

## Chapter 5

### Youth Soldiering: An Integrated Framework for Understanding Psychosocial Impact

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A pervasive characteristic of contemporary political violence is that youth, mostly between the ages of 14 and 18 years, are prominent actors in these hostilities (Cairns, 1996; Wessells, 1998). Owing in no small part to the widespread availability of lightweight weapons such as the AK-47 assault rifle, many of these teenagers serve as soldiers in government-sponsored armed forces or in armed opposition groups (Brett & McCallin, 1996; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994). Consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and other legal instruments, a child soldier may be defined as “any person under 18 years of age who is a member of or attached to the armed forces or an armed group, whether or not there is an armed conflict” (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers [CSC], 2002, p. 11).

No hard data exist on the prevalence of child soldiering. The best current estimates suggest there are approximately 300,000 child soldiers (Machel, 2001), including children as young as 6 or 7 years (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000; Wessells, 1997). Further, 72 different parties to armed conflict currently use children as soldiers (CSC, 2002). In northern Afghanistan, for example, in the recent war by the U. S. and the Northern Alliance against the Taliban, nearly all boys between 14 and 18 years in villages along the line of fighting served with their local commander, many of whom continue to carry a gun (Wessells & Kostelny, 2002). In Sri Lanka, teenage girls have served regularly as combatants and suicide bombers for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil

Eelam (LTTE), wearing cyanide capsules around their necks to use for suicide if captured by government forces (Keairns, 2002). In countries such as Angola, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda, among others, girls reportedly comprise 30% to 40% of child soldiers (Mazurana, McKay, Carlson, & Kasper, 2002).

In Colombia, both government forces and armed opposition groups such as FARC have used large numbers of youth soldiers (CSC, 2002). A similar pattern of recruitment by both government forces and by armed opposition groups is evident in African countries such as Angola, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda (CSC, 2002), though it is mostly the non-state actors who recruit youth. In Sierra Leone, for example, most youth recruitment was by the opposition group Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Civil Defense Force (CDF) that armed to protect their villages against rebel attacks. In addition, youth recruitment is not limited to developing nations, as the U. S. and the U. K., among others, regularly recruit people under 18 years of age into government forces. This practice is legal under the Optional Protocol to the CRC so long as youth under 18 years of age do not participate in combat. Youth soldiering, then, is a global phenomenon.

A profound question that warrants urgent attention is how does soldiering affect youth, who are among the most precious resources of any society? Media images have alternately portrayed youth soldiers as innocent victims or as hardened killers who constitute a “Lost Generation.” Although careful analyses of the impact of child soldiering are needed, researchers face numerous complexities and obstacles. First, child soldiering is not a monolithic category since enormous differences exist in how children entered military activity, what their roles and experiences were while in the military, and

what situation they faced following demobilization. Second, how young people are impacted depends on their experiences, their ability to understand these experiences, and their perceptions of their motives, choices and identity. Two youth who have killed a person might be impacted very differently if one had viewed the killing as necessary and justified, while the other had felt forced to do it. Like adults, youth construct meanings around their life experiences. These meanings, which relate to culture, gender, class, and ethnicity, mediate the impact of life events and influence whether a particular experience creates risk or strengthens resilience. Unfortunately, these dimensions of child soldiering have not been analyzed thoroughly in the extant literature. Third, a tendency exists to impose Western psychological concepts, such as trauma and depression, that are fragmentary, individualized, and not grounded in local culture or in young people's lived experiences and their relations with family, peers, and community.

This chapter aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the consequences of youth soldiering, recognizing the diversity within the category "child soldiers" and using young people's testimonies to show how youth understand their experiences and choices. Having put the definitions of "youth" and "child soldiers" in critical perspective, this chapter analyzes various pathways for a young person's entry into soldiering, recognizing the linkage between how one enters and the impact of soldiering itself. Next, this chapter examines the varied roles and experiences of youth soldiers, connecting these with gender, the choices young people make while associated with an armed group, and their evolving sense of meaning and identity. Then this chapter probes the impact of youth soldiering within a holistic framework that links psychosocial well-being with health, cosmology, economics, and social roles and relations. The

chapter concludes with reflections on the implications of this holistic conceptualization for social reintegration and peacebuilding. In writing, the authors will draw on their own field experience and research, particularly in Afghanistan, Angola, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.

### Definitional Issues

The term “youth” is a cultural construct that exhibits enormous variation and defies universalized definitions. In Western psychology, youth typically refers to someone between the ages of 13 and 18 years, the period of adolescence in which a key life task is to define one’s identity (e.g., Erikson, 1968). In South Africa, however, youth refers to someone up to the age of 35 years. In Sierra Leone, people up to age 50 years may be considered youths. Further, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in rural areas where traditions run strong, people are considered adults once they have completed a cultural rite of passage or have married, typically in the age range of 13-15 years.

For these reasons, it is best to avoid reification of Western definitions of youth. One should also recognize that in every culture the authors have worked in, young people between the ages of 13 and 20 years are viewed as being in transition into the adult world, as making key life choices, and as defining their role and position in society. Typically, elders in these societies regard these young people as still being in need of mentoring and guidance. These aspects of social function are also characteristic of adolescents in Western societies. In these contexts, this chapter will refer to 13- to 20-year-olds as youth, recognizing that locally they may be regarded more as young people or young adults.

