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Girl child soldiers: Towards a gender-sensitive approach?

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Abstract

Though the recruitment of child soldiers is a violation of universally accepted human rights and humanitarian law, hundreds of thousands of children participate in armed conflicts today all over the world. Among these child soldiers, girls are the most vulnerable group. Apart from actively participating in the conflict, they usually experience other grave human rights violations, including forced marriage and sexual abuse. Yet, they still constitute the most invisible group of those participating in armed conflicts. The paper aims to fill this gap and examines the current situation of girl child soldiers with particular attention to the post-conflict reconstruction process and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. It builds on the assumption that the experience of girls is distinct from that of boys, and argues that a gender-sensitive approach has not yet been sufficiently incorporated into strategies. Therefore, the paper proposes the adoption of a distinct protection regime in international law and the recognition of the complexity of girl child soldier experiences during policy making. The implementation of this approach can lead to more efficient DDR programmes and higher participation rates, while it can also transform the public perception that places boys at the core of the child soldier phenomenon.

Keywords: child soldiers, armed conflicts, human rights, gender, DDR

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Introduction

A young boy carrying an AK-47[2] – this is the dominant image and thus the epitome of the public perception of child soldiers today. However, pictures in the media could easily show girls in similar situations – not just holding guns but also performing other tasks during hostilities. It is estimated that at any given time there are at least 300,000 child soldiers involved in more than thirty conflicts in almost every region of the world, most notably in Africa and in some parts of Asia and South America (Kirby, 2015: 1). Although it is difficult to assess, approximately forty per cent of them are girls (Braberg, 2016: 2). Child soldiering is therefore a complex and far-reaching issue which requires a coordinated and gender-specific response from the international community.

Though child soldiery has been at the forefront of the agenda of the international community since the adoption of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989 and a report prepared for the United Nations General Assembly in 1996, little attention was paid to its gender aspects, a trend which slowly changes, most notably in the academic community. While the majority of the literature is dedicated to the issue of child soldiery, growing attention is being devoted to closely examine the phenomenon from a gender-sensitive perspective.

The main objective of the paper is to give an overview of the current knowledge on girl child soldiers with particular attention to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes. The underlying argument of the paper is that a one-size-fits-all approach, and the traditional view which looks at only boy child soldiers and regards war as a male preserve, fails to address the specific needs and problems of girl child soldiers, and therefore leads to programmes in which girls are not included, or if they are, their distinct experiences are not adequately taken into account.

The paper is structured into four sections. The first section aims to present child soldiery and to define the terms ‘children’ and ‘child soldiers’. The second section provides a backdrop and gives a general overview of the situation of girl child soldiers. In the third section the paper details the situation of girl child soldiers after conflicts and examines DDR programmes. The final section concludes the paper by evaluating the current situation of girl child soldiers and makes recommendations for future improvement.

[2] AK-47 is an assault rifle which – because of its availability and due to the fact that it is easy to use – is frequently utilized by children in armed conflict.

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Child soldiery

Though the *Geneva Convention IV* of 1949 and its *Protocol I* adopted in 1977 can be considered the first international instruments that call for the protection of children during armed conflicts, the topic of child soldiers first received considerable attention with the adoption of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1989. This gained further momentum in 1996 when Graça Machel[3] presented the report 'Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' at the General Assembly of the United Nations. This report highlighted that young people are tortured, maimed, killed and recruited by armed groups around the globe and it called for action to protect children from participating either as passive or active actors in these hostilities (UN, 1996). Since then, the international community has made significant efforts to address the issue of children in armed conflict in general, and, more specifically, the enlistment of children into armed groups: legally binding documents to prohibit the recruitment of children were adopted, the International Criminal Court established the legal basis to convict perpetrators of war crimes, including recruiters of children under the age of fifteen, and the role of the United Nations Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict was established to strengthen the protection of children affected by armed conflict and to foster international cooperation to improve their protection.

