

The World's Most Vulnerable: Exploring Children's Unique Vulnerabilities During Armed Conflict

Kamryn Moore, Webster University – Saint Louis

All people in the world have human rights that are guaranteed to them, no matter the situation. For some groups, additionally human rights need to be created to protect those in the world that are the most vulnerable. This paper explores the rights of the world's most vulnerable: children in one of the hardest climates a person can face, which is armed conflict. Children during armed conflict suffer unique vulnerabilities that are not seen in other situations. Using international laws, treaties, and customs, this paper will explore the three biggest human rights violations that children see during armed conflict: becoming a child soldier, the loss and disruption of education, and sexual and gender-based violence.

Children are the most vulnerable group of people in the world. Today, people under the age of eighteen make up for 25.42% of the population (World Bank, 2019). This means that out of the 7.753 billion people in the world, 1.97 billion are children. Children are among the most vulnerable of civilian populations in war, and their recruitment, abduction, and torture has been an extreme, and defining, feature of post-Cold War conflicts. The United Nations Charter defines conflict as “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state” (United Nations, 1945). In today's world we rarely see large scale international conflict. Instead, we are seeing an increase in intra-state armed conflict. The Council of Foreign Relations (n.d.) noted that as of mid-March 2022, there were 27 ongoing armed conflicts around the world. These conflicts range from intra-state civil wars in South America to multi-country international conflicts in the Middle East. The increase in intra-state conflicts has created an increase in civilian casualties. According to research done by Amnesty International (2004), civilian casualties have increased from 5% during World War 1, to over 90% during intra-state conflicts in the 1990's, most of these casualties being women and children. The increased vulnerabilities that civilians

face is key to understanding how armed conflict has changed through the years, becoming far more dangerous for civilians such as women and children.

The increase in vulnerabilities that children face in armed conflict has prompted the international community to create and ratify international treaties to protect the world's most innocent. Since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989, 191 countries have ratified it – all but the United States of America and Somalia. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely supported international treaty and provides hope for the future of children all over the world. Despite this overwhelming support for a treaty that is dedicated to protecting children, gross violations of children's rights continue around the world every single day (Amnesty International, 1999). The involvement of children in times of armed conflict, both as active participants and innocent civilians, should be treated with the same disdain and outcry as all other human rights violations.

This thesis explores the unique vulnerabilities that children face during civil war and armed conflict, dividing these vulnerabilities into three main categories. The first will be the use of child soldiers. I will examine how children are recruited, why they join an armed group, what happens to them during the conflict, and the legal repercussions after the fact. The second vulnerability is the disruption, and loss, of education. I will explain the damages are of not having access to education, exploring schools in refugee camps and the legal framework being implemented to protect the right to education. The final unique vulnerability is sexual and gender-based violence. Specifically, why sexual violence is used as a weapon, the forced marriage of child brides, sex trafficking, and laws in place protecting young girls in times of armed conflict.

This paper draws on the definition of the term “child” given in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Based on this definition, the term “child” will refer to “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). This definition is also consistent with proceedings made at the International Criminal Court.

Child Soldiers

Arguably one of the most well-known vulnerabilities that children face during civil war and armed conflict is becoming a child soldier, either voluntarily or involuntarily. According to a report released by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2021, between 2005 and 2020, there were more than 93,000 child soldiers reported around the world, but they estimate the number is closer to

230,000 children (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). It is hard to get an exact number of how many child soldiers there really are because it is not something that is reported. International organizations and governments make educated estimates based on the number of former child soldiers, kidnappings, and reports of suspicious activities surrounding children. The use of child soldiers can be traced back to the very first conflicts that the world saw, but over the past two decades there has been a significant spike in child soldiers. According to Amnesty International (1999), most child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, and that is not illegal under current international law. In the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva and the Statute of the International Criminal Court, 15 is the minimum age allowed for recruitment and participation in armed conflicts (Amnesty International, 1999). Despite the international laws, there is a lot of concern regarding the legality of how child soldiers are recruited, as well as their age, with some reports saying soldiers are as young as ten years old.

There are two main schools of thought surrounding how children become child soldiers. The first highlights the idea of forced recruitment. It portrays the entry into armed groups as a kidnapping. The second school of thought emphasizes that joining an armed group creates opportunities for the children such as education, a sense of family, food, shelter, and much more (Wessells, 2009, p. 31-32). It is important to dissect these two narratives to fully understand the multitude of ways a child becomes a member of an armed group. Despite the two differences between how children become members of armed groups, the legality of the situation does not change. Armed groups have a responsibility to protect the rights of children and not allow for them to be members of their militia.

