

Gauging International/American NGOs' Challenging Role in Curbing the Scourge of Child Soldier in Africa

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Abstract:

Child soldiering as a global phenomenon has been unveiled through a myriad of international news agency articles and Human Rights reports. Usually, these materials only pinpoint limited and often sensationalized cases. In this regard, there is focus of attention at the level of this paper relative to deep understanding of NGOs' involvement in the phenomenon under study. One of the major points that this paper spotlights is the role played by international and particularly American NGOs such as UNICEF, Child Soldiers International, War Child, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International in shaping an international political and legal advocacy against the use of children in armed conflict and how to materialize it. More explicitly, the paper gauges the dimensional effects in order to curb the enduring phenomenon of child soldiers that still resists total eradication with emphasis on Africa.

Keywords: Child soldiering, Human rights, Africa, Amnesty International, NGOs, Human Rights Watch, UNICEF.

Résumé :

L'enrôlement d'enfants soldats en tant que phénomène mondial a été dévoilé par d'innombrables articles d'agences de presse internationales et rapports d'organisations de défense des Droits de l'Homme. Habituellement, ces documents ne mettent en évidence que des cas limités et souvent sensationnels. A cet égard, l'accent est mis sur une compréhension profonde de l'implication des ONG dans le phénomène en question. L'un des principaux points soulignés dans cet article est le rôle joué par les ONG internationales, en particulier américaines telles que l'UNICEF, International Child Soldiers, War Child, Human Rights Watch et Amnésie Internationale dans la formulation d'un plaidoyer politique et juridique contre l'utilisation des enfants dans les conflits armés et comment le concrétiser. Plus explicitement, l'article évalue les effets dimensionnels afin de freiner le phénomène des enfants soldats qui résiste toujours l'éradication totale surtout en Afrique.

Mots-clés: Enfants soldats, Droits de l'homme, Afrique, Amnistie Internationale, ONG,
Human Rights Watch, UNICEF.

الملخص:

تم الكشف عن تجنيد الأطفال كظاهرة عالمية من خلال عدد لا يحصى من مقالات ووكالات الأنباء الدولية وتقرير جمعيات حقوق الإنسان. في كثير من الأحيان تحدد هذه المواد حالات محدودة ومثيرة. من خلال هذا المقال، ينصب الاهتمام على الفهم العميق لمشاركة المنظمات غير الحكومية في الظاهرة قيد الدراسة. ومن النقاط الرئيسية التي تسلط هذه المقالة الضوء عليها الدور الذي تضطلع به المنظمات الدولية غير الحكومية، ولا سيما الأمريكية، مثل منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة (اليونيسيف)، منظمة الجنود الأطفال الدولية، طفل الحرب، هيومن رايتس ووتش، ومنظمة العفو الدولية في تشكيل الدعوة السياسية والقانونية الدولية ضد استخدام الأطفال في الصراعات المسلحة وكيفية تحقيقها. وبشكل أكثر وضوحاً، يقيس المقال الآثار البعيدة للحد من ظاهرة الأطفال الجنود المستمرة التي لا تزال تقاوم حتى الآن الاستئصال مع التركيز على أفريقيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تجنيد الأطفال، حقوق الإنسان، أفريقيا، منظمة العفو الدولية، المنظمات غير الحكومية، هيومن رايتس ووتش، اليونيسيف.

Introduction:

The rise of nationalist movements and the situations of civil wars that have resulted from the constant questioning of the authority and legitimacy of the central government in African countries since the end of the Cold War, reverse the state of affairs where only adults participate in armed conflicts. These conflicts, often in the territory of the same State, from the regular armed forces to the rebels, are increasingly leading to the recruitment of civilians, among whom there are many children.

Despite the lack of precise and official data, the huge number of children under the age of eighteen involved in internal armed conflicts is alarming (Wessells 407-408). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), more than 300,000 children (both boys and girls) under the age of 18 in 44 countries around the world are directly involved in armed conflicts serving most of the time as combatants among other tasks. They fight in almost 75 percent of the world's conflicts. Eighty percent of these conflicts where children are

present include fighters under the age of fifteen, some of them up to 8 years of age (Singer 105). These children, recruited within the armed forces, are deprived of their fundamental rights, such as the right to health, the right to education and the right to family unity. The phenomenon of children participating in hostilities or child soldiers, which has been virtually put on hold during peacetime, is taking on rather dramatic proportions in conflict zones, as evidenced by an avalanche of horrific images broadcast by the media. Violence and atrocities perpetrated by these children puzzled the common people: The idea of death is trivialized. The horror of such a situation raises the question of measures taken by governments to respect the rights of civilians in general, and children involved in hostilities in particular.

