
Affaires courantes et commentaires Current issues and comments

Adolescents volunteering for armed forces or armed groups

RACHEL BRETT*

The focus of attention with regard to “child soldiers” has tended to be on abducted children or those forced or coerced into fighting. When asked, however, many children and young people themselves say that they volunteered. Moreover, when negotiating the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflict,¹ 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 minimum age for recruitment.

The compromise initially agreed for the Optional Protocol was that a complete ban be imposed on all compulsory recruitment of persons under 18 years old into armed groups and on the compulsory conscription of such persons into government armed forces, but that governments be required only to raise the age of voluntary recruitment from that specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in other words that a new absolute minimum be set in that respect of 16 years.² However, because many disapproved of this, instead of stipulating a minimum age of 16 the Protocol requires that on becoming party to it a State must deposit a legally binding declaration setting out its minimum voluntary recruitment age, and this declaration can be changed only in order to strengthen it.³ In practice, most of the States that have become parties to the Optional Protocol have specified a minimum age of 18 or more.

Since children and young people *do* volunteer, demobilization and reintegration programmes need to take this reality into account, especially if demobilization is to take place where there is ongoing conflict or the situation remains unstable. It might seem obvious that if children, after being forced to join up and fight, are subsequently released, captured or escape and are offered demobilization and reintegration, they will want to take this course. Although in individual cases their circumstances may have changed

* Rachel Brett is a representative of the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva.

since or as a result of the original abduction, conscription or press-ganging, the assumption remains generally valid that because they did not want to join they will want to leave if given the opportunity. Conversely, if the children volunteered there is no logical reason to expect them to want to leave or not to rejoin, even if they are demobilized, unless the reasons *why* they volunteered are identified and addressed.

This was the rationale behind the “Voices of Young Soldiers” research project jointly undertaken by the Quaker United Nations Office, Geneva, and the International Labour Organisation.⁴ The research entailed in-depth interviews with 53 individuals from 9 countries⁵ who identified themselves as having volunteered to join armed forces or armed groups before the age of 18.⁶

In this article we set out the main findings of the research project, pointing out some of the motives of adolescents voluntarily joining armed forces or groups, examining the extent to which they have a real choice in volunteering to fight, and finally setting out some recommendations for countering the problem of child recruitment.

1 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on involvement of children in armed conflict, which was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May 2000 and entered into force on 12 February 2002; available at: <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menue/6/protocolchild.htm> (“Optional Protocol”).

2 Article 2 of the Optional Protocol reads: “States Parties shall ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces.” Article 3.1 of the same Protocol reads: “States Parties shall raise in years the minimum age for the voluntary recruitment of persons into their national armed forces from that set out in article 38, paragraph 3, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, taking account of the principles contained in that article and recognizing that under the Convention persons under the age of 18 years are entitled to special protection.”

3 Article 3.2 of the Optional Protocol reads: “Each State Party shall deposit a binding declaration upon ratification of or accession to the present Protocol that sets forth the minimum age at which it will permit voluntary recruitment into its national armed forces and a description of the safeguards it has adopted to ensure that such recruitment is not forced or coerced.”

4 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.

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

6 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.

Motivations to join armed forces or armed groups

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 to do so. These are: war, poverty, education, employment and family. Before exploring each of them in more detail, it is important to stress that they are not the only factors, for ideology, ethnicity, the struggle for liberation (or against oppression), friends, and many other things can also play a part. However, these are all less universal and each becomes more significant when combined with and accentuated, and thus amplified, by one or more of the five major factors identified.

Secondly, all the aforesaid major factors can have different influences on the choice of whether to join up or not, and they do not operate in isolation from each other. The impoverished child in a war zone, without access to school or employment and whose family has been destroyed or torn apart, is most at risk. But even in such a 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 an actual decision to join.

