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Militarization of Everyday Life: Girls in Armed Conflicts

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to highlight the issue of the changed nature of warfare in the last few decades of the 20th and 21st centuries, with a special emphasis on ethical aspects and the problem of using an increasing number of child soldiers. The main thesis of the paper is that the practice of using and recruiting children in armed conflicts around the world is the least recognized and most neglected form of child abuse in modern society, and that it is less a matter of culture and the lack of society's attitude towards the values of the child, and more a matter of pragmatism and generally socioeconomic phenomenon. Several key events on the world scene played a crucial role in recognizing the problem of the existence and recruitment of children in armed conflicts around the world. But what is significant is that even in these cases it is nowhere clear and visible where the girls are in armed conflicts, what is happening to them and what are their rights? By revealing the militarization of girls' everyday lives in armed conflicts and their role, girls must first and foremost become visible. The expected contribution of the paper will therefore move in the direction of highlighting and recognizing the ethical aspects of conflict-related sexual violence, of grave violations against children and ethical aspects of most severe forms of child abuse and the consequences of abuse, such as poor health outcomes and the destruction of their lives, and highlight the possible solutions to the mentioned problem within theoretical but also practical framework.

Keywords: *child soldier; children in armed conflicts; girls in armed conflicts; grave violation; abuse and exploitation of children's rights; conflict-related sexual violence; gender-based violence*

When it becomes the custom and the rule to divulge another person's private life, we are entering a time when the highest stake is the survival or the disappearance of the individual.
Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*.

I. Introductory considerations: The gender dimensions of grave violations against children in armed conflict

Armed conflicts have long-term, devastating impacts on children. These effects are compounded further by broader socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors, from health pandemics to the climate crisis. Children's exposure to grave violations is shaped not only by specific forms of victimisation, but also by gender norms and other intersecting identity-based characteristics, including ethnicity, race, religion, caste, ability, economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression.¹

In situations of armed conflict, understanding how gender and age influence risk, vulnerability and agency is essential for providing gender-responsive and age-sensitive prevention, protection, humanitarian assistance, and recovery.² In 2005, the UN Security Council set another precedent by creating the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) as one of its principal instruments for fostering accountability and compliance with international law and child protection standards and norms.³

The MRM has paved the way for advancing the protection of children's rights in armed conflict and engaging parties to conflict in dialogue and action plans to end and prevent violations against children. It generates information to account for violations committed and identifies parties to conflict that commit six grave violations against children: (1) recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, (2) killing and maiming, (3) rape and other forms of sexual violence, (4) abductions, (5) attacks against schools and hospitals, and (6) the denial of humanitarian access for children. Under the leadership of the SRSG CAAC, this information is used to engage parties to conflict in dialogue, develop and implement time-bound action plans and other forms of commitment, and programmatic responses involving the UN system

¹ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict* (United Nations, 2022), 7.

² Ibid, 7.

³ United Nations, "Security Council Resolution 1612 (2005), S/RES/1612," July 26, 2005, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/554197/files/S_RES_1612%282005%29-AR.pdf?ln=en.

to deliver coordinated protection and support for conflict-affected children.⁴

Strong and recurrent evidence across many contexts demonstrates that boys and girls experience conflict differently. Among other identity factors such as age, ethnicity and race, the gender inequality context and harmful social norms play a determining factor in how children are exposed and subjected to grave violations by parties to conflict.⁵ Their vulnerabilities to specific conflict-related violence vary based on socio-cultural gender norms and practices, resulting in distinct impacts for girls and boys, hence requiring distinct protection and prevention responses. However, despite the mounting evidence on the gender dimensions of the impact of armed conflict on children, a systematic gender-sensitive approach in collecting MRM evidence across the board is still lacking.

What is a gender analysis and why it is so important and critical? In *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*, there is a systematically approach and examination using specific research tools and methods to identify and investigate how differences in gender roles, norms, activities, needs, opportunities, access to resources, participation in decision-making, and rights/entitlements have a differentiated impact on men, women, boys, girls and LGBTQI persons in a particular context.⁶

In the MRM context, gender analysis would describe efforts, at the levels of data collection and analysis that shape prevention and response strategies, that aim to highlight the differences in the ways girls and boys are respectively exposed and subjected to conflict-related violations and the differentiated outcome for each. Adopting a gender perspective would mean no longer referring to “children” as a monolith and instead identifying violations affecting specific groups of children concerned, on the basis of sex/gender as well as other identities.⁷

Gender analysis rests on quantitative as well as qualitative data being disaggregated by sex, age, as well as other factors, so that the specific situations of each child, girls and boys, can be visible. The analysis of such data provides a more accurate representation of the distinct ways in which girls and boys are subjected to and affected by

⁴ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary, *The Gender Dimensions*, 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gender analysis places a great emphasis on ‘intersectional identities’ because the realities and experiences of women, men, girls, boys and LGBTQI+ persons do not solely depend on gender: they intersect with other factors such as an individual’s age, class, religion, education, ethnicity, income, etc. This can help identify if a particular group is targeted and why.

violations.⁸ We must ask questions that lead us in a way to understand why and how a violation has affected a particular child, and what their coping/support mechanisms are. An understanding of dominant gender norms, potential gaps or discriminatory elements in existing national legislation, harmful practices, notions about masculinity, among others and their impact on the lives of girls and boys, as well as the agendas of various parties to conflict are crucial tools for a gender analysis of violations.⁹ But first we must define who is child and who is child soldier in a context of armed conflicts.

II. Who is child?

At the heart of current debates lies the question: what is a child? This is not just a matter of semantics but a question increasingly central to practice. James and Prout in their work *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, highlights that in 1979 the International Year of the Child was launched.

The television screens and hoardings of affluent western societies depicted sick and starving children. What was new, however, was the gradual emergence of the concept 'the world's children' in the official discourses of international agencies such as UNICEF and WHO. This confronted the West with images of childhood contrasting strongly with those familiar to them. The consequences of famine, war and poverty for children threw the very idea of childhood into stark relief. The 'world's children' united 'our' children and 'their' children only to reveal the vast differences between them.¹⁰

James and Prout emphasize that childhood as we understand it, construct of the Western middle class, especially white, who believe that the child is vulnerable and in need of our protection.¹¹ Furthermore, they point out that childhood is a sociological and historical construct, changeable and different, varies through society, gender, cultures, and is dependent

⁸ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary, *The Gender Dimensions*, 9-10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Alison James and Alan Prout, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London: Palmer Press, 1990), 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

on the social and temporal context. Therefore, the concept of childhood cannot be understood universally:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such it provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.¹²

The age perspective can be developed on the opposition age, the child's biological age and the cultural construct of age limits. The social life of children cannot be explained on the basis of the biological facts of life, nor can it be derived from them. This does not ignore the fact that age relations are based on the physical characteristics of youth and adolescence, but only by pointing this out does not mean that they can be derived from the naturalistic fact of life.

