

Research has shown that child soldiers have been used in armed conflict for years. Governments and armed groups in more than 87 countries recruit children as soldiers. Although it is impossible to accurately calculate the number of children involved in armed forces and groups, the United Nations estimates there are 300,000 child soldiers. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers defines a child soldier as “any person under 18 years of age who is a member of or attached to government armed forces or any other regular or irregular armed political group, whether or not an armed conflict exists”.

Child soldiers may perform tasks including participation in combat, laying mines, spying, sabotage, acting as decoys, messengers or guards; training and drills; carrying out domestic tasks, like cooking and washing clothes; transporting equipment; sexual slavery and forced labor. The International Labor Organization Convention has identified forced or mandatory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict is one of the worst forms of child labor.

Rebel groups around the world use child soldiers often to fight the government. Governments use child soldiers in armed conflict. Some countries actively recruit children as young as seven years old.

Countries who are known to recruit child soldiers include, among others, Iraq, Sudan, Uganda, Afghanistan, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Burma, India, the Philippines and Democratic Republic of Congo. Africa has the largest number of child soldiers. Youth are recruited by the National Army, rebel forces, insurgent groups, Taliban militias and guerilla forces.

Some children are abducted or forced into conflicts while others volunteer or are volunteered by their families. Reasons to join include salary and money paid for work, a promise of a better life, status, a sense of power or revenge for a wrongdoing. In some cases, there is simply no other choice.

Children are used as soldiers because they are easier to train, force and brainwash, and they are expendable.

It is believed that all child soldiers are male. In fact, 40% of all child soldiers are female. Many girls are used as “wives” and sex slaves for the soldiers and officers.

Violence is a part of daily life and many children are forced to kill, as well as witness atrocities to horrendous situations. Child soldiers have to deal with cruelties like malnutrition and exposure and force to taking drugs. As a result, trauma is greatly suffered.

Recruitment often requires unheard of acts, including forcing young children to kill or seriously injure family members. This makes it difficult for them to ever return home. The effects on these children remain long after they are set free or escape. Psychological damage can remain with them for life. Most have had no continuing education and without this, future employment is near impossible. As a result, some choose to return to the rebel groups, as it seems they have nowhere else to go.

Many governmental and non-governmental organizations are working to put an end to this problem. In 2013, the United Nations set a goal to get rid of all child soldiers in the world by 2016. Organizations around the world have created rehabilitation and reintegration programs, as well as are providing education, health and counseling services. Article 38 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children under 15 years of age are not to be recruited into armed forces. Since the Convention was written, two other protocols have been added.

Sources: Child Soldiers 1379 by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers; War Child <http://www.warchild.org.uk>, Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org.uk>; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers www.child-soldiers.org.