

Evaluating Child Soldiering In Africa

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ABSTRACT

For hundreds of years, children have suffered many hardships during armed conflicts, and they have been especially vulnerable to being recruited, abducted or coerced into joining armed groups for the sake of child soldiering. As child soldiers, there is the inherent danger they will be killed, maimed, or traumatized during combat or while fulfilling such other duties as laying mines and building explosives, spying, or acting as decoys. Additionally, children suffer serious mental, physical, and emotional injuries from direct and indirect participation in armed conflict, including witnessing, and perhaps perpetrating, horrendous atrocities, as well as from sexual slavery, which girl child soldiers are so often subjected to. If a child soldier is captured or surrenders, the child is then often subjected to prolonged administrative detention and/or prosecution. Thus, due to their age, child soldiers are extremely vulnerable because they remain dependent on adult care. In this article, we evaluate the cultural and political background for using child soldiers as well as the contributing factors to child soldiering.

Keywords: Child soldiers, Fighting capacity, Rebel groups, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Governments, militias, and especially rebel organizations have actively and in large numbers recruited children throughout the world [1]; [2]. Although child soldiering is not a new phenomenon, it has turned (again) into a more common practice since the end of World War II, while children's contribution has changed fundamentally as well [3]. With an increase in internal conflicts and changes in warfare [4], children as the targets of violence and also as members and even combatants of rebel groups have become more central to the way wars are fought: their involvement in today's conflicts can no longer be classified as passive [5]. Although it is unclear how many children are currently involved in armed groups, the fact that children (have to) actively participate (even as fighters) in military campaigns constitutes one of the most serious violations of children's rights [6]; [7]; [8].

While the scholarly research on this phenomenon is substantially growing, activists, think tanks, or civil society groups have conducted most of the earlier work [9]. The existing academic studies on child soldiering - despite being few in number and largely focusing on single countries or being of a descriptive nature have nonetheless revealed crucial insights. For example, given a predominant focus on child soldier recruitment, scholars looked at the "general systemic factors" such as globalization, the development of small weapons, or legitimacy concerns [10]; [11]; [12]. Others examined why children would join armed organizations, i.e., the so-called supply side of child soldier recruitment. [13], for instance, claims that children might join armed groups as a way out of poverty.

[14] states that children can be daring and tenacious in combat, particularly when under the influence of drugs or when compelled by political or religious zeal.

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Child units can greatly add to confusion on battlefields, slowing opposing forces' progress. Yet, the relationship between child soldiers in rebel groups and their military effectiveness has not yet been explored systematically and rigorous empirical research remains scarce. The existing work, although having the somewhat different focus on the *recruitment* of children, points to contradictory answers. On one hand, the presumed military effectiveness of child soldiers stems from their characteristics: they can provide logistical support, it is cheaper to provide for them, they are more obedient, and more easily susceptible than mature combatants. Also, children socialized into rebel groups acquire the norms and values of their militant environment and become significantly more aggressive than their grown-up counterparts [15]; [16]. On the other hand, adolescent soldiers may negatively affect rebel groups' fighting capacities as children are less proficient fighters than adult combatants and they are more difficult to control. Examining the impact of child soldiers on armed groups' fighting capacities may not only contribute to the on-going debate about what makes children attractive recruits, but additionally provide arguments against the use of adolescent soldiers in conflict, which has inherently short and long-term implications for the development of children in affected countries [17].

The Political and Cultural Background For Using Child Soldiers

In 2006 the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) held its first multiparty elections in 40 years, marking the end of a difficult three year transition period that followed nearly a decade of war. Two successive wars, the first from 1996 to 1997 and the second from 1998 to 2005, left DRC devastated and at least five million of its citizen dead, some due to disease and starvation but many as a result of torture and ill-treatment.

Cultural factors play an important role in the origins of conflict in DRC. In contrast with the past, when conflicts were ascribed mainly to political or economic

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motives, conflicts today are localized and have ethnic, civil and/or religious causes. They stem from longstanding intergroup rivalries that often lead to political instability. A second characteristic is the increased intensity of the violence and the seemingly irrational behaviour typical of people involved in ethnic and civil conflicts in the DRC. For example, civilians are increasingly the specific targets of armed conflicts as evidenced by the rising number of civilian casualties in proportion to the total. Women and children in particular are now more likely to suffer casualties. Families and communities are now more likely to disintegrate and lose their cohesion. While young children play no part in negotiations or even the conduct of war, they are subjected to severe injuries, visible and invisible.

They experience destitution, abandonment, neglect, abuse, exploitation, and long-term emotional and psychological effects. Of all the weapons of modern warfare, the landmine is one of the most lethal to children. Mines are not only a common cause of mortality, injury and disability, but also the cause of widespread social and economic disruption and psychosocial distress in child soldiers. Land mines threaten not only individual survival, but the survival and continuity of whole communities. They are forced to leave their lands and seek work in urban areas, increasing the number of displaced persons.

In most cases there are no maps indicating where mines are laid. In some parts of DRC, child soldiers are mutilated for life because of the thousands of mines strewn over the countryside and are abandoned to their fate and forced to eke out an existence as best they can.¹ Anti-personnel mines often look like brightly coloured toys, but when mines are picked up or stepped on, they maim and kill indiscriminately. In some places troops send child soldiers on ahead, thereby testing the route. A third characteristic of conflict today in DRC is the significant involvement of children and young person's as participants in the conflict.