The term “youth soldier” also needs to be problematized. This label can stigmatize people, invite attempts to re-recruit them, or increase risks that they will be attacked by people who remember what they had done. Keen ethical awareness is required in the use of such terms. In addition, the term “youth soldiers” sounds monolithic, when in fact, it masks enormous differences in life experiences and roles. The term tends to be imposed in ways that young people themselves see as inappropriate or offensive. For example, a young girl who is abducted and forced to be a “sex slave” but who never engages in combat or adopts a military identity may see herself not as a youth soldier but as a person who has been captured and robbed of her civilian life and freedom. Being ashamed of her situation and fearing rejection on her return home, she might resist being labeled a “youth soldier.” In contrast, a 15-year-old boy who joined an armed group out of ideological fervor, serves as a commander, and has experienced repeated firefights might relish being called a soldier. Recognizing this complexity, this chapter aims to unpack some of the diversity within the category “youth soldiers.” This analysis begins with an examination of different modes of entry into military activity.

#### Entry Into Military Activity

Broadly, youth enter into activity with armed groups or armed forces in three ways: forcible, voluntary, and compulsory recruitment (CSC, 2002). Forcible recruitment occurs when people are coerced through force or threat of force by illegal means such as the abduction of youth at gunpoint. Voluntary recruitment occurs when people join without obvious force or state conscription. Compulsory recruitment is guided by national legislation and entails legal conscription into the government military. In reality, the lines between these categories are blurry. Life pressures and hardships can make it

very difficult to distinguish between voluntary and forced recruitment. A youth who joins an opposition group because he has no means of obtaining food or health care may appear to make a “voluntary” decision, but in fact the youth may have no other options for insuring survival. Similarly, compulsory recruitment, which is presumably legal, often occurs illegally in African countries. Since few accurate birth records exist, it may be impossible to determine youths’ actual age. Further, troop-hungry commanders are often willing to overlook age and may recruit anyone who appears sufficiently large to carry a load or handle a weapon.

Aside from the logic of these categories, what matters most is how youth themselves perceive and understand their recruitment. Youth form cognitive schemata that frame their entry, define their position vis-à-vis the military force or armed group, influence their self-perceptions and identity, and activate a set of attributions regarding their own behavior. Perhaps the broadest schema is that of voluntary versus forced recruitment. For example, a youth who is recruited at gunpoint off the streets and forced to fight using a weapon may not identify himself as a military man and may attribute most of his fighting to avoidance of punishment and the necessity of obeying commanders in order to stay alive. In contrast, a youth who joins a liberation struggle without explicit coercion may see himself as a freedom fighter, perceive his fighting as voluntary, and find meaning in his aggressive behavior and commitment to a higher cause. In this sense, the youths’ self-perceptions may be more important than are the labels applied by adults and outsiders. With this in mind, various forms of forcible and voluntary recruitment will be examined below as told through the youths’ own voices and perspectives.

### *Forced Recruitment*

Few hard data are available regionally and globally on the percentage of youth recruits who enter the military by force. Across and even within countries, significant variety exists, reflecting the particular recruitment strategies used by government, paramilitary, and opposition groups as well as whether the local population views the fighting as worthwhile or necessary. Nevertheless, available evidence suggests that forced recruitment is widespread and that the majority of forced recruitment occurs through non-state actors (Brett & McCallin, 1996; UNICEF, 2002; Wessells, 2002).

Abduction is one of the primary means of forced recruitment, as illustrated by the following testimonies.

*A 14-year-old Ugandan boy:*

At night I was hiding in the bush with my sisters when the rebels attacked our home. They tortured my father to hand me over to them. I came out of the bush to save his life since it's me they wanted. They abducted me but still went ahead to kill my father and mother that night. I feel so bad because if it was not for me, possibly they would still be alive. They abducted eight other children that night. Two of them tried to escape but they were arrested and killed with axes before our eyes as a warning that if we ever try to escape we too would be killed.

(UNICEF/World Vision, 1997, p. 15)

*A 19-year-old girl from Sierra Leone who had been abducted at age 16:*

I was captured in Kono where I was with my aunt. Initially I escaped to the bush, but the RUF captured me and offered two options—kill or be taken. (interview with M. Wessells, August 13, 2002)

*An East Timorese boy who was forced to join an Indonesian militia at age 14:*

The militia first came to my village in early January. ...They beat many people and killed some. They told us that if we did not join them we would die. When the militia came, my parents were very afraid and said to me, 'If the militia ask you to do anything, just do it or they will kill us.' The first time they took me from my house, we had to rape a woman and then kill anything we could find, like animals and people. They ordered us to rape. We did this together....

Everyday they came to get us and if we didn't want to go, they would threaten us with machetes. They beat me with a piece of wood everyday. (UNICEF, 1002, p. 17)

As these quotes indicate, the abduction experience is typically saturated with violence and fear of death, beginning a journey of forced servitude in which captors use terror to control their abductees.

Often, however, abduction occurs in more subtle, indirect ways that straddle the boundary with "voluntary" recruitment. In northern Afghanistan, for example, where Tajik and Uzbek peoples were eager to expel the Taliban, each village has a commander who mobilizes local people for fighting. This commander system, itself a vestige of the Afghan opposition to the Soviet invasion of the 1980s, creates strong pressures to go with the commander, who wields great power and controls access to food and basic services. Speaking of the fighting that occurred following September 11, 2001, a 15-year-old Afghan said, "The commander came to my house and told me to come with him.... If I had not gone with him, I would have been beaten or bad things could have happened to my family." (need citation) Many Tajik and Uzbek youth expressed mixed motives,

saying they had gone with their commander because it had been their duty to protect their village and also because they feared the consequences of not going with him.

