

The Unheard Voices: A Case Study of Girl Child Soldiers in Congo

Dr. Gauri Narain Mathur

Abstract

The armed conflict across the globe has embroiled children in the quagmire of violence. These conflicts and civil wars have wiped out various ethnic communities and have produced millions of Child Soldiers. These child soldiers are providing their services as frontline workers, suicide bombers, human shields, scouts porters, guards, messengers, spies and cooks. These child soldiers often have to face extreme brutality and abuse by the armed militias. During the past 15 years the recruitment of child soldiers has extended to most parts of the world particularly in the states like Afghanistan, Uganda, Colombia, East Timor, Uganda, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Peru, Haiti and Democratic Republic of Congo. According to an estimate of the United Nations, presently around 3 Lakh child soldiers are entrapped in the Civil wars. Out of this around 40 percent are girls, whose voices have often, being ignored as it is assumed that girls serve in the shadow armed units. However, these girl child soldiers are also recruited as the frontline soldiers, cleaners, cooks, potters and medical support. In fact most of these adolescent girl child soldiers are forced to marry chiefs of these armed militias while some of them become their sex slaves.

As far as Democratic Republic of Congo is concerned its citizens have undergone a major civil war and violence. According to an estimate by the Human Rights Watch around 30,000 Congolese children are forcefully recruited by the warring forces out of which 12,000 are girls ageing from 7 to 12 years. Thus, this paper seeks to analyze the plight of the girl child soldiers in Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Unheard Voices: A case study of Girl Child soldiers in Congo

Introduction

Women's involvement in the armed conflict has various aspects; it refers to the segregation from their families, bereavement of the relatives, financial loss, insecurity as well as heightened threat of sexual brutality, trauma, maiming, detainment and death. They are also vulnerable to marginalization, poverty while they undergo discrimination during the peace period. In this context it needs to be noted that women are often at the danger of being

represented as the agent of ethno- cultural identification. In some cases young girls are have to undergo physical and mental exploitation which includes massive amount of work and the procreation related health care issues across the globe continue to rise at a rapid scale at the time of civil strife. A large number of girls are coercively enlisted in the armed forces.

The recruitment of children in armed forces has disastrous impact on the children as well as on their families and their respective communities. Nevertheless this system of recruiting child soldiers remains ceaseless within the states that are embroiled in the armed conflicts. In terms of UNICEF innumerable Children are deployed as soldiers throughout the globe. . In most of the armed conflicts the state agencies, militias and other warring forces deploy child soldiers in order to fill their position through abduction and trafficking. Although the question of child soldiers itself is crucial it is evenly essential to focus that a major proportion of these Child Soldiers are girls. Most of times, the voices of the girl child soldiers are neglected. These girl child soldiers are extremely susceptible to sexual abuse and glaring breach of human rights. Also these girl child soldiers have to undergo far more serious challenges as far as their rehabilitation and reintegration process is concerned

Girl Child Soldiers have to undergo diverse challenges such as following their enrollment they usually go through gender bias; inequalities as well as they face instances of gender specific brutality. Most of the girl child soldiers in the countries likes Uganda, Democratic Republic Congo, Honduras, Mozambique, Cambodia, and Myanmar are considered as commodities or sexual properties which are given as remuneration for the soldiers. Similarly in the state of Uganda these girl child soldiers were presented as the wives of the LRA commanders who are

compelled by the army in the kidnapping of other child soldiers. These girl child soldiers are frequently forced to undergo organized sexual abuse and rape. In addition to rape, sexual slavery and other sexual abuse are used as the customary armament of warfare against the girl child soldiers. Thus they were continuing gender based inequality and gender centered violence but the girl child soldiers face the major threat of death at the time of their gestation and child bearing. This also comes with major health hazards which are intensified in the war torn environment. Most of these girl Child soldiers have to face peculiar psychological damage including the loss of family and dignity. Finally, girl child soldiers are frequently ignored in the restoration process and reintegration process post conflicts. Most of these girl child soldiers are renounced and condemned by their families

