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### Child Soldiers: Their Life within the Warzone

On a sunny afternoon in the middle of Uganda, Africa, a young boy is on his way home from school. He smiles as he sees his parents who are waving at him with joy. Suddenly gunshots are heard as armed militants storm the small village where the boy lives. The boy is captured and forced to watch the death of his parents and other people he once knew. The militants then take the boy along with other children and run off. While imaginary, this scenario is all too real in the lives of many boys and girls in Uganda and around the world who are forced to become a growing epidemic: a child soldier.

Children participating in wars are common and date back as far as The Hundred Years War in France (Mancini). However, within the past few decades there have been a startling increase in the number of child soldiers used throughout the world. Governments and opposition groups have begun to use children as a means for war with no regards to the well-being of the children involved. They are considered expendable, like the child soldiers who were sent in waves over minefields during the war between Iran and Iraq (Fund). The amount of child soldiers used in warfare today, whether it be voluntarily or against their will, along with the psychological effects that they suffer is horrific.

The Council of Foreign Relations states that approximately 300,000 child soldiers are fighting in nearly three-quarters of the world's conflicts with 80% of the children below the age of 15, some being as young as 7 or 8. Another half a million are serving in armies that are not currently in war. Of all the world's armed forces and organizations, 40% of them have children

servicing in their ranks. Some countries that have child soldiers within their ranks include Uganda, Colombia, Liberia, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Kaplan).

With the rising increase of child soldiers being used in armies and battles across the world, it is important to understand why the militias who use these children for war find it so effective. “Everyone asks why do they go after children? Because you can manipulate them” says Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier and ambassador for The United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) (Beah). Most of the children used in militias are under the age of 15, they are not yet old enough to understand what they are fighting for and who to trust. It is this factor which makes them vulnerable to manipulation tactics like intimidation and fear. Manipulating children ensures that they will obey orders and makes it less likely that they will run away.

Another reason militants like to use children as weapons of war is because as warfare has advanced, weapons have been made that can easily be carried by children onto the battlefield. AK-47s and M-16s are deadly and can be easily carried by children to use in battles. A child of 10 can be taught how to strip and reassemble an AK-47, much less to shoot it. They are also cheap, with AK-47s costing only US\$6 in one African country (Fund). They are incredibly durable and with the large accumulation of them in war zones, armed forces have enough to supply a large amount of child soldiers with them.

The Council of Foreign Relations also says that another reason militants like to use children as soldiers is because they add confusion to the battlefield. They demoralize the soldiers they are fighting against and hesitation from those soldiers could cost them their life. Children are also daring when provoked by religious or political motives and under the influence of drugs. Militants also like to use them as advancing troops during ambush attacks (Kaplan).

The documentary film, *Soldier Child* by Neil Abramson, states that one of the main methods used by militants to acquire child soldiers is by abducting the children and forcing them to fight. The children are kidnapped mainly at night from home, but it could also happen in the middle of the day on their way to school or to the store. Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, is reported to have had his army abduct over 12,000 children to use as child soldiers. After they are abducted, their hands are tied behind them to their waist. After some time they are eventually tied to a gun, and then to the person who kidnapped them. Once abducted, most of the children are forced to kill either family members or friends. An 11 year old child named Simon who was abducted was told that if he or any of the other children tried to escape the militants would go and burn all the houses in their village. Those who try to escape and are recaptured are either killed by new abductees or are tortured (Abramson).

The other way that children end up fighting in armies is by volunteering in them. The main reason that children volunteer to become soldiers is a problem that many face around the world: poverty. Many of the children come from families that undergo many hardships like losing either their father, brother, or other supporting family member. Their family is very poor, so the children enlist in the militias to gain money and contribute. A child serving the terrorist group Al-Qaeda can earn up to \$300 a month to contribute to their family which needs about \$100-\$150 a month to survive (Mancini).

Another reason a child can want to volunteer is to have some sort of a family relationship. In war torn countries like Sierra Leone and Myanmar, many children have lost their families and homes and have nowhere to go. They join these armies because the armies protect them and give them a family type connection. They will also volunteer to fight and get revenge against the soldiers who killed their families.

The armies of countries who accept children who want to volunteer find ways to hide the children's true age. Khin Thant, a former commanding officer in the Myanmar Army in Myanmar, says that "if a child came to join the army at 15 years of age, they would let them sign as 18 and then issue a new ID card, so if the international community were to check, the card would serve as proof he was 18" (Jolliffe). The minimal age for a child to join an army is 18 according to the human rights law and letting any child under the age of 15 be recruited and used in an army is a war crime as said by the International Criminal Court (Conflict). Therefore armies must find ways to prove a child is above 18, even if the child isn't.

