

FACTORS RELATED TO THE RECRUITMENT AND EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICTS - A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

This literature review tackles the factors concerning the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict, focusing on the structural and agential reasons behind the occurrence of this phenomenon. This literature review will also look at the political and economic reasons behind this phenomenon. Attention is also paid to the question of whether children can voluntarily join militia organizations out of their own will or whether it is not possible for children to exercise their own judgment in such matters. This systematic literature review will also deal with the factors that may enable the perpetuation of this phenomenon, such as the difficulties involved in attaining the process of pacification in countries affected by internal conflict. Special emphasis will also be directed towards lack of human development and the socio-economic inequalities that prevail in the Global South as factors that influence the continuation of the phenomenon of the recruitment and exploitation of children.

Keywords

Child exploitation, armed conflict, global south, structure, agency, child soldiers.

1. Introduction

Armed conflict has important repercussions for the long-term well-being of children and their development as adults. In many parts of the world, the incidence of armed conflict severely affects their chances of survival (Haer, 2019). One of the main features of armed conflict is that children are seldom if ever passive participants. Militia organizations recruit children for the fulfilment of combat or ancillary duties (Shumba, 2022). This is not a new phenomenon in the history of warfare. Children have participated in armed conflict since time immemorial (Van Bueren, 2021). However, this is a phenomenon that has become more prevalent in recent years, as a result of the breakdown of internal order in many parts of the world. Regular peacekeeping forces have indicated that they encounter children on a regular basis in countries affected by conflict (Mashhadi *et al.*, 2021). It is important to note that this is an issue of high sensitivity for most people. The recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict breaches international law and it hinders the possibility of achieving a medium of pacification in countries that have been affected by internal conflict, because of the enduring trauma created as a result of this widespread phenomenon (Bond & Gibson, 2018).

The children that spend their formative years in contexts of violence oftentimes end up shaping their identities in accordance with the values inherited from militia groups

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(Van Bueren, 2021). Understanding the implications of this phenomenon is an aspect of paramount importance for ensuring that societies that have gone through a period of conflict are able to achieve a modicum of pacification. Identifying the prevalence of the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict requires multidisciplinary approach that is centered on the sociological and psychological implications of the experiences recounted by children that were involved in armed conflict (Sassòli, 2024).

Contested Definitions and Prevalence Rates in the world

There are several definitions of child exploitation, some of which are contested due to the level of sensitivity. Children are oftentimes considered to be collateral damage in conflict that takes place in areas targeted for military purposes. At the same time, the destruction that is generated as a result of conflict leaves the door open for the recruitment of child soldiers, who become part of the regular or irregular forces involved in conflict (Jo, 2015). Child exploitation is also exacerbated by the presence of displaced children, orphans as well as children who have been injured as a result of conflict (Denov, 2020). These are definitions of child exploitation that have been subject to a great deal of politicization. There is also the spectrum of imprisonment and exploitation of children, which sometimes manifests itself in the occurrence of sexual violence (Sassòli, 2024). These contested definitions of child exploitation stem from the fact that during armed conflicts, national governments renege on their duty to protect children. UNICEF states that the number of children that are subject to being recruited and exploited in armed conflicts has reached the amount of 93,000 between 2005 and 2020. However, these are unofficial figures and the actual prevalence rate may be much higher than envisaged. Children are not only used as soldiers but also as “scouts, cooks, porters, guards, messengers and more [with many], especially girls, are also subjected to gender-based violence” (<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces>). It pays to note that the variegated nature of child exploitation in armed conflict has given rise to contested definitions of this phenomenon, which are somewhat interlinked, since they infringe international legislation on the subject.

Definitions of concepts which use it in this study

The literature on the subject of the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict reveals that certain terms need to be defined for the purpose of clarifying aspects related to the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict. Shenoda et al. (2018) argue that, “armed conflict” should be “defined as any organized dispute that involves the use of weapons, violence or force, whether within national borders or beyond and whether involving state actors or nongovernmental entities” (p. 1). At the same time, the idea of child recruitment and exploitation in warfare should be understood as any situation in which the individual is compelled to participate in any war-related act. Souris (2022) argues that, “by its nature attacks the moral dignity of the child, which is a fundamental human value”, which makes it morally repugnant for most people (p. 74). There is also a debate on whether children are always victims and whether their actions should be categorized as belonging to the morality of adults or whether, in all circumstances, the actions involving children in warfare should be considered from the perspective of victimization (Qadhi, 2019). Indeed, conflict is always initiated by adults. Any ancillary role that children have within it never arises out of their own volition.

