**Child soldiers**



Children and young people play an active part in conflicts all over the world. They fight, shoot, lay mines, and go on reconnaissance. They are used as spies and for mine clearance and other hazardous activities. They face injury and death. Many children are sexually abused. Those who survive are likely to be seriously scarred emotionally by their experiences.

**Why do armies want children to be soldiers?**

The use of children in war – as drummer boys and messengers – has happened throughout history, but in the past young people’s size and physical strength would have told against them in combat. Nowadays, the widespread availability of cheap, lightweight small arms and other weaponry has meant that children’s assets – inconspicuous, quick and knowledgeable about terrain – have become useful for active soldiering. To some armies and militias, children are cheap, compliant and tragically dispensable.

Both girls and boys might be active soldiers. Girls are more at risk of rape, sexual harassment and abuse – often recruited to be sexual slaves.

**Are there many soldiers?**

Latest estimates suggest there are around 300,000 children and young people under 18 taking a direct part in hostilities around the world. The figures are very rough – no one, for obvious reasons, keeps official records. In fact a report by the “Swedish Save the Children” was titled “The invisible soldiers” to indicate how well hidden the problem is. The statistics are the result of research in many different countries and are, if anything, on the low side. Of course, the actual numbers will vary depending on the state of conflict or peace in any particular country.

Most of those taking a direct part in hostilities are aged 15 to 18 and while this may worry some people, there are younger children, some as young as eight, involved in fighting.

**Do they volunteer to fight?**

The majority of over 15s join up voluntarily, though many will have few other options. If they are living in a conflict zone, they may want to fight to avenge violence against friends or family. Some report being under pressure from relatives or peers to join up or having ideological motivations. They may be attracted by offers of money in areas where there are few other jobs. Children in a conflict setting who are not living with their families are more vulnerable to recruitment – it may be a survival technique.

However, children of all ages don’t volunteer. They are conscripted or abducted into rebel armies, even into official government forces. There are horrific stories of children and young people being forced to take part in atrocities in order to brutalise them for what is to come. Sometimes they are given drink or drugs to dull their senses and inspire courage for fighting.

**Where are they?**

Mostly in African countries, including Chad, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Uganda. The use of soldiers aged under 18 is also prevalent in parts of Asia such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, and in the Middle East.

In Europe and in America the problem is not unknown. Up to 14,000 children are believed to be involved in armed militias in Colombia, and under 18s are thought to be fighting in parts of the Russian Federation.

**Is it legal to use under 18s in fighting?**

Under international humanitarian law, 15 is the minimum age for recruiting soldiers so it would be legal for a 15-year-old to be fighting in an army or armed group. However, campaigners and organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, are working to increase the minimum age to 18.

Under human rights law, an Optional Protocol was added to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2000, which went some way towards this – setting 18 as the minimum age for conscription into the armed forces and banning under 18s from non-governmental armed groups.

This does not go as far as many would like – it means that from the age of 15, children can still join a national army voluntarily.

Recruiting and conscripting children under the age of 15 is a war crime and those accused of using under 15s in fighting would be tried, the same as any other war crimes suspect. Three militia leaders tried at the Special Court for Sierra Leone were the first to be convicted for recruitment of child soldiers in June 2007.

**What happens when the conflict ends?**

Former child soldiers have difficulty adapting to life out of a fighting context. Having learnt that survival depends on violence and aggression, their families and communities often cannot cope with their changed personalities. Many are stigmatized by their home communities. Others end up living on the street or join gangs which are, once again, feared by the public.

Children and young people need help in getting over their traumatic experiences and with reintegration, but this must be done sensitively and within the context of the community, they live in. There is no point in parachuting in many western experts in counselling, encouraging young people to talk about the horrors they have witnessed.

It is better to use community-based approaches, and help young people recover by supplying education and leisure opportunities to help them reintegrate and regain their lives and their right to protection.

Getting more children out of armies and militias was the goal of a recent agreement made by nearly 60 countries. Signatories to the “Paris Principles”, including 10 countries where the UN believes children are used in fighting, said they would help child soldiers in their countries leave the armies or militias and support their integration back into the community. Chad’s government has started working with Unicef to begin removing child soldiers from its national army.

**Can child soldiers be tried for war crimes?**

It is possible, but a prosecutor would be more interested in who recruited them. Some international Tribunals such as the International Criminal Court are limited to trying over 18s, but the Sierra Leone Tribunal has a minimum age of 15.

In practice, it is unlikely that any under 18s would be tried before the Court because it is required to prosecute persons who bear the “greatest responsibility”. Should an accused between 15 and 18 appear before the Court, it is required to consider the child’s age and vulnerability, and the prospect of his or her reintegration into society.

**Activities and discussion**

* It’s often assumed that taking an active part in a conflict is too distressing for children. What if you wanted to fight e.g. because your parents had been killed by the enemy? Would you take objection if you were told you are too young to fight? Discuss the current minimum age of 15 and the efforts to raise that limit. What minimum age would you set and why?
* Child soldiers are often seen as victims of abuse. Are child soldiers, who commit war crimes, victims or perpetrators? Can someone cause harm to someone else and still considered being the victim? What view do you think a child soldier’s victim would take? How might the soldiers’ family feel?
* Discuss the difficulties child soldiers might have after a conflict ends. Would it be a relief no longer to have to fight or might they feel less powerful unarmed? How might the community they left respond to their return? Would it vary depending on the circumstances in which they left to join the armed force? Talk about the different reasons – such as abduction or pressure to leave the family.