

The Global Rise Of Child Soldiers: Why We All Should Be Concerned

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Abstract

The use of child soldiers is not new, children have been used in armed conflicts essentially since the very first recorded armed conflict. While the international community does not support this, we have nevertheless come to expect it, particularly in certain regions of the world. Alarming, however, over the past ten to fifteen years the use of child soldiers has spread to virtually every region of the world and can be seen in virtually every armed conflict. Current estimates are that there are thousands of child soldiers, male and female, currently serving in armed conflicts with some under the age of ten years old. Some of these soldiers are forcibly recruited, but many are volunteers. This paper examines the rise of this phenomenon, attempts to understand its origins from a historical perspective, and discusses the underlying causes along with examining the lives of these children after serving as child soldiers. Finally, this paper focuses on the efforts being made and solutions being offered to quell the rise of the use of child soldiers and reintegration efforts.

Keywords: Abduct, Child Soldiers, Conflict Zones, Human Rights, Reintegration

Introduction

The use of child soldiers is not new; children have been used in armed conflicts since the very first armed conflicts of history. Even in the fabled story of David and Goliath, David was but a child when he went out to slay Goliath [1]. The use of children in military conflicts literally extends back several centuries and has continued to the present day.

In modern times, we have romanticized the “Drummer Boys” of fought side by side with soldiers in the American Civil War, during World War II Hitler used children as spies and soldiers. In fact, the widely publicized Hitler Youth movement expertly indoctrinated children into accepting the Nazis’ world view on politics and social issues with ominous results. While Hitler did not use forced conscription or abduction of any kind, he used the equally powerful means of propaganda, brainwashing, and manipulation, all strategies still in use today [2]

However, the use of child soldiers is no longer an aspect of history or an occurrence that is restricted to very specific regions of the world. Child soldiers are being used in virtually every region of the world and in every armed conflict and this occurrence is on the rise [3]. The focus of this paper is to examine why there is such a recent increase in the use of child soldiers and to hopefully uncover suggestions for quelling this rise. To do so, we must first examine the concept of “child soldiers.”

What are child soldiers and how are they used?

The generally agreed upon definition of a child soldier, as described by the United Nations Childrens Fund(UNICEF) is any child, male or female, under the age of 18 recruited by a state or non-state armed group to be used as personnel to aid in armed conflict [4]. There are many ways in which these children are being used, but some of the more common ones are: as human shields, spies, cooks, suicide bombers, executioners, explosives transporters, guards, messengers, porters, domestic servants, sex slaves, and combatants [5].

Another disturbing feature of these human rights violations is the use of young girls as child brides for fighters. These young girls are forced into marriages which often leaves them abandoned, divorced, widowed, killed, or maimed [6]. While the definition of a child soldier is any child under the age of eighteen, soldiers as young as the age of six have been recorded [7]. While it is not possible to know the exact numbers o child soldiers at any given time, it has been verified that between the years 2005-2018 over 65,000 child soldiers have been used in various conflicts around the globe [8].

Who becomes a child soldier?

It is not difficult to predict where children are most susceptible to becoming conscripted into armed conflicts. The children that are poor, displaced from their families or who have limited access to education are very susceptible to recruitment by armed forces [9]. In addition to these vulnerabilities, children that live in combat zones are also more likely to be forcibly recruited [10]. Not all child soldiers are forced conscripts, many are volunteers as a result of societal pressures, or a belief that becoming a soldier offers them the best odds for survival [11]. While yet others are looking for income, food, security, or even adventure [12].