- War

Very few youngsters go looking for a war to fight.⁷ 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 invades their lives. However, for adolescents war is also an opportunity. It is an opportunity for employment (be it formal employment with the army or an informal source of financial income or food via armed groups); to escape from an oppressive family situation or from humiliation at school; and 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, but fewer are in a situation where they can try it out in real life.

⁷ The term "war" is used to cover situations of both international and internal armed conflict and also situations of militarized violence not amounting to armed conflict in the strict legal sense. Outside war or violence, a military environment includes some of the same aspects.

Furthermore, war itself helps to create or exacerbate the other major factors mentioned, for example by forcing the closure of schools, causing the dispersal or death of family members, resulting in the loss of income, the lack of alternative employment, and so on.

War also rapidly becomes normality for children, and their involvement in it may take on a certain inevitability, either because it is part of the family tradition, or because they see no other alternative, or because the availability of weapons and the use of violence mean that they need to protect themselves or other members of their family. In addition, where violence is “normal” and weapons can readily be obtained, adolescents (especially boys) are more likely to join an armed group as a means of self-protection.

- Poverty

There is a tendency to see poverty as the cause of child soldiering, but this overstates and oversimplifies the case. Even in war zones, there are many more poor children who do *not* become child soldiers than those who do. 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 soldiers. The same is true of child labour, and in fact the research project clearly shows that child soldiering is a particular form of child labour. The corollary of this is that to seek to eliminate child soldiering without providing alternatives will lead to a rise in other forms of child labour.

Poverty is both a direct and an indirect cause for young people to volunteer to become soldiers. In all situations, whether armed conflict or not, the proportion of poor children not attending school is greater. Their job prospects are more limited, and are reduced still further by lack of education. In developed countries, such as the UK, the army may be one of the few employers that require no educational qualifications.

- Education

In considering the situation of children and adolescents rather than adults, it is important to recall that school is one of the main influences in their lives — for good or ill. It is consequently not surprising that the role of schoolchildren was so significant, for example, 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) also means youngsters have fewer choices of employment, and for those neither at school nor in jobs the temptation to become involved with armed forces or groups, particularly where they are prevalent, is considerable. This may be simply because the youngsters have nothing else to do, or because they are perceived by recruiters to be available and are 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 seen as a role model. Even when education is available, adolescents will tend to drop out of school if the educational environment is unlikely to lead to employment, or if it denigrates or humiliates the pupils either individually, or a specific group of them, or as a whole. For many youngsters, the decision to join armed forces or groups is triggered by the closure of the school, or by their exclusion from it either because they are forced to move away or because of their own personal behaviour.

On the other hand, schools may also serve as centres for military recruitment — whether directly by the government armed forces or armed opposition groups, or indirectly in response to an ethnic, religious or political dimension of the conflict.

- 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 are aware that a lack of education, appropriate schooling or vocational training leaves them with very few choices. Many also know all too well that the choices available are limited, whatever their level of schooling. Where they perceive the army or armed groups as the only “employer”, it is not surprising that they opt for this “alternative” either on a regular basis or as a last resort to support themselves or their family.

- Family

Perhaps the most inadequately considered factor of all is the role of the family in relation to child soldiers. Again, like school, it is important to realize how much more significant the family aspect is in a child’s life and environment than it is for an adult. Thus both the push and the pull influence of family are perhaps the single most crucial factors in determining whether or not a child ultimately decides to join the armed forces or an armed group.

