

Constructing the Child Soldier Crisis: Violence, Victimhood and the Development of Transnational Advocacy against the Recruitment and Use of Children in Conflict, c.1970-2000'

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Children have become integral to contemporary humanitarian and human rights campaigns, both as the subjects of intervention and as an essential aspect of humanitarian iconography.¹ In the 1990s one form of child victim erupted spectacularly into prominence: the child soldier.² International non-governmental agencies, commentators and media sources alike brandished a figure of 300,000 child soldiers fighting or having been recently demobilized to alert the world to the scale of this problem in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³ An estimated 120,000 were said to be African, and indeed for most of the 1990s the iconographic image of 'the child soldier' was overwhelmingly African – the small, wild-eyed Sierra Leonean or Liberian boy in ragged clothes, brandishing an AK-47.⁴ Since the 1990s the 'child soldier crisis' has become a major humanitarian and human rights project, from the United Nations Machel Report in 1996 to the Kony 2012 phenomenon. Humanitarian campaigns have repeatedly highlighted the abduction and forced recruitment of children, depicting child soldiers as brutalized, traumatized victims of adult abuses whose recruitment violates norms of both war and childhood, and whose rescue requires international action.

The question arises however: why did the figure of the child soldier as an abused and exploited victim of war emerge in humanitarian campaigns, and why at this particular point in history? There is a long history of children's military involvement in conflicts across the globe, but prior to the 1980s the figure of the child soldier was absent from child-saving and broader humanitarian campaigns.⁵ Key studies and policy documents from the 1990-2000s depicted child soldiering as a new problem that emerged or sharply intensified in the so-called 'new wars' and civil conflicts of the post-Cold War era, their involvement fuelled by postcolonial state crisis, broken child protection systems, and new hyper-violent and civilianized forms of warfare.⁶ This article however argues that it was as much a shift in rhetoric and strategic framing as in empirical realities that drove the emergence of the 'child soldier crisis': children did not suddenly emerge across global battlefields in the 1980-90s but their involvement was increasingly rendered visible as the subject of humanitarian concern. The 'child soldier crisis' was a product of the politically-engaged liberal humanitarianism that emerged after 1989, shaped by globalization, human security and human rights structures, and which combined with child rights discourses to create the politico-legal and cultural crucible from which international humanitarian concern about children's participation in conflict emerged.⁷ More directly, it was also the result of the successful campaigning tactics of committed transnational advocacy networks (TANs) that developed in 1980-2000s from initial NGO collaboration to the formation in 1998 of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. Existing studies have established that child soldiers dominated

advocacy efforts around child rights campaigning from the mid-1990s to 2000s but have not explained how or why this transpired.⁸ This article uses child soldiering as an empirical case study to ask why some issues gain traction and generate successful humanitarian advocacy campaigns when others do not? It analyzes the structural and contingent factors that drove transnational child soldier advocacy efforts from initial expressions of concern in 1969-71 to the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPICRC) in 2000.

In terms of why this issue gained prominence, this article argues that a humanitarian calculus of concern drove the emergence of the child soldier crisis. The central element of this was the development of a compelling target for humanitarian concern with the construction of a sympathetic but provocative ‘victim’ in the figure of the child who participated in wartime violence. The object ‘victim’ figure required generative force from the action of committed norm entrepreneurs, but also the identification of tangible, targetable villains and the provision of clear, actionable solutions. The specific temporality of this humanitarian calculus was shaped by the intersection of late/post-Cold War geopolitics with child rights, liberal humanitarianism, new media technologies, and by concerns about ‘civilianization’ and hyper-violence in ‘new wars’. As this humanitarian calculus of concern progressed from the 1970s to 1990s, the concept of the child soldier was transformed from a pragmatic description of children’s actions in conflict, recognising their agency and

resilience, to one that privileged victimhood over agency, with those forms of victimhood later being bolstered and nuanced by transgressive discourses of child violence.

To explain how the issue gained traction, the article adapts Finnemore and Sikkink's work on norm cascades to argue that, in child soldier campaigning, rather than a unilinear cascade from norm production to implementation and emergence, there were recurrent feedback loops of norm development and diffusion around international humanitarian law and rights mechanisms, building momentum towards the eventual cascade and implementation of norms against child soldiering.⁹ There were four key stages to this norm production and development in campaigns against the recruitment and utilization of child soldiers. Firstly, in the 1970-80s issue emergence was driven by committed advocates, and the issue adopted by major gatekeepers.¹⁰ Unlike in other late twentieth-century campaigns – like those against landmines or sexual violence in war – international legal prohibition of child soldiering here preceded coordinated humanitarian activism. Weakness in those legal protections however fueled subsequent campaigns by norm entrepreneurs that were focused on category expansion and norm development rather than straightforward implementation. Secondly, to construct the 'child soldier' as a major humanitarian issue, it was (re-)framed and grafted onto successive topical concerns in the late 1980s-early 1990s: from civilianization and 'women and children' in armed conflict, to contemporary slavery and child rights, and then onto war crimes and sexual and gender-based violence. Thirdly, in 1980-90s newly emergent TANs operating across humanitarian and human – specifically child – rights spheres engaged with new human

security paradigms to promote norm diffusion across international organizations, civil society and states, culminating in the 1996 Machel Report for the UN on children in armed conflict.

Fourthly, the late 1990s-early 2000s witnessed the zenith of the ‘child soldier crisis’ and resultant norm cascade and norm implementation in both legal and political arenas, from the establishment of the UN Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict to the International Criminal Court (ICC) establishing the recruitment of child soldiers as a war crime and the campaigns culminating in the OPCRC.

