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UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

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DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMITTEE

The United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) promotes international economic and social development. It has 54 members who are elected annually by the UN General Assembly for three year terms. Besides its normal functions, it also has the obligation of determining how much progress has been made towards fulfilling the UN Millennium Development Goals. ECOSOC is also in charge of coordinating a number of secondary organizations in the UN including the Commission on Social Development, UN Development Program, and UNICEF.

TOPIC: CHILD SOLDIERS

“I would like to give you a message. Please do your best to tell the world what is happening to us, the children. So that other children don't have to pass through this violence.”

~ A 15-year-old girl who escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda

Source: Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, the face of war has been changing. **Armed conflict**—the fighting between two or more groups involving the use of weapons—has taken the lives of millions of **civilians**—non-soldiers. In countries all over the world, families, villages and communities also have been broken up by war. Wars and armed conflicts are harmful to all people. Children are often affected the most because they do not have the power to escape from these dangerous regions of the world. As a result of armed conflict, children suffer serious injuries, are forced to leave their homes, and lose family members. Many even die.

Children are one of the most vulnerable targets in armed conflict. In many places, children have always lived with armed conflict. It is all they know. Growing up in this environment makes it difficult for these children to imagine a world without violence and how they should function in it<sup>1</sup>. The **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** says that eighteen is the legal age of



adulthood. Children are not to be allowed in the military; however, in many conflicts children are fighting. Children as young as six or seven years old are recruited to fight as soldiers in countries including Cambodia, Somalia, Uganda and El Salvador<sup>2</sup>. Children can handle weapons, serve as messengers in the military or perform other tasks. Governments and military groups often prefer to use **child soldiers** because they are cheaper to feed and clothe than adults.

Although most child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, children as young as 7 can be recruited for fighting in wars. Almost 300,000 people under the age of 18 are taking part in some 30 wars today—many against their will.

Source: UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict  
[www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict](http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict)

An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 children serve as soldiers worldwide<sup>3</sup>. These children face physical and emotional injury. Often, because of the emotional trauma these children suffer, the country is plagued by the effects of the conflict for years after the fighting stops. Without other skills, these children often return to violence, beginning the cycle again.

## BACKGROUND

### *Why & How Children Become Soldiers*

Children suffer the most damaging effects of war when they are recruited to fight as soldiers. Whether they are fighting voluntarily—because they want to—or against their will, child soldiers suffer both physical and emotional pains and are pushed into violent situations and places. It is not rare for children to be taken to the front lines of battle and trained to carry AK-47s and M-16s—machine guns, serve as human mine detectors, and perform many other tasks.

### **Invisible Children: Can a story change the world?**

“In the spring of 2003, 3 young Americans from California left in search of such a story. What they found was a tragedy that disgusted and inspired them. Come and discover the unseen.” *Invisible Children* began as a movie made by three Americans who went to Sudan in search of a story about the war. What they found instead was child soldiers being kidnapped in Uganda; children walking miles every night to safety. They found a story to start a movement that would sweep the United States and eventually change the world.

Source: [www.invisiblechildren.com](http://www.invisiblechildren.com)

Children become soldiers when society begins to break down. Sometimes children are abducted. For others, these armed groups can seem like the only opportunity to escape their situation. Studies have shown that adolescent often join the military because they see no other alternatives even if they say they voluntarily enlisted<sup>4</sup>. In conflict, many children do not have access to school, are driven from their homes, or even separated from their family. Some military groups attract children to become soldiers by promising them educational opportunities, food, shelter or



clothing—things the child may not have otherwise. Others join to escape poverty or seek revenge after a family member has been killed<sup>5</sup>. Children are often more easily tempted to enter the army than adults because they like spending time with the group and may be impressed by the chance to use guns. Even if some children are unable to fight, their small size allows them to serve as scouts, spies, messengers or decoys<sup>6</sup>.

