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To cite this article: Roos Haer (2019) Children and armed conflict: looking at the future and learning from the past, Third World Quarterly, 40:1, 74-91, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2018.1552131](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1552131)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1552131>



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Published online: 21 Jan 2019.



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# Children and armed conflict: looking at the future and learning from the past

Roos Haer

Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

Children are currently being recruited to an increasing extent by armed groups, assuming both ancillary and combat roles. Academic research on this phenomenon has grown in scope over the last few years. However, the current research lacks a comparative perspective. As a result, we presently have a very restricted perspective of the state of the art on the subject of child soldiering, making it difficult to recognise research areas that urgently require further investigation. The ambition of this article is twofold: first, to explore the existing state of child soldier studies across disciplines, and second, to encourage potential research by highlighting three relatively underdeveloped research areas.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 July 2018

Accepted 21 November 2018

## KEYWORDS

Child soldiers  
youth  
armed conflict  
girl soldiers

## Introduction

War is arguably the most catastrophic event known to humankind, entailing particularly grave consequences for children in terms of survival, development and well-being.<sup>1</sup> Children are not exclusively the passive victims of conflict between armed groups; in fact, they have been increasingly recruited by such groups, assuming both ancillary and more active combat roles.<sup>2</sup>

While children have been part of armed groups throughout history, (anecdotal) evidence suggest that we encounter more often children in armed conflict. A NATO report<sup>3</sup> argues that Western forces are encountering more often child soldiers as they intervene in failed states. A report released in November 2004 by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers found that children were fighting in almost every major conflict, in both government and opposition forces.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does child recruitment breach international laws,<sup>5</sup> but recruiting them for military purposes can also have serious consequences for both the children involved and for the entire society. When children are engaged as soldiers, spending their formative years immersed in systems of violence and constructing their values and identities under the guidance of these armed groups, they can become vehicles of violence rather than citizens who can build stable peace.<sup>6</sup> Child soldiering<sup>7</sup> should thus be a high priority for the international community interested in promoting peace and stability as well as for academics.<sup>8</sup>

**CONTACT** Roos Haer  [R.van.der.Haer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:R.van.der.Haer@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)  Institute of Political Science, Leiden University, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, The Netherlands

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Surprisingly, until recently, the literature on the use of child soldiers was fairly sparse, with a heavy preponderance of the work conducted by members of the think-tank and civil-society communities rather than by academics.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, academic research on the use of children in armed conflict has expanded over the past few years. The disciplines involved include anthropology,<sup>10</sup> law,<sup>11</sup> political science,<sup>12</sup> economics,<sup>13</sup> psychology<sup>14</sup> and sociology,<sup>15</sup> among others. This literature, although extremely interesting and helpful in identifying important causal mechanisms, suffers from some important limitation: most studies (but definitely not all) have focused their investigation on one or a limited number of cases, i.e. a limited number of former child soldiers are interviewed, the recruitment practices of one or two armed groups are examined or only a limited number of countries are examined. As a result, they can provide no or only very limited comparative perspective, restricting the generalisability of the findings as well as the possibility of identifying more universal patterns.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, we currently have a very limited view of the state of the art on the topic of child soldiering, making it difficult to identify research areas that are relatively unexplored and underdeveloped.

The ambition of this article is to overcome this important scientific gap. My objective is not to present any new data, or evaluate the quality of previous findings, nor do I seek to test any specific new empirical hypotheses about the causes or consequences of child soldiering. On the contrary, in attempting to remedy this deficits in the research, this article has two aims: first, to explore the existing state of child soldier studies across disciplinary boundaries, and second, to encourage potential future research by highlighting three relatively underdeveloped research areas connected to child soldiering.

## State of the art

Generally, one can divide the academic literature on child recruitment into four main approaches: those who investigate the influence of general and structural factors, those who emphasise the importance of the supply side of child soldiering, those who examine the demand side and those who are primarily interested in the consequences of child soldiering.

### *General and systematic factors*

The existing literature provides a number of structural explanations for the use of child soldiers in armed conflicts.<sup>17</sup> These explanations tend to link broad social, political and economic conditions to the costs associated with recruiting and employing child soldiers in conflicts. Although many different explanations are discussed, three (interrelated) factors are repeatedly mentioned.

First, several authors have pointed to the influence of the technological advancement of personal weaponry and the proliferation of small weapons.<sup>18</sup> Singer<sup>19</sup> argues that such advancements have facilitated the transformation of children into fighters as lethal as adults, increasing the likelihood of child recruitment. The small arms argument, however, is heavily debated.<sup>20</sup> Researchers have pointed out that many children are often sent into battle unarmed or solely armed with traditional weapons, and that the lack of existing data on illicit arms trade means that testing of this potential causal linkage is extremely difficult.

