

# ALLONS-Y

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THEORY INTO ACTION

## MILITARIZATION, VIOLENCE, AND DISPLACEMENT: WAR'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN IN 2018



THE ROMÉO  
DALLAIRE



**CHILD  
SOLDIERS**  
INITIATIVE



**DALHOUSIE  
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Photo by Josh Boyter

# ABOUT THE DALLAIRE INITIATIVE

The Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative was established in 2007 by retired lieutenant-general the honourable Roméo Dallaire, former force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR). Our mission is to progressively eradicate the use of child soldiers through a preventative security sector approach.

To achieve this important objective, the Dallaire Initiative conducts activities on three fronts:

- It conducts world-class interdisciplinary research to build—and share—knowledge, which in turn leads to new solutions;
- It engages in high-level advocacy activities to create and promote the political will to end the use of children as soldiers;
- It delivers tactical, prevention-oriented training to security sector actors, so as to promote broader security sector reform.

In every aspect of its work, the Dallaire Initiative seeks to collaborate with concerned governments, security sector actors, academics, humanitarians and civilian communities. In particular, its unique approach working with soldiers, police, prison personnel and private security operators – many of whom are the first point of contact for child soldiers outside of their armed force or armed group – is both groundbreaking and critical to the interruption of children's recruitment.



*LGen Roméo Dallaire, Rwanda, 1994. Used under permission from the National Speakers Bureau.*

# ABOUT ALLONS-Y

In January 1994, General Dallaire, then the Force Commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), sent a fax to UN headquarters in New York warning of the impending genocide. He signed the fax with the line “peux ce que veux. Allons-y” – “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Let’s go.” At the time, there was not a will among the international community, with lethal results for nearly a million Rwandans.

Since then, General Dallaire has worked tirelessly to ensure that there is both a will and a way to prevent mass atrocities in the future. However, action must be informed by understanding for it to be effective. Each of us has the ability to stand up and contribute to prevention of these crimes and the involvement of children in committing them. *Allons-y* serves as a call to action for young people today to add their talent, perspectives, and experiences to this mission.

*Allons-y* is a series of peer-reviewed papers written by young academics and practitioners, complemented by expert commentary, designed to foster discussion and innovative thinking on issues relating to children in war, terrorism, and violence. This format seeks to leverage the unique viewpoints and contributions of young people working and studying in this field, and magnifies their impact by pairing each piece with the voice of leading experts. This combination firmly situates each piece in praxis, bridging the all-too-frequent gaps between academics and practitioners.

Participants in the Annual Summit of Youth for Human Rights International, 2017.  
UN Photo/Manuel Elias





# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

For this volume of *Allons-y* we asked young authors to write about how armed conflict impacts children in the countries on International Crisis Group's ten conflicts to watch in 2018 list. Much has changed in these conflicts since then, but all continue to do grave harm to children, which we struggle to address in the aftermath. The militarization and abuse of children are often used by autocratic regimes and armed groups to further their aims, and the trauma can have a lasting impact on the children and their societies. The four papers and their accompanying commentary in this volume illustrate these challenges and collectively highlight the importance of prevention.

The authors, all young scholars who are in or have recently completed graduate school, wrote about the ways in which children are ripped from their communities in order to be used for military and political ends in armed conflict, and the difficulties of repairing these harms afterwards, whether in countries affected by armed conflict like the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) or when people flee as refugees to new lands. The first two papers explore how children are weaponized: Peter Steele writes about the North Korean *Songbun* system that militarizes children from birth, and Airianna Murdoch-Fyke writes about the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war targeted at girls in the DRC. Both methods are designed to disrupt a child's connection to their family and community. The last two papers explore the difficulties of addressing the resulting trauma: Arpita Mitra writes about the failures of the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration process in the DRC, and Emily Pelley writes about the difficulties of aiding young refugees exposed to wartime violence when they come to Northern countries such as Canada. Collectively, these papers highlight the need to invest more in prevention of wartime abuses, rather than scrambling to catch-up and repair the damage already done.

While it may be cliché to say that young people are the future, it is also the truth, and it is important for them to have platforms to discuss and present their ideas and contribute to the most pressing challenges facing our world. Whether it is young politicians challenging our complacency on climate change, students fighting for safer schools, young activists towards peace in their countries and around the world, or young scholars such as the authors of this volume, we must turn to and support the younger generations who are invested in making a better world for themselves and all of humanity. In this spirit, *Allons-y* seeks to pair the academic and practical work of young people with the commentary of those who are more experienced in their field to demonstrate how young people can contribute to and create a brighter tomorrow.

*Dustin Johnson, Editor of Allons-y  
Research Officer at the Roméo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative*



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# THE SOLDIERS OF SONGBUN: MILITARIZATION, HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE AND CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES OF NORTH KOREAN YOUTH

By Peter Steele

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## ABSTRACT

North Korea is an enigma. The United Nations (UN) states that it is “...without parallel in the contemporary world ...” in terms of abuse, exploitation and lack of civil rights.<sup>1</sup> No other rogue state commands the attention and mystique as the isolated nation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Despite an increasingly prevalent international front, including warming relations with South Korea<sup>2,3</sup> and the threat of nuclear weapons<sup>4</sup>, everyday citizens

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- 1 Human Rights Watch, “UN: North Korea Exploiting Children”, Geneva: Human Rights Watch, Feb. 8, 2017; para. 9. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/08/un-north-korea-exploiting-children>.
  - 2 Al Jazeera, “North Korea ‘seeks closer South Korea ties, reunification’”, Al Jazeera, Mar. 6, 2018, Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/north-korea-seeks-closer-south-korea-ties-reunification-180306062814201.html>.
  - 3 Y. Seo & L. Smith-Spark, “North, South Korea to hold reunions for families long separated by war”, CNN Asia, Jun 22, 2018, Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/22/asia/koreas-family-reunions-intl/index.html>.
  - 4 E. Stewart, “North Korea is reportedly making more nuclear weapon fuel”, Vox, Jun 30, 2018.

remain hidden. Public displays of Olympic cheerleaders<sup>5</sup> or the admittance of “K-Pop” stars across the Korean Demilitarization Zone (DMZ)<sup>6</sup> distract from the widespread human rights abuses and public indoctrination that is second nature in the country.<sup>7</sup> But this is no surprise; In the DPRK, the leader is above all else. While marginalized groups in other countries may be granted a voice by international organizations, the vulnerable in North Korea are obscured in the shadow of the great leader’s actions.

The life of children in North Korea can take many different forms, but all share a legacy of systematic abuse and manipulation which infringe on the rights of the child.<sup>8</sup> Despite widespread condemnation, the DPRK remains steadfast in its policies of lifelong militarization and marginalization.<sup>9</sup> The lives of this underrepresented population are caught between the innocence of childhood and the complexities of daily life in North Korean society, leaving many children to experience maltreatment.

Through this article, I explore the everyday lives of the nation’s children. With an explicit effort to identify the legacy of abuse and militarization of children in the nation, I analyze how the government ingrains obedience and fear into their young people. The actions of the state directly infringe the rights set out by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC)<sup>10</sup>, which suggests that the international community must act to preserve the right to childhood just as it attempts in other countries. Despite North Korea’s ratification of this agreement<sup>11</sup>, there has been no effort to improve the lives of children or to curb the government-sanctioned abuse which mires the lives of young people in the nation. With this normalization of violence, we must ask how these aspects feed into the dangerous culture of extremism and

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Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/6/30/17520638/north-korea-increased-activity-nuclear-trump>.

- 5 B. Haas, “North Korea’s cheerleaders amaze and appal at the Winter Olympics,” *The Guardian*, Feb. 13, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/13/north-korean-cheerleaders-winter-olympics>.
- 6 Y. Seo, “K-pop stars to perform in North Korea in art troupe visit,” *CNN Asia*, Mar. 20, 2018, Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/20/asia/korea-pop-art-troupe-north-korea-intl/index.html>.
- 7 *Human Rights Watch. Country Summary – North Korea*. New York: Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2017, Retrieved from [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/northkorea\\_2.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/northkorea_2.pdf).
- 8 *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 44/25*, Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Nov. 1989, United Nations, pg. 1-12, Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>.
- 9 *Human Rights Watch*, “UN: North Korea Exploiting Children”.
- 10 *General Assembly Resolution*, CRC, pg. 1-12.
- 11 *Human Rights Watch*, *Human Rights in North Korea: June 2018 Briefing Paper*, New York: Human Rights Watch, Jun. 2017, Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/05/human-rights-north-korea>.

loyalty that debilitates the lives of young people in the nation. Failure to recognize the severity of this situation will result in the continued maltreatment of North Korea's youth, in favour of militarism and fear.

## ON STUDYING NORTH KOREA

Before presenting the experiences of children in North Korea, it is important to contextualize the academic study of this closed nation. Unlike other countries, there is no opportunity to undertake an independent research study. The information collected by visitors to the country is curated by the government, preventing truly objective academic research. To counter this, many authors turn to the testimonies of North Korean refugees and defectors, which share common experiences of tragic state treatment through UN depositions.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, these testimonies can generate bias and complex narratives that waver under the intense scrutiny of the international spotlight.<sup>13</sup> Rather than rejecting defector testimony, researchers must deconstruct the pressure of fulfilling the expectations of eager interviewers, and the influence of the cultural norms of this group to obey authority or cling to survival.<sup>14</sup> Through the limitations of capturing the reality of North Korea, we must instead carefully develop narratives based on common elements of the information that escapes the country.<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, this study of North Korea relies on a mix of defector testimony, official mandates from governing bodies, publications from news outlets, traditional academic literature, and more.

## POLICIES OF THE NORTH KOREAN STATE

In North Korea, the experiences of its youngest citizens vary within huge extremes, stemming from the position of families within society. To understand the DPRK, we must recognize the country's complete dedication to their social structures and leadership. With an emphasis on unwavering obedience, North Koreans celebrate the violent and oppressive institutions which formally define their society. Of note, *Juche* and *Songun* are two policies that keep people devoted to government mandates. *Juche* is the DPRK's institutionalized ideology of self-reliance which has been in place for over five decades.<sup>16</sup> This strategy ties together North Korea's international isolationism with methods to develop unity and national sovereignty, thus encouraging the concentration of power among the elite.<sup>17</sup> In alignment

12 *United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – Public Hearing in Seoul (Unofficial Transcripts). [Multiple Resources].*

13 *OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry, [Multiple Resources].*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Personal communications with Dr. Robert Huish, Office meeting, March 2018.*

16 J. Suh, "Introduction: Making sense of North Korea – Institutionalizing *Juche* at the nexus of Self and Other," *Journal of Korean Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): pg. 3-4.

17 *Ibid*, pg. 10.

with this philosophy, *Songun* relays collectivist action under a “military-first” policy that requires militaristic indoctrination of all citizens regardless of age.<sup>18</sup> These structures help to maintain *songbun*, which is the state-sanctioned classification strategy of social hierarchy that – intersecting with gender, disability and political discrimination – defines the permanent social standing of North Korean citizens from birth.<sup>19</sup> The interaction of these three policies have undue influence on the lives of all children in the country, as early experiences of social categorization and militarization prepare them for acquiescence with the structures of the Workers’ Party of Korea.

Ultimately, these ideological pillars define the experiences of young people in North Korea. With an unwavering constitution of support for the leader, there are no attempts within these structures to safeguard childhood experience. The familial relationships that dominate the lives of young children in much of the world are lost here. Defectors have commented that they do not even know their own parents birthdays but have elaborate celebrations dedicated to the Kim family.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, there are testimonies of defectors in political prison camps who would willingly give up their own family members upon hearing of escape attempts, but actively shared the little food they had with military guards – who represent the authority and power of the state.<sup>21</sup> These efforts to eliminate individuality and freedom directly defy Articles 12 through 16 of the CRC<sup>22</sup>, through a fundamental effort to control the experiences of young people. This blatant abuse remains unchecked at the international stage and comes at the consequence of the most vulnerable. The erasure of the common experiences of children is profound, and it is necessary to recognize how these fundamental shifts, which happen so early in life, come to define youth in the nation.

## EDUCATION, MILITARIZATION & THE EXPECTATIONS OF YOUTH

The indoctrination and militarization process of North Korean children begins formally through education. At nursery schools, children sing nationalistic anthems while holding toy machine guns and watch cartoons featuring anthropomorphized representations of the military fighting others representing the Americans and Japanese.<sup>23</sup> Children’s literature is

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18 J. Woo, “*Songun politics and the political weakness of the military in North Korea: an institutional account*,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 4 (2016): pg. 253-254.

19 *United Nations General Assembly*, Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, A/HRC/25/63 (Feb. 7, 2014); pg. 8.

20 *United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR)*, Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – Public Hearing in Seoul – Afternoon Session, Aug. 20, 2013, Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiry-onHRinDPRK.aspx>.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *General Assembly Resolution*, CRC, pg. 4-5.

23 J. Makinen, “*At a North Korean nursery school, tots get an early education in weaponry*,” Los

filled with Soviet influence and a celebration of technology to defeat American imperialism.<sup>24</sup> In kindergarten, five-year-olds are taught to believe that the state is heaven on earth.<sup>25</sup> This ideological training, to control children's impressions of the state, directly violates *CRC* articles dedicated to education and freedom of expression.<sup>26</sup>

While North Korean education maintains a familiar curriculum of language, math, and literature, the content of these classes is aligned with ideological training.<sup>27</sup> Even within these universal subjects, all teachings prescribe to Kim Il-sung's 1977 thesis on socialist education, which emphasizes the role of politics in teaching to develop revolutionary spirit.<sup>28</sup> For example, children in kindergarten read ideological children's books ripe with anti-American messages, while math problems in higher grades discuss military action and the killing of Japanese spies.<sup>29</sup> For the few schools that maintain foreign language classes, students are taught to say phrases such as "long live great leader generalissimo Kim Il-sung" before simple greetings.<sup>30</sup> These methods reflect the priority of indoctrination and support for the state within education.

Beyond these familiar classes, students are required to learn "socialist ethics" and the historical legacy of the DPRK state.<sup>31</sup> Through these courses, children are taught to model themselves on the successes of the state, with great attention paid to memorization and understanding of *Juche* principals, the evil nature of "liberalism", and the notion of placing the collective before oneself.<sup>32</sup> Efforts to encourage obedience and support are fundamental in the curriculum and result in an unrivalled effort to mainstream militarization within formal teaching.

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Angeles Times, May 4, 2016: para. 10-14. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-nursery-school-20160504-snap-htmstory.html>.

24 D. Zur, "Let's Go to the Moon: Science fiction in the North Korean children's magazine *Adong Munhak*, 1956-1965," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 2 (2014): pg. 327-334.

25 C. Byung-Ho, "Living Dangerously in two worlds: The risks and tactics of North Korean refugee children in China," *Korea Journal* 43, no. 3 (2003): pg. 192.

26 *General Assembly Resolution, CRC*, pg. 1-12.

27 F. Tertitskiy, "Life in North Korea – The early years," *The Guardian (UK)*, Dec. 21, 2015: para. 3. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/21/life-in-north-korea-the-early-years>.

28 P. French, "A day in the life of Pyongyang – how North Korea's capital goes to work," *The Guardian (UK)*, May 2, 2014: para. 2. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/02/north-korea-a-day-in-the-life-pyongyang>.

29 A. Fifield, "North Korea begins brainwashing children in cult of the Kims as early as kindergarten." *The Washington Post*, Jan. 16, 2015: sect. 2. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/for-north-koreas-kims-its-never-too-soon-to-start-brainwashing/2015/01/15/a23871c6-9a67-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/for-north-koreas-kims-its-never-too-soon-to-start-brainwashing/2015/01/15/a23871c6-9a67-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html).

30 Tertitskiy, "Life in North Korea," para. 3.

31 *Ibid*, para. 3.

32 Byung-Ho, "Living Dangerously in two worlds," pg. 192.

As student's progress through the education system, these teachings translate into practical measures. This includes children in secondary school (between the ages of 10 and 16) participating in annual trips to perform agricultural labour, and working on local labour projects to raise funds for their school.<sup>33</sup> During these month-long trips, students work 12 to 14 hour days.<sup>34</sup>

Despite having claimed to end child labour over 70 years ago, the state still requires students to participate in a variety of forced labour projects in paramilitary brigades, known as *dolgyeokdae*, which includes extended working hours and corporal punishment.<sup>35</sup> Construction projects, including the breaking down of rocks<sup>36</sup>, which yield buildings, statues, roads and railroads<sup>37</sup>, and provide no financial or professional benefit to the students. Teenagers work on construction projects through the day and night with little safety equipment, all with the purpose of demonstrating loyalty to the supreme leader.<sup>38</sup> Earning less than \$1 a day<sup>39</sup>, this is simply a further methodology to suppress and indoctrinate youth with collectivist notions of support for the Kim regime.<sup>40</sup> Protection from economic exploitation, access to leisure and low standards of living are also guaranteed within the CRC<sup>41</sup>, and the DPRK has fundamentally failed these principles.



**Despite having claimed to end child labour over 70 years ago, the state still requires students to participate in a variety of forced labour projects in paramilitary brigades.**

Outside the classroom, the efforts of indoctrination remain strong through extracurricular activities. Just as *dolgyeokdae* represents a formal avenue for schools to enforce collective labour,

33 *Human Rights Watch*, Country Summary, pg. 4.

34 M. Oppenheim, "What it's like to be a teenager in North Korea," *The Independent (UK)*, Sept. 9, 2016: para. 5. Retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/north-korea-independence-day-dating-love-sex-drinking-video-games-and-being-gay-in-north-korea-life-a7233526.html>.

35 *Human Rights Watch*, "UN: North Korea Exploiting Children", para. 2.

36 R. Pinnington, "Brutal life of North Korea children: Propaganda in schools and forced to watch executions," *Express (UK)*, Nov. 4, 2017, para. 4. Retrieved from <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/875134/North-Korea-child-labour-abuse-Kim-Jong-un-Human-Rights-Watch>.

37 *Human Rights Watch*, "UN: North Korea Exploiting Children", para. 6.

38 *Open North Korea*, Contemporary form of Slavery, Dolgyeokdae in North Korea, (n.d.): pg. 1-2. Retrieved from [http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/PRK/INT\\_CRC\\_NGO\\_PRK\\_26561\\_E.pdf](http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CRC/Shared%20Documents/PRK/INT_CRC_NGO_PRK_26561_E.pdf).

