

# **SCRATCHING THE SURFACE: A COMPARISON OF GIRL SOLDIERS FROM THREE GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS OF THE WORLD**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over 300,000 children are estimated to be conscripted participants in conflicts throughout the world. Depending on the particular armed group that employs child soldiers, girls represent 6 to 50% of child soldiers. Despite this prevalence of involvement, the experience of girls as soldiers in war and political conflict has rarely been investigated. In order to build a foundation for more focused study on girl soldier experiences, this literature review aims to provide a comprehensive report of girl soldiers throughout the world. The analysis focused on three aspects of conflict experience: (1) how girls become affiliated with armed groups; (2) their experiences while associated with armed groups; and (3) the effects of participation in war. Particular attention was given to whether girls' experiences vary across geographic area. Generally, in African conflicts (e.g., Sierra Leone and northern Uganda) girls become affiliated with armed groups through abduction. Often, they experience sexual abuse and, as a result, are stigmatized by their families and communities when they return home. In contrast, in the Americas (e.g., Colombia and El Salvador) and in Indonesia/South Pacific (e.g., Philippines and Sri Lanka) girls become involved as an escape from unpleasant home lives. These girls are less likely to experience sexual abuse, and do not experience the same stigmatization from families and communities. Often these girls are taught a skill, such as nursing, while with an armed group but are unable to find job opportunities post-war using their newly acquired skill. The apparent variations in girls' experiences in armed conflict have implications for both research and application in helping focus attention on the conflict-specific aspects of girls' experiences. In some regions both research and applied efforts need to focus on the effects and treatment of sexual abuse, whereas in other conflicts, time and resources would be better spent at understanding and promoting female integration into the post-conflict occupational sphere.

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In some areas of the world, child soldiering is a common experience for many children and youth. Boothby and Knudson (2000) and Save the Children, UK (2005) estimate that over 300,000 children are child soldiers in conflicts throughout the world. In 2000, there were documented child soldiers in 36 current or recently ended conflicts on four continents (Boothby & Knudson, 2000). In 2005, a study by McKay revealed that between 1990 and 2003 girls were a part of armed groups in 55 countries. While these two studies highlight the prevalence of child soldiering, the actual number of countries that institute this practice may be higher due to children crossing borders and becoming involved in a neighboring nation's conflict (Save the Children, UK, 2005).

Research suggests girls represent anywhere between 6 to 50% of child soldiers in an armed group, noting that the percentage varies across countries and groups. For example, it is estimated that 30 to 40% of child soldiers are girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Verhey, 2004); while some reports indicate that there are exclusively female fighting units in this country (Specht & Attree, 2006). In Colombia, girls have been found to participate in all guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Depending on the group, these girls represented 25-50% of child soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2003a). Countries in which girls have been or are currently involved in fighting forces include, but are not limited to, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burma, Burundi, Cambodia, El Salvador, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Liberia, Macedonia, Mexico, Mozambique, Nepal, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Uganda (McKay, 2005; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the global prevalence of girl soldiering.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACHES**

There are at least two theoretical approaches that justify a focus on girl soldiers. Socio-Political approaches to the study of girl soldiers emphasize that these young girl soldiers age and become adult members in their population and impact their community through social relationships and political preferences (see Kemper, 2005 for a review of socio-political approaches). Women perform unique contributions to a society in that they are traditionally responsible for the socialization of children (Machel, 2001). Girls who have been in-

volved in armed groups and become accustomed to war-like behaviors may teach their children to engage in aggressive behaviors through modeling or coaching strategies (Kliewer, Fearnow, & Miller, 1996). In addition to problem solving behaviors, females transmit political values to their children. As an example, Peteet (1991) has noted that Palestinian women teach their children of the historical oppression of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government. Through this socialization process, Palestinian children are groomed to take on the Palestinian cause as adults.

The age range of the girl soldier population provides further evidence to support the study of this population. A child soldier is any individual under the age of 18 who is associated with an armed group and research documents girls as young as eight years of age as being recruited or abducted by armed groups indicating that adolescence is the primary age of girl soldiers (Denov, 2006; Denov & Maclure, 2007). According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is a critical time for identity formation. He suggests that identity formation is the central task of adolescences and all experiences up until that point influence the development of one's identity. The society, as well as peer relations, must create an atmosphere in which the youth is allowed to explore her identity and reach psychosocial well-being. Under the context of war, and more specifically being involved with an armed group, girl soldiers face the challenge of identity formation by the constraints of armed groups and the more important necessity to secure basic needs in the midst of war.