It is now well recognized that the destruction or dispersal of their family may induce 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. When their parents have been killed or their families disrupted, children may not only have to fend for themselves, but may find themselves having to assume the additional responsibilities of heads of households and provide financial maintenance and physical protection for other members of their family. Interestingly, none of the girls interviewed cited providing for family or protecting others as a reason for joining, whereas boys often did. Girls, on the other hand, spoke more often than the boys of the need to protect themselves — including in particular from rape and sexual violence. “When you are a girl”, as one sixteen-year-old interviewee from the Democratic Republic of Congo 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 fact that a number of adolescents join armed forces or groups 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 mainly of girls to run away and join up (for example in Colombia and Sri Lanka). This decision is linked to the greater prevalence of sexual abuse of adolescent girls, as well as to their use for domestic labour — whether in their own homes, in the extended family or elsewhere. It is also linked to the scarcity of other options for girls who are running away from home. However, many adolescent boys, too, cite domestic violence as being a factor in their decision to join. Often family problems are related to alcohol abuse or step-parents, but in other cases they are 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 involved in armed forces or groups), 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 such families explicitly encourage joining up, or because the child sees military life as the normal (and acceptable) progression, or at least as a possible option where others without military connections might not even think of it.

Voluntary recruitment?

The focus of the “Voices of Young Soldiers” research project 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 the respondents 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, their view needs to be taken into account in planning any demobilization and reintegration processes, even though an external observer might disagree about the actual facts. This is partly a psychological issue: if someone takes responsibility for his or her actions, it is not necessarily helpful or appropriate to tell that person that he or she had no choice, or was not entitled to make those decisions because he or she was under age. The girl who decides to volunteer rather than waiting to be abducted, because she realizes that by so doing 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 did make decisions; even if the degree or nature of the “choices” available to her are not such as were envisaged by the drafters of legal distinctions between forced and voluntary recruitment.

Moreover, many adolescents join believing that they will be able to leave again when they want. Sometimes they are deliberately misled in that respect. For others it is simply part of the process of adolescence; that time of coming to terms with the discovery that some of one’s own decisions can have permanent effects and cannot be revoked when one finds out how unwise they were or, in a case like this, how dangerous they can be. And of course, although some adolescents volunteer because they want to go and fight, many do join for completely different reasons, as described above, and clearly have very little idea 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 the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Protocol lays down four safeguards for the only exception to the complete prohibition of all recruitment of under-18s by either government armed forces or other armed groups.⁸ This exception applies only to voluntary recruitment of those aged at least 16 into government armed forces and who will not in any circumstances be deployed in combat. These safeguards require that:

- (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”, a term that is otherwise undefined. To take the most quantifiable criterion as an example, only eight 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 rigorously scrutinized. It does not, however, detract from the point made above, namely that the youngsters' *own* view of their actions must be understood and taken into account in planning both preventive strategies and demobilization and reintegration programmes.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of the research project show 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 in terms of these factors. Given that the major factors identified are war, poverty, education, employment and the family, this presents a challenge of monumental proportions.

⁸ Article 3.3 of the Optional Protocol.

It may be more helpful to consider these five factors as providing a framework for the planning of policies and courses of action, without which no programme is likely to have a sustained effect. Thus any activities that reduce wars and poverty, provide access to quality education for all children and 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 promote demobilization and reintegration that tackles all or several of them is likely to be significantly more effective than if they are addressed separately. At the same time, the most influential factor will have to be determined case by case 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 and/or the different groups involved (religious, ethnic, urban, rural, girls, boys). Thus urban boys in one area may prioritize access to formal education, whereas 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: a girl who ran away from home may decide that perhaps it was not so bad after all in the light of her wartime experience, whereas another girl 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 of such violence or abuse on girls, 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 demobilized and reintegrated on a par with boys. Every demobilization of child *soldiers* which excludes girls intentionally or by default is an act of discrimination. Because so few girls are demobilized, the assumption remains that there are few girl soldiers — and that girls associated with fighting forces are not soldiers but merely “camp-followers”. These girls who volunteered for armed forces or armed groups are therefore being doubly discriminated against.

Finally, unlike girls, who are behaving counter-culturally if they volunteer, boys are often expected to fight, told that it is their duty to join, or considered cowards or weaklings if they do not wish to fight. Some had “volunteered” reluctantly in the face of such attitudes, either to protect their own reputation or that of their father or family. Action to address the gender stereotyping of boys that encourages or pressures them into taking up arms would therefore also have a major impact on child soldiering.