39 S. Boroweic, "North Koreans perform \$975 million worth of forced labor each year," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 6, 2016: para. 6-8. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-north-korea-forced-labor-20161006-snap-story.html>.

40 French, "A day in the life of Pyongyang," para. 2.

41 *General Assembly Resolution*, CRC, pg. 1-12.



there are many other institutions in which North Korean children are forced to participate in. For children aged of 7 to 13, there is mandatory participation in the state-sponsored Korean Children's Union<sup>42</sup>, which furthers the opportunities for indoctrination and enforcing the collective militarization of the population. In their oath of allegiance, which occurs during the admission ceremony, they proclaim their support for the regime with the following:

*I join the ranks of the Korean Children's Union, founded by the Great Leader Generalissimo Kim Il-sung and shined upon by the Great Guide Commander Kim Jong-il, do hereby swear to always and everywhere think and act according to the teaching of the [Kim regime] and to become a good reservist of the brilliant cause of constriction of Communism, which is carried along from generation to generation by the great revolutionary deed of Juche.*<sup>43</sup>

This militarized proclamation, recited by thousands of North Korean children each year, demonstrates the purpose of such a children's union: providing emphasis on ideological training. When children age out of this program, they join groups such as the Socialist Youth League (for ages 14-30)<sup>44</sup>, which encourages the practices of *Juche* and state participation through formal education sessions.<sup>45</sup> In both settings, youth participate in group criticizing sessions, where students attack one another's dedication to the mission of the state.<sup>46</sup> Under the guise of a social organization, these criticizing sessions encourage students to act towards rectification and place blame on others for not participating in communist structures.<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, these brain-washing practices influence the children of North Korea in the most fundamental of ways. There is no opportunity for any personal freedom, as North Korean children have training and education that is rooted in revolutionary ideology.<sup>48</sup> These efforts provide a specific emphasis for the state to enforce mutual distrust for other students, loyalty to the state, a fear of the outside world, experiences in labour and military organization, and a hatred of North Korea's "enemies." Through education, the regime strips away the innocence of

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42 Human Rights Watch, "UN: North Korea Exploiting Children".

43 Tertitskiy, "Life in North Korea," para. 3.

44 Human Rights Watch, "UN: North Korea Exploiting Children".

45 Oppenheim, "What it's like to be a teenager in North Korea," para. 2.

46 United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – Public Hearing in Seoul – Morning Session, Aug. 21, 2013, pg. 47. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>.

47 United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – Public Hearing in Seoul – Morning Session, Aug. 22, 2013, pg. 16. Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>.

48 *Ibid*, pg. 19.

childhood in favour of normalized violence and militarism. Even the constitution references the importance of this education, as to enforce “socialist” pedagogy and influence the next generation to fight.<sup>49</sup> Education is a fundamental tactic of the state to assert control, which is in contravention of Articles 18 through 20 of the *CRC*.<sup>50</sup> Beyond this, the abuse that is prescribed in school settings offers irreparable damage and a fundamental betrayal of the right to childhood. The normalized violence (physical and structural) in these settings defies any suggestion of protecting young people in the country from injustice.

## POVERTY, SOCIAL STATUS AND ABUSE

Outside of Pyongyang, the proficiency of education is hindered by widespread poverty. For example, in 1998 it was reported that, although a quarter of students (representing the elite) attended all classes, an additional quarter had no access to food during lunch, while the remaining half could only attend morning classes or could not attend at all.<sup>51</sup> As *songbun* classifications often defines a citizen’s life, the children of elites receive disproportionate access to the best schools and social programs.<sup>52</sup> While one might assume this alleviates indoctrination for lower caste, this lack of opportunity often forces children into positions of exploitation by other means. Although *dolgyeokdae* is a practice which most school participate in, for children of lower classes, it represents a singular opportunity for post-secondary education, as families are unable to pay fees.<sup>53</sup> Children of low *songbun* status often end up doing forced labour as part of military brigades for up to 10 years without pay, building public infrastructure to further the “socialist” mission of the DPRK.<sup>54</sup>

Children of lower status are further marginalized through the isolationist policies of the state. Children often end up independent at an early age.<sup>55</sup> In the countryside, the early lives of children are often categorized with malnourishment and cold, as food security and power are very limited. The state assumes responsibility for early child care through the Public Distribution System (PDS), which is intended to provide foodstuffs and medical support.<sup>56,57</sup>

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49 *International Constitutional Law Project*, North Korean Constitution, articles 43-45. Retrieved from [http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/kn00000\\_.html](http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/kn00000_.html).

50 *General Assembly Resolution*, *CRC*, pg. 5-6.

51 *Byung-Ho*, “Living Dangerously in two worlds,” pg. 193.

52 *Human Rights Watch*, *Country Summary*, pg. 2.

53 *Human Rights Watch*, “UN: North Korea Exploiting Children”.

54 *Ibid*, para. 6-7.

55 *Byung-Ho*, “Living Dangerously in two worlds,” pg. 191.

56 *Ibid*, pg. 193.

57 *Tertitskiy*, “Life in North Korea,” para. 2.

However, this dysfunctional system often fails to provide for marginalized groups.<sup>58</sup> Documented experiences include fathers encouraging children to steal from well-off neighbours, participation in the black market, and even foraging in the mountains for sustenance.<sup>59</sup> With widespread reports of the malnutrition of North Korea children, which includes some 37% who are stunted during development and an additional 23% who are underweight<sup>60</sup>, youth often suffer from skin diseases and delayed puberty due to poor nutritional diets.<sup>61</sup> Protein deficiency, respiratory problems, and diarrhea are rampant in times of crisis.<sup>62,63</sup>

Orphans are a particularly marginalized group within North Korea. As family units are challenged by the widespread poverty in the country, leading to abandonment<sup>64</sup> and children leaving their families to alleviate burden<sup>65</sup>, there is a large contingent of young people without support. Contrary to the togetherness of militarized practices, these children are left to fend for themselves in the street, begging for food or resorting to wild vegetation like grasses, and sleeping next to transformers to stay warm in the punishing winter.<sup>66</sup> For children who end up in orphanages, domestic abuse and deadly disease is common.<sup>67</sup> During the height of famine in the 1990s, children in orphanages were left without support. Defectors recount tales of subsisting on lice and corn kernels from cow feces<sup>68</sup>, while another claimed 24 of the 75 children in their orphanage had died from malnutrition.<sup>69</sup> Homelessness among

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58 J. Katona-Apta, A. Mokdad, "Malnutrition of Children in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea," *Community & International Nutrition* 128 (1998): pg. 1315-1317.

59 J. H. J. Han, "Beyond Safe Haven: A critique of Christian custody of North Korean migrant in China," *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 4 (2013): pg. 551-552.

60 R. Margesson, E. Chanlett-Avery, A. Bruno, "North Korean refugees in China and Human Rights issues: International response and US policy options." Congressional Research Service (Sept. 26, 2007): pg. 7.

61 Byung-Ho, "Living Dangerously in two worlds," pg. 203.

62 J. Katona-Apta, A. Mokdad, "Malnutrition of Children in the DPRK," pg. 1317.

63 D. Sagolji, "Damir Sagolji: North Korea [Photo Series]," Reuters, Feb. 10, 2012, Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/damir-sagolji-north-korea-idUSRTR2XLL4>.

64 M. Park, "Orphaned and homeless: Surviving North Korea," CNN (USA), May 14, 2013, para. 1. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2013/05/13/world/asia/north-korea-orphans/>.

65 Byung-Ho, "Living Dangerously in two worlds," pg. 200.

66 Park, "Orphaned and homeless: Surviving North Korea," para. 1-2.

67 E. Shim, "North Korea defector: Children ate lice to stay full," United Press International, Nov. 22, 2017, para. 3-4. Retrieved from <https://www.upi.com/North-Korea-defector-Children-ate-lice-to-stay-full/7661511370351/>.

68 *Ibid*, para 1-2.

69 P. Walker, "North Korea: 'You are brainwashed from the time you know how to talk'," *The Guardian* (UK), Feb. 17, 2014: para. 11. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/17/north-korea-human-rights-abuses-stories-un-brainwashed>.

children is so widespread in North Korea that they have adopted the name *Kotjebi*. This term, which translates to mean “fluttering swallow”<sup>70</sup>, represents groups of 12- to 18-year old street children.<sup>71</sup> Often concentrated near the Chinese border, these street children are motivated by money, opportunity, access to medicine, lost family members, and adventure to dart back and forth between the DPRK and China.<sup>72</sup> Children often engage in local industry, beg, and steal to earn enough money for basic necessities that are out of each in their home nation.<sup>73</sup> These young people face a constant threat of being caught by North Korean officials and have no legal standing to access Chinese services.<sup>74</sup> These conflicted children feel guilt for abandoning their country, while simultaneously experiencing a vagrant and rebellious lifestyle unimaginable in the DPRK.<sup>75</sup>

For children that are caught, the inevitable destination for betraying their country is a prison camp. The children in these institutions are often sentenced in relation to a family member’s crime or generational punishment, which results in children being born into camps.<sup>76</sup> This means, regardless of age, children are subject to the human rights abuses that occur within the camps.<sup>77</sup> Physical abuse, forced labour, menial chores and sexual abuse are documented within camp settings<sup>78,79</sup>, all of which are covered by the CRC.<sup>80</sup> Young guards, who are groomed for torture due to a strong ideological background<sup>81</sup>, are rewarded with higher education, denoting the militarized hierarchy within political camps.<sup>82</sup> Although children have access to education, the tenets of *Juche* are less dominant in favour of lifestyles that emphasize hard labour.<sup>83</sup> For prisoners themselves, the ideologies of *Juche* are taught but remain secondary to

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70 S. McPhee, “Kotjebi: North Korean children in China,” *Asian Affairs* 45, no. 3 (2014): pg. 486.

71 Byung-Ho, “Living Dangerously in two worlds,” pg. 199.

72 McPhee, “Kotjebi: North Korean children in China,” pg. 486.

73 Byung-Ho, “Living Dangerously in two worlds,” pg. 199-200.

74 McPhee, “Kotjebi: North Korean children in China,” pg. 488.

75 Byung-Ho, “Living Dangerously in two worlds,” pg. 207-208.

76 Pinnington, “Brutal life of North Korea children”, para. 2-3.

77 Human Rights Watch, Country Summary, pg. 3-4.

78 Pinnington, “Brutal life of North Korea children”, para. 3.

79 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Afternoon, Aug. 20, 2013, pg. 8-9.

80 General Assembly Resolution, CRC, pg. 1-12.

81 United Nations Human Rights Council (OHCHR), Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea – Public Hearing in Seoul – Afternoon Session, Aug. 21, 2013, pg. 22, Retrieved from <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx>.

82 *Ibid*, pg. 3-19.

83 *Ibid*, pg. 8.

survival tactics.<sup>84,85</sup> The constant threat of being placed in these unfortunate circumstances also contributes to the militarized and collectivist actions of young civilian populations.<sup>86</sup>

Although these latter comments on the daily lives of marginalized children in North Korea are pointed towards human rights abuse, it is important to recognize how this institutionalized maltreatment helps to maintain North Korean society. Defectors who endured political camps have described apathy towards *Juche* as a wider principle, but the maintenance of allegiance to the leadership is harder to shake.<sup>87</sup> Ultimately, these experiences of abuse present a terrifying reality for the DPRK's youngest citizens, and further reflect a harmful culture of State self-reliance and placing the collective first. These children are not to blame for the maintenance of this system, as the indoctrination process offers no alternative. However, it is relevant to reflect upon these experiences as part of the systematic abuse towards children that extends beyond propaganda and militarization. With countless articles of the CRC being disregarded, including those referencing child health and welfare<sup>88</sup>, there is ample opportunity for the international community to respond. As the experiences of these children are an unthinkable tragedy, the regime directly benefits from fear and control.

## CONCLUSION

Even in our globalized world, North Korea is absolute in its ideological stance. Children grow up in a society that clearly defines what they will be able to say and do, and conversely defines the consequences for failing to prescribe to the unavoidable indoctrination. The experiences of children in North Korea are desperate. Whether considering young adults forced to be part of labour organizations<sup>89</sup>, or orphan children on the Chinese border left to fend for themselves<sup>90</sup>, there is no lack of tragedy within this case study. On the topic of militarization and government suppression, the lives of the DPRK's youngest citizens are dominated with explicit attempts to indoctrinate and control them. On the surface, North Korean children are not so different: they watch cartoons, they go to school, they socialize and celebrate birthdays. The difference is in the way their government forces these actions into their lives. The colourful cartoons present anti-foreigner and pro-military propaganda.<sup>91,92</sup> Education presents an intersection

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84 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Afternoon, Aug. 20, 2013, pg. 33.

85 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Morning, Aug. 21, 2013, pg. 10.

86 *Ibid*, pg. 40.

87 *Ibid*, pg. 10

88 *General Assembly Resolution, CRC*, pg. 1-12.

89 *Open North Korea*, Contemporary form of Slavery, pg. 1-2.

90 McPhee, "Kotjebi: North Korean children in China," pg. 486.

91 C. Richardson, "'Still quite fun to read': An introduction to North Korean children's literature," Sino-NK, Sept. 7, 2013: para. 3.

92 Makinen, "At a North Korean nurse school", para. 7-9.

between access a militarized curriculum, and the inequalities of the *songbun* structure.<sup>93</sup> Socializing is relegated to high-stakes criticizing sessions with the Socialist Youth League.<sup>94</sup> The celebration of birthdays is exclusive to that of the Kim family.<sup>95</sup>



**On the topic of militarization and government suppression, the lives of the DPRK's youngest citizens are dominated with explicit attempts to indoctrinate and control them.**

These experiences cannot go unrecognized. Although North Korea remains isolated and unstable, the children within its borders are subject to unimaginable trauma. Discussions of reunification present a forum for change but cannot be at the expense of these young victims of such extreme political ideologies. With the acknowledgement that the Kim regime has deliberately disregarded the CRC<sup>96</sup>, it is necessary to commit additional resources to the plight of children in North Korea. The CRC notes that it is the responsibility of other ratified countries to enforce these rights<sup>97</sup>, meaning that leaving the actions of North Korea unchecked results in the systematic failure of victims of abuse. Although some research demonstrates their situation, the isolated nature of the country often leaves formal academic investigation unsuitable. As such, groups like Human Rights Watch and the UN have provoked combative responses through inquiries and depositions, but more tangible efforts are needed. Efforts to respond to North Korea cannot be solely rooted within fear of nuclear war – not while *Juche* and *songbun* continues to exploit the innocence of children.

Thankfully, cracks have begun to show in the North Korean exterior: the restrictive practices of the state are being challenged by American and South Korean media.<sup>98,99</sup> Although they can be publicly executed for the possession of such materials, the increasing need for freedom has galvanized young people to seek a brighter future. *Kotjebi* do not point to famine or desperation as justification for their illicit journey into China, but rather the want for better opportunity.<sup>100</sup>

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93 Human Rights Watch, Country Summary.

94 Human Rights Watch, “UN: North Korea Exploiting Children”, para. 4.

95 French, “A day in the life of Pyongyang,” para. 7.

96 General Assembly Resolution, CRC, pg. 12-15.

97 *Ibid*, pg. 12-13.

98 Oppenheim, “What it’s like to be a teenager in North Korea,” para. 3.

99 J. Jones, “A digital escape from North Korea’s secret state: Kim Jong-un faces threat from undercover films posted on the web,” The Independent (UK), Nov. 10, 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/a-digital-escape-from-north-koreas-secret-state-kim-jong-un-faces-threat-from-undercover-films-8931494.html>.

100 McPhee, “Kotjebi: North Korean children in China,” pg. 489.

With little concept of the outside world<sup>101</sup>, it might be assumed that the unwavering obedience is absolute. However, discontent and apathy towards this ideological upbringing is inevitable with the extreme scarcities that exist within the state.<sup>102</sup> It would be wrong to suggest that North Korean children are not subject to extreme mind training<sup>103</sup>, but it would be equally unjust to suggest that youth in the nation are irreconcilably corrupted. Childhood wonder remains within North Korea, even as the articles of the *CRC* are betrayed by the state.

In pre-schools across the world, children play with toys and watch cartoons. North Korean children do these things as well – after all, children share many common experiences. But children should never have to experience the constant threat of war, arduous military exercise, severe malnutrition, physical and emotional abuse, and harmful ideologies. With a greater effort to understand the complexities of the North Korean situation, as well as efforts to bring human rights and glimpses of the outside world into the country, the plight of children can be addressed. Approaching its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the *CRC* offers important requirements to maintain the dignity and rights of childhood.<sup>104</sup> These rights have been defied by the North Korean state. As a result, the international community must respond and offer tangible efforts to curb the maltreatment of young people in the nation. Advocacy and a demand for information is an important first step, but ultimately, to protect the fundamental rights of these young people, there must be greater involvement in preserving their right to childhood.

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101 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Afternoon, Aug. 20, 2013, pg. 46.

102 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Morning, Aug. 21, 2013, pg. 10.

103 OHCHR, Commission of Inquiry – Morning, Aug. 22, 2013, pg. 52.

104 General Assembly Resolution, *CRC*, pg. 1-12.



*The Juche Tower in Pyongyang.  
Photo by Uwe Brodrecht, used under CC BY-SA 2.0*



# COMMENTARY: “WE MUST BE READY FOR REVENGE”: THE REAL VALUE OF CHILDHOOD IN NORTH KOREA

By Robert Huish

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The Korean Children’s Union is not designed to nurture nor to inspire its members through friendship, camaraderie, or duty. It is meant to belittle, to intimidate, and to instill the belief that the supreme leader is all powerful. It rigorously instructs children that to be an individual is meaningless. No child is unique. Each one is just like the other. Replaceable, disposable, and ultimately? Worthless.

Based on the testimony of numerous defectors, we know that North Korean children are told by the government to love the supreme leader more than their own parents. Mom and dad may be responsible for them day to day, but ultimately it is the leader who provides for them in every way. Sound cultish? It is.

Juche, or “self reliance”, is North Korea’s official ideology meant to drive the nation towards true socialism. It is a deranged and maniacal cult of personality that convinces people not to think for themselves, but to think through the leader.

