Thaer Tayeh Tayeh 1

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English 1710

October 25, 2015

**Lost Girls**

**Introduction:**

Over the couple of years, there have been more children that have been affected with armed conflict than the past years. In earlier wars, up to 90% of all casualties consisted of adult soldiers but today over 80% of the victims are women and children (Brett & Stohl, 2004). Due to their direct participation in these wars, hundreds and thousands of children around the world are being stripped of their childhood. According to UNICEF, around 500,000 are involved in armed conflicts, 300,000 of whom are serving as soldiers at any given point of time. UNICEF defines child soldier as:

Any child– girl or boy – under the age of 18, who is part of any kind of regular or

irregular armed force or armed group, including, but not limited to, combatants, cooks, porters,

messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than as family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for sexual purposes or forced marriage. (Brett & Stohl, 2004).

Children involved in armed conflict are frequently killed or injured during combat or

while carrying out other tasks. They are usually forced to live under harsh conditions

with insufficient food and little or no access to healthcare. They are almost always treated

brutally, subjected to beatings and humiliating treatment. Punishments for mistakes or

desertion often very severe. Many children are heavily drugged as a means of control to keep

them fearless, brutal and emotionally detached from the act of killing. Some children are given

“morale boosters” which include cocaine, marijuana and alcohol.

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There are many parts of the world where girls are also used as soldiers, especially in Colombia and Ethiopia, where they contribute to one-third of child soldier populations. There are many risks associated with having female recruits, for example, they are more likely to get raped, sexually abused and harassed as well as being involved in combat and other tasks. In certain countries like Angola, Sierra Leone and Uganda, the leaders would sexually abuse young girls and forcefully take them as their “wives”. It was reported in Uganda by the Human Rights that Watch that the commanders have impregnated the young female soldiers. After giving birth to the babies, these women were made to tie their babies to their backs and continue with their normal military duties, which included shooting. As stated by a 13- year old Burundi girl “I don’t know how many people had sex with me. A man would come, and then another and another. You couldn’t refuse, they said they’d kill you if you ran away” (Cohn & Goodwin ­Gill, 1994).

**Causes of Girl children being used as soldiers:**

Several reasons contribute for the recruitment of girls as soldiers. One of the reasons is that they are easy targets due to their psychological and physical immaturity. Also, it is easier to manipulate children, as they are not equipped to make an informed decision. Since they are ignorant of their rights, they are most vulnerable to being easily taken advantage of. They are valuable in combat, as they require less food compared to the adults, and are easier to train and force into being aggressive. They cost less and make obedient soldiers.

The economic situation that accompanies any violent conflict increases the chances of

children being recruited as soldiers, and is thus, a key contradiction. Some major factors that contribute to children’s involvement in armed conflict include poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education, domestic violence, exploitation and abuse.

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One reason for which children become such attractive targets for armed groups is that, in their desperation, they become easily persuaded by military ideological propaganda that encourages them to enlist. More often than not, a gun equals a meal ticket and joining an armed group seems like a more appealing alternative to sitting alone at home in utter fear and helplessness.

One of the young women, Alice, struggled with an acute sense of powerlessness after leaving the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) and coming back home.  As reported in *The Toronto Star,*Alice told the reporter: “In the bush, you can get what you want from people because you have a gun, but here I do not have a gun. In the bush, we were free to do anything we want without much control. You could ambush vehicles, you could loot.”

The reporter, Ellison told “Women in the World” that Alice was “quite unique” in her prolonged affinity for violence: she was abducted at a very young age and thoroughly indoctrinated by the LRA. But Ellison also noted that many of his interview subjects felt regret after leaving armed groups. “A lot of the women said they were surprised, when they came back, how hard things were,” he explained. “When they come back from the bush, often they haven’t come back with their ‘husbands’ [i.e. the male soldiers they were forced to marry], often they have a couple kids to look after. Often their own family members stigmatized them in their own community or sometimes they would wonder, ‘Why did they leave?”

**Forced Recruitment:**

Until 1992, two major reasons for forced recruitment in war zones were the shortage of

manpower and class discrimination. During the United States’ civil war, the government never

made any efforts to enforce legislation for systematic and fair conscription. People had very little motivation to enlist, as army salaries were extremely low, especially in proportion to the

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enormous risks involved in being a soldier. As such, even poor people were rarely attracted by the option to enlist, thus lowering military numbers. Unfortunately, members of the lower class became the main target of recruitment drives as they were most easily spotted in public areas. Wealthier young men were less likely to ride the country buses where recruitment sweeps would take place. In the rare cases that they happened to be taking public transport, they could always escape recruitment by paying bribes or “unofficial fines”, in exchange for a younger brother or son. Between1980 and1986, forced recruitment by the armed faction was reported to be at its worst. In many villages, especially in the northeast part of the country, children between 6 and 12 years old were obliged to attend guerrillas’ schools; those between 12 and 15 were required to go through military training; and anyone between 16 and 40 was forced to perform military service. As such, countless Salvadorans fled their towns to protect their children from being recruited (Cohn & Goodwin ­Gill, 1994).

Becoming a child soldier is dependent on a combination of the local environment and the personal circumstances surrounding the girl's life. Girls were more readily abducted if they are poor and live near a conflict zone. Girls who volunteer are usually influenced to join a significant person in their life or because they believed the movement's propaganda that promised them a better life. They saw themselves having food, a uniform that would give them status and a group to which they could belong.

**Solutions to the problem:**

Many challenges face the developing as well as the developed nations in order to halt the conflict

of female child as a soldier. For example, economic resources for military actions are scarce in

Uganda while there is little interest in wealthy nations like United States to get involved in this

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conflict. Developed nations have little domestic political interest in doing something about the rising recruitment of girl child soldiers in the developing nations, so there is less international aid.

Female child soldiers needs to be protected by an explicit statement in some treaty or convention. It is important to expand the definition of a child soldier to encompass girls who are forced to serve in a domestic and sexual capacity in an armed force. This expansion of definition can help in bringing all nations together for finding the solution to the problem.

It is also important to educate the people and children the rights of Children, so that they are better aware of what is right and what is wrong for them. Most important solution to this problem would be increasing the salaries of military officials so that more people join the army and girls are not abducted for this cause. It is also very important that girl child soldiers are reintegrated into the community otherwise they are left to fend for themselves.

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