

WOMEN behind the GUN

Aiming for Equality and Recognition

The women and girls who are featured in this section have something in common: at some point in their lives, whether as adults or as children, legally or illicitly, they all became intimately familiar with firearms. Not all of them have actually had to fire their guns in the line of duty, yet most hold or carry a weapon as a demonstration of force. Most also reflect a desire to be recognized for their contributions—as combatants, as professionals, as equals.

Sexism and the threat of sexual assault can profoundly threaten the self-esteem and security of women in the military. A Dutch soldier recalls that she was advised to carry a gun to the toilets at night to protect herself from her male peers while stationed in Afghanistan. A former US Marine recalls that, during her first tour of duty in Iraq, she began to question her will to live as male Marines repeatedly demeaned her to signal their superiority. She welcomes US plans to integrate women in combat roles as a means of removing the 'last gender-specific definition of performance' in the military.

Former and current rebels also speak of an ongoing need for gender equality. A group of demobilized *guerrilleras* in Colombia seeks to prevent ex-combatant women from being forgotten, mischaracterized, and vilified. They recall facing a lack of trust from male combatants, some of whom disobeyed or even abandoned their female commanders—an act unheard of among *guerrilleros*. In Iran, *peshmergas* (fighters) in the Komalah, a Kurdish armed movement, rank the pursuit of gender equality and the promotion of women's rights high among the objectives of the movement, although they note that the number of women in decision-making roles is in decline despite 'good policy'.

A call for respect also characterizes the account of a prison guard in South Africa, who

laments that many people—including her own daughter—cannot understand why a woman would do such work, be in charge of men, or carry a gun.

There are signs of change, however. A veteran policewoman in Kenya explains that civilian men have become increasingly willing to work with female officers, that addressing gender-based violence gradually became part of the police mandate, and that her daughter also joined the police and now works in a gender unit.

For policewomen in United Nations peacekeeping missions, being female can be beneficial. A Rwandan policewoman in the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire points out that Ivorian women are more likely to approach a policewoman than a policeman with their problems and concerns. Similarly, in the UN Mission in Liberia, the commander of the Indian Formed Police Unit argues that policewomen have easier 'emotional access' to Liberians and that they have succeeded in demonstrating that a police officer can also be female.

Women are also part of the Syrian insurgency. A female sniper in the Free Syrian Army claims many Syrian men 'want their wives and sisters to learn how to use weapons'. Yet a former child soldier with the Lord's Resistance Army, in Uganda, reveals that the group's leaders would force young mothers who had been abducted and trained as fighters to carry their infants on their backs 'so that our hands were free to carry and fire weapons'.

In short, the picture is mixed—as further illustrated by the story of an Irish bodyguard. She considers being female an asset in her line of work, as she guards mostly women and children who 'do not want attention'. In that context, she essentially aims to look inconspicuous.

Illustrations by ZAZA U. Röttgers

— Tania Inowlocki

Sexual harassment is something I could have encountered, having been deployed twice to Afghanistan in an international environment. At one base they told me, 'If you go to the toilets at night, take your pistol to protect yourself against colleagues.' That was completely new to me, something I had never encountered.

When you are on patrol as a woman, Afghans perceive you as a third gender, as something new, something interesting. In my experience, Afghan men do not see us as they see their own women because they see that women from their society have a different role and the men have to protect the women. Therefore, they are very willing to engage with us and talk to us. It comes down to masculinity in general—they tend to discuss different topics with male colleagues than with me. To me they talk about more feminine things, like feelings and the current situation—more emotional things. And that was something we saw throughout the whole unit, the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

We were the first unit that focused on having females in each of our engagement teams. We had a minimum of one female in each of those teams. We gave them gender training beforehand, and we implemented gender policies throughout our whole mission.

As the only female officer in my engineer battalion, I was tasked with making sure that the PRT engaged women in the local population. It's about how you improve your situational awareness and

your operational effectiveness by engaging 100 per cent of the population. After our mission, NATO requested an investigation of how UN Resolution 1325 on gender and security could be implemented. Having done that, I just stayed with the gender topic.