The ultimate goal for the process of recruiting a child soldier is to foster a dependency on an armed group and prevent their escape from the organization. As previously mentioned, the first narrative surrounding the recruitment of child soldiers is abduction. Abduction is an act of violence that rips children from the security of their families and homes (Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, n.d.). Child soldiers are used by both State armies and rebel groups. Both armed groups generally target places where they can get many children at one time, such as buses, places of worship, and schools. The act of abducting multiple children at one time is known as press gangling. In situations of mass abductions, the group is not worried about what kind of children they get, the goal is numbers. When an armed group is looking for children to perform specific tasks, there is a different way of determining who to take. One example of this is with the United Congolese Party in the eastern Congo. Their policy was that each family within its area of control needed to provide a cow, money, or child to the group (Singer, 2005, p. 58). This example highlights a type of

abduction that forces families to put their children at risk. Armed groups “recruit” in areas of extreme poverty where they know that families cannot provide an adequate cow or money, so their child will get taken.

While children living with families are at risk of being abducted by armed groups, it is children in orphanages or homeless children that are the most vulnerable. When an entire school, or all the children in a village, are abducted, there is a huge amount of public outcry. This level of public outcry can be seen in the 2014 Chibok schoolgirl kidnappings done by Boko Haram. When this happened, the world lit up with anger and started the #BringBackOurGirls campaign (see Seay, 2021). But for homeless children, or those without families, the international community tends to be less aware. An example of vulnerable children being abducted was in Sudan during the Sudanese civil war. During the war, the government set up camps for homeless children, but it was actually a ploy to kill them, or recruit them to join the military, in their efforts to clean up Khartoum, the capital city of Sudan (Singer, 2005, p. 59). Despite abduction being the most agreed upon narrative of how children become soldiers, a study done by UNICEF in 2008 has shown that only about 40% of child soldiers are abducted, and 57% joined on their own volition. When Western societies think about child soldiers, it is typically assumed that the children must be forced into it. The reality of the situation is much grimmer, but it is equally as important to address.

Due to the realities of children’s lives during armed conflict, the line gets blurred between being coerced to join an armed group and wanting to join an armed group. Children that live in war zones and are perceived to have joined an armed group voluntarily are subject to a lot of international critiques, with many narratives saying that these children do not deserve assistance because they are committing criminal behavior by choice. However, these children’s decision to join an armed group is plagued by poverty, necessity, hardship, obligation, violence, and the desire for personal agency (Wessells, 2009, p. 33). It is important to understand that a child's voluntary entrance into an armed group is in fact anything but voluntary. Children may volunteer to join an armed group if they believe that that is the only way to ensure meals, clothing, shelter, and medical care. When there are so many external factors contributing to a decision, it becomes about survival.

Another reason why children may volunteer to join an armed group is to protect their families. As seen with the United Congolese Party, families are at risk if the children do not join the fighting. In addition to this, many families are rewarded for having children fight in armed conflict. In some cases, armed groups will pay the families of child soldiers a monthly wage for their child’s services. This can be very appealing to a son who wants to help his family and protect his siblings. These children now face

familial pressure to join the conflict. For some families that are living in poverty, seeing their children with [stolen] items that they once would not be able to have allows the family a sense of economic security and prosperity that they didn't think possible (Singer, 2005, p. 63). From a Western perspective, it seems unheard of to send a child to join a militia for a little bit of money, but this is the harsh reality and decisions that families around the world need to make every single day. If the children are in a home that can no longer provide the basic necessities such as food and water, joining an armed group seems like the best chance for survival.

One factor that really enhances the voluntary recruitment of child soldiers, particularly with young boys, is the idea of seeking revenge. Anthropologists refer to these situations as "shame culture." This culture consists of clan-like social structures in which a son must do everything they can to honor their family. With this mentality, when a child's civilian family is killed during an armed conflict, they will view themselves as unworthy of carrying on their bloodline and having their surname until they can get revenge. One gets revenge by joining the enemy of the group that killed your family. There have been many cases of this around the world today, and former child soldiers, and their families, have spoken about their experience with revenge. One woman in Afghanistan has spoken about her young grandson's that have joined a militia because the other group killed their father: "but they fight to avenge their father. When they see other children with their fathers, they become very sad and want to take revenge" (Engel Rasmussen, 2016).