Second, certain scholars have emphasised the influence of globalisation. Honwana<sup>21</sup> argues that, due to social and economic crises associated with globalisation, many low-income countries experience a widening of existing inequalities thereby straining and weakening the 'social fabric'. Honwana<sup>22</sup> further argues that this has impacted the capacity of households and communities to nurture and protect children. Ultimately, this trend has resulted in the commodification of children, a revaluation that has brought about an increase in child labour, including child soldiering.

Related to this globalisation argument is the idea that the state's poverty level is the driving force behind child recruitment.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes this is even cited as *the* cause of child soldiering.<sup>24</sup> Cohn and Goodwin-Gill<sup>25</sup> assert that many young soldiers enlist in an attempt to 'counter [their] feelings of helplessness, vulnerability and frustration'. However, as Achvarina and Reich<sup>26</sup> contend, this explanation is too simplistic: there are many more poor children who do *not* become child soldiers, even in war zones.

Lastly, the sheer number of children – that is, the abundant supply – constitutes another frequently mentioned structural variable. For example, Peters, Richards and Vlassenroot<sup>27</sup> note that Africa is the world's youngest continent. As a result, both rebel groups and governments may have an easier time recruiting children.<sup>28</sup> A version of this argument examines the relationship between the size of the orphan population within countries and the usage of child soldiers.<sup>29</sup> However, Achvarina and Reich<sup>30</sup> do not find any significant relationship between orphan rates and child soldier usage.

### **Supply side of child soldiering**

Two central points of criticism regarding the structural understandings can be raised: first, it neglects individual agency in social and political processes,<sup>31</sup> and second, it cannot explain the significant variation in child soldier rates across countries and armed groups over time and space.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, many scholars have turned to supply factors, i.e. factors influencing the enlistment of children. These supply motivations are variegated, complex and can be generally divided into push and pull factors.<sup>33</sup>

Push factors are negatives that children escape by joining an armed group.<sup>34</sup> Many studies have pointed to the lack of educational opportunities as one example of such a factor.<sup>35</sup> Peters<sup>36</sup> argues, on the basis of his ethnographic research in the Congo, that whenever normal educational opportunities are blocked, young people begin to seek out other educational opportunities, often ending up in military schools. Along the same lines, a lack of employment opportunities can also invoke a sense of despair and/or can make fighting in armed conflict seem like a viable job option.<sup>37</sup> Other scholars have argued that children often join to escape insecure situations. For example, they may want to leave home to escape (sexual) abuse.<sup>38</sup>

Equally compelling are the pull factors, which are positive rewards and incentives for joining armed groups.<sup>39</sup> Besides the obvious promise of money and security, some children are attracted to armed groups by the 'adventure', 'the sheer fun of belonging', a desire to become 'famous and admired' or simply because they believe in what they are fighting for or want to take revenge.<sup>40</sup> It can reasonably be conjectured, however, that both pull and push factors and the interactions between them play a crucial role.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Demand side of child soldiering***

Whereas the supply-side explanations offer theories of willingness, demand explanations primarily explore the opportunity aspect of the phenomenon. Scholars working in this strand of research investigate factors influencing the decision of recruiters to enlist children. *Prima facie*, recruiting children would not seem to be a very good business model for an armed group: they can be undisciplined, they lack the necessary weight-bearing abilities and tactical and strategic judgment that might be necessary in combat situations, they are psychologically unprepared for the sustained hardships of war and consequently they are more likely to defect.<sup>42</sup> Despite all these shortcomings, many armed groups do recruit children.

Several interrelated solutions to this puzzle are offered. The first centres on troop shortages and the need to maximise recruitment.<sup>43</sup> As Woods<sup>44</sup> explains, recruiters often target children based on the simple need to fill ranks, especially when armed forces face shortages of traditional adult recruits.<sup>45</sup> A related argument is that some armed groups consider child recruitment to be an act of social inclusion that unequivocally proves the universal character of their cause.<sup>46</sup> As such, the participation of children is seen as a huge moral and political victory: it represents the group's capacity to incorporate new social layers.<sup>47</sup>

Second, some scholars argue that the answer lies in the differences in behaviour and decision-making between children and adults. They assert that children possess certain characteristics that make them more effective fighters in comparison to adults. For example, children are more malleable, adaptable and obedient; thus, they are more readily indoctrinated and deceived and are consequently easier to control and retain.<sup>48</sup> For instance, Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) consciously recruited children on a large scale because they were considered to be more readily to obey and their moral judgments were easier to suspend.<sup>49</sup> The idea that children are unable to evaluate the consequences of their actions, that they score higher than adults in terms of sensation-seeking and risk-taking behaviour<sup>50</sup> and that they often feel that they are invulnerable<sup>51</sup> has been partially confirmed by psychological research and experiments performed by behavioural economists.<sup>52</sup> Lastly, some authors have argued that certain groups focus on the recruitment of children due to the moral shock it creates on the battlefield.<sup>53</sup> One can especially find this line of reasoning in literature on the use of children by terrorist organisations.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Consequences of child soldiering***