As gender advisers for military operations, we advise on the implications of gender and the gender perspective within the mission, about operational effectiveness. When I teach I tend to focus more on the operational side. If you look at the implementation of Resolution 1325, it has an internal and an external focus. Looking at the external focus is how you improve your mission, how you focus on the host nation. The internal aspect is about the diversity of the army, men and women in the army. I think that is connected to culture in general and your national view on gender roles.

I have been in the army now for 12 years and you can see a big difference between now and when I started. Men and women are more equal in society, so there are more women in the army in different and higher positions. Ten years ago there were no female generals; now women are rising in the ranks, more and more.

Source: interview by Alexander Buehler

Captain in the Royal Netherlands Army, instructor with the Civil-Military Co-operation Centre of Excellence, former deputy commander of the Dutch-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan



Mentor for US veterans, former sergeant in the US Marine Corps reserves, including as a machine gunner on convoy security in Iraq*

A Marine operates within a squad and a fire team, and trusts every other member with her safety, because every other Marine relies on her for their safety. If a woman experiences rape, she can no longer rely on this. A mentor or representative of Veterans Affairs can help to retrain this trust and provide an opportunity for the patient to regain the value of seeking and receiving help. Military sexual trauma creates a specific need for care, regardless of the victim's gender.

During my first tour of duty, gender differences were used more as a control method, rather than as a means of barring me from combat; the men verbally demeaned and abused me, due to my gender, as a method of reminding me that the men were in charge, and that at any time they could remove me from the gunner position. My performance and critical thinking were constantly questioned and I was accused of being a failure at everything. My self-esteem was at an all-time low, and I questioned my desire to remain alive.

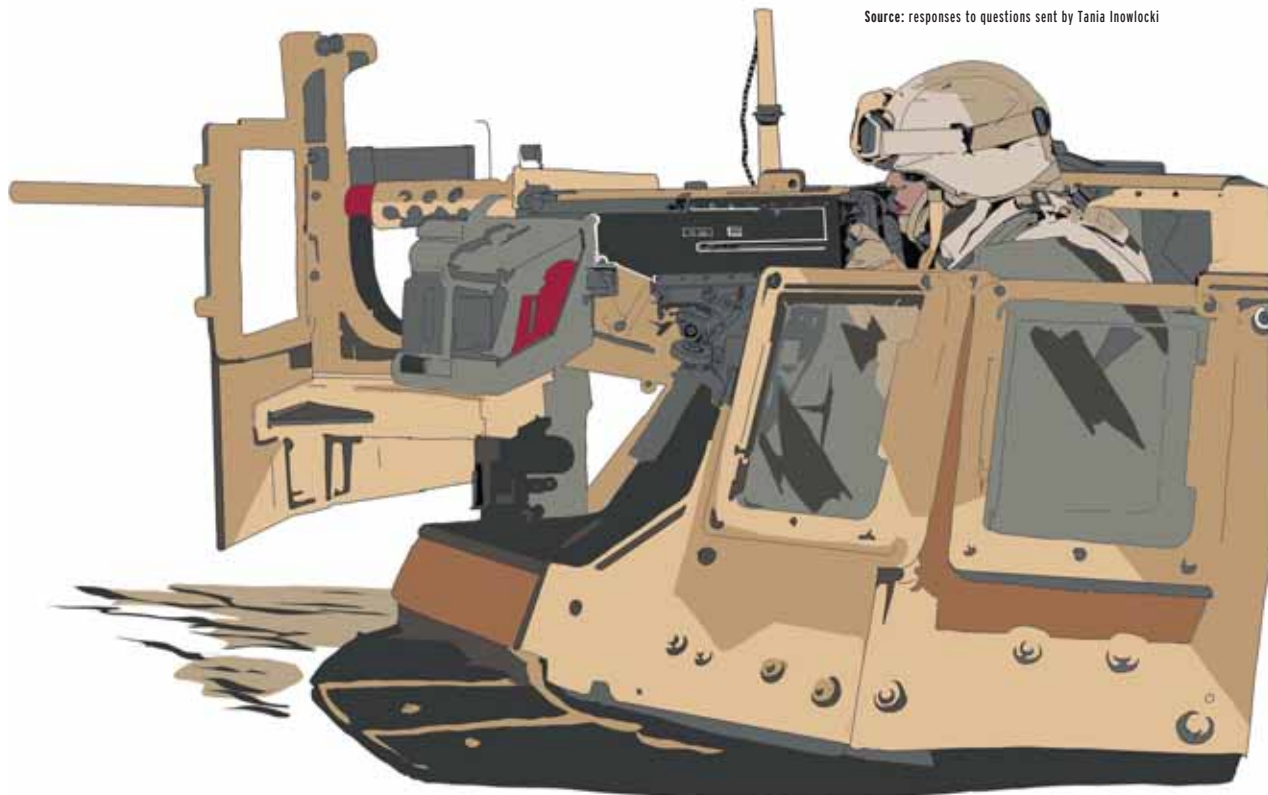
Gender was also an issue when we observed the Islamic restrictions on interactions with the opposite sex. Other women and I were on hand, during patrols, to search women for contraband weapons and devices. As a female, I could thor-