In situations such as war and the participation of children in armed conflicts, as we will see in the following exposition, unfortunately that construct, the definition of a portrait or image of a child and childhood that we described as vulnerable, innocent, passive victims of war unfortunately has its own flip side and acquires a different reality and context because it is not and cannot be the dominant explanation and interpretation of childhood. Namely, in war, all the depth and complexity of the problem come to the fore, because children are in a doubly weakened position, as victims and as someone forced to commit violence and accustomed to it. It is not always clear and obvious and things cannot be seen in black and white optics when we come face to face with a child warrior.¹³ The paradigm shift, from describing and glorifying child warriors as heroes to interpreting them as either victims or demons, is associated with the development of human rights discourse and humanitarian movements around the world that associated the military with something criminal or deviant.¹⁴

¹² Alan Prout and Allison James, "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, eds. Allison James and Alan Prout (London: Falmer Press, 1990), 7-34.

¹³ Darija Rupčić Kelam, *Bioetički aspekti socijalne i zdravstvene skrbi o djetetu* (PhD diss., University of Zagreb, 2017), 408-422.

¹⁴ David M. Rosen, *Armies of the Young: Child Soldiers in War and Terrorism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10-15; 57.

III. Child soldier

This brings us to the question of who is a child soldier and how to treat children on the battlefield? Adopted in April 1997, in Cape Town, The Cape Town Principles were the result of a symposium organised by UNICEF and the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child to develop strategies for preventing recruitment of children, demobilising child soldiers and helping them to reintegrate into society.¹⁵

“Child soldier” in this document means any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular (government, State) or irregular armed force (non-government groups) in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. “Recruitment” encompasses compulsory, forced and voluntary recruitment into any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group. “Demobilization” means the formal and controlled discharge of child soldiers from the army or from an armed group.¹⁶

The term “psycho-social” underlines the close relationship between the psychological and social effects of armed conflict, the one type of effect continually influencing the other. By “psychological effects” is meant those experiences which affect emotions, behaviour, thoughts, memory and learning ability and how a situation may be perceived and understood. By “social effects” is meant how the diverse experiences of war alter people’s relationships to each other, in that such experiences change people, but also through death, separation, estrangement and other losses.¹⁷

In 1998, the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (ICC), entered into force on July 1, 2002, strongly condemned the recruitment of children under the age of 15, and declared the practice

¹⁵ See *Global Protection Cluster*, <https://www.globalprotectioncluster.org>.

¹⁶ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, adopted by the UN General Assembly, Res. 54/263, 25 May 2000, Annex I, Articles 1 and 4; Statute of the Special Court for Sierra Leone, annexed to the 2002 Agreement on the Special Court for Sierra Leone, Freetown, 16 January 2002, annexed to Letter dated 6 March 2002 from the UN Secretary-General to the President of the UN Security Council, UN Doc. S/2002/246, 8 March 2002, p. 29, Article 4(c).

¹⁷ Jean Claude Legrand, *Capetown Principles and Best Practices on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children in the Armed Forces and Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa* (New York: UNICEF, 1997).

of child recruitment as a war crime.¹⁸ In the years that followed, *The Optional Protocol to The Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* and *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* defined a child soldier as “any person under the age of 18 who is part of any armed group of any capacity and ability, other than purely as a family member.”¹⁹

In *The Preamble* of ILO conventions on the worst forms of exploitation and abuse of children *C 182 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention*, 1999,²⁰ The General Conference of the International Labour Organization, having been considering the need to adopt new instruments for the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, as the main priority for national and international action, including international cooperation and assistance. To complement the Convention and the Recommendation concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, 1973,²¹ which remain fundamental instruments on child labour, and Considering that the effective elimination of the worst forms of child labour requires immediate and comprehensive action, taking into account the importance of free basic education and the need to remove the children concerned from all such work and to provide for their rehabilitation and social integration while addressing the needs of their families, and recalling the resolution concerning the elimination of child labour adopted by the International Labour Conference in 1996, and recognizing that child labour is to a great extent caused by poverty and that the long-term solution lies in sustained economic growth leading to social progress, in particular poverty alleviation and universal education.

In Article 3 of mentioned Convention the term *the worst forms of child labour* comprises all forms of worst forms of such labor, and special emphasis is put on forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict and all the work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.²²

¹⁸ See International Criminal Court, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (The Hague: International Criminal Court, 2002).

¹⁹ See United Nations, “Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict,” May 25, 2000, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>.

²⁰ International Labor Organization, “C182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention,” no. 182, 1999.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

The effects of child labor on the well-being of the child as a whole become a problem at the moment when the number and concentration of child workers, who worked under dangerous and extremely difficult conditions, become visible. Consequently, the establishment of the legal framework of governments and civil society defined through responsibilities that include responsibility for the most vulnerable members such as children, raises the issue of child labor as one of the fundamental and key problems. The issue of child labor becomes even more significant and aggravated if we include in that the issue of the worst forms of exploitation and endangerment of children, such as the issue of child recruitment in armed conflicts.

International Labour Organization's *Conventions 138* and *Conventions 182* are related to Child Labour. Convention No. 182 calls for the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, which includes slavery, forced labour and trafficking. Before we proceed to further clarification, it is important to note, that not all child work is worst form of work or labor that needs to be eliminated. Namely, only that labor that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and dignity, that prevents them from getting an education and that endangers their physical and mental development bears the label of child (hard and arduous) labor.²³ Child labor is a violation of every child's right to childhood and a violation of all the government's fundamental tasks and duties to protect children. At the global level, every tenth child is a victim of exploitation for the purpose of work.²⁴

Using children in armed conflict is the worst form of child labour, a violation of human rights and a war crime. As we mentioned above, *ILO Convention No. 182* defines forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict as a worst form of child labour. *The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* prohibits all recruitment, voluntary or compulsory, of children under 18 by non-government armed groups and State armed forces. *The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* makes it a war crime, leading to individual prosecution, to conscript or enlist children under the age of 15 years or use them to participate actively in hostilities. Efforts to put an end

²³ More about difference between *child work* and *child labor* in Michael Bourdillon, "Children's Work," in *Handbook of Child Well-Being: Theories, Methods and Policies in Global Perspective*, eds. Asher Ben-Arieh, Ferran Casas, Ivar Frones, and Jill E. Korbin, 821-861 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 846.

