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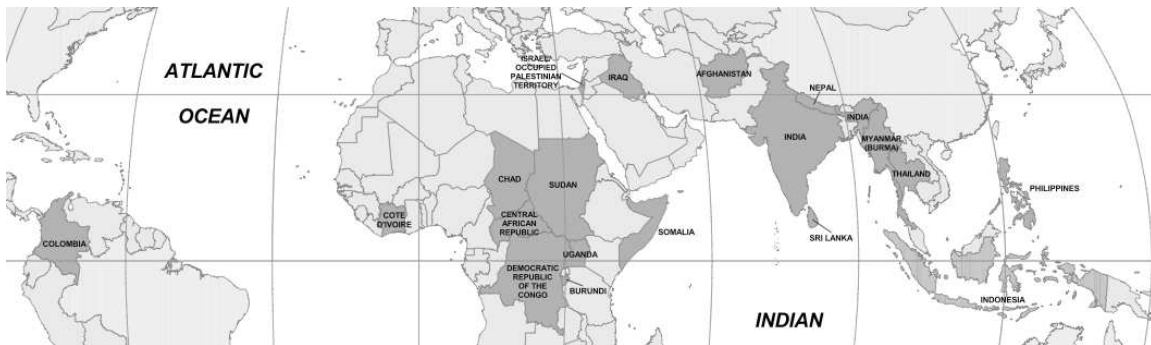
*Children at War*: Research Paper

War has been a part of human kind from the very beginning. Traditionally the men of the community, willing to sacrifice their lives have fought to protect their country. Woman and children were to be spared the horror of war. Recently these rules have changed. Children are now being pulled into the fight. Stolen from their families to fight in wars they do not understand. Taught to kill or be killed. It is estimated that there are over 250,000 children soldiers today (“Bulletin of World”, 2009). This new trend changes the face of war completely.

In many cultures there are traditions that help usher someone from child to adult. Through ceremonies, people are given the right and responsibilities of adulthood – usually taking place at some point in the teen years. One of these responsibilities is often taking part in protecting the community – potentially in a war situation. Although these are the traditions of certain cultures, it has become very common in societies for children to be considered an adult at age eighteen. So who is considered a child soldier? A common definition of a “child soldier” is “any person under the age of eighteen years of age who is engaged in deadly combat or combat support as part of an armed force or group” (Singer, 2006, pp. 7). Throughout the course of time, children have been a part of war, generally not as frontline fighters, but were charged with other responsibilities. For instance, during the Civil War young men often served as drummer boys to help lead troops into battle but were not there to fight. More recently children have been recruited

in to training programs. During World War II the Nazis had children join a group called the Hitler Jugend. Although they were a part of the war and often went in the SS following their training, the program was used primarily as a form of indoctrination (Singer, 2006, pp. 14). Near the end of WWII they were sent to the front as a last ditch effort by the Nazis. Today children are being used as a part of war in a much different way.

Now children have been pulled into either government armed forces or combatant groups that do not belong to the state in nineteen different countries or territories (Coalition to Stop, 2008). The map below displays the countries that were shown to have children serving as soldiers from April 2004 to October 2007 (Coalition to Stop, 2008).



“Most child soldiers are aged between 14 and 18, while many enlist ‘voluntarily’ research shows that such adolescents see few alternatives” (“Child soldiers”, 2009). About two out of three children “volunteer” allowing many groups to say that they have broken no moral code – although this does not satisfy the fact that they should not be permitted to join under 18, volunteer or not (Singer, 2006). In addition to these “volunteers” many children are forced to join using tactics such as: coercion, being sold into war by their families, and most commonly being abducted.

Once in, children are quickly taught to fear and fight. Groups use fear to keep these “soldiers” from leaving. Fear is taught in many ways; making children watch while others are beaten, a child’s personal safety is threatened, or they are beaten. One senior officer in the Chadian National Army said, “When the armed groups have got recruited...youth, they than would...take an oath. After that, they cannot withdraw. Otherwise, other members would kill them called ‘blood halal’ or killing with out guilt, because this is an act of betrayal to religion” (Coalition to Stop, 2008, pp. 13). After this indoctrination of fear, these children are taught to fight. The training programs – if provided – are not through and simply teach children the basics of how to kill. Very rarely are they given any training on what they are fighting for. Combine this fear and fight method prepared children with the idea of kill or be killed.

