

Children Without Childhood: Robbed Innocence and Its Implications for Violence

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Background

Afghanistan, Chad, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and Sudan - these are eight countries in which armed forces – be it in a national capacity or in *de facto* rebel militia - regularly and mercilessly exploit hundreds of thousands of children.^[i] A quick internet search for images of child soldiers turns up thousands of pictures of hardened children with vacant stares holding machine guns; something alarming but not unexpected, in the thousands of photographs that appear, not a single child smiles. These are children because of their chronological ages - ranging from as young as five years old to seventeen - not because of how they behave, what they do, how they think. With their childhoods quickly ripped away, these individuals are often given guns and ordered to kill or to die; ruthless violence becomes endemic to their lives. With a current estimated count of 250,000 child soldiers (possibly as high as 300,000), something must be done to preserve these children's innocence, as well as to prevent future aggression and hostility that this indoctrination is engendering.^{[ii][iii]}

So, who is to blame for this ongoing crisis? The governments, the children, or the rebel leaders who put youths to use for their own cause? In 2007, The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), published *The Paris Principles*, wherein "The Principles recognise that, in situations of armed conflict, States and armed groups are

the primary actors responsible for the protection of civilians in their effective control and that if they are unable or unwilling to meet all of their humanitarian responsibilities directly they are charged with enabling the provision of humanitarian action by impartial actors.”^[iv] While blameworthiness and responsibility are major components of exploiting youth as child soldiers and accountability must be expected of those responsible, the immediate focus should not be only on blaming the responsible parties, but rather, that there should be a global aim of addressing the more pressing issues of prevention of violence, rehabilitation from the damage caused by severe indoctrination, and reintegration into a non-violent world.

To understand the degree to which child soldiers are exploited, we must first clarify the roles into which these children are generally forced. According to *The Paris Principles*, a child “associated with armed forces or armed groups,” is defined as “any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”^[v] Therefore, the at-risk group is clearly much larger than that comprised by the sadly iconic gun-toting children; as such, “child soldier” describes a number of functions that these children are expected to perform, many of which inappropriate for people of any age, but especially for young children, and which are carried out regardless of the children’s lack of maturity and inability to understand and give consent.

To realize the gravity of ethical corruption regarding this human rights violation, we must first discuss several motives for why young children are regularly kidnapped and coerced by armed forces into becoming child soldiers. Firstly, it does not require much effort to steal these children away from their families. Entire communities are constantly terrorized with individual and collective punishment – with frequent murderous raids, kidnappings, mass rape, wanton destruction, and threats of violent annihilation - if they fail to surrender a given number of children to these forces. At the various, early stages of development during which these children are captured, they still rely on authority figures to understand the ways of the world; therefore, they can be easily influenced. Often under the effects of drugs forced upon them by their captors, these children can undergo frightful transformations with regards to moral understanding, appropriate social behavior, and sense of self, in relation to others. The physical, emotional, and psychological malleability and susceptibility to indoctrination - and the subsequent harmful consequences - are often sufficient to desensitize these child soldiers to the atrocities they witness and commit. Furthermore, young children do not have the capacity to understand the gravity and finality of death, the mental and emotional capacity to comprehend the meaning of their actions - whether self-intended or when ordered to do so - or the willpower to resist the authority that coerces them into committing such despicable and vile actions.^[vi]

Moving Forward

In response to this widespread, terrible crisis, on March 6, 2014, the United Nations publicly announced its most recent goal: “to end the recruitment and use of children in Government forces in conflict by 2016. [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon stressed that children should be armed with pens and textbooks, not guns.”^[vii] *The Secretary-General’s Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict*, named eight countries in

which armed forces recruit and use children as soldiers. As previously noted, they are: Afghanistan, Chad, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and Sudan. ^[viii] As of June 2013, the first six nation states listed had agreed to collaborate with the United Nations to reduce the recruitment and exploitation of children as soldiers. ^[ix] Discussions with the governments of Yemen and Sudan have already occurred and, according to the United Nations, the two are expected to sign action plans, as well. However, the fact that authorities in these countries have been complicit in the commission of grave crimes against their own children, in addition to having poorly functioning democratic institutions devoted to safeguarding human rights, makes their public pronouncements questionable. Worse still, the ostensible cooperation with the United Nations has been consistently used as a foil against exposure and criticism.

