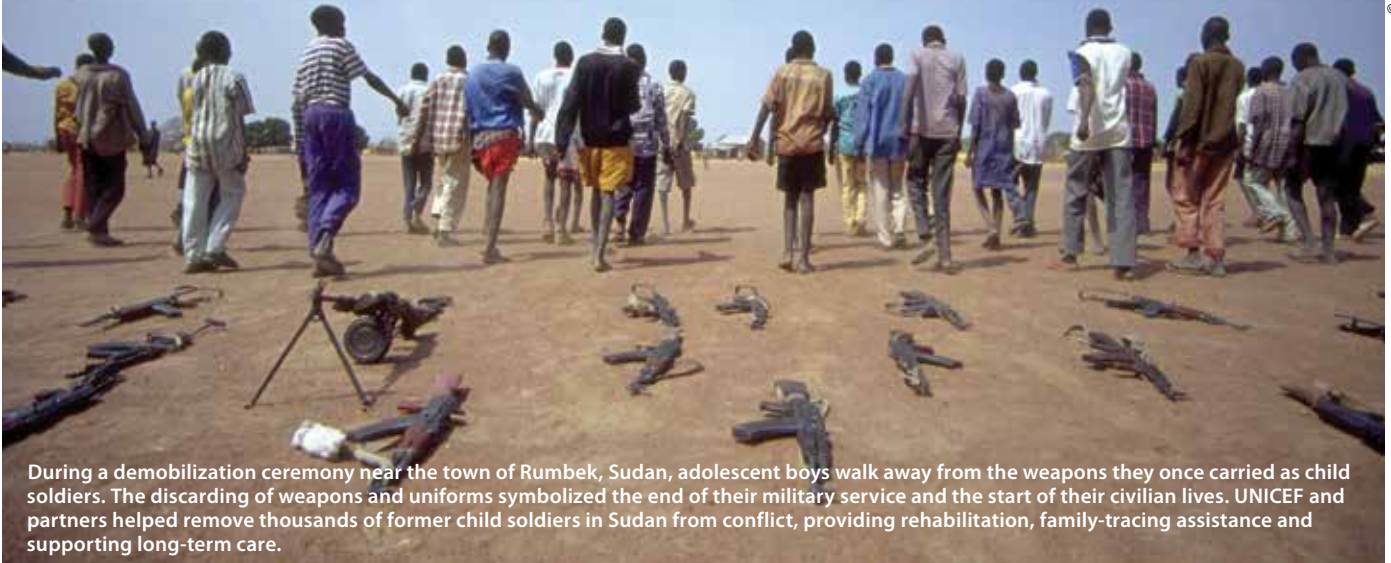


# Child Soldiers: Rights Denied, Hope Restored

Kenneth T. Carano and Robert W. Bailey



During a demobilization ceremony near the town of Rumbek, Sudan, adolescent boys walk away from the weapons they once carried as child soldiers. The discarding of weapons and uniforms symbolized the end of their military service and the start of their civilian lives. UNICEF and partners helped remove thousands of former child soldiers in Sudan from conflict, providing rehabilitation, family-tracing assistance and supporting long-term care.

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The forceful induction of children as child soldiers is an abhorrent violation of human rights.<sup>1</sup> It is very disturbing that while many children are forcibly recruited into armed conflicts, others actually volunteer, due to their nightmarish alternatives.<sup>2</sup> Although the practice has recently gained worldwide attention, awareness alone will not end the violation of children's rights, and more action is necessary.

In preparing students for global citizenship in a rapidly changing world, social studies education proves an ideal forum to expose students to important world issues and challenges. Competent instruction motivates students to become engaged in finding solutions that can improve the future of the world.<sup>3</sup> The application of the framework of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child facilitates the identification of children's rights and exposes violations against child soldiers in significant ways.

## Child Soldiers

Currently, over 250,000 children, some as young as seven years old, are actively involved in armed conflict in 24 coun-

tries or territories, despite the condemnation of this practice by the international community.<sup>4</sup> Even today, children are recruited into military service in 63 countries.<sup>5</sup> "Children are increasingly the face of war," stated Jimmie Briggs, journalist and author of *Innocents Lost*, following a lecture on the University of South Florida campus.<sup>6</sup> Boys are often highlighted by the media, but as many as 40 percent of child soldiers are female.<sup>7</sup> While many girls are abducted into this life, others voluntarily join in order to escape domestic servitude, abuse, and forced marriage, only to end up in arguably worse conditions fighting on the front lines or becoming sex slaves of military leaders.<sup>8</sup>

