

The use of child soldiers in warfare criminology essay



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When looked back upon our childhood, memories of playgrounds, games and friends are often remembered, not even in our darkest nightmares would we imagine having to fight in warfare. Instead of playing sports, many children are forced to carry weapons, act as spies, decoys, and assassins. In addition to traditional warfare, children clear minefields, act as suicide bombers, and serve as messengers and sex slaves. Almost 5, 000 children are still in military groups within Sierra Leone, and Myanmar, also known as Burma, holds an estimated 50, 000 child soldiers. Despite the fact that many humanitarian organizations like UNICEF and CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) have focused on this issue for decades, it is only in the last few years that international media organizations started sending pictures of eight-year-old children carrying AK-47s in the jungle of Sudan to the living rooms of people in the United States and Europe.

In the last decade, more than two million children have been killed due to participation in warfare. An astounding forty-one countries in the world have children under the age of 18, and sometimes much younger are used in warfare by rebel groups and even by governments. They are denied basic human rights and are often abused terribly, and the practice of training young children to destroy and kill perpetuates cycles of violence in war-torn countries. The chronic problem occurs when former child soldiers are rehabilitated into society and are unable to socially adapt with other people, for example, shell shock. Despite this sad reality that child soldiers face, it remains very difficult to enforce child soldier laws on an international, national and regional laws. When countries release child soldiers from military service, they often lack the resources to help them through the

transition. Trained in war, children are psychologically damaged and need rehabilitation. They are often ostracized by their own families or communities. They will often return to violence unless they receive help.

The Problem in Sudan

Sudan, the largest country in Africa, with more than 10, 000 children serving in military organizations, clearly illustrates all of the issues facing children in warfare. The Juvenile Care Council Sudanese, an official government agency, often takes children into custody directly off the street. Children out running errands or playing are scooped up and quickly forced into military camps.

The government does not attempt to notify a child's family, who may not see the child again for several years. If a child manages to escape the clutches of the military, he or she is at risk of being picked up by the other side, Sudan's rebel army—the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

Children's rights while they are serving as soldiers in Sudan are violated in a number of ways. Beyond the forcible capture, reports indicate that while in government custody children are denied their rights of religious freedom and forced to take a Muslim name and to convert to Islam. On the other side, the SPLA rebel organization often recruits with promises of food and then forces its new recruits to walk hundreds of miles from their homes.

The problems in Sudan are deep rooted. The government denies any use of children and instead points to a Sudanese law that prohibits the recruitment of anyone under the age of eighteen into the military. the rebel group SPLA is hidden in the shadows of the country and out of the control of the government, international observers, and aid workers.

Forced Recruitment

Schools become a source of military manpower, and government forces as well as rebel forces often snatch children right from their desks. Although this kind of abduction is a common tactic, it is rarely documented and therefore difficult to regulate. During their “recruitment” children often experience extreme brutality, such as being forced to witness or participate in their parent’s executions, or suffering beatings from their captors.

Tragically, in addition to losing their families, many lose their identity as they are forced to forget their names, ages, and the towns or villages they came from.

Obedience

Once captured, drafted, or volunteered, a child undergoes training that is often incredibly brutal and intended to desensitize him or her to violence and ensure compliance. Reports in Central America found that children are forced to kill animals and drink their blood. They are burned with cigarettes, beaten, verbally abused, and even killed if they resist. Children are also taught to abuse and kill each other for disobedience. Resistance to abide orders and attempts to escape are met with brutality, often losing an ear or limb for their actions. Since a child’s home community may associate such injuries with violent rebel groups, the community often rejects the child, these scars in themselves can prevent children from returning home. In addition, child combatants often suffer from post-traumatic stress and may continue their violence outside of war, withdraw from social interactions, and suffer from nightmares and hallucinations.

A child who has witnessed violence and brutality may need assistance in healing from guilt, anger, fear, and hatred to lessen the chances that he or she will return to violence. In many cases child soldiers have been written off as a lost generation with no hope of emotional and physical rehabilitation.

Debating the Numbers

Overall, the lack of agreement on the age of majority poses an obstacle for counting the number of children soldiers and also for establishing international guidelines to prevent child militias. estimates on the numbers of children active in some capacity of war range from 87 countries with close to one million children in combat, to 30 countries with 300, 000 children active in war.