Abductions also occur through proxy (Brett & McCallin, 1996). In Angola, the opposition group National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) used a quota system in which they told local village leaders to provide ten youth recruits or else the entire village would be destroyed (Wessells, 2002). Psychologically, this system highlighted local leaders' inability to protect the village, thereby weakening their prestige and ability to mobilize local resistance to UNITA. Similarly, in Taliban-controlled villages in northern Afghanistan, the Taliban required that the village turn over a quota of youths for military service, typically for a rotating tour of several months. The local selection process favored the wealthy, whose families sometimes protected their own sons by paying poorer families to send their sons instead (Wessells et al., 2002).

The disproportionate burden of youth soldiering on the poor is visible also in press ganging, a widely practiced form of group abduction and forced recruitment. In this method, groups of soldiers or militia arrive at a school, a marketplace, or anyplace where groups of youth congregate and take them away by force. In Myanmar, one youth described the process as follows:

We were leaving school at the end of the day and the...soldiers surrounded the school....There were 30 or 50 of us all leaving together, and we were all arrested. We were all 15-, 16-, 17-years-old and we were all afraid of the soldiers.... Our teachers ran away in fear. Everything was in chaos...We were all terrified. (cited in Brett & McCallin, 1996, pp. 84-85).

Worldwide, armed groups often recruit by conducting round-ups in poor neighborhoods that may be less able to resist. Street children and separated children, including many orphans, are often favorite target groups since they lack adult protection.

### *Nonforced Recruitment*

Even without explicit coercion, youth join military forces and armed groups for diverse reasons, one of the most important of which is ideology. In highly oppressive, conflict torn societies, youth may learn to define themselves in part by opposition to the enemy. They may find meaning through participation in a liberation struggle, using violence as their means of achieving liberation (Garbarino, Kostelny, & Dubrow, 1991; Punamaki, 1996; Straker, 1992). Within communities seeking liberation, adults typically use propaganda to politicize youth and make them willing to sacrifice for the cause. In Sierra Leone, a 17-year-old youth said, “When the RUF soldiers came, they took us...They taught us about social injustice and the need for armed struggle. I believed them—maybe I was brainwashed—but I believed them.” (interview with M. Wessells, August 12, 2002). Many youth are attracted by ideologies that romanticize the struggle and portray martyrdom as the highest achievement. In Sri Lanka, girls who sacrificed their life in battle or who had taken significant risks in battle were regarded as heroes and often received a “Hero’s Welcome” back home (Keairns, 2002).

Extremist forms of religion play an increasingly prominent role in warrior ideologies, as is evident in militant forms of Islam. Radical ideologies that call people to engage in jihad have strong appeal to youth who are frustrated with the current situation, feel little hope for nonviolent change, and find meaning and identity in religious purification and struggle. In Pakistan, Afghan refugee youth received instruction in

religious schools, known as madrassahs, that taught extremist forms of Islam and hatred toward Western countries. Thousands returned to Afghanistan to join the Taliban out of the belief that they were fighting a jihad and had a solemn obligation to expel the infidels (Rashid, 2000). Extreme religious ideologies often create strong, clear beliefs that the fighting is moral, divinely sanctioned, and an obligation to a higher power. In Afghanistan, as in other war contexts such as Palestine, youths who sacrificed their lives were portrayed as martyrs; their stories often became part of communal memories and legends that invite more youth into the struggle.

Ideology, however, is only one of many factors that can lead youth to join armed groups. Youth may also join for reasons such as power, prestige, excitement, money, revenge, family or peer pressures, or escape from bad family or marriage situations. This diversity of reasons is best revealed through their own voices.

*A 20-year-old boy from Myanmar who had joined at age 14:*

I left home in 1992 and traveled to the border, to a school in a Karenni village, with about 10 friends. I just wanted to be a soldier. I was attracted by the Karenni soldiers when I saw them in the village. I think soldiers are very beautiful. It makes me want to join the army. (UNICEF, 2002, p. 29)

*A 25-year-old man from Sierra Leone who had joined at age 15 the CDF that fought the RUF:*

The RUF killed my father and also my mother. I had no way of getting anything—I joined the CDF to get food and water. (Interview with M. Wessells, August 10, 2002)

*A 15-year-old from Philippines who had joined at age 7:*

I joined the movement to avenge my father's death in the hands of the military. When I was seven years old, I saw the military take away my defenseless father from our house... so I joined my grandfather who went to the mountains to join the movement. (UNICEF, 2002, p 28)

*A girl soldier from Colombia:*

One of my mother's men tried to abuse me when I was younger. He tried to abuse me and because I didn't let him he got angry. He used to fight with my mum and he used to fight with me...so I didn't want to live with my mum anymore. (Keairns, 2002, p. 17)

*A 25-year-old young man from Papua New Guinea who had joined when he was 17:*

Realistically, if the enemy is approaching and destroying your community, how can you stand back?...Sometimes people were exploiting us...I want to save my island and my people...I have five brothers. Four joined the fighting, three joined before me. I want to defend my island and my people. My parents supported me. They know it's the right thing. (UNICEF, 2002, p. 26)

Two points stand clear in these and many other youth testimonies. First, youths' decisions to join are often bounded by victimization, difficult life conditions such as poverty, and desire to protect oneself and meet basic needs. It is in this respect that discussions of voluntary recruitment need to be contextualized. Second, youths' decisions are often influenced by important social ecologies such as peers, families, and communities. For instance, in collectivist societies that place group welfare over the

individual's, it is particularly misleading to understand "choice" in the same individualized manner used in Western societies.