In comparison to the number of studies focusing on the supply and demand sides of child soldier recruitment, relatively few scholars have examined the consequences of child soldiering. Several studies examining the individual consequences of child soldiering have demonstrated that children often experience mental health problems following their association with combat forces, especially those who were exposed to violence and returned to situations of limited family and peer support and/or community stigmatisation.<sup>55</sup> It is important to note, however, that not all the evidence is gloomy.<sup>56</sup> Some scholars have suggested that a child's response to stressful conditions is often less intense than might be expected,<sup>57</sup> and that impacted children sometimes show signs of positive adaptation, competence and even post-traumatic growth.<sup>58</sup> For instance, Belsky et al.<sup>59</sup> suggests that particular children due to their biological (genetic), temperamental and/or behaviour characteristics are more

vulnerable to the adverse effect of negative experiences (i.e. war exposure), whereas others are relatively resilient with respect to them.

Apart from these individual psychological changes, former child soldiers also endure other challenges. Blattman and Annan<sup>60</sup> examine the economic and educational consequences of being abducted, finding that in comparison to youth who were not involved in the conflict, economic and educational impacts were widespread and persistent among those who were abducted. However, not all effects are negative. Blattman<sup>61</sup> shows that forced recruitment leads to greater post-war political participation among former child soldiers; for example, such recruitment increases their likelihood of voting.

A second issue that is often examined is the effective reintegration of former child soldiers with the help of Disarmament Demobilization Reintegration programmes. Due to a lack of comparative data, most research exploring this topic involves in-depth case studies on individual DDR initiatives. For instance, Halton<sup>62</sup> uses a practitioner perspective to investigate reintegration problems in Sudan, showing that strong enforcement of local-level child-protection mechanisms has been used to provide follow-up care for demobilised children.

In addition to these two major strands, a few academics have examined the consequences of using child soldiers – not only for the armed groups, but also for society at large. Haer and Böhmelt<sup>63</sup> investigate how child soldiering influences the military effectiveness of armed groups and the duration of conflict, concluding that child soldiering increases the strength of rebel organisations vis-à-vis the government. Others have shown that the risk of conflict recurrence increases with child soldiers recruited by rebel groups in an earlier dispute; counterintuitively, the presence of DDR programmes is unlikely to influence conflict recurrence at all.<sup>64</sup>

The scholarship reviewed above reflects not only the diversity of the researchers interested in child soldiering and the numerous causal mechanisms proposed to explain the supply and demand sides of the phenomenon, but also the various methodological and disciplinary approaches employed to examine the topic. For instance, a great deal of impressive ethnographic work has been conducted in the attempt to identify individual supply-side factors. Additionally, clinical and social psychology has significantly contributed to the strand of research examining the consequences for former child soldier. Political scientists have led the way in investigating repercussions for society in general and conflict dynamics. At the same time, the state of the art presented here illustrates how our methods of examining child soldiering are limited.

Until recently, most of the reviewed studies focus on one or a limited number of cases of child soldiering, restricting the generalisability of the findings as well as the possibility of identifying more universal patterns. Identifying these patterns can help us not only in predicting the occurrence of child soldiering but also set in place measures that might prevent its occurrence. More importantly, due to this lack of comparability, the reviewed studies often suffer from some form of selection bias. For instance, some scholars have focused solely on prominent armed groups, such as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda or the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone, both of which are known to recruit children on a very large scale.<sup>65</sup> In doing so, they fail to consider armed groups that refrain from using children. The same form of bias can be found in studies examining the individual consequences of child soldiering: much of this research exclusively investigates former child soldiers, neglecting children who were not involved with the belligerents and those who are still active in the group. Although these shortcomings are understandable and although

this work has been extremely helpful in identifying potential causal mechanisms and expanding our existing theories, omitting countries, armed groups or even particular groups of children severely constrains the discovery of more general factors and patterns that might not only increase our academic understanding but might also be needed to set up preventive measures. For instance, it might be the case that conflicts in which few or no children are recruited share commonalities that make such recruitment more difficult. Moreover, there might be important difference between child soldiers that were active as fighters (i.e. child combatants) and those children that were primarily used in support functions. It is also possible that the severity of the mental problems suffered by former child soldiers does not differ greatly from that of children not enlisted by any armed group but merely growing up in a conflict situation. Similarly, the factors influencing the recruitment of children may be no different from those impacting the recruitment of adults.<sup>66</sup>

