

Forum: General Assembly 3

Issue: Decommissioning child soldiers in national military, paramilitary, and other armed groups

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Introduction

“Between 2005 and 2022, more than 105,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher” (UNICEF, 2021). These children, more commonly referred to as “child soldiers”, are subject to much more exploitation and abuse than one might think. Children join armed forces for various reasons which may include abduction, threats, and others may be driven by poverty or the influence of their communities. Whatever the cause may be, it is clear that the recruitment and use of children by armed forces is “a grave violation of child rights and international humanitarian law” as directly stated by the United Nations and UNICEF and it also perpetuates cycles of violence and instability in nations facing conflicts. Furthermore, child soldier victims also must endure severe physical and psychological consequences in the long-term. Such consequences can include PTSD, depression, hostility, and inability to cope with daily life. Addressing this issue and focusing on demobilization requires a comprehensive grasp of the socio-political context and factors that lead to the recruitment of children into the armed forces specific to nations. This then emphasizes the need for a more in-depth exploration of strategies, challenges and ethical considerations surrounding steps to rehabilitate and reintegrate child soldiers, highlighting the importance of international cooperation and sustainable interventions to break cycles of conflict and protect children's rights.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Soldier

Any person under the age of 18 who is enlisted in the armed services or is utilized by such groups in any capacity, including but not limited to combat, support duties, or espionage, is considered a child soldier.

Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR)

A procedure used to help ex-combatants return to normal life through ways such as disarming them, demobilizing them from armed groups, and helping them reintegrate into society by providing them with support and rehabilitation.

Paris Principles and Commitments

The Paris Principles and Commitments provide a framework for the protection of children from recruitment and use in armed forces and groups. They include guidelines for preventing recruitment, releasing child soldiers, and supporting their reintegration.

Children in Armed Conflict (CAAC)

A term encompassing aspects of children affected by armed conflict, including recruitment as child soldiers. It highlights the need for protection, assistance, and prevention of harm to children in conflict zones.

Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict

An appointed official by the UN Secretary-General who works to advocate for the rights and protection of children affected by armed conflict, including those recruited as child soldiers.

Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs

Programs aimed at providing psychosocial support, education, vocational training, and community reintegration for former child soldiers to help them rebuild their lives.

Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism

Mechanisms established to monitor and report on the recruitment and use of child soldiers in conflict zones. This often involves collecting and analyzing information on violations and advocating for accountability.

Child Protection

A broader field focusing on protecting the rights and well-being of children, including efforts to prevent their involvement in armed conflict and ensuring their protection in conflict zones.

Background

The recruitment, as well as deployment of child soldiers in national military, paramilitary, and various armed groups, represent a deeply troubling and prevalent issue rooted in centuries of human conflict with examples from both modern and ancient societies. A combination of socio-political, economic, and cultural elements fuel this phenomenon, which is furthered by armed groups that rely on impressionable youth during times of crisis.

Historical Progression

World War I and World War II

One historical precedent for the use of child soldiers can be found in the context of World War I and World War II. While not as systematic as more recent conflicts, there are accounts of underage individuals volunteering or being conscripted into military service during these particular global conflicts.

The desperate nature of wartime mobilization often led to lax enforcement of age restrictions, inadvertently exposing young boys to the harsh realities of battle (Pollarine, 2008).

Documentations and Specific Instances

Sierra Leone Conflict

One of the earliest documented instances of large-scale child soldier recruitment occurred during the Sierra Leone Civil War (1991-2002).

These young soldiers gained notoriety for taking part in horrific violent crimes, such as massacres (Betancourt, 2010). The crisis in Sierra Leone raised awareness of child soldiers' situation on a global scale and led to a growing realization of the pressing need for action. Furthermore, drawing attention to the fact that armed organizations typically make use of children's vulnerabilities and manipulable resources in environments characterized by political instability, economic hardship, and a lack of efficient governance and education.

