

A silhouette of a child's head and shoulders is centered in the background, looking towards the right. The child is positioned behind a horizontal strand of barbed wire. The entire scene is set against a solid, light blue background. The text of the article is overlaid on the left side of the image.

BEYOND THE BINARY: WHY GENDER MATTERS IN THE RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN

By Nidhi Kapur¹, Hannah Thompson¹

¹ Proteknôn Foundation

The views, opinions and analysis expressed in this article are those of the authors. The position taken by the authors is not necessarily shared by Proteknôn Foundation for Innovation and Learning.

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ABSTRACT

Gender matters in conflict. Socio-cultural norms, attitudes and expectations related to gender dictate the causes, course and consequences of child soldiering. Despite international commitments, the recruitment and use of children in armed forces and groups persists. This paper summarizes existing quantitative data from the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, in light of complementary qualitative analysis from other sources, to highlight the ways in which gender norms can (a) drive recruitment, (b) determine roles and responsibilities, and (c) influence outcomes for children associated with armed forces or groups. The needs and experiences of girls and boys are explored, and where evidence allows, that of children of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). Recommendations are made on potential actions that can further nuance the gender perspective proposed in the Vancouver Principles. Suggestions are made on how to ensure prevention and response interventions are (1) supported by consistently disaggregated data, (2) cognisant of the gender drivers behind recruitment, and (3) tailored to the distinct needs of children of diverse SOGIESC.

KEYWORDS

Child soldiers; children and armed conflict (CAAC); gender; non-binary; Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC), Vancouver Principles.

INTRODUCTION

Gender matters in conflict. All children bear the brunt of armed conflict, yet the ways in which they experience egregious violations of their rights are directly tied to socio-culturally prescribed norms, attitudes and expectations related to gender. Conflict can exacerbate pre-existing gender dynamics, rendering them more regressive or restrictive. Yet, conflict can also upend traditional gender norms. As societies shift into survival mode, girls may be forced to adopt roles that would otherwise be deemed socially unacceptable, while boys can take on roles that were previously reserved for adult men. The many and varied ways in which girls and boys are recruited and used by armed actors in conflict is often reflective of these evolving gender dynamics. Although roles can and do overlap, the division of labour amongst boys and girls can mirror stereotypical gender roles and pre-conceived notions of their relative physical strength and personal capacities. Gender can dictate the causes, course and consequences of child soldiering.

Contrary to multiple, mutually reinforcing legislative and normative frameworks aimed at the protection of children in conflict, the recruitment and use of children in armed forces and armed groups persists. Worldwide, at least 61,852 children were recruited and used between 2005 and 2019.¹ When analysed from a gender perspective, available figures indicate that, while girls have been targeted in several contexts, boys appear to be disproportionately targeted in every context in which the recruitment and use of children is observed.² Indeed, 91% of verified cases in 2017 and 2018 that were disaggregated by sex involved boys.³ The incidence data on the recruitment and use of children can, however, be highly context-dependent. Girls can be recruited in larger numbers in some places, and their roles can encompass support, sexual and combat functions.⁴ Similarly, boys may be subjected to sexual violence during the course of their recruitment and use,⁵ or as a result of their subsequent arrest and detention for their perceived or actual association with armed actors.⁶

1 Based on meta-analysis of the United Nations Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict, as cited in Nidhi Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict: Addressing The Different Needs Of Children* (Save the Children, 2020), <https://www.savethechildren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SC-Gender-Age-and-Conflict-report-final.pdf>.

2 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

3 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

4 Marie de la Soudière, *What the girls say: Improving practices for the demobilization and reintegration of girls associated with armed forces and armed groups in Democratic Republic of Congo* (Child Soldiers International, 2017), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2017_DRC_Report_-_ENGLISH_-_Online_PDF.pdf.

5 Sarah K. Chynoweth SK, Julie Freccero, Heleen Touquet, "Sexual violence against men and boys in conflict and forced displacement: implications for the health sector," *Reproductive Health Matters* 25, no. 51 (2017): 90-94. doi: 10.1080/09688080.2017.1401895.

6 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2467, S/RES/2467 (2019), [https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2467\(2019\)](https://undocs.org/en/S/RES/2467(2019)).