It is easy to see how this system is perpetuated. It is extremely difficult to break a cycle of violence when fear is one of the lead, driving forces. Often children feel that if they don’t join the army the rebels will kill them and vise versa. Although fear is a big portion of keeping children in, the situations outside the combatant groups is often not any better. Many are from refugee camps or villages that have suffered from war and poverty, these places do not have the supplies to take care of all those living inside. One former child soldier said, “No matter how old, returnees [former child soldiers] must live with their parents because they have nothing” (Corbin, 2008, pp. 321). Joining the different armed groups seems like a good option because they make promises of better things like food, shelter, and/or protection.

There are also cases where children simply get mixed up with those that are fighting. With no uniforms and no way to distinguish those children who are already

involved and those who are not children will get involved by mistake. How is a child supposed to say no to someone who is much bigger than them and holding a weapon? With no way to distinguish one child from another, the system is perpetuated in a way by accident.

Another reason why children join is the idea of glory; whether it be an honor to the family or personally. The reasons listed before as to why children join are things that could be and should be changed; however, this reason is harder to change, as this idea of glory and honor comes from a cultural idea. It also brings up the question, should it be changed? One father said, “Everyone treats me with more respect now that I have a martyred son. And when there is a martyr in the village, it encourages more children to join the jihad. It raises the spirit of the entire village” (Singer, 2006, pp. 124). This ideology is part of a culture, where should the line be drawn regarding changing a cultural idea? It is simple to say that the culture needs to change but is it the place of outsiders to come in and make the change. Sustainable change really must come from those whom it will affect. If those within the culture want the change then outside support could come into help with that, those within must first initiate it.

When looked at from this perspective, children on the battlefield is not as simple as it may seem. Making a blanket age for people to join military forces is not necessarily the way to go. As mentioned earlier, many cultures have ceremonies and traditions regarding the change from child to adult and these do not always take place at the age of eighteen. Just as in the case of a child joining the army as a way to honor their family, it begs the question is this morally wrong? “It is important to remember that so many young people engage in these activities not only because they are forced by circumstances, but

also because these offer a sense of independence that resonates with their own experience” (Hart, 2006, pp.218).

To take this thought one step farther, consider that the children being placed in these situations are already not experiencing the protected and safe childhood that children deserve. Often they have been exposed to violence and terror from an early age. This life of war is normal and no different from any other day. The difference comes when they are doing the killing. By viewing children this way they are being put into a box of helplessness. Children are very capable – often much more capable than the adults around them give them credit for. By imposing a blanket age of eighteen to enter the armed forces would in fact change the American standard. In the US forces one must be eighteen without parent consent or seventeen with parental consent to join. Many American citizens do not know that the military is actually allowing seventeen year olds to not only be on active duty but also start fighting on the front lines.

This leads into the potential global implications the issue of child soldiers. Placing youth into war zones changes the face of war all together. It has the potential to change cultures. For example, with so many children fighting what impact will this have on soldiers from countries who do not allow children to fight? America does not – and hopefully will never – allow anyone under the age of seventeen to fight; however when they are in another country they may find themselves fighting children. Soldiers often need to place those they consider enemies in a less than human light. Nazis portrayed Jews as less than human and took action to make them appear this way to citizens. Coming from a society that portrays children as ones to be protected and taken care of how should the American soldier view their enemy, as a child or a soldier? This creates a

moral issue for those fighting the children but it is just as important to consider the moral effects it will have on the children fighting.