End of Cold War

During the end of the Cold War, it was also possible to see a rise in intrastate conflicts, further exacerbating the issue of child soldier recruitment. In countries such as Liberia and Sudan, armed factions engaged in protracted conflicts, and the utilization of child soldiers became a tactic to raise their ranks. For instance, 'Lord's Resistance Army' (LRA) in Uganda, led by Joseph Kony, became synonymous with the abduction and conscription of children, employing them as soldiers, and even as sex slaves.

Global Awareness

International awareness and concern regarding the issue gained momentum in the late 20th century, leading to efforts to address the plight of child soldiers internationally. For example, the "2000 Optional Protocol" to the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' on the involvement of children in armed conflict set a significant milestone by establishing 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and participation in hostilities (United Nations Children and Armed Conflict, 2002). This protocol, paired with the United Nations Security Council resolutions, aimed to create a legal framework for the prevention of child recruitment and the demobilization of child soldiers.

The 20th Century to the 21st Century and Progress in the Issue

Efforts to address the problem of child soldiers often include disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) which aim not only to remove children from armed groups, but also to provide psychosocial support, education, and vocational training to facilitate their reintegration into society. Such programs have started to emerge into the 20th century with a rise in awareness regarding the issue. Despite this development, significant challenges still remain. Child soldiers continue to be recruited and used in armed conflicts in regions such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Syria. The complexity of these conflicts and the difficulties in monitoring and implementing effective interventions highlight the ongoing nature of this problem as a whole.

Major Parties Involved

National Governments

National governments are central to decommissioning child soldiers through the enactment and enforcement of laws prohibiting their recruitment. Governments lead demobilization efforts, providing psychological support, education, and vocational training. These multifaceted approaches highlight the critical role of national governments in addressing and resolving the issue, and some relevant national governments may include The Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, and more.

African Union (AU)

The African Union actively addresses the issue of decommissioning child soldiers by advocating for regional initiatives and collaborations. The AU engages member states to implement and strengthen legal frameworks, conducts awareness campaigns, and supports demobilization and reintegration programs. Through the Peace and Security Council, the AU monitors and addresses conflicts involving child soldiers, working towards the eradication of this grave violation of children's rights across the African continent.

UN Security Council

The United Nations Security Council plays a crucial role in addressing the issue of decommissioning child soldiers. Through resolutions and mandates, the Security Council establishes mechanisms to monitor and report on the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts. It collaborates with member states, international organizations, and NGOs to implement measures aimed at preventing recruitment and ensuring the successful demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration of child soldiers, working towards the protection of children in conflict zones.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

The United Nations International Children's Fund is actively addressing the issue of child soldier release through the implementation of a comprehensive program. UNICEF supports governments in creating protective environments for children affected by conflict, providing psychosocial support, education, and vocational training. Through partnerships with local communities and international organizations, UNICEF contributes to the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers, defends their rights, and works to prevent further recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts.

International Criminal Court (ICC)

The ICC has the ability to prosecute individuals for war crimes, including those related to the recruitment of child soldiers. The Rome Statute, which initially established the ICC, considers the recruitment or conscription of children under the age of 15 into armed forces or groups, or the use of children to actively participate in hostilities, to be a war crime. The ICC's work overall helps prevent impunity for those responsible for the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Noteworthy international efforts have been made to address the issue of decommissioning child soldiers in the national military, paramilitary, and other armed groups. For instance, the involvement of international

organizations, governments, and non-governmental organizations working collaboratively to implement strategies for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of child soldiers is a valuable development to mention. More specifically, steps towards the DDR process have included United Nations Security Council's multiple resolutions addressing the recruitment and use of child soldiers (Such as Resolutions 1261, 1612, and 1882) which have emphasized the need for the protection of children in armed conflict and have established monitoring and reporting mechanisms to record violations. To add, the "Paris Principles and Commitments" were developed in 2007 to provide a framework for the release and reintegration of child soldiers. Through being supported by various governments, these principles outline guidelines for preventing the recruitment of children and supporting proper rehabilitation.

Many individual countries affected by the use of child soldiers have also taken steps towards implementing national programs to address the issue. These programs often include rehabilitation and training to help the reintegration of former child soldiers back into their communities. In comparison, non-governmental organizations, such as Child Soldiers International, have been actively involved in "research, advocacy, and on-the-ground initiatives" aimed at directly supporting the resolution of the issue of child soldier recruitments and reintegration (International Action Network on Small Arms).

