

CHAPTER 2:

LIVING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED AREAS: FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children and Youth in Conflict-affected Areas

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Children, youth and conflict: overview

Millions of children and youth are caught up in violent conflict and suffer from its devastating impacts. Many are killed as a by-product of general disorder and violence, whereas in some situations, for example, in genocide, children and youth may be specifically targeted. They are also targeted and recruited, often but not always forcibly, as child combatants. Research has shown that war-affected children and youth, regardless of whether they have served as combatants, may suffer from severe emotional distress.

Literature on children and youth has tended to concentrate on their portrayals as passive victims or as active security threats, in the case of youth. There is increasing attention, however, on the need to focus as well on the resilience of children and youth and on their positive contributions to peace processes and reconstruction activities.

Conflict also disrupts children's access to services such as health and education. Education is increasingly accepted as an integral part of humanitarian response in conflict and post-conflict situations. It can help restore normalcy, safeguard the most vulnerable, provide psychosocial care, promote tolerance, unify divided communities and begin the process of reconstruction and peacebuilding. However, both providing and accessing education in such contexts is particularly problematic.

Sommers, M., 2006, 'Youth and Conflict – A Brief Review of the Available Literature', USAID, Washington, D.C.

How can programmes help youth in conflict and post-conflict situations? This literature review illuminates key themes, trends and prospects for war-affected youth and the programmes that aim to assist them. While war's effects on youth are complex, resilience is a prominent shared characteristic. Effective youth interventions require increased participation of female youth, better engagement with youth to determine and address their precise needs, quality programme evaluations and more dissemination of programme documents.

UNDESA, 2003, 'Youth and Conflict', Chapter 14 of the World Youth Report, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York

How can youth involvement in conflict be addressed? This study shows that youth are often a targeted group during conflict. It argues that traditional prevention mechanisms have proved top-heavy and ineffective in addressing the root causes of conflict and problems leading to the escalation of tensions. In tackling conflict, the international community must go beyond the narrow approach determined by top-level ideals of peace and embrace cross-sectoral approaches.

UNICEF, 2009, 'Machel Study 10-Year Strategic Review: Children and Conflict in a Changing World', UNICEF

What progress has been made in protecting children affected by armed conflict? There is increased global awareness about deliberate violations against children in armed conflict, such as

the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. However, appalling consequences that stem from the complex interplay of conflict, poverty and discrimination are often overlooked. Children living in war-affected contexts are less likely to be in school or have access to clean water and basic sanitation. They are more vulnerable to early mortality as a result of disease and undernutrition, and they have less chance of becoming adults able to play a constructive role in their societies.

[See full text](#)

UNDP, 2006, 'Youth and Violent Conflict: Society and Development in Crisis?', United Nations Development Programme, New York

This report seeks to improve understanding of the intersections between youth and violent conflict focusing on the sub-region of West Africa. Youth should not be treated as an all-encompassing category and analysis for their role in causing and resolving conflict should go beyond a superficial analysis to understand the deeper issues of their experiences. The report reviews both literature and programming and provides recommendations for future action.

[See full text](#)

UNESCO, 2011, 'The Hidden Crisis: Armed conflict and education', Education for All, Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO

To what extent are the goals of Education for All being achieved in countries affected by armed conflict? This report shows that there is not only a lack of provision of education but also a failure to protect education systems and their students, and to devote sufficient funds to education in reconstruction and peacebuilding programmes. It argues that educational challenges in conflict-affected states are largely unreported, and that education in such contexts merits a far more central place on the international development agenda.

Child combatants, mobilisation and war-affected youth

The precise number of child combatants globally is unknown. The figure most frequently cited is 300,000, most of which are adolescents. Key negative impacts for combatants have been found to be psychological distress concentrated in those that experience the most violence; loss of human capital due to time away from civilian education and work experience; and social exclusion, as former child fighters are considered tainted and impure.

