What Do They Dream About?: The Long-lasting Effects of War and Trauma on Child Soldiers

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**What Do They Dream About?**

What long-lasting effects does trauma experienced in war have on a child soldier?

By: Danny Chavez, Esther O’Connor, and Alexander Markos

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**Do You Know?**

There is evidence for the use of child soldiers in over 40 countries since 2008, including the United States and several European countries.

- There is evidence for the use of child soldiers in over 40 countries.

- There are an estimated 300,000 children currently used as soldiers worldwide.

- Child soldiers are involved in armed conflicts all over the globe, including the American Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War.

- From 1987 to 2007, 83 out of 107 armed conflicts involved the use of child soldiers. Out of these 83, 26 occurred in Africa, 26 in Asia, 11 in Europe, 11 in the Middle East, and 9 in North/South America.

- The youngest child soldier today is 7 years old.

- The most common reason for the widespread use of child soldiers is the development of lighter weapons, which make child soldiers more effective than they have been in the past. Child soldiers are also less costly and are more easily manipulated than adult soldiers.

- During their time in these conflicts, child soldiers are exposed to all kinds of violent acts such as beatings, murder, and rape.

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**Impact of Trauma**

- **Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):** This disorder is usually caused by death, injuries, or sexual violence. The specific symptoms that most child soldiers have are distressing and frightening dreams, flashbacks, reenactment in play, and memory blanks. Most of them have feelings of detachment, guilt, and a constant negative state of mind. The most difficult part to fix though is the aggression, depersonalization and derealization.

- **Chronic danger or exposure to extreme stress requires costly developmental adjustment in children.**

- The trauma experienced by child soldiers results in various psychological complications and disorders:
  - Severe depression
  - Suicidality
  - Intense anxiety behavior
  - Anxiety disorders
  - Social withdrawal
  - Loss of trust
  - Rapid, violent mood swings
  - Guilt and shame

- In different studies, over 50% of former child soldiers experienced extreme cases of depression. There has been proven dramatic correlation between suicidal thoughts and PTSD in child soldiers.

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**After Disarmament and Demobilization comes... Reintegration**

"Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child." (United Nations Convention, Article 39)

- **What is reintegration and how does it help?**
  - After a child is disarmed and demobilized from his/her military position of servitude and re-enters society, there are a multitude of different problems that are encountered. There are difficulties, including but not limited to: acquired negative values, disconnect with social norms, major emotional scars, physical deformation, lack of family or supporting community, gender-restrictions, deficit in literacy and/or skillsets, etc. Reintegration and its different methods focus on healing these scars and filling these deficits to improve the lives and well-being of those involved.

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**Liberia**

- A case study done in 2006, "examines the various methods employed in providing support to the thousands of child soldiers resulting from the Liberian conflict that ended in 2003.
- Found that reintegration works best with:
  - Educational support
  - Skill acquisition
  - And family reunification

- The main challenges to overcome:
  - Funding
  - Inadequate educational infrastructure
  - Weak family economy
  - Inadequate follow-up agencies

- The success of reintegration relies primarily on the reunification of children with family or community.

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**Uganda**

- Conflict and war caused by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and government forces has been plaguing and creating child-soldiers in Uganda since late 1980s.
- Reintegration should include:
  - All children affected regardless of soldier status
  - Programs dedicated to distress and sexual activities
  - School-based interventions that reduce symptoms and violence, and promote healthy communities.

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**Child Soldiers**

- "Children as a part of a reintegration program of the Child Soldiers Initiative: http://www.childsoldiers.org/resource/treatment-center-database/"