Besides the steps taken in the field of international law, actors also recognized the severity of the situation and took action to mitigate the consequences of child soldiery on the ground: the United Nations together with non-governmental organizations developed DDR programmes focusing on the reintegration of children into society and local communities and established the informal Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR.[4] Although it is difficult to assess, the UNICEF estimates that approximately 65,000 children have been released from armed forces and armed groups between 2007 and 2017, which required the continuous improvement of these programmes (UNICEF, 2017).

In spite of the increasing attention, no universally accepted definition of child soldiery has emerged, mostly because defining the term 'child' is also widely contested due to the fact that its form and content varies across the world and is constantly influenced by cultures, traditions and local values. This article relies on the broad

[3] Graça Machel, who had served as Minister of Education in Mozambique earlier, was the expert in charge of preparing a report on the impact of conflict on children.
[4] The Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR consists of 22 United Nations entities which – along with other stakeholders – aim to improve the effectiveness of DDR programmes.

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definition of the Paris Principles[5] which – acknowledging the different roles of children during armed conflicts – uses the term "children associated with armed forces or groups" and defines them as "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes" (UNICEF, 2007), whether taking direct part in hostilities or not.

Girl child soldiers

The definition of the Paris Principles refers to both boy and girl child soldiers, indicating the importance of the inclusion of gender-related aspects into child soldiery. Indeed, the use of girls in armed conflicts is a large-scale phenomenon. It is estimated that girls have participated in armed conflicts in 58 countries across the world in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Colombia and Sri Lanka since 1990 in both non-state political armed groups and state armies, and still account for forty per cent of all recruited children (Carroll, 2015: 38). They perform various tasks during conflicts: they do not usually serve only as active fighters and combatants but also carry out other military-related tasks such as spying, moving weapons, transporting ammunition or taking care of younger children, cooking, cleaning and providing medical support while many of them experience other grave human right violations by being subjected to various kinds of sexual violence and sexual torture or being forced into marriages with the commanders of the armed groups.

Despite the fact that girls carry out a wide variety of roles within armed groups and therefore become fundamental to the war machine, they have remained largely invisible (or unnoticed) for long. In spite of the increased attention toward child soldiery of the international community and academia since the beginning of the 1990s, apart from a few documents that call for gender awareness in armed conflicts (such as the Paris Principles and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of 2000), both the scholarly literature and international law instruments can be considered gender-blind, a trend that has not changed until quite recently (Denov–Ricard-Guay, 2013: 474-475). Armed conflict has long been regarded as a phenomenon that occurs between men, therefore most of the actors have portrayed child soldiery as a male preserve. These

[5] The Paris Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups were adopted at an international conference organized by UNICEF and France in 2007. They aim to address to issue of child soldiers.

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perceptions were further strengthened by the media that showed images almost exclusively of boys as combatants while girls have been excluded or in some cases have been viewed as playing only peripheral roles in conflicts. Besides that, a considerable number of documents have labelled child soldiers as a homogenous group, generalizing their experiences and constructing a monolithic child soldier (Lloyd, 2015: 20). In those instances where they were separately mentioned, girl child soldiers were often categorized as vulnerable victims of sexual abuse which is a dangerous narrative as it portrays them as voiceless and incapable actors while in reality it is impossible to list "typical" activities girls carry out during armed conflicts (Denov, 2008: 823).

Mainly as a response to the oversimplification of the gender-related aspects of child soldiery a much "richer portrait of girls" (Denov–Ricard-Guay, 2013: 476) started to appear in the past couple of years that led to a more complex understanding of their roles and experiences. The question is how this change of approach, led by the academic community, is reflected in the concrete actions of the international community on the ground, specifically in DDR policies and programming.

DDR programmes

At the beginning of the 1990s armed conflicts and humanitarian disasters across the world led to the evolution of post-war development assistance programmes for ex-combatants, most notably the implementation of DDR programmes. Since then, more than sixty programmes have been launched across the world with the aim to contribute to stability and security in post-conflict environments. The early short-term security-oriented programmes were later replaced by long-term programmes with a developmental approach that enabled the inclusion of other actors, including former child soldiers and the development of child-oriented DDR programmes that can address their special needs (Stankovic-Torjesen, 2010).