²⁴ See International Labor Organization, "C182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention," no. 182, 1999.

to child recruitment and release children from armed forces and groups have intensified in the last decade.²⁵

According to a new report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF, which date from 10th June 2021, global progress in the fight against child labor has stagnated since 2016, while the absolute number of children in child labor has increased by more than 8 million, in line with the increase in the global population. In 2020, 11.2% of boys worked (10.7% increase in 2016) and 7.8% of girls worked (drop down for 8.4% in 2016). Therefore, the number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide, an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years with millions more at risk due to the impacts of COVID-19.²⁶

The Report warns that globally, nine million additional children are at risk of being pushed into child labour by the end of 2022 as a result of the pandemic. Additional economic shocks and school closures caused by COVID-19 mean that children already in child labour may be working longer hours or under worsening conditions, while many more may be forced into the worst forms of child labour due to job and income losses among vulnerable families.²⁷

The girls and boys who are associated with armed forces and groups constitute only a small proportion of a much larger number of children who are trapped in other worst forms of child labour as a result of armed conflict. Conflict has a destructive impact on the socio economic environment and can increase the risk factors associated with child labour. Conflict also increases the potential for children already working to be involved in more dangerous and harmful work. These indirect effects on the worst forms of child labour last after the conflict ends. Armed conflict is one of the major challenges to meeting the target of eliminating all worst forms of child labour by 2016. This has led IPEC, in close collaboration with the ILO International Training Centre, to explore ways of addressing more systematically how conflict and post-conflict settings, including emergency situations, impact on the worst forms of child labour.²⁸

²⁵ "Child Labour and Armed Conflict," *International Labor Organization*, accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/Armedconflict/lang--en/index.htm>.

²⁶ "Child Labour Rises to 160 Million – First Increase in Two Decades. The International Labour Organization and UNICEF Warn Nine Million Additional Children at Risk as a Result of COVID-19 Pandemic," *International Labor Organization*, June 10, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_800090/lang--en/index.htm.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ "Child Labour and Armed Conflict."

IV. Recruiting children into the armed conflicts: Child soldiers

These frightening data become even more frightening if we highlight the issue of warfare and the recruitment of children into the military ranks. Recruiting children into the military ranks is one of the worst and most obvious, grave violations of human rights norms and children's rights. In May 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted a non-binding protocol to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, illustrating the growing global sentiment against the use of children for military purposes. What the Protocol aimed at was increasing the minimum age limit for recruitment to 18 years, and in previous conventions, as we mentioned, the minimum age limit was 15 years (110 countries signed this Protocol).²⁹ However, this long list of conventions and laws is regularly ignored and violated. On the contrary, the practice of recruiting children into the military and armed ranks is proving to be the new standard for waging wars around the world.

This leads us to the basic thesis of the paper that the practice of using and recruiting children in armed conflicts around the world is the world's most unrecognized form of child abuse in modern society, and is less a matter of culture and the lack of society's attitude towards the value of children, and more a matter of pragmatism and a socioeconomic phenomenon.

There are three critical factors that form the causal chain of this terrifying practice. The first factor of this practice is the existence of social disorder and failures caused by globalization, wars and diseases that lead to greater global conflicts and instabilities, but also to generational disconnection within traditional communities, creating a generation gap, misunderstanding and disrespect for older members within traditional societies, creating new sources of potential recruits. The consequences of this are increasing socioeconomic dislocations. Another factor is the technological improvement and simplification of small and easily operable weapons that even children can easily handle, which made these weapons more accessible and more efficient in their use. The third, but no less important factor, is the rise of a new type of conflict (so-called postmodern wars or conflicts) which are far more brutal and criminal, which leads to changes in the modern way of warfare. All of the above resulted in the revival of a new doctrine of warfare, especially in the context of weakened and failed states. (the so-called Shadow state) and the so-called Kalashnikov lifestyle.³⁰

²⁹ United Nations, "Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict," February 12, 2002, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-rights-child-involvement-children>.

³⁰ William Reno, "Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars," in *Greed & Grievance Economic Agendas in Civil Wars*, eds. Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, 43-68 (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 54.

V. Terrifying data

Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict was created by the UN General Assembly in December 1996, to strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict, raise awareness, promote the collection of information about the plight of children affected by war and foster international cooperation to improve their protection.³¹

According to *The Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict* to the Human Rights Council, from the June 22, 2021, prepared following consultations and covering the period from January to December 2021, more than 8,500 children were used as soldiers last year in various conflicts across the world and nearly 2,700 others were killed. UN chief Antonio Guterres' annual report to the Security Council on children and armed conflict covers the killing, maiming and sexual abuse of children, abduction or recruitment, denial of aid access and targeting of schools and hospitals. The report verified that violations had been committed against 19,379 children in 21 conflicts. The most violations in 2020 were committed in Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen. It verified that 8,521 children were used as soldiers last year, while another 2,674 children were killed and 5,748 injured in various conflicts.³²

In 2021, children in armed conflict suffered a high number of grave violations. The United Nations verified 23,982 grave violations, of which 22,645 were committed in 2021 and 1,337 were committed earlier but verified only in 2021. Violations affected 19,165 children (13,633 boys, 5,242 girls, 290 sex unknown) in 21 situations and one regional monitoring arrangement. The highest numbers of violations were the killing (2,515) and maiming (5,555) of 8,070 children, follow

³¹ The Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *The Mandate of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict*, created by the General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/51/77), following the publication, in 1996, of a report by Graça Machel entitled the "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children."

³² "More than 8,500 Children Were Used as Soldiers in 2020, Says UN," CNN, June 22, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/22/world/child-soldiers-un-report-2020-intl/index.html>; United Nations General Assembly, "Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the Human Rights Council," January 9, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/report-special-representative-secretary-general-children-and-armed-conflict-ahrc5260-enar>. See also the relevant reports of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in specific country situations, in particular in Colombia (S/2021/1022), the Central African Republic (S/2021/882), Yemen (S/2021/761), Afghanistan (S/2021/662), the Syrian Arab Republic (S/2021/398), and the report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the Human Rights Council on children and armed conflict (A/HRC/49/58).

by the recruitment and use of 6,310 children and 3,945 incidents of denial of humanitarian access. Children were detained for actual or alleged association with armed groups (2,864), including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations, or for national security reasons.³³

Where possible, violations are attributed to parties to conflict and the annexes to the present report include a list of parties engaging in violations against children, namely the recruitment and use of children, the killing and maiming of children, rape and other forms of sexual violence against children, attacks on schools, hospitals and protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,³⁴ and the abduction of children.