“One boy tried to escape [from the rebels], but he was caught...His hands were tied, and then they made us, the other new captives, kill him with a stick. I felt sick. I knew this boy from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him and they told me they would shoot me. They pointed a gun at me, so I had to do it. The boy was asking me, ‘Why are you doing this?’ I said I had no choice.”

Susan, 16, abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda

Source: UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict  
[www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict](http://www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict)

Many armed groups around the world **exploit** the vulnerability of children. Children usually make obedient soldiers because they are easily intimidated. Army leaders prefer recruiting children because they do not need as much food as adults. They also take up less space and do not have to be paid to fight. A Congolese rebel officer once explained why children make good soldiers: “they obey orders; they are not concerned about getting back to their wife or family; and they don’t know fear”<sup>7</sup>.

### *Physical Effects*

During the fighting, children are exposed to physical violence that can injure or even kill them. On the battle field, children with minimal training are often forced to fight against professional troops. As a result, **casualties** – injured or dead soldiers – are high among child soldiers. The most frequent, permanent injuries are hearing loss, blindness, and loss of limbs. By the very nature of their jobs, children are more likely to be injured or disabled in war but are less likely to receive medical treatment. Further, countries where armed soldiers are used are also countries where top medical facilities are not available<sup>8</sup>.

The ability to kill other humans is not natural for children. It is emotionally disturbing. Groups that use child soldiers have employed a number of different techniques to **desensitize**—to make something not emotionally disturbing through repeated exposure—the children. During the initial recruitment and training process, the children may be forced to kill another child. Often, violence is nothing new for these children although, in the past, they had been the victim. Child soldiers are kidnapped when their village is raided. They may witness the murder of family members and community members by the same people who kidnap them. In some areas, it is not unusual for some of those captured to have limbs chopped off or be shot execution style.



“I would like my arms and hands to be mended. I am in great agony and a terrible situation. I don’t have hands. I can’t eat my food. I have to be fed by someone else. I would like to see my hands working. I want peace and the war to be stopped. I want to go to school and get an education. If the hospitals were working I would like my hands to be treated. If it was up to me, I would like to say to the militia, look what you have done, you have destroyed my hands. Please don’t continue to blow off children’s hands. Please stop the fighting.” ~ A twelve year old child soldier

*Source: Children at War*

Not only are children vulnerable to injury, they are more likely to be addicted to drugs and suffer from disease, especially **sexually transmitted diseases** (STDs). Drugs are used when kidnapping the children to make them more cooperative and more willing to kill. Drug addiction makes them more susceptible to future health and developmental problems. Later, withdrawal is a grueling experience. The stress, malnutrition, and conditions they live in also make them more susceptible to disease. STDs are more common among child soldiers than their adult counterparts or the general populations. This is especially true for girl soldiers who are often raped by adult soldiers.

### *Emotional Effects*

The scars and wounds that children take away from war are not only physical, but emotional as well. Memories of violent events, the loss of family members, or the removal of a child from his or her home may lead to severe psychological damage. In 1996, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) estimated that half of all the children in Rwanda had personally seen people being killed<sup>9</sup>. In some cases, children have even been forced to kill members of their own family. Witnessing or participating in these violent acts causes fear and anxiety in children—they may develop nightmares, have trouble sleeping, stop playing or laughing, and become depressed<sup>10</sup>. They are being stripped of the innocence of childhood and forced into situations that require adult maturity.

After the war ends, these children continue to suffer from the psychological affects of being soldiers. Even years after the war, the emotional damage can continue to affect the stability of the country. Without assistance, former child soldiers are more likely to return to being soldiers, sometimes for the other side of the conflict or in another country. It results in an endless cycle of violence in these countries.

The result of the 2003 peace agreement in Liberia was an outbreak of violence in Sierra Leone, also carried out by children. The violence then spilled over into Guinea and then Côte d’Ivoire. Many of the child soldiers spoke English, the language of Liberia and Sierra Leone. A dialect of French is spoken in Côte d’Ivoire meaning the child soldiers were from Liberia and Sierra Leone<sup>11</sup>.