The object figure of the child soldier as victim that emerged from these campaigns was framed by racialized and paternalistic tropes of global South societies and shifting conceptions of childhood itself. Today the label ‘children associated with armed forces or armed groups’ is preferred by many organizations who note the potentially stigmatizing connotations of the term ‘child soldier’. This article retains the term ‘child soldier’ to analyse the evolution of the category, both in terms of its expansion from under fifteen to under eighteen years of age, and its shift from being focused on direct military involvement to incorporating auxiliary roles and ‘indirect’ participation of both male and female children. Definitions of ‘childhood’ were a site of considerable contestation between states, INGOs and local communities within the development of international humanitarian law and rights frameworks on children’s military recruitment. Humanitarian campaigns often adopted universalizing, globalized norms of childhood that emerged from middle-class Westernized models. These models read posited a universal model of childhood that read all children as

innocent, nonsexual beings who should be protected from labor, sex and too rapid a transition into adulthood: a status that has historically borne little resemblance to the lived realities of many war-affected children, particularly those in the developing world.¹¹ However, contemporaneously, new historical sociologies of childhood were elucidating constructivist perspectives on childhood that stressed it was not a universal category but rather a shifting historical and cultural construct, and that children were agential beings.¹² Child soldier advocates often publicly disregarded such constructivist perspectives in the service of making universalistic claims about child protection, and tactically downplayed child agency where it suited their campaigns' need to frame child soldiers as 'victims'. This article focuses on these global discourses and category production rather than the realities of child soldiers' experience and their contested, liminal identities.¹³ It uses the term humanitarianism in its broad sense of referring to action taken to promote human welfare, rather than just emergency aid responses, reflecting that children and conflict were both key sites where humanitarian, human rights and developmental interventions increasingly overlapped in the late twentieth century.¹⁴

Existing studies of child soldiering have predominantly been undertaken through political, legal, psychological, anthropological and sociological methodologies. This article argues that a rigorous historicized perspective, based on analysis of archival evidence, is necessary to elucidate more fully longer-term patterns of child soldiering and the evolution of humanitarian responses to the issue, and it offers the first detailed analysis of the latter. It is

based on research in the archives and published literature of UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) – particularly Quaker and Rättna Barnen (Swedish Save the Children) archives –, human rights reports, and the private papers of key advocates, contextualized against broader media accounts and cultural depictions of child soldiering.¹⁵ There is a tension between such historical analysis, which stresses the constructivist and contingent facets of ‘child soldiering’, and the more universalistic and transhistorical understandings of childhood that underpin much advocacy. However, historical methodologies can strengthen strategic thinking and effective practice within TANs, helping organizations to better understand how context and temporality impact their campaigning.¹⁶

Issue Emergence and Norm Production: Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention and the Development of International Humanitarian Law on Children in Armed Conflict, c.1969-77.

Concern about the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict first emerges in humanitarian archives around 1969, at the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Istanbul.¹⁷ Prior to this, children’s involvement in military action had been noted by the ICRC but was not regarded as a systemic problem demanding humanitarian concern or action. The 1949 Geneva Conventions did not address the issue, with the large numbers of children who fought in the Second World War regarded as an aberration and concern instead coalescing around the figures of children as refugees, orphans and

traumatised victims.¹⁸ The 1950-60s however were marked by the growth of international child welfare programming and by growing concerns about juvenile delinquency and youth violence during and after conflict.¹⁹ In this context, the expansion of INGO and UN agency activities into the global South in relation to decolonization-era liberation struggles fuelled increasing awareness of children's roles in war, with many thousands of children and teenagers actively participating in anti-colonial struggles.²⁰ ICRC delegates, anti-colonial activists and international media noted with concern the treatment of detained children and youth fighters in Kenya and Cyprus.²¹ By the end of the 1960s, the high-profile involvement of children as spies and fighters in the wars in Vietnam brought the issue to international attention, generating sufficient concern for the ICRC to include discussion of 'the prohibition of using children for military purposes' in proposals for the development of Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Conventions.²² By 1971, following consultations with UNICEF and the International Union of Child Welfare, the ICRC declared that the increasing use of children in armed conflict was the 'most pressing problem for international humanitarian law (IHL) in direct relation to children'.²³

The use of children in war was first formally prohibited within IHL in the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention. The diplomatic negotiations on these protocols were suffused by contestations over the minimum age of recruitment, and whether both direct and indirect participation should be prohibited. During early negotiations in 1971, diplomatic representatives and INGOs noted that 'children are increasingly becoming involved in war,

being either used to assist irregular forces, or made the subject of military interventions’,
‘particularly in national liberation struggles with a legitimate defence or guerrilla warfare’.²⁴

When children’s military involvement in conflict first became an object of international concern in the early 1970s then, it was framed as a result of the forms of civilianized warfare developing in anti-colonial insurgencies, predominantly in the global South. Such conflicts were held to necessitate new protections for a unitized category of ‘women and children’; this singular category highlighting the essential linkage between ‘child’ and civilian status.²⁵

Negotiations highlighted the clashing perspectives held by different actors over the morality and military utility of children in armed conflict, and over what constituted a ‘child’.²⁶

Despite the deliberate decontextualization of discussions surrounding the draft articles to aid creation of a universal framework for IHL, records demonstrate that the positions of national delegations were clearly moulded by their political ideologies and recent experiences of conflict. The North Vietnamese delegate insisted that the use of children in conflict was ‘a result of colonial and neo-colonial wars’, and that children were ‘capable of acts which were inspired by noble feelings of patriotism or non-submission to a foreign occupying army’.

Reflecting domestic military recruitment policy and colonial experience, Britain joined Greece, Canada, Japan and Vietnam in arguing that fifteen to eighteen year olds ‘have the mental and physical capacity to fight, and will wish to serve their country in time of need’.²⁷

Such positions framed teenagers as ‘patriotic (proto-) citizens’, willing and able to defend their nations, who could be legitimately recruited and targeted in certain circumstances.²⁸

Against this were ranged emerging humanitarian constructions that harnessed universalistic notions of childhood innocence to frame children's use in conflict as a form of abuse, exploitation, and a violation of the laws of war. As ICRC delegate Jean-Jacques Surbeck argued, children were 'only too happy to make themselves useful...To take advantage of that feeling was particularly odious, for...they did not always understand very clearly what awaited them...in hostilities'.²⁹

With the requirement of consensus for article adoption, debates raged over establishing an acceptable definition of 'children' across different cultural, legal, and medical criteria, with the battle lines ultimately being drawn over whether fifteen or eighteen was the appropriate minimum age for military service.³⁰ Ultimately, following intransigence from developed nations who recruited teenagers into their armed forces, the Additional Protocols enshrined fifteen as the minimum age of recruitment and only required states to 'take all feasible measures' to prevent their direct part in hostilities.³¹ This relative weakness of the Additional Protocols generated frustration and discontent that would re-emerge to fuel later campaigns to expand the protection of children in armed conflict under international humanitarian law.