One of the reasons of this general lack of large comparative work has been the difficulty associated with getting accurate (individual or cross-sectional time-series) data on child soldiering.<sup>67</sup> It is only recently that large comparative data sets have been compiled. For instance, in the field of political science, Beber and Blattman<sup>68</sup> categorise the percentage share of child soldiers in 40 randomly selected Sub-Saharan African armed groups.<sup>69</sup> Haer and Böhmelt<sup>70</sup> extended this coverage by compiling a data set on the level of child soldier usages by armed groups (government and rebel groups) for more armed groups over a longer period of time (1989–2013). In the field of psychologists, one can see the intention of increasing the number of observations across time and space. Boothby et al.<sup>71</sup> extended the data collection effort by examining, as one of the first, the long-term psychological, social and economic effects of child soldiering over a period of 16 years. It is important to note, however, that all of these data collection efforts might suffer from some sort of a bias. For instance, the comparative information collected by Beber and Blattman<sup>72</sup> or Haer and Böhmelt<sup>73</sup> is based among others on reports published by advocacy groups. These groups might have the incentives to exaggerate the proportion of child soldiers. At the same time, the data might be biased in favour for the more known (and perhaps also large) groups.

## Research potential

As the above review shows, the literature on the use of children in armed conflict has flourished, providing a plethora of causal mechanisms to explain the supply, demand and consequences of child soldiering. However, the current state of the art suffers from certain limitations. I am by no means arguing that the existing studies have not produced any important results; however, due in part to the limitations described, there are several research areas related to the topic of child soldiering that have not received adequate attention. Because scientific inference depends not only on what one knows but also on recognising what one does not know,<sup>74</sup> I highlight three prominent areas that are still relatively underdeveloped.

Although, these three areas are to some extent chosen arbitrarily, I consider them as good examples of underdeveloped areas in which we can identify the link between the limitations (i.e. lack of variation and interdisciplinary work) to the state of the art of child soldier literature (i.e. supply, demand and consequences).



## ***Girl soldiers***

One of the main shortcomings of the growing body of academic literature on child soldiers is the paucity of research on girl soldiers.<sup>75</sup> This lack of attention is surprising, since some scholars assert that girls have comprised 30–40% of all child combatants in recent conflicts in Africa.<sup>76</sup> No doubt part of the reason behind this neglect has been the presumption that war and violence are in some sense ‘men’s work’.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, to the extent that girls were seen as participating in armed groups at all, it was assumed until quite recently that their involvement was exclusively confined to support roles.<sup>78</sup>

The work of McKay,<sup>79</sup> Mazurana,<sup>80</sup> Denov<sup>81</sup> and Annan et al.<sup>82</sup> have, among others, countered these images. For instance, McKay<sup>83</sup> compared the post-conflict experience of former girls soldiers that were active in the recent conflict in Sierra Leone (2002) and Uganda with those of women who recalled their experiences when they were girl participants during the Mozambican war which ended in 1992. Her research shed important light to the experiences of girls in armed groups.

Although these important works have pushed the issue of girl soldiers on the international agenda, we currently have little to no knowledge on how the experiences of girls and boys differ once they are recruited.<sup>84</sup> On the individual level, there are some indications that girl soldiers face issues that are fundamentally different from those experienced by boy soldiers; they perform additional duties, bearing heavier workloads, and receive less food and worse health care.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, the vulnerability of girls, their low status and their gender imply that they might be more susceptible to widespread physical and psychological abuse during their time in armed groups.<sup>86</sup>

Significant variation also exists between girl and boy soldiering on the group level.<sup>87</sup> Some armed groups, such as those active in conflicts in Congo-Brazzaville and Chad, largely refrain from recruiting girls, let alone using them as fighters.<sup>88</sup> Others, in contrast, actively employ girl soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>89</sup> Naturally, this variation raises a question: why do certain armed groups recruit girls, whereas others do not enlist them at all? Furthermore, why do some groups use girls on the battlefield, whereas others exploit them solely in supportive roles? The answers to these questions might lie in the characteristics of the armed group, such as its support base, ideology or perhaps tactical and strategic considerations. It might be the case that armed groups that rely heavily on terror tactics are more likely to recruit girls due to the fact that they will not be suspected of engaging in subversive activities, enhancing their ‘element of surprise’. Moreover, the use of girls in combat roles might also be a function of a group’s religious/ideological beliefs. Cunningham argues that female activism has tended to be more active within secularist context rather than among Islamists.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to the question of variation on the group level, it is also unclear what the consequences of recruiting girls (and of using them in combat) might be. Do armed groups that recruit girls behave differently on the battlefield than those that refrain from such exploitation? Adhering to a substitution argument, the use of girl soldiers might have an effect on, among other things, the perpetrated level of sexual violence: their presence might mean that male combatants do not ‘need’ to rape. Moreover, as girls are generally considered to be more caring and empathic, their incorporation might also influence the relationship between the armed group and the civilian population.