When Statistics Talk

If the rough figure seems to have slightly declined since the end of some conflicts in Africa (Sierra Leone and Liberia in particular), it still reflects the idea of the proportion of the phenomenon which is far more widespread than is commonly believed. In three-quarters of the armed conflicts that have affected the planet in the last 30 years, there have been a considerable number of children enrolled to take part in hostilities. Child soldiers represent about 10% of the fighters' strength. Considering the death toll, it is estimated that two million youths were killed in armed conflicts in the past decade alone, and three times as many have been seriously injured or impaired (Miller 28).

Who Is a Child and Who Is a Child Soldier?

The definition of the term "child" is analyzed at the etymological, doctrinal and conventional levels. Etymologically, and according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, the term "child" comes from Old English "cild" meaning "fetus, infant, unborn or newly born person". The wider sense "young person before the onset of puberty" was developed in late Old English. From Latin "infantem" (nominative infans) "young child, babe in arms," noun use of adjective meaning "not able to speak," from in- "not, opposite of" and fans, present participle of fari "to speak," (etymonline.com). The word

“infans” then means here “who does not speak/is speechless”. It is, therefore, the human being in the period of childhood.

For the *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, a child is “a young boy or girl between infancy and adolescence” (VandenBos 178). He is a human being whose age is between his birth and that of puberty. During this interval, he is still dependent upon adults for food and other resources, including intensive care (Mai, Owl, and Kersting 98). This age of adolescence, however, varies from one region to another and depending on the sex of the child. The aforementioned definition seems to be insufficient for the object of the present study in that it does not fix the age limit of childhood.

More interesting then, the child does not have the ability to protect himself physically or mentally as compared to the adult and, as a consequence, is highly susceptible to predation.

The child lives in a situation of particular weakness, whether physical, intellectual or moral. His age entitles him to the right of special protection. It is clearly shown that the child is a being who has not reached an intellectual, psychological, and moral maturity. He is incapable of analyzing and appreciating things. Under these conditions, the child is in a situation of dependence on the adult. Therefore, the child is distinguished from the adult by the fact that it is necessary for him to be protected, to be channeled, to be oriented due to his vulnerable situation.

As to the legal definitions that follow, they differ somewhat from the previous ones. Indeed, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) adopted on 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990 (OHCHR) specifies in Article 1 that a child means “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” Again, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) in Article 2 provides a definition: “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years” that is along the same lines. This distinction lies in the age limit that is referred to in the aforementioned Convention. Thus, any person whose life starts from birth to seventeen years of age is legally considered a child.

However, the Article 1 of the CRC mentioned above contains a reservation that “...unless the majority is attained rather under the legislation applicable to it”. This reservation indicates that the age of

majority, which varies according to the legislation of the States Parties to the said Convention, affects the age limit of being considered a child. For example, Uganda, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda are CRC parties where the age of majority is fixed at twenty-one years of age for both sexes (Notarius International). That is to say, all those who are not 21 years old are minors. This law leads to conclude that the CRC parties fully adhere to the conventional definition of the child in that it does not alter it in any way.

In International Humanitarian Law (IHL), “under/below 15 years” is the age limit set by the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 in most provisions concerning the child (American Red Cross). This age limit assumes the exclusion of other children over the age of 15 because there are other provisions for children without reference to age or other designations, such as “minors”, “Persons under 18 years of age” or “adolescents”. In sum, it can be retained from the previous definitions that the child is the human being from birth up to at least seventeen years of age.

For the notion of soldier, it etymologically contains the reality of an individual who is instructed and equipped for the defense of his country. According to Walter Skeat and William Skeat, the term originates from old French: ‘soldier’, ‘soudoier’, and ‘souldoyer’ meaning “one who fights for pay” (450). He is, therefore, one who is “engaged in military service and especially in the army” (*Merriam-Webster*).