Ongoing violations demonstrate that current frameworks fail to fully protect children from becoming child soldiers. The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers⁷ therefore provide an important entry point to introduce a more nuanced approach to the question of gender.

This paper begins by clarifying the meaning behind key terms in order to fully examine the gendered dimensions of the recruitment and use of children. Where evidence allows, it looks at gender disparity in the:

- (a) Motives for recruitment;
- (b) Roles and responsibilities during use; and,
- (c) Resulting short and long-term consequences of child soldiering.

To address gender variance amongst these factors, several suggestions are put forth, including:

- (1) Data must be more consistently disaggregated by gender;
- (2) Preventive actions need to be more cognisant of why and how children of different genders are recruited; and,
- (3) Response and reintegration interventions must be tailored to context and the specific needs of children of different genders.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article draws on a meta-analysis of incidence data made publicly available through the United Nations Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict between 2015 and 2019.⁸ Recruitment and use of children is one of six grave violations of children's rights in armed conflict that have been tracked by the United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) since 2005.⁹ Although the ability of reported incidents to be representative is constrained by limitations in the MRM data collection, documentation and verification process, they are used here to highlight systemic inconsistencies in data disaggregation in records of grave violations and to underscore the ways in which gender matters when it comes to child soldiering.

7 Government of Canada, *Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers* (2017), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes-pledge-engageons.aspx?lang=eng#pdf.

8 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

9 This monitoring process was established when UN Security Council Resolution 1612 was adopted in 2005.

THE WEIGHT OF WORDS: A PREAMBULATORY NOTE ON KEY TERMS

Any detailed examination of the influence of gender on the recruitment and use of children in conflict must begin by clarifying the use of key terms. First, an appreciation of the heterogeneity amongst ‘children.’ They are newborn, infant, pre-pubescent, or adolescent. They may live with disabilities or chronic illness. They come from various social, political, religious, and economic backgrounds. They reside within a broad range of family and social structures. Children’s individual characteristics intersect and overlap with all-encompassing socio-cultural norms to determine and influence the roles each child is expected to play, the rights they are able to enjoy, and the abuses they bear in times of conflict.

This paper considers ‘gender’ to mean the full spectrum of girls, boys, and children of non-conforming gender expressions and identities. It underscores the unique experience of non-heteronormative children by also referring to ‘diverse sexual orientation, gender expression and identity, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC).’ In line with the Yogyakarta Principles, ‘gender’ is neither understood as a male-female dichotomy, nor synonymous with girls. Children can comprise girls, boys and children who fall outside the gender binary. They can self-identify or be perceived as gay, lesbian, transgender, queer or intersex (LGBTQI).¹⁰ Gender identity is separate from sex, which is typically assigned at birth based on physical characteristics. Because data on child rights violations is only disaggregated by sex – if at all – it is not always possible to step outside of the gender binary in our analysis.¹¹ Nonetheless, reflections on the possible influence of SOGIESC are made on the basis of available – albeit limited – information.

The choice of language in legal and policy documents may also conceal differences. The Paris Principles were intentional in referring to ‘children associated with armed forces or armed groups.’¹² This was done to widen the historical misconception of child soldiers – shifting away from the paradigm of armed boys to encompass the diversity of functions (including combat and non-combat positions) both boys and girls occupy during their association. The Vancouver Principles, in contrast, returns to the term ‘child soldiers.’ To counter potential reductionism, the accompanying Implementation Guidance explicitly states the “...term is used as a shorthand and is interpreted broadly, in accordance with the definition found in the

10 International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), *Yogyakarta Principles - Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity* (March 2007), <https://yogyakartaprinciples.org/>.

11 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

12 UNICEF, *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, United Nations (2007), https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/publications/ParisPrinciples_EN.pdf.

Paris Principles.” It therefore “does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”¹³ This paper uses the term ‘child soldiers’ with the same caveat.