and their communities because of the disgrace and stigma. The girl child soldiers are also confronting the combined effects of being both girls and child soldiers who are usually forgotten and misinterpreted. Thus this paper seeks to evaluate plight of the girl child soldiers in Democratic Republic of Congo as well as to analyze their restoration and rehabilitation process.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, most of the girl child soldiers are enlisted through planned set of activities carried out for a long period, which let them assume, that affiliating with the armed group will improve their prospects of survival, wherein others are kidnapped from their homes. Also in Congo few of the girls propose to join these militias as child soldiers as they perceive dearth of opportunities if they remain at home. Education is restricted and most of the girls are compelled join the civil war by the economic constraints experienced at their home. Some of these girls are coerced to be part of the of the armed groups because they have been affected by sexual violence and are not considered pure by their respective communities. According to observers such as Sandra Olsson that some of the girl Child Soldiers are supported by their parents who are of the opinion that giving their children to the armed groups can guard their family from plunder, assaults and dehumanization. In some of the instances most of the girl child soldiers have joined the armed groups because of the “innocent girls” stereotypes which entitle them to go across the frontiers simply and become the informants of the armed militias. The girl child soldiers are recruited into the armed forces to do the jobs so that the boy child soldiers can pay more attention to other jobs that which includes instruction on warfare.

Recruitment

Two third of the girl child soldiers are being kidnapped and abducted by the armed group while one third of the girl child soldiers have joined the armed groups on their free will. The practice of the employment generally relied upon the type of armed groups for instance the Mai-Mai group which is a local militia fascinated most of the volunteered recruits but also went for recruitment of girl child soldiers via abduction in some cases. On the other side most of them are also part of the Ugandan armed force LRA which kidnapped most of the girls who are recruited by Mai-Mai. The recruitment of girl child soldiers takes place at voluntary bases and secondly through abduction.

Voluntary Bases

Most of the girls have joined the armed forces on voluntary bases but they are not exempted from the force and intimidation. In fact some of the girl child soldiers have joined these armed militias were their lone choice to get away from their continuous and grim attacks on their families and communities. A handful of other girls joined these armed forces in order to break free from the crutches poverty and hunger. Most of the girl child soldiers have joined these armed militias because they were not able to provide for their school fee. Some of the girls were dropped out by their schools because their parents were not able to pay their school fees so they believed that in spite of wandering around they preferred to join the armed forces while some girls were hunted to their school and were offered a lot of money to join the armed forces to which they agreed to. Dropping out from the schools has acted as major catalyst in majority of girls joining the armed forces. Thus being a part of the school acts as a preventive force in terms of restricting the girls from joining the armed groups in Congo. Another significant factor that has led the girls to join the armed forces is their need for security and protection. Plenty of the girls who have willingly joined the armed militias were because of the fact that they have been dwelling under the environment of constant terror and threat as their families and villages were being attacked and dehumanized by the armed forces. Some of these girls got involved with the Mai-Mai group in order to seek protection. Many a times the parents promoted their daughters to be a part of one of these armed groups as they believed that having their child in the Mai-Mai group will prevent their families from the constant attacks and threats. There were many armed forces which will bombard, shell, loot, plunder, ransack and rape most of these girls and they

were left with no other option but voluntarily join the Mai-Mai group. Another major factor which contributed in majority of girls joining the armed groups is to take revenge of the atrocities committed upon them by soldiers of the armed group which includes maiming and dehumanization of their parents or other family members as well as the acts of sexual violence committed by the armed forces. Fourthly, poverty also acted as the significant reason which compelled these young girls to join the armed forces. Some of girls were starving to death and hence they were left with no other alternative but to join the armed forces and so these girls joined the Mai-Mai group. However, a large majority of girls sharply repented their call to join these armed groups as they faced sexual abuse by the persons whom they considered would safeguard them.

Abduction Bases

Recruitment within the Kivu region takes places through abduction and kidnapping. Girl Child soldiers within the Northern Kivu Region are kidnapped by the armed groups such as Mai-Mai and Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda which is based in Congo while taking care of their families and their communities ‘and their agricultural land as well as gathering food and water. These girls are often kidnapped together with their other siblings and their friends. These girls put allegations upon the adults and their family and community members for not being able to save them at the time of their abduction into the armed group and hence are filled with anger towards the adults. In this context it needs to be noted that in the Haute-Uele region of Congo these abductions and kidnappings have a discrete arrangement wherein the armed groups such as the Lord Republican Army is active and most of the girls are kidnapped generally along with their parents and siblings. Many of the girls are abducted by LRA in this region are at a very young age between 4 to 9 years old. In some instances the armed soldiers of groups such as FDLR burglarize into their houses to abduct the child soldiers. The approximate duration of their stay with LRA was way greater than that of the girls abducted by the Mai-Mai and the FDLR group in the Kivu Region. At LRA most of these girls are serving for three to four years or more and have to undergo all sorts of sexual abuse.