The combination of the two terms “child” and “soldier” gives place to a contradictory term that engenders the dichotomy of “innocent” and “killer”. In this context, the definition of child soldier is essentially conventional. The CRC defines the child soldier as an individual under 15 years of age in an army. Put differently, the soldier is no longer considered a child from the age of 15 under Article 38, which prohibits direct participation in hostilities and recruitment into the armed forces of children under 15 years of age. Child soldiers are children who are used for military purposes. They are used for fighting –being forced to take part in wars and conflicts, forced to be perpetrators and act as suicide bombers. Among the forcing reasons to join “willingly” armed groups is poverty, sense of duty, or mere vengeance (“What Are Child Soldiers?”). The definition excludes children from military colleges who receive academic training punctuated by a few rules of military discipline. Similarly, a

UN Security Council report defines child soldiers as any person under the age of eighteen who belongs to an armed force, whatever his or her function, and all persons accompanying that group, other than family members.

Despite the lack of a uniform definition at the level of recruiting age, it is commonly agreed that a child soldier is any girl or boy below the age of 18 who is recruited or used by an armed force or armed group. However, they are not just someone involved in fighting. This includes but is not limited to other roles such as cooks, porters, messengers, human shields, spies, suicide bombers or those used for sexual exploitation.

For a legal definition of the term child soldier, it is necessary to wait for the year 2007 and the Paris Principles that regard a child soldier as “any minor, so under the age of 18, who takes part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity; including capacities such as combatants, cooks, porters, messengers or anyone accompanying such armed groups or forces that are not family members” (Waals 1).

Selected youths have been trained in different historical eras to be knights, samurai warriors, and raiders. The widespread employment of child soldiers in these settings favors the use of lightweight weapons principally AK-47 assault rifle because of their pervasive availability and relative inexpensiveness. Such weapons enable young teenagers and even 10-year-olds to be effective combatants (Rotberg 123).

Defining the Notion of Conflict as a Social Phenomenon

As for the notion of war or conflict, it is undoubtedly the most constant social phenomenon that humanity has known. Of the past 3,400 years, historians contend that only 268 years (“or just 8 percent of recorded history) represent the period of general peace for humans (Hedges). War in its various forms has always characterized the history of mankind. Although its typology has also evolved, its appalling reality has remained unaltered. A war has resulted in more human atrocities that are found in genocides, raids, plunders, massacres of innocent civilians, mass destructions of property, rapes, ruins, desolations, forced exiles, and deportations. These cited abuses remind us of Cicero’s popular maxim “inter arma enim silent leges”

meaning “in times of war, the law falls silent” (Ghoshray 687-88). Sometimes referred to as conflict, nowadays we witness the emergence of new forms of warfare involving regular armies, guerrilla movements, often with the intervention of foreign powers.

In sum, the classical distinction between international and non-international conflicts seems to bend. It falls into obsolescence in a context animated by new or even de-structured conflicts. These are characterized by the total or partial absence of the State. War does not seem to be in agreement with Clausewitz’s dictum “the continuation of politics by other means” (qtd. in Vigh 66). It is simply internal.

Rebuking African Countries for being Voluntarily the Nest of Child Soldiers

In addition to the rise of nationalist movements, in African countries the situations of civil wars have resulted from the constant questioning of authority and legitimacy of the central government. More, since the end of the Cold War the acknowledged situation has been reversed dictating that only adults can take part in the provoked conflicts or wars. These conflicts, which often arise in the territory of the same state – regular armed forces fighting rebels, increasingly entail the recruitment of civilians among whom children are included.

However, in Africa apart from rebels and the defense and security forces, there is also another type of combatant that belongs neither to the first nor to the second. These combatants are found in the government area. They fight on their own to protect their villages, tribes, and property: They are militias. These groups are scattered in several areas under government control. Children are an important component that constitutes these armed groups. It can be argued that it is this presence of children as soldiers that shapes the complex issue from which emanates both a challenging exploration and an inspirational study of the phenomenon. Moreover, the originality of this topic is justified by the tendency to extend children’s voluntary or involuntary participation in armed conflicts in African regions; hence the need for protection against their involvement and prevention from their recruitment as soldiers. The most recent wars in Uganda, Angola, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Ivory Coast (RCI) where the presence of this category of fighters is reported (Heidelberg), have

highlighted the resurgence of the child soldier practice. The organizers of these recruitments find it increasingly difficult to recruit adults who are often not ready to die for a cause.