While progress has been made, challenges still persist. For instance, the difficulty of reaching and rehabilitating child soldiers in conflict zones, the need for sustained funding, resources, monitoring and the importance of addressing the root causes of recruitment all remain crucial pieces of the puzzle government has not yet fully addressed. Ongoing collaboration between international entities, governments, and "grassroots organizations" remains crucial in tackling this complex issue. The success of DDR programs, furthermore, is dependent on the collaboration of national governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities in designing programs that are best fit for the needs of child soldiers in specific regions and communities.

Possible Solutions

In terms of possible solution approaches, promoting education and awareness campaigns to inform communities, families, and children about the risks and consequences of child soldier recruitment is a crucial implementation that nations facing conflicts should invest a portion of their time into. Within a similar context, providing specialized trauma counseling and mental health support to help child soldiers overcome psychological trauma should not be overlooked. This includes addressing issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and reintegrating children into supportive environments. Creating supportive environments also depends on increasing awareness regarding the issue in areas that are most affected. Additional sets of solutions can revolve around the education of the community which can be done through community workshops held by professionals and the support of national governments. On a similar note, school programs and integration of awareness into the educational curriculum can help spread knowledge regarding the detrimental consequences of child soldiers.

Furthermore, strengthening national and international legal frameworks to explicitly prohibit the recruitment and use of child soldiers should be prioritized in tandem to more educational solution implementations. Governments should enact and enforce laws that set a minimum age for military service and criminalize the recruitment of children that are against set legislations. In addition, engaging in diplomatic efforts to advocate for

the prevention of child soldier recruitment at the international level is important as it would include working with governments, armed groups, and international organizations to raise awareness and build consensus on the issue. Ensuring the safe and voluntary disarmament of child soldiers from armed groups also involves creating safe spaces for surrender and providing incentives for disarmament. Establishing demobilization centers equipped with trained staff to handle the specific needs of child soldiers. These centers provide psychosocial support, medical care, and initial education (Vargas-Barón, 2007).

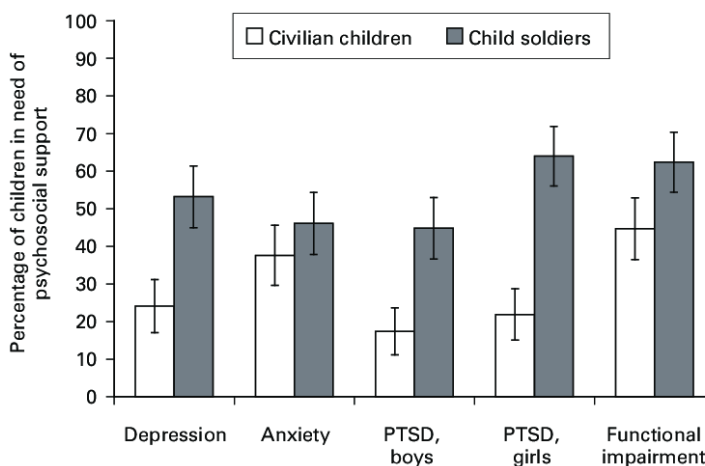


Figure 1: A bar chart illustrating the number of child soldiers in need of psychological support in comparison to civilian children (Research Gate)

On a different note, strengthening the ‘United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict’ to document and report parties involved in child soldier recruitment is a crucial development that should be implemented in all relevant regions of conflict. Such mechanisms would help hold those responsible for child soldier employment accountable and provide a basis for targeted interventions.

In summary, addressing the complex issue of child soldiers’ release requires a comprehensive strategy that includes prevention, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, international cooperation, reintegration, socio-economic development, and accountability. International cooperation is especially relevant because this issue is not limited to one specific country, but it is rather an international issue that requires international unanimity in order for rights and policies to be effectively defined and implemented. The successful implementation of these solutions depends on the cooperation and efforts of governments, international organizations, NGOs, local communities and more to protect the rights and well-being of children affected by armed conflicts.

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