Advocacy Networks, Norm Production and (Re-)Framing: From the International Year of the Child to Campaigning for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, c.1979-89.

Beyond these diplomatic and legal discussions however, child soldiers remained outside the locus of major humanitarian concern in the 1970s. Reporters and aid workers documented their presence, but few seemed shocked or outraged. The dominant frame of child victimhood

remained firmly located on child refugees and famine victims, with humanitarian concern focusing predominantly on infants and young children rather than teenagers and youth.³² It was only in 1979 that child soldiers emerged as a specific topic of concern in the humanitarian imaginary, driven primarily by the advocacy of Dorothea E. Woods and her colleagues in the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) and the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), Geneva. This demonstrates the potential significance of an agent-based approach to issue emergence in TANs and the importance of work done by committed norms entrepreneurs to mobilize initial awareness.³³ Woods' advocacy was ignited by reading two journalistic accounts of children's suffering in war, with her initial requests for action being speedily raised through Quaker hierarchies after other Quakers shared anecdotal evidence of children's involvement in (para-)military action in Lebanon, Vietnam, Ireland, and Kampuchea.³⁴ The issue gained traction with Quakers as it resonated with their customary peace activism and campaigns against militarization, but also because it coincided with the 1979 UN International Year of the Child, a watershed moment that fuelled NGO advocacy and action on child-focused issues.³⁵ From being regarded as a security and IHL issue in the 1970s, child soldiering was increasingly reframed in the 1980s as a child rights issue. It gained visibility as part of a broader push for the of 'children in armed conflict', a category of concern that it rapidly came to dominate.

Initially, burgeoning advocacy networks on children's participation in armed conflict coalesced around child and educational-focused organizations, with pressure from the ICRC,

Rädda Barnen and the Swedish government in 1984-5 convincing UNICEF to investigate the plight of children in armed conflict as part of its programming for ‘children in especially difficult circumstances’.³⁶ Asymmetries of power and knowledge shape the development and efficacy of TANs, with well-established and authoritative UN entities and INGOs often acting as gatekeepers for issue adoption.³⁷ In this case the ICRC leveraged its agenda-setting and vetting capabilities in the fields of IHL and humanitarian intervention to push for action against children’s military recruitment, facilitating broader action.³⁸ As Finnemore and Sikkink assert, norm production was necessary to assert the significance of the issue and highlight the pathways towards tackling it.³⁹ Documentation and evidence-gathering were key components of early advocacy, collating information from across the globe from various media, humanitarian and advocacy sources, including early rehabilitation programmes that provided insight into the psychological impact of participation in armed conflict for children.⁴⁰ Woods coordinated a monthly ‘Children bearing Arms’ newsletter until documentation efforts were taken over in 1995 by Rädda Barnen.⁴¹ Notably, representations of child soldiers from Woods and her colleagues were realist and pragmatic, recognizing the agency of youth and showing how joining an armed group was a rational survival mechanism for many children, given the socio-economic conditions which shaped their lives.⁴²

At this early stage of issue generation, global media also proved a significant source of ‘advocacy momentum’.⁴³ Coverage of the exploitation of militarized children by

authoritarian regimes helped reframe representations of child soldiering from ‘patriotic duty’ to ‘rights abuse’, with Iran’s widespread use of boy soldiers as ‘cannon-fodder’ and mine clearers in the war against Iraq proving a lightning rod for humanitarian concern and condemnation.⁴⁴ As Time magazine wrote in 1981, ‘One of the twentieth century’s enduring images may be that of a sad eyed adolescent cuddling his automatic weapon as if it were a toy’, whilst the UNESCO NGO study group noted: ‘the pleas of the martyred child soldiers rarely reach us, but television brings their faces to us’.⁴⁵

From the initial acceptance of child agency in early reports, campaign narratives shifted in the mid- to late-1980s as child rights discourses came to the fore. Commentators frequently stressed the enormity of the harms perpetrated on children in armed groups by deploying discourses of ‘stolen childhoods’ and ‘lost generations’, noting that ‘children who had trained to hate and had participated in armed conflicts were often physically and morally crippled for life’.⁴⁶ Such accounts deployed a fiduciary logic of children as embodiments of the future, pressuring governments to tackle child recruitment and support child protection issues to defend the future of their nation.⁴⁷

By the late 1980s there were signs of shifting norms emerging among the broader humanitarian community and international civil society. When Yoweri Museveni seized power in Uganda’s Bush War in 1986 with a rebel army that contained an estimated 3000 *kadogos* (little soldiers), much of the regional media and humanitarian reporting initially praised his National Resistance Army (NRA) for ‘adopting’ children orphaned in the conflict

and training them to be disciplined soldiers. Cole P. Dodge, the Regional Director of UNICEF, wrote that *kadogos* were ‘the mascots of the NRA and were called young liberators. To the credit of the NRA they came equipped with a code of conduct and exercised restraint’.⁴⁸ However such pragmatic acceptance of child soldiering as a rational survival strategy for war-affect children was being replaced by a focus on rights abuses.⁴⁹ As promises to demobilize and educate the *kadogos* failed to be properly implemented, Museveni was forced to deny exploiting his *kadogos* and defended using children in battle as ‘an African tradition’.⁵⁰ By 1987 rhetorics of dehumanization and brutalization emerged in humanitarian and journalistic reports, constructing child soldiers as a ‘weapon of terror’, particularly around the conflict in Mozambique where rebel force Renamo became infamous for their forced recruitment of many thousands of children.⁵¹ With evidence of their brutal treatment emerging from newly-developed rehabilitation programmes to assist former abductees, the Frelimo government seized upon these children as a source of propaganda, highlighting their abduction and abuse.⁵² Conversely, in 1989 the Ethiopian representative to the UN working group on contemporary slavery rejected reports that his government forcibly recruited underage children as ‘malicious propaganda disseminated by dissident groups’.⁵³ That accusations of recruiting children had attained leverage as ‘propaganda’ indicated shifting moral standards if not functioning norms: the military utility of child recruitment still outweighed prospective condemnation and so the practice continued unabated.⁵⁴