Filling the gaps outlined above is of vital importance, as many of the policies and programmes developed to address the needs of former girl soldiers are very poorly informed; all too often they are nonexistent.<sup>91</sup>

### ***Forced versus voluntary recruitment***

There are diverse narratives surrounding the question of why children become involved with armed groups. One key narrative, attractive in its simplicity, emphasises forced recruitment, portraying child soldiers as victims.<sup>92</sup> Although this narrative is certainly true in certain cases, some scholars are slowly opening up to the possibility that this narrative overlooks the significance of children's agency.<sup>93</sup> Peters argues that the key question that must be addressed is whether youth have far fewer options than adults in the same situation. Often, young people have been represented as not having a free choice and thus as having been forcibly recruited, while adults in the same situation are generally assumed to have joined voluntarily and thus to have had a free choice. Wessells argues that, at times, conflict represents an opportunity for children.<sup>94</sup> Singer<sup>95</sup> argues that the recruitment of roughly two out of every three child soldiers involves some form of voluntary enlistment. This assertion has been confirmed by empirical evidence: a survey conducted in East Asia found that 57% of the children had volunteered.<sup>96</sup> Another survey of child soldiers in four African countries found that 64% had joined under no threat of violence.<sup>97</sup>

Although these surveys show that the narrative of forced recruitment is somewhat exaggerated, it also overlooks the blurred lines between 'forced' and 'voluntary'.<sup>98</sup> Some scholars and representatives of think tanks, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) have contended that it is often too simplistic to think in terms of forced versus voluntary enlistment. War zones, it is argued, blur the boundaries: if a boy/girl witnesses his parents' murder and he/she joins an armed group to obtain protection and food, is this choice free or the product of desperation?<sup>99</sup> Moreover, do children really understand the consequences of joining an armed group?<sup>100</sup> In questioning choice and volunteerism, Honwana argues that we need to make a differentiation between tactical and strategic agency of children, the former being employed to 'cope with and maximise the concrete, immediate circumstances of the military environment in which they have to operate' while the latter requires a position of power, full consciousness of the ultimate goals of actions and an ability to anticipate long-term gains or benefits.<sup>101</sup>

Nonetheless, the strength of the 'forced recruitment' narrative has hampered research seeking to explain the variation in recruitment methods. The first crucial question that should be explored involves factors influencing forced recruitment. Does it perhaps depend on their available resources? The work of Gates,<sup>102</sup> Andvig and Gates<sup>103</sup> and Blattman and Annan<sup>104</sup> has suggested that when economic resources are available, armed groups do not need to rely on forcible abduction.<sup>105</sup> When economic resources are available, armed groups are less responsive to international pressure such as penalties or prosecution, which might in turn lead to more forcible recruitment.<sup>106</sup>

It should be noted that resources comprise more than economic assets. Armed groups also rely heavily on civilians for support in terms of food, hiding places and tactical information. Thus, the level of forcible recruitment might also depend on the overall level of civilian support and/or the level of territorial control.

Second, and related, it is unclear how the recruitment rate correlates with conflict dynamics. Recruitment may well be related to conflict intensity, with heavy fighting resulting in a higher abduction rate. For example, the RUF in Sierra Leone used abducted children to regain strength and continue the war effort.<sup>107</sup> Extending this argument to relatively peaceful situations, we should expect a decrease in abductions during times of peace negotiations or ceasefires. However, as the example of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) shows, forcible recruitment rates can also rise in times of peace; indeed, the LTTE increasingly resorted to this strategy during ceasefires between 2002 and 2006.<sup>108</sup>

Lastly, there is also variation found within the category of forced recruitment. For instance, in Nepal and Sri Lanka, forced recruitment by armed opposition groups has often been characterised by quota systems, whereby families are forced to supply one member for the 'cause'.<sup>109</sup> However, this method of forced recruitment is rarely seen in other conflicts, in which many children are abducted as a group or press-ganged.<sup>110</sup>

All in all, these factors suggest that the type of recruitment (forced versus voluntary enlistment) may depend on structural aspects such as resources and conflict dynamics but might also change in accordance with the group's needs and objectives.<sup>111</sup> What structural factors play a role? What group characteristics influence this decision, and how do they vary over time?