THE GENDER-DRIVEN RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN: DATA AND TRENDS

Data on the recruitment and use of boys

Although trends vary across contexts and throughout the evolution of any given conflict, analysis of MRM data from a gender lens indicates that boys face a higher risk of recruitment and use relative to girls. In some cases, the gender disparity is striking. In Somalia, a staggering 97% of child recruits in 2018 were boys. In 2017, all 727 reported incidents of recruitment and use in Afghanistan comprised solely of boys.¹⁴ Even in northern Nigeria – with the second-highest number of verified cases and where Boko Haram is notorious for its targeting of girls – 82% of all incidents involved boys.¹⁵ In Unity State, South Sudan, a mass recruitment exercise at a cattle market resulted in 150 boys being armed, while no girls were reportedly targeted.¹⁶

Data on the recruitment and use of girls

Deviations from the global norm do exist, and girls are specifically targeted for recruitment and use in certain contexts. A salient historical example is that of Colombia. Between 2011 and 2016, girls made up 30% of children registered and separated from armed groups.¹⁷ On average, the age of recruitment was eight months younger for girls than boys.¹⁸ In Sri Lanka, it was thought that similarly large numbers of girls were linked with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).¹⁹ More recently, the UN in the Philippines confirmed that 37% of the caseload (for which gender was known) were girls.²⁰ Girls have also been found in the ranks of

13 Government of Canada, *Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles*, (2019), <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/vancouver-principles.html>.

14 United Nations, Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, A/72/865-S/2018/465 (16 May 2018), <https://undocs.org/s/2018/465>.

15 United Nations, Annual Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, A/73/907-S/2019/509 (20 June 2019), <https://undocs.org/s/2019/509>.

16 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in South Sudan, S/2018/865 (25 September 2018), <https://undocs.org/S/2018/865>.

17 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Colombia (September 2011-June 2016), S/2016/837, (4 October 2016), <https://undocs.org/s/2016/837>.

18 Ibid.

19 Human Rights Watch, *Living in Fear: Child Soldiers and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka* (2004), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/srilanka1104/2.htm>.

20 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in the Philippines,

the Syrian Democratic Forces, 51 of whom were formally released in early 2020.²¹ In Yemen, at least three dozen adolescent girls served as spies, medics and guards in an all-female force within the Houthi rebel group.²²

Data related to children of diverse SOGIESC

None of the UN Secretary-General's annual reports on children and armed conflict from 2015 to 2020 mention the recruitment and use of children of diverse SOGIESC. Given the dearth of data, it is impossible to ascertain (1) if gender non-conforming and/or non-heteronormative children are being actively recruited, (2) why they may be targeted, (3) what the outcomes would be for them when they are, and (4) how best to prevent their enlistment as well as (5) how to support their release and reintegration in response.

Existing research on children and armed conflict rarely investigates the experience of children of diverse SOGIESC. Human Rights Watch found that gay and bisexual men, boys and transgender women have been subjected to sexual violence within the ranks of the Syrian army.²³ This points to the increased susceptibility of children of diverse SOGIESC in Syria and elsewhere, particularly given the pervasive social stigmatization and varied forms of abuse faced by LGBTQI individuals worldwide.²⁴ In many contexts, these individuals may not be socially acknowledged or legally recognized – and in some countries, they may even be criminalized, further compounding their marginalization.²⁵

Even less is known about children of diverse SOGIESC who are recruited and used. However, the ordeals faced by their adult counterparts have been documented in some countries impacted by war. Testimony of sexual violence – including so-called ‘corrective rape’, torture, forced intelligence gathering, killing, and enforced displacement and disappearances have been documented in conflict zones as varied as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Central African

S/2020/777 (4 August 2020), <https://undocs.org/s/2020/777>.

- 21 United Nations, Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, A/75/203 (20 July 2020), <https://undocs.org/A/75/203>.
- 22 Human Rights Council, *Report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen: Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014*, A/HRC/45/6 (28 September 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/GEE-Yemen/2020-09-09-report.pdf>.
- 23 Human Rights Watch and Helem, “*They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways*” *Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys, and Transgender Women in the Syrian Conflict* (2020), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/08/syria0720_web.pdf.
- 24 UNHCR, *Protecting Persons with Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities: A Global Report on UNHCR’s Efforts to Protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex Asylum-Seekers and Refugees*, (2015), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/566140454.pdf>.
- 25 Ibid.

Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Peru, and Colombia.²⁶ There is evidence that armed groups have also engaged in anti-LGBTQI agitation.²⁷

The same discriminatory gender norms that promote aggressive behaviour by boys and men, and that drive sexual violence against girls and women, denigrates those who identify – or are perceived to be – divergent from binary and heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality.²⁸ The absence of empirical evidence makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the potential vulnerability of children of diverse SOGIESC to recruitment and additional abuses when associated with armed forces or groups.

GENDER NORMS AND HOW THEY IMPACT UPON THE CAUSES, COURSE AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD SOLDIERING

Children's experiences of social norms in times of conflict are influenced, among other things, by heightened insecurity and correlated protection risks, as well as, resource scarcity and economic hardship. All children can be instrumentalized by armed actors because of their gender. The division of labour between boys and girls often mirrors context-specific gender roles and preconceived notions of relative strengths and capacities.²⁹ While roles and responsibilities frequently diverge, there can also be overlap. These norms also dictate the far-reaching secondary harms experienced by children during and after their release and reintegration.

Socio-economic determinants can drive boys to enlist as a means of self-protection and survival. The attitudes and expectations of armed actors, families or communities may pressure boys to engage in the fighting as a means of gaining respect.³⁰ Once recruited, boys are frequently used as armed combatants, as well as for physically laborious, logistical and tactical roles such as porters, patrols and spies. Amongst Mai-Mai militia groups in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, adolescent boys (not adult men) are accorded the responsibility of communal protection.³¹ Boys may rely on substance abuse to withstand the

26 Alon Margalit, "Still a blind spot: The protection of LGBT persons during armed conflict and other situations of violence," *International Review of the Red Cross* 100 (2018), 237-265. [doi:10.1017/S1816383119000201](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383119000201).

27 Ibid.

28 UNHCR, *Protecting Persons with Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities*.

29 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

30 Ibid; Emma de Vise-Lewis, Stefano Schwarz and Bavon Mupenda, *Tug of War: Children in Armed Groups in DRC* (War Child, May 2018), https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13862/pdf/tug-of-war_children_in_armed_groups_in_drc.pdf.

31 Nidhi Kapur, *The Gendered Dimensions of Armed Conflict on Children in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Save the Children, 2021), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/gendered-dimensions-armed-conflict-children-sub-saharan-africa>.

hardships confronted during and between battles. They can be coerced into committing other crimes, including killing, maiming, looting, burning, and raping, sometimes violating even their own family members.³²

Sadly, these roles place boys at risk of possible injury, disease, and death – in addition to arbitrary arrest and detention due to their actual or alleged association with armed forces or groups.³³ Whilst less often talked about, boys do not escape sexual violence during combat.³⁴ Boys are also at increased risk of torture in detention – including of a sexual nature – because of the higher numbers of boys arrested.³⁵ Long-term consequences for boys following detention may involve stigma, physical and mental health issues, displacement, separation from their families, and difficulties with social reintegration.³⁶

For both boys and girls, there are risks of long-term psychosocial distress and mental health issues.³⁷ However, the roles and responsibilities of girls may differ because of prevailing gender norms. Girls frequently fill support and sexual functions – working as cooks, cleaners and sexual slaves. In some instances, girls may seek relations with armed men – or be encouraged by others to do so – in order to meet their own basic needs or that of their family.³⁸ Girls have also been used to incentivize male fighters – men and boys may be promised ‘wives’ as a reward for their battlefield successes.³⁹

Yet the roles of girls are not always fully distinct from those of boys. Girls can also carry arms as spies, frontline fighters, and suicide bombers. Girls in Colombia, for example, were forced to

32 Kapur, *The Gendered Dimensions of Armed Conflict*.

33 United Nations, *Global Study on Children Deprived of Liberty* (2019), <https://omnibook.com/Global-Study-2019>.

34 Human Rights Watch and Helem, “*They Treated Us in Monstrous Ways*”; Chynoweth, Freccero, & Touquet, “Sexual violence against men and boys,” 90 - 94.

35 Hannah Thompson, *A Matter of Life and Death* (Child Protection Working Group and ChildFund, 2015), https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/9462/pdf/a20matter20of20life20or20death_lowres.pdf.