Young boys often want revenge for their family members, but young girls want revenge for themselves. A growing phenomenon among child soldiers is young girls joining a militia to seek revenge for being sexually violated by members of the opposition. A young girl in Liberia spoke of her reasons for joining the fighting: "The rape...made me feel very angry. I couldn't sit still and do nothing about it. I wanted to take revenge. Not everyone who has been raped can stand up and take revenge because not everybody [has] a strong heart. So, we were revenging for everybody" (quoted in Taylor, 2006). When a child has been harmed, either emotionally or physically, by a militia or armed group, they are hurt and voluntarily join another group, but a distinction must be made. This is another example of coerced decisions, not free decisions, because there are external factors that have harmed the child and are affecting their decision-making abilities.

Despite the trauma of being forced into becoming a child soldier, the traumatization of the children is only beginning. Among armed groups around the world, it is very common in these groups to put the children through a brutal initiation into the group. The key to having child soldiers in your group is to not only make them reliant on you, but to break them down psychologically. One way these groups

achieve this is through forcing the children to commit human rights violations such as rape and murder, often of their own friends or family members. Forcing children to commit these types of crimes is a deliberate action to break down the children even more. Once they have committed these crimes, children are traumatized by what they have done, and believe that they are outcasts and bound to the group that has made them commit these crimes (McQueen, 2019, p. 3). While some children become traumatized by the crimes they have been forced to commit, others become desensitized to the violence, which makes them that much more dangerous. This can be seen in many different types of propaganda that a group uses where children can be seen holding up decapitated heads (Bloom, 2018). The children are also bound to this group by participating in activities that are designed to create a sense of family among the members of the group. A researcher on child soldiers, Dara Cohen, reported that committing acts of violence in a group setting, such as gang rape, helps to unite the child soldiers and build a “band of brothers” that is united under one shared thing: committing gross atrocities (Bloom, 2018).

The recruitment of child soldiers begs the question: why use child soldiers in the first place? As mentioned earlier, the use of child soldiers is not a new phenomenon, but it has increased significantly in the past three decades. Child soldiers are a much cheaper way to recruit and train combatants and are much easier to abuse and manipulate than adults. In areas of armed conflict, the typical fighting-aged male is going to be hard to find because they are either already fighting, have fled the region, or are dead. The death of these men usually means that they have children left behind, so often child soldiers are the product of supply and demand. Additionally, having children join your group can help ensure that a group's ideals are carried out, especially in a violent extremist organization. These groups are not fighting for violence, they are fighting to spread their message and their ideology, and children ensure that even if the adults die, the children can pass it on.

The use of child soldiers, and children for any sort of operation, is a strategic move by armed groups to create less suspicion and hopefully shock the opposition for long enough that the child soldiers can attack first. Generally during armed combat, most groups, especially those representing Western countries, are not anticipating having to fight children (Hubbard, 2021). Not only are these armed groups hoping for a shock value on the battlefield, but they are usually hoping to attract international media attention. While media attention to human rights violations is very important and can help create change, it also incentivizes extremist organizations that are attempting to spread their ideologies around the world. The shock value that jarring images of children participating in gruesome

human rights violations allows for international coverage that is rarely seen with other types of violations. This large outcry only furthers recruitment efforts for child soldiers.

For child soldiers the trauma does not end when the fighting is over. Approximately 65,000 children around the world were released from armed forces and other groups between 2007 and 2017 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2017). Due to the nature of what a child soldier has been through, they often feel isolated and like they have nowhere to go, either because their family has rejected them, or they have been killed during the conflict. At times, families reject former child soldiers due to the crimes they have committed, possible lingering alliances with the armed group they were a part of, a new disability the child has, psychological trauma resulting in changed behavior, pregnancy, or HIV/AIDS and other possible effects of war (Alfredson, 2002). More issues for former child soldiers arise when looking at the discrepancies between the legal protection of children's involvement in armed conflict and what happens to them in practice. The Optional Protocol on the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children's involvement in armed conflict recognizes the former child soldier as a victim who needs to be supported through rehabilitation and social integration. In practice, however, children are detained by parties to the conflict due to their association with the armed group (Asokan, 2021). In a 2018 interview done in Iraq, children detained for their alleged affiliation with the Islamic State recounted torture during interrogation with plastic pipes, rods, and electric cables. Some children said they confessed to being involved simply to stop the torture, even if they had very little, or nothing, to do with the Islamic State (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict & Human Rights Watch, 2019). Additionally, in 2003 at least six Afghan boys aged 13 to 16 were captured by U.S forces and sent to detention in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (Kaplan, 2005).