Analysis of the current international order (not to say a “disorder”) context, which is the expanding armed conflicts in Africa, has become commonplace. With violence trivialized despite the general prohibition of the threat or use of force posed by the UN act, a child soldier is today one of the main challenges faced by the international community. At its forefront is the UN whose main role is to maintain international peace and security. After the Cold War period, the United Nations has significantly increased its activities in this area.

Many peacekeeping operations (PKOs) have been projected around the world, especially in Africa to deal with all these series of wars that break out there. The implementation of these operations has, in many cases, mitigated tensions and avoided violent escalations but has also uncovered their limits. Difficulties and failures in maintaining and defending peace have highlighted this old lesson of wisdom that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”.

International Organizations: Building Awareness and Establishing Cooperation

The international community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are aware of this distressing lesson and the need to act in this direction. Faced with such a phenomenon, they did not remain inactive. Today, more than ever, these organizations emerge in Africa as a categorical imperative in view of the disastrous consequences of conflicts for this continent, conflicts that states alone can no longer manage. The whole situation impairs the functioning of social norms that traditional African societies follow. The need to involve international organizations/NGOs is necessary because they have undeniably become essential actors in the resolution of conflict and crisis situations. Their principle of neutrality in interventions practically displayed since the birth of the Red Cross in 1864 (Leader), provides most of them with a unique mediating power.

The period since the 1980s has witnessed the emergence and development of a political and humanitarian movement, denouncing the use of children as soldiers in armed conflicts in different parts of

the world. From that time, international organizations have made the issue of child soldiers one of their main concerns and began reporting on children's participation in armed conflicts and civil wars, particularly in Africa. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations (UN) and NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have become tightly involved by publishing reports on this highly disturbing subject. Usually, these materials only identify sporadic and often sensationalized cases. What has been less apparent is a profound understanding of what Singer calls the "child-soldier doctrine": A calculated and pervasive strategy by armed groups to use children as combatants (Perrin 687).

The rudimentary role of non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies responsible for the protection of children as actors/victims of armed conflicts cannot be overlooked. They have worked unobtrusively for many years on this issue and have made important legal and political advances, including the preparation of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which laid the groundwork for the protection of children in armed conflicts. Initially self-invested in a humanitarian mission to these children in very special situations during hostilities and in post-conflict situations, they originally contributed to the emergence of the concepts of human security and child soldiers.

Attempts to curb the recruitment of these child soldiers continue to confuse practitioners, NGOs, governments, and international organizations. The existing international law sets 15 as the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces and participation in combat, but for more than a decade NGOs have agreed that it is time to prohibit the use of child soldiers and have campaigned for the minimum age to be 18 years for recruitment into armed forces and involvement in war (Amnesty International). Emphasis today is not just on prevention but increasingly on how to best reintegrate these youth once the conflict has ended. Reintegration focuses on psychosocial support, family and community reunification, and education and skills training, among other issues (Jennings).

In November 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, the Cold War lived its final moments and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) succeeded in bringing together the UN member states around a treaty project. Its text that would be adopted unanimously by the UN members gave birth to the International Convention on the Rights of

the Child (ICRC). Only three countries did not ratify it: Southern Sudan, Somalia and the United States (Attiah).

In 1994, when the African continent was already experiencing several conflicts, a commission chaired by the Mozambican politician and humanitarian Graça Machel was in charge of a study on the impact of armed conflicts on children. The 1996 report covered, inter alia, refugee children, child victims of sexual exploitation and child soldiers. It was on the recommendations of this commission that the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict was established. Its head, the Algerian legal expert on Human Rights and Administration of Justice Leila Zerrougui summed up its mission: "From now on, our work is based on the global consensus that child soldiers should not be used in conflicts. This is a breakthrough of major significance. We are now working alongside States, as partners, with the legitimacy to move forward to end a recognized problem (Wallström and Zerrougui).