The literature has tended to focus on child combatants as boys who are abducted and coerced into fighting. The role of girls in fighting forces is largely neglected, and girls have consequently been excluded from recovery programmes. There has also been limited examination of situations in which children and youth are not abducted but are mobilised in other ways. Some recent work has looked at youth agency and the role of the desire for status and a sense of empowerment. New research has shown that children and youth in displacement camps may become motivated to engage in political violence due to frustrations and the distinctiveness of life in a camp and the politicisation of everyday experiences.

Reintegration packages have generally focused on education, income generation and livelihoods. Youth often prefer support for income generation and livelihoods as they find it difficult to return to school with children much younger than them. In order to counter the social exclusion of former child combatants, initiatives have also included community based projects in order to make the receiving village more receptive to the former combatants' reintegration.

Blattman, C., 2006, 'The Consequences of Child Soldiering', Households in Conflict Network Working Paper 22, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton

Hundreds of thousands of child combatants fought in recent civil wars in Africa, yet little is known about the long-term impact of child soldiering. Using data collected in Uganda, this paper finds that, contrary to existing evidence, the major consequences of child soldiering are educational and economic. Exposure to conflict also seems to increase political participation by abductees, and the psychological impacts of war appear to be moderate and concentrated in a minority. More research is needed to inform evidence-based post-conflict policies and programs.

Denov, M., 2007, 'Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood', Canadian International Development Agency, Ottawa

Girls within armed groups have generally been neglected by scholars, governments and policymakers. This paper traces the experiences of girls in armed conflict in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Uganda. It finds that girls in fighting forces are rendered invisible and marginalised during and after conflict, although they are fundamentally important to armed groups. They experience victimisation, perpetration and insecurity, but are also active agents and resisters.

Hart J., 2008, 'Displaced Children's Participation in Political Violence: Towards Greater Understanding of Mobilisation', Conflict, Security and Development, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 277-293

This article argues that children's participation in political violence should be considered in wider terms than just coercion. The experience of growing up in context of systemic oppression can politicise children at an early age. Responses aimed at curtailing children's involvement in political violence need to consider the political and economic processes affecting the lives of displaced children.

[See full text](#)

Housden, O., 2009, 'In a Weak State: Status and Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAG) in Nepal', IPCS Research Paper, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi

Despite Nepal's 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement targeting rehabilitation of children from armed group associations, the government has failed to implement satisfactory reintegration. This paper reviews the current status of the reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups. State failure to tackle deep-rooted inequality and structural problems continues to allow armed movements to recruit marginalised groups, including children, and consequently flourish.

McIntyre, A. (ed.), 2004, 'Invisible Stakeholders: Children and War in Africa', Institute for Security Studies, South Africa

African children and youth have been absorbed into liberation struggles, political campaigns and insurgencies. Yet explanations for the presence of young people in battlefields have tended to be simplistic and overlook the political significance of this phenomenon. This book goes beyond representations of them as victims or glorifying them as the vanguards of African liberation struggles and as voices against colonial oppression and injustice.

[See full text](#)

For discussion and resources on gender-based violence against women and girls, see the [GSDRC's gender topic guide](#).

Dissatisfied youth and youth bulges

Youth bulge refers to “extraordinarily large youth cohorts relative to the adult population” (Urdal 2007). A large pool of young people is not inherently destabilising; however, some analysts argue that there is a correlation between youth bulges and political violence, in particular under conditions of economic stagnation. While contested, the understanding is that young people - particularly young men, who are jobless and alienated, and have few outlets for positive engagement, are ready recruits for those seeking to mobilise violence. Thus, it is argued that more attention needs to be paid to providing employment or education opportunities to youth, particularly during times of economic decline. Limits on migration may increase the risk of violence in some countries with large youth bulges if it is not compensated for by increased domestic employment opportunities. The countries expected to experience high relative youth populations in years to come are mostly situated in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia.

