

## Cultural Anthropology

### CHILDREN AND WARFARE, ARE THEIR RIGHTS BEING VIOLATED?

*“My parents refused to give me to the LTTE so about fifteen of them came to my house—it was both men and women, in uniforms, with rifles, and guns in holsters.... I was fast asleep when they came to get me at one in the morning.... These people dragged me out of the house. My father shouted at them, saying, “What is going on?”, but some of the LTTE soldiers took my father away towards the woods and beat him.... They also pushed my mother onto the ground when she tried to stop them.”*

*-girl recruited by the LTTE in 2003 at age sixteen*

I have read two books written by anthropologists about African, Asian and European, Middle Eastern countries that use children as part of the military at a young age. Children at War by P.W. Singer that describes child soldiers where they are sent off to fight in war-torn hotspots from Colombia and the Sudan to Kashmir and Sierra Leone. P.W. Singer explores the evolution of this phenomenon, how and why children are recruited, indoctrinated, trained, and converted to soldiers and then lays out the consequences for global security. Enemy Lines Warfare, Childhood, and Play in Batticaloa by Margaret Trawick. Margaret Trawick lived and worked in Batticaloa in eastern Sri Lanka, where thousands of youths have been recruited into the Sri Lankan armed resistance movement known as the Tamil Tigers. This compelling account of her experiences is a powerful exploration of how children respond to the presence of war and how adults have responded to the presence of children in this conflict.

Sergeant Nathan Ross Chapman was the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. service person to be killed by unfriendly fire in Afghanistan. He was killed by a sniper after a meeting concluded with local tribal leaders in the Paktia province. He was gunned down by a bullet shot by a child soldier. According to UNICEF, the definition of a “child soldier” is defined as any child - boy or girl - under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying

such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for sexual purposes and/or forced marriage. The definition, therefore, does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried weapons" (Cape Town Principals, 1997) (1). Children soldiers are a big problem in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries. Gun makers are producing lighter assault weapons that can be carried by children. According to the BBC, from Colombia to Sierra Leone, Sudan to Palestine, Kosovo to Burma, as many as 300,000 child soldiers are occupied. In military fighting, there are about 30 countries on every continent except Antarctica and Australia. In Afghanistan, child soldiers are serving in Angola, Uganda, Pakistan, Burma, Sierra Leone, Colombia and Chechnya. In just the last decade, more than 2 million children have been killed in struggles. Even small girls are not spared from this induction. Girls find that they are forced to have sex or used as human minesweepers.

***"We have young boys that are more familiar with a gun than with school."  
-Afghan warlord***

Iraq's Lion Cubs; Sierra Leone's the West Side Boys; and Sri Lanka's the Birds of Freedom. 75% of today's wars retain children from 7 to 17 years old. These kids are trained in camps with the thought that their life is to kill and sacrifice their own lives. They're frequently sent to dangerous missions, leading to great casualties. Groups are sometimes give nicknames to groups or kids. These nicknames are "little bells" by the military, "little bees" by guerillas, because they "sting" their enemies before they know they are under attack. In the 1990s, child soldiers served in El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru. The most notable is in Colombia. In Europe, child soldiers serving in Chechnya, Kosovo.

In Liberia, for instance, former president Charles Taylor rose to power by using a gang of children to topple the government, terrorize people, and take valuables. The civil war that

followed, he became one of the world's richest warlords, pulling in \$400 million through illegal transactions and pillage. Advances in light weaponry along with the large number of arms left over from the Cold War likewise facilitate child exploitation (3). Charles Taylor of Liberia, In the early 1990s he turned an army of 150 amateur soldiers armed with small arms into a force of thousands by the recruiting and using child soldiers. He demonstrated the potential payoff. Through child soldiers, he was able to use a small gang to gain a kingdom.

Most groups forcefully pick up children from the streets and orphanages or raid villages. They determine whether a child is ready to fight like in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, it is the presence of two molar teeth. Other children join out of desperation for food and clothing. Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, is known for being made up of just child soldiers. During its 10 yr. fight with the government, they have kidnapped well-over 12,000 children to make into soldiers (4). The LRA's reportedly youngest member they recruited is 5 yrs of age.

Children who are forcibly recruited are usually from special risk groups like, street children, the rural poor, and refugees. Some that do enlist, are from the same groups. The short term burdens that affect these kids famine and diseases. 75% of people live with HIV live in Africa (5). Light weight weapons such as rifles, grenades, light machine guns, land mines, and other child-portable systems are weapons mostly used in warfare and create 80-90 percent of casualties (6). Children can use these weapons just as effectively as adults. Small weapons have been simplified in their use, in a way that they can be stripped, reassembled, and fired by a child below the age of ten. With only a few hours of training, a child can be taught all they need to know to kill (7). Due to the post-Cold War surplus, there were an estimated 550 million small arms floating around the globe, making them really cheap and easily obtainable. In Uganda, an

AK-47 can be purchased for the cost of a chicken, while in northern Kenya it can be bought for the price of a goat (8).

*“They took away my younger brother the other day. He was coming home from the market and he was taken away. I went and begged them, saying, “I gave you years of my life and I gave you my health. Please let me have my brother back—he is the only one I have who takes care of me, helps me to go to the toilet, helps me get into bed.” They didn’t release him, and they threatened to shoot if I reported his abduction to any NGOs. They also told me at the same time that I had to re-join. Is this how they thank me for all the time I gave them? Why are they doing this to me?”*

*- Girl who was recruited by the LTTE at age sixteen and severely disabled in combat*

Minimally trained soldiers, mostly new recruits, are quickly put on the battlefield. For rebel groups, the standard unit tactic is to place them in small, platoon-sized groups (roughly 30-40 children) under the command of a few adults. Typically, they are grouped by age. These units tend to stay on the move and operate as raiding parties. The employment of child soldiers by December 1997, the Leopard brigade of the LTTE, its elite child soldier formation mostly made up of orphans, was able to surround and kill nearly 200 Sri Lankan army commandos. The loss demoralized the whole army, as these soldiers were considered the force's vanguard. Once the kids are in the army, many of them do not want to leave their new lives. Some grow physically and psychologically addicted to drugs that the adults are making them take. The factor that ties the kids to the group is fear of what might happen if they try to run away and are then caught.

Children are also usually used in suicide missions or what some call human wave attacks. This is where they overpower a well guarded opposition stronghold. This accomplished, because of their great number of soldiers. The rates for child soldiers that are killed have been much higher than those for same adult groups. The outcome of this new tactic is extremely dangerous. Using child soldiers has a potential conflict with groups, thus creating more wars and making them bloody. Child soldier are here to stay whether we like it or not. The relevant question is whether real well-organized troops will be prepared to handle this dilemma.

Tamil children are vulnerable to recruitment beginning at the age of eleven or twelve. The LTTE routinely visits Tamil homes to inform parents that they must provide a child for the “movement.” Families that resist are harassed and threatened. Parents are told that their child may be taken by force if they do not comply, that other children in the household or the parents will be taken in their stead, or that the family will be forced to leave their home. The LTTE makes good on these threats: children are frequently abducted from their homes at night, or picked up by LTTE cadres while walking to school or attending a temple festival. Parents who resist the abduction of their children face violent LTTE retribution.

Once recruited, most children are allowed no contact with their families. The LTTE subjects them to rigorous and sometimes brutal training. They learn to handle weapons, including landmines and bombs, and are taught military tactics. Children who make mistakes are frequently beaten. The LTTE harshly punishes soldiers who attempt to escape. Children who try to run away are typically beaten in front of their entire unit, a public punishment that serves to dissuade other children who might be tempted to run away.

### Bibliography

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