### Roles and Experiences

Mapping the roles of youth soldiers is fraught with difficulty due to the enormous variety that exists in being a soldier and the fact that role multiplicity and change are the norm. Young women and men who become soldiers have diverse experiences that may vary according to the context, the norms of the armed group, and the culture, among others.

To illustrate, enormous variety exists in regard to the sexual exploitation of young women and men (Mazurana et al., 2002). In northern Sierra Leone and northern Uganda, many young girls who had been abducted by the RUF and the LRA, respectively, were raped by their captors and served as "soldier's wives," a euphemism for the sex slavery that in fact occurs (Wessells, 2002). In Angola, UNITA forced girls to dance and sing all night and to respond to sexual demands (Keairns, 2002), presumably to entertain the men but in reality to maintain excitement and distract youth from thinking about home. In contrast, girl soldiers in armed groups such as the LTTE of Sri Lanka have not been abused sexually as part of their military experience, and some armed groups expressly forbid sexual exploitation (Keairns, 2002). Similarly, although sexual exploitation of girl soldiers has been reported more widely than has the sexual exploitation of boy soldiers, the latter does occur (Thompson, 1999). In northern Afghanistan, where the soldiers were male, hospital physicians reported that it was not uncommon for an older, stronger soldier to violate sexually a new recruit such as a smaller, weaker 14-year-old (Wessells et al., 2002). Unfortunately, such episodes are associated with strong taboos and stigmas

and hence are underreported. As a result, little is known about the prevalence of the sexual exploitation of boy soldiers.

The variety of youth soldiers' experience is also evident in regard to drug use. In Sierra Leone, the RUF plied youth soldiers with drugs such as alcohol and amphetamines to prepare them for battle. A 16-year-old soldier reported "When I went into battle, I felt no fear and no pain—I was so high... but NO FEAR!..." (interview with M. Wessells, August 12, 2002). In contrast, youth soldiers in Afghanistan, a country that has massive opium production, did not report use of drugs, which would have violated their fervent Islamic beliefs.

Despite the enormous variegation that exists in youth soldiers' roles and experiences, some generalizations are still possible. Youth soldiers, girls as well as boys, perform multiple roles such as combatants, cooks, porters, spies, bodyguards, and mine clearers. Within these multiple roles, most youth soldiers experience attack, witness killings, see dead bodies, and fear for their lives. Of those who are combatants, significant percentages report that they have fired their weapons at other people in battle, and many can recall having killed someone. No accurate statistics exist, however, regarding the frequency with which youth soldiers participate in combat or wound or kill people.

Often, roles evolve in accordance with youth soldiers' experience, level of competence, and the trust of their commanders and peers. In Sri Lanka, for example, girl recruits initially receive a wooden dummy gun, but receive a real gun, an event viewed as a significant accomplishment, when they demonstrate comfort with the dummy gun and the desire to handle a rifle (Keairns, 2002). Similarly, youth soldiers who demonstrate

valor or efficacy in combat may be rewarded by being made commanders. The armed groups that exploit youth as soldiers understand all too well the power of reinforcement and peer recognition and respect, and they use this to draw young people into increasing military responsibilities. These evolving roles reposition youth within their group and can change youths' perceptions regarding their identity. One 15-year-old youth in northern Uganda reported, "I was proud to be a commander, and my fighters looked up to me. I had never thought of myself as a military man, but that's what I became."

(interview with M. Wessells, July, 1998)

### *Terror and Progressive Engagement in Violence*

For many youth soldiers, extreme violence is a pervasive part of the soldiering experience. In contrast to the reward strategy described above, many armed groups that abduct children insure obedience and control by inflicting terror, pain, and fear, mixing these with indoctrination (Boothby et al., 2000; Cohn et al., 1994; Wessells, 2002). In many cases, the terror is linked with horribly brutal systems of training (Brett & McCallin, 1996). In Honduras, for example, commanders forced nearly naked youth recruits to roll on stony or thorny surfaces that stripped one's flesh off. In Paraguay, youth recruits suffered brutal initiation rites that included excessive exercise, hitting with sticks and rifle butts, burning with cigarettes, and being kicked in the legs or stomach. In such contexts, violence becomes normalized, thereby blunting one's emotional responsiveness to and questioning of it. To further the normalization process, some armed groups have forced youth recruits to engage in sadistic practices such as cutting animals' throats and drinking their blood (Brett & McCallin, 1996).

In Sierra Leone, the terror had a strong gender component. When the RUF attacked a village, they frequently abducted and raped girls and women. Some were raped in open view of family and village members, apparently with the intent of defiling the girls, making them unacceptable to the community (Human Rights Watch, 1998). Abducted youth have also been forced to commit acts of violence and killing. In Sierra Leone, some youths who had been abducted by the RUF told the first author of having been forced to commit atrocities such as killing a neighbor or even a family member at the time of abduction as other village members watched. Apparently, this horrendous practice was calculated to break the bonds between the youth and his village, leaving no option to go home and thus sealing his fate as an RUF soldier.