Loss of Education

In areas of war and armed conflict, education is often among the first casualties. Education is not a privilege; it is a human right. The right to education appears in multiple places throughout different international treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 26 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has a right to education. Article 28 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes education as a legal right to every child and should be accessible to all (United Nations Human Rights, 1989). Not only is education a human right, but it provides children with the understanding, knowledge, and skills they need to live a fulfilled life. Over the past three decades, the international community has become more aware of the ongoing problem of education in conflict zones. Children in conflict zones

receive a poor level of education, much lower than children in non-conflict zones, in addition to the increased vulnerability of discrimination due to race, gender, socio-economic status, or religious affiliations (Mundy & Dryden-Peterson, 2011, p. 2). Under the right to education, States have both the positive obligations towards individuals, such as the provision of free and compulsory primary education, and negative obligations, such as the prohibition on impeding access to education (British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2019). The right to education is therefore seen as binding under all circumstances and must be protected as such, including during armed conflict.

Under international humanitarian law there has been a wide variety of legal instruments when referring to the right to education for children in emergency situations such as armed conflict. The 4th Geneva Convention of 1949 provides legal protection for the education of orphaned or unaccompanied children (Article 24), the right to education under military occupation (Article 50), the right to education for interned children and young people (Article 94), and education of children during non-international armed conflicts (Article 4(3)a) (see International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). International humanitarian law enhances the legal protection of the right to education in times of armed conflict. Outside of legal precedents that are used to protect education, there are also international development goals to enhance, and encourage, a state's educational efforts. Education For All is part of the Sustainable Development Goals within the United Nations that is used to recognize several impediments to universal education and attempt to combat them through supportive measures. Although its only goal is not to provide education in armed conflict zones, it is one of their major missions.

Education is affected in many ways during insecurity and armed conflict. All human rights are interdependent, which means that having one right respected often means that other rights are going to be respected. The right to education plays a significant role in the interconnectedness of human rights. The right to education is often necessary for becoming aware of other human rights that one has access to, especially for children who would not otherwise be made aware of their rights. Armed conflict undermines the delivery of public services, especially that of education, through numerous mechanisms. In public services there are several ways that armed conflict compromises the short-term, and long-term, outcomes, including (a) reductions in resources due to economic slowdowns, loss of trained professionals, and destruction of key infrastructure; (b) shifts in spending from public services to security or other conflict-induced investments; and (c) complications to service delivery resulting in less efficient use of resources (Ghobarah et al., 2003, p. 1713-1722). In many situations, households may

struggle with the cost of sending their children to school when the armed conflict has made them lose their jobs.

Access to safe schools during times of war can provide students with not only an education, but with a sense of normalcy and feeling of safety. Schools can also be used to teach children about their rights and be a home for receiving international humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, one tactic of armed groups around the world is turning school facilities into their military bases. When this happens, children's safety is at risk from incoming attacks on the school, and the possibility of abuse from the militia members inside the school. When armed members use schools as a base, the school immediately becomes a target for opposing military forces. In 2012 in Somalia, the militant group Al-Shabaab set up a rocket launcher in the playground of a local school, which led government military forces to target the school killing 8 children in the process (Sheppard, 2019 p. 672). Not only are children at risk for outside attacks but being in the presence of the members of the group, and their weapons, is possibly the greatest risk these children are facing at school. On many occasions fighters have forced teachers and children to work for their group including the selection of children to be soldiers, for domestic duties like cleaning, or for forced child marriage and sexual activities. For some families the threat to their children's safety is so intense that they pull their children out of school, most commonly their daughters (Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 67-68). Not only are children at risk for targeted attacks at school, but their school lessons are often changing to teach children how to create explosive weapons. In 2015, ISIS gained control of Ramadi, a city in Iraq during the war, and replaced traditional lessons with classes on how to make improvised explosive devices, particularly how to make them more challenging to defuse and remove (Hubbard, 2021). Additionally, it has been reported that throughout the Middle East (Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, and Sudan), schools are dedicated to producing martyrs (Bloom, 2018). In 2014, ISIS assumed defacto authority over schools in the area that it took control of and forced the teachers to teach ISIS-controlled curriculum, which included weapons training and intense ideological conditioning (Bloom, 2018).