Despite the importance of this developmental stage and the unique role females fulfill in a society, little research exists on this population. Before 2000, discussions of the effects of political violence on child soldiers did not include specific examinations of girls' experiences (Mazurana, McKay, Carlson, & Kasper, 2002). Often when researchers and authors discussed the issues surrounding these youth, they used the term "child soldier." While the term itself denotes a neutral gender, researchers and authors almost always referred to boys either explicitly or by default since all of their examples were of male child soldiers. When articles on girl soldiers began to emerge in the literature, researchers overemphasized the occurrence of sexual violence within armed groups and understated the vastness of girl soldiers' experiences (Mazurana et al., 2002). Currently researchers are beginning to give a fuller picture of girls in armed groups, discussing the complex reasons for entering an armed group and variability of roles, extending beyond that of sexual and domestic slaves (Kearins, 2002; Heninger, 2005; McKay, 2006a Wessells, 2006)

## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

The main purpose of this article is to give a review of the available research on female child soldiering experiences. Forty-eight empirical studies on girl soldiers published between 1999 and 2008 were identified. Articles were found in database searches, such as PsycINFO, by using “girl soldiers”, “girl and political violence”, and “female and political violence” as keywords. Bibliographies of relevant articles were used to find additional studies. Some of the studies included analysis of both girls and boys, but in order to be included in this review, explicit discussion of girl’s experiences must have been present.

Of the studies included, 70% focused on African girl soldiers. Sixteen percent described girl’s experiences in Colombia and El Salvador (the Americas), and the remaining 14% referred to Sri Lanka and the Philippines (Indonesia and the South Pacific) (see Figure 2 for a graphic representation of this distribution). Given the high number of countries that have documented girl soldiers, it is apparent just how limited the study of female child soldier experience is, both in terms of the low number of total studies and the restricted, regional coverage of these studies. Indeed there has been no research on girl soldiers in most of the countries in which they are known to participate in political conflicts.

This review proceeds by organizing the relevant information from the identified studies by the three regions in which most of the studies were conducted (Africa, the Americas, and Indonesia and the South Pacific) and according to the focalizing guiding issues (1) how girls become affiliated with armed groups, (2) their experiences while associated with armed groups, and (3) the effects of participation in war.

## AFRICA

### *Reason for Entry into Armed Groups*

It is apparent from the reviewed studies, that while African girls enter armed groups for a variety of reasons, most often they become involved in armed groups through abduction. There are reported cases of abductions of girls into armed groups in Angola (Heninger, 2005; Honwana, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2003a), Liberia (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Utas, 2003), Sierra Leone (Denov & Maclure, 2006; McKay, 2005; Rosen, 2005), and Uganda (Human Rights Watch, 2003b; McKay, 2006b; Temmerman, 2001). Additionally, cross-boarder abductions have been reported in Sierra Leone, northern Uganda, and Sudan (McKay, 2005; Utas, 2003; Wessells, 2006).

While there are many instances of abductions into armed groups in Africa, it is not the only means by which girls become apart of armed groups. Gener-

ally, on the African continent (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000), and specifically in Congo (Refugees International, 2002), poverty is a risk factor for entry into an armed group for both African girls as well as boys. During war situations, children are often faced with the choice of either living on the streets in poverty and in desperate want of basic needs or joining a group that will provide food and housing to its followers. For these children, the decision is one of immediate survival (Refugees International, 2002). Becoming an orphan often amplifies the level of poverty and the need to become associated with a group (Boothby & Knudsen, 2000). Former girl soldiers in Mozambique were either abducted into the armed group Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), or joined the group for survival and protection (Honwana, 2006). While poverty is not specifically mentioned as a risk factor for these girls, the need to seek protection within a violent group suggests these girls have access to few resources as civilians.