Urdal, H., 2007, 'The Demographics of Political Violence: Youth Bulges, Insecurity and Conflict' Chapter 6 in *Too Poor for Peace? Global Poverty, Conflict and Security in the 21st Century*, eds. L. Brainard and D. Chollet, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, pp. 90-100

This chapter reports study findings suggesting that demographic ‘youth bulges’ may provide both a motive and an opportunity for political violence. These bulges increase the risk of internal armed conflict, terrorism, and rioting, but the conditions under which they are most volatile seem to differ. Bulges appear to particularly increase the risk of terrorism and riots under conditions of educational and economic stress, but to provide greater opportunities for armed conflict in autocracies and greater motives in democracies.

Hilker, L. M., Fraser E. M., 2009, 'Youth Exclusion, Violence, Conflict and Fragile States', Report prepared for DFID by Social Development Direct, London

What factors contribute to youth exclusion and increase the likelihood of youth engagement in violence? How can DFID effectively address issues of youth exclusion and violence? This report examines existing evidence and analysis on the links between youth exclusion, violence, conflict and fragile states. It highlights factors which can contribute to youth violence, and makes recommendations for DFID's work on youth exclusion and violence.

For additional resources on youth and social exclusion, see the GSDRC's [social exclusion](#) guide.

Participation of children and youth in recovery and peacebuilding

There is growing recognition that children and youth need to be engaged in positive activities; and that they have much to contribute to peace processes, reconstruction and peacebuilding initiatives. Children and youth have already been making effective contributions to various programmes, including those focused, for example, on rebuilding social relationships, developing cultures of peace, rehabilitating education systems, and promoting livelihoods and economic recovery. Involvement in such activities can counter the traumatising and destructive experiences of violence that war-affected children and youth have undergone. More broadly, it provides positive and constructive roles for youth that render them less susceptible to mobilisation to violence.

USAID, 2005, 'Youth and Conflict: A Toolkit for Intervention', USAID, Washington

Why do young people participate in conflict? What can be done to steer young people away from violence? This toolkit examines youth participation in violent conflict and draws out lessons for development programming. It asserts that although a large proportion of young people is not

necessarily destabilising, those (particularly young men) who are uprooted, intolerant, jobless and have few opportunities could represent a ready pool of recruits for ethnic, religious and political extremists. Avoiding future conflict means drawing positively on the energy and capacity of youth as the leaders of tomorrow's societies.

Fischer, M., 2006, 'The Need for Multi-Dimensional Youth Work: Education, Interethnic Networking and Income Generation', in *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ten Years after Dayton*, ed. M. Fischer, Lit Verlag, Münster

How can youth in postconflict societies become a catalyst for positive change? This research gives an overview of the challenges facing youth work in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It presents the 'Young People Build the Future' project, which uses a multidimensional approach to try to meet some of these challenges. An integrated combination of initiatives that provide training, empowerment, peace education, vocational training and income generation opportunities is essential.

Derluyn, I., Mels, C., Parmentier, S. and Vandenhole, W. eds., 2012, 'Re-Member: Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Reconciliation of War-Affected Children'. Intersentia Publishing Ltd., Cambridge

Not all children and youth affected by war are child soldiers. What are their experiences of the rehabilitation, reintegration and reconciliation processes aimed at them? This book takes a multidisciplinary approach to address this question, drawing on children's rights, psychosocial studies and transitional justice. Case studies help illustrate the shift towards, and benefits of, more holistic, local knowledge-based, and community-based reintegration programs. There is a need for a comprehensive approach to the needs of war-affected children, integrating a variety of different elements including, but not limited to, psychosocial, rehabilitation, reconciliation, and human rights. See [details on publisher's website](#)

Women in Conflict-affected Areas

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Women and conflict: overview

Women and girls suffer disproportionately from violent conflict. They suffer not only from the by-products of war, but are also targeted as a strategy of war. Rape and sexual violence have been recognised as instruments of war, designed to weaken families and break down the social fabric of communities and societies. Although men and boys are also victims of gender-based violence, women and girls are the primary target.