There are over 149 million children that live in high intensity conflict zones, these areas experience thousands of battle related deaths each year [13]. Since 2010 there has been a 34% increase in the number of children living in conflict areas with a staggering 170% increase in the number of “Grave Violations” [14] committed against children in conflict areas, this includes child soldiers.[15]. Girls currently make up 10-30% of child soldiers and are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse, rape, forced pregnancies, and sexual violence.[16]

Where are child Soldiers commonly found

The existence of child soldiers has been documented from every region and from every part of the globe, however there are currently areas that seem to produce large numbers of child soldiers on a regular basis. Countries that have reported the use of child soldiers include:

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| 1. Afghanistan | 7. Mali |
| 2. Columbia | 8. Pakistan |
| 3. India | 9. Thailand |
| 4. Iraq | 10. Sudan |
| 5. Libya | 11. Syria |
| 6. Russia | 12. Yemen[17] |

Child soldiers can be found all over the globe wherever a conflict exists and their use ranges from combat fighters, to spies and couriers and much more. In India for example, Maoist Naxalite rebels in Chhattisgarh have been known to use children as child soldiers. These Maoist's induct children as young as six into children's associations designed for recruitment of child soldiers. The Maoist also use children as young as twelve in armed squads, receive weapons training, and are often assigned to participate in armed encounters with government security forces[18].

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, children have been known to serve in the government armed forces as well as various rebel forces. In fact, at the height of the DRC's war, the United Nations estimates that more than 30,000 boys and girls were fighting various parties to the conflict [19].

In Afghanistan, insurgent groups, including the Taliban and other armed groups, use children as fighters, including in suicide attacks. The United Nations also reports recruitment of children by the Afghan National Police [20].

In Nigeria, Boko Haram kidnapped hundreds of boys, and girls to use as fighters, wives for their fighters, and as suicide bombers. The use of children, especially girls, has become one of the defining, and alarming features of this particular conflict[21].

Finally, in Sierra Leone during the 1990's and early 2000's, the Revolutionary United Front abducted thousands of children and organized those under the age of fifteen into Small Boys units and Small Girls Units [22]

In the current Russian conflict with Ukraine, there have been ample reports of children being used in a variety of ways to support the war effort. It has been reported that minors have been involved in all types of prohibited activities including spying in social media, passing messages, running arms stores, carrying weapons, and serving as guards at check points [23].

The fact is, Russia has a complete "patriotic education" program with a military themed education curriculum aimed at indoctrinating children into support for Russia's military efforts. These programs include hours of patriotic curricula, militarized patriotic camps, military clubs. These military clubs provide instruction weapons training, instruction in martial arts, and indoctrination in protecting the 'motherland"[24]. A social media post, showed seven-year-old Nikita, at one such camp discussing the conflict with Ukraine, "When a Ukrainian appears, we just blast him, and that's it, he's f**ked." [25]

The fact is, as Michael Wessell suggests in *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, "most evidence suggests that ordinary children, faced with the extraordinary circumstances of combat, are capable of learning to kill and to kill repeatedly" [26]. We then should not be surprised that under the extraordinary conditions of extreme conflict, children can be induced, coerced, manipulated, and forced to not only act as soldiers but to also carry out some of the world's worst atrocities.

What Becomes of Child Soldiers?

Child Soldiers have a very difficult time reintegrating into society and dealing with the emotional and psychological trauma that they have suffered. "I was forced literally to kill my best friend as an initiation process into the army. That's something I will never forget, and I still fight with every single day" [27] This is a quote from a former child soldier in the Democratic Republic of Congo and captures the horrible trauma that many of these children have experienced. As is clear by the trauma these children have suffered many have sustained severe psychological damage that will take years of treatment and therapy to overcome.

Many child soldiers, particularly females, are rejected by their communities when they return home and those who are not rejected outright often carry an immovable stigma. Former child soldiers have higher degrees of post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) than their civilian counterparts.

Another cause of rejection is the misplaced perception that these children who were forced to act as adults in combat are in fact adults. As a result,

many have been known to be punished for the actions and treated as war criminals in the same manner as adult soldiers. Sadly, in countries like Uganda and Rwanda, child soldiers have been punished for genocide and rebel causes and incarcerated as a result [28].

Where do we go from here?

There is tremendous agreement from the international community that the use of child soldiers is immoral and very much against modern international law. Notwithstanding this almost universal agreement, the unnatural demands of war will continue to push for the use of child soldiers [29]. In an effort to quell the use of children in war several measures have been put into place, none singularly are sufficient, but the hope is that collectively, they will put an end to this horrible war time practice.