oughly search an Iraqi woman while respecting her culture. Often, fellow male Marines would say that the only reason female Marines were allowed on patrol was to respect the Islamic restrictions. My response was always, so what if that's the only reason? It provides female Marines the opportunity to prove that they can operate in combat environments with distinction, and that the more common reasons for restricting service women are false. If the door to gender equality in the armed forces opens with respecting gender politics of an occupied country, then I'll take it.

The removal of the combat ban on women was a step in the right direction, because it removes the last gender-specific definition of performance within the military. No longer can men, theoretically, use a woman's biological differences to justify her exclusion from certain roles, and thus from career advancement. I speculate that the successful integration of women into combat roles will drastically reduce the rate of military sexual trauma, because there will no longer be a reason for men to feel superior to women. Full gender integration will create an environment where men can no longer say, 'You aren't allowed in combat, so you are, by default, weaker than me.'

Note: * This text is an excerpt from a longer submission. For the complete version, see <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/publications/by-type/yearbook/small-arms-survey-2014.html>.

Source: responses to questions sent by Tania Inowlocki



Social memory is a battlefield in Colombia. The role of women combatants has been erased and there are attempts to delegitimize our contributions to our country's history. The images of women in war are full of stereotypes. It is common to hear that women joined armed groups to flee domestic violence or forced marriage, as a result of forced recruitment or for the love of a soldier. Traditional representations also depict women as less inclined to violence and more peaceful than men. Thus, because we fought as men, carrying and using weapons, we are considered monsters. We must approach with caution both overly glorified and degrading representations of combatant women as well as representations that view us merely as victims.

As women combatants we were stronger, more disciplined, and more committed than men, because our engagement was a thought-out decision, considering that we had stepped out from the traditional role assigned to us by our society. The price to pay was that it would take us double the time and effort to get to the same positions as men although we had the same capacities. To exert power as a woman commander was particularly difficult: we faced a lack of trust from male combatants. Some refused to obey and others would abandon their female commander during a harsh fight while they would have died for their commander if she had been a man.

For the few of us who managed to have command positions, we did not have any feminine model to guide us in this role. The only model we had was from male commanders and anyway we had to abide by the rules of the organization and its ethics. We did not aim at changing the way these groups were functioning because they

were organized as political spaces, with a view to changing society. We shared this objective and so we did not advocate any change. We were only women who transited into these groups and became empowered from this participation.

As women, we conducted the war in the same manner as men, with the same strength and determination. But we managed to carry out our activities in a manner that would avoid harm against civilians. It is not that men were more brutal but that, as women, we were more sensitive to this issue and more strategic about it. We were particularly outstanding in our capacity to create trust among the community, gain their support, and ensure protection of women and children in the midst of war.