The importance of the study

The importance of this study rests on the fact that in the last decade, an approximate ten million children have been killed as a result of armed conflict (Derluyn *et al.*, 2015). The literature on the subject indicates that children are vulnerable to the negative implications of armed conflict (Souris, 2022). Children suffer more than adults because they tend to remain unattended by adults (Qadhi, 2019). Moreover, this study is also important because it shows the manner in which the fundamental rights of children are infringed in cases concerning the onset of conflict. Many of children that participate in armed conflict are left with injuries, psychological trauma and significant disabilities. Children are affected by conflict in direct and indirect ways, with many of them being taken away from their families and places of origin. The high level of trauma created by this situation is, in many cases, responsible for perpetuating the cycle of violence in countries affected by intergenerational conflict.

Aims of the Review

This study consists of a systematic literature review regarding the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflicts from the World War Two onwards. The main aim of the study is to establish the prevalence and nature of the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflicts, as a result of the poverty, unemployment and a lack of care or the absence of a parent. This aspect of child abuse has oftentimes been neglected by human rights organizations. Additionally, the exploitation of children in armed conflicts has also been overlooked by the media as well as international institutions devoted to the expansion of the scope of human rights in the world.

2. Methodology

A systematic literature review has the purpose of identifying and selecting the material that will be used in order to appraise in a critical fashion for the purpose of formulating a set of research hypothesis in a clear manner (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The outlining of a systematic literature review has to follow a well-demarcated protocol that follows criteria that is set before the actual review is carried out (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016). A systematic literature review is quite comprehensive in nature, for it tackles the whole spectrum of the research conducted for the purpose of examining what the authors and commentators are saying about the subject that is being researched (Morgan, 2013). A systematic literature review is carried out by referring to many sources across several databases. In order to be effective, the systematic literature review needs to refer to a well-focused question (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The search terms and strategies as well as the limits of the research need to be included in order to map out the implications of the research undertaken. A systematic literature review needs to be transparent, clear, focused on the matter in hand and accessible. A systematic literature review enables researchers to identify the loci of evidence regarding the issue that they are investigating (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria used in this systematic literature review includes literature regarding the exploitation of children in armed conflicts. The literature selected includes professional studies, theses, books and research against female and male between the

ages of 0 to 18. Who are exploited in armed conflict? The material excluded from the systematic literature review is the one not related to the exploitation of children in armed conflict, as well unofficial written material such as medial reports, studies by local organizations as well as material not published in the English language.

Table 1. Studies consistent with the selection criteria

No	Author and date	Study title	Nature of publication	Research design	Gender	Age range	Study area
1	(Agudiegwu, 2016)	Child Soldiering And Human Development In Africa: Overview Of The Democratic Republic Of Congo	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	African studies
2	(Bond, 2018)	<i>Contested Terrains And Constructed Categories-Contemporary Africa In Focus</i>	Book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	African studies
3	(Denov, 2020)	When Child Soldiers Grow Up	Journal article	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in armed conflict
4	(Derluyn <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	Victims and/or perpetrators?	Journal article	Qualitative/ Interdisciplinary	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in armed conflict
5	(Dinstein, 2021)	<i>Non-International Armed Conflicts in International Law</i>	Book	Qualitative/ International law	Male/ Female	Under 18	Internaitonal conflict
6	(Elmesky, 2017)	<i>The Power of Resistance</i>	Edited Book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Internaitonal conflict
7	(Errante, 2015)	Comparative Study of Child Soldiering on Myanmar	Journal article	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Choldren in conflict
8	(Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2015)	Children's Exposure to Community and War Violence and Mental Health in Four African Countries	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict in Africa
9	(Haer, 2019)	Children and armed conflict: looking at the future and learning from the past	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
10	(Haer & Böhmelt, 2017)	Could Rebel Child Soldiers Prolong Civil Wars?	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
11	(Jo, 2015)	<i>Compliant Rebels</i>	Book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
12	(Lasley & Thyne, 2015)	Secession, Legitimacy and the Use of Child Soldiers	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
13	(Lori & Boyle, 2015)	Forced Migration -Health and Human Rights Issues Among Refugee Populations	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Migration and children
14	(Mashhadi <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	The Situation of Children in Armed Conflict	Journal article	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
15	(Masten <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	Children in War and Disaster	Journal article	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
16	(McKeown, 2016)	<i>Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory</i>	Edited book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	The nature of conflict
17	(MEI, 2020)	Begin with the children: Child soldier numbers doubled in the Middle East in 2019	Report	Quantitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Conflict in the Middle East
18	(Qadhi, 2019)	Victims, Agents or Both?-A Critique of the Global Humanitarian	PhD thesis	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict

		Discourse on the Subject of Child Soldiers					
19	(ReliefWeb, 2019)	Child soldier levels	Report	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
20	(Reuters, 2021)	Factbox: Ten facts about child soldiers around the world	Report	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
21	(Sassòli, 2019)	<i>International Humanitarian Law</i>	Book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Conflict and international law
22	(Shenoda <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	The Effects of Armed Conflict on Children	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
23	(Shumba, 2022)	Understanding perennial recruitment of child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo.	Journal article	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
24	(Souris, 2022)	What Is So Wrong With Using Child Soldiers?.	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
25	(Steinl, 2017)	An Introduction to Child Soldiering, Its Images and Realities	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
26	(Swart & Hassen, 2016)	A Comparison Between the Position of Child Marriage 'Victims' and Child Soldiers -Towards a Nuanced Approach	Journal article	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
27	(TheirWorld, 2022)	Child Soldiers	Report	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
28	(UNICEF, 2022)	Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups	Report	Mixed	Male/ Female	Under 18	Children in conflict
29	(United Nations, 2021)	Restoring Trust and Inspiring Hope	Report	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	The prevalence of conflict
30	(Van Bueren, 2021)	<i>The International Law on the Rights of the Child,</i>	Book	Qualitative	Male/ Female	Under 18	International law and conflict

3. Results

3.1. Findings of Global Studies

It is only in recent times that the subject of the recruitment and exploitation of children in warfare became prominent. International legislation on the subject contribute to raising awareness about the plight of children involved in armed conflict. This situation entails a change of worldview regarding the role that children play in warfare. In the global conflicts that took place in the twentieth century the role of children in warfare was seen as heroic and of vital importance in order to achieve victor (Derluyn *et al.*, 2015). It is understood that in many situations, children seek to join militias. However, it is not possible to argue that this situation arises out of true volition. Because of the barbarous conditions that are usually involved in warfare, children who are affected by poverty and the death of relatives have no choice but to join irregular militias. This is important why it is important to appraise the structural aspects that affect the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict. The voluntary recruitment of children into militias has been defined by Steinl and Steinl (2017) “an exercise of free will on part of the recruit” (p. 15). However, it has been widely acknowledged that children in situations regarding internal conflict are not in position to make an unconstrained decision regarding their recruitment. Children are not able to make informed decisions about their lives at a tender age. Lack of emotional and intellectual maturity is what gives rise to the idea of exploitation when it comes to the recruitment of child soldiers (Swart & Hassen, 2016).

There appears to be a push and pull between structure and agency in matters related to understanding of the dynamics that impact on the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict. Clearly, the prevalence of this phenomenon is facilitated by the fact that several regions of the world are affected by political upheaval and economic turmoil. It is important to state that the process of globalization has been responsible for the exacerbating the social and economic inequalities (Haer & Böhmelt, 2017).

This means that households are generally not in a position to protect their children; specially if they are in a situation of conflict. This means that in many parts of the world, children had become a commodity to be used by militia groups involved in warfare, which in many cases fight each other in order to appropriate the country's resources (Bond & Gibson, 2018). The process of globalization has led to a proliferation of weaponry of all calibre, which in many cases facilitates the recruitment of children, which are only able to carry out small weapons.

