

Forum: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

Issue #2: Preventing the recruitment of minors for armed conflicts

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Introduction

Any person below the age of eighteen who is recruited by any means to participate in an armed group is considered a child soldier. There are many reasons why children get involved in these violent situations. One of them is force; a child might be abducted or threatened into joining a group against

their will. Another factor is vulnerability due to social and economic factors within the area that they are living in. If they are separated from their family or live in an unstable household, they are more likely to be a target for recruitment. It can also happen that they willingly volunteer to fight for a cause their family believes in, with little knowledge of what they are truly standing for. Between the years 2005 and 2022, there were more than 105,000 children involved in an armed conflict. This number keeps rising as more children are involved in this issue worldwide.

Children are often preferable targets for armed groups due to their young age; they are more easily influenced and manipulated by the members of the group. Additionally, due to their smaller bodies, they require less food and other resources than grown adults, which is beneficial to armed groups. Moreover, they do not have a fully developed sense of danger; consequently, they are more likely to participate in threatening tasks without extensive protest. This doesn't decrease the risk for them, regardless of the role they are assigned within the group. The most common task that a child soldier can have is related to hostile activities that put the child in severe danger, such as human shields, suicide bombers, or explosive transporters. They can also have other duties, such as cooks, messengers, spies, or domestic servants. In the case of girls, especially, they are subjected to gender-based violence, exploited for sex, and harassed. Forcing children to go through this form of abuse has significant consequences, both physical and psychological, and although there are programs for the reintegration of child soldiers, violations of rights are still present and an issue that countries are still fighting against.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Soldier: As defined by the UN a child soldier is any person below the age of 18 associated with an armed group that has been recruited for any purpose including hostile activities, cooks, spies, porters or sexual activities.

Recruitment: In this context, the word recruitment can also be understood as military recruitment, and it encompasses the activity of selecting people for military training and combat.

Forced recruitment: The process of coaxing individuals, independent of age or gender, to join an armed group against their will.

Voluntary recruitment: The process of willingly participating in an armed group, frequently a decision taken out of necessity.

Armed conflict: A confrontation with weapons between the armed forces of States (when referring to international armed conflicts) or between a government and organized armed groups (national armed conflict).

Demobilization: The action of releasing troops from military service or armed group service back into civilian life.

Disarmament: The act of collecting and removing weapons from an armed group or any other military party.

Reintegration: In the context of child soldiers it refers to the process of

transferring children back to normal civilian lives in their communities.

General Overview

Historical context

The use of children in armed conflicts is not an event that has appeared in recent history and has presented itself as an issue since ancient times. Children are involved in violent conflicts all around the world. In the twentieth century, a clear example of children and teenagers being part of military forces despite being underage is during the First and Second World Wars. During WWI almost 250,000 male teenagers were recruited by the British Army to fight in the war according to BBC News, and despite the recommended age to be 19, the law did not protect minors from taking part in violent confrontations. One important detail to consider is that during this time there was a great number of underage voluntary recruits, it was a fault in the legislation of countries during WWI that allowed these children to be allowed in the army. Similarly, another situation of the use of minors for warfare was during World War II. Children were recruited by both the Allies and the Axis. When the Nazis rose to power in 1933 they established a group called Hitler Youth (Hitlerjugend in German) in which they got boys from the age of 10 to 18 to indoctrinate them in Nazi idealism and prepare them to fight in the war. The number of participants grew as the war progressed, reaching almost 7.2 million members as of 1940 (Holocaust Encyclopedia). During many more conflicts that arose in the world child soldiers are an aspect that is concerningly overlooked. Nations in the continent of

Africa, for instance, had the most cases of child exploitation in the military throughout the 21st century.

Causes for Recruitment

There are many reasons for the forced recruitment of children by armed groups during times of national or international conflict. One of the most notorious ones is to use the children for hostile action that makes them vulnerable and exposes them to crude violence. One of the purposes they can have is to be suicide bombers, a job that before would be carried out by a middle-aged soldier but would be done by children 12 years old and sometimes younger. A suicide bomber is a person who delivers explosives and detonates them to inflict destruction and kill themselves in the process, which demonstrates the little regard armed groups have for the lives of the children they recruit. They can also be used as spies, given the innocent appearance they have. Furthermore, children can have roles that are not directly related to violence, including being cooks and porters. Plus, in the case of girls, mainly, they are sexually abused and used for sexual activities.