In addition to abduction and poverty, African girls join armed groups due to peer pressure, family pressure, and propaganda. In Mozambique, former girl soldiers stated that the armed group Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) used recruiting techniques such as gang pressure (McKay, 2005). FRELIMO framed girls' involvement with their group as acts of heroism, despite the fact that girls were severely pressured to join and participate (West, 2000). Ethiopian girl soldiers were more likely to join armed groups if family and friends had participated with the group. Similar to FRELIMO in Mozambique, Ethiopian armed groups used propaganda to enlist young women. Additionally, Ethiopian girls reported they joined armed groups to escape early marriages (Veale, 2003). In contrast, girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo were not directly pressured into becoming a part of armed groups, but reported voluntarily joining as a means of escaping domestic violence (Specht & Attree, 2006). In sum, the available research indicates that in Africa girls enter armed groups for a variety of reasons. Predominant among them is abduction, with poverty, social, and media influence also big factors.

### *Life Inside an Armed Group*

Reports indicate that girls who are abducted into armed groups are at the greatest risk for sexual abuses (Machel, 2001; Wessells, 2006). McKay (2005) asserted that the primary role for girl soldiers in Africa is to provide sexual services to the commanders and fighters of an armed group. While sexual abuses exist in other parts of the world, sexual services are a distinct characteristic of African girl soldiers (McKay, 2005). In Angola, girls' roles were to entertain troops and carry commanders' belongings. If a girl refused a sexual advance,

then she was tied to a tree and beaten (Kearins, 2002). In northern Uganda one-fourth of all abducted girls were given to commanders or soldiers as wives (Survey of War Affected Youth, 2008). In the eastern Congo, girl soldiers were sent into villages to gather information. Many times this meant prostituting themselves and sleeping with civilian men (Refugees International, 2002).

There have been reports in Sierra Leone of girls being raped and gang raped so often that a forced marriage to a commander or male soldier, in which that commander or male soldier owned the young girl, proved to be a better life than being vulnerable to sexual assaults from multiple men, or in some cases women (Denov & Maclure, 2006; Denov & Maclure, 2007). Often African girl soldiers, as young as nine years of age, marry their "bush husbands," a commander or fighter in an armed group (Denov & Maclure, 2007; Honwana, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2003b). It is common for a "bush husband" to have multiple wives and children. With multiple wives and children, there is a scarcity of resources, food, and protection from sexual abuses from other men. The wives often compete, sometimes violently, with each other to gain attention from their husbands.

One exception to the commonality of sexual abuses in African countries is Ethiopia. Girls who joined the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) were either fighters or educated by the group. The TPLF's mission was to help communities by establishing health and education centers. Ethiopian girls were not abducted into the armed group, but rather many joined to escape the traditional customs of early marriage. In the TPFL, rape was forbidden and marriage was discouraged, since it was believed that marriage and children were distractions from the group's mission (Veale, 2003). The evidence seems to suggest that the TPLF's social agenda and respect for women provided protection from sexual abuse as experienced in other African conflicts.

Other roles African girl soldiers have played in armed groups includes being guards of the camps, spies, messengers, ammunition carriers, looters, combatants, cooks, farmers, and caregivers of children (Honwana, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003a; McKay, 2005; Rosen, 2005). Some girls fulfill multiple roles at once, while other tasks are age specific. For example, older girls tend to be fighters, while the younger girls complete domestic tasks that are necessary to the daily functioning of the group (Human Rights Watch, 2004; McKay, 2006b). African girl combatants often fight on the front-lines and can be promoted to an officer position if they excel in battle (McKay, 2005). Regardless of the role, these girls often have to endure the lack of food, proper shelter, and access to proper hygiene resources (Honwana, 2006). In sum, girls in African armed groups fulfill a variety of roles from com-

batant to domestic tasks. However, the most prevalent experience of African girl soldiers is sexual victimization.

### *Effects of Involvement*

The sexual abuses that many African girl soldiers experience are directly related to the physical, social, and psychological effects of their involvement with armed groups. Former Angolan and Mozambican girl soldiers who were victims of sexual abuses felt shameful of their sexual experiences and had difficulty marrying. Girls have reported that their communities view them only as prostitutes, and men are unwilling to consider them as a legitimate marriage partner. Additionally, some girls chose not to marry due to the sexual trauma they have experienced (Honwana, 2006; McKay, 2005). It is predicted that many of these girls who are victims of sexual abuses have contracted STDs such as HIV/AIDS (Human Rights Watch, 2003b). Moreover, girl soldiers who were sexually abused are at greater risk of being trafficked to another country for prostitution (Machel, 2001).

