

Children and Armed Conflict

“I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.....

Peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold”

Martin Luther King, accepting his Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1964
(<http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html>)

War – 21st century style

Throughout history nations or other groups have used violence to gain more land or more money, to protect their honour or religion, and for many other reasons. After the 2nd World War the United Nations (UN) was set up to try to create world peace. Although the UN has helped to end and prevent many wars, world peace is still a far off dream.

In the 20th century there were a lot of changes in what wars are like. International politics and new technology, not just in weapons but in communications and transport, means modern day wars are very different to wars in the 19th century or before. This has changed what type of people wars affect and how.

What are these changes?

After the end of the 2nd World War there have been over 149 major wars killing over 23 million people. Every year, on average, more than twice the number of people died in wars between 1945 and 1996 than they did in the 19th century. (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/contents.htm>).

More people are dying in wars.

Before 1945, Europe was the area with the highest number of wars, however after the end of the 2nd World War most wars happened in less developed countries in Asia and Africa. The Nobel Peace Prize Organisation counted 48 wars just during the 1990s, 20 of these were in Africa and 19 were in Asia.

(<http://nobelprize.org/peace/educational/conflictmap/index.html>)

More people living in poverty are affected by wars.

Wars have always affected far more people than just the soldiers fighting in them. In wars in the early 20th century around half of all people killed in wars were civilians (not soldiers). In the 1980s, 90% of war victims were civilians. This is partly because of new

Real life

The longest running war is between Israel and Palestine. It started in 1948 and, despite several international attempts to end the violence, it is still going on. At least 3 generations have never known peace. Over 13 000 people have died.

Afghanistan has been in a state of war since 1978, although the groups fighting have changed over the years. Of all the wars happening today it has the highest death toll: 600 000 people.

(<http://nobelprize.org/peace/educational/conflictmap/index.html>)

war techniques, especially aerial bombing (dropping bombs from aeroplanes). This means a war can be brought directly to people in their homes, with little risk for the soldiers. (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/1cinwar.htm>)

The type of war happening has changed too. Civil wars (between two groups in the same country) have become the most common type of war. Civil wars involve ordinary people far more than other types of war. This is because they are not normally fought on battlefields but from village to village, meaning people's homes become the battlefield. When they leave to avoid the fighting, they often lose everything they had as it is destroyed by bombs, taken by soldiers or because they have to leave with very little warning, simply leaving their possessions behind in a rush to escape.

More ordinary people are affected by wars.

Civil wars are especially difficult to end. To bring peace the two sides have to agree to live side by side in the same country. How can you live in the same street as or even work with someone who might have killed your family? Very often other countries are involved in civil wars by supporting one group over another. This can make wars last for much longer, as both groups continue to receive weapons and money from outside sources that are not directly suffering the consequences of the war. Some wars like this have been going on for decades.

More people have never known peace.

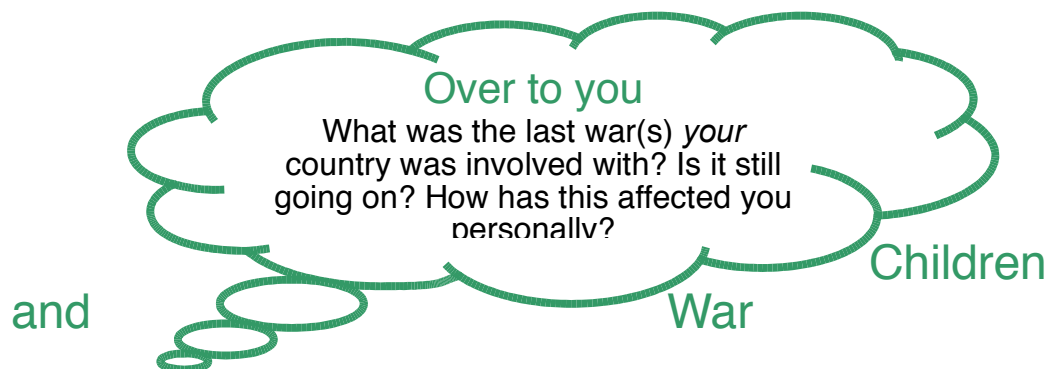
Parents normally try to protect their children from the effects of war. But wars can now reach ordinary people in their own homes. This can make it impossible for parents to stop their children suffering too.

Real Life

In 1994 there was a war in Rwanda between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. Radio broadcasts would encourage Hutus to kill Tutsis. One broadcaster said "To kill the big rats, you have to kill the little rats" –telling Hutus to try to kill Tutsi children.