NGOs' Collective and Individual Implications: Demobilization and Reintegration

Many NGOs (some of which have joined together in the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers), as well as international organizations (UNICEF, ICRC, Amnesty International, ACEI, HRW, War Child, etc.), play an active role in the demobilization of child soldiers. They mobilize both actors in the field and public opinion. Besides, international courts consider recruiting and using child soldiers as a crime and actively pursue it. This is an offense frequently committed in armed conflict, as the phenomenon has become widespread and general. This act, unlike others, is relatively easy to prove. It is enough to demonstrate the presence of child soldiers in the ranks of the leader in question and to prove that he could not ignore this presence.

Who are the NGOs? What are the reasons for them to get involved in crisis situations to remedy the phenomenon of child soldiers? How do they do it? In other words, what is the rationale of this special attention given to children in armed conflict and in what form does it take place?

The notion of NGOs covers different realities. Apart from international organizations, of which is the renowned United Nations, other essential actors originating from a specific associative phenomenon would emerge. They are according to Volker Heins “post-traditional civil associations. They represent a distinctive social form that has organizational characteristics and behavioral proclivities different from states, firms, political parties, trade unions, or nonpolitical voluntary associations” (4). They can be any organization, association or movement enjoying substantial autonomy and constituted in a sustainable manner of individuals from different countries with a view to pursuing seemingly non-profit-making objectives. The non-profit-making characteristic of NGOs is regarded as a distinctive criterion. Indeed, NGOs are by no means commercial enterprises in search of profits. They pursue social interests such as assistance, relief and development without expecting a financial contribution from the beneficiaries. Such an explanation is reflected by their presupposed name as it is defined first by opposing to what is governmental or intergovernmental; and also by the non-profit nature of the activity, which distinguishes NGOs from corporations or business companies. The UN identifies an NGO as “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level” (Yaziji and Doh 4) for the purpose of performing a variety of services and humanitarian functions, providing analysis and expertise, monitoring and implementing international agreements and promoting cases such as human rights (4).

In addition, it would be awkward to approach the notion of NGOs without considering the several other notions it emanates from, especially that of the civil society, which remained for long the expression of collective freedom. It can be remarked that the notion of NGOs refers to a non-profit, non-political international solidarity association shaped by states’ humanitarian and independent norms. This kind of association is created by private initiative and brings together natural or legal persons to carry out an activity of general interest, solidarity or voluntary cooperation for economic, social, cultural, environmental and humanitarian development (Yaziji and Doh 1-10).

The notion of protection etymologically originates from the Latin term ‘*protegere*’ which means to “to secure or preserve from encroachment, infringement, restriction, or violation; maintain the

status or integrity of [a person]" (Reaves 136). The wording of the above definition refers to protection "as being an inherently exclusive action in that person" with the intent of preventing harm or injury (136).

As the NGO notion takes on the meaning of that acknowledged institutional channel that acts to protect, in the present context, the protection in question concerns children. Their protection is supposed to include all measures designed to promote their optimal development, to protect them from harm, mitigate, and remedy the after-effects of violations of their safety and human rights. These embrace educational and pedagogical knowledge, formal social and family policy measures, and a number of voluntary actions, public law means, and others. These enclosed in international laws promulgated by institutions as the Hague Convention on Protection of Children, the Hague Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children (HCCH). All these measures are shaped to be employed but in favor of children's well-being. Simply put, child protection is based on prevention and intervention.

One-third of child soldiers are in Africa, and the majority of them are in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 2011 alone, the United Nations Office for the Fate of Children in Conflict identified 272 new cases of recruitment in that country, 12 of those children were under the age of 10. More recently, and from the outset UNICEF and all child welfare organizations alerted the view of the presence of children among combatants in the Central African Republic and Mali (*The Use of Children as Soldiers in Africa*).

Experts say that organizations such as NGOs such as Child Soldiers International, formerly Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, Save the Children Alliance, and Human Right Watch continue to play a vital role in preventing the use of children as soldiers. According to Becker of Human Rights Watch, the role of NGOs is really important at two levels. The first level is prevention: It is about persuading governments and armed groups not to recruit and not to use children in armed conflicts. Moreover, NGOs have a very important role to play in another facet: When child soldiers emerge

from a war situation, they provide them with assistance for social reintegration.

Jo Becker, who has been operational on this issue for more than a decade, noticed considerable progress in combating this form of child exploitation. He observed that many NGOs involved in the field are undertaking reintegration projects, such as UNICEF, which oversees prevention and protection programs, to particularly prevent new recruitment. Since 2001, nearly 100,000 children have been supported in their release and reintegration (Anthonya, et al.). This assistance involves schooling, apprenticeship and, of course, psychosocial support. One of the priorities of these NGOs is to ensure that these children have the support of the host communities and a protective environment.