Once a child has been either abducted or has volunteered to join a type of armed force, their life within the warzone begins. From the beginning they are forced to kill whether it be friends, family members, children who tried to escape, or someone chosen at random. The way that the child kills the person includes stabbing with a knife or bayonet, stomping, shooting and other various methods. The children perform the killings in groups but can also perform them alone. They are required to perform these killings as part of the training that the militia makes the children undergo.

Any type of emotion is forbidden and any child who shows emotions like crying or regret at any point while they are part of the militia are either killed or beaten ruthlessly by either the soldiers or the other children. Ishmael Beah described how "a nine-year-old boy cried because they missed their mother and they were shot" (Beah). One of the beatings that the Uganda children have to suffer through is the beating of 20 sticks. The child is beaten with a stick until the stick breaks, and they are continually beaten until 20 sticks have been broken (Abramson). The reason for doing this is to show the other children that if they begin to act like the child that was killed or beaten, they will receive the same punishment.

Soon after joining a type of militia, the children will start to undergo training where they are brainwashed and taught to kill. According to UNICEF this training is not pleasant and many children suffer greatly during it. The children of Cambodia, for example, are brutally beaten and terrorized in order to turn them into heartless killers. The reason for the abuse and the terror is to “socialize them into violence” and to harden them for battle. In Sierra Leone the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces the children to either witness or participate in the torturing and killing of their own friends and family. This brutalizes the children and outlaws them from their village, therefore making the RUF their only home (Fund). The type of training that child soldiers from other countries go through isn’t much different with much of the abuse and killing remaining the same.

While they are undergoing training, many children start out doing common tasks like being a porter, where they will carry heavy loads like injured soldiers and ammunition for soldiers. They will also perform other duties such as serving as lookouts and messengers or cooking for the soldiers in the army. More recently children are being used as suicide bombers and other acts of terror as modern warfare grows more horrific and destructive (Conflict).

After the children have completed what little training they go through, they are forced to do different tasks. An article in the journal *Child Development* stated that research done on 330 former Uganda child soldiers showed that 41.8% were required to participate in front-line tasks, 55% were boys and 26.8% were girls. These tasks included fighting, looting, and abducting other children for recruitment as child soldiers. 28% had to perform logistic tasks like spying, escorting commanders, and carrying heavy loads. 34.3% of these children were boys and 20.8% were girls. Another 27.7% were assigned domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and carrying for

the younger children. The majority of the children performing these tasks are girls with 47.7 % while 10.1% of the children being boys (Klasen).

Almost all of the children who are child soldiers suffer and experience horrific acts of violence. Former child soldier Emmanuel Jal described his life as on the battlefield as “hell”. “Most of us have seen our homes burned down, have seen terrible things happen” says Jal who was 8 years old when he was abducted and made into a child soldier (Jal). In Uganda, the child soldiers are sometimes forced to remove the intestines of the people they are killed and to tie it around their neck. They are also asked to drink the blood of the person and to smear the blood across their bodies. Afterwards, they must eat their lunch with their hands stained with the blood of the person (Abramson).

Male children are not the only ones subjecting to the horrors of being a child soldier, with females commonly being used as child soldiers too. An article in the Journal of Pediatrics and Child Health states that about 40% of child soldiers are girls, totaling about 120,000 of girls in the world. About half of the female child soldiers are fighters, the others perform tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and other tasks. In some cases the girls are given to soldiers and commanders as “wives” to be used for sexual pleasure. They are subject to sexual abuse such as rape, torture, and various psychological trauma. Due to the sexual abuse, many contract STD’s and damage to their reproductive health (Girl Child Soldiers). Many become pregnant and are either forced to abort the child or give birth to it either as a child soldier or after. Those who give birth as a child soldier are forced to carry the baby on their back into battle.

While serving as a child soldier a child can be subjected to many horrors and violent actions. In the study on 330 former Ugandan child soldiers, 87.9% said that they witnessed murder and another 52.6% admitted to killing another person. 90.6% were beaten by armed

forces, 86.4% were threatened with death, and 25.8% were raped by the armed group members. Of the children that were raped, 22.4% of them were boys and 29.4% were girls. 65.2% of the children looted houses and 59.1% abducted other children for recruitment. The average time that the children spent as child soldiers were 19-20 months with 81.2% eventually escaping. That, however, did not save some of them as 38.6% of the children were abducted more than once, some of them up to five times. The study showed that child soldiers were one of the most traumatized group of children in the world (Klasen).