Note: *These women are members of the Network of Women Ex-combatants from the Insurgency (Red Nacional de Mujeres Excombatientes de la Insurgencia), which was established in 2000 to raise awareness of the experience of women ex-combatants and enhance their role in Colombian society. The Network comprises women who were formerly affiliated with the armed groups that signed peace agreements between 1990 and 1994—Movimiento 19 de Abril (M19), Ejército Popular de Movimiento Indígena Armado Quintín Lame, and Corriente de Renovación Socialista—as well as ex-combatants from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), who joined the network after recent individual demobilizations.

Source: portrait supplied by Geneva Call

Demobilized guerrillas in Colombia*



Peshmergas (fighters) in the Komalah, a Kurdish armed movement in Iran

My movement deeply believes in gender equality and equality between men and women. We also believe in positive discrimination. We take extra care to support women's roles and values that promote women's rights within the organizations. We have an excellent background in this. In all Kurdish regions, the movement is known for its support and its belief in the equality of women and men.

It was the first movement in the Middle East that managed to attract hundreds of courageous and politically motivated women. However, it is difficult for women today to join the movement because many of us live in exile in other countries.

Women receive the same training as men when they join the movement. Everyone is entitled to carry a weapon, but not everyone participates in combat. The role of the movement is not just military, but also political. The movement's media and Internet presence play a big role in promoting the roles of women. Women are very active in the media work.

We can talk about a double repression that affects women: because they are Kurdish and because they are women. Women do not have the

same opportunities and freedom as men in the society, throughout their lives. Therefore, they need much more time and education to achieve the same status as men.

In the movement, women are allowed to create their own organizations. Women can gather and fight for their rights; they take courses on women's rights, in which they can learn to be more independent and how to develop themselves more.

The movement tries to encourage women to be more active, which means women can get priority access to conferences and courses. Yet, this is still not enough. The movement also has problems and limitations, which hinder it from reaching all the objectives set regarding women. In spite of good policy, the number of women participating in decision-making processes is decreasing these days.

Women remain as involved as men in the movement. Some get married, want to have children and a calmer life; some migrate to other countries because of family pressure. Yet, overall, women do not leave the organization before men. In joining the movement, they find a certain form of freedom and many other opportunities.

Source: portrait supplied by Geneva Call



There wasn't money to study so I joined the Department of Correctional Services in 1996, when I was 25 years old. I work in the Emergency Support Team within Pollsmoor. We are mostly called in for serious situations like a gang fight or a conflict incident. We also handle all the high-security exercises, like transporting an offender to court. Inmates try to intimidate me but you have to be firm. Over the years you learn survival techniques.

There are 25 guards per unit, with smaller teams of approximately six persons per team. Within the 25-person unit there are three women. For six years I was the only woman in the unit—at least now there are three of us. We work 11 days on and then have three days off. I only get nervous if I cannot choose my team. I am confident in my ability and, if I know my team's abilities, then it's ok. But if I have unknown people on my team then I am worried as you don't know how they will react.

