

Why do adolescents volunteer for armed forces or armed groups?

Paper for Spanish Red Cross International Conference "Adding Colour to Peace"
(Valencia, Spain, 5-7 November 2003)

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Introduction

The focus of attention in relation to "child soldiers" has tended to be on abducted children or those forced/coerced into fighting. However, when asked, many children and young people themselves say that they volunteered. In addition, when negotiating the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, some governments claimed the right to continue to recruit volunteers under the age of 18, and indeed still do so although others have raised their recruitment age.

If children and young people *do* volunteer, this suggests that demobilisation and reintegration programmes need to take this into consideration, in particular if demobilisation is to take place where conflict is ongoing or the situation remains unsettled/uncertain. It might seem obvious that if children are forced to join up and fight and subsequently are released, captured or escape and are offered demobilisation and reintegration, they will want to take this course. In practice, in individual cases, circumstances may have changed since, or as a result of, the original abduction, conscription or press-ganging, but the assumption remains generally valid that since they did not want to join they will want to leave if given the opportunity. By contrast, if the children volunteered, unless the reasons *why* they volunteered are identified and addressed, there is no logical reason to expect them to want to leave or not to rejoin even if they are demobilised.

This was the rationale for the "Voices of Young Soldiers"¹ research project jointly undertaken by the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva, and the International Labour Organisation. This research

¹ The term "young soldiers" was used for the research project rather than "child soldiers" because the focus of the research was on the adolescent age group rather than on younger children. Being qualitative research, it entailed interviews with the youngsters themselves, many of whom would not have responded well to being addressed as "children". It in no way suggests a redefinition of the term "child soldier" as applying to all those up to the age of 18 years. Although the term "adolescent" may not be used in all cultures, there is widespread recognition of a transitional period during which a young person is no longer a "child" in the commonly understood sense but not yet an "adult" although increasingly expected to take on adult tasks and roles.

entailed in-depth interviews with 53 individuals from 9 countries² who identified themselves as having volunteered to join armed forces or armed groups before the age of 18.³

Findings

What emerges from the research is that there are five major factors in the decision of youngsters to join armed forces or armed groups without being abducted or physically forced. These are: war, poverty, education, employment and family. Before exploring each of these in more detail, it is important to make clear that these are not the only factors: ideology, ethnicity, the struggle for liberation (or against oppression), friends, and many other things can also play a part. However all these are less universal and each becomes more significant when combined with and mediated, and thus amplified, through one or more of the five major factors identified.

Secondly, all these major factors have both pull and push aspects to them in relation to joining up, and they do not operate in isolation from each other. Thus the impoverished child in a war zone, without access to school or employment, whose family is destroyed or dispersed, is most at risk. Even in this situation, not all children will join up. There are always more specific features of the individual child's situation (for instance being orphaned with younger siblings to care for) and character (some will flee to another area or even another country to avoid being drawn into fighting), and/or specific trigger events (such as the killing of a family member, the enlistment of a close friend, a chance encounter at a crucial moment) which lead to the actual decision to join.

1. War: Very few youngsters go looking for a war⁴ to fight. This is so obvious that there is a tendency to overlook war as a factor in its own right in creating child soldiers. Most children get involved because the war comes to them - to their town, village, school, family and takes over their lives. However, for adolescents, war is also an opportunity. It is an opportunity for employment (whether formal employment with the army, or for informal financial income or food via armed groups); for escape from an oppressive family situation, or from humiliation at school; as well as for adventure, to emulate military role models (whether real life or fictional), or to serve the cause (whether religious, ethnic, or political). Many youngsters dream of becoming a hero in battle: unlike these ones, few are in a situation where they have the possibility to try it out in real life.

