at least as severely at the time was the physical hardship she experienced in marching, going on raids, and searching for food, followed by the fear of severe punishment if she did not perform her labors adequately: “I didn’t know what he would tell me now that I had come back with nothing from the raid. He might be the one to kill me that day.”⁵⁹

Still, the question remains: why do armed groups choose to pursue the particular strategy of forced marriage? Their instrumental military, logistical, and sexual requirements can be met through forced labor and sexual slavery, so why do they introduce the element of conjugality? Forced marriage is a form of symbolic warfare in seeking to control female bodies and their reproductive labors, but it can also be an aspect of armed groups’ political desire to “reorder” society. During the Rwandan genocide, the

forcible marriage of Tutsi women to Hutu men was part of efforts to establish Hutu dominance of the nation at both micro- and macrolevels; similarly, the LRA's use of forced marriage for reproduction has been identified as part of a larger plan to "populate a new Acholi nation."⁶⁰ According to Krijn Peters, many wives were held in the RUF's bush camps—spaces where a youth underclass tried to forge a new meritocratic Sierra Leone.⁶¹ These attempted reorderings of society were based on strictly patriarchal power structures. Marks argues that RUF laws governing gender relations were "strident perversions of pre-existing social norms," reconfigured to socially alienate women and limit their agency within marriage, building dependence on husbands and the armed group.⁶²

In Somalia, al-Shabaab instituted forced and early marriage as part of the group's efforts to impose its version of shari'a. A recent Human Rights Watch report argues that these marriages were not simply the actions of individual fighters but a more organized practice by which al-Shabaab preached marriage of fighters to schoolgirls and abducted and detained girls under the group's auspices for this purpose.⁶³ As a seventeen-year-old boy from Mogadishu pointed out: "Usually they [al-Shabaab] were in town and when they would see girls from school they would find one, confront her, say they want to marry her. Sometimes they would go to the parents but if the parents refuse they just take her. I saw it all the time."⁶⁴ The line between forced marriages and "arranged marriages" was sometimes blurred, but it is clear that girls or families who refused marriages faced considerable reprisals: "Girls were taken at gunpoint and forced to become wives of combatants. One parent who protested was killed. One girl said she could not go and al-Shabaab shot her in the forehead in front of my class."⁶⁵

Recent humanitarian efforts to combat rape and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have highlighted that early and forced marriages among civilian populations are common in some areas.⁶⁶ Numerous accounts of sexual enslavement have been reported in Goma, Bukavu, and Uvira in the DRC, with girls and young women abducted by combatants and taken to bases in the forest where they were forced to provide sexual services and domestic labor, sometimes more than a year. But these situations were apparently not initially termed "forced marriages" in humanitarian reports.⁶⁷ It was noted that some girls joined armed groups to escape arranged marriages at home.⁶⁸ Mai-Mai forces tended to hold girls in common; other groups more frequently

allocated abducted women to individuals, although the designation of these captive women as wives in a “bush marriage” did not routinely occur.⁶⁹ In these regions, rape was also widely used as a weapon of terror to maintain control over the civilian population, so perhaps the forced relationships there lacked more overtly conjugal elements and were closer to sexual slavery because they were more focused on meeting the immediate sexual, domestic, and labor requirements of armed groups, many of which appear to have had no clear political aim of ruling local populations or establishing new social orders. In contrast, former girl soldiers from the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) in Ethiopia have reported that rape or sexual abuse was rare and severely punished, stressing that within their units, “there was no forced sexual relationship with males. The male fighters did not force us to do anything without our interest. The male had no feeling of superiority over the female”—a situation they contrasted starkly with civilian life. Marriage and children were seen as distractions from the goal of overthrowing the Derg and were therefore rejected by the TPLF’s hierarchy.⁷⁰ In this situation, a combination of Marxist-Leninist political ideology, clear military goals, and close cooperation with local communities, with the ultimate aim of controlling the nation, appear to have limited the use of sexual violence and coerced relationships within the TPLF.