Forced participation in killing, however, is often done in a manner calculated to reduce the moral qualms people usually have in regard to killing. One strategy is to force many young people to beat someone, thereby creating tacit peer pressure, diffusing responsibility, and making it nearly impossible to determine who actually killed the person who had been beaten. A 15-year-old girl from northern Uganda reported:

They came to our school in the middle of the night. We were hiding under the beds but they banged on the beds and told us to come out....We waked and walked and they made us carry their property that they had looted.... On the third day a little girl tried to escape and they made us kill her. They went to collect some big pieces of firewood. Then they kicked her and jumped on her, and they made us each beat her at least once with the big pieces of wood. They said, 'You must beat and beat and beat her.' She was bleeding from the mouth. Then she died. (Human Rights Watch, 1997)

In many cases, youth soldiers are increasingly exposed to violence and killing in order to prepare them for their own participation. In northern Uganda, youth were initially forced to carry heavy loads with little food or water, and they watched as children who were too weak to continue were killed. Taken across the border into Sudan for military training, they were subjected to a brutal training regime in which the slightest mistake could result in a beating. When an abductee tried to escape, everyone had to beat the escapee. Subsequent escape attempts could bring orders for everyone to bayonet the escapee. This method, which gets youth to take small steps along a continuum of violence, can desensitize or numb the youth to killing and reduce moral qualms about doing so. It also increases the likelihood that smaller steps such as beating someone will increase one's willingness to take larger steps such as killing someone. Broadly, the principle is that normal people can be lead step-by-step to do horrendous things through progressive participation in violence (Staub, 2002; Waller, 2002).

### *Choices*

The forcible recruitment, brutal treatment, and brainwashing of many youth soldiers, coupled with the emphasis on compliance with orders of all armed groups, creates strong pressures for youth to obey. Some media images have portrayed youth soldiers as hapless victims who become mindless killers, "damaged goods" who are beyond rehabilitation. These simplistic media portrayals fail to recognize that even when youths have been recruited forcibly they are not passive victims who obey without question, but are agents who make choices and try to define their roles and pathways. Their choices may reflect longstanding values and help them resist complete

identification with their captors and full integration into a system of violence. A young man from Sierra Leone whom the RUF had abducted at age 16 said:

They [the RUF] captured me on my father's farm and took me away. I was forced to leave this area. They gave me a gun and forced me to go and loot. Also I was forced to carry all the loot, and if I refused [I] would be flogged or shot. We had food only sometimes....The leader told us to beat women and saw it [watched us] with his eyes. Also the leader told us to have sex with women older than your mother. I told him 'no' and was flogged and made to do hard work. (interview with M. Wessells, August 11, 2002)

In a similar vein, a young woman who had been captured by the RUF at age 14 resisted sexual service to her captor even though she knew her survival might depend on it. She said, "I told him I was too young.... He told the other soldiers, and they took me to Freetown. There, they cut off my left arm." (interview with M. Wessells, August 10, 2002). As these cases indicate, a largely untold story is of how youth soldiers make choices that do not compromise their values. Not infrequently, considerable emotional pain and ambivalence attends the choices they do make. Not surprisingly, the young girl described above who had lost her arm reported that her life was very hard with only one arm and that if she had it to do again, she might have chosen differently.

A related point is that youth soldiers may actively define their own roles, with some managing to construct roles related to protection and caregiving. In Sierra Leone, one young woman reported that the RUF had abducted 28 women, 24 of whom had been killed outright. Although they had also shot her, the bullet had not entered her body. About to be bayoneted, a soldier nicknamed "Rambo" saved her. She decided she did not

want to be a fighter and began looking after the children. The women in the company elected her the “mommy queen,” the leader of the women and the caretaker who looked after women and girls. She proudly reported that 130 children had been in her care when the ceasefire had been achieved and that she had helped reunite them with their families. Although her choices may have depended partly on good fortune and circumstances, one should recognize that youths’ agency may enable them to influence the nature of their roles and, correspondingly, the kinds of experiences they are likely to have.

Of course, youths’ agency can be a double-edged sword, as some may choose to become assassins, executioners, or worse. In northern Sierra Leone, people in one village told of a youth soldier who had, apparently without orders, elected to terrorize local people and earn a reputation as a “bad man” by carving “RUF” into people’s chests using a razor blade. Recognizing the bounded nature of decision-making by youth soldiers, an important task for future research is to chart what factors lead youth to choose pathways leading toward increased violence or peace, respectively.