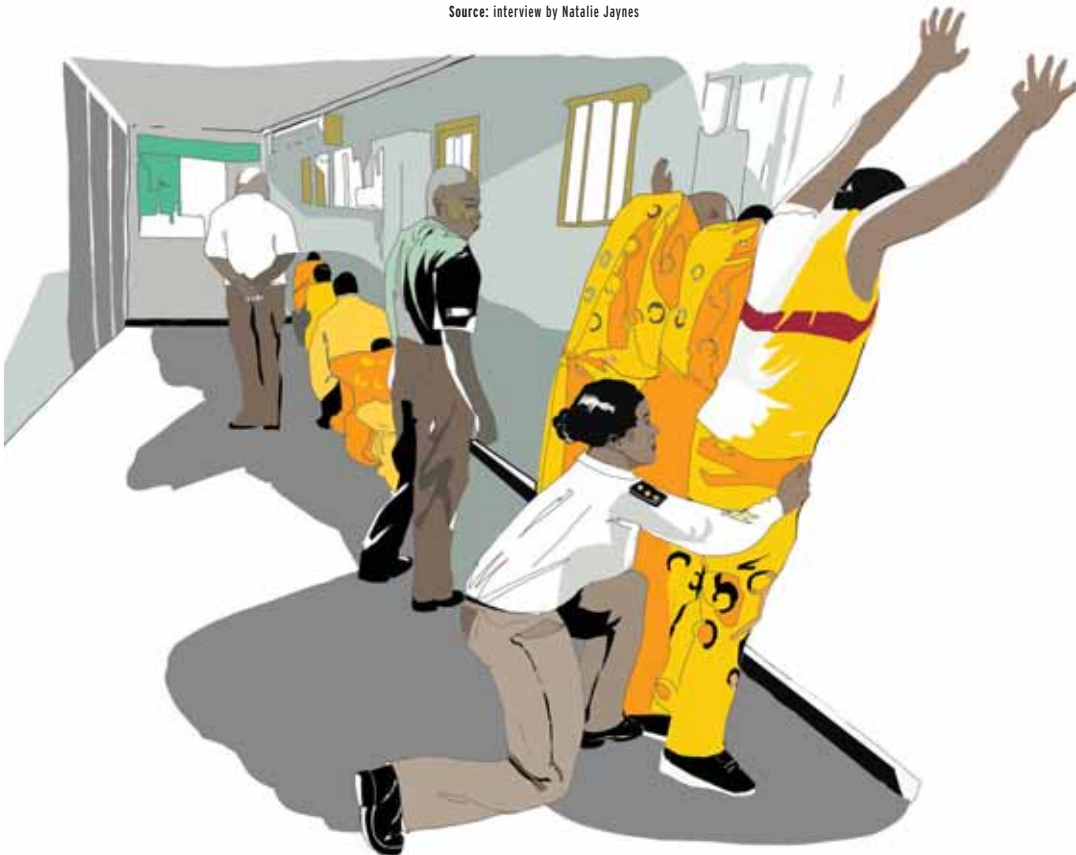
Many women don't join because they are not comfortable with firearms. I carry a firearm every day. A Glock 19. I use it to intimidate but not to fire. We use batons, teargas, and shock-shields. I take the gun home as I can be on call and then I need it.

The hardest part of the job is being accepted by other people. They don't understand why women would do this work. They don't understand that women can be in charge of men. That I can carry a gun. People judge me for doing this work and they see me as different. My ex-husband was too intimidated by me and so we got divorced. My eight-year-old likes my job, he is proud of his Mom. My daughter is 21 and she wishes I would get another job. I do what I do and I can do it well. I love my job and I would not change it for anything, but sometimes it can be lonely because people don't understand.

The experience that most stands out for me happened when I was on maternity leave in 2005. My unit was involved in escorting an offender to court and they walked into an ambush. There was a shoot-out and one of my team members was killed. I felt so guilty because I wasn't there. If I was there I could have prevented it. I have lost a child, I have been through a divorce, but this was much, much worse. This was the most significant. I could have prevented it, if I was there. I was a mess for a long time and I had to pay for my own counselling. The Department of Correctional Services did not make any psychologists available for us.

Source: interview by Natalie Jaynes

Guard at Pollsmoor
Maximum Security
Prison, South Africa



Officer Commanding Police Division, Kenya Police Service Division in Embu, Eastern Province

My service with the Kenyan Police is a god-chosen career. I was 17 years old when I was recruited, in 1975. There was an ad in a magazine, from the commissioner of police, calling for people to join. There was no history of my family in the police at that time, but I took the test and they selected me. After six months of training I was posted in Kitale.

As a female police officer then it was difficult to interact with civilian men. It was hectic for us female officers, and people did not want to interact with us and so we had big challenges. But things are very different now. Civilian men are more willing today to work with female officers.

Early on, addressing gender-based violence (GBV) was not part of the police mandate. But today we have come to understand it as part of what we do.

We work closely with NGOs and other organizations with a focus on GBV. There is a GBV commissioner within the police now, a sign that we have really picked it up. Before my current position, I was based in Nairobi for many years working on GBV issues. It is important to keep talking to people, to get information from them about GBV. Many cases of GBV have been opened up

and this has added trust in the police among the people. Work on GBV is a commitment of the police now.

I was trained to use many different types of firearms—sub-machine guns, AK-47s, G3s, and others. Today, at the managerial level, I no longer carry larger weapons, but instead I carry a 9 mm pistol. This is common for officers in similar positions to mine.