The present *Report of the Secretary-General UN Conflict-related sexual violence*, from 29 March 2022, which covers the period from January to December 2021, is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution. According to that Report, whereas 70 per cent of children affected by grave violations are boys, the number of violations affecting boys has decreased, while the number of girls who were casualties of killing and maiming, or subjected to abduction and sexual violence, increased, particularly in the Lake Chad basin. Cases of sexual violence continued to be vastly underreported, owing to stigmatization, the fear of reprisals, harmful social norms, the absence of services, impunity, the lack of humanitarian access and safety concerns.³⁵ Rising inequality, increased militarization, reduced civic space and the illicit flow of small arms and light weapons also contributed, among other factors, to fueling widespread and systematic conflict-related sexual violence, even in the midst of a global pandemic.³⁶

³³ “More than 8,500 Children Were Used as Soldiers in 2020, Says UN,” *CNN*, June 22, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/22/world/child-soldiers-un-report-2020-intl/index.html>; United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the Human Rights Council.”

³⁴ For the purposes of the present report, the phrase “protected persons in relation to schools and/or hospitals,” used in *Security Council Resolutions 1998 (2011), 2143 (2014) and 2427 (2018)*, as well as in the statements by the President of the Security Council of 17 June 2013 (S/PRST/2013/8) and 31 October 2017 (S/PRST/2017/21), refers to teachers, doctors, other educational personnel, students and patients; “More than 8,500 Children Were Used as Soldiers in 2020, Says UN,” *CNN*, June 22, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/22/world/child-soldiers-un-report-2020-intl/index.html>; United Nations General Assembly, “Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict to the Human Rights Council.”

³⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, “Report Conflict-related Sexual Violence,” 29 March, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/7403a5e7-9e70-3b17-b390-5a7cd6248d92/SG-Report2021for-web.pdf>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

The year 2021 saw a deadly mix of conflict escalation, military coups and takeovers, protracted and new conflicts, as well as violations of international law, all of which had a devastating impact on the protection of children around the world. Cross-border conflict and intercommunal violence also impacted the protection of children, especially in the Lake Chad Basin and Central Sahel regions highlights the *Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*.³⁷

Girls were increasingly affected by grave violations, comprising up to 30% of all victims. The Lake Chad Basin region showed a significant increase of girls affected by grave violations. “Boys and girls often face different and evolving risks across conflict situations, and *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict* published by my office in May 2022,³⁸ highlights the importance of better understanding the gender dimensions of child rights violations during armed conflict to inform our prevention and response strategies,”³⁹ emphasized the Special Representative.

The UN document *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict* highlights that gender analysis can prevent overlooking some aspects of the nature of violations that are underreported, often on the basis of sex/gender – for example, sexual violence against boys or girls, or their recruitment and use by parties to conflict. Disaggregated data can more effectively equip child protection actors with gender-specific prevention and response strategies, so they can develop interventions that are much better tailored to the differentiated protection needs of girls and boys. Gender analysis can also then assist child protection actors in monitoring the effectiveness of these interventions. The incorporation of the gender approach shows that this is a better approach, when we talk about ways of gender-based violations of children’s rights.⁴⁰

³⁷ For more details and data about grave violation of children see United Nations, “Annual Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict,” July 11, 2022, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/document-type/annual-reports/>; <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/children-and-armed-conflict-report-secretary-general-a76871-s2022493-enarruzh>.

³⁸ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*.

³⁹ United Nations, “Statistics Should Never Overshadow the Individual Suffering of Children in Armed Conflict, ‘We Must Redouble Efforts to End Grave Violations,’” July 11, 2022, <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2022/07/statistics-should-never-overshadow-the-individual-suffering-of-children-in-armed-conflict-we-must-redouble-efforts>.

⁴⁰ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*, 11.

There are several ways in which gender considerations should be reflected. Information on the violation of children's rights should be disaggregated according to sex (girls and boys) during data collection. Further, certain violations of children's rights may constitute gender-based violence, as the violation is particularly directed against children due to their sex or identity.⁴¹ Everyone who is part of the programs that help those children in recovering and reintegration after being forced or involved in armed conflicts, child protection practitioners or MRM,⁴² should be sensitive to the specific needs and coping mechanisms of girls and boys when dealing with the cases of the violations against children. Particular sensitivity must be toward child's sexuality or self-image. We must be aware that girls and boys have different ways of experiencing violations, different coping mechanisms and different needs. MRM staff and all those who works with the children affected by this grave cases of violence need to be sensitive to this, as well as to the responses needed by children.

The information does not represent the full scale of violations against children, as verification depends on many factors, including access. The report presents trends and patterns of violations, and engagement with parties responsible for violations that might lead to behavioural change, including promotion of accountability and inclusion of child protection provisions in peace processes.⁴³ Statistics should never overshadow the individual suffering of children in armed conflict.

VI. Causes and consequences of this situation

The biggest burden and the greatest consequences are on the youngest part of the population, the children. One quarter of the world's youth survive on less than a dollar a day, 250 million children live on the streets, 211 million of them have to do hard work in order to survive for themselves and their families, 115 million children have never attended school. One third of children in Africa suffer from severe hunger.

Insecurity, poverty and all of the above contribute to synchronized failures at multiple levels: economic, social, ecological, political,

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Grave Violations against Children in Situations of Armed Conflict. This publication is a tool for field practitioners implementing the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM). The MRM was established in 2005 by the Security Council to foster accountability and compliance with international law and child protection standards. Over the years since, the work of child protection practitioners implementing the MRM has yielded real results for children in some of the most difficult and dangerous places on earth.

⁴³ "More than 8,500 Children Were Used as Soldiers in 2020, Says UN," *CNN*, June 22, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/22/world/child-soldiers-un-report-2020-intl/index.html>.

environmental, socioeconomic fragmentation, the dissolution and collapse of values and norms, the weakening of state legitimacy and role, from which violent conflicts and terrible exclusion and distress arise. Among young people there is a lack of perspectives and visions. All of this leads us to lost youth, weakened social structure and relations between members of society, and everything breaks through the most vulnerable, through the children, making them even more vulnerable, insecure and more susceptible to recruitment. This is the so-called a social bomb in which desperate and excluded children represent a large labor pool, making them vulnerable to the illegal economy, organized crime and armed conflicts.

