

### Conference Post-Reading 3: Children at War

#### ***“Displaced Children's Participation in Political Violence: Towards greater understanding of mobilisation”***

The following extracts are from a journal article by Jason Hart, which unfortunately we are unable to reproduce in full for copyright reasons. I would highly recommend accessing the full article if you are able. This article is an excellent example of the social theory of childhood applied to the contentious issue of child soldiers; the author is not arguing that children's participation in conflict is a good thing, but that it should be understood as a political and often logical reaction to children's circumstances, rather than always being a result of the manipulation and coercion of innocent and passive children.

The full reference for this article is:

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#### **Extract One: “Introduction”**

“In his film *Turtles Can Fly* Bahman Ghobadi presents a stark picture of Iraqi Kurdish children and their struggles to survive around the time of the US-led invasion of 2003. Towards the end of the film, a group of boys head off to the nearby town to obtain guns and then set these up on the roof of their school as defence against a possible military attack. This is not recruitment in the conventional sense but the self-mobilisation of a group of children under the leadership of a 13-year-old. Ghobadi's film also shows us the rape by Iraqi soldiers of a young girl and her subsequent suicide, the wretched living conditions in a makeshift displacement camp, and large numbers of children engaged in the manual defusing of landmines for meagre pennies. Amidst these horrors, the children's efforts to arm themselves are hardly shocking. Indeed, given the dangers and deprivation such action appears tragically reasonable [...]

Often absent from the burgeoning literature and debate on children's involvement in military action and political violence is careful attention to the processes through which mobilisation occurs. The appalling cases where children are abducted and compelled to take part in acts of brutality are well known. Yet not all rebel groups and government forces operate in the same manner in pursuing the recruitment of underage personnel. [...] From Sri Lanka to Colombia and Nepal to Sierra Leone, it is apparent that in many, if not most, locations where children are associated with military groups, recruitment cannot be explained solely in terms of physical coercion and intimidation. Furthermore, as Ghobadi's film illustrates, organised groups may not be necessary for children to mobilise and take up arms [...] In the effort to prevent children from engaging directly in political violence we are bound to consider in careful detail their motivations.” (pp. 278)

#### **Extract Two: “Agency”**

“Within both the contemporary discourse of children's rights and the emerging discipline of childhood studies, much attention has been given to the notion of agency. Earlier assumptions about the inherent passivity of children have been challenged head-on and largely replaced by a vision of the child as ‘a subject of rights who is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence

solutions, to intervene as a partner in the process of social change and the building up of democracy'<sup>3</sup>. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—which speaks of the right of children to 'express . . . views freely in all matters affecting (them)'— is the common starting-point for activists and development practitioners who seek to enlarge the space for children's participation and the exercise of agency [...]

In practice, however, the promotion of participation within a rights-based framework has not been a one-way street heading towards the greater involvement of children in all arenas and forms of public life. While the young have been recognised as legitimate actors and facilitated in certain activities and processes, other settings are placed off-limits ever more emphatically. Children's involvement in military-type activities, perhaps more than any other, has come to be seen purely in terms of violation rather than as an instance of participation or the exercise of agency. Suggestion that the young may engage in the support or practice of political violence by their own volition is commonly countered by statements such as the following, taken from the 'Machel Report' on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children; 'rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures—economic, cultural, social and political'<sup>5</sup>." (pp. 279-280)

### Extract Three: "Conclusion"

"Much of the literature on displaced children living in situations of conflict tends towards an assumption that they are vulnerable to recruitment by virtue of a combination of their immaturity<sup>36</sup> and, their residence within a camp<sup>37</sup>. Such views sidestep serious questions about displaced children's own motivations for engagement in armed conflict: questions that would highlight the politics and economics that shape and constrain their lives. Avoidance of political-economic context in this manner is not an inevitability. Indeed, from an historical perspective we can see that the long-standing involvement of teenagers in armed conflict has only come to be considered in these depoliticising terms relatively recently: The literature on children's involvement in political violence in earlier times clearly shows how the young were seen—and saw themselves—as part of the collective struggle <sup>38</sup>.

Although we should all be concerned to avoid the risks associated with children's involvement in political violence, it is doubtful if the current trend in writing and advocacy that marginalises consideration of displaced children's own motivations and concerns can ultimately serve this purpose." (pp. 290)

### Footnotes

<sup>3</sup> Santos Pais, M. (2000) 'Child Participation and the Convention on the Rights of the Child', in Ranjani, R. (ed.), *The Political Participation of Children*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies

<sup>5</sup> Machel, G. (2001) *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* London:Hurst & Co, pp. 11

<sup>36</sup> EG Brett, R. and Specht, I. (2003) *Young Soldiers: Why they choose to fight* Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reiner

<sup>37</sup> EG Reich, S. and Achvarina, V. (2006) 'No Place to Hide: Refugees, Displaced Persons and the Recruitment of Child Soldiers' *International Security* 31(1): 127–164

<sup>38</sup> EG Van Emden, R. (2005) *Boy Soldiers of the Great War* London: Headline Book Publishing