### *Effective international response*

In its fight against the use of children in armed conflict, the international community has implemented three kinds of measures: the 'naming and shaming' of perpetrators, the sanctioning of violators and the use of juridical instruments to punish offenders. Chief among these efforts has been a push for accountability in the form of naming and shaming the perpetrators on the part of the United Nations Security Council in its Annual Report on Children in Armed Conflicts (Resolution 1662; 1882; 1998; 2068; 2225). In these reports, offenders are called out for their use of children in combat. In order to be removed from the lists, these groups must develop an action plan on how they intend to end the recruitment of children, as well as how they plan for their release and reintegration. For example, in 2009, the UN entered into an action plan with the Maoists in Nepal, who subsequently released 3000 minors.<sup>112</sup>

Until recently, listed violators did not face any sanctions; however, this policy changed with the adoption of Resolution 2225 in 2015.<sup>113</sup> This resolution promoted the establishment of country-specific sanctions committees that can establish sanctions (such as arms embargoes, asset freezes and travel bans) against individuals who persistently use children in armed conflict. At present, sanction committees have been established in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia.<sup>114</sup>

In addition to these two measures, the international community has also increasingly concentrated on criminalising child recruitment.<sup>115</sup> On 14 March 2012, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, was found guilty by the International Criminal Court of enlisting and conscripting children and actively using them in hostilities.<sup>116</sup> Charges have also been brought against members of other groups. Furthermore, the Special Court for Sierra Leone has already convicted five individuals of enlisting children for active participation in hostilities – including former President of Liberia Charles Taylor.<sup>117</sup>

Especially in the policy community, there has been a debate over the effectiveness of such measures. Some have argued that the international community has been so successful in pushing for the creation of international rules and conventions against the use of child soldiers that we can now speak of a norm against the use of child soldiers.<sup>118</sup> Others have pointed to the rise in child soldier recruitment as a counterargument.<sup>119</sup> This observation brings up a very interesting puzzle that has received only limited attention from academics: why, despite the considerable efforts of the international community, do state and non-state actors still actively recruit children? In other words, does the punishment of offenders actually deter potential rebel and state leaders from recruiting children? Has the naming and shaming policy of the UN and other international organisations really had an effect? Do the sanctions imposed impact the behaviour of rebel and state leaders? Do they influence their cost-and-benefit calculations? Do rebel leaders react differently to these measures than state representatives? The studies of Lasley and Thyne<sup>120</sup> and Hamberg<sup>121</sup> provide a first few insights. Lasley and Thyne<sup>122</sup> argue that the recruitment decisions of rebel groups are a product of rational calculations with a keen eye towards the future. They demonstrate that, constrained by their desire for legitimacy, separatist rebel groups are likely to avoid the use of children in their struggle in an attempt to be recognised by the international community. Hamberg,<sup>123</sup> in contrast, in his case study on the motivations of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement in demobilising its child soldiers, shows that international measures did not play a significant role in the decision to release the children; rather, the aim was to secure support from the US. However, the question still remains: in light of the considerable efforts of the international community, why do we observe state and non-state actors actively recruiting children?

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was not to answer a research question, nor was it to present new data on child soldiering or to test specific expectations. Instead, this article's agenda was twofold. The first objective was to present an extensive overview of the literature on the use of children in armed conflict. In so doing, four strands of research were recognised.

The review reveals that many of the studies suffer from some form of selection bias: they focus on extreme cases of child soldiering or examine a limited number of cases, and some lack a comparative perspective. This does not allow for drawing general conclusions across many cases, let alone determining the main causal mechanisms leading to the use of or refusal to use children in armed conflict.

Following this review, the second aim of the article was to identify several areas linked to child soldiering that have not yet received adequate attention. For instance, little is known about why certain armed groups decide to abduct children, whereas others rely primarily on voluntary recruitment. Why is it that the campaign against the use of children has enjoyed little success, in contrast to other campaigns against human rights abuses (such as the use of landmines and human trafficking)? Moreover, what explains the variation in the use of girl soldiers?

As the article has demonstrated, the use of children in conflict is a horrible example of the deteriorating standards of human rights that can potentially entail serious consequences for societies as a whole and as well as for neighbouring countries. More precise and in-depth knowledge of why children join violent conflicts, why irregular and regular armies enlist and/or abduct boys and girls, and what the consequences are for the children, the armed

groups and the society at large will help us to craft policies capable of reducing child soldiering.<sup>124</sup> Obtaining a more profound understanding will only be possible by crossing disciplinary boundaries, ensuring a comparative perspective and covering the full range of potential research areas. Not only will these steps help to increase the effectiveness of existing DDR programmes, but they will also facilitate essential protective policies that will give all children growing up in conflict areas a better start in life in life.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

**Roos Haer** is an Assistant Professor of Internal Relations at the Institute of Political Science, Leiden University in The Netherlands where she specialises in studying the consequences of child soldiering, political violence and civil war dynamics at the micro-level. She has published several articles in journals in the field of international relations and psychology, including *Journal of Peace Research*, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, *Aggressive Behavior* and the *European Journal of International Relations*. In addition, she is author of *Armed Group Structure and Violence in Civil Wars: The Organizational Dynamics of Civilian Killing* (Routledge, 2015).