Despite the growing commonality of using schools as their bases, many governments and armed groups have declared their disdain for this practice and have committed to stopping it. The first government to make an official stance against this practice was the United Kingdom in 2004, when the country was in war with both Iraq and Afghanistan. The Military of Defense issued an updated Manual of the Law of Armed Conflict which prohibits committing hostilities against cultural properties, including institutions dedicated to education (UK Ministry of Defense, 2004, para. 15-18). Non-state armed groups have also begun making commitments to protecting educational facilities. In 2014, the Free Syrian Army

made an official public statement saying that their group was prohibiting the militarization of schools and said that any member of their group that participated in such activities would be held accountable (Lister, 2014). There have also been instances in which peace agreements between two armed groups agree to protect educational facilities. In the 2002 peace deal between Sudan and the Sudan people's Liberation Movement in 2002, both sides committed to "refrain from endangering the safety of civilians... schools to shield otherwise lawful military targets" (UN Peacemaker, 2002, article 1). In 2015, Norway and Argentina spearheaded the first international declaration to attempt to protect schools from being used as military bases: The Safe Schools Declaration. It has been joined by 144 countries and is committed to taking steps to reduce the risk of targeted attacks on schools and universities (Raqib, 2017).

Due to the nature of armed conflicts and the effects on educational facilities, teachers and governments have been forced to create alternative schooling methods for children. Although the creation of these alternative teaching methods is commendable, they are not enough to make up for the loss of traditional schooling that armed conflict is causing and there is no guarantee that children will continue to attend school under these new conditions. Children who live in areas of conflict that cannot enroll in traditional primary school are 20% more likely to leave school before graduation than students in areas not affected by armed conflict (UNESCO, 2015, p. 132). When schools are taken over by armed groups, many of the children will move to the nearest unoccupied school, but this can cause immense overcrowding, which leads to a lack of resources and student support (Sheppard, 2019, p. 675). When there are no alternative facilities for students to attend, teachers are left to come up with creative solutions to give children the education that they deserve. In Eastern Ukraine many teachers have been left to hand out and collect assignments from all the children's homes and use phone calls and emails to answer questions and teach their lessons. For students and teachers alike, there is no alternative for traditional schooling, but children have the right to education that must be respected no matter what (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 52-55).

A common side effect of armed conflicts is refugees, and consequently refugee camps, which creates the need for another alternative schooling method: refugee camp learning centers. Although children living in refugee camps have the right to education as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951), displaced children very often receive the education they need inside the camps. Within the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals to achieve by the year 2030, education in emergencies is supposed to be created to support the overarching goal of inclusion for refugees, stateless persons, and internally displaced persons (see United Nations, n.d.b).

Right now, Bangladesh is facing an extreme influx in Rohingya refugees due to the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, but the country is not equipped, and not willing, to help Rohingya children get an education. Studies show that as of November 2017, NGOs provided minimal support to their education, and the government allocated no funds to providing education to refugee children (Shohel, 2022, p. 108). In many refugee camps there are Temporary Learning Centers (TLCs) run by non-government organizations that provide basic education for children, but typically only up to the age of 14. Although Bangladesh has been facing recurrent influxes of Rohingya refugees, it was not until 2015 that the government approved education for children in refugee camps. In 2015, the government of Bangladesh agreed that non-governmental organizations should come in and provide refugee children with informal education, but they refused to provide money, resources, or accreditation for these learning centers (Shohel, 2022, p. 113). Bangladesh is not the only country that refuses support and accreditation for refugee learning centers, more than half of the temporary learning centers around the world are underfunded and unofficial (United Nations, 2019).

Sexual and Gender Based Violence

All children face unique vulnerabilities during armed conflict, but young girls face the additional vulnerability of sexual and gender-based violence. Article 27 of the 4th Geneva Convention states that “Women must be especially protected against any attack of their honor, particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any other form of indecent assault” (International Committee for the Red Cross, n.d.). Sexual violence has taken many forms within armed conflict throughout many decades and cultures. In the post-Cold War world, the strategy of war has changed dramatically, allowing for an increase in the use of sexual violence as a weapon. It is a type of weapon that humiliates, dominates, and even exterminates groups of people, specifically young girls. As previously mentioned, armed conflict has moved from large scale global wars to smaller intra-state armed conflict. With this change came a change in the way that armed conflicts were fought, and that has made sexual violence against girls exponentially easier. The move toward smaller arms and lighter weapons that are traveling often by foot or by truck through rural areas makes violence much more localized and intimate, and with that brings an onset of sexual violence (Leatherman, 2011, p. 40).