Early on we didn't have very sophisticated weapons. Civilians had many, primarily supplied by neighbouring countries experiencing civil wars. We didn't have the types of firearms necessary to confront them, but we are catching up.

In Kenya, it is always necessary for the police to carry firearms. I have been involved in many instances where firearms were necessary. One such incident involved a number of armed criminals who had killed some people on the road near Nakuru. We were well armed, we had the same firearms as the criminals, and we apprehended all of them.

I have a family of four and my daughter joined the police over 12 years ago. She is doing very well. I have been a mentor to her and today she is part of a gender unit within the police.

Source: interview by Khristopher Carlson



As a policewoman, it's important that I carry a firearm. Our mission is to protect civilians and sometimes you encounter individuals who can threaten security, which is why we need arms to protect ourselves and others. Since we share one mission, there is no difference between the men and women who carry arms. And we are all working in the same conditions, so I don't see any differences.

I am the focal point for child protection at UNOCI headquarters and am the mission's liaison officer to the National Police of Côte d'Ivoire. I also coordinate our focal points in the field. We have mixed teams on the ground and our female staff members are well trained to approach women and children, since in the local culture it is easier for women to approach another woman than a man with problems and concerns. But when it comes to efficiency, again, I see no difference between UNPOL women and men.

In my career, I have focused on the protection of vulnerable persons because my country—Rwanda—has experienced exactly these problems.

We had war, genocide. I have seen children suffering as well as the violence of conflict. I have seen in my country that there is a necessity to protect children and other vulnerable persons. Because children can die due to the effects of conflict, or of poor hygiene, or as a result of being separated from their families. Children are more vulnerable than adults. In armed conflicts there are more civilian victims and children are especially vulnerable.

I wanted to share my experience and have a possibility to intervene for the others, since that is required by the international community when there are conflicts.

Before 1994 I was member of the Gendarmerie Nationale of Rwanda, so I was trained to use firearms. But it was a strange feeling that whenever I wore the uniform, I had to carry a firearm. I was asked a lot of questions, like 'What are you doing there?' or 'If you use the firearm, isn't that going to have negative consequences for us?' I told people that firearms must always be used very carefully because they destroy lives.

Source: interview by Alexander Buehler

Rwandan United Nations Police (UNPOL) Officer, United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI)



Commander of the Indian Formed Police Unit (FPU) of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), Monrovia

Our FPU contingent is composed of 124 women and we receive logistics support from 21 men. Even though our contingent is an all-female FPU, our tasks are not gender-specific. Our primary tasks are to guard the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Liberia and to assist the UN Police and the Liberian National Police during night patrols. But we also carry out other mandated tasks, such as providing security for UN personnel and anti-riot control.

As a female UNMIL peacekeeper, it's easier to get emotional access to the people of Liberia. The response is very positive from the people here. In the initial period of our deployment, seven years ago, we attracted attention, but now the people are used to seeing us.

We have many outreach programmes, we encourage the women to participate in the law and order process and to get enlisted in the police. Our contingent medical officer assists during the recruitment of women to the Liberian National Police. We help in stepping up awareness—we show that a police officer can also be female. I think we have been able to send a message to the people.

Many women have recently graduated from the academy, so in the future there will be a higher proportion of women in the Liberian National Police. From the data for 2007 to 2013, it is clear that the proportion of women registered in the Liberian National Police has increased from 6 per cent to 15 per cent.

When I joined the service in India, a formerly male-dominated force, they were already used to having women around. In my particular service, the department first started to enlist women in 1988. And I joined in 1997. So female recruits were not new when I joined. In India, my department has three battalions that are composed exclusively of women; it includes 1,200 staff.

The police service gives you a sense of purpose, of joining a profession, which is very important in maintaining the order of the country. In India, the services are a very respectable profession. People respect the uniformed services because you are seen as serving the nation. The uniform gives a sense of security and you literally feel empowered. And this is also something we are promoting in Liberia.

