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Protecting and protecting the rights of children in war zones

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INTRODUCTION:

United Nations published 54 articles on Children Rights in 1989, yet still in many countries with active conflict, these rights are being overlooked and dismissed. Children don't choose to be part of these wars and yet they lose the majority of their lives to them. Many organizations around the world have acknowledged this as a pressing issue and are actively fighting against, however this battle has a long way to go.

KEY TERMS:

Child:

Any human under the age of 18 unless in that said country adulthood is legally set earlier (this applies to countries like Iran, Yemen, Indonesia etc.)

Convention on the Rights of the Child:

It is a document published by the General Assembly in 1989. It has 54 articles that generally call for safety, no discrimination, education, free will etc. This document also establishes the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It is also the guide for UNICEF's actions. (To read the whole convention:https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child)

War zone:

War zone:
A war zone is an area where an active war is taking place. It may also be some other kind of violent conflict.

The six grave violations:
A list of grave violations against children in war zones published by the UN Security Council in 1999. The six grave violations are: Killing and maiming of children; Recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups; Sexual violence against children; Attacks against schools or hospitals; Abduction of children; and denial of humanitarian access for children(https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-under-attack-six-grave-violations-against-children-times-war) . The UN relies on local NGOs to report these violations.

Sexual abuse
Sexual abuse is sexual behavior towards someone without their consent. Be aware that it doesn't necessarily need to involve physical contact in order to be considered sexual abuse.

Abduction
The act of taking someone away against their free will. It may be using deception where a person my consent to going somewhere, however under unlawful circumstances which still makes the action illegal.

GENERAL OVERVIEW:
As Eglantyne Jebb (founder of the "Save the Children" organization) once said: "Every war is a war against children". Children get born into countries with active conflicts without a choice and yet they are one of those who suffer the most. In times of conflict everything else besides armed forces seems to go aside including the rights of children.

Firstly, when resources get tight many countries reserve to recruiting children into their armed forces. Between 2005 and 2020 more than 93 000 children were verified to be a part of an armed force in an active conflict (Six grave violations against children in times of war, 2022). This not only endangers their overall safety, but also denies them education and a happy childhood. Children are being exposed to extremely violent situations, where many times they are forced to commit violent acts as well, which negatively affects their mental health and cognitive development. Even when they are not forced to join such organizations, they aren't spared of witnessing these atrocious acts. Children hospitals and schools are a usual target for air attacks.

Moreover, as less attention is paid to the overall safety of the civilians, crimes such as rape or abduction become much more common. Around 17% of children that live in conflict areas have been victims of sexual misconduct (sexual violence against children in conflict, 2021). The abduction rates have been increasing over the years, where governments and organizations have been abducting children because of their religion, parent believes, race etc. These numbers are simply estimated and most likely there much more cases than we can even imagine.

MAJOR PARTIES INVOLVED

NGOs
NGOS have been trying for many years to urge governments of problematic countries to pay more attention to the rights of children despite being in an active conflict. Many produce yearly reports with estimates of mistreated children (these can be very useful during research;))They have also been trying to stay in close contacts with local communities as they believe that is one of the keys to protecting children. Some noteworthy examples are:

1. **Save the Children** is an international organization that concentrates on protecting the rights of children all over the world. They mostly work in areas of active conflict, but they also help in some LDCs. https://www.savethechildren.org.uk

2. **All survivors project** is an organization that fights against conflict-related sexual violence towards men. They try to do this by strengthening international and national responses. https://allsurvivorsproject.org

3. **Human Rights watch** is an organization that reports and investigates human rights violations against the world. Then through advocacy with governments larger organizations etc. they try to solve the problems. https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us

Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict

This was a mandate that was established in 1996 to give more power and representation to children in armed conflict. Its purpose is to cooperate with relevant UN bodies to ensure the best international cooperation. In more lame terms it's a person that instead of a country represents children in armed conflict during debates in different committees.

OHCHR

The Committee on the Rights of the Child was established in 1989 and consists of 18 independent experts. Its purpose is to monitor the implementations of child rights in different countries. It is meant to be independent and thus the experts there don't represent views of any countries.

IMPORTANT STATISTICS

- 10 most dangerous countries for children in armed conflict: Afghanistan. DRC, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sudan, Central African Republic
- 230 million children living in war zones (estimated 2022)
- 17% of children living in war zones are victims of sexual abuse (2021)
- From 2005 to 2020 93 000 children were recruited into armed forces
- 27 million children in war zones are without an access to education (2017)
- From 2005 to 2020 at least 25 700 children were verified to have been abducted by parties to conflict (real number is probably much higher)

PAST AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

UNICEF and OHCHR

UNICEF and OHCHR are actively working to cooperate with governments with the objectives to:

- Eliminate attacks on highly populated areas, hospitals, educational facilities etc.
- To urge all countries to uphold all the Right of the Child (end sexual abuse, abductions, recruitment into armed forces etc.)
- To release children that are being held captive by parties involved in armed conflict and to provide them with a safe home.
- Continue to monitor countries actions to uphold the Right of the Child

Current Initiatives

Act to protect children affected by conflict was launched by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in 2020. IT aims to strengthen the collaboration between UN, civil society and international society to support actions and programs designed to end these abuses.

Paris principles and commitments is a set of political commitments that was purposed by

France in the SC and all member states agreed to uphold them. They discuss the protection of children in warzones. It has now been in action for 15 years.
https://www.unicef.org/media/113631/file/UNI-Paris-Principles-and-Commitments-FAQ-21.pdf

Current issues in progress

- Protecting the children affected by the Ukrainian war
- Protecting children in African countries that are affected by armed conflict
- Protecting children in South Asia

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

How do we ensure education for children in war zones?
How do we ensure proper healthcare for children in war zones?
What guidelines do we have to implement to further prevent children from getting recruited into armed forces?
How do we improve cooperation with NGOs to ensure maximum efficiency?
How do we spread awareness about this issue?
…

SOURCES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:

https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/about/
https://www.unicef.org
https://www.savethechildren.org.uk
https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc
https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child
https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122812
https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us

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