In the late 1980s advocacy efforts against children's military recruitment coalesced and gained momentum around the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), grafting the issue onto wider child rights actions, which Pupavac argues were driven by a 'profound disenchantment with humanity' and the abuse of children in conflicts.⁵⁵ Significantly, early frameworks for the CRC did not address the rights of children in armed conflict. Following concern about the military exploitation of children in the Iran-Iraq war however, advocacy networks played a significant role in both pushing for the inclusion of articles against the use of children in conflict and their repeated redrafting.⁵⁶ A key development was the 1983 establishment of the NGO Group on the Drafting of the CRC by Rädda Barnen, the International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB) and Defence for Children International to coordinate action and boost engagement with diplomatic negotiations. Influenced by their field operations in Lebanon and Palestine, Rädda Barnen energetically took up the issue, becoming key actors alongside QUNO/FWCC in shaping sustained humanitarian advocacy and action.⁵⁷ After 1986 the NGO Group ramped up their campaigns to persuade states to ensure the CRC expanded protections against the military recruitment of children beyond those available under the 1977 Additional Protocols.⁵⁸ It was in this period that the term 'child soldier' emerged broadly across humanitarian texts, giving a discursive fillip to advocacy, the apparently oxymoronic words 'child' and 'soldier' being combined to signify the antinomical nature of children's participation in conflict. However, despite consensus over the need for stronger protections, including measures requiring states to

‘endeavour to prevent’ children under eighteen taking ‘a direct part in hostilities’, final negotiations to extend protections to children in armed conflict and extend the category of child soldiers from those under fifteen to under eighteens ultimately collapsed, with the United States in particular being intensely criticised for torpedoing discussions.⁵⁹ After years of deliberation, the CRC ultimately only reaffirmed existing standards, requiring signatory states to ‘refrain from recruiting’ under fifteens.⁶⁰ Humanitarian activism had proved unable to sufficiently overturn state agendas to create new norms.

Building Networks and (Re-)Framing the Child Soldier: Norm Diffusion in and around the Machel Report, c. 1989-1997

Despite this setback, by the mid-1990s, the ‘child soldier crisis’ became a major focus of humanitarian concern and action, culminating in the 1996 Machel Report and the establishment in 1997 of the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children in Armed Conflict. But how, after the failure of the CRC negotiations, did child soldier advocacy networks succeed in rapidly propelling the issue to the forefront of international governance?

Structural shifts facilitated the expansion and impact of TANs. At a geopolitical level, the post-Cold War era was marked by epochal shifts in conflict and international relations, with a proliferation of civil wars, including so-called ‘new wars’ marked by high levels of asymmetric warfare, civilianization and extreme violence.⁶¹ Such wars lead to an increasing

delegitimization of conflict, particularly global South conflicts, and child soldiering became an iconographic form of this civilianized violence and ‘new barbarism’.⁶² Human rights became a flourishing global ideology and new forms of politically-engaged liberal humanitarianism emerged, their intersection generating the politico-cultural crucible in which the ‘child soldier crisis’ emerged discursively by the mid-1990s.⁶³ The emergence of human security agendas also increased non-state actors’ influence in defining and pushing for international action.⁶⁴ Technological developments and the emergence of the internet era meanwhile lowered the transaction costs of engaging in transnational activism and facilitated denser political engagement across borders.⁶⁵

The early 1990s witnessed the spread of global networks on child rights, such as the Child Rights Information Network, efforts which brought the iconography of the suffering child to the forefront of the international community’s attention and created fertile ground for child soldier campaigns.⁶⁶ The Sub-Group on Refugee Children and Children in Armed Conflict of the Geneva-based NGO Group on the CRC, took the lead on child soldier issues in this period, with a steering group that included QUNO, the ICCB, Rädde Barnen, the Lutheran World Federation, and World Vision International. Despite the involvement of multiple faith-based organizations, campaigning remained predominantly secular, foregrounding moral and legal arguments rather than overtly religious discourses to generate universal norms, although the ‘sanctification’ of action to protect children of armed conflict emerges more explicitly in

internal literature.⁶⁷ QUNO proved to be a lynchpin of child soldier campaign networks due to the knowledge gained from its sustained commitment on the issue from 1979 to 2009 and its collaborative approach. QUNO's human rights representative Rachel Brett asserts that they 'deliberately and proactively worked to bring in other NGOs' with different skills and more lobbying power, such as Human Rights Watch, to boost their impact.⁶⁸ The network split responsibilities and operated across multiple fronts so that some groups were publicly denouncing governments to keep pressure up, whilst others were working directly with government representatives.⁶⁹

One factor behind the efficacy and legitimacy of burgeoning TANs was the success of their evidence gathering and dissemination. A key development was the quantification of child soldiering. In 1988 QUNO estimated that there were some 200,000 child soldiers worldwide, connoting a 'continuing and possibly increasing threat'.⁷⁰ In fact, Wood's personal papers reveal this was a self-confessedly rough guess extrapolated from news and human rights reports, but the release of this figure generated significant interest from UN agencies and media sources, raising the issue's international profile.⁷¹ By 1999 around 300,000 children were said to be fighting or recently demobilized, but this became a zombie figure that continued in common usage long after it became inaccurate.⁷² More broadly, with multiple organizations all generating data, the form and format of evidence dissemination also played a significant role in raising the issue profile. Reporting generally sought to balance empirical

data and ‘forensic truths’ with sentimentalized narratives and affective appeals, combining statistics with selected personal testimony and striking images.⁷³ Major human rights organizations Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch brought their credibility and the moral legitimacy of their investigations to the campaign, providing empirical evidence on individual conflicts for groups like QUNO and Rädde Barnen to synthesize into accessible briefs for key stakeholders, particularly in UN fora.⁷⁴ At the United Nations, the issue of child soldiering moved from being discussed at the contemporary slavery committee/working group to the new committee on child rights – this was significant in terms of the discourse and framing of the issue, with an emphasis on forced recruitment morphing into a focus on rights abuses.⁷⁵ Notably, the term ‘child soldier’ first occurs in UN archives in 1989 and was rapidly adopted into common parlance by 1991-93, indicating both the shifting discourse and increased activity around this issue.