Various communities and cultures expect girls who are married to commanders to stay with their “bush husbands.” It is culturally inappropriate for wives to live apart from their husbands. This issue becomes even more complicated when a former girl soldier has children with her “bush husband.” She is faced with the decision to leave her husband and break up their family unit or to continue to live in war conditions with her abuser (McKay, Burman, Gonsalves, & Worthen, 2004; Upward, 2003; Veale, 2003; Verhey, 2004). In some instances, former girl soldiers have become fond of their “bush husbands” and have reported feelings of anxiety over leaving him (Human Rights Watch, 2003b; McKay, 2005; McKay, 2006b). Even though girls who are victims of sexual abuse report depressive symptoms, thoughts of suicide, loss of life chronology, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Heninger, 2005; Mack, 2005; Mazurana, McKay, Carlson, Kasper, 2002; Reis & Vann, 2006), many are not interested in inflicting revenge upon their aggressors, but rather state their desire to impact their communities in a positive way (Brett & Specht, 2004).

Recently, researchers have suggested that despite these horrific living conditions and life experiences, African girl soldiers are still able to show positive functioning. Researchers identify positive functioning through the girls’ ability to be resourceful and display purposeful modes of resistance to their abusers (Denov & Gervais, 2007; Denov & Maclure, 2006; McKay, 2006b). Girl soldiers in Sierra Leone stated that they purposefully seduced and married officers to gain protection, excelled in domestic chores to avoid fighting and to gain higher status among other girls, formed forbidden friendships with other women and

girls to create a sense of community and emotional support, and excelled in combat to reduce sexual victimization and gain respect from male combatants (Denov & Gervais, 2007; McKay, 2006b; Rosen, 2005). Girls resisted sexual abuses by pretending to menstruate or by fighting and killing their abuser. Additionally, they avoided being perpetrators of physical violence by deliberately missing their enemy during battles (Denov & Maclure, 2006). Through connections with other girls and women, some girl soldiers were able to use planning and organizational skills to escape from an armed group (Denov & Gervais, 2007). These girls were able to show resistance by positioning themselves for the best possible outcome in light of their circumstances (McKay, 2006).

### *Summary*

As shown above, African girl soldiers primarily, but not exclusively, enter armed groups through abduction, experience sexual abuses while part of the armed group, and the effects of involvement appear to be directly related to sexual abuse. The response of the community once girls are demobilized and reintegrated appears to be critical for psychosocial development. According to Erikson, being rejected by one's community, feeling the cultural constraints of living in a traditional family unit, being sexually violated, and, in some instances, forced to kill others impacts one's development into adulthood. If these girls continue to live in armed groups with their "bush husband", their children grow up in an atmosphere which promotes violence and the abuse of women. Practitioners would be wise to focus efforts on community education as it relates to sexual abuses. Educating community leaders to the negative impact of sexual abuses may help in decreasing the stigma attached to girls who have been victims of such abuses. In addition, many of these girls are now mothers and have the double burden of stigmatization and caring for their children. Providing education, child-care, and occupational opportunities for these girls appears to be critical for their successful reintegration.

## **THE AMERICAS**

As noted above, 16% of research studies involving a focus on female child soldier experience have been conducted in countries in Central and South America.

### *Reason for Entry into Armed Groups*

Girl soldiers in Central and South America have joined armed groups for a wide variety of reasons. These reasons include: physical and sexual abuse; abandonment by the family; parental death; divorce of parents; an arranged

marriage in which a girl does not desire; propaganda from armed groups; desire for societal change; gain wealth and status; revenge; pressure to excel in school; and educational opportunities (Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Heninger, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2003c; Kearins, 2003a). The brevity of the discussion of why girls in Central and South America join armed groups in this report is limited by the available information in the reviewed studies.

The role of education in driving girls' entry into armed groups is complex. For example, girls in Colombia stated that pressure from the school system and their families to excel in school provided a reason to join (Kearins, 2003a). Girls in El Salvador, however, reported being displeased with their education and looked to the armed group to teach them skills such as nursing (Dickson-Gomez, 2002). This discrepancy may be due to cultural differences the two countries place on education or in the characteristics of the sample groups in each study.