Terrorist groups and transnational criminal networks continued to destabilize some of the most fragile contexts, including through the use of sexual violence as a tactic. In some situations, gender-based hate speech and incitement to violence were evident in public discourse, including on digital platforms. Women peacebuilders and human rights defenders were often specifically targeted, including through sexual violence and harassment as a form of reprisal, in order to exclude them from public life. Activists and advocates working to highlight the plight and defend the rights of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and to support their access to justice and services, were also subjected to reprisals and intimidation. Sexual violence further impeded women's livelihood activities, against the backdrop of economic shocks and poverty driven by protracted conflict and pandemic-related restrictions.⁴⁴

These trends emerged at a time when the global public health crisis as a result of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) had already diminished humanitarian access and diverted resources away from life-saving services to address gender-based violence and deeply affecting survivors, in particular displaced women and girls. Military spending outpaced investment in pandemic-related health care in fragile and conflict-affected countries.⁴⁵

Systematically marginalized, withdrawn from the margins of society, excluded, desperate, easy targets and prey, vulnerable, alienated, angry, become lonely, accustomed to violence and conflicts, living in constant chaos and daily militarization, looking for security and structure, a sense of control and belonging. This type of life and the situation in which these children find themselves, Lorraine Macmillian names *the essential militarization of life and the omnipresence of sol-*

⁴⁴ United Nations Secretary-General, "Report Conflict-related Sexual Violence," 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

*diers around them.*⁴⁶ In such a situation of moral vacuum, rebel groups appeal and offer security and a sense of control and power, belonging, a sense of cohesion, security, commitment, purpose and meaning.

When one has no left on the earth, neither father, nor mother, neither brother nor sister, and when one is small, a little boy in a damned and barbaric country where everyone slashes each other's throats, what does one do? Of course, one becomes a child soldier, a small soldier, to get one's fair share of eating and butchering as well. Only that remains.⁴⁷

The issue of the changed nature of warfare in the last few decades of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a special emphasis on the use and increasing mass availability of child soldiers, the implementation of the doctrine of the use of child soldiers, the traditional strategy of conducting war, significantly and radically changes everything. What can be seen is the breakdown of warrior honor and the rules of warfare.

Once such violence erupts, a new kind of conflict takes place here ancient warrior codes, which once dictated unwritten rules that minimized bloodshed and cruelty, and have been swept away by the onslaught of modern warfare.⁴⁸

Economy, i.e. profit is the main driver and origin of war, money, resources, supremacy and power over territories (eg: Sierra Leone diamond fields, DRC mines of coltan ore needed for motherboards of laptops and cell phones). The classic philosopher of war, stated: "Politics is the womb in which war develops."⁴⁹ Another author, Michael Wessels, points out:

⁴⁶ Lorraine Macmillan, "Militarized Children and Sovereign Power," *The Militarization of Childhood: Thinking Beyond the Global South*, ed. J. Marshall Beier, 61-76 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴⁷ See Ahmandou Kourouma, *Allah is Not Obligated*, trans. Frank Wynne (New York: Penguin Random House, 2000).

⁴⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 109.

⁴⁹ See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

Since the problem of child soldiers is based on the structural violence of poverty and social inequality, the priority is to reduce poverty accompanied by a fairer distribution of resources [...] ecological degradation, failed states and wild militarism, poverty and social injustice constitute the root of most armed conflicts in the world.⁵⁰

The problem of child soldiers goes beyond the boundaries of gender. In isolated cases in the past, when children were used on the battlefield, they were exclusively boys. Today, although most child soldiers are still boys, there are a significant number of girls under the age of 18. About 30% of the world's armed forces that recruit child soldiers include girls. Around the world, it is estimated that girls make up 10% to 30% of children in combat forces.

During armed conflicts, girls are particularly susceptible and subjected to various systematic forms of violence and violations of their rights that have mental, psychological, physical, spiritual, emotional and material consequences. These forms of violence are forced kidnapping, forced imprisonment, human trafficking, various tortures, violence, and other forms of inhumane treatment, amputation and mutilation, forced recruitment, conversion into sex slaves, rape, sexual exploitation, increased exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection/ AIDS, forced prostitution, forced marriage and forced pregnancy or forced abortion. Armed conflicts impose unimaginable suffering and consequences on the lives of girls. All this creates the need for even better documentation, monitoring and reporting on this type of violence against girls in order to develop and strengthen policies and programs for the prevention of violence against girls.

Most often, girls are not recognized, invisible and their presence, rights and needs are not recognized in armed conflicts and groups, and even in the post-conflict period, demobilization and social integration, which is the most difficult process of regaining childhood. A possible pregnancy is also a big problem, the question of the fate of the girl and her child if she keeps him, her problematic relationship with the bully who tied her to him in this way. Because of everything, they feel fear, guilt and shame about it.

Often, the real data on the numbers of participation and involvement of girls are kept secret, so that this further complicates the possibility of their rehabilitation and return to the community. For example,

⁵⁰ Michael Wessells, "How We Can Prevent Child Soldiering?" *Peace Review* 12, no. 3 (2000): 409.

the governments of Northern Uganda, Mozambique and Sierra Leone conceal, hide, deny and manipulate data on the involvement of girls in their official military ranks, while on the other hand, they highlight their presence in rebel ranks.

VII. The situation is more difficult for girls

Where are the girls in all this if they are not counted as part of the armed forces? How to help them if they are invisible and do not exist? Who will heal them, help them, how will they return to their communities if they don't exist? Girls are given various names, such as women in captivity, wives of commanders, followers of rebels and sex slaves, and in this way their role is minimized, reduced and made less visible. That is why many NGOs propose the name of the girl in armed conflicts and groups.

Intersecting humanitarian, security and political crises exacerbated the root causes of conflict-related sexual violence, including militarization, the proliferation of arms, impunity, institutional collapse, structural gender-based inequality and harmful social norms. Protection is the bedrock for women's full, equal and meaningful participation in political, social and economic processes. Women and girls must be able to safely participate in all peace and security decision-making processes.⁵¹

Female soldiers are generally relegated to a footnote in analyses of contemporary warfare. As the topic of women and war is usually considered in terms of female soldiers, little is said of the relationship between women and armed conflict in general. But the analyses of warfare differ significantly from the front-line experiences of war. Women stand as general targets – raped, maimed, and murdered – in the dirty war construction of a *culture of terror*⁵² intended to subdue the civilian community into social and political acquiescence.⁵³

Therapeutic narratives during psychotherapy revealed that the most girl soldiers shared a common history. Abducted as children, the majority were raped within the first 24 hours, before being 'initiated' involving being forced to perpetrate an extreme act of violence against captured civilians. During the period of captivity, they were repeatedly

⁵¹ United Nations Secretary-General, "Report Conflict-related Sexual Violence," 5.

⁵² Michael Taussig, "Culture of Terror – Space of Death. Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, no. 3 (1984): 467-497.

