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Are those forced to be criminals actually criminals?

Sometime in the late 1990s, a group of kids around the ages of 10 to 15 were in their dorm at a private school about to go to sleep in their respective beds. It was late into the night when the group heard loud footsteps getting closer and closer to their door. Eventually, those footsteps turned into loud bangs on their door, and they started to panic and hide under their beds as they knew what was happening. They were being raided by the LRA, or the Lord's Resistance Army, which is a rebel group that goes against the governments of Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These kids were about to be taken away to war, and they couldn't do anything about it. They tried to resist, but they were met with physical abuse and death threats. The LRA took them to their camp where the group was forced to kill their friends, sexually assault innocent women, and do many other cruel tasks. This is just one of the many cruel stories related to child soldiers. Though, despite this cruelty, many people tend to still view these kids as criminals since they themselves committed these acts. People don't seem to care that these children were threatened with death or beaten if they didn't obey their captures orders, but this doesn't make any sense. The child soldiers here are not the criminals. These innocent children are taken from their daily lives and are forced into experiences they've only seen happen in movies and books; events that they would never expect

to actually be in. The true criminals here are the capturers, and we as a society must recognize this as failing to do so will not solve the issues children face every day in less developed, war torn countries.

To reiterate on the previous point, children are sometimes captured at a young age, and they don't really know what to do in situations where they have a gun pointed to their head or in a situation where a large man is standing over them with a stick ready to kill them if they don't follow orders. According to Source C the average age of child who gets captured and made into a child soldier is around the normal ages of pre-teen years and teenage years. Now, visualize a 10-year-child. Think about how innocent and ignorant of the world they are. By that age, they really only have experiences given to them by their parents. They are used to following what their parents say, playing sports outside with their friends, and generally living a care free life. Now imagine that all of a sudden this child gets captured by military trained rebel groups with large guns, who are forcibly and threateningly taking the kid away from his home and making him kill a friend he was taken away with. This is exactly what happened in the book *War Brothers* by Sharon E. McKay (Source A). The name of the kid was Norman, and he was 10 years old. All he had been exposed to is sports and school, and all he knew was that he had to do well in school to make his parents happy. He wasn't expecting that he would go to school one day and be taken away by rebel soldiers who would later force him to kill his best friend. When Norman got to the camp, his friend was weakened from the physical abuse he suffered when trying to resist the rebel group. His friend, who was named Adam, seemingly had broken ribs, and he could barely walk. The LRA, being as cruel as they are, ordered Adam to be killed by his friends. They walked up to Norman and forced him to hold a stick. Norman questioned why he was being given this. The LRA soldier demanded Norman and his friend group to kill Adam by beating him

down with sticks as all he was doing was slowing down the group (Source A). Norman resisted, but he was met with more physical abuse and a death threat. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't fight back or he would be killed. Eventually, other kids started to hit Adam. More people started to join in. Norman was still standing there. Screams echoed around him. The soldier started yelling at him again, and a gun was pointed at Norman's head. In a sudden wave of fear, he took his stick and hit his friend as fast and as hard as he could. He closed his eyes to prevent seeing the bruises and blood everywhere on his friend's body, but he was yelled at for doing so. He opened his eyes, and he was met with a bloody, gruesome sight that essentially scarred him for life. After that, he was silent, scared, and shaken. He lost all mental stability and hope. He viewed himself as a "demon" (Source A), and after he escaped from the LRA, his family did too.

However, he isn't a "demon". He simply had no other choice in the matter, and naturally, a kid with little connection to someone else would value their life over someone else's. Again, Norman did not know that he would be going through these events that day. He wasn't prepared to die or make any sort of sacrifice. It's unreasonable to think any kid in that situation would be able to make rational and proper judgements to fight against those who were controlling him. He is not an adult. He has little knowledge of how to handle himself in dangerous situations as they are not educated on that topic yet, nor are they old enough to be educated. Furthermore, the children shouldn't even be put to blame here. Who's the one that created the LRA? Who's the one that organized these crimes to begin with? It wasn't the children. The people who should be treated as criminals here are the soldiers and the leaders of the LRA who are stealing these poor kids from their families and forcing them to commit horrible crimes. The concept of adults using child soldiers is essentially the same as the concept of adults taking advantage and exploiting

kids that are younger than them to get whatever they please. These groups are extremely manipulative, and they can easily sway the odds in their favor if they need to. “If...adult exploitation of children lies at the heart of the problem of child soldiers, should it not be adults who are held accountable for what child soldiers have done?”(Source D). The quote just shown states that child exploitation is the heart of the problem here, and those who participate in this exploitation should be held accountable, which is exactly what should happen. The families of these children and the government itself needs to recognize this as the problem. This mindset of always viewing children as the culprits for everything that goes wrong is a narrow minded and inconsiderate way of thinking. The children clearly have feelings too. In Source A, *War Brothers*, it is clear that when the children kill there are lingering effects. They are broken. They don't talk to others, and they continue to isolate themselves unless something can hopefully bring them back to who they once were. These aren't the emotions of a killer. These are the emotions of someone who is hurt, someone who houses a deep regret for their actions and will continue to for their entire life. Their families and more importantly, our society as a whole desperately need to view these children as victims, along with creating ways to help these children overcome the horrors they face, or they will continue to have these ever-lasting negative emotions for the rest of their lives.