#### Psychosocial Impact—A Holistic Approach

To conceptualize the impacts of youth soldiering adequately, one must take a holistic approach that is temporally extended and grounded in local culture and the understandings of youth themselves. A holistic conceptualization has numerous distinctive features. First, a holistic approach integrates various dimensions of youth well-being—physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual—that are often considered separately in both theory and field practice. It recognizes that the psychosocial impact of soldiering cannot be reduced to individualized, clinical syndromes such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or anxiety

(Bracken & Petty, 1998). As outlined below, youth soldiers' emotional well-being is inextricably linked with his or her social, economic, physical, and spiritual well-being. Second, because it is culturally grounded, it reflects local understandings and reduces the tendency to impose outsider categories that fit neither the local culture nor youth's own perspectives. For example, Western clinical psychologists tend to focus on the impacts of violence, whereas youth soldiers may focus on other elements such as inability to earn an income, fear of rejection by their community, or possible stigmatization as being unsuitable for marriage. Third, a holistic approach looks beyond a deficits focus that depicts only the negative impact of youth soldiering and portrays youth themselves as victims or as damaged individuals. In fact, youth themselves sometimes see soldiering as providing access to opportunities for training, leadership, and commitment to a meaningful cause that they might not have had through other venues (e.g., Keairns, 2002; Peters & Richards, 1998). Fourth, because it is temporally extended, a holistic approach recognizes that the impact of youths' soldiering experiences do not stop when they have been demobilized, but resonate in what happens afterward. Youth often report that the return to their village was as stressful as their experiences in the armed group had been.

To achieve a holistic conceptualization, it is necessary to analyze the main dimensions of impact while also noting their interrelationships.

### *Physical Impacts*

The most visible physical impacts of youth soldiering are the death and physical injuries that occur in connection with shelling and firefights. The damage may be worse for children and youth who are forced to make frontal assaults or led into suicide bombing (Brett & McCallin, 1996). Landmines, which are widely used in armed

conflicts, kill or maim significant numbers of youth soldiers. Many mine-affected youth become amputees and face disfigurement, stigmatization, social isolation, difficulty marrying, and reduced ability to earn a living in an environment already devastated by poverty. A 15-year-old Afghan soldier who had lost his leg the previous week reported, “It was a trail I had walked many times. But this time, I hit a mine. Now I have no way of earning a living... What will I do?” (interview with M. Wessells, March 12, 2002). Even following release from an armed group, young soldiers continue to be at risk since they often have to travel on foot back to their village across both familiar and unfamiliar terrain that has been mined.

In addition to these visible physical impacts of wounding, youth report that the less visible physical ailments are the worst. In fact, many youth describe persistent hunger as the worst physical aspect of their soldiering experience. Further, sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS typically exact a heavy toll on youth soldiers, many of whom travel to different areas and engage in unprotected sex with numerous people, often through force. Health workers in Sierra Leone estimated a 70% to 90% prevalence rate for sexually transmitted infections among rape survivors (Mazurana et al., 2002). Conflict often helps HIV/AIDS to spread due to the higher rates of sexually transmitted infections typical in armed forces. The resulting spread of HIV/AIDS, which occurs most rapidly among people between the ages of 10 and 24 years, leads to the birth of children who themselves carry the disease or who acquire it through breast-feeding from an HIV-positive mother (Machel, 2001). Because armed conflict devastates health infrastructure, few of these children or their young

parents have access to proper health care. People who are HIV positive often experience profound emotional and social trauma such as stigmatization, shame, and hopelessness.

The physical impacts of soldiering are highly gendered (Mazurana et al., 2002, *passim*). Young women who have been forced to engage in sex may sustain abdominal pain, bleeding, cervical tearing, and infection. Repeated rapes may lead to death, uterine deformation, menstrual complications, and premature births. These dramatic effects often mask quieter, daily affronts such as the embarrassment and psychological anguish girls experience in military settings when trying to maintain personal hygiene in a context that affords no privacy. Birthing, too, is a risky process for young women in armed groups. In addition to the lack of health resources needed to handle complications, some armed groups use dangerous practices designed to force or delay birth according to the group's military needs. In Sierra Leone, RUF members reportedly jumped on the abdomens of girls in labor to force birth or, if the group needed to move, tied the girl's legs together to delay birth (Mazurana et al., 2002). Because of unwanted pregnancies, pregnant girl soldiers may induce abortions themselves, a practice that carries high risk of maternal death.

### *Emotional Impacts*

Youth soldiers, like other war-affected children, may experience a complex constellation of emotional effects such as trauma, depression, and anxiety (Apfel & Simon, 1996; Danieli, Rodley, & Weisaeth, 1996). It is important to note, however, that how youth respond to traumatic experiences depends on temperament, whether they had preexisting problems, what kinds of emotional support they had while soldiering, and how they interpreted their experiences. Youth who believe they are fighting for a cause

and see the violence as meaningful suffer less negative impact than do youth who experience random, meaningless violence (Punamaki, 1996; Straker, Mendelsohn, Moosa, & Tudin, 1996). In fact, research has shown that many youth soldiers exhibit remarkable resilience to the stressors of conflict (Cairns, 1996; Straker, 1992). This fact cautions against the simplistic depiction of traumatized soldiers that often accompanies discussion of youth soldiers. In addition, diagnostic categories such as PTSD (see Marsella, Friedman, Gerrity, & Scurfield, 1996) do not adequately reflect the reality that youth soldiers experience multiple, chronic stresses such as separation from family, loss of home, death of loved ones, abduction, witnessing people being killed, and fighting and killing.