## Notes

1. Denov, "Girl Soldiers."
2. Boyden, "The Moral Development."
3. NATO, "Child Soldiers."
4. McBride, *The War Crime*, 2; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, "Child Soldier Use 2003."
5. For instance, recruiting children under the age of 18 breaches the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Recruiting children under the age of 15 years old violates international humanitarian law.
6. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 3; Haer and Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs"; Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," 130.
7. The standard definition of a child soldier was formulated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2007; "A 'child soldier' is any child – boy or girl– under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members." This definition has been adopted in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, but also as international law in 2000. Before that, two of the most influential reports on children in conflict—the UN Machel Report of 1996 and the UN 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child – also defined children as those under age of 18. I recognize, however, that this threshold is not without controversy. It is especially contested by anthropologists and sociologists working in childhood studies (see e.g., Hart, 'Saving Children'; and James and James, *Key Concepts*). It is additionally important to note that the term 'child soldiers' does not solely refer to children active as fighters. On the contrary, child soldiers have often supportive roles in an armed group. For instance, they are active as cooks, intelligence officers, carriers, etc."
8. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 3; Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," 130.
9. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," 131.
10. Boyden and de Berry, *Children and Youth*; Rosen, *Armies of the Young*; Boyden, "The Moral Development."
11. Fox, "Girl Soldiers"; Drumble, *Reimagining Child Soldiers*.
12. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering"; Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide."
13. Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance"; Annan et al., "Civil War, Reintegration."

14. Wessells, "Children and Armed Conflict"; Betancourt and Khan, "The Mental Health"; Boothby, "Mozambique Life Outcome Study."
15. Twum-Danso, *Africa's Young Soldiers*; Cook and Wall, *Children in Armed Conflict*.
16. Tynes and Early, "Governments, Rebels."
17. Ibid., 18.
18. Stohl et al., *The Small Arms Trade*; Singer, *Children at War*.
19. Singer, *Children at War*.
20. Andvig, "Child Soldiers"; Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide"; Shepler, "The Social and Cultural Context."
21. Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*.
22. Ibid.
23. Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict*; Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*; Singer, *Children at War*.
24. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide."
25. Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*, 31.
26. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," 134.
27. Peters et al., "What Happens to Youth."
28. Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*; Tynes and Early, "Governments, Rebels."
29. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*; Brett et al., "Children: Invisible Soldiers."
30. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide."
31. Denov, *Girls in Fighting Forces*, 39.
32. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering"; Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide."
33. Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors."
34. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 46.
35. Machel, *Impact of Armed Conflict*; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*.
36. Peters, *Re-examining Voluntarism*, 21.
37. Tynes and Early, "Governments, Rebels," 83; Brett et al., *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*.
38. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*, 88.
39. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 46.
40. Brett et al., *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*, 60ff; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 32.
41. Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors," 2.
42. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering"; Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors"; and Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors: The case of Colombia."
43. Blattman and Annan, "Child Combatants"; Twum-Danso, *Africa's Young Soldiers*.
44. Woods, *Child soldiers*.
45. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*; Singer, *Children at War*; Brett et al., *Children: Invisible Soldiers*.
46. Ferro and Uribe, *El orden de la guerra*; Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors," 9.
47. Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing minors."
48. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering"; Boyden, "The Moral Development"; Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors," 18; and Gutiérrez-Sanín, "Organizing Minors: The case of Colombia".
49. Thompson, "Beyond Civil Society."
50. Arnett, "Sensation Seeking"; O'Donoghue and Rabin, "Some Issues," 36.
51. Brett and Specht, *Young Soldiers*.
52. See O'Donoghue and Rabin, "Some Issues" for an overview.
53. Dallaire, *They Fight Like Soldiers*; Tynes and Early, "Governments, Rebels"; Singer, *Children at War*.
54. Singer, "The New Children of Terror"; Bloom, "Analysis: Women and Children."
55. Betancourt et al., "Research Review"; Tonheim, "Who Will Comfort Me?"; see Denov, "Girl Soldiers" on the stigmatization of former girl soldiers.
56. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 28-29; Blattman, "From Violence to Voting," 231; Boothby et al., "Mozambique Life Outcome Study."
57. Shaw, "Children Exposed," 238.

58. Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth"; Masten and Narayan, "Child Development"; Betancourt and Khan, "The Mental Health"; see also Meyerson et al., "Posttraumatic Growth" for an overview of post-traumatic growth.
59. Belsky et al., "For Better and For Worse."
60. Blattman and Annan, "Child Combatants"; Blattman and Annan, "The Consequences of Child Soldiering."
61. Blattman, "From Violence to Voting."
62. Halton, "Child Soldier Reintegration."
63. Haer and Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs?"; Haer and Böhmelt, "The Impact of Child Soldiers."
64. Haer and Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs?"
65. Peters, *Re-examining Voluntarism*; McKay, "Girls as Weapons of Terror."
66. Peters, *Re-examining Voluntarism*, 6-7; Ames, "Methodological Problems," 17.
67. McCallin and Brett, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers*; Høiskar, "Underage and Under Fire"; Tynes, "Child Soldiers."
68. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering."
69. Additionally, Tynes, "Child Soldiers," recorded a dichotomous indicator with the help of reports from the NGO *Child Soldier International*, on the use of child soldiers by 198 armed groups between 1987 and 2007. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," have collected comparative information on the country level for 19 cases.
70. Haer and Böhmelt, "The Impact of Child Soldiers"; Haer and Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs?"
71. Boothby et al., "Mozambique Child Soldier."
72. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering."
73. Haer and Böhmelt, "The Impact of Child Soldiers"; Haer and Böhmelt, "Child Soldiers as Time Bombs?"
74. Ames, "Methodological Problems," 14.
75. Park, "Other Inhumane Acts."
76. Denov, "Girl Soldiers," 814.
77. Denov, "Girl Soldiers," 813; Mason, "Women's Participation," 63.
78. Park, "Other Inhumane Acts"; Fox, "Girl Soldiers"; Mason, "Women's Participation," 64; Brett, "Amazons."
79. McKay, "Girls as Weapons of Terror"; McKay, "Reconstructing Fragile Lives."
80. Mazurana et al., "Girls in Fighting Forces."
81. Denov, "Girl Soldiers."
82. Annan et al., "Civil War, Reintegration."
83. McKay, "Reconstructing Fragile Lives."
84. McKay, "Girls as Weapons of Terror," 389.
85. Mazurana et al., "Girls in Fighting Forces."
86. IBID.
87. Haer and Böhmelt, "Girl Soldiering."
88. Mazurana et al., "Girls in Fighting Forces."
89. Specht, "Red Shoes"; UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*; Hogg, "Child Recruitment"; Barth, *Peace as Disappointment*; West, "Girls with Guns."
90. Cunningham, "Cross-Regional Trends." However, female activism in orthodox Islamic violent organizations seems to have increased as of late 2000s (see Cunningham, "Countering Female Terrorism").
91. Mazurana et al., "Girls in Fighting Forces."
92. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 31.
93. Hart, "Saving Children"; Haer, "The Study of Child Soldiering"; Peters, *Re-examining Voluntarism*, 6-7.
94. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 31.
95. Singer, *Children at War*, 61.

96. UNICEF, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers*.
97. International Labour Office, *Wounded Childhood*; Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 31; Singer, *Children at War*, 61.
98. Andvig, "Child Soldiers," 20; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*; Singer, *Children at War*.
99. Wessells, *Child Soldiers*, 33.
100. Singer, *Children at War*, 62
101. Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, 73.
102. Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance."
103. Andvig and Gates, "Recruiting Children."
104. Blattman and Annan, "Child Combatants."
105. Beber and Blattman, "The Logic of Child Soldiering."
106. Ibid.
107. Singer, *Children at War*, 98.
108. Becker, "Child Recruitment," 112.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid., 109.
111. Singer, *Children at War*, 58.
112. UN News Centre, "UN and Nepal."
113. UN, "Sanctions."
114. Ibid.
115. Tynes, "Child Soldiers," 252; Gates and Reich, "Introduction."
116. ICC, "The Prosecutor v. Thomas Lubanga Dyilo."
117. Rosen, "Child Soldiers," for an interesting discussion on the laws governing child soldiers.
118. Hamberg, "Transitional Advocacy Networks"; Lasley and Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy; see also Fox, "Girl Soldiers"; Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, *Child Soldiers*; Chikuhwa, "The Evolution of the United Nations" for an extensive discussion of the existing rules and laws on the issue.
119. Achvarina and Reich, "No Place to Hide," 128.
120. Lasley and Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy."
121. Hamberg, "Transitional Advocacy Networks."
122. Lasley and Thyne, "Secession, Legitimacy."
123. Hamberg, "Transitional Advocacy Networks."
124. Ames, "Methodological Problems," 14.

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