The life of a child soldier ends for children in many different ways. Many are killed either in battle or by the militia they are part of. Those who manage to stay alive can also be freed of being a child soldier if a peace deal between whatever militia they are enlisted in and the militia they are fighting against takes place. Many of the children though end up escaping to rid themselves of the horrors that they live through as a child soldier.

After a child has escaped the life of being a child soldier, it is very tough for them to reintegrate into society. Many of the children have tensions with their families because of the atrocities the children have been forced to commit. Myat Win, a former child soldier in Myanmar, was jailed when he refused to fight anymore. After he was released and went back home, people treated him as a stranger because they didn't know why he was jailed. "People thought I was a bad guy because I had went to jail" he says "I had become a stranger in my own community" (Jolliffe). The children are also subject to the wrath of the government that they are under. In January 1999, five teenage boys between the ages of 14-17 were executed by the Ugandan army under the suspicion that they were rebel fighters. Another 25 boys were charged with treason in April 1998 in Uganda and they could face the death penalty (Mancini).

Many of the children suffer psychological problems due to the trauma that they suffered from being a child soldier. Out of the 330 Ugandan child soldiers, one third of them developed PTSD with 97-98% of them suffering from clinically significant PTSD. Other problems that they suffer from include depression and anxiety disorders, dissociation, aggression, and disruptive behavior (Klasen). These psychological problems worsen the already traumatized state of the children and make reintegrating them back into society much harder.

One of the places that the children may go to are rehabilitation facilities that help treat the children and readjust to life after being a soldier. Ishmael Beah was taken to a rehab facility after being rescued in Sierra Leone where he said he and the children would beat up the workers. “We were very angry. We were destructive. We destroyed the center and burned some things up” Beah says as he described his first few months in the rehab center. He was able to reconnect with his childhood and himself, however, with the help of a patient worker named Nurse Esther (Beah).

Another rehabilitation center for child soldiers is the Gulu Save the Children Organization (GUSCO) Rehabilitation Center in northern Uganda. People there like George Omonu, the program director, and Stella Akello, a social worker, help the children undergo therapy to help them deal with the trauma that they suffered as a child soldier. Susan, a 16 year old former child soldier at GUSCO, suffers nightmares about the things she did while she was in the militia like many other child soldiers do. “I still dream about the boy I killed. He is talking to me saying I killed him for nothing, and I am crying” Susan says as she describes her dreams about the atrocities she was forced to commit. When a child has nightmares or are withdrawn from the other children, social workers begin to talk to the child and may send them to the psychiatrist at the rehabilitation center. Once a child has confidence in the social worker that is



working with them, they begin to tell their experiences and stories to the social worker. They participate in activities like drawing therapy, where they draw their experiences such as battles and killings. Doing this helps the children express how they feel and tell their experiences to the social workers. Also at GUSCO the children receive medical care that they was not provided to them as a child soldier. Many have Vitamin A deficiencies and some of the children have to have one of their eyes removed due to injury or trauma (Abramson).

As the horror of the lives of child soldiers are being discovered and shown to the world, the international community is trying to take action to stop the use of children in warfare. 58 governments and dozens of nongovernmental organizations signed a list of principles called the Paris Commitments at the “Free Children from War” conference. The principles states that the governments and nongovernmental organizations vow “to spare no effort to end the unlawful recruitment or use of children by armed forces or groups in all regions of the world”. Portugal is prioritizing children’s rights and are mainstreaming those rights into both the national and international agendas. Namibia has established various laws that prohibit violence against children and implemented initiatives to protect the rights of children. Numerous countries have integrated the commitments of “A World Fit for Children” into their development plans and are pursuing further means to stop children being used for war (Mancini).

With children being exploited as soldiers and understanding the horror they have to go through, it is easy to how traumatized they end up. Even with the international community trying new ways to stop children from being used, child soldiers still exist in the world today, with terrorist groups such as ISIS and the Boko Harem using children for war. The children being used are just that: children. They don’t understand why they are being used and are forced through fear to commit horrible acts of violence. They do know, however, that it is wrong. That

is why many try to escape, and many try to tell their story so that it will hopefully stop. They are trying to tell us how horrible it is, and we should listen. Like Mary, a 13 year old former child soldier at GUSCO who gives a very important message. “Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children” she says, “So that other children don’t have to pass through this violence” (Abramson). Her story, and the story of hundreds of thousands of other child soldiers is a representation of the horror that they are forced to live through.

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