Most important, Western diagnostics may fail to capture what is most troubling to young soldiers themselves. In Sierra Leone, a 17-year-old former RUF soldier said, “When I came back [from the bush], my biggest feeling was fear....I was so afraid...afraid someone might recognize me and remember what I had done, maybe try to kill me. People called me ‘rebel’ and I constantly feared rejection.” (interview with M. Wessells, 8/15/02) Similarly, youths’ reactions to war experiences are mediated by cultural beliefs, including spiritual beliefs, which have no counterpart in Western psychology. In northern Sierra Leone, a 14-year-old girl soldier reported that her rape had made her impure and had given her a “heavy heart,” meaning that she experienced great sadness. When asked what she needed, she replied “cleansing” by a traditional healer, whose cleansing ritual was believed to be capable of removing her spiritual impurity (citation?). As this example illustrates, the impact of rape is culturally constructed. The implications of rape and the emotional burdens it imposes differ

according to whether the society understands rape as the girl's failure or as a dishonor to her family and community. Thus, emotional impacts can be understood only in social and cultural context.

Culture also must be taken into account in understanding problems such as nightmares, which potentially are symptomatic of PTSD. In Angola, for example, a former youth soldier complained that he could not sleep and felt too sad and worried to engage in his usual social activities. Asked why he did not sleep, he replied, "The man I shot...his spirit comes to me and asks 'why did you do this to me?'" In rural Angola, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, people believe that the visible world is intimately connected with the realm of the ancestors. An act such as killing someone is understood as destroying the harmony between the living community and the ancestors. According to local beliefs, the boy soldier is spiritually contaminated—haunted—by the unavenged spirit of the man he killed (Wessells & Monteiro, 2001). In contrast to Western psychology, which tends to view issues such as guilt and trauma as individual, rural Angolans understand the problem as collective. In particular, the boy's spiritual contamination is viewed as potentially causing bad things such as poor health, misfortune, drought, and fighting to happen not only for the boy but also for his family and the wider community. Although such beliefs may appear superstitious to outsiders, they are very real to local people whose behavior they influence. That the emotional impacts are culturally constructed should make researchers eager to start by asking how local youth understand their experiences. Unfortunately, relatively few researchers have done so.

In contrast to images of hardened killers, youth soldiers often experience guilt and moral anguish, and many exhibit quite sophisticated moral reasoning (Straker, 1992). In some cases, youth soldiers who joined an armed group to support a movement feel guilty about being separated from their families and not being able to support them while they were away (Keairns, 2002). Often, the guilt relates to specific actions, including coerced actions. Boy soldiers from numerous countries have told the first author that they had killed to stay alive and to avoid being killed by their commanders, yet they felt badly about having killed people nevertheless. Interestingly, guilt sometimes emerges over time, becoming more prominent after the youth have reentered civilian life. It is as if they had used different moral frames while soldiering and afterwards; the full weight of what they had done had become apparent only when they had returned to an environment that prized life and in which violence was not normalized.

The adoption of military identity is among the most powerful psychological impacts of youth soldiering. These identity shifts change values, increase aggressive behavior, and may position young people to continue cycles of violence. As discussed above, armed groups use training regimens, prolonged brutality, reward structures, and propaganda that are calculated to remake youth as soldiers. That they may succeed is evident in the report of a 15-year-old boy from Mozambique who had been with Renamo. "I was reborn in that base camp. Even if I could escape, I never could have gone home again. Not after what I had seen and done." (cited in Boothby et al., 2000, p. 64) In Sierra Leone, the RUF assigned youth military names such as "Rambo" or "Cock and Fire," thereby cementing their military identity and inviting peer pressures to encourage "bad" behavior. Experience in many countries indicates that youth who take on a

military identity are at risk of increased aggressive behavior. Even after the war has ended and demobilization has occurred, they may turn to banditry, using violence as a means of meeting basic needs and achieving a sense of personal power. Some evidence suggests that the amount of time a young person had spent with a group such as Renamo or the RUF determines whether they retain a military identity or transition back to a civilian identity (Boothby et al., 2000). Additional research, however, is needed to ascertain the key turning points that lead to shifts toward military identity and what enables or blocks subsequent shifts back toward civilian identity.

The reification of identity should be avoided in discussions of youth soldiers. Popular writers in particular have tended to view youths' military identities as immutable, thereby creating a warrant for viewing the youth as damaged goods. A core principle of social psychology, however, is that situations exercise enormous influence on self-perceptions and behavior. In countries such as Guatemala, South Africa, Angola, Uganda, and Sierra Leone, the first author has known many youth soldiers who by their own descriptions had been tough, determined freedom fighters and had strong military identities. With appropriate changes in the situation, these individuals managed over a period of years to reconstruct a civilian identity and to integrate back into civilian life. Careful longitudinal research is needed, however, to determine systematically the long term identities and prospects of former youth soldiers.

### *Social Impacts*

The impact of youth soldiering is best viewed from an ecological perspective that emphasizes the influence of diverse social ecologies such as the family, the peer group, and the community (Dawes & Donald, 2000). Primary among the social impacts is

separation from families, which puts youth at increased risk of problems such as abduction, sexual exploitation, and poverty (Machel, 2001; McCallin, 1998). Nearly universally, youth soldiers report that their family separation is very painful, a feeling that is amplified if their parents had been killed when the youth had been abducted.