## Convention on the Rights of the Child

In 1990, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) established the civil, economic, political, and social rights of children worldwide.<sup>9</sup> Given the tremendous support for the main body of the Convention (signed by every nation except the United States and Somalia), the UN pressed for further protections for children. By 2002, the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted. As of May, 2012, this document has been signed or ratified by 170 nations, including the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The Optional Protocol contains 13 Articles and defines such issues as age verification, voluntary recruitment policies, and notices to potential combatants. One of the caveats allowing the United States to ratify the treaty with impunity is Article 1, which permits persons under the age of 18 to enlist as long as they do not engage in hostilities until they come

of age. One issue with the treaty is that many children are forcibly recruited by non-state actors, often fighting against the state itself. Article 4 of the Protocol demands that such practices should end and that nations should work to “take all feasible measures” against the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

While the debate over adoption of the main body of the treaty continues, the United States stands committed to the Optional Protocol of 2002. Unfortunately, this international legislation and collaboration has not ended recruitment of child soldiers. A solution may require more than proclamations; it may take educating the world community.

### **The LRA: A Child’s Life**

Central Africa presents a disturbing example of the life of child soldiers. The Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has been fighting the Ugandan government since the 1980s. Although most of the fighting has moved out of Uganda, the conflict has spilled into bordering areas and now contaminates much of Central Africa, while still employing Ugandan children, who make up almost 90 percent of the soldiers.<sup>11</sup> Children escaping or released from the LRA are often pressured into joining government forces, making this a child-on-child war.<sup>12</sup>

Charlotte Atyam’s story started out similar to those of many girls abducted into the world of child soldiers. Charlotte was a 14-year-old student at St. Mary’s school in Aboke, Uganda, when in 1996, the LRA abducted her and 138 of her female classmates (109 were later released, but 30 were held in captivity). For the next eight years, Charlotte would fight for the LRA, be raped, and forced to marry an LRA commander, ultimately bearing two of his children.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after Charlotte’s abduction, her mother Angelina, along with family members of other missing girls, formed an advocacy group for abducted children called Concerned Parents Association (CPA). The group has been instrumental

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## **CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES: EXPLORING INNER REALITIES**

Students draw images summarizing critical aspects of their lives and assemble adjectives describing the images. They then observe pictures drawn by child soldiers and amass a list of common adjectives describing them. Next, students contrast “child soldier” adjectives with those describing personal images and discuss underlying reasons for differences.

**Resolution:** Students construct “friendship bracelets” to sell for donations to Invisible Children Campaign.

### **A Guided Imagery**

Students close their eyes, listen, and put themselves in the place of the author as the teacher reads first-hand accounts of child soldier stories provided on Amnesty International’s site ([www.amnestyusa.org/children/child-soldiers/page.do?id=1051047](http://www.amnestyusa.org/children/child-soldiers/page.do?id=1051047)). After hearing the traumatic events endured by child soldiers, students write a harrowing conclusion. Students read aloud their conclusions or share writings with each other.

### **Life and Crime**

Students watch both a child soldier and a U.S. law enforcement video interview (see below). Students then write a short summary of a child soldier’s experiences and compare and contrast the story with the life of a child in an American street gang. Observations should include drug use, brainwashing, fear tactics, respect, being “used,” and a lack of parent involvement and education. Discussion might involve methods for escaping both situations and the healing process.

### **Ishmael Beah — Child Soldier (10 minutes)**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K4yhPSQEzo&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K4yhPSQEzo&feature=related)

### **Kids, Drugs, Violence and Drug Enforcement Educational Video (1 hour)**

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCgNXZGLOHU&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCgNXZGLOHU&feature=related)

## **WEBSITES:**

### **American Red Cross: Exploring Humanitarian Law**

(<http://ehl.redcross.org/curriculum/module2/C.php>)

This website includes educational resources and classroom materials on the movement to end the use of children in armed conflicts.

### **Invisible Children**

([www.invisiblechildren.com](http://www.invisiblechildren.com))

The site provides information on the use of child soldiers including ordering information for their acclaimed documentary.

### **Amnesty International**

([www.amnestyusa.org/children/child-soldiers/page.do?id=1051047](http://www.amnestyusa.org/children/child-soldiers/page.do?id=1051047))

Find stories of child soldiers with photos, and links to related materials at this site.

just individuals covered with fabric. As a small measure of opposition, women are taunting the law by pushing their rousari, a scarf-like head covering, back just a little to let their hair show.