Of interest in the studies on girls' experiences in the Americas, abduction was not listed as a reason for participating with an armed group. This contrasts with girls' experiences in Africa. This does not mean abductions do not occur in the Americas (see Mazurana & McKay, 2001); rather, it may indicate that the practice of abduction is not as prevalent as it is in African conflicts or that the practice is not being reported.

### *Life Inside an Armed Group*

Girl soldiers in Central and South America fulfill a variety of roles within an armed group. Girl soldiers in El Salvador participate in supporting roles. These roles include cooking, sewing uniforms, nursing, coordinating movement of soldiers, and carrying supplies. Only a minority of women and girls are combatants. The opportunity for these girls to learn medical and logistical skills justifies, in their minds, joining the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) to gain educational opportunities (Dickson-Gomez, 2002).

In Colombia, girls perform similar tasks to girl soldiers in El Salvador. However, girls' roles in Colombian paramilitary groups differ from girls' roles in guerilla groups. In Colombian guerilla groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN), girls are just as likely as boys to become combatants. Both girl and boy combatants are subject to physically grueling combatant training and little sleep. If a girl proves herself skilled in battle, she is just as likely to be promoted to commander as her male counterpart (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2003c; Kearins, 2003a). Conversely, in paramilitary groups Colombian girl soldiers perform traditional gendered tasks such

as cleaning and cooking. These girls are also more likely to be viewed as sexual objects (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

While rape and sexual abuses in Colombian armed groups are less frequent when compared to African armed groups, girls are often forced to undergo unsafe medical procedures to insert birth control devices into their bodies. If a girl becomes pregnant, she is often forced to have an abortion. There is little or no access to proper medical facilities and abortion procedures often happen in the camps. However, each paramilitary and guerilla group has different standards regarding birth control, pregnancies, and abortion (Human Rights Watch, 2003c).

In Colombia as in many countries in Africa, girl soldiers survive by aligning themselves with a commander. While not forced to marry like African girl soldiers, Colombian girl soldiers seek to find a “commander boyfriend” within the armed group. Commander boyfriends can provide extra privileges, lighter work loads, and protection from fighting on the front lines. Similar to African girl soldiers, girls compete against each other for the attention of commanders and are expected to protect their commander boyfriend during battle (Human Rights Watch, 2003c; Kearins, 2003a).

### *Effects of Involvement*

There is little information in the research literature as to the effects of participation on girl soldiers from the Americas. The data that has been collected suggests that as girls get older they start to regret their decision to join the armed group. Older girls begin to realize that others are distrustful of them because they were a part of an armed group, and this contributes to chronic loneliness and depression (Heninger, 2005; Kearins, 2003c). Additionally, former girl soldiers in the Americas are more likely to be sexually promiscuous with the intent of becoming pregnant. Researchers suggest that former girl and boy soldiers rush to have their own children as an attempt to mourn the loss of their childhood (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). A local Colombian humanitarian agency, Defensoria del Pueblo, estimates that in 2005 only 9.5% of former girl soldiers planned on using contraceptives (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008).

Despite early planned pregnancies and feelings of regret, early life experiences tend to be more traumatic for these girls than their war experiences. In documented interviews, former Colombian girl soldiers expressed more emotion when talking about early childhood experiences than participation in war (Heninger, 2005). As stated in previous sections, some Colombian girls join armed groups to escape physical and sexual abuse or are abandoned by their

families. These early life experiences appear to have a greater impact on the emotional and psychological development than war experiences, which is consistent with the literature on abused children (see Herman, 1992). Groups and agencies working with these girls would be remiss if they ignore the impact of girls' pre-war experiences on their psychosocial development.

Finally, like their counterparts in Africa, former girl soldiers in both Colombia and El Salvador reported desires to live healthy, productive lives. Obstacles that stand in their way include harm from former guerilla and paramilitary groups and inability to find work. During participation, girl soldiers do not receive formal education, but rather gain skills such as healthcare. A lack of job opportunities in these skilled areas is a financial concern for former girl soldiers (Dickson-Gomez, 2002; Kearins, 2003a).