The United Nations focus on this issue has driven a global outcry which has resulted in international legislation. *The Geneva Convention* was the first to attempt to address this problem and while the original conventions do not specifically address the recruitment of child soldiers, later *Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention* enacted in 1977 offers more specific direction. *The Convention on the rights of the Child* enacted in 1989 attempts to improve upon the 1977 protocols. *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* enacted in 1990, has been ratified by 15 African states and specifically prohibits the recruitment of children and the participation in hostilities by children. Of the fifty-four member states of the African Union 46 have become party to this African Charter.

In 1999 the *Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour* was adopted by the International Labor Organization (ILO), and it specifically prohibits the recruitment and direct participation in hostilities of children under the age of eighteen. Finally, the *United States Child Soldier Protection Act* (CSPA) not only defines the use of child soldiers, but it prohibits said use as well. It further grants the State Department the jurisdiction to police countries across the globe to determine and investigate their use of child soldiers with attendant consequences for violations.

The United Nations has declared that the reintegration of child soldiers is critical to restoring communities and rescuing these children from the horrors they have endured. The reintegration program that they promote must have the following features to be a viable reintegration program:

Psychological support: Child soldiers have witnessed unimaginable horrors, have been personally victimized, and have been forced to participate in horrible acts of human tragedy. Some have even been forced to kill their friends and family members. To overcome the trauma these acts have imposed upon them it will take specifically tailored individual and group counseling to restore them.

Education and Vocation Training/Opportunities: Part of the reintegration program must include rebuilding the lives of the former child soldiers. It must be recognized that many were removed from their former lives during the critical years of their education, while yet others were victims of extreme poverty, and no education was available for them. A comprehensive education plan or vocational training plan will help restore these children's self-esteem and allow them to become productive members of their communities once more.

Gender Sensitive Programming: The horrors that these children have endured also includes mistreatment of their bodies, particularly girls. Many of the girls have been victimized by repeated rapes and acts of sexual assault. They have been victimized by forced pregnancies and many of them carry the children of their abusers into their new lives as former child soldiers. Some have reproductive system problems that will require surgery and on-going medical attention.

Young girls are not the only ones sexually abused, many of the boys have experienced sexual assaults or forced into unwanted same-sex relationships as part of their soldiering experience. This type of trauma requires specific programming and treatment and must be included in any viable reintegration program.

Long Term Planning: It is recognized that the experiences of having been a child soldier during the critical developmental years of children will optimally require years of treatment, counseling, and intervention. A comprehensive long-term program that continues to provide support into adulthood and beyond is critical to the success of a viable reintegration program[30].

Conclusion

The use of children as soldiers and involving them in hostilities between warring factions is one of the world's worst remaining human rights violations. It is hoped that with greater focus and attention on this problem with real prosecutorial consequences, this is one form of human rights violations that can be wiped off the face of the earth.

Literature Review

Research Methodology: Qualitative Research

Child soldiers are not new, we have found evidence of children being actively engaged in combat for centuries including biblical references. (Holy Bible, KJV 1 Samuel 17) Even in modern times we note that children have been involved as targets for indoctrination and participants. *Human Trafficking: A Comprehensive Exploration of Modern-Day Slavery*, does an excellent job of providing the historical references for this type of human rights violation.(Stickle) most poignantly exemplified by the Hitler Youth Movement. *Violence Inequality, and Human Freedom* (Idicola).This form

of propaganda and indoctrination continues to be effectively used today, *Human Trafficking: A Comprehensive Exploration of Modern-Day Slavery*, (Stickle).

In order to comprehend the magnitude of the problem it is important to distinguish the differences between child soldiers and children engaged in conflict zones. World Visions, through their publications, provides definitional guidance on this point in particular. *Child Soldiers: What you need to Know*, (World Visions). The international community relies upon the Paris Principles, inter alia, to have a working definition of what constitutes a child soldier. *Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*. These international guidelines are consistent with the definitions used by the United Nations. *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers-children, and Armed conflict* (UN). Prevailing literature identifies factors that are predictive of who becomes child soldiers, Amnesty International in its publication identifies that living in conflict zones, poor educational opportunities, and poverty are some of the leading factors that create the conditions for the use of child soldiers. *Killings by Government*. London: Amnesty International (Amnesty International), This is consistent with the findings of leading scholars in this area of international law. *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* (Martin).