### Education for Liberation

As opposition to the regime has been known to result in harsh punishment, education remains the most promising weapon for change. With approximately 75 percent of Iran's population under 25 years old, it is important to educate students. This will give Iranian youth an opportunity to share their voices, and show that "there is no dividing line between religion, culture, society, and government."<sup>14</sup> With increased education, Iranian women and girls can create a better way of life for themselves, and young Iranian men can avoid following the footsteps of their elders in a "do as they see" syndrome. An educated population is more likely to promote programs and activities to eliminate intolerance and discrimination against women. 🌐

### Notes

1. World Legal Information Institute. The Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran (adopted 1979, revised 1995) [www.worldlii.org/ir/legis/const/1992/](http://www.worldlii.org/ir/legis/const/1992/).
2. The information can be found in the statistics of the United Nations, *UN Statistical Yearbook*, 2010 (New York: United Nations, 2011), 63. The Yearbook is accessible at [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/syb/syb55/SYB\\_55.pdf](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/syb/syb55/SYB_55.pdf). Similar information can be found in the statistics of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which show that Iran has a score above 1.0 on the gender parity index for tertiary education. A score above 1.0 shows a larger enrollment of women than men, while a score below 1.0 reflects a larger enrollment of men than women. See Chapter 5, "Enrollment and Gender Trends: Tertiary Education," in UNESCO, *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education* (Paris, France: UNESCO, 2012), 80. The information can be accessed at [www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/world-atlas-gender-equality-education-2012-en.pdf](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Library/Documents/world-atlas-gender-equality-education-2012-en.pdf)
3. Abbas Milani, "The Mousavi Mission," *The New Republic* (March 11, 2010): 12-15. The article is accessible at [www.tnr.com/article/environment-energy/the-mousavi-mission](http://www.tnr.com/article/environment-energy/the-mousavi-mission).
4. Lindsey Hilsum, "Jeans and Mascara Under the Veil," *New Statesman* 127 (July 1998): 33-34.

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in raising global awareness and acting as an underground railroad in securing the freedom of former child soldiers within war-torn northern Uganda. Charlotte and her mother were reunited in 2004 after her daring escape with her children. The CPA has repeatedly hidden Charlotte from her LRA abductors.<sup>14</sup>

### Abolitionists

In the previous decade, over two million children have been killed and six million seriously injured due to armed conflicts, according to estimates.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, tens of thousands of former child soldiers have gone through government-run programs known as disarmament, demobilization, and rehabilitation (DDR). Unfortunately, these programs, which often focus on social reintegration, have been criticized for dealing inadequately with the psychosocial needs of ex-combatants and neglecting females in the rehabilitation process.<sup>16</sup>

The numbers of abducted child soldiers are grim. Fortunately, there are modern-day abolitionists fighting on the front lines against this crime of humanity. The CPA is only one of many groups attempting to provide safe havens and shedding light on the continued use of child soldiers. Authors like Jimmie Briggs and organizations such as the Invisible Children, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, and Amnesty International have thrown light on this tragic global issue.

### Conclusion

While children in the United States conquer computer-animated video games in order to establish high scores, many Ugandan children have been forced to engage in the destruction of real villages to survive. Many Americans are unaware of these conditions and, thus, cannot be expected to take action. However, if teachers work to enlighten their students on the reality of the situation of child soldiers, these same students, in

their active role as global citizens, can become empowered to participate in a new generation of abolitionists. 🌐

### Notes

1. Charles London, *Voices of Children in War: One Day the Soldiers Came* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007).
2. Ibid.
3. Stephen J. Thornton, "Incorporating Internationalism into the Social Studies Curriculum," *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, ed. N. Noddings (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 81-92.
4. United Nations: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General. "Children and Armed Conflict," <http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>.
5. Child Soldiers Global Report 2008, "Child Soldiers: Progress, but Too Little," Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. [www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/files/country\\_pdfs/FINAL\\_2008\\_Global\\_Report.pdf](http://www.childsoldiersglobalreport.org/files/country_pdfs/FINAL_2008_Global_Report.pdf).
6. Conversation with Jimmie Briggs, October 1, 2008, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL.
7. Matt Hobson, "Forgotten Casualties of War: Girls in Armed Conflict," Save the Children, London (2005) [www.global-sisterhood-network.org/gsn/downloads/forgotten-casualties-of-war-girls-in-armed-conflict.pdf](http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/gsn/downloads/forgotten-casualties-of-war-girls-in-armed-conflict.pdf).
8. Ibid.
9. Unite for Children, "Convention on the Rights of the Child," UNICEF. [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/).
10. United Nations: Human Rights Council. "Annual Report of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy," [www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/21/38](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/21/38).
11. United Nations: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General. "Children and Armed Conflict." <http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/>.
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14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Theresa Betancourt, I. Borisova, J.E. Rubin-Smith, T. Gingerich, T. Williams, J. Agnew-Blais, *Psychosocial Adjustment and Social Reintegration of Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups: The State of the Field and Future Directions* (Austin, Tex.: Psychology Beyond Borders, 2008).

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