Children are normally treated better than adults in war. Soldiers will naturally feel worse about killing or injuring children, as children are innocent victims. But in the late 20th century more wars were fought between ethnic groups. In this type of war one group may believe children of the enemy ethnic group are no more innocent than the adults and might even target children specifically as they want to destroy future generations of the other group.

More children are affected by war than ever before.



"War violates every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of the personality, and the right to be nurtured and protected."

Graça Machel, the UN Secretary-General's Expert on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. (<http://www.unicef.org/graca/>)

There's no doubt that wars have terrible effects on all the people who live through them but children are especially vulnerable to their effects. Children need a safe and stable environment to grow up physically, mentally and emotionally. Wars are dangerous and chaotic, making it extremely difficult for the children affected by them to become healthy, happy adults.

Since the 1980s across the world millions of children have become victims of war; up to 2 million have been killed, 5 million disabled, 12 million left homeless, 1 million have lost their parents and 10 million have been psychologically traumatised. Of course these are not exact figures, as many children are lost in the chaos of war and can not be counted. (<http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/contents.htm>)

Here are three of the main ways wars hurt children, but remember there are other ways war can affect children too.

On the run

When a war is being fought in your country, you may have to leave your home to escape the fighting. Often there is very little warning and you have to leave all your belongings and money behind. Even if you do have time to pack your things, they may be taken later by soldiers, who need supplies themselves and threaten to kill anyone who does not help them.

Most people who leave their homes go to refugee camps to find protection from the fighting and to get help to survive (food, water, shelter) after they have lost everything. Many children lose their parents when they leave their homes. In Rwanda, 114 000 children were separated from their parents. Their parents may be dead, or simply lost in the confusion of the fighting. 5% of refugees are children without an adult looking after them.

Refugees often have to travel by foot for long distances, without enough food or water, before they reach a refugee camp. Many die on the journey and those who make it arrive very weak. This makes them more vulnerable to diseases, as their bodies aren't strong enough to fight off illnesses. Diseases spread easily in refugee camps, because a lot of people are living very close together and don't have enough water or equipment to keep everything clean.

Real Life

Most children who die in wars aren't killed by bombs or bullets. They die from starvation or diseases when they are forced to run away from their homes. 20 times more people die from hunger and disease in African wars than from guns or bombs.

There isn't always enough food and medicine in refugee camps to help the people who arrive there. Wars make it difficult to transport food and medicine – soldiers don't stop shooting to let a lorry past. As many wars happen in less developed regions, the governments may not have enough money to send food and medicine to help refugees.

International aid agencies, like UNICEF and Oxfam, fundraise to take supplies to refugee camps and try to arrange safe transport routes to get it through. Even when they can do this, living in a camp sharing toilets, taps and tents with hundreds of strangers is nothing like living in your own home with your family.

Real Life - Darfur

Since 2003 1.8 million adults and children in the Darfur area in the north of Sudan have been forced to leave their homes. The Janjaweed, a group of fighters supported by the Sudanese government, have been fighting two rebel groups who oppose the government. The Janjaweed attack ordinary people as well as the rebel groups, because they are all the same ethnic group. They have burned down villages and raped and killed the adults and children living in them.

1.8million people have fled to refugee camps in Darfur and 220 000 have gone further to camps over the border in Chad. UNICEF think about 1.4 million of the refugees are children under 18 and 500 000 are children under 5 years old. Another 1.5 million people can not get food for themselves as the war has destroyed farmland and the local economy. People can not go to work because they may be attacked. All together about 51% of the population of Darfur before the war began have had their lives changed.

But even in the camps the refugees don't feel safe. The Janjaweed have attacked women and girls when they leave the camps just to collect firewood. Leaving to camps to work, get food or water is impossible. This means these people are trapped in the refugee camps, and their only way of surviving is to rely on international aid agencies to provide them with the essentials to survive.

A ceasefire was negotiated but all groups are simply ignoring it. The African Union has sent troops to try to make them respect the ceasefire and has made some areas a bit safer. However, they don't have enough soldiers or equipment to stop all the fighting. In fact, in 2005 the situation got worse as the Janjaweed began attacking civilians again. There is no end in sight and it seems the refugees will not be able to go home for a long time. Many of them have no homes to back to, as they have been burnt down.

International agencies have done lots to make life in the camps as good as possible. One little girl said to UNICEF that they bring light to her life in the camp. They have made sure most of the refugees have access to clean water and 70% have access to basic healthcare. Many of the children are very weak because they don't have enough food to eat. This makes them easy targets for disease. UNICEF has run a vaccination programme against measles, a disease that spreads and kills quickly. They believe they have saved 50 000 lives by doing this.