Apart from the severe psychological problems and post-traumatic stress former child soldiers face, girls are often affected in ways different from boys'. They are more likely to experience sexual violence than boys, and usually face severe stigmatization and community rejection that further complicate their reintegration process, their access to education and their employment opportunities (Carroll, 2015: 47). Some of them may even be pregnant, become mothers, disabled or orphaned. Their unique experiences require special attention from the international community, the national governments and the actors on the ground.

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On the basis of the lessons and best practices that were drawn from the experiences of United Nations agencies and funds that were involved in the programmes, the United Nations drafted and published a document of integrated DDR standards, a set of policies and guidelines for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes with the aim to improve their effectiveness. It was first launched in 2006 and it has been regularly updated since then. Within these standards, a whole chapter focuses on children with particular attention to girls, explaining the importance of their inclusion in the programmes and highlighting their distinct situation that needs special attention (UNDDR, 2006: 9-14).

However, despite the growing interest and recognition of girls in armed conflicts both by the academic community and the international community, they continue to be marginalized in DDR programmes. According to estimates, approximately five per cent of girl child soldiers enrol in DDR programmes (Varma, 2018). Some may actively decide not to participate due to the fear of stigmatization or the lack of medical and hygienic facilities (Denov–Ricard-Guay, 2013: 480). In many cases, their low participation rates are a result of the fact that they and their special needs are not given priority (Kirby, 2015: 16). Previous examples show that boys were the main recipients of the benefits of these programmes and girls were often excluded or were not given proper attention. Denov's study of girl child soldiers in Angola, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda states that the role of girls as soldiers and combatants was invisible and marginalized, and therefore they were not included in DDR programmes. Thus, their reintegration process was spontaneous (Denov, 2008). The international non-governmental organization Child Soldiers International conducted a research among former girl child soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2016 and found that demobilization and reintegration programmes have failed to systematically reach girls as more than a third of the girls they interviewed stated that they had never received any assistance, and those who were included in programmes only received varying support, mostly in the form of medical consultation. Summarizing its findings, the report states that "current DDR programmes are generally lacking in specific provisions for girls, both in terms of demobilization and reintegration assistance" (Child Soldiers International, 2017: 11).

Conclusion: Towards a gender-sensitive approach?

Despite the fundamental roles that girl child soldiers play within armed forces, little attention has been paid to them by the international and academic community for a long

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time. A wide range of legal instruments and the policy discourse also recognized the importance of the protection of children's rights and addressing their needs during and after armed conflicts, but the gender-related aspects of these appeared only sporadically and were mentioned only in a few documents, in the Paris Principles and in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

Nevertheless, the recognition of girls during armed conflicts in the academic community has evolved more over time from a focus on their vulnerabilities and their victimization to a better understanding of the complexity of their roles and to a more thorough examination of their needs and their post-conflict lives. As a result, we now have a better understanding of their distinct and unique experiences. Yet, this trend was not followed by a change on the ground. Although the United Nations called for a better inclusion of girls in DDR programmes, in its integrated DDR standards document they are still marginalized in the post-conflict reconstruction and reintegration process.

Since the current policy does not go beyond calling for the better understanding of girls' roles in armed conflicts and their higher participation in DDR programmes, the way forward should be the adoption of a distinct protection regime in international law and the recognition of the complexity of girl child soldier experiences during policy making by developing girls-focused, separate DDR programmes. With the presence of the Inter-Agency Working Group on DDR and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, the institutional framework is complete, and only smaller changes may be necessary. However, proper financing should be ensured as it is essential for success.

Building on the findings of the academic community, the true commitment of the international community to protect the rights of girl child soldiers and the implementation of a new approach can lead to more efficient DDR programmes and higher participation rates, while it can also transform the public perception that still places boys at the core of the child soldier phenomenon. Ultimately, the picture of a young girl performing tasks in an armed conflict could be placed besides the portrait of a boy child soldier carrying an AK-47.

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