It begins with nursery rhymes. There are two distinct kinds. The first gives fawning praise and boisterous credence to Kim Il Sung, the eternal leader of North Korea, along with his direct descendants Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un. The second set of children's songs are chalked full of lyrics about killing "Japanese dogs" and dismembering "American bastards". Children are told that those who question the leader, or those who show dissent, are "mushrooms that grow in human shit". In their earliest days of song and speech, North Korean children learn to worship one man, prepare for revenge against the country's enemies, and all through a barrage of intimidation and vulgarity.

This is the experience for the "elite class" – those lucky enough to live in the relative comfort of Pyongyang. For those deemed "wavering" or "hostile" by the DPRK's *Songbun* caste system, a feudal system categorizing the population based on political loyalty, the living conditions worsen, while the psychological abuse intensifies. While still forced to show audacious affection to the Dear Leader, teachers and police remind children in the wavering class that their only value in life will be service to the leader through tiring work.

For those deemed "hostile", childhood turns to horror. Food is minimal, and malnutrition rampant. Stories emerge of feral children near the Chinese border who, abandoned by their parents, live a roaming existence in packs in search of food and warmth. One child was found crossing the Chinese border in the middle of winter with terrible burns to his bare feet. Trying to stay warm, he knocked over a kerosene lamp that ignited his shoes.

In political prisons, protein is so scarce that rats and lizards are highly regarded commodities. In the political labour camps North Korean children can be born into captivity. Defector testimony presented to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights Abuses in North Korea include stories of male and female political prisoners, some with no previous relations, be forced into conjugal visits while in captivity. If a child comes of this, that child will live a life starved, and physically worked to absolute exhaustion. The *Songbun* system demands three generations of punishment for those hostile to the regime. Children born into North Korean prison camps are often there for the political crimes of their parents or grandparents.

Since the tightening of sanctions against the Kim Regime in 2017, North Korea has embarked on a feel-good campaign of diplomacy. Kim Jong smiles and shakes hands with leaders from South Korea, China, Russia, the United States, and he has even invited Pope Francis to visit.

Peter Steele's article reminds us that far from the photogenic summits, papal invitations, and the high-level diplomacy remains a horrifying reality for children in North Korea. Steele writes, "the life of children in North Korea can take many different forms, but all share a legacy of systematic abuse...which infringe the rights of the child".

The key word here is “systemic”. North Korea raises generation after generation through a cult of personality that goes beyond violating UN conventions and international edicts. North Korea robs its own children of humanity. It is not done by accident, or by consequence of a catastrophic event. Dehumanizing compatriots, including children, is a carefully scripted North Korean policy. Bureaucrats engineer it, soldiers implement it, and Kim Jong Un repeats it with impunity.

It is almost assumed that every nation has genuine concern for the well-being of its children. Steele’s article shines a much needed light on the everyday horrors of North Korea, and the absurdity of *Songbun*. It illuminates just how obscene it is for Washington, Seoul, Beijing and Moscow to want to dismantle ballistic weapons systems in the DPRK, while remaining mute on Mr. Kim’s astounding abuses to human security.

By all rights childhood in North Korea is a governed experience to weaponize youth through conformity, intimidation and degradation. It is all to keep a cult of personality in power. If the international community is serious about peace in the Korean peninsula, The Korean Children’s Union, and other tenets of the *Songbun* system, must be dismantled just like any other weapons system.

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The UN Human Rights Council discusses sexual and gender-based violence in the DRC.  
UN Photo/Jean-Marc Ferré



# RAPE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO: A GENDERED APPROACH TO THE PROLIFERATION OF SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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Content warning: this paper includes some explicit details of sexual violence.

## ABSTRACT

Gendered and sexualized violence are serious issues plaguing the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Sexualized violence promotes patriarchal control over populations and leads to the debasing of women and girls in afflicted regions. Sexualized violence and rape are committed to ethnically cleanse regions, assert patriarchal dominance, and incite fear in affected areas. The utilization of rape serves as an effective tool to force girls into a submissive victimized role and taint the ethnic composition of future populations through forced pregnancies. The proliferation of rape has serious connotations for victims and for communities. Rape damages the social cohesion of regions and forces victims to become social pariahs. Sexualized violence creates long-term psychosocial impairments which limit

the victim's ability to reintegrate into society successfully, and further damages the sense of self that girls, under the age of eighteen, are beginning to develop at the time of their attack. Furthermore, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) disrupts future economic capabilities of afflicted children which leads to a continuation of poverty and sexual violence. Finally, violent acts of rape and subsequent torture experienced by many children in the DRC have significant physical impacts which produce lifelong physical impediments for victims. In order to address such gendered atrocities this paper asserts a developmental framework must be applied in order to promote sustainable development within the region. This initiative must include the simultaneous implementation of the following four pillars: gender equality, education, healthcare, and responsible governance. While it will be challenging to successfully implement all four pillars during such high incidence of conflict, it is a necessary step that must be taken to permanently address the ongoing violence and the subsequent impact this conflict has on children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

## INTRODUCTION

In this article the term sexualized violence will be characterized by the definition created by the World Health Organization WHO) which states:

*sexual violence encompasses acts that range from verbal harassment to forced penetration, and an array of types of coercion, from social pressure and intimidation to physical force. Sexual violence includes but is not limited to: rape within marriage, systematic rape, sexual slavery and other forms of violence, which are particularly common in armed conflicts, and customary forms of sexual violence such as forced marriage or cohabitation.*<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, throughout this article rape will be characterized as the act of sexual intercourse that results from the desire to control, dominate, and assert power and fear within the victim and the community in which they reside. Additionally, this paper will utilize the framework of rape developed by Scott Anderson, who states, "rape can be understood to involve coercion for purposes of sexual gratification from another or causing her sexual humiliation or degradation."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, rape will be considered as a gendered crime, since it is almost always perpetrated by men against women, with damaging effects both on individual women as well as on women as a group.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in this article the term gender is utilized and will refer to

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1 "Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women," World Health Organization, accessed April 10, 2018, [http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO\\_RHR\\_12.37\\_eng.pdf;jsessionid=21CA70885B65A6DD975646CC11F5AEAF?sequence=1](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77434/WHO_RHR_12.37_eng.pdf;jsessionid=21CA70885B65A6DD975646CC11F5AEAF?sequence=1).

2 Scott Allen Anderson, "Conceptualizing Rape as Coerced Sex," SSRN Electronic Journal, (September 2015): 6.

3 Anderson, "Conceptualizing Rape as Coerced Sex," 6.

the definition employed by the WHO, which states gender is a set of, “socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as normal roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men.”<sup>4</sup>

## CONTEXT OF GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN THE DRC

Rape, sexualized violence, and gender discrimination are facets of every patriarchal society. Rape is utilized to portray dominance over another, sexualized violence is promoted as a tool to degrade, dehumanize, and damage women, and gendered discrimination is employed to systematically ensure women and girls are unequal, unwanted, and unprivileged due to their gender identity. Rape is a weapon employed by militias, militaries, and police personnel in conflicts around the world. It is an effective way to systematically harm individuals and entire communities without putting the aggressor in an overtly dangerous situation. Women and girls in the DRC play a very submissive role in society and typically conform to traditional gender roles of male dominance and subsequent female subordination. Women and girls are valued for their reproductive capabilities and their sexual purity. Females in the DRC are direct victims of gender inequalities at all levels, leading to significant gaps in social, economic, and cultural capabilities.

In her article, *Explaining Sexual Violence and Gender Inequalities in the DRC*, Jane Freedman (2011) asserted that women are mainly concentrated in the informal and agricultural sectors of the economy, which leads to exploitation and a negation of economic decision making capabilities.<sup>5</sup> Freedman also postulates there are significant gender inequalities in relation to the poverty line with 61.15% of female headed households living below the poverty line, compared to 54.32% of male-headed households.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Freedman argues there are also large gender discrepancies in the DRC in terms of access to medical treatment, education, and due process in the criminal justice system.<sup>7</sup> Such gender disparities further the patriarchal tendencies of the region and promote the suppression of women and girls. These traditional gender roles encourage females to be subordinate fixtures in a male dominated society and hinder the progression of gender equality and the liberation of women and girls from such bigotry.

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4 “Gender, Equity and Human Rights,” World Health Organization, accessed May 12, 2018, <http://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/understanding/gender-definition/en/>

5 Jane Freedman, “Explaining Sexual Violence and Gender Inequalities in the DRC,” *Peace Review*, 23:2, (2011):170-175.

6 Freedman, “Explaining Sexual Violence,” 172.

7 Freedman, “Explaining Sexual Violence,” 173.

In a report published by the United Nations, the DRC was labelled the worst place in the world to be a woman and with good justification.<sup>8</sup> In their article, *Rape with Extreme Violence: The New Pathology in Eastern DR Congo*, Denis Mukwege and Cathy Nangini (2009) assert on average 1,100 reported rapes occur each month in the DRC.<sup>9</sup> These sexual attacks forced researchers to create a new category of rape due to their sadistic qualities: rape with extreme violence. Mukwege states the effectiveness of rape relies on, “the perception, deeply embedded in patriarchal societies, that women’s sexuality is a prefecture of male ownership, and is linked to the persistence of unequal gender relations and particularly to the way women’s bodies are regarded”.<sup>10</sup> The patriarchal inclinations of the region and the presence of intense conflict has led to the utilization of four different types of rape by aggressors. The first type of rape is gang rape, which is usually carried out by three or more men. This type of rape leads to more incidences of injury as it is quite violent.<sup>11</sup> The second type of rape is genital mutilation, in which the perpetrators will rape their victim and then mutilate her genitals with guns, glass, or heated metals. One report stated that a young girl was gang raped publicly in the region, and after the initial attack the aggressors poured acid into her vagina while she remained bound.<sup>12</sup> The third type of rape documented occurs when rape is utilized as a biological weapon through the intentional transference of sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>13</sup> Many customary beliefs in the DRC assert girls who are still virgins are less likely to be HIV positive, or in certain circumstances can cure a man infected with HIV.<sup>14</sup> Thus younger females have an increased risk of being raped by males infected with HIV. According to data released by UNAIDS, as of 2016 there are 48,000 children aged 0-14 living with HIV in the DRC. Moreover, an estimated 210,000 women aged 15 and over are living with HIV. When comparing this to the number of males aged 15 and over, 110,000, the propagation of rape becomes quite evident.<sup>15</sup> These statistics illustrate the grave reality of the intentional transference of HIV/AIDS and the significant impact such transmissions have on children living in the DRC. The fourth documented type of rape happens when victims are forced

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- 8 Yolanda Sadie. “Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” *African Security Review* 24 (4) (2015): 450–57.
- 9 Denis Mukwege and Cathy Nangini. “Rape with Extreme Violence: The New Pathology in Eastern DR Congo.” *PLoS Medicine* (6): (2009): 1–5.
- 10 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.
- 11 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.
- 12 Shelly Whitman. “Sexual Violence, Coltan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.” In *Natural Resources and Social Conflict: Towards Critical Environmental Security*, edited by Matthew A. Schnurr and Larry A. Swatuk, (2012): 128–51.
- 13 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.
- 14 Whitman, “Sexual Violence,” 140.
- 15 “Democratic Republic of the Congo,” UNAIDS, last modified May 22, 2018, <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/democraticrepublicofthecongo>.



to rape each other.<sup>16</sup> In her article, *Rape and Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Banwell (2012) asserts approximately 70% of documented rapes were premeditated with a specific focus to “terrorize, loot, rape and then leave”.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, in an article published by Nelson et al. (2011) girls living in rural areas reported a “relatively higher proportion of gang rape (35.5%), sexual slavery (35.4%), or combined gang rape and sexual slavery, (47.4%), and a lower proportion of rape [committed by a single assailant]” when compared to their urban counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Bartels et al. (2012) reported more than 60% of all sexual attacks reported in their region of study were incidences of gang rape with the use of extreme violence committed by militia and government military officials.<sup>19</sup> Mukwege and Nangini found 57.3% of females interviewed believed that the extreme violence executed during their rape was proof that armed forces were intentionally attempting to exterminate Congolese people and communities to which these women belonged.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, 72% of rape victims reported that they were tortured during the rape itself, which included having foreign objects inserted into their vagina including sticks, pestles coated in chili pepper, and rifle barrels. These victims asserted these rapes were aimed at destroying the women’s identity by means of ethnic cleansing and the intentional transmission of HIV/AIDS was an attempt to destroy entire communities, and the generations to come.<sup>21</sup>

In the DRC these three strategies; rape, sexualized violence, and gender discrimination; are repeatedly used by rebel and local government forces to purposefully harm children, specifically girls, in the region. According to a report released by Save the Children, it is estimated that approximately 30-40% of all children in armed groups were girls and virtually all girl soldiers have endured at least one type of the aforementioned rapes.<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting this statistic does not include the female victims not directly involved in armed conflict. It is estimated nearly half of all the victims of sexual gender-based violence are girls less than 18 years of age.<sup>23</sup> Young girls are typical targets of rebel and government forces for violent

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16 Stacy Banwell. “Rape and Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Case Study of Gender-Based Violence,” *Journal of Gender Studies* (2012): 45–58.

17 Banwell, “Rape and Sexual Violence,” 49.

18 Brett Nelson et al. “Impact of Sexual Violence on Children in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*, (2011): 211–25.

19 Susan Bartels et al. “Militarized Sexual Violence in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, (2012): 340–58.

20 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.

21 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.

22 “Reaching the Girls. Study on Girls Associated with Armed Forces and Groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo.” Save the Children, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/reaching-girls-study-girls-associated-armed-forces-and-groups-democratic-republic-congo>.

23 Brett Nelson “Impact of Sexual Violence,” 212.

rape since they are easily captured and culturally trained to submit to dominant male figures. Therefore, the historical trend of rape in war coupled with prevalent patriarchal tendencies has led to a proliferation of widespread rape and male dominated violence directed at girls in the DRC.



**In the DRC these three strategies; rape, sexualized violence, and gender discrimination; are repeatedly used by rebel and local government forces to purposefully harm children, specifically girls, in the region.**

## SOCIAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL

The utilization of rape against girls in the DRC has significant social and psychosocial impacts for girls afflicted by such egregious attacks, and for communities. The dominance of patriarchal beliefs and attitudes in the DRC coupled with intense stigmatization of such violence has serious psychosocial repercussions for victims and alters the way in which she is able to operate within her community. Victims of rape tend to be rejected by their families and ostracized from their communities due to the patriarchal tendencies in the region and the valuation of a girl's virginity.<sup>24</sup> In his book, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children*, Romeo Dallaire (2010) asserts the level of stigma raped girls face is immense. Dallaire observed that because of the fear of being stigmatized, many girls attempt to self-demobilize and try to hide the fact they were raped. However, this rarely works as they find it difficult to reconnect to their pre-recruitment past.<sup>25</sup> This attempt to hide their attack leaves these girls unable to receive any emotional support and limits access to medical care to address their vaginal lesions, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), or any other treatment they require. Additionally, the difficulty girls have with reintegration due to the emotional and physical traumas they endured forces many to move from the community in which they were raised and live in solitude. This type of segregation and lack of protection puts these girls at a greater risk of reoccurring episodes of sexual attacks by militia forces. These ostracized girls typically become involved in the sex trade or become addicted to substances to cope with the trauma of their attack.<sup>26</sup>

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24 Jennifer Scott et al. "A Qualitative Analysis of Psychosocial Outcomes among Women with Sexual Violence-Related Pregnancies in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo." *International Journal of Mental Health Systems* (2017): 2–10.

25 Romeo Dallaire and Jessica Dee. Humphreys, *They Fight Like Soldiers, They Die Like Children the Global Quest to Eradicate the Use of Child Soldiers*. (Toronto: Random House, 2010), 176.

26 Graça Machel, "International Conference on War-Affected Children," *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: a Critical Review of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children*, (2001):1–49.

In a study published by Fuadd Freh (2016), he asserts that the presence of war has severely affected generations of children and youth, physically and psychologically for the rest of their lives. An important aspect of childhood is being raised in a safe and protective environment; however, girls victimized by gendered and sexualized violence are unable to experience such a familial dynamic. According to Freh, it is estimated that one third of children living in a war zone are vulnerable to developing some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), psychopathological symptoms, and lower psychosocial function during their life time, which points to the volatile and violent environment in which they are living.<sup>27</sup> The psychological consequences of experiencing conflict and the traumas associated with sexual violation therefore greatly impacts the social capabilities and psychosocial capacities of girls.

Moreover, the deeply rooted social constructs surrounding rape and the preconceived notions about gendered roles in society has an enormous impact on the ability of girls to reintegrate into society after a sexual attack. Stacy Banwell asserts women are disproportionately disadvantaged economically and socially in the DRC due to strong beliefs that women are of a lower status than men, which places them at a higher risk to be exposed to gender discrimination and sexual victimization during an armed conflict.<sup>28</sup> In particular, it is increasingly challenging for girls who became pregnant or gave birth as a result of their attack to reintegrate into their community. Scott et al (2017) stated girls and women impregnated as a result of their rape face significant emotional distresses as a result of being rejected from their community. These individuals also anticipated they would lose social stability and a decline in future social opportunities due to their attack.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Dallaire asserts girls who became pregnant as a result of their attack are unable to attend school or receive training. The presence of an infant draws attention to their rape and further stigmatizes the victim.<sup>30</sup> Girls who were sexually attacked and face unwanted pregnancy and children do not find adequate means in which to rebuild their lives within the normal construct of the social structure.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, there is a lot of shame associated with the pregnancy and a great deal of fear. According to Trenholm et al. (2013) communities are not receptive to girls returning to their village, especially with children of rebel forces, because they fear retaliation by the armed forces that took her.<sup>32</sup> These social constructs and the psychological implications of these stigmas makes it difficult for girls victimized by sexual violence to reintegrate into society or access services to assist in their

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27 Fuaad Mohammed Freh, "Psychological Effects of War and Violence on Children," *Journal of Psychological Abnormalities*, (2016):1-2.

28 Banwell, "Rape and Sexual Violence," 51-52.

29 Jennifer Scott et al. "A Qualitative Analysis of Psychosocial Outcomes," 5.

30 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 176.

31 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 176.

32 Jill Trenholm, "Constructing Soldiers from Boys in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo," *Men and Masculinities*, (2013):203-27.

physical and emotional recovery. Therefore, ostracizing rape victims increases the impacts of sexual violence and creates a violent environment for young children.