Schools have also been started in the camps. 250 000 children are going to school there - that's more than before the war! Child-friendly centres are places in the camp where children can learn to read and write, and can play and feel safe – something they haven't felt for a long time.

Child Soldier

Children have always been used in wars – as drummers, look-outs or assistants in military camps. But in the 20th century children were used more and more as soldiers, fighting on the front line. This is partly because of new weapons. Modern guns are light to carry and easy to use – an AK47 can be taken apart and cleaned and put back together by a child as young as 10.

International Law – what is a 'child' soldier legally?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child said a 'child' was any person under 18. However it said that anyone over 15 could be recruited as a soldier. Later, a 'child soldiers' protocol' was added, this is an optional extra part of the convention. It says that, although 16 year olds can join armies, anyone under 18 should not fight on the front line, be forced by law to join or join an armed group which is not the official national army.

See if your country has signed up to the child soldiers' protocol - <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/protocol.htm>

Military commanders often want children as soldiers as they don't demand salaries and they are easier to scare into doing exactly as they are told. They kidnap children and force them to fight by threatening to kill them or their families. Boys and girls have been kidnapped to become child soldiers. However girls are also often taken to become 'wives' of much older military leaders or forced to work as unpaid prostitutes for the soldiers.

Sometimes children choose to become soldiers. Some wars started decades ago, meaning that many children grow up in an atmosphere of violence, seeing their family suffering or dying because of the war. They

may blame one side and choose to join the other to get revenge. They may be orphans with no way to get food to survive or protect themselves from attacks. The army or rebel group will look after them and can even become like a family for them when they have no-one else. In 1990 the Director of the Red Cross in Liberia said that children as young as 7 joined the fighting because "those with guns could survive". (www.unicef.org/graca).

Sometimes children think being a soldier is 'grown up', even glamorous, or they believe that they are fighting for a good cause. They don't understand the brutal reality of war until it is too late.

It is impossible to know exactly how many child soldiers there are – you can't walk around a war zone and count them. However the best estimates are about **300 000 soldiers under 18 years old** in 33 wars all over the world. Some of these are only 7 or 8 years old. (<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/crp/facts.htm>)

Real Life – Sierra Leone

There was a civil war in Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002. The Revolutionary United Front invaded Sierra Leone to try and take power from the corrupt government. People quickly began to suspect that the RUF were really more concerned with getting the diamond wealth of the country as they became more violent and brutal. They would rape women and girls, cut off the arms and/or legs of some victims and burn others alive.

The RUF began recruiting children to fight with them. The children did not have a choice; they were kidnapped and killed if they did not agree to fight. Often they made children torture or kill their own families when they were caught. After this, children would feel too ashamed to want to go home and

doing the same thing to strangers would not seem so bad. The RUF also made the child soldiers take drugs so they could not think clearly about what they were doing and wouldn't feel pain if they were injured.

Around 7000 children were used as child soldiers in Sierra Leone. After the war stopped a Special Court was started to punish people who had committed war crimes. The court agreed that recruiting children as soldiers is a war crime and they have charged 13 people with doing this. The legal process is still going on but the Special Court is trying to give justice to all the victims of the war.

As part of the peace agreement a special system was introduced to help ex-soldiers, adults and children, rebuild their lives. This is called a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration, or DDR, process. Around 10% of the people helped by the DDR process were children. Children were also offered places to stay where they could receive education, medical care and join in fun activities while they looked for their parents. 92% of ex-child soldiers in Sierra Leone have now been re-united with their families and are building a new life.

After seeing his father killed when he was only 8 and then made to fight with the RUF, Ibrahim Barry Junior knew exactly what he wanted when the war ended. He said,

“The only way for me to be happy is to be back at school.”

He is now one of over 100 000 children who have returned to school through Plan's Education Renewal programme. Going to school gives children a stable, normal routine after the chaos of war and also helps them to feel proud and confident again.

“Academic work mixed with fun and games means children can gradually put the ugly past behind them and concentrate on developing their talents,” explained a primary teacher.

All in the Mind

“You can take a child out of a war, but how do you take the war out of the child?”

WarChild

Children in wars live through experiences that are worse than most people's nightmares. Seeing people, often close friends or relatives, killed, tortured or wounded, feeling terrified that they will be next can leave children with psychological problems long after the war is over. Teenagers can be especially vulnerable, as they understand what is going on around them far more than young children.

Real Life

After the war in the Bosnian area of the former Yugoslavia children and teenagers experienced feeling of fear, insecurity, depression, anger and bitterness. Some had terrible nightmares, flashbacks of their traumatic experiences or fits of uncontrollable crying that stopped them getting on with daily life. Some teenagers even tried to kill themselves as they felt they couldn't cope with their memories.