Sexual and gender-based violence differs from other types of violence that occurs during armed conflict due to not only its specificity, but its ability to reshape an entire generation. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance (2005), defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or

acts to traffic a person's sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work" (p. 8). As the 1998 Rome Statute states, sexual violence can be a component of crimes against humanity, genocide, or war crimes (see International Criminal Court, 2011). It is important to understand that sexual violence comes in multiple forms. This type of abuse can look like genital mutilation and other means of degradation directed against sexual organs or parts of the body that are viewed as sexual, such as the breasts and butt. Although girls are not the only victims of sexual violence during armed conflict, they are the majority, and that is why I am highlighting this unique vulnerability in relation to young girls in conflict.

National laws regarding sexual violence against children vary from country to country based on their own legal definition of a child, which helps to identify when a person is the age to consent to sexual activity. For most countries, their national laws specifically single out minors to be protected against sexual violence and unable to give any type of sexual consent. Despite these laws, many countries continue to allow marriage and subsequently the sexual violence of girls by adult males (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011). Because there is no universal definition of child or marriage, it is important to define child marriage in the context of this paper: "child marriage includes those that are formalized, registered, and recognized by custom, religion, or the State, as well as those that are not formalized, are unregistered and are not recognized by custom, religion, or the State" (Mazurana et al., 2019, p. 584).

State fragility and armed conflict impact the rates of child marriage significantly. Poverty, increased by conflict and displacement, is a driver of child marriage as parents hope to protect their daughter's future, ensure her basic needs, and attempt to shield her from sexual violence (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016, p. 1). In 2011, the Women's Refugee Commission began a research project to try to uncover the ways that child marriage changes in times of armed conflict, specifically why children end up in child marriages. The study was done by researching four groups of displaced people: Ugandans in Nuvwini, Northern Uganda, Congolese in Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda, Syrians in the Al Marj Settlement in Lebanon, and Somalis at the Kobe Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. What they found was that in times of armed conflict, families often voluntarily married off their young daughters in hopes of keeping them alive, and as safe as possible (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016).

Fears of sexual violence against young girls have continued to fuel the perceived need for marriage at early ages in all contexts. The belief is not only that girls would be protected from sexual violence if they were married, but that the marriage would protect their girls, and therefore their

families, from any stigma surrounding the survival of sexual violence. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016 p. 14). As discussed earlier, many countries in armed conflict experience what is known as "shame culture." This idea of shame does not only apply to boys, but it applied to young girls that are the survivors of sexual assault. In Syrian society honor, or al sultra, is what is used to protect a woman's purity. When an armed conflict takes place, and a girl becomes displaced, her honor and purity are already at risk, so a child is often married to protect her honor (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016, pp. 13-15). For some girls and families, the incident of rape during the armed conflict shaped the decision to get married young. Some girls feared that they would no longer be able to find a husband willing to marry someone that was no longer pure, so families would marry their daughter off to the man that raped her. This was a common practice for many girls that got pregnant during their rape, as they did not want to bring shame on their families for having a child out of wedlock. Similarly, to young boys making the decision to become child soldiers, young girls during armed conflict that choose to get married as children are not making their decision based on their true wants and desires. They, along with their families, are making a choice based on fear and violence, so it is no longer a choice, but a forced decision disguised as a free choice. Human trafficking occurs almost everywhere in the world, but it can look different in a country that is amid an armed conflict. The types of sexual trafficking that is most prevalent in areas of armed conflict is sexual exploitation, enslavement, and forced marriage (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019, p. 3). When looking at who is committing acts of sexual exploitation and human trafficking, no group of people is innocent. Reports of these acts have been submitted against armed and violent religious extremist groups, peacekeepers, criminal networks, national militaries, corrupt government officials, and representatives from nongovernmental and multilateral organizations (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019, p. 4). The people that are supposed to protect civilians from armed conflict, UN peacekeepers and personnel, are often some of the worst at sexually exploiting young girls. Between 2005 and 2018, more than two thousand allegations of sexual exploitation were filed against UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic: South Sudan and Haiti (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019, p. 5). For some, the sexual trafficking of girls can be used as a tactic to recruit, and reward, members of the armed group. This can be seen looking back at World War II with "comfort women" in brothels run by the Japanese military, to now with ISIS promising their male members [kidnapped] girls as their wives (Bigio & Vogelstein, 2019, p. 9). Sadly, for some young girls, they go through sexual exploitation which then leads to becoming a child bride. "She [Ista] was abducted at the age of nine and immediately gang raped and sexually abused until she became the 'wife' of a commander" (Bloom, 2018).