⁵³ Carolyn Nordstrom, "Women and War: Observations from The Field," *Pasadena* 10, no. 1 (1991): 1.

raped, forced to adopt the role of ‘wives of soldiers’ and were forced to continue to commit atrocities and to engage in socially and culturally unacceptable behaviours including eating human flesh. Towards the end of the insurgency many of the girls escaped. These girls return to the village, but the community stigmatizes them, considering them members and supporters of odious rebel groups. They were also stigmatised as a result of the SGBV (sexual and gender-based violence) they had experienced and were labelled ‘kisigira’ in Swahili, meaning ‘worthless.’⁵⁴

In addition, after returning to their communities and homes, their fear of committing violence again and continuing the chain of violence is formidable, as well as they are perceived as being likely to have sexually transmitted infections. These women continued to carry out acts of violence within the community, reinforcing the rejection and exclusion by family and community members.

VIII. Sexual violence as a tactic of war and terrorism

In the background of ongoing political and security crises, connected by trends of militarization and the proliferation of arms, sexual violence continued to be used as a tactic of war, torture and terrorism.⁵⁵ Shrinking civic space, coupled with misogynistic threats, were worrying trends observed in Afghanistan, Libya, Myanmar, the Sudan and Yemen, where sexual violence was perpetrated against political activists, including during demonstrations.⁵⁶

The term “conflict-related sexual violence,” as used in the present-ed *Report of the Secretary-General UN Conflict-related sexual violence*, refers to rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, enforced sterilization, forced marriage, and any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity perpetrated against women, men, girls or boys that is directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. This link may be evident in the profile of the perpetrator, who is often affiliated with a State or non-State armed group, including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations. The profile of the victim, who is frequently an actual or perceived member of a persecuted political, ethnic or religious minority, or targeted on the basis of

⁵⁴ Katy Robjant, Anke Koebach, Sabine Schmitt, Amani Chilbashimba, Samuel Carleial, and Thomas Elbert, “The Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms and Aggression in Female Former Child Soldiers using Adapted Narrative Exposure Therapy – A RCT in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 123 (2019): 2.

⁵⁵ United Nations Secretary-General, “Report Conflict-related Sexual Violence,” 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. The term also encompasses trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual violence and/or exploitation, when committed in situations of conflict.⁵⁷

Conflict-related sexual violence, where family members were forced to witness rape, daily contribute to already eroded family networks. The collapse of protective social networks and prevailing insecurity exposed internally displaced, refugee and migrant survivors to further violence in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and elsewhere. In certain contexts, the diversion of resources to military efforts undermined health and social services. Migrant and refugee women and girls in conflict-affected areas, particularly those held in detention facilities, continued to face heightened risks of sexual violence in Libya and Yemen.⁵⁸

Across diverse contexts, women and girls suffered ongoing attacks and threats of sexual violence engaging in daily livelihood activities. In the Central African Republic, women and girls included in agriculture, gathering firewood or returning home to retrieve essential items after displacement, were raped and in some cases abducted and held by armed groups.⁵⁹

Localized armed violence also intensified at the subnational level in contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. In the Sudan, from July to October 2022, there was an increase in reported incidents of sexual violence corresponding to the farming season, especially along transhumance routes. Economic hardship compounded by political instability and structural gender-based inequality deepened the risk of conflict-related sexual violence. In Afghanistan, the loss of livelihoods, in many cases owing to the Taliban takeover and ensuing inflation, caused many to resort to negative coping strategies, with reports indicating the sale or forced marriage of women and girls, including to Taliban fighters.⁶⁰ In almost all settings covered in the present Report, sexual violence impeded women's participation in social, political and economic life, highlighting the importance of addressing the root causes of sexual violence as part of promoting substantive equality in all spheres.

There are vast number incidents of conflict-related sexual violence and discernible trend of sexual violence, exploitation, and ongoing cy-

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

cles of violence in the context of abduction and trafficking, including by United Nations designated terrorist groups operating in conflict-affected settings in which State presence and the rule of law remain weak. The present Report is limited to incidents of conflict-related sexual violence that were verified by the United Nations. While it conveys the severity and brutality of recorded cases, it does not purport to convey the full scale and prevalence of these crimes.

What are the impacts of war on the participants, and do they vary by gender? Existing theory and evidence are both inconclusive and focused on males. Children are disproportionately affected by conflict, and the impact of conflict on children is inherently gendered.

Gender and age are among the many factors that shape the ways in which children are at risk and what resources are available for their protection, both within the family and the broader community. But gender analysis requires more than sex disaggregated data, as these numbers alone will not increase understanding about the individual, group, or environmental risk factors, or the profile and motivation of the perpetrators.

It is essential to recognize that children, regardless of their gender, are exposed to any type of violation in the context of conflict. Grave violations rarely occur in isolation and are often interlinked with socio-economic circumstances. Therefore, a gender analysis of the grave violations must take these issues into account and entail an understanding of how risks are exacerbated due to gender stereotypes and the complex elements related to each violation.

In *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*, there are the key elements of the six grave violations against children, that we must take in to account, while conducting a gender analysis. These are: 1) Recruitment and Use; 2) Killing and Maiming; 3) Rape and other forms of Sexual Violence; 4) Attacks against Schools and Hospitals; 5) Abduction; and 6) Denial of Humanitarian Access.⁶¹

New data and a tragic natural quasi-experiment in Uganda, for example, allow us to estimate the impacts of war on both genders, and assess how war experiences affect reintegration success. As expected, violence drives social and psychological problems, especially among females. Unexpectedly, however, most women returning from armed groups reintegrate socially and are resilient.⁶²

⁶¹ More about six grave violations in UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary, *The Gender Dimensions*, 13.

⁶² Jeannie Annan, Christopher Blattman, Dyan Mazurana, and Khristopher Carlson, "Civil War,

Girls suffer from severe forms of rights violation and violence against them, especially gender-based violence (sexism, misogyny, extreme forms of violence against girls and their bodies by boys and men). Girls who become pregnant, usually through rape, and their return to communities as well as their children whom they decide to keep, are a particularly big problem and more difficult to integrate. They are often not accepted without any chance of recovery. There is also a huge problem of sexually transmitted diseases, because many of these girls are intentionally infected, especially with the HIV/AIDS virus.

Concerted action and investment are urgently needed to prevent sexual violence in the first instance and to tackle the structural root causes that perpetuate these crimes. Until now, little attention has been paid to prevention in conflict and post-conflict settings, including to preventing the escalation of sexual violence, the revictimization of survivors and the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Despite these gaps, the road map for prevention is clear.⁶³

Realizing that girls are important and essential for the recovery of entire communities means realizing that they are not just an escort for soldiers and rebels, they are essential, and their role is crucial in healing. What we need, as we highlighted earlier in this article, is gender-based policy, advocacy, and programs to make girls' presence visible.