An Overview of The Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Armed Conflicts

Children recruited for armed groups perform a range of tasks, e.g., “participation in combat, laying mines and explosives, scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards, training, drill or other preparations, and logistics and support functions such as portering, cooking and domestic labour” (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers 2010). In light of this, the academic literature on child soldier usage can generally be categorized along two interrelated, albeit different streams [18]; [19]. The first one focuses on the general or systemic factors to explain the rise in child soldier usage since the end of World War II. [20], for example, argues that inequalities increased with globalization, which weakened social norms and value systems to protect children from recruitment. This, in turn, led to a rise in the number of children used in armed conflict. Additionally, [21] highlights the sheer abundance of young recruits, as overpopulation made children cheap or renewable resources as influences of child soldiering. Furthermore, [22] stresses the fact that weapons have been simplified and became lighter in the recent past, which makes them usable for children.

In this context, scholars emphasized that these general systematic factors have facilitated the “transformation” of children into active fighters who are then just as militarily effective as adults. In turn, children may therefore be recruited more often than in earlier periods of time [23]. Put differently, while children may be recruited for secondary support functions [24], [25], e.g., logistics, carrying goods, cooking, or intelligence gathering, some of these systematic factors make it more likely that children take a more active role in combat. [3], for instance, claims that most child soldiers do in fact participate in combat actively rather than fulfilling secondary functions. This is also confirmed by a [7] survey, which indicates that more than 90 percent of the children had served in combat rather than in more supportive functions.

Individual research on armed groups active in Liberia, Colombia, or the Central African Republic confirms this assessment (Human Rights Watch 2003; International Labor Office 2003; IRIN 2003).

The second stream mainly studies the motivation of children to join armed groups, i.e., the supply side of child soldiering. The most prominent influences in this context pertain to the lack of education and future perspectives, as well as poverty and starvation [12]. Other identified supply-side variables are the social pressure exercised by family and friends due to religious or ethnic identification, the desire to protect the home village and community, or the pursuit of “adventures and excitement” [20]; [21]; [22]; [23]; [24]; [25].

Against this background, a third stream recently emerged as a response to the inability of the first two to explain variation in child soldier usage across warring parties active in the same period of time and the same country (or a common region) [16]. To elucidate this variation, scholars now increasingly focus on the so-called demand side of child soldier recruitment, i.e., what are the incentives of armed groups to recruit children? One important and often mentioned reason might be that rebel organizations draft children, because they improve the military effectiveness or fighting capacity of armed groups. [3] emphasize, for example, that “children will be recruited if they are more effective fighters than we suppose” [8]; [9].

Contributing Factors

The surge in intrastate conflicts after the Cold War surge has brought hundreds of thousands of young children to the front lines in sub-Saharan Africa. Armed struggles over power and resources have caused civil wars between state and non-state actors. Lacking the financial and military capacity to maintain rule of law, weak governments have incited multiple power-hungry political entrepreneurs to take up arms. Despite limited resources and varying degrees of support, these warlords have easily countered governmental forces by tapping into the

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abundant supply of easily accessible and expendable fighters child soldiers.

Utilizing extreme indoctrination and fear tactics, warlords have been able to transform impressionable, dependent youth into loyal, ferocious armed forces capable of overtaking comparatively powerful, well-equipped governmental forces. Governmental forces have followed suit, placing young children on the front lines to fight against their peers, as was the case in the Sudanese civil war. In the early stages of the conflict, 36 percent of government forces were consisted of children, compared to the majority 64 percent fighting for the rebel forces. By the end of the war, the number of children fighting for the Sudanese army had increased to 76 percent [19].

The widespread availability of small arms has also contributed to the increase in child soldiering. Hundreds of thousands of weapons that flooded into Africa after the Cold War have proven to be a timely asset for fighting factions. In addition to the surplus of small arms circulating in the global market, excessive manufacturing and technological improvements have yielded accessible,

The international community should realize that recruiting and using children during battles is not just an immoral strategy, but can in fact positively affect rebels' fighting capacities. This does certainly not make the aim of abolishing child soldiering easier, as activists may be ill-advised to try to dissuade child soldiering on tactical grounds. Hence,

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lightweight, inexpensive machines that can be easily mastered by young children. This dangerous trend has allowed even small rebel groups to emerge as powerful forces, capable of terrorizing, displacing and murdering hundreds of thousands of citizens within their own states.

Unprotected displacement camps have also contributed to the increased number of young combatants. The surge in armed conflicts and widespread violence in sub-Saharan Africa have caused an estimated 15.2 million people, with the majority consisting of women and children, to seek refuge in protected camps within or outside their homelands. Although these new settlements have been intended to provide a safe haven for vulnerable populations, the lack of camp protection has inadvertently resulted in ideal training and recruitment camps for armed factions preying on vulnerable young transients. The abduction of 4,700 refugees in Chad during a one-month period has demonstrated the danger facing millions of people already battling the insecurity of displacement, disease, poverty, and increased mortality.

CONCLUSION

governments and activists should rather rely on other, more enforcing ways that can change rebels' cost-benefit analysis more substantially. For instance, economic sanctions or counter-propaganda strategies can be considered as a worthwhile tool in order to enforce compliance with international law.

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