## *Effects on Education*

Education also suffers as a result of war. Children who are used as soldiers are too burdened with military duties to have time for an education. Often these children are forced to leave school at an early age. As a result, the only skills they have are the skills of a soldier<sup>12</sup>. When the war is over, they do not have the knowledge needed to rebuild their homes, participate in the community or get jobs. Instead, many return to fighting because they do not have the education and skills needed to rejoin the community after the war ends.

## *Girl Soldiers*

Girls are not immune to being kidnapped by groups that use child soldiers. According to a Canadian human rights organization, girls have been involved in armed conflict in 50 countries. In fact, it is estimated that one-third of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA)—a rebel group in Uganda—are girls.

Not only are girls forced to perform the same tasks as boys but they are often forced to marry older soldiers. Most girl soldiers are sexually abused or raped. They may become pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD). While pregnant, they must continue fighting. In some areas, such as El Salvador, the children born to these girls are placed with rural families. When the child is old enough to fight, the group returns for him or her and he is initiated into the army as well. Other groups require the girls to fight with the infant strapped to their back.

## *After Conflict*

When a conflict ends, work begins to rebuild the region. Initially, combatants need to be disarmed. **Disarmament** is one of the first steps towards rebuilding a society that has been affected by conflict. Child soldiers must be disarmed before they can return to society. After disarmament, child soldiers need to go through a **demobilization** process. Many NGOs run demobilization camps around the world. These camps help provide these children with new skills as well as emotional and physical support to make the transition from combatant back to their communities.

After the child is demobilized, he or she must be **reintegrated** into society. This involves re-establishing contact with his or her family and community as well as ensuring the child receives an education. Because they have been away from schools, many child soldiers are behind in their schooling. They would be placed in classes for younger children, not in classes with their peers. Special classes for former soldiers that can then be integrated into the regular school may be one way to get these children back up to grade level. Providing these children with an education not only gives them new job skills, but it also provides them with a sense of normalcy that can help them reintegrate into society.

After a conflict, one of the major problems that society faces is the desensitization of these children. They are desensitized to extreme violence. This can lead to them being violent even after demobilization because they cannot separate their identity from their former violent identity



they developed while a soldier. However, a successful **disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) program** can help break the cycle of violence that using child soldiers starts.

Another significant problem is the low percentage of girl soldiers who are demobilized. The percentage of girl soldiers that are demobilized is significant less than the number of boys. Girls are less likely to escape, especially after they have given birth to a child. Those that are able to leave the military are less likely to be reintegrated into society because of the stigma of having been raped. Others are unable to receive the same services boy soldiers receive because they are not seen as **combatants** by relief organizations. In the Democratic Republic of Congo only about 2% of the child soldiers going through Save the Children's demobilization camps are girls. The percentage of child soldiers who are girls is estimated to be much higher. Many of the girls who do not reintegrate into society through a demobilization process become prostitutes. Because they are ostracized by their community, they do not have many options for supporting themselves.

### *Adult Child Soldiers*

In long term conflicts, some of the child soldiers will become adults during the duration of the conflict. At the end of the conflict, these former child soldiers are seen as adults. However, they suffer from many of the same problems as the child soldiers because they grew up only knowing violence. Because they are adults, they are not given the same access to DDR programs as child soldiers. Without these programs they have a difficult time reintegrating into society. Like most child soldiers, **adult child soldiers** have suffered psychologically and physically from their years in the military. Often they do not have the education and skills necessary to become productive members of society. As a result, they too may return to violence because they do not have the skills to do anything but fight.

### *Who Is a Child?*

Monitoring and preventing children from being taken as soldiers is extremely difficult. One reason is that not every culture agrees on what age separates "children" from "adults." In the United States, anyone who is 18 or older is considered an adult. Even so, the American army had up to 2,880 17-year-olds in their military in 1997<sup>13</sup>. These teenagers volunteered for their positions, but are still not at the legal voting age for American citizens.