All this is before war does its part to create or exacerbate the other major factors, for example, forcing the closure of schools, dispersal or death of family members, loss of income, lack of alternative employment and so on. War also rapidly becomes normality for children, and their involvement in it may take on an inevitability, either because it is part of the family tradition, or because they see no alternatives, or because the availability of weapons and use of violence means that they need to protect themselves or other members of their family. In addition, where violence is "normal" and weapons are readily available, adolescents (especially boys) are prone to get into trouble and then see joining an armed group as a means of self-protection. For example, one of the Colombian interviewees ended up knifing a classmate who was harassing him; another was excluded from school after shooting at a fellow pupil.

² Afghanistan, Colombia, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland)

³ The full results of the project will be published as: Rachel Brett & Irma Specht: *Young Soldiers: Why They Choose to Fight* (International Labour Organisation, Geneva, and Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colorado, May 2004)

⁴ The term "war" is used to cover situations of both international and internal armed conflict and also situations of militarised violence not amounting to armed conflict in the strict legal sense. Outside war or violence, a military environment includes some of the same aspects.

2. Poverty: There is a tendency to see poverty as the cause of child soldiering. However, this overstates and oversimplifies the case. There are many more poor children who do *not* become child soldiers than who do, even in war zones. What *is* true, is that poverty is the single most easily identifiable common characteristic of child soldiers. In other words, it is rare for children who are not living in poverty to become *child* soldiers.

Poverty is both a direct and an indirect cause. Thus, more poor children are not in school in all situations, armed conflict or not. Their job prospects are fewer, and lack of education reduces them further. In developed countries (such as the UK), the army may be one of the few employers who require no educational qualifications; elsewhere it may be one of the very few paid employments at all. Family poverty may lead to children being required to help support the family. Girls may be taken out of school to look after younger siblings and do other domestic chores to free adult family members to work. The death of parents may lead adolescent children to take on the responsibility of supporting the family.

3. Education: In considering the situation of children/adolescents rather than adults, it is important to recall that school is one of the major influences in their lives - for good or ill. Thus, for example, it is not surprising that the role of schoolchildren was so significant in the South African independence struggle, since it was at school that youngsters gained their most immediate and telling experience of the *apartheid* system.

Lack of education (including vocational training) may lead to youngsters having few choices of employment. Equally, for those in neither education nor employment, the temptation to become involved with armed forces or groups is high, particularly where these are prevalent. This may be simply because the youngsters have nothing else to do, or because they are perceived by recruiters to be available and thus targeted, or because they get involved in violence or crime and joining an armed group becomes a form of protection, or because the military are role models. Even when education is available, adolescents will tend to drop out if it is inappropriate (for example, unlikely to lead to employment) or if the educational environment is one that denigrates or humiliates the pupils, or one individual pupil or group of them specifically. For many youngsters, the critical moment of decision to join arises from the closure of the school, or their exclusion from it either because they are forced to move, or because of their own personal behaviour.

On the other hand, schools may also be recruiting grounds for the military - whether directly by the government armed forces or armed opposition groups, or indirectly as part of the ethnic, religious, or political dimension of the conflict.

4. Employment: Adolescents are acutely aware of their prospects for formal employment or other gainful economic activity, or the lack of such prospects. They are at or approaching a critical juncture in the transition between school and work, between economic dependency and self-sufficiency. Many recognise that lack of education, or lack of appropriate schooling, or vocational training leaves them few choices. Many know all too well that there are few choices available whatever their level of schooling. Where they perceive the army or armed groups as the only "employer" it is not surprising that this is the "alternative" they select whether on a regular basis, or as a measure of last resort to support themselves or their family/siblings.

5. Family: Perhaps the most under-considered factor of all, is the role of the family in relation to child soldiers. Again, like school, it is important to recognise how much more significant an aspect the family is in a child's life and environment than is the case for an adult. Therefore, both the push and the pull factor of family are possibly the single most critical influence determining whether or not a child in fact decides to join the armed forces or armed group.