There are also specific factors that explain the occurrence of child soldiering. For example, Lasley and Thyne (2015) argue that, "child soldier use increases as the duration of the war increases, when there is a vulnerable supply of internally displaced people, as youth unemployment increases and when rebel groups rely on illicit funds" (p. 289). There are, therefore, economic considerations that seem to be of significant importance when it comes to assessing the conditions that facilitate the recruitment and exploitation of children in warfare. Moreover, it has been found that the use of children in armed conflict is another factor that explains the continuation of war. It appears that having access to a pool of very young soldiers enables militia leaders to continue with the fight against other factions. Haer and Böhmelt (2017) argues that, "child soldiering increases the strength of rebel organizations vis-a-vis the government [and that] this, in turn, lowers the capability asymmetry between these non-state actors and the incumbent, allowing the former to sustain dispute" (p. 332). This is a powerful incentive when it comes to understanding the use of children in armed conflict. At the same time, there is a school of thought that claim that recruitment represents the end of "childhood" for those who joined the ranks of the militias (Errante, 2015). This is a phenomenon that is common in "failed states" that are not able to monopolize the use of force within the territory that they claim sovereignty on. The lack of human development and the dim prospects of pacification that prevail in countries affected by human conflict have been cited as reasons for the prevalence of child soldiering. Agudiegwu (2016) states that in order to address this problem, there needs to be "proper demobilization, rehabilitation, reorientation and reintegration during and after peace agreements" (p. 1). It is worth noting that the economic conditions that prevail in the countries that have been impacted by conflict dictate the factors that are going to influence the successful reintegration of former child soldiers. It has been claimed that, "the living conditions that motivated the boys to join the armed group are still present after their demobilization. Thus, they not only still find themselves in poverty but the time spent in the armed group and the impacts of war have put them in an even more marginalized position today than prior to their recruitment" (Elmesky *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, it is possible to argue that the persistence of this phenomenon comes about from the fact that several parts of the Global South have not achieved a consistent level of pacification. Wessells (2016) highlights how, "social identity influences children's recruitment and reintegration in ideologically laden conflicts and also ones in which entire families and communities become militarised" (p. 105). Children oftentimes remain traumatized after the experience of being recruited and exploited as soldiers in armed conflict. However, this does not mean that their successful

reintegration into society in the aftermath of conflict is not possible. Denov (2020) showcases the, “resilience of former child soldiers and their ability to cope well despite wartime adversity and individual, familial and structural stressors (p. 695). From this standpoint, one could argue that the phenomenon of child soldiering is not an irretrievable cause of societal breakdown, since former child soldiers are able to provide important information when it comes to establishing the foundations for a pacified society in countries affected by conflict.

3.2. Prevalence rates

The literature shows that there is some debate over the prevalence rate of children recruited and exploited in armed conflict. The 1996 report compiled by Graça Machel, concluded that there were at least 300,000 children involved in more than thirty conflicts around the world. The report was of significant importance for the purpose of setting up the U.N. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict set up in 2016, which has expanded the classification regarding the exploitation of children from a gendered perspective (United Nations, 2021). The prevalence rates of children recruitment as soldiers is bound to increase as a result of the proliferation of conflict throughout the world. Denov (2020) states that, “in 2017, approximately 420 million children-nearly one in five-were living in conflict-affected areas, an increase of 30 million from the previous year” (p. 694). Hence, this is a large-scale phenomenon that requires the attention of the international community in order to be tackled in an effective manner. One of the problems associated with trying to come up with exact prevalence rates for the phenomenon of child soldiers is that many of the children that have been exploited by armed militias made their way to the Western world after the end of conflict (Lori & Boyle, 2015). Child soldiers are quite common in conflict taking place in Africa. It has been argued that, “tens of thousands of children are estimated to be recruited and used by armed groups. In 2019 alone, more than 7,740 children, some as young as six, were recruited and used as soldiers around the world, according to the United Nations [with] most are recruited by non-state groups” (Wuilbercq, 2021). Prevalence rates are higher in countries that suffer from political turmoil as well as economic malaise. Some sources claim that there is, “an estimated 250,000 child soldiers in the world today in at least 20 countries [with] about 40% of child soldiers are girls, who are often used as sex slaves and taken as “wives” by male fighters”. This is an occurrence that is quite common in the case of the conflict taking place in the Ukraine at the present time (<https://theirworld.org/resources/child-soldiers/>). The United Nations claims that, “the number of children used in armed conflict around the world has more than doubled since 2012 with a 159% rise and almost 30,000 recruitment cases verified” (Child Soldiers International, 2019). Child Soldiers International estimates, “that more than 100,000 children were forced to become soldiers in state and non-state military organizations in at least 18 armed conflicts worldwide” in the late 2010s (Mulroy *et al.*, 2020). The territorial disintegration that unfolded in the Middle East as a result of the War on Terror led to the formation of Islamist militias that have also capitalized on the recruitment of radicalized minors. These are figures that are shown above indicate that there the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers continues to be a widespread phenomenon, as a result of the high prevalence of internal conflict in many parts of the world (Denov, 2020).