The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* allows children who are 15 or older to take part in military activities<sup>14</sup>. Recently, 16-year-olds have been used in combat by as many as 25 different nations and guerilla movements—local military groups<sup>15</sup>. Many nations, however, see 15 and 16 as still too young to participate in war. The international community must decide where the line that separates a child from an adult should be drawn. Then, the use of children in military conflict can be outlawed.



## *National Effects*

The physical and emotional effects of conflict on children can affect entire countries. When children must flee a nation to escape violence or when they participate in the military instead of attending schools, an entire generation of children may grow up without a solid education. This will mean that the future work force will not have the skills and the knowledge they need to work for hospitals, schools, the government or private companies. The trauma that children in armed conflict experience can also make it difficult for them to become productive citizens in the future. They might be physically or emotionally disabled and they may require care that will be very expensive for the government. Ensuring the safety of children during armed conflict helps provide for both the future of the child and the future of the nation.

## **PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTION**

According to the UN, children must be allowed the same basic rights as adults while also being given special attention and care. These ideas are outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In 1959, the UN also passed the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, which addressed the health, freedom and safety of all children across the world. It outlawed the use of children as soldiers by stating: “The child shall not be admitted to employment before an appropriate minimum age; he shall in no case be caused or permitted to engage in any occupation...which would...interfere with his physical, mental or moral development.”<sup>16</sup> There is no doubt that serving as a soldier in times of war would interfere with a child’s development.

The United Nations often creates both declarations and conventions. These two types of documents are very similar:

- A *declaration* is a statement of a group’s goals and solutions to a problem;
- A *convention* is a meeting where groups gather to discuss and debate an issue. The groups then write a document explaining what they have discussed in the meeting and what solutions they have considered. This document is often also called a “convention.”

In 1989, the UN also introduced the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*. This document changed the definition of a child to any person under the age of 18 and stated that children have a right to be protected from acts of physical and mental violence<sup>17</sup>. Children over 15, however, can volunteer for positions in armies. All nations have ratified—agreed to follow—this convention except for Somalia and the United States. However, several countries continue to recruit child soldiers even after they have signed the convention.



## CRITICAL THINKING

*Why is it difficult for parents to take care of and protect their own children during war times?*

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In February of 2002, the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* went into effect. This document outlined concerns about child soldiers and was ratified by 42 countries. First, it stated that anyone under the age of 18 cannot be involuntarily recruited into the military. It went on to ask nations to do everything possible to raise the minimum age for volunteering for the military to 16 (up from 15 in the 1989 *CRC*)<sup>18</sup>. Although this document aims to protect children from war, many nations oppose it and insist that 15-years-old is not too young for people to volunteer to serve as soldiers.

Paska Achieng Otto, a former child soldier in Uganda who was convinced to join a rebel army at the age of 14, says of her first battle, "The shooting started—boom! People were dropping like fish. My major thing was just to try to get the (wounded) people out." Although she was still a young girl, Paska went on to command over 1,000 troops and was eventually wounded by a grenade during a battle.

Source: War Affected Children, [www.waraffectedchildren.gc.ca](http://www.waraffectedchildren.gc.ca)

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

Delegates should consider the problems of child soldiers. With this in mind, delegates should address the following when creating draft resolutions:

- Raising the minimum age of children for recruitment by armed groups;
- Prevention of the use of child soldiers in conflict;
- Protection of children during times of armed conflict;
- Establishing DDR programs in areas where children are used as soldiers;
- Involvement of NGOs in preventing the use of child soldiers and reintegrating former children into society;
- Addressing the specific needs of girls soldiers and adult child soldiers in DDR programs;



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Has your country signed CRC? If it has, how well has it been implemented?
2. Has your country signed the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict? Is it being implemented?
3. Is there an armed conflict occurring in your country? Are child soldiers being used?
4. What services do former child soldiers have access to in your country?
5. If conflict were to breakout in your country, what processes does your country have in place to protect children from becoming child soldiers?