The most recent case concerns Syria. The use of child soldiers by armed groups fighting in this country continues to be of worry to human rights organizations and international institutions. Several recent reports show that their numbers have increased, particularly in the jihadist ranks where they are subjected to an important ideological conditioning. There are several examples of published reports about the taken steps that have changed the behavior of governments or armed groups that recruit or use child soldiers. For example, HRW succeeded in persuading the LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy), a Liberian rebel group, to stop using child soldiers. It is also seen that in recent years that the use of children by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka (Human Right Watch, *Children as Weapons of War*) has significantly decreased because of the pressure that is constantly exerted upon the recruiters.

International Coalition to Undermine the Global Expansion of Child Soldiers

Because the issue of child soldiers is so complex, NGOs have come together to deal with it. Human Rights Watch, an international NGO, for example, is part of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Amnesty International, Defence for Children International, Jesuit Refugee Service, Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva, Rädda Barnen for the International Save the Children Alliance, International Federation Terre des Hommes, World Vision International and several other regional NGOs from Latin America,

Africa and Asia are members of its steering committee ("Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers"). The Coalition advocates the adoption and observance of national, regional and international legal standards, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prohibits the use of children under the age of 18 in armed groups.

The Coalition participated in the drafting and adoption of this protocol and facilitated its ratification by 192 countries. It also organized field workshops for human rights defenders in order to help them engage in this issue, conduct monitoring and follow-up, and to influence some governments to bring about legal and political changes. The coalition tries evenly to influence some governments to bring about legal and political changes. These efforts can be attributed to the reduction in the number of child soldiers in the world.

According to Rachel Stohl, a senior analyst at the Center for Defense Information at the World Security Institute, a research organization based in Washington, D.C., there is no single way to solve the problem. It is important to put pressure on governments and groups that continue to use child soldiers. Stohl also sees that it is equally essential to protect children at risk, and this, and according to her, this cannot be done in Washington only. These program need to be implemented in the concerned countries, at the local government level. Stohl contends that if such agenda is unable to help former child soldiers or protect children, then everything is just words in the air (Brough, Lango and Linden).

What Next Steps to Take? The Case of US NGOs

There is a series of international treaties to protect children from combat operations. The question is how to implement them. In the United States, HRW was from the beginning supportive of the draft law on the prevention of the use of child soldiers, which was submitted to Congress in 2007. The passed law limits assistance to the governments involved in the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Again, Becker believed this was a way for the United States to exert influence to try to change the behavior of other governments. She was optimistic that this project would likely succeed. In her opinion, the version that was before the Senate had 34 co-sponsors, both Republicans and Democrats. The House of Representatives had

already adopted its version of this proposal as part of the renewal of the Act to assist victims of trafficking in persons. Despite her optimism that “the United States has a powerful tool to pressure foreign countries to crack down on these abuses,” she sharply criticized former President Obama for his failure to use it effectively during his presidency (Becker).

Difficulties Related to Prevention

The Child Soldiers issue appears to be daunting. The international community has started to react, but the problem is whether this is no more than rhetoric. On January 8, 1999, *The Washington Post* wrote in an editorial

A nightmare is unfolding in the civil war in Sierra Leone, West Africa.... Perhaps the worst of it is the broadening threat to the children of Sierra Leone as their villages and families disintegrate around them. The boys, some seven years old and younger, are being kidnapped, to be press-ganged into military service, meaning in some cases being compelled to clear paths with their bodies through unmarked mine fields. (qtd. in Skinner)

In this development of things, the difficulties related to the prevention of the phenomenon of child soldiers are exposed. Their examination corresponds to the concern of demonstrating the problems and inadequacies encountered by the State in the efficient implementation of the measures to eradicate, or at least to reduce the phenomenon of child soldiers: Hence the need for NGOs to get involved. Their important role reflects their degree of intervention that effectively contributes to the preventive and curative protection of children from becoming child soldiers.