36 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and Human Rights Watch, *Military Detention of Children in Armed Conflict: The Role of Handover Protocols* (2019), <https://watchlist.org/publications/military-detention-of-children-in-armed-conflict>.

37 Theresa S. Betancourt, Katrina Keegan, Jordan Farrar, and Robert T. Brennan, “The intergenerational impact of war on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: lessons from the longitudinal study of war-affected youth in Sierra Leone,” *Conflict and Health*, 14, no. 62, (2020), [doi: 10.1186/s13031-020-00308-7](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-020-00308-7).

38 Emma de Vise-Lewis, Stefano Schwarz and Bavon Mupenda, *Tug of War: Children in Armed Groups in DRC* (War Child, May 2018), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13862/pdf/tug-of-war-children-in-armed-groups-in-drc.pdf>.

39 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

engage in sexual relations with government forces to gather intelligence.⁴⁰ In the Kasai region of Democratic Republic of Congo, girls were thought to possess magical powers rendering them impervious to bullets. Girls as young as four years old were sent to the battlefield – ostensibly as human shields – dressed in magical straw skirts and charms, armed with little more than sticks, brooms, mops and kitchen utensils.⁴¹

Girls in Nigeria have been used as human bombs by Boko Haram. This strategy is predicated on widely held perceptions of women and girls as non-threatening, or as victims rather than perpetrators, allowing female bombers to go undetected. Not only do they arouse less suspicion, female bombers are less likely to be subjected to invasive searches.⁴² Evidence also suggests that girls are allowed to move more freely within the wider community even when associated with an armed actor.⁴³

The specific consequences of child soldiering for girls include exposure to rape and sexual violence; early or unwanted pregnancies, as well as complications during both pregnancy and childbirth. In some cases, girls may opt to remain with their armed force or group, rather than undergo release and reintegration processes.⁴⁴ In many conservative societies impacted by conflict, the likelihood of being a social outcast is greater for girls returning pregnant or with a child born out of marriage.⁴⁵ Children born of conflict-related rape face unique risks. They are reported to be at increased risk of later recruitment into armed forces or groups themselves.⁴⁶ Children fathered by Boko Haram insurgents can face a lifetime of family rejection and social stigmatization.⁴⁷

40 Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, *Colombia's War on Children*, (2004), <http://watchlist.org/wp-content/uploads/WL-Report-Colombia-2004-en.pdf>.

41 Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, “All that I have lost” *Impact of Attacks on Education for Women and Girls in Kasai Central Province, Democratic Republic of Congo* (2019), https://protectingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/documents_drc_kasai_attacks_on_women_and_girls.pdf.

42 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

43 de Vise-Lewis, Schwarz and Mupenda, *Tug of War*.

44 International Alert/UNICEF, “Bad Blood” *Perceptions of children born of conflict-related sexual violence and women and girls associated with Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria* (2017), https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Nigeria_BadBlood_EN_2016.pdf.

45 War Child, *Rethink Child Soldiers: A new approach to the reintegration of all children associated with armed forces and groups* (2019), <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/rethink-child-soldiers-new-approach-reintegration-all-children-associated-armed-forces-and>.

46 António Guterres, *Conflict related sexual violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General, S/2019/280* (29 March 2019), <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/report-s-2019-280/Annual-report-2018.pdf>

47 International Alert/UNICEF, “Bad Blood”.

THE VANCOUVER PRINCIPLES: PURPOSE AND POTENTIAL

At the international level, there have been incredible strides in the global fight for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls everywhere, including in conflict settings. 2020 marked twenty-five years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,⁴⁸ and twenty years since UN Resolution 1325 and the creation of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.⁴⁹

There is a growing understanding of how to protect children in situations of conflict. Graça Machel's 1996 ground-breaking report⁵⁰ inspired the UN General Assembly to recommend the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAAC).⁵¹ Fifteen years ago, the monitoring of grave violations against children began,⁵² solidifying a stand-alone agenda for Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC). The international community started to recognize children engaged in conflict as victims as opposed to perpetrators.⁵³ In 2007, the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups were developed.⁵⁴ These attempted to recognize and redress the historical invisibility of girls from earlier release and reintegration efforts.⁵⁵ Practical approaches to improving gender-sensitivity were outlined in the associated Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards (IDDRS), including recommendations for how to better identify and access girls for the purposes of documentation and subsequent release and reintegration.⁵⁶ The IDDRS has since gone through an iterative process of revisions based on lessons and best practices from the field.⁵⁷