Furthermore, girls taken as child soldiers face serious obstacles during their reintegration attempts because their societal value was negated during their attack. According to Romeo Dallaire, “young girls in such conflict zones become victims of two dehumanizing tragedies: being forced into the life of a child soldier and horrific sexual violence such as rape.”<sup>33</sup> Dallaire asserts that although boys face similar psychological and physical challenges it is easier for males to assimilate back into society because they can acquire new skills through education and training. However, for girls it is harder because she is viewed as having lost her purpose at the heart of the community. She no longer has the same marriage value and her children are considered non-persons. An ex-girl soldier knows if and when she returns to her village she will be seen as a disgrace to her family and her community even if she wasn’t to blame for what happened to her.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, the social-cultural conceptions surrounding the rights of girls form significant barriers to their release from armed forces and reintegration efforts. Many cultural conceptions assert that a girl must remain with her first sexual partner, even if that partnership was the result of rape. According to a report released by Save the Children, military officials view young girls as a possession and not as children, thus asserting the captured girls are their ‘wives’ and not ‘child soldiers’ the latter of which they are obligated to demobilize.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, there is a strong belief among communities that females must be submissive to their partner, which makes demobilizing these young girl soldiers an issue and creates a problem for rape victims since many girls are forced to stay with their rapist.<sup>36</sup> Devaluation and dehumanization lead girls to remain with their rapists or rebel captors for security and survival. Roméo Dallaire argues the repeated acts of brutalized rape serves the sexual desires of those controlling the girls but he notes the most “insidious purpose is to undermine and alienate the child, making her a creature of the armed group. This form of torture also stigmatizes girls, especially within their cultural milieu, and makes it exceedingly hard for them to ever go home again.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, patriarchal conceptions about the role of girls and women within male dominated societies tend to exacerbate violent situation and leads to more severe consequences for afflicted children.

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33 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 176.

34 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 176-77.

35 *Save the Children*, “*Reaching the Girls*.”

36 Brett Nelson “*Impact of Sexual Violence*,” 220.

37 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 134.

The societal impact of sexualized violence and the consequences for children involved in conflict are far reaching and stem from deeply rooted political motivations and patriarchal suppression tactics. According to Sara Meger (2011) rebel forces utilize sexualized and gendered violence for societal gains. This has negative social impacts on afflicted individuals, especially young girls. Rebel forces use rape and sexual violence to divide communities and implant fear within individuals.<sup>38</sup> Through the employment of sexual violence against girls, rebels effectively fragment the societal functioning of communities. Ruth Seifert asserts the women are what hold communities and family structures together, “their physical and emotional destruction aims at destroying social and cultural stability. In many cultures the female body embodies the nation as a whole. The rape of women of a community, culture, or nation can be regarded as a symbolic rape of the body of that community.”<sup>39</sup> Not only does sexual violence demoralize victims, it also leads to a demoralization of the community from which she originated. Meger asserts, “Sexual violence [is] effective in demoralizing and undermining the solidarity of the victimized community and is therefore an effective weapon of dispersal used by armed groups to gain control over an area containing a valuable resource and exploit the resource privilege.”<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, due to the severity of rape with extreme violence and the long-term individualistic repercussions, there is a higher degree of destructive consequences for the social cohesion of communities. When rape occurs in public the victim’s identity is damaged more because of the abundant shame and public humiliation associated with rape. Not only is sexual violence devastating to the individual, it also affects the community as a whole, because the long-term repercussions of rape are translated into a slow decline in the population due to the victim’s inability or unwillingness to conceive children.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, Mukwege asserts that on a micro community-based level, rape with extreme violence greatly damages “social cohesion and the identity of the rape survivor, which is exacerbated when rape is committed in public, searing shame into the collective memory of the community. The long-term outcomes translate into the slow death of a population incapable of reproducing.”<sup>42</sup> Moreover, on a macro community level Mukwege argues “the impact of military rape on the population as a whole has far-reaching effects that ultimately undermine national, political, and cultural solidarity; it confuses the loyalties of all survivors and the

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38 Sara Meger, “Rape in Contemporary Warfare: The Role of Globalization in Wartime Sexual Violence,” *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* (2011):100–132.

39 Seifert, R., “The Second Front: The Logic of Sexual Violence in Wars,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, (1996): 35.

40 Meger, “Rape in Contemporary Warfare,” 113.

41 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence,” 2.

42 Mukwege, “Rape with Extreme Violence” 2.

identities of subsequent generations.<sup>43</sup> Finally, Banwell postulates because women are a vital component to the core of communities when adolescent girls are raped it is regarded as an attack on the entire community.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, patriarchal tendencies and cultural conceptions surrounding traditional gender roles play a pivotal role in societal reintegration attempts and the significant level of stigma associated with rape creates an unforgiving and volatile community for children to be raised.

## ECONOMIC

Children in conflict zones face numerous economic consequences which impact their productivity in society. The proliferation of rape and sexualized violence in the DRC also significantly influences the economic capabilities of its victims and the communities in which they reside. Many girls are unable to receive a formal education, which decreases their economic capabilities. This denial of education is caused by their experiences with sexualized violence and unequal gender relations within the region. Finally, due to the psychological, psychosocial, and physical impairments that occurred because of their attack, girls have a decreased productivity level making them uncompetitive candidates in the economy.

It is necessary to begin this section by addressing the role economic gain plays in the DRC's current conflict and the connection between economic objectives and sexual violence. The abundance of natural resources has played a pivotal role in the recurrent conflict and is partially to blame for the high prevalence of sexual violence. Séverine Autesserre in her book, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*, asserted the illegal exploitation of minerals and other natural resources in the Congo is a central motivation for the prevalence of violence committed by regional and national actors.<sup>45</sup> Autesserre highlights that the involvement of regional and national actors produced violence in three ways: first both actors competed for control of mining regions; second, illegal exploitation of resources allowed armed groups to fund their combat efforts; third, all groups involved used extreme forms of violence against civilians, which included murder, rape, and torture, to gain control over the area or the ability to exploit the area.<sup>46</sup>

The instability created by conflict over resources and the lack of a legitimate government allowed rebels to further exploit the resources and gain control over important mining areas. Thus, this level of violence has become "an intrinsic part of the political economy of resource exploitation because it provides competing groups with a cover and power necessary to extract

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43 Mukwege, "Rape with Extreme Violence," 2.

44 Banwell, "Rape and Sexual Violence," 52.

45 Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 65.

46 Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo*, 65.

the valuable commodities.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, Meger asserts sexual violence is utilized by rebels and government officials because it “reinforces norms of hegemonic masculinity and exploits core social themes of honour, shame, family, and identity, has proven an effective method of maintaining a generalized state of violence and terror under the cloak of which armed groups are free to pursue their economic agendas.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, the economic roots of this conflict, which has subsequently promoted sexualized violence in the region, has led to severe economic impacts, such as lack of education, lack of employment, and decreased economic capacity for those afflicted and has led to a further perpetuation of patriarchal tendencies and a promotion of sexualized violence directed at women and children.



**The instability created by conflict over resources and the lack of a legitimate government allowed rebels to further exploit the resources and gain control over important mining areas.**

Children raised in conflict zones are less likely to receive an education due to increased levels of violence and instability within the region. Due to prominent gender discrimination girls are less likely to receive any formal education compared to boys of the same age in the same region. One reason for this gender imbalance is the active recruitment of child soldiers and child brides from school zones. In a report published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Office (UNESCO), it was asserted rebel groups systematically target schools and abduct children on their way to school to serve as child soldiers. This methodical recruitment of children likely decreases the incentive of many individuals to receive an education and also implants apprehension about placing children into the school system in fear they will be abducted.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, schools are reportedly ransacked by police and rebels and are occupied by both sides, which not only displaces the children who were supposed to be there but damages the school itself.<sup>50</sup>

It was estimated in 2010 15% of girls aged 15 years had no formal education, compared to 10% of boys of the same age. Moreover, in 2010 girls between 13-17 years of age who lived in a war-affected area only received on average 2 years of education, compared to the 3 years of education received by boys in the same age group and region.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, the female literacy rate, when compared to boys, was also quite devastating. In 2008, only 40% of girls

47 Meger, “Rape in Contemporary Warfare,” 113.

48 Meger, “Rape in Contemporary Warfare,” 113.

49 “The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education” United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization, accessed May 12, 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190743e.pdf&p=DevEx,5069.1>.

50 UNESCO, “The Hidden Crisis.”

51 UNESCO, “The Hidden Crisis.”

aged 15 years were literate, compared to 70% for boys in the same age group and region.<sup>52</sup> This data signals a sharp gender inequality in education and also demonstrates how conflict impacts the economic capabilities of girls because this lack of educational attainment adds to the poverty levels experienced in the region and perpetuates the present conflict. Many girls do not attend school because they fear being abducted and raped and others do not receive an education because of patriarchal conceptions about gender roles. Additionally, those who escaped their captors are shunned from their communities and thus are unable to return to school. It was reported girls are faced with additional challenges to education such as early marriage, household chores, rape, poverty, and the prioritization of male education over female. Moreover, according to a report for UNIFOR's Social Justice Fund, nearly half of all women in the Eastern part of the DRC are illiterate and only 28% of girls are enrolled in

secondary school, which is a sharp difference compared to the 51% of boys.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, it is evident that girls victimized by sexual violence and experience incidents of extreme rape are less likely to receive an education because of stigmas associated with their rape and fears of abduction while attending school leaving them with a decreased economic capability.

Furthermore, direct involvement in conflict has significant economic impacts on children. In her book, *The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment*, Julie McBride (2014) asserts children who had their perspectives and moral values changed by their experiences during conflict are more likely to have a difficult time readjusting to life after conflict subsides, they are generally not in a position to make an economic contribution to their community and turn to drug abuse and criminal activity, and in the case of young girls, prostitution.<sup>54</sup> The economic impact of such conflict has direct implications for children and communities in which they reside and are made more severe when sexualized violence occurs. According to an article published by Rebecca Loya (2014), *Rape as an Economic Crime*, sexual violence impacts a victim's economic well-being in a number of ways, which reduces an individual's earning power and impacts their economic wellbeing for months or years after the assault. Loya also found these economic consequences and loss of employment opportunities ultimately shift the victim's long-term economic trajectories.<sup>55</sup> Loya argued the presence of sexual assault creates high economic expenditures for the individual and society as a whole.<sup>56</sup> Due to the stigmatization of rape

52 UNESCO, "The Hidden Crisis."

53 "Democratic Republic of Congo: Redefining Gender Roles for women, building opportunities" UNIFOR Social Justice Fund, accessed April 10, 2018, <https://www.unifor.org/sites/default/files/attachments/sjf-casestudy-congowomen-en-v1.0.pdf>

54 Julie McBride, *The War Crime of Child Soldier Recruitment*. (The Hague, The Netherlands: Asser Press, 2014).

55 Rebecca M Loya, "Rape as an Economic Crime." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2014): 2793–2813.

56 Loya, "Rape as an Economic Crime," 2795.



and sexual violence this economic impact has not been accurately measured in the DRC. The prevalence of mental health problems after an attack also negatively impacts a victim's economic well-being. Rape victims experience high levels of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, all of which negatively affect not only the economic well-being of the individual but puts a large strain on the economy of the community as a whole.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the presence of such high levels of gender and sexualized violence directed at girls damages the individualistic economic abilities and injures the economic capabilities of communities. Therefore, girls are impacted economically by sexual attacks because such incidents leave girls with lower educational attainment, decreased competitiveness in the economy, and an increased chance of reoccurring sexual assaults.

## PHYSICAL

The physical impacts conflict has on children are horrendous. Children in the DRC are faced with deadly situations and girls especially are being raped, beaten, tortured, captured, murdered, and infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. In her article, *Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood*, Myriam Denov (2007) asserts "the violence and victimization experienced by girls ranged along a continuum from verbal abuse to outrageous acts of cruelty and reflected the patriarchal power relation and gendered oppression inherent in the armed group."<sup>58</sup> These acts of cruelty are carried out as a systematic attack on an entire gender group. Girls are impacted significantly by conflict due to the use of sexualized violence directed at women. Denov argued girls attempt to negotiate with their commanders, using their bodies in exchange for hygiene products or food, or taking a husband to escape the more severe forms of abuse.<sup>59</sup>

Additionally, Dallaire asserted "rape is inevitable for the girls and sometimes for the boys. A resilient child soon learns that it is better to endear herself to one soldier with the gun and the power to protect her, than to be a communal sex object."<sup>60</sup> Due to the powerful male dominant structure of armed forces girls become property of males, with their bodies being used as resources to be exploited and even as gifts or rewards. Girls in each of the contexts were thus constantly aware of the potential threat and danger of sexual violence by their adult commanders and other males within the armed groups.<sup>61</sup>

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57 Loya, "Rape as an Economic Crime," 2796.

58 Denov, Myriam, "Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood," Canadian International Development Agency, (2015): 1-36.

59 Denov. "Girls in Fighting Forces," 11.

60 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 133.

61 Denov. "Girls in Fighting Forces," 14.

This type of sexual exploitation leads to a proliferation of physical health problems among young girls. Denov postulates girls experience a multitude of gynecological problems as a result of rape, which include genital injury, infections, complications from forced and consensual abortions, complications due to childbirth, and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>62</sup> Dallaire further illustrates the physical impact such acts of extreme rape have on child victims. Dallaire asserts that many child sex slaves have contracted STIs and/or HIV/AIDS as a result of their repeated sexual attacks. He highlights that because of the unsanitary and dangerous conditions in which many girls are forced to give birth, many are even afflicted with fistula, which causes so much irreparable damage that many girls are unable to give birth again.<sup>63</sup>

Sexualized violence also occurs outside the confines of armed groups and is perpetuated in communities as well, whether by rebels, government officials, or community members. The presence of conflict makes it extremely difficult for girls to seek justice or access proper healthcare or counselling. In her article, *Sexualized Violence, Coltan and the Democratic Republic of Congo*, Shelly Whitman asserts that FARDC, the government army, is the single largest perpetrator of sexualized violence against girls.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Whitman argued that age is not a factor when it comes to victims of sexual violence, as 65% of sexual violence victims during 2008 were children, of which 10% were under the age of 10. Additionally, between January 2010 and July 2010, 66 girls under the age of three were admitted to a single hospital for issues relating to sexual violence.<sup>65</sup> Men target girls for a multitude of reasons, each of which has severe impacts on the physical health of females. Through the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, the utilization of brutal torture techniques, and the long-lasting physical traumas associated with such heinous acts, the proliferation of rape against children has severely impacted their physical health.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN A CONFLICT ZONE

In order to address the aforementioned issues of sexual and gendered violence, a sustainable development approach must be taken in the DRC. This approach should focus on the promotion of education, healthcare, security and good governance, and, most importantly, gender equality. Through simultaneous implementation of all four pillars there can be a growth in the legitimate economic capabilities of the region and an increase in the level of educational attainment which will also foster economic advancement.

Firstly, through the promotion of gender equality and educational programs which tackle the stigmas associated with rape, girls who were sexually attacked could access essential

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62 Denov. "Girls in Fighting Forces," 20.

63 Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*, 177.

64 Whitman. "Sexual Violence," 139.

65 Whitman. "Sexual Violence," 149.

services more readily, reducing the impact sexual violence has on children and communities. Furthermore, with an increase in the accessibility of public education equally available to both boys and girls there can be an increase in the level of educational attainment and thus a decrease in unequal gender dynamics as they relate to education. It has been demonstrated that an individual in a developing country who has a completed primary education will receive, on average, a wage 143% higher than an individual with no education.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, if an individual has successfully completed secondary education they will receive a wage that is 216% higher than an individual who has been denied an education.<sup>67</sup> Without education, there is no hope for individuals to escape from poverty. In his book *Common Wealth*, Jeffery Sachs (2008) argued education enables individuals to acquire skills with which to navigate the economy, both locally and globally.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, in order for education to be utilized by all, accessible programming needs to be implemented which aims to eliminate gender discrimination in the delivery of education to children.



**Therefore, in order for education to be utilized by all, accessible programming needs to be implemented which aims to eliminate gender discrimination in the delivery of education to children.**

Through healthcare promotion and medical training for local individuals, rape victims could be treated more easily and diseases associated with rape would not be as widespread throughout the region. Moreover, the ability to access medical treatment must also be addressed. There must be an increase in the availability of medical treatment for the general population of the DRC as well as specialized treatment for victims of sexualized violence. In his book *Economic Growth*, David Weil (2013) illustrates a parallel between health and income. He highlights the severe disparities between the ‘developed’ and the ‘developing’ in terms of access to healthcare. Weil argues, “among the rich countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), there are an average of 2.2 doctors per thousand people; in the developing world, the average is .8; and in sub-Saharan Africa, the average is only .3.”<sup>69</sup> Therefore, a large emphasis needs to be placed on the promotion of healthcare in order to raise human capital, income per capita, and societal welfare. This access to healthcare must be equally available to both females and males to recognize gender equality through the provision of health services.

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66 David Weil, *Economic Growth*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2013), 154.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Jeffrey Sachs, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

69 Weil, *Economic Growth*, 154.

Furthermore, the promotion of gender equality which weaves into each pillar must be addressed separately as well. Gender inequality can lead to decreased levels of welfare and income depending on how extreme the discrimination is. Naila Kabeer (2005) asserts gender inequality is often perpetuated by the presence of decreased welfare,

*Poverty and disempowerment generally go hand in hand because of an inability to meet one's basic needs – and the resulting dependence on powerful others to do so – rules out the capacity for meaningful choice. This absence of choice is likely to affect women and men differently, because gender-related inequalities often intensify the effects of poverty.*<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, Kabeer argued access to equal opportunity and access to resources also play a central role in poverty reduction. Without gender equality there is often an unequal distribution of resources, which exacerbates issues of poverty. Kabeer asserts that such unequal dispersal leaves males in a privileged position and gives them the ability to control the rules and conventions which are forced upon women.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, through the promotion of gender equality there can be a decrease in the level of poverty prevalent because women can have equal access to resources and decision-making platforms. They can become empowered and have independent choice over their futures. Women can also acquire proper education, healthcare, and access to the labour market, all of which will benefit the entirety of society. There can be a decrease in infant mortality, maternal mortality, and a more sustainable level of population growth because women will be able to receive education on healthy reproductive patterns.

