

Child Soldiers

Children Associated with Fighting Forces



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KEYWORDS

• Child soldier • Trauma • War • Mental health • Gender-based violence

KEY POINTS

- Around the world, there are an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 children involved in armed conflict.
- Children can be abducted into a fighting force to fight or serve as sex slaves.
- Child soldiers have been shown to have depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms.
- Nongovernmental organizations, academic researchers, and clinicians have tried various mental health interventions, with promising results.
- Child and adolescent psychiatrists are uniquely trained in understanding and assisting youth to heal from having endured such extraordinary experiences.

INTRODUCTION

War and armed conflict have claimed the lives of 2 million children in the past decade.¹ Around the world, these wars and armed conflicts have included the conscription of children into armed forces. The term children associated with fighting forces has been used by many working in child protection, instead of the term child soldier, to better represent the diversity of children involved with fighting forces. For the sake of readability, this article uses the colloquial term child soldier or former child soldier to describe children associated with armed forces.

A child soldier is defined as someone “Below 18 years of age who is or has been recruited or used by an armed group in any capacity, including as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies, or for sexual purposes. It does not refer only to a child

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who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”² Within this definition, it should be highlighted that child soldiers are not only those who use weapons to pillage villages and engage in mass rapes. In addition, so-called bush girls and boys have also been used for such purposes as human shields, mine sweepers, and guards. This knowledge has important implications for defining who receives services after a ceasefire.

Despite international regulations, in 2006 more than 250,000 children and adolescents were participants in armed forces around the world.³ Child soldiering is not specific to any country or culture. Limited opportunities for healthy child development, unstable political security, poverty, and population displacement are all factors that can contribute to an environment in which children are not protected from joining the armed forces and are made vulnerable to be exploited. Rebel or terrorist groups may not abide by humanitarian law that protects civilians; therefore, the use of children in these settings can pose even greater risks to children in a war situation.

EXPERIENCE OF A CHILD SOLDIER

The first Global Report on Child Soldiers in 2001 showed that girls and boys were abducted into government forces and armed groups around the world.⁴ Many children were forcibly recruited into the armed forces when villages, schools, and homes were raided. Families were threatened with death or severe punishment if the request to take the child was denied. Children as young as 7 years old were both abducted and recruited to fight in the armed forces, because they were thought to be easier to control and were considered to be fearless.⁵

Some countries, such as Sierra Leone and Mozambique, forced children to physically harm their families, kill a family member, or ransack their village, both to prevent them from having a place to come home to (the armed force becoming their new home) and to weaken or disrupt family ties that are often strong in interdependent societies. Often, abduction included witnessing extreme violence.⁶ Some children reported joining the armed forces voluntarily; however, when joining was necessary for survival, or when there were few other opportunities for protection, it is unclear how voluntary this was. Some children joined out of revenge, because loved ones were brutally killed or humiliated because of their ethnic or religious affiliations. In many cultures that value ancestry, killing a family member may imply psychological suicide. The soul of the perpetrator becomes unable to be reincarnated, and hence remains in the nebulous space between life and death as a perpetual family outcast. Many believe that the soul could become a revengeful spirit attacking the living with misfortune.⁷ Other children were reported to have joined for social inclusion, political ideology, to enter manhood precociously, or to escape exploitation (forced marriage) or abuse.⁸ The initiation process of involvement in violence often takes place in steps, making it increasingly difficult for the children to extricate themselves.⁹

When a war ends and ceasefire ensues, the international community usually comes to assist in the process of reintegrating soldiers into civilian life. In many countries, such as Angola, Burundi, Liberia, Nepal, Mozambique, Uganda, and Sierra Leone, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs have been designed specifically to assist child soldiers to assimilate back into the civilian world. Disarmament involves soldiers showing that they know how to use weapons, then turning the weapons over. Demobilization then formally disbands the child soldier groups into the civilian world. The third phase is reintegration, in which child soldiers are then placed into the community, where they may face stigma and livelihood hardships with little

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