

## **BOOK REVIEW: Child Soldiers – From Violence to Protection**

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In the West, we mostly think of those involved in war as people who have volunteered to serve and defend their country. However, this is not always the case in conflicts all over the world. In many countries, it is not just men who fight, but children as well. In his book *Child Soldiers: From Violence to Protection*, Michael Wessells explores the world of child soldiers and portrays them according to three themes (peace, meaning, and hope) in an effort to thoroughly understand how children become involved in war, the role they play, and how to bring about restoration when they are able to come home. Recognizing that the issues pertaining to child soldiers are complex, Wessells examines not only the child soldiers themselves, but the societal factors that contribute to the systems of violence that make child soldiering possible. These systems are deeply rooted into society, and Wessells explores these problems in a way that leaves readers with a stronger understanding of how these conflicts affect society and politics, as well as the actual people who endure the atrocities and have to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.

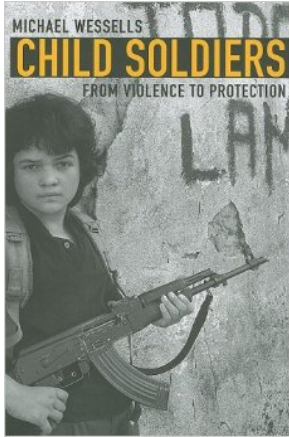
Wessells presents the issue of child soldiers in a way that is not usually portrayed. Typically, one thinks of child soldiers as being kidnapped and forced into becoming foot soldiers for an oppressive and violent commander. However, there are many factors that contribute to the recruitment of child soldiers. For instance, some children see fighting in the war as an inevitable part of life, especially if their home culture is highly militarized. This can especially pertain to child soldiers who were previously

involved in a conflict that has since ended. These children know nothing other than violence, so joining in on another conflict seems to be, in their eyes, the next logical step. Others see joining the conflict as an escape from their problems. Whether they are trying to get away from family pressures, a lack of opportunity, or poverty, these children see war as a chance to find something better than the life they are currently living. Still, some see it as an act of revenge and an opportunity to kill the people who took their family and home from them. All of these factors can come into play in influencing a child before they join an armed group, which contributes to the truly complex nature of the problems surrounding child soldiers. Now, it is important to note that this form of voluntary (when compared to someone who is forcibly recruited and given no other option) recruitment does not make the use of child soldiers acceptable. In these cases, the children are still victims who have to live with their experiences from a war that, under different circumstances, they may not have had anything to do with. Regardless of how the children get there, changes to the structure of society need to be made.

One of the most intriguing parts of Wessells' book is his thoughts on prevention and restoration. He breaks it down into three strategies: a legal strategy, a conflict prevention strategy, and a systematic prevention strategy. The fact that he broke the issue down this way is further evidence of how thoroughly Wessells examined the issues surrounding child soldiers in an effort to find a solution. Many people look at conflicts involving child soldiers and create their own assumptions about what is occurring, only focusing on the conflict itself instead of looking at all of the surrounding factors that thrust children into war; it was refreshing to see someone tackle the issue in this way. His ideas on conflict prevention especially struck a chord as he proposed using "youth as peacebuilders" (p. 245) in order to create change. Surprisingly, this thought doesn't occur to people often, perhaps because the main thought is to get the children away from the conflict. But these children can help, and they certainly have the desire to. Wessells presents compelling evidence showing the involvement of children in Youth Councils, in raising awareness, and in creating programs to help prevent children from

becoming involved with armed groups. If the children are brought into programs where they can help and make a difference in a conflict that directly affects or has affected them, then maybe they can help make the necessary lasting impact that could bring about the end of child soldiering.

Examining the issue through the lens that Wessells has created, the benefits in terms of working towards ending the use of child soldiers become apparent. This point of view allows readers to not only look at the concepts behind child soldiers in a way that they may not have thought of before, but it gives them the opportunity to examine the problem as a whole instead of just a small section. Wessells has provided the perfect framework to do this. Through this framework, it can be seen that child soldiers are more than simply a byproduct of a lack of manpower; they are a side effect of a culture and society that is ensnared by violence and poverty, leaving the people with limited opportunities for their future. Studying child soldiers from this perspective of culture and society then explains both forms of recruitment of children: In terms of voluntary recruitment, the violence that the children have become accustomed to makes violence acceptable and propels them to join in the next conflict they come across. Involuntary recruitment is further perpetuated by the culture of violence as well, since the recruiters behave in violent ways that reflect their own experiences. They are then continuing to foster the culture of violence, instill such behavior in children by being violent towards them and encouraging them to respond in a similar manner. Therefore, in order to help bring about the end of the use of child soldiers, we must consider the best way to change the culture of violence in a society, instead of simply how can we bring these child soldiers home. It is important not to place focus only on winning the individual battle at hand, but on winning the war against the use of child soldiers in its entirety to help provide the children their best chance at happy lives.



**Book Information**

*Child Soldiers: From Violence to Prevention*

Michael Wessells (2009)

257 pp, Harvard University Press, \$22

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