### *Summary*

For girl soldiers in the Americas, pre-war experiences dictate involvement with armed groups. These girls view armed groups as an escape from their negative family experiences. The roles girl soldiers in the Americas fulfill depend on the country and nature of the armed group. Some girl soldiers fight while others engage in domestic tasks or are taught a skill such as healthcare. Instead of focusing on their war experiences, helping these girls to understand and accept their decision to join an armed group could go a long way in helping them achieve psychosocial well-being since many girls report regretting their decision to join an armed group and a desire to become mothers at an early age. Additionally, promoting female integration into the post-conflict occupational sphere could benefit many former girl soldiers. All too often, reintegrated girl soldiers are left with few occupational options and are forced to marry or become domestic servants for financial stability. Few occupational opportunities appears to be especially troubling in countries, such as El Salvador, where girls join armed groups in hopes of gaining better access to education and employment.

A better understanding of how girls become involved with armed groups (ex. domestic violence) points to the needed preventative actions of practitioners. If girls are joining armed groups because of unhealthy home lives, humanitarian efforts focused on preventing child and domestic abuse could go a long way in deterring girls from joining armed groups. These girls' ability, which is affected by psychological health, to positively contribute to the functioning of their society and community, either as mothers or workers within the community, could play a major role in the stability and development of their societies.

## INDONESIA AND SOUTH PACIFIC

Referred to above, the least number of empirical studies in the girl soldier literature, 14%, focus on girls' experiences in Indonesia and the South Pacific.

### *Reason for Entry into Armed Groups*

Girls in Indonesia and the South Pacific join armed groups for personal and social reasons. For example, girls in Sri Lanka stated they joined the non-governmental military group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) because of their experiences witnessing government army officials and soldiers raping women and terrorizing citizens. Girls stated they hoped to gain revenge on the government army for its actions (Bloom, 2005). Similar to girl soldiers in Ethiopia and Colombia, Sri Lankan girl soldiers also joined to escape arranged marriages. Again, similar to Colombian girl soldiers, girls in Sri Lanka viewed joining the LTTE as an escape from the pressure to excel in school and as an opportunity to advocate for social justice in their country (Kearins, 2003c).

In the Philippines, the non-governmental armed groups engage in powerful propaganda to enlist girls and boys. Some of these groups may promote the idea of gender equality, which resonates with many young girls. Females are disadvantaged in the Filipino society, and girls hope to improve the condition for females through involvement with armed groups. These girls view participation as a means to achieve gender equality (Brett, 2003; Kearins, 2003b).

### *Life Inside an Armed Group*

Sri Lankan girl soldiers fulfill many of the same roles in the armed group, LTTE, as Colombian girl soldiers. Sri Lankan girl soldiers are taught to fight, read maps and compasses, tie knots, spy and engage in detective work, and provide relief work to towns and civilians. Girls are either chosen to work with combatant groups or complete political and relief work in the towns to gain the community's support for the group. In order to avoid distractions from the work and mission of the group, sexual affairs are forbidden by the LTTE. The LTTE instills feelings of rage and revenge in their child soldiers towards the government. They must indoctrinate their child soldiers as to the worthiness of the group's cause in hopes of convincing their young fighters that it is better to die than be captured by the government forces (Heninger, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2004; Kearins, 2003c).

Girls in armed groups in the Philippines are fighters, organizers, educators, service personnel, and political leaders (Heninger, 2005). The physical training for girls varies, but the political training is systematic. Girls and boys are taught public

speaking skills, and the youth are sent out into the villages to persuade villagers to support the group and to teach civilians how to recover their lives from the devastation of war. After a day in the villages, boys and girls attend debriefing groups in which they give each other feedback on their speaking techniques. Boys and girls are also given guns and function as combatants. Currently, the literature does not indicate any sexual abuses in the Filipino armed groups. In fact, similar to Sri Lanka, it is forbidden for males and females to be alone together (Kearins, 2003b).

### *Effects of Involvement*

Girls in Indonesia and the South Pacific experience psychological effects of their involvement with armed groups. In contrast to Filipino girl soldiers, Sri Lankan girl soldiers have reported more negative effects from war experiences. Former Sri Lankan girl soldiers identified with feelings of brokenness, worthlessness, confusion, regret, fear, and loneliness. Accepting their decision to join an armed group and involvement within the group has proven to be difficult for former girl soldiers. These girls desired to reconnect with their families but were unsure of the family's location and felt too psychologically distant from their families to return (Kearins, 2003c). Moreover, Sri Lankan girls identified looking towards the future, completing an education, and giving back to their communities as a means to redeem themselves and as part of their healing process (Heninger, 2005; Kearins, 2003c).