Luckily, it seems the help has already started to appear in many countries home to child soldiers. While many children in countries that have many child soldiers treat these kids as criminals, there are a lot of places in the world where children get rehabilitation. In fact, even though a lot of child soldiers in Africa face jail time and other forms of punishment for their actions, many of them get treatment to bring them back into society, and this makes Africa the continent where most child soldiers get the proper treatment they deserve. For example, many

children end up getting back into school or getting vocational training, which is explained by this quote from Source B: “If the boy from Mosul had been part of armed groups in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or any number of conflict countries around the world, he might be back in school or getting vocational training. In the past twenty years, tens of thousands of former child soldiers have benefitted from rehabilitation programs designed to help them rejoin society.” Helping child soldiers rejoin their people is a great process because it clearly recognizes these children as people who need help rather than recognizing them as criminals. It ends up benefitting them as source B stated since they will be able to overcome their fears and learn from their past mistakes to prevent future events such as the ones they might have experienced from happening to them or to anyone else again the future. More importantly, it recognizes the true criminals here, which are the people who captured these children in the first place. By doing this, we are tackling the problem as needed since we are eliminating the heart of the issue. If the people capturing the children are not stopped, then they will continue to make children commit several crimes and more and more children will be wrongfully punished for the crimes they commit. This process is simply taking a step backwards and not learning from the past. Luckily, it seems that many countries in Africa recognize the children as people who were simply caught in the cross fire of pointless wars and nothing more, but sadly that isn’t the case for all countries.

The infamous terrorist group, ISIS is known for using children as soldiers as well, and in the Middle Eastern countries, if a child is part of ISIS, they are most likely charged with terrorism, and consequences can vary depending on their actions. This is a complete contrast to what is seen in Africa, and this is shown in a quote from Source B which states that, “When it comes to ISIS, however, children who have been involved with the group in any capacity are

increasingly being treated as criminals and charged with terrorism.” More countries are continuously adopting more aggressive counterterrorism measures, and a lot of these measures involve “detention and prosecution of children”(Source B). The situation is extremely horrible in Iraq, where the Kurdistan Regional Government are “currently detaining an estimated 1,500 children for alleged ISIS involvement” (Source B). The unfortunate truth here is that countries need to take action to defend themselves from terrorism, so they will do anything necessary to do so. Many children willingly join these groups as well, which further adds to the discussion of whether or not they are criminals. In the case of ISIS, a lot of children join to get food or to escape poverty, and since the prosecution has been continuously increasing as stated before, it doesn’t matter what the reason is as any involvement labels them as criminals. However, the reality of this situation is still that these children cannot be considered criminals. According to Source C, “Most children...enlist they may not have thought carefully about their decision or made an informed choice. It may be that the child thought it would be safer to enlist or factors such as poverty and hunger influenced their decision rather than a desire to fight.” Once again, children lack experience, and when met with a rough situation, they don’t understand the best way to get out of it. When they are in poverty, or when they are part of a struggling family, all they want is for everything to get better, and they’ll do whatever they can to make that happen. That is what happens in Middle Eastern countries, and that is what happens with most child soldiers across the world. The continuous prosecution is not going to help anything. All it will continue to do is paint these misguided children as horrible people, and the Middle East will continuously torture and imprison them. This is the unfortunate outcome for many child soldiers in the Middle East, but as Africa has shown, if these children are given comfortable lives and

rehabilitation, they can definitely rejoin society and better themselves in many ways. The countries just need to implement more programs that can make that happen.

The debate over child soldiers will seemingly never die out, as there are so many different cases around the world with different causes that can decide if a child soldier is truly criminal. However, one thing is clear, most of the time, child soldiers are forced to join against their will, and they are forced to commit horrible crimes to please their commanders. If they are to join willingly, then they do so because they are in desperate need for something that will help them better their lives or their family's lives. This does not make them criminals. It makes them victims, and victims should not be the target for our desperate struggle to minimize the amount of child soldiers in war-torn countries. By giving these children rehabilitation as well as helping them rejoin society, we are taking the proper steps to ensure that this horrible crime is finally eradicated from this world. These countries must work with these children to help them regain their lives, so they can do the same with other child soldiers. Should this not happen, more children will have their true feelings and trauma neglected, which is something that our world shouldn't do to kids who just want to go back to their families and live their lives normally.

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