Life at the War Front

These girl Child soldiers had to undergo numerous hardships while they were serving the armed forces. Their hardships encompassed both the physical suffering and psychological distress. These girl child soldiers were most of times deprived food and were compelled to sleep outdoor. They were also forced to transport heavy physical objects and used to walk throughout a long distance. Those girl child soldiers who were not strong enough to carry the heavy load were immediately murdered. Some of the girl child soldiers were not given adequate amount of food were feeding on the wild grass. They had to undergo acute trauma on everyday basis and they were possessed by the notion that they may not be able to catch the sight of their families again. Most of them also feared that if they lost their lives during the combat their dead bodies would not be recovered by their families. These girl child soldiers emphasized upon the anguish they faced was that of loneliness while they were the part of the group as they were not allowed to talk to the other children. Some of the girls were again and again raped by more or less by different soldiers. According to a former girl

child soldier they were considered as toys by the armed personnel and were often drugged. Another traumatizing experience which the girl child soldiers had in the armed forces they were compelled to engage in looting and plundering and were supposed to prey on stolen goods. Their engagement in the roles, that were ethically not justified to them, lead to a profound regret. In fact both the volunteered girl child soldiers and the kidnapped ones described few of their extremely intolerable periods as they experienced brutal and violent looting and plundering and then reaping the profits of the loots. According to Uvira a seventeen year old girl child soldier their lives in the armed groups revolved around looting, robbing and terrifying the people of their own ethnic communities and would steal all the things from them. Within the Haute-Uele region, LRA coerced the girl child soldiers to murder or kill and to dehumanize most of their community members or their own family members and any refusal on the part of the girl child soldier would result into army personnel taking the life of that girl child soldier. Most of these girls are distressed by these occurring even after many years of their return. In some of the armed forces such as the Mai- Mai groups resorted to the use of rituals instead of conflict and used these girl child soldiers to practice these magic rituals such as imprinting tattoos and wearing fetishes, it was assumed that these rituals will protect them in the combat.

Rejection and Restoration

When these girl child soldiers return back to their communities some of them were encountered with skepticism, dishonor and prejudice if not complete non acceptance. However girls who had joined LRA had their happy coming and were better received by their community's in spite of the ones who came back with their children. Although the ones who were not accepted by their families and communities had to even beg for the shelter. These girl child soldiers had to face various types of prejudice such as discrimination, bullying, humiliation by their friends, teachers neighbors and family members. It is assessed that 40% of the child soldiers in Congo are girls and in spite of having such a major involvement of the girl child soldiers in armed groups the number of girls who are reintegrated is very less. Apparently not much is known about the girl child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this context it becomes important to look at the obstacles in the integration process.

Path to Recovery

Denouncing the stigma, prejudice and non- acceptance is key for the favorable integration but it was not sufficient. Relevant and uninterrupted aid or assistance is required to support

the former girl child soldiers to recover from their traumatizing encounters. Nevertheless, where the former girl soldiers got their assistance focus has been on providing them with vocational training and to aid them to begin income generating activities.

Role of Education

It is quite evident that the schooling alleviates the impact of war and trauma of these girl child soldiers as well as help in regaining their lost social value in the purview of their communities. Schools gives the organized environment in which disturbed girl child soldiers and can exercise a positive influence on these girls. It enables them to grow a renewed and positive character. It also provided them the sense of dignity and self- worth via the procurement of knowledge. The school life and education provided them a sense of commitment and goal to their lives.

Role of Religion

Several girls stated that professing their religion provided them some sort of solace and optimism. According to a former girl child soldier Bourdu Du Lac (name changed) some of friends did not mix with her but she found her solace at Church. Religion gave these girls assistance of various kinds. As far as the religious aspect is concerned they found peace while confiding in the God. On the psychological aspect religious places gave them room to establish social relations and friendships of charity, tolerance and acceptance. The girls believed that they acquired their social value by visiting churches and mosques and they organized and took part in various Youth Group Meeting and Church Choir. The girls who took part vigorously attained major psychological advantages.

Role of Foster Families

The girl child soldiers who returned from the armed forces who were adopted by the foster families were commonly optimistic about their experiences. Foster Families were extremely optimistic stating that initially the conduct of these girls has been embarrassing and strenuous but that has become better gradually with due course of time. In fact most of these girls stayed in touch with their foster parents despite of the fact that some of these girls lived with their foster parents hardly for few days. Children who were staying with their foster parents have undergone very few issues as far as their reintegration process is concerned.