It is no coincidence that NGOs have been the groups that have been very much involved in helping African societies through their support and advocacy to contain their civil wars. Yet, it is also clear that these organizations are as weak as the children they are trying to assist. For example, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has elaborated a number of measures to deal with the situation in Uganda that could be

generalized to other areas where child soldiering has caused serious human damage, but in vain. The failure is that it does not have either the political clout or resources to engage in more than moral suasion. HRW holds the position that no one under the age of eighteen should take part in armed conflicts of any kind, whether it is national or international. It, therefore, supports the efforts of the international community (through the work of a UN working group under the Commission on Human Rights) to set the minimum age for involvement in armed conflict at eighteen. However, the US government actively opposes international efforts to set the age limit. The best that the HRW can do is to hope that the creation of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child would bring results.

In this field, HRW has recommended that the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda immediately put an end to the "abduction, killing, torture, and sexual abuse of children and release all children remaining in captivity (Human Rights Watch, *Stolen Children* 3). It has urged the government of Sudan to use its influence with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) to accept those recommendations, and to cease all military aid and other support to the rebels until they comply with the above recommendations (4). Finally, it counseled the Ugandan government to ensure that all children who escape or are captured from the LRA receive prompt and adequate access to medical attention and advice while in government custody, release children promptly to their families, or if the families' whereabouts are unknown or the families are unable to receive the children, arrange for appropriate alternative care for the children, take into account the special needs of the young people and develop a concrete plan for meeting the long-term needs of former child soldiers (4).

However, it is quite clear to HRW and the other numerous NGOs that the world community has a special obligation to help reduce affliction of child soldiers. The UN special rapporteur for Sudan has been urged to report on the role of Sudan in supporting the LRA, especially the abduction, killing, torture, and rape of children, and their use in armed conflict. Finally, the UN working group drafting an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict is urged to

recommend that eighteen be the minimum age at which people can be recruited into armed forces.

Issues that appear among the poor and disadvantaged usually spread upward and threaten the stability of more affluent societies. This is very much a function of globalization where while all societies are gradually and often quickly linked economically and culturally, the cultural values from the core diffuse more rapidly to the periphery than the economic factors that underpin them. Unless this is understood, one cannot see the linkage between the use of child soldiers in African societies, and the war against children among the police forces in places such as Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. In this society, too, it is not apparently recognized that sacrificing its young in the hope of giving comfort to adults is to commit social death (Skinner).

Conclusion :

Concern is growing about the increasing use of child soldiers in civil wars around the world. In view of all the aforementioned facts, there comes up the question of child protection in peace, but in war times, especially. The expected answer has shown how the use of children for military purposes became a cause of concern. Pictures of children wielding weapons, sowing desolation and terror, and inflicting atrocities constantly animate the theater of armed conflicts. Trained on the culture of violence, children have become the cruelest fighters and merciless killers. The notion of child soldier is closely linked to that of armed conflicts.

Conventionally, the protection of these children is the responsibility of the State that normally guarantees the rights of its nationals. The phenomenon has so seriously affected different regions of the world, especially Africa, and NGOs are now deeply involved to assist them. The study therefore has delved into the phenomenon of child soldiers and how NGOs contribute to its reduction.

The analysis of the current context of the international order, which is the multiplication of conflicts in Africa, for example, is a chaos established by armed conflicts where violence is somewhat trivialized despite the general prohibition of the threat or use of force posed by the creative act of the United Nations. It is today one of the main challenges the international community faces at the forefront of which is the UN. Its main role is to maintain international peace and

security. After the Cold War, the United Nations has significantly increased its activities in this area, but with no visible results.

Finally, considering the role of the Security Council and the whole UN system, in addition to NGOs, this crisis is now far more widely acknowledged than it was at the time of the first international study on the effect of conflict on children by Machel (1996). Yet, Security Council resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict and other international standards for protecting children are not consistently enforced, thus allowing offenders of human rights to continue ignoring these laws with impunity. Alarming, the substantial international legal framework to protect these children is failing in the most ways. Despite the willingness of NGOs to minimize the impact of child soldiering and its damaging consequences through their advocacy, they will permanently face complex legal and political hindrances in relation to countries that are reluctant to cooperate to eventually create a political and social climate which makes the recruitment of children as soldiers completely unacceptable. Until something is done, this continues to be an ominous norm in conflict, one which is in direct opposition to the principles which the Convention on the Rights of the Child seeks to uphold.

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