It is now well-recognised that the destruction or dispersal of the family may lead children to join armed forces or armed groups for their own survival and support. In fact any child alone whether permanently or temporarily is particularly vulnerable to both forced and voluntary recruitment. Where the family has been killed or dispersed, children may not only have to fend for themselves, but may find themselves taking on the additional responsibilities of becoming heads of households and having to provide financial and physical protection. Interestingly, none of the girls interviewed cited providing for family or protecting others as a reason for joining, while boys often did. Girls, by contrast, spoke of the need to protect themselves more often than the boys did - including in particular from rape and sexual violence. "When you are a girl", as one sixteen-year-old interviewee from the DRC put it, "you know what men will do; you will be abused, you catch diseases, you can have children ... the men here, they believe they can treat you how they want; they don't ask whether you agree or not."

What is only now emerging is the number of adolescents who join because they are running away from an abusive or exploitative domestic situation. There is a particularly high correlation between domestic exploitation, physical and/or sexual abuse and the decision of girls to run away and join up (for example in Colombia and Sri Lanka). This is linked to the greater prevalence of sexual abuse of adolescent girls as well as to their being used for domestic labour - whether in their own homes, in extended family or non-familial domestic situations. It is also linked to the scarcity of other options for girls who are running away from home. However, many adolescent boys also cite domestic violence as being a factor in their decision to join. Often, family problems are linked to alcohol abuse, or to situations where there are step-parents, but in other cases it is part of the inter-generational struggle of parents and adolescent children.

The family can also be a pull factor: some girls join to assert their equality (for example with the male members of the family who were involved), while some boys feel pressured into joining because it would reflect badly on their father if they did not. It was noticeable in interviews in many different contexts how often it seems to be the military family that has military children. This may be because the family explicitly encourages this, or because the child sees military life as the normal (and acceptable) progression, or at least as a possible option where those without military connections might not even think of it.

Voluntary recruitment

The research focus was on adolescent volunteers. For the purposes of the project "volunteering" was defined as not being abducted or physically forced to join the armed forces or armed groups. Since the research was based on individual interviews with young soldiers and ex-soldiers, in practice they were self-defined as volunteers. In other words, those who said that they were not volunteers were not interviewed, while those who identified themselves as volunteers were.

In the course of reading and analysing the interviews, it became clear that the degree of real choice varied. "One of my friends ... was shot in his head because he refused to join them. He was killed

straight in front of me," said one self-defined volunteer in Sierra Leone describing the circumstances in which he joined.

However, if the youngsters consider themselves to have volunteered, this needs to be taken into account in planning any demobilisation and reintegration processes, even if an external observer might disagree on the facts. This is partly a psychological issue: if someone takes responsibility for their actions, it is not necessarily helpful or appropriate to tell them that they had no choice, or that they were not entitled to take the decisions they did because they were under-age. The girl who decides to volunteer rather than waiting to be abducted because she realises that by volunteering she gets to choose which commander to join up with in a personal as well as a military relationship is behaving rationally and deserves to be treated – and consulted – as someone who took decisions; even if the degree or nature of the “choices” available to her are not such as were envisaged by those drafting legal distinctions between forced and voluntary recruitment.

Moreover, many adolescents join believing that they will be able to leave again. Sometimes they are deliberately misled in this respect. Sometimes this is simply part of the process of adolescence; that time of coming to terms with the discovery that some of one's decisions can have permanent effects, cannot be revoked when one discovers how unwise they are, or (in a case like this) what danger they put one in. And, of course although some adolescents volunteer because they want to go and fight, many as described above join for completely different reasons. Many clearly have very little concept of the reality of military involvement.

These issues raise a number of legal questions concerning the real distinction between voluntary and compulsory recruitment. Is it enough that the choice was exercised once and that no second thoughts are permitted?

The only attempt at a legally defined distinction is that in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflict. The Protocol specifies four safeguards for the only exception to the complete prohibition on all recruitment of under-18s by either government armed forces or other armed groups. (This exception applies only to voluntary recruitment of those aged at least 16 years into government armed forces and who will not be deployed into combat in any case). These safeguards are:

- (i) the recruitment is genuinely voluntary;
- (ii) the recruitment is carried out with the informed consent of the potential recruit's parents or legal guardians;
- (iii) the potential recruit is fully informed of the duties involved in such military service; and
- (iv) provides reliable proof of age prior to acceptance.