Narratives of child soldiering were also refracted through new forms of humanitarian witnessing and vocabularies of suffering which highlighted the mental as well as physical impact of war on children and drove a focus on child soldiers as traumatised victims.⁷⁶ Such reporting however was not unproblematic, and in public-facing appeals accuracy was sometimes sacrificed on the altar of raising awareness, with an over-reliance on sensational and sentimental narratives that presented extreme events as normative occurrences and which often stripped children of their agency.⁷⁷ Evidence was also inflected through ‘dependency-triangle’ relationships built between (I)NGOs, researchers or the media, and former child

soldiers, who could become adept at producing ‘victimcy’ statements, crafting narratives of victimhood to suit humanitarian expectations in order to ensure support.⁷⁸ In this period child soldiers’ own voices were primarily presented in multiple extracted quotations, creating a ‘composite portrait of victimization’: it was only in the 2000s when the child soldier as spokesperson really emerged as part of transnational advocacy, with memoirs and activism from the likes of Ishmael Beah, Emmanuel Jal and Grace Akallo.⁷⁹

The emblematic geographical framing of the issue shifted between the 1970s and 1990s in a manner that reinforced narratives of child soldiers as doubly-victimized: victims because of their youthfulness, and their global South status. From initially being seen as a problem linked with anti-colonial struggles in places like Vietnam, in the 1980s child soldiering became more explicitly globally-located as advocates sought to convey the scope of the problem, being associated with Cold War-era civil wars and leftist insurgencies across Asia, Latin America and Africa, as well as urban insurgencies in the Middle East and Ireland. In the early 1990s however, the focus shifted sharply towards Africa amidst concerns about the so-called ‘new wars’ and ‘new barbarism’ which wracked the continent, with child combatants in Sierra Leone and Liberia becoming the literal ‘poster children’ for the ‘child soldier crisis’.⁸⁰ Rosen posits that ‘The focus on Africa is so ubiquitous that virtually the entire child soldier issue has been Africanized. It is unclear exactly why this is the case’, but the answer is a combination of timing and race.⁸¹ The perception of ‘crisis’ and the shock factor of stories of drug-addled children committing atrocities was a crucial factor in

precipitating ideational and normative change.⁸² The focus on Africa served to intensify claims of child soldier ‘crisis’ by mobilizing historic racialized constructions of Africa ‘both as a place of hell and misery and as a continent that, like a child, can be saved’, with African warfare being invariably cast in Western discourse as irrational.⁸³ As Jézéquel asserts ‘[t]he child soldier has become the symbol of an African continent adrift, a “heart of darkness” decidedly alien to Western modernity. It has become the object of a new “humanitarian crusade” and a Western neo-interventionism with many moralistic similarities to the civilizing missions of preceding centuries’.⁸⁴ The image of the innocent and brutalized child soldier in these contemporary humanitarian campaigns ‘repeats [a] colonial paternalism where the adult Northerner offers help and knowledge to the infantilised South’, implicitly critiquing and pathologizing developing world parents and societies, and privileging external salvation.⁸⁵ Tellingly, although QUNO repeatedly argued in UN fora that child soldiering was also a problem of teenage recruitment and militarization in the developed world, particularly in Europe and North America, this issue gained little traction as these regions were also leading humanitarian donors.⁸⁶ Although advocates have subsequently expressed frustration at how the focus on ‘10 year olds in Africa’ hijacked discourses and misrepresented the nature of child soldiering, this geographic focus was instrumental in mobilizing international concern.⁸⁷

The fulcrum of international activism on child soldiers proved to be the 1996 Machel report on the impact of armed conflict on children.⁸⁸ The report was commissioned by the UN in

late 1994 following consistent pressure from global human and child rights fora, with eminent Mozambican humanitarian, politician, child rights campaigner Graça Machel appointed as the expert in charge.⁸⁹ This period witnessed an explosion of co-joined research and activism, with QUNO being commissioned to lead research efforts on child soldiers.⁹⁰ The Machel Report led directly to the establishment of the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict – with Northern Ugandan lawyer and diplomat Olara Otunnu taking the position –, and became a foundational text for campaigning against child soldiering, strengthening discourses and reframing the phenomenon to fit contemporary political and affective climates. By the mid-1990s the child victim of violence had become a prime icon of child rights campaigning as children’s development was increasingly linked to national development and security, and child soldiers became most high-profile expression of this trend.⁹¹

The Machel Report imbued child soldiering with the ‘moral opprobrium from other delegitimized practices of warfare’ and other child rights-abuses in conflict, assessing it alongside failure to protect refugee children, landmines and sexual exploitation.⁹² Machel presented child soldiering as a result of ‘a desolate moral vacuum...a space devoid of the most basic human values...in which children are exploited as soldiers’.⁹³ The report framed the phenomenon as a product of ‘the callousness of modern warfare’ and contemporary socio-political crisis, supporting humanitarian rhetoric that framed child soldiers temporally as a newly-emergent and immediate crisis to generate a rapid response.⁹⁴ A frame’s potency

is fuelled in part by what the frame is not about – excising and eliding more difficult and complex aspects of the issue.⁹⁵ Highlighting forced recruitment and downplaying or rejecting children’s ability to ‘voluntarily’ enlist, as occurred in the Machel Report, helped to craft a cleaner narrative of victimhood and rights abuse.⁹⁶ These humanitarian rhetorics functioned to create an essentialist category of ‘the child soldier’ with universal applicability, but this category is superficial and expurgates the messy, contentious realities of children’s participation in conflict.⁹⁷