It is also important to note the different ways in which armed groups recruit children. In terms of forced recruitment, armed groups kidnap the children for their causes, separating them from their families. This tends to be more common in Sub-African territories, while in ISIS-controlled territories, it is a more frequent occurrence for families to volunteer their children. It is openly encouraged by the parents. ISIS is the name for which the extremist armed group Islamic State is

known. They have committed several attacks worldwide and have strong dominance in the nations of Syria, Iraq, and Libya. A similar situation occurs in the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, where families are encouraged to engage their children in military activities. Another cause of child recruitment is the exploitation of vulnerability. Socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of education, lack of shelter, food, or water are significant drivers for children to either voluntarily join armed groups or be more easily coaxed into joining. As an illustration, consider the country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. To this day, it remains one of the focal points of child exploitation in the world, with almost 46% of children under the age of five being recruited for armed conflict, according to the UN's Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict from 2023 (Save the Children). An important correlation to highlight is the fact that the DRC is one of the five poorest nations in the world, with 76% of the population living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2023 (World Bank Group). Plus, the DRC has numerous conflicts with more than 120 militias in the territory (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect). This evidence exposes the importance of tackling poverty and vulnerability when mitigating the use of child soldiers in conflicts. Although vulnerability is a key factor in the recruitment of children, it can also happen that they join driven by revenge or the desire for power and prestige.

Impact on Children

There are several significant impacts on children from being used as child soldiers. The constant exposure to violence and traumatic events causes major

psychological disorders in developing minds as they serve armed groups. These children do not have the opportunity to grow and learn in a safe environment, which affects the way their brains develop and makes it challenging for them to recover a normal life and reintegrate into society. It is highly likely that the children will develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The accumulated trauma builds up and deteriorates mental health. Additionally, the PTSD and accumulated trauma lead to heavy flashbacks and a fear response under the slightest stimuli that might be related to the situation the child faced in the conflict. A study of former Ugandan child soldiers presented in the National Library of Medicine exposes that 69 out of 71 children interviewed (97%) have reported PTSD at clinical levels. It was also found that the detrimental effects of being recruited by armed groups affected children equally, regardless of gender, age, role, or period of captivity. Similar results were presented for children who were child soldiers in Sri Lanka and Mozambique, among other territories. Another issue that needs to be addressed is the possibility of the development of alcohol and drug misuse. A study conducted by the International Labor Organization found that the regular use of alcohol, cigarettes, or alcohol was higher for children who had been recruited than those who had not in the Congo (National Library of Medicine). However, it is an investigation that is still being developed.

Reintegration to society

Reintegration and rehabilitation programs aim to aid children who were previously associated with an armed group to recover and become part of

society. It is the last aspect of the Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs. These efforts are carried out by several organizations around the world, including the United Nations, with the help of the Office of the Special Representation of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. In these programs, children are provided with shelter, food, psychological support, and healthcare. For example, in Uganda, there is a child soldier reintegration program called the Grassroots Reconciliation Group. The space is designed specifically for Ugandan culture and focuses on the children involved in conflicts in the country to face the trauma and stigma that comes with being a child soldier. They are provided with a forum and trained counselors to express their concerns and build strength as a community. The first group reported that 95% of its participants improved relationships between the community and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) as of 2019 (Grassroots Reconciliation Group).

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

African Union: The African Union is an alliance made up of several countries on the continent of Africa that include, but are not limited to, Algeria, Angola, the Central African Republic, Somalia, and many more. Africa is one of the most affected continents by warfare and the use of child soldiers; nonetheless, the leaders of the African Union attempt to implement measures to diminish the exploitation of children by armed groups.

Afghanistan: This is one country that has faced an unstable political climate since the Taliban reclaimed power in 2021, and one where there have been several human rights violations. In this country, the UN confirmed that 196 children were recruited for armed conflict in the year 2020, and the number keeps increasing to this day. There have been several efforts to aid the children in Afghanistan. For instance, NATO carried out the Resolute Support Mission with the purpose of training the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in order to enhance the protection of children.

NATO: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is one of the many organizations that have focused their efforts on protecting and assisting children in vulnerable situations who have been forced to participate in armed conflicts. The first initiative was in 2012 at the Chicago Summit, where NATO decided to develop mission and action plans to mitigate the military exploitation of children. It created Military Guidelines on Children and Armed Conflict and an e-learning module on child protection, which provides an overview of the six grave violations against children's rights highlighted by the UN Secretary-General and the legal action to protect child soldiers.

ISIS: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is a group responsible for great destruction in the world and has an established system for the recruitment of child soldiers, targeting minors in cities like Mosul, Anbar, and Telafar, among others. They developed propaganda aimed at cultivating fear and recruiting children; they did it through the promise of independence from a culture in

which children are taught to obey their parents without question. With numerous child soldiers, they were exploited as figures for propaganda as well as dangerous attacks that endangered their lives.