Obstacles in the Reintegration Process

Firstly, most of the girls did not have the ability to undertake instruction, training and professions. They did not even possess the special knowledge or expertise and free time required to attain success in the given arena. In fact most of the girls opted out from the training as they were supposed to assist their families in the agriculture and in the marts and some of them preferred to baby sit their younger siblings than to learn something new.

Secondly, these former girl child soldiers were not adequately counseled. In many cases tailoring was the lone alternative provided to the girls without their consultation. Most of these girls requested to attend the school but their demands were turned down by stating that there was not enough financial support and were compelled to put up with the course that did not interest them much.

Thirdly, the assistance reached extremely late. Support and aid was provided after a significant period at the time when most of the girls had dropped out from the armed forces and have returned back to their communities as a consequence of financial and funding barriers.

Fourthly, most of the assurances were busted. In this context one could refer to the fact that out of 22 girls which were provided training 9 had got their instruction called off. Around 18 girls had been guaranteed training and Inter Governmental Assistance but after some time there was no contact after that. Around 18 former girl child soldiers acquired support and aid in terms of food, clothing, shoes, soap, sugar and pans and were assured that the funding agencies and NGO's will come back but this did not happen.

Finally, the aid and assistance was irregular in terms of aid provided to the former girl child soldiers in the similar locations. In certain areas few girls were provided training and were taken to CTO while the rest in the similar area which barely met the NGO once or twice and this was marked no follow ups on the part of the NGO. In certain instances these girls were delivered only a set of clothes but were not provided any medical treatment.

Conclusion

According to an estimate by the Child Soldiers International, many of the former male child soldiers have more opportunities in the public sphere or in the field of education. However in the contemporary times this stereotypical scenario has transformed. There is a

general consensus upon the need to pay more attention and acknowledge them with gender sensitive perspective in mind. Also there is need to develop the convergence professional and program methods in order to safeguard the girl child soldiers. One of the biggest reason for the suffering of the girl child soldiers post return is due to the scarce and ill funded reintegration and recovery projects. Also Girl Child Soldiers are supposed to be provided safeguards by any specific declaration in some international agreement or convention. Thus the reintegration measures must focus on both community reintegration and by International support. In a nut shell Psychological reintegration must be taken into consideration.

References:-

- Nduwimana, Donatien.(2017). Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Occasional Paper. The International Peace Support Training Centre. Nairobi. Vol(4). No(12).
- What Do Girls Say.(2012). Report. Child Soldiers International.
[https://www.wvi.org/opinion//view/how-can-we-best-help-girl-child-soldiers/-](https://www.wvi.org/opinion//view/how-can-we-best-help-girl-child-soldiers/)
- Leibig, Abigail.(2005). Girl Child Soldiers in the Northern Uganda: Do Current Legal Framework Offer Sufficient Protection. North Western Journal of International Human Rights. North Western University School of Law.Vol(3).No(1).
- Cherwon, Betty.(2014). Child Soldiers in Africa: A case Study of Uganda and South Sudan. Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies. University of Nairobi.
- Anderson, Rory E, Fortunate Sewankambo, Kathy Vandergrift.(2004).Children, Conflict and Peace in Northern Uganda, Pawns of Politics. World Vision.
- Akelo,Grace, Annemeik Ritchers and Ris Raees.(2006). Reintegration of Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda:Coming to Terms with Child Agency and Accountability.Intervention.Vol(4). No(3).
- Akelo,Grace.(2013). Experiences of the Forced Mothers in Northern Uganda: The Legacy of War. Intervention. Vol(11).No(2).
- Kiplagat, Docras Jepkuruny.(2014). Alone and Frightened: Experiential Stories of Former Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda on Improving Reintegration. Goldin institute. Arigatou International.
- Abducted And Abused:Uganda.(2003). Human Rights Watch.
- Denov, Meriyam and Ines Marchand.(2014). I can't Go Home: Forced MigrationAnd



Displacement Following Demobilization. Intervention. Vol(12). No(3).

Uganda Child Abductions: Skyrocket in North. (2010). Human Rights Watch.

Ugandan Civil War. [wwwhttps://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/uganda.htm](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/uganda.htm).

Who Are Soldiers. (1998). Child Soldiers

International. <https://www.childsoldiersinternational.org>

Machal, Graca. (1996). Impact of Armed conflict on Children. UNICEF. United Nations.