Another reframing came through increased alignment with women’s rights and emergent gender justice campaigns against sexual violence in war after 1993, particularly around practices of forced marriage and sexual slavery which were highlighted as pressing issues in the Machel Report.⁹⁸ This gendered child soldier campaigning, introducing the figure of the ‘girl soldier’ within advocacy efforts and humanitarian actions and rendering visible the impact of sexual violence as well as physical and psychological violence against children in conflict, as well as highlighting that such forms of violence primarily targeted youth. High-profile events like the kidnapping of 136 schoolgirls by the Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda in October 1996, raised awareness of the horrors of sexual slavery and how it intersected with the abduction of children for military purposes, creating new gendered dimensions of victimhood in humanitarian campaigning.⁹⁹ Partially as a result of this shift, the humanitarian categorization of ‘child soldiers’ was also expanded to stress the auxiliary nature of much of children’s military use, with the 1997 Cape Town Principles asserting the

term ‘does not only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms’, but includes anyone under eighteen years who is part of an armed group ‘in any capacity...including girls recruited for sexual purposes’.¹⁰⁰

Archives and publications reveal how TAN action moved the child soldier issue to the forefront of international concerns and generated effective action. The question remains however as to why this particular issue gained such traction with the international community? Partly, this was due to the creation of effective ‘affective economies’ around the image of the child soldier.¹⁰¹ As Malkki argues, since 1945 humanitarian nodes of imagining a world community have focused around the moral figure of the child, with this used to manipulate emotion and foster a self-conscious globalism grounded in notions of a depoliticized shared humanity.¹⁰² Children became a ‘sacred icon of global civil society’, their salvation legitimating humanitarian intervention.¹⁰³ Representations of childhood in transnational advocacy frequently highlight the ‘moral quality of innocence and the social quality of vulnerability’, locating children outside of history and political contexts, their neutrality rendering them easily mobilized as the ‘universal icon of suffering’ and the ‘dominant signifier of death’.¹⁰⁴ As Keck and Sikkink show, advocacy efforts focused on the prevention of bodily harm for vulnerable populations are most likely to generate international support. Children are frequently framed in both public and political discourses as the most vulnerable population demographic, something that was capitalized upon by campaigners against children’s military recruitment and use.¹⁰⁵ But the child soldier figure highlighted

new forms of victimhood that were emerging. Whilst in the 1970-80s child fighters in conflicts from Biafra to Ethiopia had remained hidden behind the iconographic figure of suffering of the starving child famine victim, in the 1990s concern was shifting from a focus on children as pure, violated, objects of suffering towards an increasing concern about children, and more specifically youth, as a potential source of instability and social contagion. Child soldiers became increasingly potent as objects of humanitarian concern, their rising profile driven in part due to a fear of the disruptive potentialities of youth and wider anxieties about responsibility for violence. The turn to the child soldier as a figure of (violated) innocence furthered, but also obscured, complex and urgent questions about the complicity for violence of individuals, armed forces, and societies.

In the traditional iconography of child rights campaigning, children elicit sympathy for passive suffering, politically disenfranchising them from their active roles in war and survival.¹⁰⁶ Burman posits that in standard humanitarian constructions of children ‘if the price of innocence is passivity, then the cost of resourcefully dealing with conditions of distress and deprivation is to be pathologised.’¹⁰⁷ Tabak argues that recent in UN interventions the concept of the child soldier serves as a model of what is antithetical to the norm of human development; that child soldiers are constructed as deviant and pathological exceptions to childhood norms.¹⁰⁸ However many 1990s child soldier advocacy campaigns sought to avoid directly pathologizing their subjects, condemning instead the conflicts and societies that produced them, noting child soldiering ‘has no place in civilised society’ whilst identifying

the real ‘villains’ as military leaders who recruited children: ‘Hitler, Mussolini...and Pol Pot used them’ as do modern dictators and warlords.¹⁰⁹ To do this, they privileged narratives of victimhood over evidence of agency and voluntary enlistment: ‘his face is childlike, [but] something has happened to his gaze. Violence, hardship, terror and death have made a lasting impression. His innocence has gone and his childhood has been stolen’.¹¹⁰ Discursive emphasis was laid primarily on young children rather than teenager fighters to lay easier claims to their ‘innocence’.

In the traditional iconography of child rights campaigning, children elicit sympathy for passive suffering, politically disenfranchising them from their active roles in war and survival.¹¹¹ However, there is an intrinsic ambivalence within the affective economies of child soldier campaigns: in their humanitarian calculus of concern they have to convey both victimhood to provoke an empathetic response, and threat to generate action. In a crowded market of humanitarian victimhood in 1990s, innocent suffering was not enough to generate large-scale action; something had to make child soldiers stand out and generate sufficient emotional capital to prompt action.¹¹² It was child soldiers’ perpetration of violence, their sacrilegious affect that attracted attention and justified external salvation through humanitarian action. Whilst rarely directly expounding upon the violence perpetrated by child soldiers, advocacy capitalized upon public and political concerns about their bloodshed and brutality. Campaign visual imagery semiotically highlighted the cognitive dissonance occasioned by them, sharply contrasting the youthful innocence of their bodies with

dangerous, adult accoutrements – guns, cigarettes – and the corrupted precocity of their flat, hard or drugged facial expressions. By the mid-1990s media coverage of the phenomenon intensified; fuelled by evidence of their violence and involvement in atrocities, child soldiers were being depicted as ‘killers’ rather than just ‘victims’.¹¹³ Humanitarian campaigns responded by crafting new forms of victimhood: the ‘victim-perpetrator’, who commits rights abuses because their own rights have been abused. Advocacy had to tread a fine line between highlighting the danger occasioned by (as well as for) child soldiers to raise awareness and establishing that they were still redeemable in order to convince audiences of the efficacy of intervention; hence the discursive emphasis on successful examples of rehabilitation and reintegration the came to prominence in reports.¹¹⁴