IX. Reasons for joining the armed groups

Although some girls join armed groups voluntarily, many of them are forced, and many claim that it was their only choice to escape the constant violence and terrifying attacks on their villages. Many of them joined armed groups to escape hunger and poverty. Girls often believe that within these groups they will be protected and saved from the climate of fear, terror and insecurity in which they live during frequent attacks, looting and robberies by these armed groups. Sometimes the parents themselves encourage them to join, because they think that having a child in armed group can be good for them as well because it will provide them with protection and security against attacks.⁶⁴

Many of them themselves "choose" to join one of the groups provided, in the hope that they will thus provide themselves with a better

Reintegration, and Gender in Northern Uganda," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 55, no. 6 (2011): 877-908.

⁶³ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary, *The Gender Dimensions*, 13.

⁶⁴ More about reasons see in Suzan Tiefenbrun, "Child Soldiers, Slavery and the Trafficking of Children," *Fordham International Law Journal* 31, no. 2 (2007): 415-486.

chance of survival, actually running away from the violence they suffer in their communities, as a strategy to protect themselves from it and gain better chances to meet their basic needs. Recruited, conscripted, chose to join themselves, many were abducted, as we mentioned, but most of them want to protect themselves due to fear of further violence against them by their community and parents who try to get financial benefit from recruiting girls. This was tempting for desperately poor girls living in a climate of high insecurity.

The significant majority of the girls bitterly regretted their decision to join. Once in the group, they were sexually abused by the very people they thought would protect them. For those whose parents had encouraged them to join, adult betrayal was even more complete. The majority urged to advise other girls of the horrors of life in the bush, in case they were tempted to join.⁶⁵

Another experience that seems to have left lasting psychological scars on many girls was being forced to participate in looting and living off stolen goods. The involvement of these girls in crimes and acts that are absolutely repugnant to them creates a deep sense of shame and guilt in them. Both “volunteer” recruits and abductees “defined some of their most unbearable moments as witnessing violent pillaging, then benefitting from the loot. They spoke of their distress at profiting from these acts of violence.”⁶⁶

The girls who had been abducted or had joined an armed group in the hope of a better life, instead of better life that they hoped for, they were physically and emotionally abused and experienced extraordinary violence, loneliness and terror, including daily threats of death. When they finally came home, most were met with suspicion, humiliation and discrimination, if not outright rejection, and were clearly made to feel that they were considered lesser human beings. Girls who had been abducted were blamed and rejected as much as those who had joined “voluntarily.”⁶⁷

These girls spoke of many forms of rejection: discrimination, humiliation, insults, blame, bullying by families, friends, neighbours, or teachers. Along with the ensuing isolation, the girls overwhelming-

⁶⁵ “What the Girls Say: Improving Practices for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Child Soldiers International*, June 19, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/what-girls-say-improving-practices-demobilisation-and-reintegration>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁷ UN Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary, *The Gender Dimensions*, 13.

ly defined this as the source of their deepest emotional suffering.⁶⁸ Many of the girls had returned to home. For some, the situation had improved, although one could sense that the wound had not entirely healed, but many were still victimized. Unfortunately, many of the traditional roles assigned to them by society are also imposed on them within the armed groups they belong to (cooking, washing, serving men, cleaning...). Even after reintegration, they are forced to return to these traditional patriarchally imposed roles, which does not increase their chances of recovery and better living conditions.

What is important to emphasize is that girls go through deep personal changes and changes in identity and personality. In their roles within the armed groups, they come to the realization that they can no longer accept traditionally imposed roles and that they cannot return to their previous lives. They were often subjugated and subjected to severe forms of gender-based violence and atrocities with little or no possibility of autonomy. Thus, they constantly relive the experience of second-class persons in the reintegration process, compared to boys (so-called second-class reintegration). What is needed is to reduce the feeling of segregation, marginalization and second-class status in the DDR process (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process).

All these frightening statistics and situations of enormous and grave violence against children, especially girls in armed conflicts, pointing out to deep and radical changes in the rules of war and the breakdown of war norms, which are radically changing. Graca Machel, the former first lady of Mozambique and wife of Nelson Mandela, perhaps best described the breakdown of the norms and rules of war.

She points out that the statistics are shocking enough in themselves, but the conclusions that can be drawn from these data are even more frightening. More and more of the world is being drawn into this desolate moral vacuum. It is a space devoid of the most fundamental human values, a place where children are slaughtered, raped, and mutilated, a space where children are exploited as soldiers, a space where children are starved and exposed to extreme brutality. Such unregulated terror and violence speak of liberated victimization. There are still some abysses and depths into which people can sink.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ UNICEF and Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict United Nations, *Machel Study 10-year Strategic Review Children and Conflict in a Changing World* (New York: UNICEF, 2009).

X. “Lost value”: Returning to home

Some reports reveal cycle of violence and rejection suffered by former girl soldiers in Democratic Republic of Congo and it reveals why some are re-joining armed groups. The majority of girl soldiers interviewed were sexually abused by soldiers. Up to 40% of child soldiers in DRC are girls, but of thousands released by the UN only 7% were girls. Stigmatisation, family rejection at home causing some to re-join armed groups. Girls coming out of armed groups in Eastern DRC are often rejected by their families when they return home, with a number of re-joining groups that abused them as a result, reveals a new report from *Child Soldiers International*. Released on the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, *What the Girls Say*, reveals the girls’ experiences in their own words. Most girls interviewed were sexually abused by the armed groups. For many, sexual violence was a daily event. For some, sexual violence in their own homes, was itself the motivation to join the armed groups.

Despite the daily violence of life with the armed groups, many girls reported that returning home to rejection and stigma they faced as survivors of sexual violence was the source of their deepest emotional suffering. Some who are unable to bear rejection from family and friends upon returning even choose to rejoin. Others do not risk attempting to return home at all.⁷⁰

Decades-long conflict in DRC has created thousands of underage soldiers. Girls account for up to 40% of them but between 2009 and 2015, only 7% of thousands released by the UN in DRC were girls.⁷¹ Many others escaped independently. For the girls who did return home, the overriding desire was access to education.

There are no accurate statistics on the number of girls who have been, or still are, associated with armed groups in DRC. What we do know is that, between January 2009 and November 2015, of 8,546 formerly associated children registered by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in DRC (MONUSCO), only 600 (7%) were girls.⁷² In contrast, MONUSCO estimates that girls make up a significantly higher percentage – 30 to 40% – of all children associated with

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ MONUSCO, “Invisible Survivors: Girls in Armed Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo from 2009 to 2015,” November 2015, https://monusco.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/151202%20Girls%20in%20Armed%20Groups%202009-2015_ENGLISH_FINAL.pdf.