Most of the “volunteers” interviewed for this research would fail one or more of these tests (were they applicable), even before taking account of their participation in combat, and without addressing the tautological and subjective nature of the stipulation that voluntary recruitment must be “genuinely voluntary” (otherwise undefined). To take the most quantifiable criterion as an example, only 8 of the 53 interviewees had explicit prior parental consent to their joining. Thus in legal terms, few qualify as volunteers. What this demonstrates is that any claim that under-18s have volunteered for armed forces or armed groups should be treated with scepticism and scrutinised rigorously. This does not, however, alter the earlier point about the practical issues of understanding the youngsters' own perspective on their actions in planning both preventive strategies and demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

Conclusion/Recommendations

What this research shows is that there are certain key underlying factors in the decision of children and young people to join armed forces or armed groups when not abducted or physically forced to do so. To counter the problem of child recruitment with any hope of lasting success, it is necessary to address the root causes at the level of these factors. Given that the major factors identified concern war, poverty, education, employment and the family, this presents a challenge of monumental proportions.

However, it may be more helpful to consider these five factors as providing a framework for policy and programmatic planning, without which no programme is likely to have sustained effect. Thus, any activities that reduce wars and poverty, provide access to quality education for all children, a reasonable standard of living, and improve family solidarity and parenting skills, will have an effect on reducing the incidence of child soldiering. Since these factors are cumulative, as well as mutually reinforcing, any programme to prevent (or reduce) child recruitment and for demobilisation and reintegration which tackles all, or several, of them is likely to be significantly more effective than if they are taken separately. At the same time, the particular aspect of these issues which is most relevant, will have to be considered in each conflict situation. For example, is it lack of access to school, or is the school the breeding ground for recruitment? It may also vary according to different regions within the conflict area, the different groups involved (religious, ethnic, urban, rural, girls, boys). Thus urban boys in one area may prioritise access to formal education, while their rural counterparts may want work, or vice versa. Girls may see vocational training as more, or less, relevant than schooling, and so on. The same need for specific analysis applies at the individual level: the girl who ran away from home, may decide that perhaps it was not so bad after all in the light of her war-time experience, while another may not have a home to return to, or may be even less welcome after her military involvement.

Three final comments are worth stressing. The first concerns the need to reduce domestic violence or abuse of children. To do this will reduce the number of adolescents running away to join armed forces or groups. The particular impact on girls, and its interplay with the dearth of other options for them, and the greater likelihood of them not being in school, illustrate the need to tackle the bigger problem of the status of girls and women in society.

Secondly, in this research all the girls interviewed had been fighters - even when they had also been wives, concubines, sex slaves, cooks, nurses, porters, etc. Yet, few girls are demobilised and reintegrated as equals with boys. Every demobilisation of child soldiers which takes place excluding girls by design or default is an act of discrimination. Because so few girls are demobilised, the assumption remains that there are few girl soldiers - and that girls associated with fighting forces are not *soldiers* but "camp followers". These girls who volunteered for armed forces or armed groups are, therefore, being doubly discriminated against. Most joined because they refused to accept the exploitation and abuse to which they were being subjected. The failure to demobilise them on an equal basis with their male counterparts, and to address the societal attitudes that led to their joining in the first place, is a further abdication of responsibility. It also highlights the real links between child soldiering and other forms of child labour. To seek to eliminate child soldiering without providing adequate alternatives will only lead to a rise in other forms of child labour. Conversely, measures to reduce child labour in general are likely to reduce the incidence of child soldiering.

Finally, addressing the gender stereotyping of boys that encourages or pressurises them into taking up arms would also have a major impact on child soldiering.