Finally, in order to provide citizens with adequate social services, the governmental faction must be able to organize itself in an efficient, non-corrupt manner, and be able to engage in healthy international relationships. In their book, *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012) argued many nations fail due to the political and economic institutions implemented in the state. Acemoglu and Robinson asserted that political institutions which utilize extractive measures tend to also have extractive economic institutions which lead to the enrichment of a few and the devaluation of many. They argued, “those who benefit from extractive institutions thus have the resources to build their (private) armies and mercenaries, to buy their judges, and to rig their elections in order to remain in power.”<sup>72</sup> Acemoglu and Robinson further assert the economic features of a state also largely contribute to the long run viability of the state. The extractive economic institutions often allow the practice of extractive

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70 Naila Kabeer, “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Goal 1,” *Gender & Development*, (2005): 13-24.

71 Kabeer. “Gender Equality,” 15.

72 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, (New York: Crown, 2012) 343.

political institutions to continue. The desire for unchecked power and civilian suppression allows such institutions to prevail and brings along with it the pillaging of national economic riches.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, in order to have a stable government able to provide beneficial social expenditures, there must be extensive checks on power, and a focus away from extractive political and economic decisions. Thus, with the implementation of legitimate government branches, not only can the perpetrators of egregious sexual attacks be tried, the rule of law can be established in the DRC. While such a plan will be difficult to implement in such a violent failed state, with the assistance of international organizations already present, along with the United Nations and international governing and security bodies, such a strategy can be implemented at a local level throughout the region.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gendered and sexualized violence are utilized as weapons of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo in a systematic attempt to destabilize the region. The use of violence has serious impacts on children, especially girls, in conflict zones and causes long term social and psychosocial, economic, and physical consequences for victims. This type of organized violence will prevail until the root issues of the conflict are addressed. Sustainable development needs to occur at a local level through the promotion of education, healthcare, good governance, security and policing, and, most importantly, gender equality. These pillars must be implemented into this failed state if there is any hope of sparing future generations from the turmoil and treachery of sexualized violence and mass systematic ethnic rape.

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73 Acemoglu. *Why Nations Fail*, 343.



*MONUSCO peacekeepers on patrol in the DRC.  
UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti*

# COMMENTARY: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND ADDRESSING SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE DRC

By Eileen Alma

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In the last two years, ethnically motivated sexual and gender-based violence rose in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a country marked with ethnic-based tensions and conflict over the control of its extractive industries over decades. According to the 2018 Report of the United Nations Secretary General to the United Nations, sexualized violence cases emerged and spread in several provinces in 2017 with at least 804 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in this period, affecting 507 women, 265 girls, 30 men and 2 boys.<sup>1</sup> Despite progress by the international community actors to end these abhorrent practices, this marks a significant increase from the previous year and the delay in national elections has exacerbated conflict. Both non-state actors and state actors are identified perpetrators of sexual violence, including the Congolese National Police.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. *Report of the Secretary General on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence*. 16 April 2018. <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/report/s-2018-250/SG-REPORT-2017-CRSV-SPREAD.pdf> pp 16-17.

Airianna Murdoch-Fyke's article provides an important overview on the gendered use of rape as a weapon of war in the DRC, noting in particular that the vast majority of these crimes are perpetrated by men against women and girls, and its prevalence in rural settings. The author elaborates on the long-term socio-economic impacts not only for the victims but also on the social fabric of kinship groups, communities and the nation as a whole. While noting the challenges of its implementation in conflict zones, the author offers a sustainable development approach to addressing sexual and gender-based violence, noting the pillars of gender equality, education, healthcare, and security and governance as being cornerstones for alleviating such impacts.

The four types of rape – researched and identified by the author as organized with other extreme forms of violence – including mutilation, infection and ultimately death – go well beyond a reinforcement of patriarchal notions of men's domination and women's submission to male ownership. Such acts of extreme violence are on the one hand, acknowledgement by perpetrators that women, objectified, hold high social and economic value and thus they have desire to render them destroyed and valueless to their "owners". At the same time, they highlight an understanding of the importance sexual and gender based roles occupied by women in kinship ties and the irreparable harm they can do to matrilineal and patrilineal lines, kinship power, economic status and relationships. The author notes that the high rates of rape in the DRC indicate attempts at community division, destruction of social cohesion, or ethnic cleansing, conclusions which are affirmed by research with victims themselves.

From the perspective of the individual, the author notes the devastating consequences of rape and extreme violence on women and children's physical, mental and social wellbeing, which calls into question how a sustainable development approach can adequately respond. For example, the notion of individual resilience – the ability to adapt in the face of adversity – is pushed here to the extreme, such as with the case of a child learning to align with one rapist to avoid a gang. Moreover, the lack of conflict resolution and the social stigma of rape means that victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence not only live with the consequences of violence for the rest of their lives, they must also do so in the midst of their oppressors. It is in this respect that promotion of gender justice and poverty eradication – utilizing the pillars noted by the author – must be accompanied by the discontinuation of impunity for perpetrators of violence against women in times of conflict or otherwise. While there has been progress in the country to convict perpetrators, the reparations that are necessary for a shift from victimhood to survivor rehabilitation, have not been so forthcoming.<sup>2</sup>

In the article, the author's development approach focuses in large part on the delivery of services intended to support rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of sexual violence, including

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2 *ibid.*



child soldiers. This includes aspects that contribute to survivors' ability to meaningfully take part in economic activities and address the wide range of physical and mental health problems that hold them back. The author also focuses on educational aspects that contribute to poverty alleviation, and address stigmatization of victims. At the same time, strategies that address existing cultural and social norms holding back development and contributing to the protracted nature of conflict dynamics must also accompany these sustainable development approaches. Efforts to address the norms and negative behaviours of those in power, especially of those in armed and security forces, are essential.

International pressure must continue to ensure that economic players in the extractive industries, whether formal or informal, are held to account. Finally and most importantly, the number of women meaningfully engaged in formal decision-making roles must be increased to ensure that their needs and those of children are being taken into consideration. Supporting women's organizations on the ground is one of the best ways to help move these important recommendations for sustainable development from rhetoric to reality and ensure the accountability of both state and non-state actors in the process.

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*UN Photo/Sylvain Liechti*

# CHILD SOLDIERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO: REVISITING ‘REINTEGRATION’ THROUGH A PSYCHO-SOCIAL FRAMEWORK

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## ABSTRACT

The paper assesses ‘reintegration’ mechanisms implemented for child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the overall Disarmament-Demobilisation-Reintegration (DDR) programme. It re-visits the ‘macro-level success’ claimed by DDR mechanisms in DRC internationally and focuses on evaluation strategies at the ‘micro-level’ implementation of the said objectives. The paper advances a psycho-social assessment of reintegration of child soldiers considering their complex identities as ‘victim-perpetrator-by-stander’. Identifying the gaps between individual experiences of war trauma (psychological breakdown) and community reintegration (social reintegration, discrimination, and stigma), the paper conceptualises reintegration measures vis-à-vis children’s psycho-social needs and greater community involvement.

## INTRODUCTION – ‘MACRO-LEVEL SUCCESS TO MICRO-LEVEL GAPS’

On 14 March 2012, the International Criminal Court (ICC) sentenced a Congolese warlord to 14 years for the war crimes of ‘enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 years and using them to participate actively in hostilities (child soldiers)’. *The Prosecutor v Thomas Lubanga Dyilo* (*‘Thomas Lubanga’*) (2012) became the first sentence handed down by the ICC, setting a precedent vis-à-vis the recruitment of child soldiers. Five years later, in December 2017, the Court determined Thomas Lubanga’s financial liability to be a total of US \$10 million for providing reparations to the victims – the highest compensation judges at the Court have ever placed on an individual.<sup>1</sup>

This landmark ruling reflects the grave violation concerning ‘children associated with fighting force’ (or ‘CAFF’) both in terms of the act of child recruitment and the wide range of associated purposes including, but not limited to, sexual exploitation, spying, bearing munitions and performance in frontline combat units.<sup>2</sup> The judgment serves a twin-purpose – to ‘acknowledge’ the harms systematically committed on children in the DRC and equally focus on provisions for repairing the harms that align with,<sup>3</sup> among others, medical and psychological treatment, although what this treatment should entail remains ambiguous.

At the regional and national level in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Great Lakes region, reintegration of ex-combatants, including child soldiers, was undertaken by the Multi-Country Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (MDRP) between 2002 and 2009. The Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme involved seven countries,<sup>4</sup> a funding of USD 450 million, and demobilisation of approximately 300,000 ex-combatants, making it largest programme of such a mandate in the world.<sup>5</sup> Despite the acclaimed macro-level success, reintegration measures were challenging to achieve. Within the context of operational delays and prolonged emphasis on disarmament and demobilisation, minimal time was reserved for the objective and preparation of reintegration, more specifically with regards to training and execution of reintegration activities.<sup>6</sup> Child-specific reintegration

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1 Reuters Staff, “Congo child soldiers awarded \$10 million compensation in landmark ruling”, Reuters, December 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-warcimes-congo/congo-child-soldiers-awarded-10-million-compensation-in-landmark-ruling-idUSKBN1E9110>.

2 Human Rights Council 37/47, Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, A/HRC/37/47, January 8, 2018, [www.undocs.org/A/HRC/37/47](http://www.undocs.org/A/HRC/37/47) [hereinafter Human Rights Council 37/47].

3 Human Rights Council 37/47.

4 The seven countries involved in the conflict on the territory of DRC – Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Burundi, Uganda, DRC, Rwanda, Angola.

5 Andre Kollin, “DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo”, Peace Direct, November 2011, 1-4 [hereinafter Andre Kollin, “DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo” 2011].

6 Development Alternative Inc (DAI), “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects for Child Soldiers

incorporates a range of activities, these included – psycho-social support, restoration of basic services of schooling, healthcare and vocational training – all of which are adapted to the specific and differential needs of children as returnees from the conflict. Investing minimal time in reintegration obstructs the long-term development of these activities, including the sustained involvement of community members as well as the scope for monitoring and follow-up programmes by DDR practitioners and social workers.<sup>7</sup>

In the DRC, despite instituting a DDR programme for approximately 300,000 ex-combatants, ‘reintegration’ could only achieve 58% of the estimated target.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the situation concerning the reintegration of child soldiers faced more difficulties. The MDRP consisted of four key components,<sup>9</sup> one of which was the ‘Special Projects’ component responsible for the DDR mechanisms for child soldiers. Initially, the MDRP-funded DDR process for child soldiers targeted an intervention for approximately 30,000 ex-combatants. However, out of a total of 12,511 child soldiers who were reported to have become part of the reintegration efforts, only 604 of them completed the entire process. In other words, the Special Projects component could achieve only 2.9% of the overall target before the program elapsed.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the *Commission Nationale de Démobilisation et Réintégration* (CONADER), the agency set up to manage the needs of child soldiers in DRC before a national DDR Programme could be instituted, was widely critiqued on grounds of its limited capacity to effectively coordinate a comprehensive DDR mechanism due to its weak institutional foundations, shortage of technical expertise, lack of decentralisation, concerns around internal corruption and the overall inadequacy in its supervisory and coordination roles for child-centred DDR.<sup>11</sup>

The DDR programme in DRC goes to demonstrate that acclaimed macro-level achievements do not always translate to ground realities, calling for needs-assessment with regards to children’s individual experiences and community interactions. This paper assesses the ‘reintegration’ component of the overall DDR programme for former child soldiers in DRC. It sheds light on some of the psycho-social harms experienced by child soldiers – a neglect

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*in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Final Report Presented to The World Bank's Multi-country Demobilization and Reintegration Program (MDRP)*, February 5, 2007:1-18, <http://www.crin.org/en/docs/Congo%20child%20D%20and%20R%20evaluation.pdf> [hereinafter DAI “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects”, 2007].

7 IDDRS 5.30 Children and DDR.

8 Andre Kollin, “DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo”, 2011, 4.

9 These included – the Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme (DRPs), special projects, regional activities and programme management. The Special Projects was a coordinated effort of different organisations such as Save the Children, UNICEF and the Belgian Red Cross.

10 DAI “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects”, 2007, 17

11 DAI “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects”, 2007, 4

of which has impeded the process of reintegration. Using Betancourt's approach,<sup>12</sup> the paper examines the gap between children's individual war exposure and psychological breakdown and the post-conflict experiences concerning stigma and community perceptions that determine their psycho-social reintegration. The paper suggests that bridging this disjunction requires an integrated approach, community involvement, but most importantly, drawing a link between national reparations measures and provisions of reintegration under the DDR within a psycho-social framework.

## I. WHERE DID DDR IN DRC GO WRONG?

The DDR process largely functioned through a quasi-official manner, including situations such as individual commanders bringing children to a transit centre or contacting a relevant organisation.<sup>13</sup> Yet, there continued to remain certain conceptual and procedural ambiguities, some of which are described below.

### *a. Normative Definitions of DDR'*

Recognising the involvement of multiple parties both within and outside the country, the DDR programme in DRC is often referred to as DDRRR, or disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration, resettlement, or repatriation. In addition to traditional DDR approaches, the DDRRR refers to repatriation and resettlement of foreign fighters back to their country of origin.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, given the difference in linguistic usage, there is a demarcation made between 'reinsertion' and 'reintegration' of former combatants, including child soldiers. Articles 71 and 73 of the Law No. 09/001 (adopted as on 10 January 2009) restates the State's responsibility in ensuring child protection in 'exceptional situations'<sup>15</sup> and the demarcation between 'reinsertion' (...et sa reinsertion en famille ou en communauté) and 'readaptation' (...réadaptation et al réinsertion') respectively. Reinsertion was often conceptualised as a phase preceding reintegration of child soldiers – a 'transitional safety net' – unlike

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12 Theresa Betancourt et al. "Past horrors, present struggles: The role of stigma in the association between war experiences and psychosocial adjustment among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone", *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol.70, Issue 1, January 2010, 17-26, 10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.038 [hereinafter Theresa Betancourt "Past horrors, present struggles", 2010].

13 Beth Verhey, "Going Home: Demobilising and reintegrating child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo", *Save the Children*, 2003, 1-13, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/going-home-demobilising-and-reintegrating-child-soldiers-democratic-republic-congo> [hereinafter Beth Verhey "Going Home", 2003].

14 Beth Verhey, "Going Home", 2003, 10.

15 LAW NO 09/001 Concerning Child Protection January 10, 2009, *Democratic Republic of Congo*, Journal Officiel. As per Chapter I General Provisions, Point 5, "Children in exceptional situations: children in situations of armed conflict, tensions or civil unrest, natural disasters or significant and prolonged deterioration of socio-economic conditions". It provides for "exceptional protection", by which it prohibits the enlisting or using of children in the armed forces or armed groups.

long-term re-adaptation, which was a 'life-long' endeavour.<sup>16</sup> It was conceptualised as a child's participation in the transit centre or camp for a period roughly between 3-6 months, wherein they received psycho-social counselling.<sup>17</sup> Further, reinsertion measures were often considered akin to 'rehabilitation' – a process whereby child soldiers were prepared to adjust to civilian life 'before' they were facilitated into the process of reintegration.

In practice, the two concepts of 'reinsertion' and 're-adaptation' were often used synonymously, and interchangeably, even though there existed a demarcation of the different tasks within each.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, evaluation teams and stakeholders were met with confusion 'over the normative definitions and objectives' with regards to reintegration.<sup>19</sup> This lack of clarity had negative implications with regards to sequencing different activities that concern transit centre-based support, short-term reinsertion support, and long-term reintegration, and the specific psycho-social needs of children at each stage therein.

#### *b. Eligibility and Exclusion in the DDR Framework*

Two strategies were conceptualised in response to the weaknesses and mismanagement within DDR programmes, especially with regards to reintegration. The principle of 'one weapon, one combatant' was executed in the second and third phases (more specifically in Ituri, Phase III) of the nationally-guided DDR process.<sup>20</sup> Eligibility under the national DDR programme was determined as per three factors: (a) DRC nationality, (b) ability to prove membership in an armed group recognised by the government and (c) either armed or in possession of a certificate of disarmament.<sup>21</sup> Contrary to expectations, the 'one weapon one combatant' principle restricted the number of eligible persons for the DDR programme.

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16 Andre Kollin, "DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo", 2011, 6.

17 Lt. Col. Donatien Nduwimana, "Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo: Challenges and Prospects", The International Peace Support Training Centre Nairobi, Kenya, Occasional Paper Series 4 No. 2, (2013:5) [https://www.icc-cpi.int/RelatedRecords/CR2017\\_04712.PDF](https://www.icc-cpi.int/RelatedRecords/CR2017_04712.PDF).

18 Robert Muggah, et al, "The Long Shadow of War: Prospects for Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration in the Republic of Congo: A Joint Independent Evaluation for the European Commission, UNDP, and the MDRP Secretariat" February 13 - March, 6, 2003: 1-9 [hereinafter Robert Muggah, et al, "The Long Shadow of War", 2003].

19 Robert Muggah, et al, "The Long Shadow of War", 2003, 9.

20 Joanne Richards, "Demobilization in the DRC Armed Groups and the Role of Organizational Control", Small Arms Survey Issue Brief, Brief No.1, 2013, 5, <<http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/G-Issue-briefs/SAS-AA-IB1-DDR-in-the-DRC.pdf>> [hereinafter Joanne Richards, "Demobilization in the DRC Armed Groups", 2013].

21 Joanne Richards, "Demobilization in the DRC Armed Groups", 2013, 5.

First, for many armed groups in DRC, specifically among the Mai-Mai, the 'ratio of combatants' was disproportionate to the number of weapons; these weapons often being less and shared within an armed group.<sup>22</sup> This impacted child soldiers' access to government-led DDR provisions.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the principle lacked consistency with the international understanding of a 'child associated with an armed group' in varying capacities such as cooks, porters, messengers, spies, and for sexual purposes.<sup>24</sup>



**Contrary to expectations, the 'one weapon one combatant' principle restricted the number of eligible persons for the DDR programme.**

Second, the identification of young girls in armed groups remained fairly difficult in DDR programmes. Across DRC, young girls involved with the armed forces have been referred to as 'shadow armies' for continuing to serve as 'servants, messengers, porters, cooks and sexual slaves or wives'.<sup>25</sup> As a result, they often fail to meet the one weapon one combatant principle and their involvement in a range of other activities within armed groups is rendered invisible. In fact, DDR programmes in DRC record registration of only 2.6% female combatants among the total share of ex-combatants.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, reintegration of female participants was heavily influenced by the community perceptions. Social ostracisation and exclusion took the form of everyday interactions, wherein, for instance, female soldiers were not allowed to associate with other girls in the neighbourhood and were labelled as 'bush wives'.<sup>27</sup> In DRC, reintegration of female soldiers and participants in armed conflict remained far more complex, due to a range of factors.