During a war children only think about surviving day to day. This means, young children especially, never learn how to play, make friends or deal with normal daily life as they simply have not experienced it. This can mean that they just don't know how to make friends or form relationships with adults looking after them in a normal way. When they disagree with someone they might find it hard to know how to resolve the problem peacefully, instead of using violence.

Violence becomes a normal fact of life during a war. Children who see this or take part in it, especially ex-child soldiers, only know how to get what they want or express their feelings through violence. Often adult soldiers praise child soldiers for acts of violence, meaning these children learn to feel good about themselves for hurting people.

In some wars, especially ethnic wars, soldiers often rape girls in the enemy group. This destroys their self-confidence and can make them feel ashamed, even though they have done nothing wrong. Girls who are taken as soldiers 'wives' suffer sexual abuse over a long period of time and many begin to feel that their only purpose is to be a sex object for men.

Children may also experience problems trusting adults and forming friendships after living through a war. Many children experience several changes in which adults look after them, after their parents are killed or separated from them. They may feel that all adults will abandon them. Seeing adults harming other adults and children or being harmed by an adult themselves, can make children afraid of adults. These experiences make it difficult for children to trust any adult at all.

After a war children need help to overcome these psychological and social problems. Activities like drama, art or sport can help children learn to express themselves in non-violent ways. They can also give children a sense of achievement and make them feel good about themselves for doing something not related to violence or sexual abuse. Play workshops help younger children learn to develop normally and begin to have a childhood.

Real Life

In Rwanda, 56 per cent had seen children kill people, nearly 80 per cent had lost immediate family members and 16 per cent had been forced to hide under dead bodies. More than 60 per cent of the Rwandan children interviewed said they did not care whether they ever grew up. <http://www.unicef.org/graca/>

Real Life - Columbia

The civil war between guerrilla groups and the government in Columbia started over 40 years ago. At first, guerrilla groups wanted to start a new left wing government but now most are more interested in getting money from the drug trade or ransoms from kidnapping. They have committed many human rights abuses. In 2005 these included massacres, torture, demanding money with violence and kidnappings. At least 7 000 child

soldiers are used by the guerrilla groups – nearly 1 out of every 4 of their soldiers is under 18.

The war is only happening in certain, mainly rural, areas but this means many people have to leave their homes to escape the violence. Up to 3 million people, half of these under 18, have been forced to abandon their homes in the last 3 years. (<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/colomb12206.htm>).

UNICEF is working with the Columbian government to get child soldiers released and over 600 have been allowed to leave the guerrilla groups in the last 3 years. These children need help to learn to adapt to everyday life after fighting in the war. Refugee children may have been traumatised by the violence that forced them to leave their homes. Many children, especially those living in poverty, choose to join the war to get revenge for attacks on their families or because they think it is glamorous and 'grown-up' to fight, without realising the harsh realities of life as a child soldier. All these groups of children can benefit from artistic projects, which show them the alternatives to violence.

The charity War Child works with other organisations in Columbia to run this type of project. Their projects organise activities like dancing (modern and folk), music, theatre, sculpting and video as well as running educational workshops about human rights and life as a child soldier. *Disparando Cámaras para la Paz*, "Shooting pictures for Peace", is an especially original project where refugee children in a poor area of Bogotá, Columbia's capital, learn to take and develop photos. They can show their experiences and life through the photos and feel proud of their work. Working together on the project they also learn to co-operate and resolve arguments peacefully. You can see their work by clicking on the link "digital picture gallery" on: http://www.warchild.org/projects/WC_Holland/Columbia/colombia.html

Take Action!

See more children's true stories from war and donate to War Child by downloading the latest music from 99p
www.warchildmusic.com

Be inspired by a great poem by a UK schoolchild on the effect of war, look at the Q&A link to get more info on child soldiers or buy a football to help child soldiers.
<http://www.child-soldiers.org/resources/for-schools>

Look at their "make a difference" link to join the latest campaign. www.child-soldiers.org

Join discussion forums with young people from around the world on the latest topics and much more.
Teachers: check out "Teachers' corner" for resources and lesson plans.
<http://www.nowarzone.org>

Read a short novel telling the story of a fictional child caught in a war, with suggested classroom activities for teachers – realistic, powerful and upsetting.

<http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/childsoldiers/whatsgoingon/>

Send a letter to encourage governments to sign the Optional Protocol to protect soldiers under 18 and/or join other campaigns about specific countries.

<http://www.humanrightswatch.org/campaigns/crp/whatdo.htm>

You can't have war without guns – find out how you can help the latest campaign to make weapons more difficult to get hold of.

http://www.controlarms.org/act_now/