Recommendations and Conclusions

There are both international steps that must be taken to ensure children's rights during armed conflict, and there needs to be steps taken to protect specific rights and groups of children. The first step needs to be including children's rights in peace agreements. A post-conflict peace process can be defined as "a mixture of politics, diplomacy, changing relationships, negotiation, mediation, and dialogue in both official and unofficial arenas" (Saunders, 2011). Out of 431 ceasefires and peace agreements that the United Nations has taken part of, only 17% of them from the Central African Republic, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, South Sudan, and Sudan included references to child protection (United Nations, 2019). Mediation strategies that address child protection issues and tackle systematic human rights violations against children can contribute to a more sustainable peace. The issue is that even though 10 of the 12 resolutions adopted by the United Nations Security Council on Children and Armed Conflict include language on child protection provisions during the peace process, this is clearly not happening (Asokan, 2021). The problem comes into place when looking at the mediators of the peace process and their lack of understanding, and training, involving children's rights in armed conflict. To try and combat this lack of understanding by mediators, in February 2020 the UN launched practical guidance for mediators to protect children in armed conflict. However, this guidance does not address children's participation in the peace process or provide strategies for the implementation of child protection (Asokan, 2021). This lack of clarity leaves children vulnerable to continued violations of their rights and does not include them in an integral part of their recovery. Allowing children to participate in the peace process does not necessarily mean that children need to have a literal seat at the table, but that their views and needs are considered in a meaningful way.

For children that have fallen victim to armed conflict, there is the hope that justice will be served to those that violated their rights. The four Geneva Conventions and their two Additional Protocols, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, require accountability for those who commit human rights violations against children (Asokan, 2021). Despite the multitude of legal documents demanding justice, few perpetrators of these crimes are ever held accountable. One example of this is in the instance of South Sudan when President Salva Kiir granted amnesty to Rick Macher and other high ranked rebel commanders for their involvement with the Sudan People's Liberation Army, a group that was known for using over 1,000 child soldiers (Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict & Human Rights Watch, 2019). Due to the nature of armed conflicts and the number of international laws that are violated, the rights of children are often not thought of. Given the universality of the belief that children are the most

innocent civilians and should be protected at all costs during armed conflict, it is shocking to see such a disregard for allowing children to experience justice. Making the protection of children's rights a part of the peace process in a post-conflict country can help get parties to agree that perpetrators of human rights violations against children must be held accountable for their actions.

Although there are a multitude of legal documents that allow for the special protection of children during armed conflict, there is a lack of clarity and real-world practice. Among the international community, one of the most considered alterations to the protection of children is to move to a single international instrument that combines all existing legal protections for children in armed conflict with one international institution being responsible for the implementation of said instrument (Save the Children, 2020, p. 6). The international humanitarian laws that allow children special protection in armed conflict can currently be found in three different sources (Additional Protocol I; Additional Protocol II, and customary international law), but each of these sources has a different expression of what this protection looks like. By having different definitions in different sources, groups can seek legitimacy for their actions by capitalizing on the unclear definitions. Moving to a single instrument with its own accountability mechanism would address the major problem with protecting children in armed conflict and would have 5 main advantages: accountability, easy identification, simplification, clarification, and the development of standards. The hope is that this new single instrument would be created as an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which already has three additional Optional Protocols (Save the Children, 2020, p. 11).