4. Discussion

The factors indicated in the above sections show that there are several factors that need to be considered when it comes to examining the phenomenon of the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict. The commodification of children as instruments of military conflict arises as a result of the socio-economic factors introduced by the process of globalization (Masten *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, it does not seem that it will be possible to tackle this phenomenon in a situation in which much of the Global South remains mired in economic turmoil (Elmesky *et al.*, 2017). Children are compelled to join militias in order to survive the worst effects of internal conflict (Dinstein, 2021). This is a situation that is exacerbated due to the support that these militias get from organizations operating at an international level; particularly those that have a religious orientation, as seen in the case of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (Wessells, 2016). It also appears that the international community has some responsibility in matters related to the phenomenon of the recruitment and exploitation of children in armed conflict, for there does not seem to be an incentive to put a stop to the use of minors by militias. The high level of poverty and destitution that prevails in the Global South entails that, oftentimes, children have no choice but to join these organizations. Economic factors are very important for understanding the high prevalence of child soldiers in various parts of the Global South (Lori & Boyle, 2015). The high level of inequality between the countries of the Global South and the Developing World is an important element to bear in mind when appraising the reasons for the high prevalence of the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers (Foster & Brooks-Gunn, 2015).

Here we see the push and pull between structural and agential factors. One of the most important aspects related to the recruitment and exploitation of children in warfare concerns the question of compellence. It is worth stressing that the use of child soldiers is the result of the inability to bring about the pacification of countries that were affected by internal conflict. Moreover, the countries of the Global South that are impacted by conflict usually have young populations. This means that the militia organizations are able to tap into this human resource in order to prolong the spectrum of conflict. The use of minors is connected, in an inextricable manner, to the appropriation of strategic resources by militia organizations. This is an aspect of this phenomenon that needs to be looked at much more closely by the international community (Denov, 2020). The continuation of this phenomenon also unfolds due to the inability of the international community to enforce the extant legislation on this matter and to endow the United Nations with the military resources needed for the purpose of entrenching the pacification of countries that were affected by internal conflict. Dealing with the structural components of this phenomenon be a positive development in order to ensure that children are not drawn into the conflicts that impact on many countries of the Global South (Lori & Boyle, 2015).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The best way to address the problems that stem from the participation of children in warfare is by preventing conflict and ensuring that those countries that have gone through a period of internecine warfare are able to heal from the consequences of having used children in armed conflict. It is recommended that international institutions and organizations such as the United Nations put in motion mechanisms for the purpose of deterring previously warring parties from seeking conflict as an instrument for resolving

outstanding issues (Shumba, 2022). The best manner of bringing about this situation is by enforcing the protections included in the Geneva Convention, which give special status to children in times of warfare, along with the enforcement of the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, which requires national governments to give protection to civilians in times of internal conflict. In any case, the enforcement of these legal provisions can only come about through the auspices of a multinational peacekeeping force capable of dealing with the possible effects of armed militias seeking to destabilise the internal order and to acquire power through force (Jo, 2015). The undertaking of constabulary duties for the purpose of enforcing international law is, therefore, the best way to prevent the participation of children in warfare in years to come.

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