Establishing the ‘Straight 18’ Position: The Coalition, the Optional Protocols and Norm Cascades, c.1997-2000

In the wake of the Machel Report, campaigning gathered momentum across humanitarian, political, legal and public spheres. Rädä Barnen launched a major research, documentation and online database project to boost activism, with child soldiers being named a priority issue for the Save the Children Alliance for 1997-2002.¹¹⁵ A contagion effect emerged as INGOs and UN agencies like UNHCR and UNESCO shifted tack to focus on child soldiers rather than just children as innocent victims of war, out of both genuine concern and strategic utility to raise the profile of their work.¹¹⁶ This generated a new ‘transnational “politics of age”’, with activism coalescing around a ‘Straight 18’ position that aimed to increase protections by

expanding the category of ‘child soldier’ to include those under the age of eighteen years of age rather than fifteen years, as well as including children in armed groups who did not bear arms.¹¹⁷ As Rosen highlights, the Straight 18 agenda is ‘a prime example of how a new political agenda can be represented as an existing cultural norm’.¹¹⁸ The immediate target of advocacy networks was to secure the adoption of an Optional Protocol to the UNCRC prohibiting the military recruitment and use in hostilities of anyone under eighteen. Negotiations however were once again mired in debates over contested ideas of the boundaries of ‘childhood’ in a military contexts, and between moral desires to protect (global South) ‘children’ from illegitimate warfare and politico-military desires to recruit trainable youth for national protection. During 1994 negotiations, Australia, Japan, Germany and America opposed raising the minimum age of recruitment to eighteen years, leading the Working Group chair to remonstrate against their ‘double standards based on pragmatism and double standards about the nature of civilized, legitimate warfare’, as global North states attempted to frame child soldiering as a problem effecting illegitimate conflicts and non-professionalised armed forces in the global South.¹¹⁹

To overcome such resistance, in 1998 Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, QUNO, the Jesuit Refugee Service, the Save the Children Alliance and International Terre des Hommes Federation joined together (with UN and ICRC support) to establish the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.¹²⁰ The Coalition brought together a potent combination of human rights, humanitarian and child rights expertise and legitimacy. As Carpenter argues,

networks on children in armed conflict were shaped as much by coalitional dynamics as by the issue's intrinsic merits.¹²¹ Coalition members proved able to effectively navigate these dynamics through a complementarity of approaches. Sometimes the Coalition could leverage its transnational status and collective legitimacy to issue statements that member NGOs could not do individually; at others, specific members would act in their own names to undertake constitutive issues within a broader strategy.¹²² Internal emails between key activists show the Coalition recognized the importance of having a simple narrative with a compelling message and short-term, concrete solutions – stop child soldiering by outlawing their use and prosecuting those who recruit them.¹²³ Unlike some issues like landmines where there was held to be substantive utility to their use in terms of military strategy and an almost insurmountable number of mines to be cleared, or those like refugees or sexual violence in conflict where structural inequality prevented the development of simple solutions, child soldier campaigning benefited from being easy to argue against in terms of both national and human security and being presented as having achievable solutions, through IHL, child rights implementation and reintegration programming.¹²⁴ Contrasts were also drawn with domestic legislation establishing thresholds of adulthood for voting, marriage, drinking, which were routinely higher than for military enlistment.¹²⁵

The Coalition deliberately appropriated successful tactics from other recent TAN campaigns to build a multi-pronged approach, hiring as their first coordinator Stuart Maslen who had worked with the Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) to

help secure the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel mines after only five years of campaigning.¹²⁶ The Coalition's campaign strategy built on existing child soldier advocacy tactics in maintaining a commitment to publish new research, produce briefings, and raise awareness through its website and media efforts, bringing the figure of the child soldier increasingly into the limelight.¹²⁷ Previous tactics of combining formal discussions at the UN with more informal meetings with government representatives and other interested parties were continued, but the Coalition upscaled its strategy by embarking on a series of high-profile regional conferences that were time- and resource-intensive but critical to further expanding activist networks and building international pressure, and by cultivating alliances with sympathetic governments like Sweden and Canada's.¹²⁸ A crucial fillip to the Coalition's work was the momentum gained by national advocacy campaigns and the domestic pressure they exerted on governments, with campaigns in over thirty countries by 2000.¹²⁹ Unlike other contemporaneous campaigns, the Coalition did not turn to celebrity humanitarianism to boost its public campaign profile, instead garnering the support of global statespersons including Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela to lend moral weight to its political action.¹³⁰

Such activism helped shift cultural norms sufficiently to generate substantive pressure on international and state actors, leading to a proliferation of instruments applying 'Straight 18' protections, including the 1997 UNICEF Cape Town Principles, 1998 International Labour Organization Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, and the 1999 African Charter on the

Rights and Welfare of the Child.¹³¹ The 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court recognized the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict as a war crime, although only those under fifteen. From 1998 the UN Security Council began to hold annual debates on child soldiering and adopted a series of resolutions calling on parties to conflict to end their recruitment of child soldiers.¹³² Despite this backdrop, diplomatic negotiations over the Optional Protocol hit repeated stalemates with a small number of states continuing to reject raising the minimum age to eighteen.¹³³ Both internal emails and public communiques show activists protesting against the hypocrisy of Global North states who positioned themselves as moral leaders on human and child rights yet balked at extending protections for children who were being exploited as soldiers in protracted conflicts and civil wars across the globe, and sought to shame states who failed to support the draft Optional Protocol.¹³⁴ Emails between advocacy leaders bemoan the ‘narrow self-interest of a few western governments’, and warn that ‘[state’s] names will be mud with the NGOs’ if they fail to support extended protections.¹³⁵ To overcome this impasse, the Coalition borrowed tactics from the ICBL, proposing to bypass the UN Working Group to develop the relevant articles on child soldiering, which would allow greater humanitarian input, and ratcheted up its campaign events and communications to place moral pressure on states, repeatedly highlighting that ‘at the end of the twentieth century the use of children as soldiers is a moral outrage’.¹³⁶ During final negotiations in January 2000, the Coalition hosted press conferences singling out America for its continued opposition, and Terre des Hommes held a vigil outside

UN offices in Geneva. In this environment, the UN Working Group finally agreed a text for the Optional Protocol that prohibited compulsory recruitment and direct use in hostilities of under eighteens by state parties, and all recruitment and use of under-eighteens by non-state armed groups.¹³⁷ Whilst the Coalition had achieved its foundational aim, humanitarian campaigns were only responsible in part for this success: timing and contingency played a key role in delivering political backing for the Optional Protocol. Coming precipitately after its refusal to sign the 1997 Ottawa Mine Ban treaty and the 1998 Rome Statute, America's international reputation was vulnerable to shaming campaigns, leading to a dramatic volte-face which saw the country adopt the consensus position.