Not only do changes need to be made on an international level to protect children, but local communities that endured armed conflict need to create inclusive, community-based programs to help reintegrate children into their communities. The successful reintegration of children is not as simple as returning to their homes and being with their families. It will require a substantial amount of work toward the longevity of successful reintegration. A 2007 study done by Save the Children throughout countries in Africa found that one major factor to reintegration programs success was if the programs were community based. The studies that were done showed that children were more likely to participate in reintegration programs if they were not targeted to one specific group (being a former child soldier, having a disability, being a refugee, etc.). The children showed a strong disdain for having to share their history with not only strangers, but their peers, so if it the programs were for anybody effected by armed conflict, attendance and participation rose significantly (MacVeigh et al., 2007, p. 4). In order to allow children to be a part of the peace building process, there needs to be programs in place that will create successful reintegration amongst their communities. Violence begets violence and if a

child has had to fight in an armed conflict, they are more willing to resort to violence once again, which in turn increases the likelihood that an armed conflict will reoccur (Hubbard, 2021).

The use of child soldiers is one of the fastest growing human rights violations that children are facing around the world. Whether their recruitment is through abduction or coerced free will, children around the world are falling victim to this gruesome act. All children that have grown up surrounded by armed conflict to any extent need reintegration support, but for child soldiers, there are additional steps that must be taken to ensure longevity in reintegration. Demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers can often be involuntary due to both the reliance on the armed group, and the fear of returning to civilian life. During demobilization efforts, child soldiers must be separated from all other members of the group. This ensures that the children cannot continue to be manipulated by the group (Verthy, 2002, p. 1-2). For children who fear rejection from their families and communities, it is vital that, if possible, family reunification happens quickly and with psychosocial support for the entire family. The way that groups manipulate children is by teaching them that there is no other family option for them, so they need to see that they have a family to return to. If family reunification is not possible, a long-term, supportive, family environment must be found for the children (Verthy, 2002, p. 3). A childhood outside of armed conflict plays a key role for the socialization process, but unfortunately for child soldiers, their time in an armed conflict provides a process of socialization (Verthy, 2002, p. 4). International and local communities must come together to support child soldiers and protect their human rights.

To prioritize the right to education that all children have, even in times of armed conflict, both international and local communities must work together to create safe educational systems that can be used during armed conflict. Currently, there is very little priority for the restoration of education after armed conflict, but it can be one of the most vital ways to ensuring reintegration. Local governments need to begin developing contingency plans to reduce the rights that educational facilities face in conflict-affected areas. With this, it would include creating structured alternative teaching methods. (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, n.d.). Alternative teaching methods can be the easiest, and most likely safest way to continue education in conflict-affected areas, but if there is no structure, there is no way to guarantee that these alternative methods will happen, let alone be up to par with what is guaranteed in the right to education. The right to education has four key components, also known as the four A's: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability (British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2019, p. 16). By putting a priority on the restoration of education in a post-conflict society and taking preemptive measures such as creating contingency plans to protect

educational facilities and create alternative teaching methods, the right to education can be protecting during armed conflict, and children will not miss vital years of their education.

Sexual and gender-based violence is difficult to both prevent and persecute as an international crime, but it is vital to protecting the rights of young girls around the world. One of the biggest prevention tactics that can be used to prevent sexual violence as a weapon of war is to teach cultures about women's rights before a conflict begins. Although this may seem trivial, sexually violating girls stems from the creation of a culture that views women as objects, not people. In times of war, everyone is viewed as the enemy, but not all people are sexually violated in the same way that girls are. This is a way to tell that there is a clear disconnect between how women and men are viewed in society. By prioritizing the joint education of both boys and girls on human rights, and how that looks for all people, steps towards eliminating sexual violence can begin. Additionally, sexual violence needs to be prosecuted as the war crime that it is. Throughout the history of armed conflict, there has only been two times that rape and other forms of sexual violence have been included in international criminal proceedings of war crimes: in 1992 during the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and in 1994 with the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which became the first time that a person was found guilty of using rape as a crime of genocide (United Nations, n.d.a). Almost every single armed conflict throughout history has used sexual violence against girls as a weapon, yet most girls around the world are not getting justice for their human rights, and dignity, being so clearly violated.

For millions of children around the world, armed conflict is not something they read about in a textbook from the safety of their classroom on the other side of the world. It is something that is a part of their daily lives. When armed conflict is considered normal, the idea of childhood must be redefined and protected. Children have the right to grow up without being bombed in their homes or kidnapped by soldiers. Boys and girls around the world have the right to not be sexually violated by members of an armed group. They have the right to not be murdered, abducted, or forced into armed groups. Children have the right to grow up with the freedom to live their lives fully, and without fear. Children in armed conflict situations are extremely vulnerable and disproportionately suffer the consequences of wars that they have not chosen to start.

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