Why Children? Causes and Consequences

Economic Conditions:

Economics also play a crucial role in the formation of child soldiers as families with the lowest incomes are most vulnerable to military recruiters and abductors. Lack of education, the inability to pay off the recruiters, being orphaned, the need of the family for income from the military, and many other factors of poverty make a child easy prey to harsh and dangerous military involvement.

Children who grow up in poverty without clean water, safe shelter, and education are the most vulnerable. Forced recruitment tends to target poorer children. While poverty-stricken families have few resources and little recourse for finding and retrieving a child taken by a military organization, wealthier families can send their children out of the country for educational

purposes, bribe authorities to release their child, or buy out their child's obligation to a military operation. In Sudan, the SPLA provides grand illusions of food and safety, causing parents to relinquish their children freely because they believe their lives may actually be better in a militia.

On the other side, children appeal to military groups who are strapped for resources. They tend to be more economical, since they eat less and demand lower wages, if they are even paid. If a child is paid he may earn an important salary and contribute to the well-being and continued existence of an entire family.

Political Situations:

There are a variety of reasons why children are dragged into this horrific lifestyle and are unable to escape. Many of these reasons are internal conflicts, which may include ethnic conflicts, revenge for murdered family members and even due to propaganda promoting violence. However, the most likely reason is due to a shortage of adult fighters because of many long years of civil wars within war-torn countries.

Government publicity actions in times of war can be an additional source of the problem. The use of parades, propaganda, rallies, and even anthems and pledges teach children that war is an honorable activity and that soldiers have exciting and rewarding duties.

Good Things Come in Small Packages

Unfortunately, the very nature of children's "not being fully grown either physically or emotionally" plays a contributing factor. Physical size often

contributes to capture; kids are easier to transport than adults. Children are also less likely to attract suspicion and can easily plant bombs and engage in intelligence-gathering operations. If apprehended, children often face less harsh punishments from the law than do their adult counterparts. An additional benefit for a military or rebel group is that adult soldiers of the other side may not fire on child soldiers.

The International Arms Trade

The international trade in small arms is intricately tied to the issue of children in warfare. Technology has in recent years created smaller guns, plastic explosives, hand grenades, and overall lighter weapons. Children are more able to handle the new instruments of warfare. For example, assault rifles like the Russian-built AK-47 and the American M-16 are easy to carry and to use. These new weapons are also less expensive. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development found that in some African countries the guns sell for US\$6 apiece.

Some observers argue that countries that sell these weapons aggravate the problem as they continue their very profitable sale of small arms to governments or groups supported by governments who employ children as combatants.

Preventions: Crime without Punishment

Despite the fact that popular international attention is only beginning to focus on children in armed conflict, efforts to prevent children from participating in warfare are more than 70 years old. The issues revolve around what rights children have, if these rights compete with the rights of

parents, and what rights countries have to form and recruit their own militaries.

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits the forced recruitment of all children under 18, yet still allows a government to accept volunteers at 16. The United States, like most countries, argues that it is its sovereign right to form an army of its choosing.

Recent History and the Future

The Future of Children in Combat: Good News and Bad

Depending on where you look, the future for preventing the involvement of children in warfare is encouraging. In the spring of 2001 the SPLA in Sudan released 3, 500 children to UNICEF, and in August 2001 all but 70 returned to their homes.

A recent poll of Americans found that 75 percent of people surveyed felt that child survival should be both an American and an international priority. there are hundreds of international organizations and non-governmental organizations working on monitoring the use of children in warfare, negotiating their treatment while in combat, and assisting in their reintroduction to civilian life. Organizations like UNICEF, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), the International Committee for the Red Cross, the World Food Program, and the International Rescue Committee, as well as private groups like Save the Children and CARE, employ hundreds of doctors, counselors, and researchers to address this problem.

Children often prove themselves very adaptable. With medical attention, counseling, and vocational training, many former soldiers return to a normal life. In Sierra Leone, one representative from Amnesty International reports that “ the majority of them have really improved... they are back in schools. Once they are in the right environment, we start to see the change very quickly.”