Conclusion

Between 1971 and 2000, humanitarian campaigning through TANS played a key role both in creating the figure of the 'child soldier' as a victim of conflict and rights abuses, and in the development of international mechanisms to prevent their recruitment and use. Scholars like Jacqueline Bhabha have argued that this movement emerged at the expense of sustained political efforts to advance the basic rights and social status of former child soldiers, and that it occluded other categories of children in armed conflict who were as, if not more, in need of support.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, isolating factors in the humanitarian calculus of concern that drove successful child soldier campaigning offers potential lessons for transnational advocacy and humanitarian campaigning on other issues.

Firstly, the message matters, both in how and when it is conveyed. Key to advocacy success was the construction of a sympathetic object of concern in the figure of the child soldier as an abused human rights victim, but one which carried within it the potentiality for destabilizing violence that intensified calls for action in a crowded humanitarian marketplace. The very liminality that made children attractive as military recruits also enabled campaigners to successfully reframe the issue and graft it onto multiple topical concerns. It was this malleability which facilitated both proactive and reactive campaigning to generate sustained advocacy momentum as the international community's attention cycled through multiple trends in interest. Child soldiers were successively (if contestedly) (re-)framed against a shifting background of global human/child rights and humanitarian norms from patriotic proto-citizens into 'women and children' civilian victims; rational survivors; human rights abuse victims; 'lost generations'; deranged killers; bush wives; and - more recently -, as resilient future citizens who require empowerment. A temporal immediacy also galvanized campaigns, tied to the concept of childhood itself as time-bound life stage and the need to save individual children from exploitation and the destruction of their future. These campaigns demanded prompt action tied to proximate goals in international humanitarian law and human rights instruments, but without the unrealistic deadline-bound demands for action and intervention that later stymied 'Kony 2012'.¹³⁹ Secondly, the campaign crucially also offered apparently simple, short-term solutions to the problem of children's use in war, with a moral positionality that was difficult to oppose. Child soldiers made an effective focus for

advocacy because whilst they possessed a disruptive impact and potentiality, ultimately it became difficult for any state to argue that children fighting in war was not a 'moral outrage': they could contest the definition of 'child' but not the essential transgression. Thirdly, success was linked to the ability of TANs to effectively combine different skill sets, and to deliver sustained leadership and long-term commitment to a cause. The NGO groups and later Coalition were collectively able to gather evidence from the field, collate and analyse it, and then transmit it to key officials, having effectively developed links with governments, utilising both formal and informal meetings. They were responsive enough to adapt their tactics and learn from other successful advocacy campaigns: these tactics have been adopted and refined by subsequent networks like Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. As Jo Becker identifies with more recent child soldier advocacy, progress depends on building personal relationships with policy-makers, developing concrete recommendations for action backed by solid information, and perhaps most importantly, applying continuous pressure to ensure that available points of leverage are used.¹⁴⁰

However, whilst successful in generating concern around the figure of the child soldier, these campaigns did have weaknesses, with some advocates feeling they were 'too much of an advocate - too confrontational' at times.¹⁴¹ One detrimental development was how accuracy was sometimes sacrificed on the altar of raising awareness: exceptions became taken as normative, the impact of war on children was catastrophized to provoke timely responses, and a lack of firm data on numbers and outcomes from child soldiering continues to inhibit

humanitarian interventions in the field to this day. The growth of child rights frames in the 1980-90s led to a downplaying of children's agency in an attempt to construct a suitably innocent and abused victim deserving of external salvation. This overturned previous narratives that had allowed space for children's agency as well as the structural forces driving the recruitment; an approach to which more recent research and campaigning have returned. Advocates notably pushed for recognition of child agency on some occasions whilst strategically downplaying it or ignoring it in others. The tension between awareness-raising and accuracy continues to inhibit humanitarian campaigns as organizations seek to navigate the moral predicaments surrounding soliciting funding or action using 'sympathetic portraits of need', particularly in the 'post-humanitarian' era of digital and viral campaigning.¹⁴² But perhaps a greater awareness of historical context and shifting empirical realities can help (I)NGOs and advocacy networks find a balance between sentimentalized narratives and hard data in producing effective campaigns.

Ultimately, the reason why transnational advocacy was successful at campaigning against the 'child soldier crisis' was because of its tactical ability to both marshal convincing data and to politically and morally capitalize on a potent figure of humanitarian concern; one that combined intense suffering and victimhood with the capacity for disruptive violence.

Through such methods, 'children' who became 'soldiers' were rendered befitting of salvation by those advocates who fought on their behalf. As famed human rights defender Thomas Hammarberg proclaimed in a 1994 NGO symposium on the issue, child recruitment had

become symbolically significant: ‘one of the issues that reflects our views of how other human beings should or should not be treated’.¹⁴³

Many thanks are due to Martin Thomas, Emily Bridger, Beccy Williams, Katharina Stornig, Fabian Klose, Johannes Paulmann, Andrew Thompson, Daniel Palmieri, Fabrizio Benzi and the Fellows of the Global Humanitarianism Research Academy for their support and comments on earlier versions of this article, and to the peer reviewers for their very helpful and constructive feedback. Any errors remain my own. Research for this article was supported by the British Academy, a Swarthmore College Moore Fellowship and AHRC ‘Care for the Future’ funds.

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