Source: interview by Alexander Buehler



When the revolution erupted two years ago, I was taking photos and recording videos. I came here to Aleppo not to fight, but to help people, around September 2012. But when I saw that the FSA fighters were very happy to defend the land, to fight the regime, to defend the people, I found myself able to hold a weapon. I wasn't accurate with my aim, so I asked my husband—he's the leader of a *katiba* (battalion)—to train me.

It's very easy. I am sure that all Muslim women could help by taking up arms. Our men, a lot of them, want their wives and sisters to learn how to use weapons. It is common for us here, not something strange. If you want to learn how to shoot, that's okay. We have a Muslim rule, a saying: 'Teach your children how to shoot, ride horses, and swim.'

Today we are at war in Syria. And what do you need? Weapons. You need to defend yourself and the others around you. I want the people to be safe.

The goal with me is not the number of killings. The goal is to stop the regime from proceeding towards us, to the checkpoint of our *katiba*. In my *katiba* we are three snipers. I watch the streets around the front. If I see men coming towards us, I know the regime asked them to go to this area, and this area is very dangerous. So I shoot in the street. When I see a soldier—click—I will kill him. The soldiers are like our men, they are 18-21, 22.

Source: interview by Alexander Buehler

Free Syrian Army
(FSA) sniper in
Aleppo



Former child soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Uganda

I was abducted when I was 15. I gave birth to a baby while I was in the LRA. Many times we were forced to carry our infant children on our backs so that our hands were free to carry and fire weapons (Lira District, 2003).

I asked for a weapon to fight with. I wanted to be away from the LRA camps as it was the only way to escape. I did escape. During a fight with the Uganda People's Defence Force I pretended to be dead, and when everyone was gone, I left the gun and ran (Gulu District, 2003).

Most of the girls taken by the LRA were trained as fighters, except the youngest ones. One commander who had many wives made those without children take guns and fight. He said it was necessary for them to contribute their part to the LRA's effort to defeat the government (Lira District, 2005).

My husband had eight wives and there were four children among them. I had one child from the bush. He made one of his wives fight even when she was pregnant. If pregnant wives refused to fight, they would be killed (Lira District, 2005).

Source: interviews by Christopher Carlson



I trained in firearms mostly for jobs, because they would look for a firearms licence—it's something for your CV. And if you're going to a more high-risk area, you'd need it. I've gotten jobs just because of my certificate.

Having a military background in this field can be a hindrance in some situations. I've worked with ex-military people and they tend to present themselves differently. They have a more aggressive approach, putting hands out and smashing camera lenses. Coming from a civilian background, you can take a softer approach—things don't need to be elevated to another level. The first weapon of defence is your brain, first and foremost. The last line of defence is confrontation—everything else is just avoidance.

Being female and not coming from a military background definitely helps with the type of work that I do. I work with a lot with women and children. The people I work with do not want attention—it's not like Madonna jogging through Central Park surrounded by five huge bodyguards. So you try to look like one of their friends or a secretary. You look inconspicuous. When people ask if I'm a bodyguard, I say, 'I'm the secretary.' And people get really disinterested.

Firearms are sometimes a problem in crowds. All bodyguards are looking at the first three rows because you can get a shot in from there. But after the third row, it's likely you're not going to hit your target. Surveillance teams are looking for stretched-out hands trying to touch VIPs, and if there aren't two hands out, they're looking for that. And if they think there's a problem they'll move the VIP off the red carpet.

When I started training, there were very few female bodyguards. But about ten years ago the demand for female bodyguards started to increase because of the growing number of Arab clients. Arab men didn't want men around their women. When I was fully trained and worked with other female bodyguards for the first time, I was shocked—I could not believe the standards. I was the only female bodyguard who had been properly trained. So I reported back and said there was a need for training.

Slowly, there's been an increase in the number of women who get training. Women come for training from Japan, Russia, and Eastern Europe. I fought against women-only courses because you might as well make it natural. Men can be sexist in this line of work—but even in the training environment, there's no point in sugar-coating it.

Source: interview by Tania Inowlocki

Bodyguard and director of the Women's Bureau of the International Bodyguard Association, Ireland