22 Joanne Richards, "Demobilization in the DRC Armed Groups", 2013, 7. "A former MaiMai Simba captain reported that a group of 30 combatants might have had only ten firearms between them."

23 Joanne Richards, "Demobilization in the DRC Armed Groups", 2013, 9. "A former child combatant from Goma explained that: Since we were demobilized we have received nothing. The ones who received something are those who handed in weapons. We are considered as if we are not demobilized."

24 UNICEF *The Paris Principles: Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated With Armed Forces or Armed Groups*, The United Nations, 2007 – 2.1 of the Paris Principles reads – "A child associated with an armed force or armed group" refers to any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities."

25 Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering", ed. E. Martz (Springer), (2010, 311-15) [hereinafter Elisabeth Schauer et al. "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering", 2010].

26 Andre Kollin, "DDR in the Democratic Republic of Congo", 2011, 11.

27 Sandra Olsson 'Hear the Voices of Congo's Girl Child Soldiers', IRIN NEWS, <https://www.irinnews.org/opinion/2017/06/19/hear-voices-congo%E2%80%99s-girl-child-soldiers>.



Such factors include, the fear of being easily identified by the community, the suspicion and stigma attached to their identities, association of shame, dishonour, 'loss of value' that these girls bring upon themselves, their family and community by virtue of their association with the fighting forces and assumption of having experienced sexual abuse and involvement with multiple sexual partners.<sup>28</sup>

Stigma was part of young girls' individual and inter-personal experiences. To begin with, the risks of experiencing conflict-related violence, including rape, abduction, sexual slavery targeted against women, and the roles performed by female combatants within armed groups was often a direct manifestation of the gendered values embedded in the society and community interactions. Additionally, the fear of negative community perceptions upon return shaped individual stigma in the form of internalised shame and self-inflicted denial. In fact, rather than being recognised as CAFF and qualify for processes of demobilisation and reintegration, girls often regarded their association with armed factions in the form of social roles such as 'wives or cooks'.<sup>29</sup> In this regard, individual characteristics of stigma must be understood within the social context and as a consequence of the social responses to the stigmatised individual.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the social context impacts children's long-term psycho-social adjustment and has differential impact based on one's gender.

## II. 'VICTIM-PERPETRATOR' DIVIDE, COMPETING VICTIMHOOD AND DETERMINATION OF BENEFICIARIES

There continues to remain a dearth of empirical data for assessing the mental health and psycho-social impact of the armed conflict on child soldiers as 'perpetrators' of violent acts.<sup>31</sup> Practitioners face a dilemma in classifying child soldiers in the determination and allocation of beneficiaries, which are otherwise provided for 'victims' of an armed conflict. The neat 'victim-perpetrator' divide, often conceptualised for heuristic purposes, fails to account for a direct proportionality between cumulative experiences of committing violence and exposure to mental health concerns such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>32</sup>

Because of their age and lower ranks in armed groups, former child soldiers are reported to commit more atrocities during the conflict, both in quantity and gravity of violence,

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28 Save the Children, "Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict", Save the Children UK, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/2717/pdf/2717.pdf> 1-30.

29 DAI "Independent Evaluation of Special Projects", 2007, 20.

30 Theresa Betancourt "Past horrors, present struggles", 2010.

31 Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants in Non-Western, Post-conflict Settings" ed. E. Martz (Springer), (2010, 177-181) [hereinafter Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants", 2010].

32 Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants", 2010, 181.

than some of the adult former combatants.<sup>33</sup> Equally, mental health experts account for a 'building-block effect' due to child soldiers' direct exposure to violence. Repeated exposure to different types of traumatic stressors accumulate and heighten their risk of developing trauma-related disorders that subject them to psychological vulnerabilities.<sup>34</sup> Despite their return and family reunification, former child soldiers are reported to experience anxiety, stress, and PTSD, including 'repetitive-compulsive' behaviour. Due to this behaviour, children are prone to re-enact an event of trauma, either in the form of memory (flashback, nightmares) or actions which are violent in nature.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the risks of former child soldiers committing violence upon their return are not only enhanced; they also stifle the process of community acceptance and the broader social understanding of the trauma-inducing causes behind such individual behaviour.<sup>36</sup> Thus, owing to the tensions in classifying a child soldier's identity as a victim or perpetrator, as well as accounting for some of these community perceptions, DDR programmes are often critiqued on grounds of 'rewarding bad behaviour'.<sup>37</sup> These perceptions can be understood in light of the broader context of the conflict.

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33 Katharin Hermenau, et al., "Growing up in armed groups: trauma and aggression among child soldiers in DR Congo", *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, November 6, 2013, 4: 21408 - <http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21408> [hereinafter "Katharin Hermenau, et al., "Growing up in armed groups" 2013] states that "...child soldiers in the conflict in the eastern DRC begin their military career from the bottom, whereas adult combatants and soldiers start with higher ranks depending on their educational background or age. Frequently, child soldiers have to execute the most dangerous and gruesome tasks in which they experience and perpetrate significant amounts of violence".

34 Katharin Hermenau, et al., "Growing up in armed groups", 2013.

35 Anne Whitehead, "Trauma Fiction", Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 119, 153-140 [hereinafter Anne Whitehead "Trauma Fiction" 2004]. Repetition-compulsion is a Freudian concept referring to a person who repeats a traumatic event or its circumstances, re-enacting the event or putting oneself in situations where the event is likely to happen again. This repetition is intended to achieve 'retrospective mastery'. In the case of traumatic memory, repetitive compulsive behaviour accounts for the return of the traumatic event after a period of time in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. However, the unavailability of memory together with the literal return of the traumatic experience refers to the central paradox of trauma, which is that - there is 'simultaneously too little and too much memory of the event.'

36 Theresa Betancourt 'Past horrors, present struggles', 2010, 13, "for instance, a former child soldier who displays hostility may be more likely to be negatively stereotyped and discriminated against compared to a former child soldier who does not display hostility."

37 Jason Stearns et al. "The national army and armed groups in the eastern Congo Untangling the Gordian knot of Insecurity", Usalama Project, Rift Valley Institute, 2013 1-66, "The reintegration stage was especially difficult: it targeted individual combatants and in the communities to which they returned the perception tended to be that those who took up arms were rewarded financially and given vocational training."

Pablo de Greiff, *Establishing Links between DDR and Reparations*, International Center for Transitional Justice Research Brief, February 2010, 1, <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-DDR-Reparations-ResearchBrief-2010-English.pdf>.

The armed conflict in DRC has been coined by organisations such as the International Rescue Committee ‘as the deadliest war in the world since World War II and the deadliest in Africa ever recorded’.<sup>38</sup> The repercussions of the conflict have been particularly grave for children – with over 800,000 reported displaced persons,<sup>39</sup> and an aggravating nutrition crisis and food insecurity impacting more than 400,000 children.<sup>40</sup> Given the lack of sustained community interactions and follow-up programming – both in terms of psycho-social assistance and developmental aid – , any assistance to former child soldiers potentially creates a climate of competing victimhood between the experiences of child soldiers and other children impacted by the post-conflict, developmental challenges faced by the country. In fact, reintegration assistance to child soldiers has often been viewed as counterproductive, in that provisions that are otherwise expected to support and facilitate the process of reintegration risk generating community resentment.<sup>41</sup>

Going beyond some of the assumptions that guide the DDR programme, the question that must be asked concerns not only about ‘how’ reintegration is to be achieved, but also about ‘what’ are former child soldiers reintegrated ‘to’? While a ‘tick-box’ approach most likely may regard the implementation of vocational and skills training as a reflection of best practice, in the absence of well-instituted economic opportunities or job market, the efficacy of holistic reintegration remains a hollow promise for most child soldiers. Similarly, the assumption around an existing, rather stable ‘home community’ where children may be reintegrated into remains equally problematic in the context of protracted conflicts experienced within DRC, since there are several communities that continue to survive in situations of non-permanent settlements and mass-scale displacement.<sup>42</sup>

### III. LACK OF ‘FOLLOW UP’, RECRUITMENT AND RE-RECRUITMENT

As previously noted, the DDR programme in DRC experienced an operational delay in executing reintegration activities. Given that reintegration – both in terms of transition to a civilian life and re-settlement in the community – is a long-term endeavour, efforts in following-up equally require sustainable measures and practices. The program identified specific ‘Community Protection Networks’ – volunteer officials elected at the community level

38 WATCHLIST on Children and Armed Conflict, “Struggling to Survive: Children in Armed Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo”, April 2006: 1-8, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/gbv/resources/document/download/502>.

39 Humanitarian Aid, “Restive eastern DR Congo home to one of world’s worst displacement crises for children – UNICEF”, UN News, January 25, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/01/1001211>.

40 United Nations, “New Year could bring more misery to children in DR Congo’s restive Kasai region, warns UNICEF”, December 12, 2017, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/12/639132-new-year-could-bring-more-misery-children-dr-congos-restive-kasai-region-warns>.

41 Katharin Hermenau, et al., “Growing up in armed groups”, 2013.

42 Anna Maedl, et al. “Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants”, 2010, 200.

as well as identification of local organisations selected by the network, 'to undertake follow-up actions at the individual level.'<sup>43</sup>



**In fact, reintegration assistance to child soldiers has often been viewed as counterproductive, in that provisions that are otherwise expected to support and facilitate the process of reintegration risk generating community resentment.<sup>41</sup>**

Yet, the follow-up mechanisms were inadequate. First, there was a lack of mental health assessment in the follow-up measures.<sup>44</sup> As a result, the psycho-social foundations of coping challenges and impact assessment of reintegration measures, as in family reunification, community sensitisation, economic and social activities, were side-lined. Second, the mandate of these measures was not clearly defined. Here again, reliable data on performance indicators – such as ‘children’s progress in reintegration’, functioning of community mediation in mitigating possible disruptions, or the number and reasons for children who abandon the process (also called ‘defaulters’) were not clearly identified.<sup>45</sup>

In the absence of holistic documentation and processes of follow-up, the efficacy (and possible redundancy) of instituting reintegration activities became apparent. A tussle ensues between the fixed temporal dimension of a DDR programme, guided by the timed-framework of donor priorities and the long-drawn out, process-based experience of reintegration, largely impacting the scope of follow-up measures. For example, it is unclear whether children, who defaulted from the phase of reintegration at a time when they were over the age of 18 years, fall within the scope of the DDR programme and its follow-up measures.<sup>46</sup> In other instances, ambiguities prevailed regarding children who were re-recruited into armed forces following the completion of reintegration and family reunification.

Given these ambiguities, re-designing measures of reintegration continued to be based on unstructured feedback and the high probability of re-recruitment of former child soldiers.

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43 DAI “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects”, 22.

*Beth Verhey, “Going Home”, 2003, 54, “In addition, for demobilised children, a local organisation is selected by the community network to undertake follow-up actions at the individual level. This includes follow-up visits and micro-projects such as literacy classes, livestock, or small-scale vocational training.”*

44 Anna Maedl, et al. “Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants”, 2010, 190.

45 DAI “Independent Evaluation of Special Projects”, 24.

46 *Beth Verhey, “Going Home”, 2003, 55, “A review of the data shows that 62 per cent of those re-recruited were over 18 years of age. While forcible recruitment should be denounced at any age, for practical reasons, following up such cases is beyond the scope of activities for child protection organisations.”*

In fact, DDR programmes instituted in a climate of competing victimhood also meant that certain reintegration activities, such as provision of reintegration kits and monetary payments to former child soldiers became an incentive for other conflict-affected children to enlist into armed groups.<sup>47</sup> In the specific context of DRC, re-recruitment was triggered by prolonged economic and social dependency, wherein engagement with ‘violence came to be seen as a means to get access to resources, wealth and prestige’.<sup>48</sup> The question then is, what does reintegration, or a potential route ‘away from violence’ offer.

#### IV. PSYCHO-SOCIAL ROOTS OF REINTEGRATION: THE GAP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL ‘WAR EXPOSURE’ AND ‘POST-CONFLICT’ COMMUNITY ADJUSTMENT

The goal of reintegrating former child soldiers was largely undertaken through the ‘Special Projects’ within the overall DDR framework for the region. Reintegration was conceptualised broadly through micro-level economic and social activities. As indicated before, economic reintegration was conceptualised through provision of vocational skills-training and reintegration kits with monetary support. In terms of social activities, reintegration of child soldiers was executed through family reunification and school education.<sup>49</sup> The measurement of success for economic and social reintegration could be contested in the absence of job opportunities and resistance from community members, respectively:

*...for a victim of rape or a ‘girl mother’, learning embroidery or sewing does not protect her (or other girls) from the same abuse; or, for a street child or demobilised child soldier, learning carpentry does not necessarily protect him from re-recruitment or prevent recruitment violations of other children...<sup>50</sup>*

Clearly, the tick-box approach does not correspond to reintegration ‘as an experience’, in that both economic, and social re-adjustment, are guided by, and dependent on, the child’s psycho-social adjustment. Arguably, this form of psycho-social adjustment is closely tied to:

- a. exposure to war trauma at an individual-level, and
- b. post-conflict association with community stigma at an interactional-level.

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47 Beth Verhey, “Going Home”, 2003, 55, “...in North and South Kivu, especially in a context of ongoing conflict, monetary payments in child soldier DDR efforts are not recommended. In the context of widespread poverty and vulnerability, such payments risk favouring child soldiers at the expense of other conflict-affected children and risk expanding recruitment or re-recruitment.”

48 Sara Geenen, “Former combatants at the crossing: How to assess the reintegration of former combatants in the security and development nexus? Case study: Ruyigi (Burundi) and Kinshasa (DRC)”, Dissertation, University of Antwerp, 2007, 1-21.

49 Nduwimana, “Reintegration of Child Soldiers”, 15.

50 Beth Verhey, “Going Home”, 2003, 17.

In examining former child soldiers' experiences, Betancourt explains the 'disconnect' between an individual's war trauma and psycho-social reintegration that negates the post-conflict community interactions.<sup>51</sup> The disconnect exists primarily because traumatic experiences of former child soldiers are assessed largely in relation to their wartime experiences and isolated from the everyday post-conflict stigma; while the latter is routinely lived through inter-personal exchanges with other members of the community. Betancourt's study on 'stigma' not only bridges the gap between individual trauma and psycho-social reintegration and re-adjustment; it also broadens our understanding of trauma from 'isolated events of the past' to a reality lived through a 'spectrum' of events continuing from the past and reflected in present interactions. From the point of view of the DDR, reintegration is far from being a 'clear break with the past'. Consequently, it can be inferred that failure to address the psycho-social foundations of economic and social reintegration remains at the core of a 'misdirected' intervention.

## V. PSYCHOLOGICAL MALFUNCTIONING AND BREAKDOWN

Social learning theories understand behaviour as a learned phenomenon that is guided by an individual's observation within the environment. They explain the likelihood for a continued performance of behaviour based on the response received from the environment, in the form of rewards and punishment.<sup>52</sup>

From the point of view of understanding violence, social learning theories adapt to the experiences of child soldiers. In fact, various practices, such as dehumanisation and rewarding violent acts, ensure that child soldiers resort to atrocity performance not only as an assigned task but as an internalised behaviour that inclines them to the use of violence. Also referred to as the 'brutalisation' strategy, child soldiers are subjected to the risks of being habituated to the use of violence. As a result, the process of indoctrination not only damages children's pre-existing norms and values; it also involves instilling child recruits with 'new moral and social values that legitimise and celebrate violence'.<sup>53</sup>

Drawn from these approaches, 'cultures of violence' can refer to individual combatants' sustained use of violence.<sup>54</sup> These individuals are not only desensitised to violence, but the exposure propels its reinforcement as a socially-learned behaviour, thereby losing its negative value. When violence becomes the basis for further social interaction, it contributes to

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51 Theresa Betancourt "Past horrors, present struggles", 2010.

52 Albert Bandura, "Social Learning Theory", 1971.

53 Kieran Mitton, "Rebels in a Rotten State: Understanding Atrocity in the Sierra Leone Civil War", *Hurst and Company, October 2015*, 228-231 [hereinafter Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, 2015].

54 Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, 2015, 48-57.

further escalation and in a vicious logic, contributes to the very culture the interaction was embedded in.<sup>55</sup>

In the experiences of child soldiers, exposure to large-scale violence distorts their pre-existing and fundamental belief system concerning 'safety, trust, self-esteem' to name a few.<sup>56</sup> As perpetrators (even as victims and bystanders) of violence, their experience of mental trauma and shattered emotional-cognitive processing reaches to the extent of a 'psychological collapse'. This breakdown indicates a near-total removal of any psychological barriers that previously restrained violence.<sup>57</sup> Equally, it translates into violence as a learned behaviour and basis for social interaction.

Part of the psychological breakdown develops, in former child soldiers, a response in terms of certain psychological defences. In the absence of the usual 'fight or flight' response options, child soldiers develop alternatives.<sup>58</sup> Such defences range from active disassociation from the memory to 'repetition-compulsion' in the very pursuit of clarifying the memory, as indicated before. Equally, the removal of inhibitions vis-à-vis violence can in part account for child soldiers' re-recruitment in armed groups.

*In DRC, a former child soldier recalled committing rapes of as many as 53 women, not driven by anger or aggression, but 'because it gave (them) a lot of pleasure'<sup>59</sup> This form of appetitive aggression has been documented in studies concerning child soldiers in DRC, such that 'a gradual transformation in the perception of violence is marked less by reactive aggression and more by an appetite for violence-related pleasure or enjoyment'.<sup>60</sup>*

Thus, from the point of view of reintegration, exposure to violence and war-related trauma for a sustained period contributes to complex psychological malfunctioning of child soldiers, which impair their 'ability to work, contribute to income generation, to establish and sustain social relationships, or to take care of themselves'.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in such conditions, provision of economic and social re-integrative opportunities without engaging with their foundational psycho-social needs of the child may constitute what has previously been termed as a misdirected intervention.

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55 Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, 2015, 50.

56 Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants", 2010, 187.

57 Kieran Mitton, *Rebels in a Rotten State*, 2015, 51.

58 Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, "The Psychological Impact", 334.

59 Pete Jones, "Congo: We did whatever we wanted, says soldier who raped 53 women", April 11, 2013, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/11/congo-rapes-g8-soldier>.

60 Katharin Hermenau, et al., "Growing up in armed groups", 2013.

61 Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants", 2010, 178.