Revisiting an earlier question, when government security forces recruit and employ child soldiers for use in armed conflict, upon whose shoulders does the responsibility lie to rescue and protect these broken youths? I agree with the spirit of the *Paris Principles* that stipulate that in situations of armed conflict it is primarily the responsibility of the states and armed groups to provide the public with humanitarian protection and aid. However, it is certainly unrealistic to expect the violators to become human rights enforcers. Therefore, when child soldiers comprise a significant component of armed forces, who then is to be held responsible for the action of these young killers and what can be done when innocent children become mechanical murderers? To what degree, if at all, should child soldiers be held accountable for their actions? Here, we must consider the mental state and capacity of child soldiers – in both an emotional and psychological sense. In evaluating issues of moral responsibility, we cannot ignore the context in which the child soldiers operate; we must take into account what exactly is at stake, how the children interpret and internalize violent experiences that surround them, how cognitively aware these children are of their actions and the ensuing consequences, what their state of cognizance is (i.e., drugged, drunk, brainwashed), and how much physical and psychological trauma can be endured before an individual's moral sense and personal dignity collapse. With their lives torn asunder, these children are robbed of their innocence and of their trust in humanity; what remains is a generation of deeply scarred minds and souls.

As hundreds of thousands of child soldiers are currently being used, there are crucial issues that demand our immediate attention: protecting children by preventing future exploitation, rehabilitating the psychologically, physically, and emotionally damaged children, and reintegrating the youth into protective, rehabilitative, and healthy societies. There must be a collective, universal effort to end this exploitation of children and save them from witnessing and taking part in human rights atrocities. Although the attitude is commendable, I am wary that the action plans between countries with child soldiers and the United Nations represent noncommittal efforts on both sides. I am not advocating for foreign invasion into these countries, however appeals of nonmaleficence and justice to these national forces will only fall on deaf ears. I worry that this trusting reliance on this illusion of cooperation will inevitably lead to the betrayal and abandonment of the victims, the damaged children; particularly since child soldiers are often ostracized from their families and home communities as a result of the atrocities they are forced to commit.

In hopes of rehabilitating rescued child soldiers - reversing as much emotional and mental damage as possible - we need to collectively engage in a prolonged, involved educational and therapeutic intervention; ideally, these efforts would involve support from people within the communities most affected by this crisis, so as to restore a sense of worth to these children. When approaching this difficult task of rehabilitation, a key concept

that must be honestly confronted is that what has happened cannot be undone. This sensitive issue must be addressed in a supportive environment in which the youths should neither be punished for their previous actions nor be exonerated. Instead, we should help them to understand the significance of their actions, explaining how they may not have had the discretion to refuse to participate in acts of brutality.

Realizing the devastating effects of the conditions into which child soldiers are forced, I believe these children should be rescued, protected, and rehabilitated. In our most vulnerable, exposed state, we cannot always be accountable for our actions. For these often kidnapped children, the integrity of the self, willpower, and sense of agency are compromised; instead, these internal structures have been distorted and overwhelmed by violent ideology and action. I do not believe their actions can truly be classified as *decisions* because exploited and abused child soldiers have limited capacity with respect to making informed decisions. It is crucial to bear in mind that they do not have the intellectual and emotional maturity to comprehend the meaning of their newly assigned identities and ascribed roles. Furthermore, the range of severe emotional and psychological trauma that these youths experience often serves to blind them from the horrors of violence, their actions, and the human rights violations they regularly commit. They behave in the manner in which they have been treated and taught, where violence is an acceptable, standard part of everyday life.

Only once the world succeeds in eradicating child exploitation in situations of armed conflict and rehabilitating and reintegrating rescued child soldiers - challenging goals, at the very least - should we turn our focus to assigning blame and retribution.

REFERENCES

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^[ix] *Supra*, War Child.