Girls’ experiences of conflict are shaped by wider long-term patterns of structural gender violence as well as patterns of warfare. West and Central Africa, where wartime forced marriage seems to have been most common, also have some of the world’s highest rates of early marriage, with 74 percent of girls being married before the age of nineteen in the DRC and just under half of the girls in Sierra Leone and Uganda being married by age eighteen.⁷¹ In many societies, unmarried women and unattached girls have long been regarded as a destabilizing force and a “social evil.”⁷² This context helped forced marriage to become a socially normalized institution. Across Africa, there are also historically high levels of domestic violence and rape.⁷³ In Mozambique, “rape and the use of slave-wives is rather seen by Renamo soldiers as simply the rights of access to women, and a key perk of the job, not a direct tactic of war.”⁷⁴ A former girl soldier from the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) in South Sudan felt that her three “marriages” were conducted to justify and legitimate the rapes she suffered within local social and moral codes.⁷⁵ There are examples of girls joining armed groups to escape an arranged marriage or domestic sexual abuse,

only to find themselves drawn into similar structures of violence within the group. “Josephine” from Masisi, DRC, stated that she chose to join the National Congress for the Defense of the People (Congrès national pour la défense du peuple, CNDP) to escape an arranged marriage. “I joined the CNDP to avoid revenge from [the man who was to be] my husband, [it] would give me protection,” she recalled, but she left the group after being raped by several commanders and giving birth to a child.⁷⁶

One question that requires further research involves the relationship between early and arranged marriage in peacetime, and forced marriage in conflict. The chapters in this volume demonstrate that “customary” practices of marriage contained varying levels of coercion and were historically highly contested, so there is no simple link between early marriage, customary marriage, and forced marriage in conflict. Vivi Stavrou notes that in Angola, girls were drafted into the Revolutionary Youth of Angola (Juventude Revolucionário de Angola, JURA), the youth wing of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, UNITA), at adolescence, when it was permissible for them to be involved in regulated sexual activity and enter into marriage.⁷⁷ The Sierra Leone TRC suggested that forced marriages were customary marriages in extreme situations, but the Special Court for Sierra Leone refuted these claims, highlighting the dangers of “making straightforward links between complex social practices of arranging marriages between kin groups, international conceptualizations of forced marriages and the coercion of women into being ‘bush wives.’”⁷⁸ The Special Court drew a clear distinction between the customary practice of early marriage and bush marriage, the difference lying in familial and individual consent, as well as adherence to recognized religious ceremonies sanctifying and validating the union.⁷⁹

Although humanitarian narratives tend to stress girls’ victimhood, recent academic investigations have emphasized the “constrained” or “tactical agency” that many individuals display in their navigation of wartime environments.⁸⁰ Chris Coulter notes that in Sierra Leone, “as the idiom of marriage was applied to intimate relations between men and women in the bush, perhaps sexual coercion in this context was considered by the girls and women, if not normal, then to be expected.”⁸¹ Some wives saw forced marriages as a strategy for minimizing sexual violence and thus condoned it.⁸² “I wouldn’t say that I was taken by force,” one wife said, “I did it to save my life. He was my husband . . . we call these men our husbands. But they

were not a true love. I hated this man.”⁸³ For some girls, accepting the status of wife offered a form of limited protection:

At the beginning I was raped daily. At least one person would come to me for sex . . . I was every man’s wife. But later, one of them, an officer, had a special interest in me. He then protected me against others and never allowed others to use me. He continued to [rape] me alone and less frequently.⁸⁴

It should be noted that women’s use of the term *wife* does not necessarily denote acceptance of their status but rather its normalization.

Blurring the boundaries between consent and coercion, some former girl combatants from UNITA in Angola who were forced to become the “war wives” of elders in their units noted that marriage allowed them to avoid forced labor and marches:

Some, when they look at the others, who are pregnant or have children, then they begin to think that if I do that then perhaps the suffering will be less because the others who are pregnant or who have children do not go anywhere. They do not go to the marches to collect food. . . . I accepted the father of my child because of that suffering.⁸⁵

Stavrou demonstrates that sex work was regarded as a routine part of their labor during the war, but girls frequently distinguished between forced unions with elders, rape, strategic unions for protection, and free sexual relations for love:

Well some were forced, they tell them, and from now on you must marry this man. Others are the girls themselves who decide, they see an old man, even really old, but because he has a little bit (food, clothes) and she doesn’t have to go on missions, she accepts to live together with him.⁸⁶

The duties and treatment of a wife depended on her status and that of her husband, as well as the nature and location of the armed group. One woman explained:

On our arrival we were assigned to the wives of commanders and later given to commanders or fighters to be their bush wives. As a bush wife, my duties were to provide for him anything he requested, including sex at any time of the day. I was used as a sex slave for

each commander when they came to our camp, especially because my bush husband was not a senior commander.⁸⁷

Forced marriage was also shaped by interfemale dynamics rather than simply by victimhood. Some marriages were polygamous, raising tensions between the elder wife and the new war wives.⁸⁸ Wives of senior officers or those who gained status as fighters themselves could “adopt” other, younger children to carry out domestic duties.⁸⁹ The experiences of girl wives were shaped not just by luck, chance, individual agency, and their husbands’ or cowives’ personalities but also by the structure of the armed group and the nature of the conflict. Girls’ experiences of forced marriages were also shaped by their postconflict lives. Although submitting to these forced marriages was perhaps the only available strategy of survival for many of these young women, devastated communities subsequently interpreted their “marriages” as signs of collaboration. As Justice Teresa Doherty stressed in her dissenting opinion in the Special Court for Sierra Leone, the crime of forced marriage is not simply the sexual violence and labor exploitation experienced by the victim but also the “mental and moral suffering” imposed by the forced conjugal status—a status that has long-term repercussions for the girls as they attempt to reintegrate into their communities, particularly in cases where they are rejected by their families or encouraged to formally marry their husbands.⁹⁰

FORCED MARRIAGE is not a monolithic category: it varies in its instrumentality and symbolic function between different conflicts and armed groups and also by individual experiences within those groups—the experiences of a bush wife and girl soldier in the RUF are not necessarily the same as those of a young war wife within Renamo, or those abducted by Boko Haram from schools in Chibok in Northern Nigeria. More research is needed into the internal dynamics of armed groups, comparative assessments of “marriage” across different groups, and historical patterns of women’s involvement in warfare in order to fully analyze the development of forced marriages as a tactic of war and as a crime of war.⁹¹

Different forms of sexual violence in war have varying purposes, but the logic behind forced marriage is shaped by the normalization of gender violence, sexual abuse, and the exploitation of labor in contemporary African conflicts. It facilitates instrumental gains for armed groups in terms of providing regulated sexual release for male combatants,

creating internal loyalties to the group, providing logistical support and domestic duties through girl labor, creating dependence among forcibly recruited girls, social reproduction, and terrorizing civilian populations. Such factors are particularly significant for mobile, armed groups that lack strong civilian support, stable supply lines, and forms of material remuneration for the troops.

It is significant that forced marriage also seems to be more common where existing cultural norms support or allow early marriage, as young girls are more easily controlled and retained. However, sexual slavery could just as well supply these military gains, so why is the element of conjugality introduced? The enforcement of so-called marriages and the resultant creation of new family units speak to a desire to reorder society, enforcing patriarchal control and providing access to key avenues of social maturation for young, disenfranchised fighters who were controlled by older generations in peacetime. Social tensions as well as military tactics drive the practice of forced marriage. Moreover, given the way forced marriage has been presented in international humanitarian and legal debates, it is clear that a more nuanced understanding is needed in regard to both local African concepts of marriage (and consent) and local constructions of girlhood if the practice is to be effectively combated in the future.

NOTES

This title is taken from Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence during the Rwandan Genocide and Its Aftermath* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996), interview by HRW/FIDH, Birenga, March 31, 1996. Human Rights Watch and other NGO reports cited in this chapter are available online and are accessible through a search of the title.

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10. Jon Abbink, "Being Young in Africa: The Politics of Despair and Renewal," in *Vanguards or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, ed. Jon Abbink and Ineke Van Kessel (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–34; Alcinda Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). As children under fifteen years of age now constitute half the population in some countries, their involvement in military and civilian affairs has become increasingly significant.

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