## VI. POST-CONFLICT EXPERIENCES AND COMMUNITY REINTEGRATION

It would be a simplistic deduction to assume that the lives of children as former members of the armed group had been entirely 'negative'. Studies documenting the experiences of child soldiers reveal that membership in an armed group simultaneously provided them with positive association, group belonging and identification as well as triggers for psychological harm at different points of time. A denial of these complex layers of experiences may only account to some form of 'cognitive distortion'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, assuming a homogenous experience of community reintegration for former child soldiers as a 'favourable or positive experience' ignores the grey areas of children's needs within the DDR framework. Mogapi notes that very often, communities 'struggle to understand children's anger outbursts, problems with trusting, social withdrawal and other phenomena'.<sup>63</sup> Failing to understand some of the psychological experiences described previously, community members may inadvertently result in labelling and alienation instead of long-term reintegration of child soldiers.<sup>64</sup> As mentioned before, reintegration as a short-term objective may be counterproductive to the well-being of young females due to the community fears around demobilised girls being a 'source of HIV/STI', possessing 'aggressive, or military mentality', or having a tendency of inciting deviant or promiscuous behaviour' among other stigmatising perceptions.<sup>65</sup>

### CONCLUSION: A PSYCHO-SOCIAL APPROACH TO REINTEGRATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS

Long-term reintegration of former child soldiers in DRC requires innovation in existing DDR programmes. First, the processes involved in reintegration cannot assume a linear progression, in that the economic and social activities cannot disassociate from repairing the psycho-social harms faced by child soldiers. A dynamic framework equally calls for an integrated approach, with a long-term outlook and sustainable measures that allow for a community ownership of the reintegration process.

It has been noted that individual mental dispositions and responses to war-related trauma can hinder the process of holistic social reintegration and fuel reasons for re-recruitment of child soldiers. Alternatively, a psycho-social approach to reintegration in the DDR programme would combine the needs of children's 'individual psyche', along with their 'social ecology' and

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62 Anna Maedl, et al. "Psychological Rehabilitation of Ex-combatants", 2010, 187.

63 Nomfundo Mogapi, "Reintegration of soldiers: The missing piece", *Intervention*, Vol.2 No.3, (2004, 221-23) [https://www.interventionjournal.com/sites/default/files/221\\_225\\_Mogapi.pdf](https://www.interventionjournal.com/sites/default/files/221_225_Mogapi.pdf).

64 Nomfundo Mogapi, "Reintegration of soldiers", 223.

65 WATCHLIST on Children and Armed Conflict, "Struggling to Survive", 48.



practices that bear ‘cultural relevance.’<sup>66</sup> This is because reintegration is a two-way interaction, involving the return of a child and the community’s role in ‘receiving returnees.’<sup>67</sup>

Traditional approaches to reintegration are guided by community practices and rituals which have often proved to hold therapeutic meaning both for the individual children as well as seemingly more identifiable for the other members. Some of these rituals include cleansing or purification rituals symbolic of treating an ex-combatant, development of collective social perceptions of ‘personhood’, and finally, the practices of seeking forgiveness for the past wrongdoings.<sup>68</sup>

In the future, the reintegration component of DDR must be drawn more thoroughly from contextual needs and be closely tied to individual and community reparations.<sup>69</sup> As a safeguard against community backlash and competing victimhood, these linkages allow for incorporating the receiving communities’ attitudes and reactions in decisions concerning determination of beneficiaries, addressing individual and collective psycho-social harms and in proposing sustainable and long-term reintegration measures for former child soldiers.

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66 Katherine Stott, “Out of sight, out of mind? The psychosocial needs of children formerly associated with armed forces: A case study of Save the Children UK’s work in Beni and Lubero territories, North Kivu province, Democratic Republic of Congo”, *International Journal of Health Planning and Management*, 2009, S52-60, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/hpm.1022>.

67 Nduwimana, “Reintegration of Child Soldiers”, 5.

68 Brian Engdahl et al. *Psychosocial interventions with former combatants*”, in Green B, et al (Eds), 2003, 271-84.

69 Pablo de Greiff, “Establishing Links between DDR and Reparations”, 1-4.



UN Peacekeepers aid disarmament in the DRC.  
UN Photo/Martine Perret

# COMMENTARY: PUSH AND PULL FACTORS AND THE REINTEGRATION OF CHILDREN IN THE DRC

By Aneeta Williams

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The recruitment and use of child soldiers creates a lasting tear in society, and none so severely as the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is estimated that there are 310,000 children who are associated or formerly associated with armed forces or groups. Many (both girls and boys) experience sexual violence prior, during and/or following their association. As Arpita Mitra described in her paper, the scale of the tragedy is both widespread and brutal. She argues that despite the huge sums of financial assistance poured into the area for Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programming, the implementation has failed to meet its goals.

The author argues that the predominant weakness in the DDR programmes is that it lacks the effective and sustained psycho-social support for children to overcome the trauma of being exposed to violent conflict. This is particularly important for young children who, because of

their lack of capacity to understand the enormity of the atrocities, were influenced or forced to commit horrific acts of violence themselves. The lack of psycho-social support provision during and in the follow-up to the DRR is a fatal flaw, particularly as children suffer from complex psychological malfunctioning.

Some other key reasons include: the “one weapon, one child” rule which restricted the number of children eligible for DRR programming. This effectively excluded non-combatants such as child brides, cooks, and servants who were predominantly female. Inevitably there is a gender-bias towards boys who tend to be pushed to the front-line and are armed; the lack of sustained community engagement and possible resentment since the programme is seen as being counter-productive, as it provides children vocational and skills-building for an almost non-existent job market; and reintegration kits and financial payments to children formerly associated with armed groups were often seen as an incentive for recruitment or re-recruitment.

The above points reflect the fact that reintegration is a 2-way process between the children and the community that should be undertaken by more traditional routes including cleansing ceremonies requesting forgiveness. A recent report by War Child, “Tug of War,”<sup>1</sup> supports these findings and takes a deeper dive into the “push” (negative conditions or circumstances) and “pull” (positive rewards or incentives) factors affecting recruitment and re-recruitment of children into armed groups in DRC through qualitative research in North and South Kivu. It shows that the linkages between poorly executed reintegration and inhospitable conditions within communities can lead to an increased risk of re-recruitment.

The report mentions further challenges to the DDR programme, illustrating how children (once recruited) vacillate between the armed groups and community, trying to establish which of the two will offer them the best opportunity. For example, in North and South Kivu children are often disappointed by what they come back to in the community. Life in the armed groups may be physically more challenging and more brutal, but it presents an opportunity to eat better and live better (albeit through stealing) than in the community. The attempts to provide economic or vocational packages are rendered moot if there is no market to return to. This is compounded by stigma. Community members are often suspicious of boys and girls returning from armed groups, blaming them for any wrong that happens in the community and making them feel unwelcome. Children risk being arrested or imprisoned if they return to the community without a demobilisation certificate or a weapon and indeed have been severely beaten by FARDC soldiers or police – so they rarely escape their circumstances. There is also an added cost to the family, in many cases because parents are required to pay bribes

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1 War Child UK and War Child Holland, “Tug of War: Children in Armed Groups in DRC – A study on the push and pull factors on influencing armed groups in DRC” (May, 2018) [https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/Tug-Of-War\\_Children\\_in\\_Armed\\_Groups\\_in\\_DRC.pdf](https://www.warchild.org.uk/sites/default/files/link-files/Tug-Of-War_Children_in_Armed_Groups_in_DRC.pdf).

to chiefs, local authorities and security services at every step of the demobilisation process to secure the release of their child – to ensure they are not arrested or imprisoned or caught by the armed group for having escaped.

The War Child report suggests a multi-pronged approach to DRR programming. The challenge of reintegration should include advocating against corruption by different state and non-state actors, and stigma, violence and harassment of child returnees in the community. Prevention is key, for example providing parents income-earning activities to support their children to stay in school – found to be the biggest deterrent to participation in a militia. Due to their vulnerabilities, girls and mothers with young children in the DRR programme should be transferred to temporary host families or Interim Care Centres (ICC) immediately, which have received training to care for such children. Reintegration should take between 3-5 years and there is a need to develop a comprehensive, well-planned and implemented reintegration programme. Finally, it recommends the “one plus approach” – providing a child leaving armed groups and another orphaned or vulnerable child equal opportunity in the DDR programme to reduce tensions and stigma within the community.

While it is acknowledged that the DDR program in the Democratic Republic of Congo represents an enormous investment, it is also, sadly, just a start. The goal of DDR programming is to bring the child and society back together in healthy environment. This requires a long-term and sustained investment that addresses the needs of both the child and the community.

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*She has written several articles, conference papers, resources, polices and publications on safeguarding and protection of children and vulnerable groups and is a regular invited speaker at law schools and at events.*



The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan.  
UN Photo/Brian Sokol

# REFUGEE YOUTH AND MENTAL HEALTH: PRINCIPLES FOR RESETTLEMENT SUPPORT

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of young people on the move has attracted significant international attention as the amount of displacement due to armed conflict has steadily increased in recent years. The UNHCR reports that 68.5 million people have been displaced worldwide, with just over half of them being under the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> Armed conflict often forces families to flee their homes and communities in search of safety. For those who can go to a new country there are both benefits and challenges to navigate. The experiences of youth displacement because of armed conflict is an area that needs further research.

This paper explores the current situation of youth displacement and the importance of informed mental health support throughout their transition experience in a new country. A young person's resilience through the experience of integrating into a new home is not merely a description of their personality but a combination of the personal and social resources that can positively impact their well-being. This social ecological perspective of resilience is a useful framework for responding to the needs of young refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Refugee Agency, Figures at a Glance, 2018.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore the current situation of youth displacement and the importance of informed mental health support throughout their transition experience in a new country. Mental health is defined in this paper to broadly include a young person's psychopathology (i.e. psychological and behavioural dysfunction) as well as self-esteem and overall well-being.<sup>2</sup> Looking at the integration process for refugee young people from a mental health perspective allows for a discussion of how individual strengths and environmental factors influence each other. In this paper, the terms children and youth, and young people are used interchangeable to refer to those under the age of 25, in keeping with the UNESCO definition of youth.<sup>3</sup> Refugee young people arrive in their settlement countries from various backgrounds, socioeconomic status, education, arrival pathways, family structure, and English language skills.<sup>4</sup> A young person's resilience through their integration is not merely a description of their personality but a combination of the personal and social/environmental resources that can positively impact their well-being. This social ecological perspective of resilience is a useful framework for responding to the needs of young refugees.

This paper will begin with a discussion of youth displacement and the impact of war and armed conflict on their well-being. The mental health response for those young people who settle in North America will be discussed, presenting some key principles for effectively supporting refugee young people through their transition and integration into a new home. Ensuring the support refugee young people throughout their integration into their new society will be positive for both them and their community.

## YOUNG REFUGEES AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

The issue of young people on the move has recently garnered significant international attention as the amount of displacement due to armed conflict has steadily increased in recent years. The UNHCR reports that 68.5 million people have been displaced worldwide, with just over half of them being under the age of 18.<sup>5</sup> According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, those under the age of 18 are considered children.<sup>6</sup> Armed conflict often forces children to leave their homes and communities in search of safety. Contemporary civil wars show a total societal crisis, where the social order is disrupted leaving civilians –

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2 Beiser & Mantini, *The Mental Health of Immigrant and Refugee Youth in Canada*, (Oxford University Press- Canada, 2018), 378-395.

3 UNESCO, *What do we mean by youth?* United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. 2017.

4 Gifford & Edmee, *Defining refugee youth settlement and why it matters*, (The Federation Press- Australia, 2015) 118-132.

5 United Nations Refugee Agency, *Figures at a Glance*, 2018.

6 UNCRC, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989.



particularly women and children – vulnerable.<sup>7,8</sup> Recent decades have seen a shift in the nature of war and armed conflict: a shift from interstate to civil conflict which has been characterized by an increase in the number of civilian fatalities. In some cases, civilians have been the targets of hostility with the purpose weakening the opposing force. The complexities of modern armed conflict involve children through traditional warfare, civil unrest, guerrilla fighting, and terrorism.<sup>9</sup>

In Jo Boyden's article about children's experiences in conflict, she argues that the mainstream models for interventions for children affected by violence do not sufficiently capture the large number of young people affected. She argues that in most conflicts, many war-affected children remain untouched by relief efforts because of a tendency of relief programs to be "spectacular" – focusing on sub-populations such as child combatants, refugees, orphans, etc., while overlooking the larger population indirectly impacted by the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Whether they are displaced or isolated in some way from humanitarian assistance, there is still little known about their experience and their needs.<sup>11</sup> Assessing the full impact of violent conflict on young people must be multi-levelled in order to capture the complexity of their experience.

In many situations, refugee and internally displaced persons camps have become more long-term dwellings because of a drawn-out conflict or the destruction of their homes. One example of this is the Bhutanese refugees who were violently persecuted by their government based on their Nepali ethnicity. More than 100,000 people fled in the early 1990's and spent 15-20 years in refugee camps. Since 2008, a large number have been resettled around the world, though there are still approximately 12,000 refugees still living in camps with nowhere to go.<sup>12</sup> Living conditions in these camps is often substandard, leaving inhabitants vulnerable to many risks such as violence and disease.<sup>13</sup> Those refugees living in foreign cities and countries face a unique set of challenges. In a study by Mann (2012), it was determined that the Congolese refugee children living in Dar es Salaam faced intense physical challenges, with limited access

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7 Catani, Schauer, Elbert, Missmahl, Bette, & Neuner, War trauma, child labor, and family violence: life adversities and PTSD in a sample of school children in Kabul (2009) 163-171.

8 Honwana, & De Boeck, Makers & breakers: children and youth in postcolonial, (Oxford: Africa World Press, 2005).

9 Cook, & Wall, Children and armed conflict: Cross-disciplinary investigations (Springer, 2011).

10 Boyden, Children's experience of conflict related emergencies: some implications for relief policy and practice, (1994) 254-267.

11 Boyden & Mann, Children's risk, resilience, and coping in extreme situations, (Sage Publications, 2005) 26.

12 Maung, No way home: time runs out for Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, IRIN, October 7, 2016.

13 Olujić, Children in extremely difficult circumstances: war and its aftermath in Croatia (University of California Press, Los Angeles, CA, 1998) 318-330.

to healthy food and shelter. Yet, the young people she interviewed were more distressed by the lack of social support and the discrimination they felt in their new home. The marginalization they experience can exacerbate the effects of the war on these young people's lives, as it isolates them from the support that can foster their resilience processes.<sup>14</sup>

Canada has long been a haven for refugees from around the world. Nearly 10% of Canada's annual immigration quota is made up of refugees.<sup>15</sup> According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, an average of 25,000 refugees were admitted annually to Canada over the last decade.<sup>16</sup> However, in response to the crisis in Syria, the Canadian government resettled approximately 40,000 Syrian refugees between November 2015 and January 2017 in 350 communities across Canada. Most of this population had fled violence and armed conflict, in search of a safe place to live. Finding the best way to support these young refugees coming from such a situation to their new environment in North America is critically important.



**The marginalization they experience can exacerbate the effects of the war on these young people's lives, as it isolates them from the support that can foster their resilience processes.**

Research has shown that childhood exposure to violence can result in negative mental health outcomes for the young person and their family including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, risky sexual behaviour, suicidal behaviour, and difficulties maintaining healthy relationships later in life.<sup>17</sup> Being witness to, or engaging in, the violent activities of an armed group has negative mental health consequences. There is a whole spectrum of experiences here – from those engaged as child soldiers, porters, slaves, to those whose homes were destroyed, who witnessed violence in their communities, and to those living under constant threat of violence. Social integration following such exposure has proven to be a difficult experience for many young people. This social and economic fragmentation

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14 Mann, On being despised: Growing up a Congolese refugee in Dar es Salaam (*Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012*) 185-199.

15 Beiser, The health of immigrants and refugees in Canada, (2005): S30-S44.

16 Citizen and Immigration Canada. *Canada Facts and Figures*. 2014.

17 Anda, Felitti, Bremner, Walker, Whitfield, Perry, Dube, & Giles, The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood, (2006), 174-186;

MacMillan, Wathen, Barlow, Fergusson, Leventhal, & Taussig, Interventions to prevent child maltreatment and associated impairment, (2009), 250-266;

Margolin & Gordis, The effects of family and community violence on children, (2000), 445-479;

Morgan, Abdul-Razzaq, Black, Manion, Wekerle, Forshner, & Ungar, Promising Practices to Help Children and Youth who have been Exposed to Violence. (2013);

Norman, Byambaa, Rumna De, Butchart, Scott, & Vos, The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: a systematic review and meta-analysis, (2012).

that armed conflict creates often impedes the positive emotional and mental development of young people, as family structures and community supports are often damaged if not destroyed.<sup>18</sup> The prevailing conceptual framework used to understand the effects of armed conflict on young people has been PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder).<sup>19,20</sup> PTSD as defined by the American Psychiatric Association includes five criteria that specify the type of trauma experienced and the response of the individual to that trauma.<sup>21</sup> PTSD has been identified in children affected by armed conflict (CAAC) – whether they actively engaged in the conflict or were civilians left to live through the impacts of war. In a study on the comorbidity of PTSD and depression among refugee children during armed conflict, children living in war zones were found to be at higher risk of PTSD.<sup>22</sup> However, ‘exposure to trauma’ was not found to necessarily lead to PTSD, which calls into question what other factors influence a young person’s reaction to armed conflict.

A systematic review by Dimitry (2011) of mental health studies done with children and adolescents living in areas of armed conflict in the Middle East categorized the factors that impact mental health to risk factors and protective factors. For example, increased exposure to violence was directly correlated with instances of PTSD; however, the presence of a supportive family would decrease PTSD. In a study by Ungar and Liebenberg, these findings were confirmed in that the presence of certain protective factors can significantly reduce the negative effects of stress with young people in difficult situations.<sup>23</sup> An ecological perspective of this resilience – which takes into consideration the qualities of both the individual and their environment – can provide further understanding of how to promote their positive development by providing the appropriate resources.<sup>24,25</sup>

While resilience has many varied meanings, the social ecological framework leads to the following definition:

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18 Freud & Burlingham, *The writings of Anna Freud: III. Infants without families: Reports on the Hamstead Nurseries, 1939-1945.* (International Universities Press, 1973).