Launched in 2017 by the Government of Canada, the Vancouver Principles go further, combining the WPS and CAAC agendas by setting out commitments to child protection and

48 United Nations, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (September 1995), https://www.un.org/en/events/pastevents/pdfs/Beijing_Declaration_and_Platform_for_Action.pdf.

49 United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1325, S/RES/1325 (2000), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325\(2000\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1325(2000)).

50 Graça Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (1996), <https://undocs.org/A/51/306>.

51 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the general assembly, A/RES/51/77* (20 February 1997), <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/51/77>.

52 United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1612*, S/RES/1612(2005), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1612\(2005\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1612(2005)).

53 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

54 UNICEF, *The Paris Principles*.

55 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

56 United Nations, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (2006), <https://www.unddr.org/>.

57 United Nations, *Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Standards* (2020), <https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-IDDRS-four-products.pdf>.

promoting the visibility of women in peacekeeping.⁵⁸ Importantly, the Vancouver Principles acknowledge the centrality of child protection and the intersectional influence of gender. They note that Member States should account for (1) the “differential impact of conflict on girls and boys” and (2) their “specific needs, including those based on gender, age and other identity factors.”⁵⁹

The full potential of the Vancouver Principles vis-à-vis the question of gender is made clear in its accompanying implementation guidance which proposes the need for gender to be taken into account across planning, training, recruitment, deployment and monitoring.⁶⁰ It explicitly references the unique contribution of women in peacekeeping operations, citing their capacity to “often access populations and venues that are closed to men...” and to “communicate and engage with children differently.”⁶¹ It further suggests that all military, police, and civilian peacekeeping staff should have training on “gender-related aspects of encounters with child soldiers.”⁶²

Disaggregation of data by gender – in addition to age and disability – can help make visible otherwise hidden biases amongst actors responsible for the protection and the monitoring of rights violations of children in situations of armed conflict. The implementation guidance advises Member States to present “deliberate analysis of gender dynamics...to help dispel some persistent myths around child soldiers, such as the lingering misperception that girl child soldiers are not employed in combat roles, or that boy child soldiers do not experience sexual or gender-based violence.”⁶³ They recognize the need for “national planners [to] have a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the situation”⁶⁴ Yet, it stops short of stepping outside of the gender binary.

Key stakeholders – including peacekeeping personnel, armed actors, UN Member States and agencies – must recognize and report on the diversity of children that are subjected to recruitment and use. In contexts where discussing issues relating to SOGIESC may place

58 Government of Canada, *Vancouver Principles*; As of October 2019, a total of 96 countries have endorsed the Vancouver Principles. Government of Canada, The Vancouver Principles, (as of October 1, 2019), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/principles-vancouver-principes.aspx?lang=eng.

59 Government of Canada, *Vancouver Principles*.

60 Government of Canada, *Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles* (2019), <https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/vancouver-principes.html>.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Government of Canada, *Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles* (2019), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/igvp-20190614.pdf>, page 15.

64 Ibid.

staff and/or children's lives at risk, systematic data collection may not be possible. However, capturing anecdotal evidence and using it anonymously to influence policy and practice will enable interventions that are more responsive to the specific needs of non-binary and non-heteronormative children. This would ensure that gender stereotypes are put aside in favour of gender-responsive interventions.

Homogeneity in the staffing of peacekeeping missions the world over can create a narrow field of vision. As acknowledged by the advent of the Murad Code, issues facing girl survivors are harder to report to institutions that are male-dominated and or ill-equipped to appropriately handle the intersectional needs of children.⁶⁵ In the same vein, diversification of the peacekeeping workforce in general – with parallel investments to raise awareness of the inherent heterogeneity of children – can pave the way for important shifts in organizational culture. Norm-setting initiatives can open up the necessary space for boy survivors of sexual violence, as well as, gender non-conforming and/or non-heteronormative children to speak to their self-identified needs during documentation processes and other interactions with peacekeeping personnel.