Timeline of Events UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of Event
1949	Under the Geneva Conventions, Protocols I and II establish the minimum age for military recruitment and enrolment to be 15 years old.
1985	UNICEF determines that any person below the age of 18 can not be required to participate in combat. The UN committee published the document "Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances", in which they outline why child soldiers should be part of armed conflicts.
1990	The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) is implemented by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to enforce a law that prohibits any minor under 18 from being part of a military or armed group.
1994	The Human Rights Watch publishes articles regarding the situation with child soldiers in Africa.
May 25, 2000	The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts was approved by the General Assembly of the UN. It establishes that no state is allowed to recruit children under 18 to war.

2005	UN passed resolution 1612, which is a monitoring and reporting system for all child soldiers being used.
2014	The campaign Children, Not Soldiers was established by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and UNICEF. It aims to promote awareness regarding child soldiers and condemn the practice.
2024	The African Union's Political Affairs and the Peace and Security Council to discuss solutions to eradicate child soldiers in Africa.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict

This is a resolution passed by the General Assembly that establishes an internationally agreed law that no person under the age of 18 should be recruited to be part of an armed conflict. Although this solution was important to have an international boundary of the appropriate minimum age to enlist in the army, it proved to be more challenging to enforce when it comes to the forced recruitment of armed groups. Even despite the establishment of the protocol, the number of child soldiers keeps rising in diverse countries, which indicates this solution is not effective. It dismisses the forced recruitment aspect of child soldiers, which is a crucial aspect to consider as it works outside of the law.

Red Hand Day

The Red Hand Day, also known as the International Day Against the Use of Child Soldiers, was introduced on February 12, 2002, after the approval of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. It is a campaign that consists of collecting red handprints from all over the world to give to authority figures, including government officials and UN members. It is a form of protest against child soldiers. It is a solution that has been very effective in raising awareness and that has connected thousands of people across 50 countries for a common cause. It does have limitations, however, because it doesn't have a direct impact on the children being affected and cannot provide humanitarian aid; its focus is purely on awareness and a call to action.

World Vision

World Vision is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on providing aid to the most vulnerable children in the world. They have operations in more than 100 countries and provide water, healthcare, education, protection, and income generation to help children overcome difficult circumstances (which include but are not limited to child soldiers). Although the work that World Vision does is quite important and has had a significant impact on the lives of hundreds of children, there is a limited amount of resources they can use to provide aid. Additionally, their focus is on the reintegration and

prevention aspects of supporting child soldiers, but they have little direct impact on disarmament and demobilization.

Possible Solutions

To determine possible solutions, it is important to understand the jurisdiction that UNICEF and the UN as a whole have over the internal regulations and operations of states. UNICEF cannot directly intervene in the political situation of any state, but it is capable of making suggestions, raising awareness, and providing humanitarian aid. There have been several campaigns established over the years to raise awareness regarding the importance of eradicating child recruitment all over the world. It is key that the solution involves creating consciousness about this issue to get the support needed. This can be a digital campaign through social media, for instance. Another possible solution is to rely on humanitarian aid for the children who have gone through the trauma by establishing asylums in countries neighboring those with a high number of child soldiers. Education and family aid are also other aspects that can be tackled as solutions. This part would focus on one of the causes for children to enlist, either voluntarily or forced, in armed groups. By addressing the basic needs for food and shelter for hundreds of families, a key driving force is removed. Overall, it is always important to consider that the solutions must be applicable to any nation or context, and they have to be realistic for UNICEF to carry out.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

SDG #1: No Poverty

The issue of child soldiers is directly related to the first SDG goal as it addresses one of the main causes for child recruitment, as it is often the need that comes from a lack of resources that drives children and their families to enlist them in the military or armed forces. Additionally, children living in vulnerable conditions make it easier to be targets of forced recruitment.

SDG #3: Good Health and Well-Being

It is fundamental to strive for the safety and well-being of children who are living through unstable political situations and can end up being victims of armed conflicts. This is both the prevention of recruitment to ensure mental and physical well-being is not compromised by violence, and it also applies to the children that have been demobilized and require support.

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Appendix

- I. The following source is useful to understand the whole process of recruiting and demobilizing children in armed conflicts. It outlines and explains the causes and the effects it has. It does not have extensive statistics, but aids with understanding the issue.
 - A. <https://www.iiss.org/publications/armed-conflict-survey/2018/armed-conflict-survey-2018/acs2018-03-essay-3/>
- II. Another resource that might be useful is the full document of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, as it is one of the most important documents the UN has in regard to child soldiers.
 - A. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>
- III. The report by Stimson has plenty information and statistics regarding the situation with child soldiers in several countries which can be useful for quantitative research and understand the situation in specific territories.
 - A. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/2022-human-rights-reports-insights-international-global-child-soldier-recruitment-use/>