With so many children entering into the forces – regardless of why they have entered – they frequently do not know the ideologies they are fighting for. “By using children as fighters, the philosophy behind an organization becomes almost irrelevant. Most child soldiers are not motivated by any developed understanding of their groups’ cause” (Singer, 2006, pp. 99). Children are important to groups that have loose ideologies, as children will almost never question what they are fighting for. With adult soldiers there can be desert and coups; youth are accustomed to taking orders and trusting those that are older than them with no dispute. This implicit trust also allows groups that would normally have died off due to lack of support to continue because they have support from children, giving them a larger fighting force (Singer, 2006).

This lack of knowledge, also breeds hate without a full perspective. What that means is that the youth who are being taught to hate a group with no understanding of the underlying problem is simply teaching them to hate. With teachings like this happening at such a vulnerable and impacting age this roots of hate formed young will carry into adulthood. They then become adults who hate certain people or groups. These adults are parts of communities and many will have families, spreading this distain to more generations. Hate with out knowledge will only breed more hate without knowledge. Those that dislike certain people are drawn to one another, as hate is a powerful emotion and motivator. This bread hate could bring about more conflict.

“The experiences that children come away with from participating in war can have a devastating effect both for them and the border society. The cumulative

effect of these traumatic experiences will color and inform their choices, opinions, and perspectives for the rest of their lives” (Singer, 2006, pp. 109).

The future effects of youth in war are great but there are problems occurring today that are as significant. Just like with any war and people of any age, there are casualties, both psychological and physical. “Blunt instrument trauma, stabbing and gunshot injuries that result from violent combat, are the tragic staples of war-zone pathology... ‘But it is important to recognize the threat posed by psychosocial trauma and common disease in crisis situations’” (“Bulletin of World”, 2009, pp. 330). Children are not only exposed to injuries from battle but other infectious diseases. It is just as common to see children who have suffered from combat wounds, as treat a child who is suffering from a disease like malaria, cholera, or yellow fever (“Bulletin of World”, 2009).

The physiological effects can be extremely painful as well. “These children have often lost their families and so have no network of support, no way to make a living, nothing” (“Bulletin of World”, 2009, pp. 331). American soldiers returning from Iraq suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, the same is happening to children leaving the war-zone. Many young women being pulled into these conflicts are being raped – often repeatedly and by many different people. This could lead to a multitude of different psychological issues. The girls who have been raped are not the only ones facing psychological issues, war affects all those involved; therefore it stands to reason that any child involved will face some sort of psychological issues.

There are many different problems that stem from the one greater issue of having children as part of combat. So what should be done about it? The Human Rights Coalition does a “Child Soldiers Global Report” every four years. In the most recent

installment they reported that there was a downward trend in the use of child soldiers; however they suspect that this is more from conflicts ending than from a change in legislation (2008). There are many changes that need to be made to help lessen the amount of children used in conflict. Changing laws and making stricter punishments for those who are caught recruiting children could be a very good beginning. “A landmark in international justice was forged by the conviction in 2007 by the Special Court for Sierra Leone of four people on charges that included the recruitment and use of children during the civil war” (Coalition to Stop, 2008, pp. 4). As it was discussed earlier having a set age limit may not be the best way to prevent children in war but that being said there does need to be some sort of qualifier to prove that a child is ready for the responsibility of combat – this could be decided from community to community. These two things are the beginnings of prevention to protect those who are too young to be fighting from being recruited. These are only on a governmental level though; there are still many rebel groups that persuade children to join. To help change this there needs to be more action on a global and community level. Security measures to help protect children from the advances of rebel groups.

Besides better security measures, the community needs help supplying children with other options. If children have other opportunities to gain knowledge and experience, and other resources they may be more apt not to join militant groups. More resources should also need to be provided to those who have left or escaped the fighting. With more resources provided all around, it allows children to see that joining wars is not their only option. As a whole there needs to be wide spread change in many areas for this problem to decrease significantly.



“While the general direction is positive, the pace of progress is slow and its impact is not yet felt by the tens of thousands of children in the ranks of fighting forces” (Coalition to Stop, 2008, pp. 5). Children as a part of war can have a great impact not only on the individual level but also on a global scale. It is important to see it as a global issue and understand that change must happen on all sides. Although it maybe slow going, with a concentrated effort by the international community there can and will be change.

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