Not only have the Vancouver Principles secured support from key actors in the international political arena, their endorsement promotes the adoption and domestication of these ways of working into doctrine and training for military and police personnel at the national level. This has the potential to generate a normative shift in national practices, even when personnel are not formally engaged in peacekeeping missions overseas.⁶⁶ Training of staff – those in management, technical, and administrative positions and also those filling military functions within peacekeeping operations – will strengthen both prevention and response actions. General training on gender, safeguarding, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, and psychological first aid would ensure better recognition of the heterogeneity of children, each with unique protection risks and needs. Awareness-raising on the existence of unconscious bias among all personnel supporting efforts to prevent and respond to the needs of conflict-affected children is also essential.

65 Institute for International Criminal Investigations, Nadia's Initiative, UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *Background paper & draft global code of conduct for documenting & investigating conflict-related sexual violence* ("The Murad Code") (June 2020), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eba1018487928493de323e7/v/5efa1554a8553428c9395936/1593447765159/English+Draft-MuradCode%2BBackgroundPaper+June2020+Website.pdf>.

66 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In applying a gender perspective systematically across all aspects of the recruitment and use of children, the Paris Principles already represented an important departure from past efforts. However, the way in which they mainstreamed gender was to highlight the specificity of girls. This was a necessary reflex given the extent to which girls were excluded from previous Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia.⁶⁷ The corollary to this is the risk of obscuring the disproportionate targeting of boys in all settings, the context-specific ways in which girls may be instrumentalized, and the continued discounting of children of diverse SOGIESC.

As the Vancouver Principles begin to move from endorsement to operationalization, it will be important to ensure that the specific needs of boys – including their increased vulnerability to radicalization, recruitment and detention – be considered in the development of tailored prevention and response interventions. Also, interventions must escape stereotypes and address the intersecting realities and needs of diverse children – girls fill roles as combatants; boys experience sexual violence. What is required is an approach that captures the true meaning of gender equality – that is equality for girls and boys, women and men, and children and adults of diverse SOGIESC.

The diversity of what it means to be a child, coupled with socio-cultural and religious norms that are uniquely expressed in each context, leads to a widely divergent range of causes, experiences, and outcomes for children associated with armed forces and groups. Approaches to the prevention and response of recruitment and use must therefore move beyond the binary to capture the full complexity of the context-specific, gendered experience of child soldiers. Actions to protect children from recruitment and use must be grounded in an understanding of all children's distinct and differentiated needs. Implementation would need to be participatory, inclusive, and reflective. The nature of activities would have to be flexible, so that they can be adapted over time as lessons are learnt from implementation and continued consultation with diverse actors.

67 Kapur, *Gender, Age And Conflict*.

Nidhi Kapur is a child protection, gender and inclusion specialist with over twelve years of field-based experience. Motivated by a strong interest in the complexities of protection programming in conflict and post-conflict zones, Nidhi has worked for a number of international organisations including the British Red Cross, Save the Children, and Handicap International. As part of emergency response teams, she has been deployed to various countries including Liberia, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Nidhi has worked on a multitude of issues with and on behalf of children affected by armed conflict. Nidhi studied International Relations at the University of Toronto, and subsequently completed her Masters degree at the London School of Economics. Having lived and worked across the globe, East Africa has been her home since 2008. Nidhi is based full-time in Kigali, Rwanda where she continues her freelance national, regional and international work.

Hannah Thompson has over twenty year's experience supporting child protection, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and education programmes across the globe. She has lived and/or worked in South and Southeast Asia; West, East, Central and North Africa; and the Middle East. Hannah has: supported children associated with armed forces and groups; led case management support for survivors of SGBV; worked with authorities and communities to re-establish and protect schools during conflict; and worked with refugees who are, or identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex to understand their capacities and support needs. Hannah has contributed to and produced numerous flagship reports, publications, and sets of guidance on issues relating to the protection of children. Hannah has a Masters in Anthropology and Development – with a focus on kinship and gender – from the London School of Economics. She currently works out of her home in South West France.