Who then becomes child soldiers? This question leads to research from virtually every corner of the Globe. The Borgen Project, a leading international human rights organization provides clarity on this topic *10 Facts about Child Soldiers* (Rodarte, Borgen Project), also consistent with this is the findings of Save the Children, Save the Children: Published Report, *The Forgotten Ones* and Amnesty International, Amnesty International. *Killings by Government*. London: Amnesty International, Perhaps the best source on this topic we found to be Michael Wessells, *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, who presents a comprehensive, if not final view that, under the right conditions, any child can become either by force or by volunteering, a child soldier. (Wessell).

In order to determine exactly which regions of the world are child soldiers commonly found, or currently in existence it was informative to examine the UNICEF publication *Children Recruited by Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, as well as *Facts About Child Soldiers*, from Human Rights Watch (Becker, HRW) we also examined *Child soldiers worldwide*, another Human Rights Watch Special Report, as well as *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Wessell). These works provide a clear view of the regions of the world where child soldiers can most readily be found.

What then happens to the children that become child soldiers? Are they readily accepted back into their communities? What difficulties do they face? Our research shows that the transition from former child soldier to

child and member of a community is a difficult one indeed and fraught with many handicaps and impediments. We relied upon *Child soldiers, slavery, and the trafficking of children*, (Tiefenbrun) Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, *Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers-children and Armed conflict*, and reports from the U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Department of State, 2017 c, p. 21*, to assist with our understanding of this issue.

How has the international community responded to the incidence of child soldiers is the next primary question we examined in constructing this research. We found that since the United Nations has focused attention on this issue, many organizations have picked up the call for action, these organizations include Amnesty International, Save the Children, Human Rights Watch, UNICEF, World Visions, the Borgen Project and others. International Legislation has also played an important role in this area, this includes The Geneva Conventions, The Paris Principles, the *Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour*, the *United States Child Soldier Protection Act*, *Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention* enacted in 1977 offers more specific direction. *The Convention on the rights of the Child* enacted in 1989 attempts to improve upon the 1977 protocols. *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child* we further examined *Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention* enacted in 1977 which offers more specific direction. *The Convention on the rights of the Child* enacted in 1989 attempts to improve upon the 1977 protocols. *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, enacted in 1990, has been ratified by 15 African states and specifically prohibits the recruitment of children and the participation in hostilities by children was illuminating when we examined the question of how has the international community responded through legislation? The United States and the United Nations are the clear leaders in responding with international legislation aimed at reducing the incidence of the recruitment, forced or voluntary, of child soldiers.

To conclude this research, we had to look at what the lives of former child soldiers would look like after their experiences as child soldiers. Specifically, we wanted to view research on reintegration. It was determined by our research that reintegration is not easy for these children. In *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection* (Wessell) we find that many former child soldiers are rejected by their families and communities; many have no families or communities to return to. Girls are regularly shunned and stigmatized, with many of them suffering severe psychological trauma from having been raped, sexually assaulted, forced into marriage, and forced pregnancies. Upon their return, often, they are treated as adults when in fact they were children while soldiers. This type of treatment has led many to be prosecuted and incarcerated. While yet others are treated as war criminals. The international community has spoken out against this type of treatment and called for

better treatment of former child soldiers. We found that the United Nations has specified that reintegration requires intentional planning, and the optimal reintegration programs include *psychological support, education and or vocational training* with opportunities, *gender sensitive programming*, and *long-term planning* for the support and aid to survivors of child soldiering. Essential to this effort is the *United States Child Soldier Protection Act*, which not only specifies the treatment recommended for former child soldiers but grants the United States State Department the jurisdiction to police countries across the globe to determine and investigate their use of child soldiers with attendant consequences for violations.

Additional Research will be conducted for a follow up article examining the success and or failure experiences of reintegration programs for former child soldiers. It is expected that we will examine reports from *Human Rights Watch*, *Save the Children program*, *Amnesty International*, and reports from the *United Nations*, to determine the effectiveness and whether a new course of action is recommended.

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