There is increasing acknowledgement that women and girls play multiple roles during conflict. They are not only victims of violence, but can also be active participants in the violence, directly as combatants, or indirectly, by facilitating violence through fundraising or inciting their male relatives to commit acts of violence. Women also often become heads of households during war; women and girls learn new skills and contribute to peacemaking and rebuilding local economies and communities. These changes in gender relations, however, are usually short-lived and societies resort back to traditional gender roles after conflict.

Women also tend to be side-lined from formal conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes, and post-conflict recovery programmes often overlook women’s security needs. This compromises the inclusiveness and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.

Impact of violent conflict on women and girls

The literature on sexual violence in armed conflict indicates that rape and violence against women and girls prior to, during and after conflict is extensive in scope and magnitude throughout the world. Sexual violence is defined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic a person’s sexuality, using coercion, threats of harm or physical force, by any person regardless of relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”. Sexual violence, particularly rape, is often used as a weapon of war to destabilise families, groups and communities; to carry out ethnic cleansing and genocide; to instil fear in populations in order to dampen resistance and/or incite flight; as a form of punishment and torture; and to affirm aggression. The destabilisation of families and communities can contribute to other forms of violence, including domestic violence.

Sexual exploitation, trafficking and sexual slavery tend to increase in armed conflict. Women and girls who are recruited, often by abduction, into combat are in many cases forced to provide sexual services and/or are subjected to forced marriages. Refugee and internally displaced women and girls, separated from family members and traditional support mechanisms, are also particularly vulnerable. Government officials, civilian authorities, peacekeepers and aid workers have been reported to demand sexual favours in exchange for necessities – safe passage, food and shelter. Limited monitoring of camp security also renders women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence and forced combat.

Security issues hinder women and girl's access to services as well. When schools are destroyed for example, and children have to travel long distances, girls are more likely to stay at home in order to avoid the increased risk of abduction, sexual violence and exploitation.

The issues associated with reintegration are different for men and women. Returning females face different problems from returning males and women who have remained in the community during war face specific challenges when combatants return. Reintegration programmes should take gender dynamics into consideration.

Sexual violence

Ward, J. and Marsh, M., 2006, 'Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in War and its Aftermath: Realities, Responses and Required Resources', Briefing Paper, United Nations Population Fund

What is the extent and impact of gender-based violence during and after war? Statistics show that the sexual violation and torture of women and girls has become rife in conflict settings. Data also show that gender-based violence (GBV) does not subside post-conflict; certain types of GBV may even increase. This briefing paper from the United Nations Population Fund argues that while international prevention and response efforts have increased in recent years, much more must be done. A multi-sectoral model which demands holistic inter-organisational and inter-agency efforts across health, social services, legal and security sectors offers the best approach for GBV prevention.

DCAF, 2007, 'Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict: Global Overview and Implications for the Security Sector', Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces **[See full text](#)**

GSDRC, 2009, Conflict and Sexual and Domestic Violence against Women, Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, Birmingham

The literature on sexual violence in armed conflict indicates that rape and violence against women and girls prior to, during and after conflict seem to be extensive in scope and magnitude throughout the world – with reported incidents in conflicts in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Whilst there is limited comparative analysis and understanding about where sexual violence may be more or less prevalent and why, it is widely recognised that sexual violence against women in conflict is usually reflective of pre-existing patterns in society. Generally speaking, rape and violence against women is a good proxy indicator of rising tensions and incipient conflict. Much of the literature also emphasises the persistence of violence and exploitation in the 'post'-conflict, reconstruction phase.

Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam America, 2010 'Now, the World is Without Me: An Investigation of Sexual Violence in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo', Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and Oxfam International

The number of reported assaults at Panzi Hospital in South Kivu, Eastern DRC has steadily decreased between 2004 and 2008. At the same time there has been a 17-fold increase in the number of rapes carried out by civilians as opposed to armed militia. This implies a normalisation of rape among the civilian population. Women require quality care in all areas; there must be further work to reduce sexual violence linked to military action; legal and justice initiatives must be strengthened for crimes against civilians by its armed forces, and protective deployments must be tailored to local realities.

[See full text](#)

Benjamin, J. A., and Murchison, L, 2004, 'Gender-based Violence: Care and Protection of Children in Emergencies – A Field Guide', Save the Children, London

[See full text](#)

Nordås, R. , 2011, 'Sexual Violence in African Conflicts', CSCW Policy Brief, Centre for the Study of Civil War, PRIO, Oslo

This policy brief summarises key findings from a pilot study of conflict-related sexual violence in conflicts in 20 African countries, encompassing 177 armed conflict actors – state armies, militias, and rebel groups. The study finds that, in Africa, sexual violence is: mostly indiscriminate; committed only by some conflict actors; often committed by state armies; often committed in years with low levels of killings; and often committed post-conflict.

Displacement

Buscher, D., 2006, 'Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions and Resource Tools', Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, New York

Why do large numbers of displaced women and girls continue to be abused, raped and exploited? This paper explores risks facing displaced women and how to address them. Women and girls must be involved in their own protection. Their communities, including the men, must be similarly engaged. Yet only individual assessment can adequately address women's unique protection concerns. Women and girls are not just victims but also survivors, caretakers, leaders, peacemakers and providers.

Access to services

GSDRC, 2009, The Impact of Conflict on Women's Education, Employment and Health Care, Helpdesk Research Report, Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, Birmingham

The extent to which conflict restricts women's freedom of movement depends on a number of factors including the stage of conflict, whether the women are displaced, whether they are directly or indirectly affected by the conflict, and the cultural norms of the conflict-affected area. Forced displacement, for example, may in some cases lead to greater mobility, where women assume additional responsibilities such as taking on the role of primary breadwinner. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the fear of violence more often than not restricts women's freedom of movement. In times of political, economic and social uncertainty, there is a strong tendency to revert to traditional values which appear to offer protection for women and girls but which restrict their mobility.

Young women and girls as fighters

Coulter, C., Persson, M., and Utas, M., 2008, 'Young Female Fighters in African Wars: Conflict and Its Consequences', Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala

What role do young women play in contemporary African wars? Mainstream thinking on war and conflict sees women as passive and peaceful and men as active and aggressive. This report calls for a broader understanding of women's roles and participation in armed conflict in Africa. Programmes to disarm, demobilise and re-integrate former fighters need to be adapted to local contexts and designed to meet the needs of female ex-fighters.

Denov, M., 2007, 'Girls in Fighting Forces: Moving Beyond Victimhood', Canadian International Development Agency, Ottawa

Girls in armed groups have generally been neglected by scholars, governments and policymakers. This paper traces the experiences of girls in armed conflict in Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique

and Uganda. It finds that girls in fighting forces are rendered invisible and marginalised during and after conflict, although they are fundamentally important to armed groups. They experience victimisation, perpetration and insecurity, but are also active agents and resisters.

Reintegration

Maina, G., 2011, 'The Complexity of Applying UN Resolution 1325 in Post Conflict Reintegration Processes: The Case of Northern Uganda', African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), Durban

How effectively have the needs of women and girls been addressed during rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction in Uganda? This study looks the reintegration experience of women and girls after the long war between the Ugandan government and the Lord's Resistance Army. The study analyses the situation in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls on all actors to address the special needs of women and girls during rehabilitation, reintegration and post-conflict reconstruction. The study concludes that, since the female populations in northern Uganda still struggle with deprivation, want and exclusion, it is difficult speak of meaningful and durable peace.

Additional resources

For further information on women, gender and conflict please see the [gender in fragile and conflict-affected environments](#) section of the GSDRC's gender guide.