19 Friedman & Keane, PTSD: Twenty-five years of progress and challenges, (*The Guilford Press, New York, 2007*), 3-18.

20 Macksoud, & Aber, The war experiences and psychosocial development of children in Lebanon, (1996), 70-88.

21 DSM-5. *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.* American Psychiatric Association, (2013).

22 Thabet, Abed, & Vostanis, Comorbidity of PTSD and depression among refugee children during war conflict, (2004), 533-542.

23 Ungar & Liebenberg, Cross-cultural consultation leading to the development of a valid measure of youth resilience: The International Resilience Project, (2009), 259.

24 Boyden & Mann, “Children’s risk, resilience, and coping in extreme situations”, 26.

25 Ungar & Liebenberg, Assessing resilience across cultures using mixed methods: Construction of the child and youth resilience measure, (2011), 126-149.

*In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008, p. 225).*

This understanding of resilience goes beyond the individual, paying attention to the interactions between the individual and their environment. In a systematic review by Tol, Song, and Jordans<sup>26</sup>, they captured both qualitative and quantitative studies that focused on resilience and mental health in children and adolescents affected by armed conflict in low and middle-income countries. Their findings support this conceptualization of resilience as a “dynamic process”<sup>27</sup>, suggesting that focusing on individual factors can distract researchers from the complexity of the interactions between risk and protective factors, and the individual. Therefore, an effective line of inquiry is, “what conditions allow for and sustain resilience in individuals at different moments in life?”<sup>28</sup> The Challenge and Resilience Model (see Figure 1, Page 75) shows the dynamic process of how risk factors and protective factors impact the integration experience and mental health of refugee young people.<sup>29</sup> Resources, whether personal or social, can act as a buffer in a young person’s life against adversity. This model demonstrates the interacting pathways that impact mental health. The ability of a young person to integrate successfully relies on the link between place and well-being – or placemaking. “Placemaking” is a young person’s ability to transform the place they find themselves into their home.<sup>30,31</sup> This includes not just physical placemaking but also the way young people can connect with their new community. The ability to make a place a home is vital to coping with stress and integration.<sup>32</sup>

Resilience is both context-dependent as well as temporally specific. The changing nature of both the individual and their environment requires attention on the successful adaptation to

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26 Tol, Song, & Jordans, Annual research review: Resilience and mental health in children and adolescents living in areas of armed conflict—a systematic review of findings in low-and middle-income countries, (2013), 445-460.

27 Ibid. p445.

28 Ferrari & Fernando, Resilience in children of war, (Springer, New York, NY, 2013), 287-301.

29 Beiser & Mantini, “The Mental Health of Immigrant and Refugee Youth in Canada”, 378.

30 Akesson, Refugee Youth Affected by War and Displacement: A Socio-ecological Approach, (Oxford University Press- Canada, 2018), 361-377.

31 Denov & Akesson, Neither here nor there? Place and placemaking in the lives of separated children, (2013), 56-70.

32 Beiser & Mantini, “The Mental Health of Immigrant and Refugee Youth in Canada”, 378.

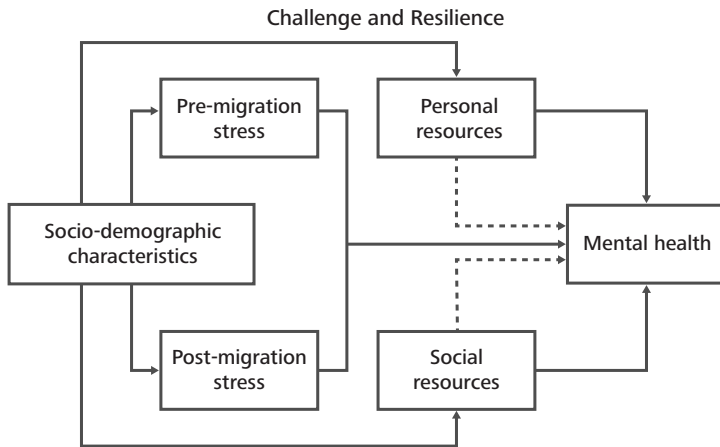


Figure 1: Challenge and Resilience: A Model of Mental Health for Refugee and Immigrant Youth<sup>33</sup>

change and how such adaptation can be facilitated in a positive way.<sup>33,34</sup> Magid and Boothby<sup>35</sup> align more with this perspective by approaching resilience as an ongoing process of balancing factors. They present an overview of the risks young people face in war. Drawing on their past research with children in conflict, they were able to demonstrate that if protective factors were able to out-weigh risk factors, the potential to counteract the negative impact on the young people’s resilience was increased. Thus, in supporting the resilience of young people in the contexts of war and armed conflict, it is important to identify and strengthen protective factors.<sup>36,37</sup>

In Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory<sup>38</sup> (Figure 2, Page 76), he presents the different levels that impact a child’s development. When applied to the experience of refugee young people, it allows for a dynamic understanding of what factors contribute to their well-being.<sup>39</sup> At the micro-level, for example, the importance of family in affecting young people is

33 Rutter, Resilience: Causal pathways and social ecology, (Springer, New York, NY, 2012), 33-42.

34 Ungar, Brown, Liebenberg, & Othman, Unique pathways to resilience across cultures, (2007), 287.

35 Magid, & Boothby, Promoting resilience in children of war, (Springer, New York, NY, 2013) 39-49.

36 Magid, & Boothby, Promoting resilience in children of war, 39-49.

37 Kostelny & Wessells, Child friendly spaces: Promoting children’s resiliency amidst war, (Springer, New York, NY, 2013) 119-129.

38 Bronfenbrenner, The ecology of human development, (Harvard University Press, 2009).

39 Akesson, Refugee Youth Affected by War and Displacement: A Socio-ecological Approach, 361.

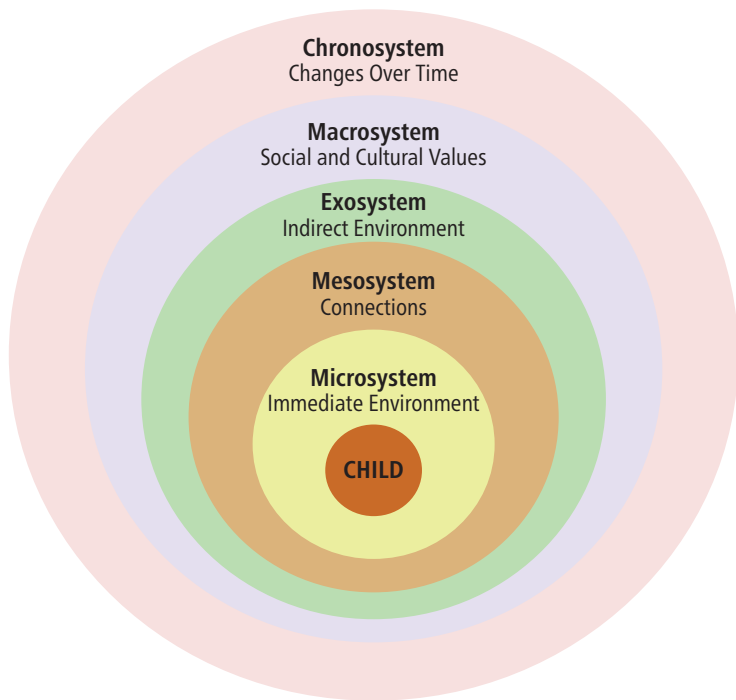


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems<sup>42</sup>

significant. There are several studies that identify family as central to the well-being of their children.<sup>40</sup> School-level support (which would be part of the mesosystem) is another effective point of engagement with young people. A Canadian example of how school-based intervention can work can be found in the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB). They have provided dynamic English-language support programs specifically for newcomer young people in the area. The young people are provided with direct instruction and language training throughout the school day, with opportunities to join the wider student

40 Betancourt, Stichick, Speelman, Onyango, & Bolton, A qualitative study of mental health problems among children displaced by war in northern Uganda, (2009), 238-256;  
 Garbarino, & Kostelny, The effects of political violence on Palestinian children's behavior problems: A risk accumulation model, (1996), 33-45;  
 Tol, Haroz, Hock, Kane, & Jordans, Ecological perspectives on trauma and resilience in children affected by armed conflict, (Routledge, East Sussex, UK, 2014), 193-209;  
 Pynoos, Steinberg, & Wraith, A developmental model of childhood traumatic stress, (Oxford, England, John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 72-95.

population for certain classes like art and physical education. This has proven to support their integration into their new home by meeting their need for language and cultural instruction while also supporting social connections with Canadian students.<sup>41,42</sup>

At the exo-level of this social ecological model, the influence of organizations and government is identified. While this may not be in the direct experience of young people, the political and social climate which they create can either support or hinder innovation in how young refugees are supported through their transition. What this model offers are levels in which the varied experiences of this population can be better understood. It is important to recognize that the contexts that refugees come from vary, resulting in differing needs and values within this population group.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, engaging refugee young people is vital for the success of a program or intervention. Creating space for youth engagement means that there are opportunities for young people to be involved in a program that is intended for them, not just as recipients of support, but as co-creators. This engagement focuses on the positive contribution that young people can make to programs and their effectiveness. Young people are then able to see that their contribution can make a difference, and that they can contribute to some positive changes in their community. In any instance of youth programming, it is important to consider the capacity of the young people in the community and what they would be both willing and able to contribute. Especially thinking of refugee youth, it is important to find ways to engage them that will help and not add stress to their lives. Youth-adult partnerships can have a positive impact on both the individuals and the success of a program or intervention.<sup>44</sup>



**Creating space for youth engagement means that there are opportunities for young people to be involved in a program that is intended for them, not just as recipients of support, but as co-creators.**

Using both an individual-centric and a community-wide approach to mental health and well-being support for young people is also extremely beneficial. An example of this strategy is Project SHIFA (Supporting the Health of Immigrant Families and Adolescents; SHIFA means health in Somali), a multi-tiered prevention and intervention program for

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41 English as a Second Language, *Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board*.

42 Pent, Professional Perspective 3: High School Principal, (*Oxford University Press- Canada, 2018*), 172-183.

43 Zinck, Ungar, Whitman, Exenberger, LeVert-Chaisson, Liebenberg, Ung & Forshner; *Working with Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts to Promote Youth Engagement, 2013*.

44 Zinck, E., et al, *Working with Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts to Promote Youth Engagement, 2013*.

Somali youths developed by the Children's Hospital in Boston.<sup>45</sup> Project SHIFA's model includes a population-wide resilience-building approach, a more targeted stress- reduction program for those particularly at risk, and an intensive intervention for those in crisis.<sup>46</sup> This multi-tiered approach not only responds to the needs of those in distress, but to the important environmental elements in the community that can directly impact a young person dealing with trauma. Some of these elements can help or hinder the health process. By engaging with community members, whether in schools, community leaders, or family members, young people can be referred for care. This helps build a network of trust which can go a long way in destigmatizing mental health treatment by connecting acute care with more broad support offered to the general population.<sup>47,48</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, some key principles have been presented as vital for effectively supporting refugee young people through their transition and integration into life in North America. Programs that include young people throughout its development, implementation, and evaluation have boasted a positive result for both the young people involved and the effectiveness of the intervention. Though this poses a challenge for working with refugee young people, it is important to realize that their perspective can offer strength and insight into what support is particularly needed. The challenge for service providers is to discover the appropriate avenue for such engagement.

A multi-tiered response can provide more broad resources for all members of the community in which young refugees are settled, from those who need acute care to those who could benefit from community-wide programs. This exemplifies Brofenbrenner's social ecological theory, allowing for support to be made available in all areas of a young person's life. It is important to ensure resources are accessible to these young people to best support their resilience. Responses to refugee young people has often focused on the psychosocial problems that arise, but it is important for programs to address not only specific mental health needs but also to their wider social context.<sup>49</sup> Research is needed to explore how psychosocial problems

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45 *Children Hospital Boston, Project SHIFA: Supporting the Health of Immigrant Families and Adolescents School-based Trauma Systems Therapy for Somali Adolescent Refugees Children's Hospital Boston, Massachusetts, 2018.*

46 *Ellis, Miller, Abdi, Barrett, Blood, & Betancourt, Multi-tier mental health program for refugee youth, (2013), 129.*

47 *Ibid, 129.*

48 *National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities, 2009.*

49 *Ellis et al, Multi-tier mental health program for refugee youth, 129.*



are both perceived and handled by different local communities and cultures.<sup>50</sup> These dynamic processes can be better understood using this broad, ecological perspective, both in research and practice. Ensuring we support refugee young people throughout their integration into their new home will be positive for not just them but for the community and nation. Our young people are our future and safeguarding their positive development must be our priority.

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<sup>50</sup> *Betancourt et al*, A qualitative study of mental health problems among children displaced by war in northern Uganda, 238.



*Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya.  
UN Photo/Evan Schneider*

# COMMENTARY: ECOLOGICAL RELATIONAL SUPPORTS AS KEY RESOURCES FOR REFUGEE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

By Linda Liebenberg, PhD

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Considering mental health outcomes of children and youth refugees is critical to ensuring not only future peace efforts in contexts of conflict, but also in supporting improved social and economic conditions domestically and internationally.<sup>1</sup> Failing to address the chronic stress and trauma that young people, their families and communities have been exposed to, undermines peace efforts and acts of repatriation. In this regard, and as stated by Emily Pelley, an interactive ecological resilience framework is an effective framework to guide to both our understanding of psychological responses to conflict experiences and to providing meaningful supports.

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<sup>1</sup> *War Child (2012)*. From neglect to protect: Bottlenecks to inclusion and (re)integration for the most marginalised children in conflict (*A discussion paper*). *War Child UK and War Child Holland; World Bank Development Report (2011)*. *Conflict, security and development*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available from [https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDRS/Resources/WDR2011_Full_Text.pdf).

Her discussion eloquently outlines the value of relational and physical resources in supporting improved and positive outcomes for children and youth. Her review also highlights the value of these resources as being both highly pragmatic (such as language classes) as well as healing (providing for example mental health supports). A recent review of cross-cutting consensual resilience elements supports this broad-based approach to facilitating healthy psychosocial outcomes.<sup>2</sup> This review has underscored the important role of personal meaning-making in directing how individuals will make sense of their experiences as well as how they will interpret the availability and relevance of support resources.

Meaning-making processes are therefore central to shaping how individuals will engage with contextually based resources within interactive resilience processes. Recognition of this central driving component within resilience processes (i.e. meaning-making frameworks) aligns with Emily Pelley's discussion of the complexity of experiences and outcomes found amongst refugee children and youth affected by armed conflict. The variation created by contextually specific conflict factors, temporal issues, cultural frameworks, national and international responses, as well as personal experiences prior to, during and following conflict exposure, underscore the ways in which universal responses to supporting children and youth are not an option. Here Emily Pelley astutely points to the need for youth to be engaged in the design of policy and programming that pertains to them. Indeed, many authors now point to the need for youth engagement if policies and related services and programs are to succeed.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the role of community-based interventions as critical supports to improved and increased positive outcomes has been exemplified across multiple studies. The extended informal social supports such an approach fosters, provide core prevention and intervention assets, extending formal resources on both fronts.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, however there is a need for resources to be provided in ways that are accessible, flexible and characterised by relational

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2 Liebenberg, L., Joubert, N., & Foucault, M-L. (2017). Understanding core resilience elements and indicators A comprehensive review of the literature. Ottawa, ON: Mental Health Promotion Unit Population Health Promotion and Innovations Division Centre for Health Promotion Public Health Agency of Canada. <http://lindaliebenberg.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PHAC-Resilience-Report-Final-Version-November-2017.pdf>.

3 See for example Ford, N., Odallo, D., & Chorlton, R. (2003). *Communication from a human rights perspective: Responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in eastern and southern Africa*. Journal of Health Communication, 8, 519–612; Gaunle, S. & Adhikari, P. (2010). Youth in policy making. Sangam Institute; Hallett, C., & Prout, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Hearing the voices of children: Social policy for a new century*. London; New York: Routledge Falmer.

4 Liebenberg, L., & Hutt-MacLeod, D. (2017). *Aboriginal community development approaches in response to neoliberal policy: The example of Eskasoni Mental Health Services*. In P. Dolan & N. Frost (Eds.), *The Handbook of Global Child Welfare* (pp. 47-58). London: Routledge.

engagement. Such resource allocation ensures “a supportive socio-ecological context [which] is at least as an important – if not more important – determinant of resilience as individual variables”<sup>5</sup>

The work of Munford and Sanders<sup>6</sup> is particularly illuminating in this regard. Their work with youth facing extreme socioeconomic marginalisation across New Zealand has demonstrated the importance of approaches that meet young people where they are at; gain in-depth understanding of how youth understand their experiences, challenges and possible supports; and integrate these perspectives into learning opportunities where children and youth are able to try, fail and try again, all the while being consistently supported by adults that engage in enduring relationships with them. Importantly, drawing on these various components (i.e. youth engagement in designing and planning policy and related resources, development of community-based informal supports, and use of accessible, flexible and relational approaches to formal service provision) also means that a strengths-based approach can be more effectively integrated into supporting improved psychosocial outcomes for children and youth affected by conflict. It is in this way that resilience resources can be augmented and positive mental health outcomes can be better supported for child and youth refugees.

*Linda Liebenberg, PhD., is a researcher and evaluator with a core interest in children and youth with complex needs, and the communities they live in. Her work explores the promotion of positive youth development and mental health through civic engagement and community development. As a key component of this work, Linda reflects critically on how best to conduct research and evaluations with children and their communities, including participatory image-based methods; sophisticated longitudinal quantitative designs; and the design of measurement instruments used with children and youth. Linda has presented internationally and published extensively on these topics of research and youth.*

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- 5 Tol, W.A., Song, S., & Jordans, M.J.D. (2013). Annual research review: Resilience and mental health in children and adolescents living in areas of armed conflict - A systematic review of findings in low- and middle-income countries. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 54(4), 445-460, p. 456.
  - 6 Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2014). Youth-centred practice: Positive youth development practices and pathways to better outcomes for vulnerable youth. *Child & Youth Service Review*, 46:160-167. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.08.020; Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2015). Fostering a sense of belonging at school – Five orientations to practice that assist vulnerable youth to create a positive student identity. *School Psychology International*, 37, 155–171; Sanders, J., Munford, R., & Liebenberg, L. (2017). Positive youth development practices and better outcomes for high risk youth. *Child abuse and neglect*, 69, 201-212.

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