⁷² Ibid.

armed groups.⁷³ These figures suggest that demobilisation efforts in DRC fail to reach most girls. The majority of the girls claim that they had not been officially demobilised but had escaped. Most also said they “left many girls behind” when they left the armed group.⁷⁴

How can we explain the lack of attention towards girls in assistance programs? Although it is true that some girls returning from the bush keep a low profile out of shame and therefore do not come forward to seek support, we also found that NGOs and RECOPE members in some areas had made insufficient efforts to proactively identify and reach out to girls. Discussions with RECOPE members seems to suggest that sociocultural perceptions are at play and result in some degree of inattention towards girls. They are often perceived as less threatening than boys, who are assumed to have been fighters and therefore more prone to violence, while girls are categorised as “wives,” making it easier to forget their silent suffering.⁷⁵ Sandra Olsson, program manager at Child Soldiers International, said:

Social exclusion and stigmatisation are far more prevalent among girls. It is linked to a perceived ‘loss of social value’ after having had sexual relations outside marriage. Their suffering is often misunderstood or completely overlooked, and their most basic psychosocial and emotional needs are woefully unaddressed.⁷⁶

An additional aggravating circumstance, as we have already mentioned, is that upon their return, the girls are exposed to further violence by their previous communities that do not accept them, which significantly and further complicates their recovery from the severe physical, psychological, social and spiritual traumas they were exposed to.

We can identify five typical responses to the rejection (or the fear of rejection) these girls faced: anger/rebellion, self-blame, going back, staying, and exile. These reactions and behaviours, however, were not necessarily mutually exclusive.⁷⁷ Most of them seemed to have prob-

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “What the Girls Say: Improving Practices for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Child Soldiers International*, June 19, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/what-girls-say-improving-practices-demobilisation-and-reintegration>.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

lems whit anger, shame and with internalized blame and withdrawn from community life, despite longing to be included. Some tried to regain the acceptance of their community, for example by working harder in the fields, taking the blame for others, or avoiding joining in dances or socialising with boys. Yet others could not bear the pain of rejection and decided to rejoin the Boys and girls often face different and evolving risks across conflict situations, talk about and gender dimensions of grave violations against children in armed conflict, highlights the armed group they had originally left.

The rooting of such feelings of mistrust towards the girls in the collective and social consciousness has important implications for programs and strategies which are to support their reintegration. The girls attributed family and community rejection to the belief that, having “known men,” they had lost their social “value.” The notion of “loss of social value,” and understanding how it can be regained, is at the core of reintegration programming.⁷⁸ The girls were clear: if they could regain social value, family and community acceptance would automatically follow. Research has shown how stigma prevents psychosocial recovery.⁷⁹

The most important predictor of successful and long-term reintegration for children formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups is acceptance by their families and communities. Acceptance is essential if a child is to adapt, find their place again in the family and community and regain and recover their psychosocial wellbeing.⁸⁰

Unfortunately, due to all of the above, the majority of girls are still excluded from the DDR program (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration). Most often, they return home spontaneously, on their own, and unfortunately their psychological, physical, mental and spiritual health is severely damaged, without any help in healing the trauma.

The positive psychosocial impact when a community fully accepts a child returning from an armed group is “associated with the child’s reduced depression at follow up and improved confidence and prosocial

⁷⁸ Ibid.; Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*, 13.

⁷⁹ Joanne N. Corbin, “Returning Home: Resettlement of Formerly Abducted Children in Northern Uganda,” *Disasters* 32, no. 2 (2008): 316-335; UNICEF, “SWAY – The Survey of War Affected Youth, Making Reintegration Work for Youth in Northern Uganda,” 2007; Theresa S. Betancourt, Jessica Agnew-Blais, Stephen E. Gilman, David R Williams, and B. Heidi Ellis, “Past Horrors, Present Struggles: The Role of Stigma in the Association Between War Experiences and Psychosocial Adjustment among Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone,” *Social Science and Medicine* 70, no. 1 (2010): 17-26.

⁸⁰ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children in Armed Conflict, *The Gender Dimensions of Grave Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict*, 13.

attitudes regardless of levels of violence exposure.”⁸¹ This is particularly relevant to DDR programming for girls, given that girls are more vulnerable than boys to discrimination, stigmatisation, and rejection upon return.

In discussions with some girls in mentioned Report from Child Soldiers International, published 19 June 2017, released on the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, *What the Girls Say*, Report reveals the girls’ experiences in their own words. Most girls interviewed explored the different avenues through which they could recover their “lost social value.” One of them are: being “humble and obedient,” “working hard,” “accepting unjust accusations,” and “avoiding boys” were all cited by the girls as ways to keep themselves out of trouble but not necessarily to become accepted. But these were not behaviours which all girls were willing or able to follow.⁸² On the other hand, training for income-generating activities was seen by all girls as value-giving. Similar value was attributed to the possession of reliable means for a livelihood such as livestock, farming tools and seeds. Unfortunately, these opportunities had been limited. Finally, most girls asserted that going to school was the best way to regain “lost social value,” a place in society and a chance at a normal life, including marriage.⁸³

XI. Towards a conclusion: Ethical perspectives

Recruiting children into the military ranks is one of the worst and most obvious, grave violations of human rights norms and children’s rights. Girls were increasingly affected by grave violations, comprising up to 30% of all victims. During armed conflicts, girls are particularly susceptible and subjected to various systematic forms of violence and violations of their rights that have mental, psychological, physical, spiritual, emotional, and material consequences. Most often, girls are not recognized, invisible and their presence, rights and needs are not recognized in armed conflicts and groups, and even in the post-conflict period, demobilization, and social integration, which is the most difficult process of regaining childhood.

⁸¹ Theresa Stichick Betancourt et al., “Sierra Leone’s Former Child Soldiers: A Follow-Up Study of Psychosocial Adjustment and Community Reintegration,” *Child Development* 81, no. 4 (2010): 1077-1095.

⁸² “What the Girls Say: Improving Practices for the Demobilisation and Reintegration of Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups in Democratic Republic of Congo,” 11.

⁸³ Ibid.

There is a significant increase of girls affected by grave violations. Boys and girls often face different and evolving risks across conflict situations, talk about and gender dimensions of grave violations against children in armed conflict, highlights the importance of better understanding the gender dimensions of child rights violations during armed conflict. Gender analysis can prevent overlooking some aspects of the nature of violations that are underreported, often on the basis of sex/gender – for example, sexual violence against boys or girls, or their recruitment and use by parties to conflict. Disaggregated data can more effectively equip child protection actors with gender-specific prevention and response strategies, so they can develop interventions that are much better tailored to the differentiated protection needs of girls and boys. Gender analysis can also then assist child protection actors in monitoring the effectiveness of these interventions. The incorporation of the gender approach shows that this is a better approach, when we talk about ways of gender-based violations of children's rights.

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