Soldiering can also rupture relations between youth and their communities, whose adult members and leaders often regard them as troublemakers and fear them. Remembering bad things the youths had done, adults may be reluctant to allow them to reenter the community. In most cases, reentry occurs, but even then problems may continue. Isolation within the community may occur as youth themselves withdraw from normal activities such as schooling. A 15-year-old former soldier from northern Uganda said, "I have been a commander and made many life and death decisions... How can I go back to school with children much younger than me and take orders from a teacher who has never faced death or been a commander?" (interview with M. Wessells, July, 1998). Peers may isolate the youth by keeping them at a distance or stigmatizing them by calling them names such as "rebel." The sense of rejection and social isolation typically weighs heavily on youth and alters their perceptions regarding the future.

Exacerbating the weight of these problems is the lack of positive skills and their social role in the community. Having been with an armed group for years, in some cases a decade or more, many youth soldiers have little education and no job skills to use in earning a living. As a result, they may be viewed (and may view themselves) as a burden to others and as having little to offer the community. Having no positive role, youths' self-esteem and hope for the future typically plummet.

In many societies, the social effects of child soldiering have strong gender elements. Often, girls who have been soldiers are regarded as unsuitable for marriage. This sentiment is typically even stronger in regard to a young girl who has been raped. If the girls' prospects for marriage are very low and marriage is a powerful cultural norm, girls who have left the armed group may not stay with their families and may see prostitution as the only means of earning a living (Brett & McCallin, 1996). Girl soldiers' situations may be even more difficult if they bore children as a result of their soldiering experiences. On return home, the children may be stigmatized as "rebel babies," and difficult questions arise regarding the girls' marital status. In Sierra Leone, some former youth soldiers who are also mothers regard their former captors as their husbands, while their parents may object. No matter how the children and girls are viewed, they face significant economic obstacles in meeting basic needs.

### *Economic Impacts*

Closely intertwined with the social impacts are the economic impacts of youth soldiering. While poverty has been identified as a cause for the inclusion of many youth into armed groups, becoming a soldier does little to mitigate these economic hardships. In fact, participation in an armed group often results in augmenting poverty by reducing youths' social status and compromising the chance for success in civilian life. Particularly for youth who had been abducted and who had seen their parents killed and their homes destroyed, soldiering marks the beginning of a downward descent into abject poverty. Poverty often continues while in the armed group, making it difficult to meet needs for basic items such as food. In addition, soldiering imposes significant

opportunity costs since youth receive no education or job skills, making it difficult for them to earn enough money to obtain shelter, health care, and other necessities.

Following demobilization, youth often return to their communities having few belongings and feeling ashamed of their situation. In Sierra Leone, a 22-year-old whom the RUF had abducted at age 17 said, “When I came out, I had nothing, NOTHING! I was very, very hungry....[I had] no clothes, not even a pair of shoes. I was too embarrassed to let anyone see me.” (interview with M. Wessells, August 12, 2002). This young man’s pain was grounded in the local reality that the poorest village members, particularly those who cannot even afford a pair of shoes or a shirt, have the lowest status and are stigmatized. In turn, low status and extreme poverty compromise one’s marriage opportunities, which itself is very troubling in a context where being unmarried isolates one and may evoke ostracism. In some contexts, the combination of economic need, isolation, and shame lead young people to return to the bush or to take up the gun again. In northern Afghanistan following the Taliban’s defeat, large numbers of youth continue to carry a gun, presumably as part of security forces but in fact under the control of their commanders. Nearly all of them report that they have stayed with their commander and carry a gun because they have no job or means of supporting themselves (Wessells et al., 2002).

To address this kind of problem, many countries have created disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs that provide former soldiers with a small monetary dispensation and a kit containing items such as seeds and tools. Receipt of such kits and dispensation, however, may create additional social problems. Returning youth soldiers may be stigmatized for having received benefits that are not available to

other youth, who were not soldiers but who are equally needy. In Sierra Leone, perceptions of favoritism led embittered noncombatant youth to ask, “Why should those who destroyed our communities be rewarded while we suffer?” (citation?) This question serves as a poignant reminder that well-being cannot be defined in strictly individual terms. Indeed, some of the greatest economic impacts on youth soldiers relate to the destruction of community infrastructure such as markets, schools, health posts, wells, roads, and bridges.

### Conclusion

This analysis has powerful implications for practice and policy. It indicates, for example, that since the impacts of youth soldiering are multifaceted and interconnected, programs that aim to assist former youth soldiers must be holistic. Rather than narrow psychosocial programs that emphasize trauma counseling, what are needed are integrated programs that enable youth well-being in all its dimensions—economic, social, spiritual, emotional, etc.—and that promote the well-being of communities (Ahearn, 2000).

At the policy level, this analysis underscores the necessity of strengthening efforts to prevent youth soldiering and to protect youths’ rights guaranteed under the CRC and related instruments such as the Optional Protocol on Children and Armed Conflict, which bans recruitment by non-state actors and sets 18 years as the minimum age for combat participation. It also points out the need for effective DDR programs that include psychosocial components and orientation. Too often, such programs have focused exclusively on economic needs, and it has not been uncommon for youth to be excluded from DDR programs altogether. In Angola, which is just emerging from forty years of

war, the DDR program defined “soldiers” as people who are at least twenty years of age, thereby denying benefits to large numbers of younger soldiers.

This analysis, however, is best regarded as an initial step toward the construction of an integrated, contextualized understanding of the impact of youth soldiering. It is very much in its preliminary stages owing to a paucity of careful research regarding impacts. This framework will have served its purpose if it stimulates the integrated, multidisciplinary research that is needed.

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