While former Filipino girl soldiers experienced feelings of guilt for leaving their families and joining an armed group, more often they reported anger towards traitors within their organizations and the organizations themselves. Girls accused the armed groups of using false promises to obtain followers and were frustrated at themselves for believing the false promises. As a result, girls found it difficult to trust people (Heninger, 2005; Kearins, 2003b). However, Filipino girl soldiers were proud of their ability to learn communication and leadership skills. Unfortunately, the girls did not believe there were opportunities for them to use these skills as civilians. Instead, their options were to become domestic servants or farmers (Kearins, 2003b).

### *Summary*

A distinct aspect of girl soldiering in Indonesia and the South Pacific appears to be the political training these girls are given while with an armed group. Both in Sri Lanka and the Philippines girls are taught organizational and public speaking skills. Girls work alongside boys in mobilizing the masses and engaging in combat. This is significant since girl soldiers in this area of the world report a desire for social justice and gender equality as a major reason for joining an armed

group. The inability to achieve social or gender change while with the armed group is shown to have a psychological impact on these girls. However, future political impact is unknown. In adult civilian life where females are constrained to domestic and gendered tasks, these former girl soldiers may be willing to join another armed group as adults in hopes of achieving social change. Additionally, according to the socio-political approach, these girls may socialize their children to physically fight against injustice which perpetuates violence in a community. Providing avenues through which these girls can use their leadership skills could help former girl soldiers to successfully reintegrate back into society and promote healthy identity and psychosocial development.

## CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to overview girl soldiering experiences throughout the world using the available empirical literature, which has concentrated on three regions: Africa, the Americas, and Indonesia and the South Pacific. The review focused on three key aspects of girl soldiers' experiences with armed conflict: (1) reasons for entry into armed groups, (2) experiences while associated with armed groups, and (3) effects of war experiences.

No one statement can summarize how girls become associated with armed groups, what they experience, and how they are affected for each explanation is determined by the specific context of the conflict. For example, girls who are abducted into armed groups are more likely to experience sexual victimization while with the armed group and experience psychological, social, and physical effects that are directly related to their soldiering experiences. Conversely, girls who join groups as a means of escaping physical and sexual abuse show psychological effects that are more heavily determined by pre-war experiences.

According to a Socio-Political lens, girl soldiers play a unique role in the development of a peaceful society since their experiences as soldiers can negatively affect their ability to achieve a healthy psychosocial identity. These former girl soldiers can impact their society through their own political behaviors as adults and the political and behavioral socialization of children.

Understanding the motivations for entry into armed groups, experiences with armed groups, and the effects of participation can guide practitioners, policy makers, and advocates as to the specific needs of girl soldiers that will promote a healthy psychosocial identity. Research must continue to unravel the diversity of girl soldier experiences with specific attention to long-term post-war development since little is known about the long-term effects of soldiering.

A limitation of this review is the exclusive focus on girl soldiers. Many female youth have war experiences other than that of a girl soldier. For example,

many Croatian and Palestinian female youth were not associated with armed groups, but experienced war conditions as citizens (Ajdukovic, 1998; Barber 2008). While the scope of this review provides detailed information on girl soldier experiences, this paper does not capture the experience of all female youth whose lives have been affected by political violence.

Secondly, studies that have not been published or were not cited in published articles were not included in this review. Non-governmental agencies working with former child soldiers may have empirical studies for their evaluation purposes that are unknown to the academic community. This could include studies on under-represented countries or areas of the world. Knowledge and inclusion of these types of studies would provide a more complete description of girl soldier experiences. Despite the limitations, this review provides a detailed overview of the state of the girl soldier literature and suggests two theoretical approaches, Socio-Political and Identity Development, which justify the study of this population.

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### FIGURE 1

For the countries highlighted in black, girls have been documented as being associated with armed groups within that country (McKay, 2005; McKay & Mazurana, 2004).



**FIGURE 2**

Percentages represent the proportion of the girl soldier literature by region of the world. (Articles not explicitly identifying participants as girl soldiers were excluded from this analysis.)