## SOURCES TO RESEARCH

- UNICEF, [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)
- Human Rights Watch, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- Amnesty International, [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)
- Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, <http://www.un.org/children/conflict/english/home6.html>



## TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Armed Conflict:** continuous fighting between two political factions that involves the use of weapons. Traditionally, this term has referred to a disagreement between two state groups, which results in the inclusion and use of armed forces. Yet contemporary situations of conflict have made it more and more difficult to clearly define certain circumstances like war, armed conflict, terrorism or peace. Today, many groups are in situations of armed conflict, which have not yet reached a level of all-out war.

**Civilians:** unarmed people, including women, children, the sick and elderly, refugees and internally displaced persons, who are not directly engaged in armed conflict.

**Convention on the Rights of the Child:** a convention passed by the UN General Assembly in 1989, which defined a child as any person under the age of 18 and stated the right of children to be protected from all acts of physical and mental violence. It was ratified by all countries except for Somalia and the United States. According to this document, children over the age of 15 can volunteer for the army. In 2002 it was followed by the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*. This convention specifically discussed child soldiers, reiterating that those under the age of 18 could not be drafted, while also strongly encouraging nations to raise the minimum age for volunteering for the army to 16. It was ratified by 42 countries.

**Child Soldiers:** people under the age of 18 who are used in a military organization.

**Exploit:** to use something/someone selfishly for one's own benefit.

**Casualties:** a person who is injured or killed in an event. It is most often used to refer to injuries and deaths that occur during combat situations.

**Desensitize:** to make indifferent or unaware in feelings or emotions to something that should be traumatic.

**Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs):** a disease spread through sexual intercourse.

**Disarmament:** The collection of small arms and light and heavy weapons within a conflict zone.

**Demobilization:** the formal discharging of soldiers from an armed group. In demobilizing children the objectives should be to verify the child's participation in armed conflict, to collect basic information to establish the child's identity for family tracing, to assess priority needs, and to provide the child with information about what is likely to happen next.

**Reintegration:** A long-term process which aims to give children a viable alternative to their involvement in armed conflict and help them resume life in the community.

**DDR programs:** programs that combine disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of child soldiers to help children return to civilian life.

**Combatants:** a person who takes part in armed conflict.



**Adult Child Soldiers:** a soldier that was initially recruited or kidnapped as a child but becomes an adult while still serving as a soldier.

**Declaration of the Rights of the Child:** a declaration passed by the UN General Assembly in 1959 recognizing the right to health, freedom and safety of all children, everywhere in the world. In particular, it outlawed child soldiers.

**Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights fo the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict:** a later addition to the CRC that specifically addresses the involvement of children in armed conflict. Among other things, it raises the age of recruitment by militias from fifteen to sixteen.



## REFERENCES

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- <sup>3</sup> "Child Soldiers", <http://hrw.org/campaigns/crp/index.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> "Some Facts", <http://www.child-soldiers.org/childsoldiers/some-facts>
- <sup>5</sup> "Child Soldiers"
- <sup>6</sup> "Kalashnikov Kids," *The Economist*, 10 July 1999. Online. Lexis-Nexis. News/majpaps. 2 December 2002.
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- <sup>8</sup> Singer, P. W. *Children at War*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005. p111
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- <sup>11</sup> *Children at War*.
- <sup>12</sup> *Children at War*.
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- <sup>15</sup> Everett M. Ressler, *Children in War*, eds. Joanne Marie Totorici and Alex Marcelino. New York: Programme Publications, 1993.
- <sup>16</sup> *Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, Article 9, the United Nations, Accessed 14 September 2005, [www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/25.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/25.htm)
- <sup>17</sup> Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- <sup>18</sup> *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*, United Nations, [www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/protocolchild.htm](http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu2/6/protocolchild.htm)

