

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The phenomenon of children fighting wars has drawn the attention of the media, international policymakers and advocates of child rights in recent years. 2002 saw the entry into force of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Of an estimated 300,000 children thought to be fighting wars around the world, nearly half are found in Africa. The cumulative total of children who have been co-opted into fighting in the past decades is subject to only rough estimation. Why such a concentration in Africa? Viewed out of context, the problem of child soldiers appears as an incomprehensible and aberrant breakdown of civilization; the norms and values that protect children seem to have vanished, or worse, never existed. Within a historical and universal context, however, a picture emerges in which families', communities' and states' ability to protect and nurture children is chronically undermined. Children have become the object of predatory rebel movements and government forces alike, for a lack of adult manpower, for their very developmental characteristics and the ease with which they can be politically and militarily mobilized. Far from being a product of 'African culture' or 'tradition', the recruitment and deployment of children is a symptom of the socio-economic and political instability that wracks a demographically young continent; around half of the population of Africa consists of children. The notion of voluntarism is debated: can a child make a rational decision to take up arms and fight a war he or she could not possibly understand? Recruitment methods vary from the brutally coercive to the more subtle and political. From any approach, African children are forced to make decisions beyond their years, whether facing the barrel of a rifle or facing exclusion, hunger and hardship. The consequences are yet poorly understood. Children and families experience loss and trauma, children become simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence. Thus socialized, they are then faced with reintegrating into societies fragmented and economically devastated by war, sometimes as adults who were recruited as children and demobilized many years later. This monograph places the issue in context by dispelling the notion that child soldiers are somehow a product of African culture and associated with particular 'tribal', 'brutal' or 'uncivilized' characteristics of the continent.

It gives a comprehensive overview of approaches to the study of child soldiers, and makes an appeal for the special consideration of girl soldiers, for whom the experience of war can profoundly differ from that of boys. This monograph lays the foundation for further research and publications from Interact, which will include studies on the political dimensions of youth and armed conflict, on the challenges of reintegration faced by children and youth, children in peace processes and on children, armed conflict and HIV/AIDS.