

This work explores child soldiers. I researched four war-torn countries that recruit the highest number of child soldiers in the world—Burma, Uganda, Syria and Colombia—to see if there is any difference in the way they use children in their army or rebel groups. I studied the impact these children face in armed conflict. What are the conditions that create child soldiers? Why are children the easiest target? What are the differences between girl and boys in the field?

These four paintings portray the raw elements of being a child soldier—the environment as well as their faces, bodies, and clothing. I wanted to individualize these elements by placing them each on a single canvas; but at the same time, I wanted to unite them by putting them next to each other. Even though their uniforms, skin color, religious beliefs, and cultural backgrounds are so different from each other, they share the same traumatic experiences as exploited children in war.

As a social practice artist, I believe that I can bring awareness to this topic. 300,000 children are currently fighting wars or are involved in conflicts they did not start. More than 2 million children over the last ten years have died in these wars. It is a problem that has been going on for longer than we know of. This problem is robbing innocent childhoods and families and, worse, forcing them into a horrific experience that will change who they are forever.

The words “child” and “soldier” should not be written next to each other.

Anouk

Child Not Soldier

Anouk



I actively follow Human Rights violations and especially Children's Rights violation throughout the world. I became interested in this topic about a year ago when I took a Human Rights course at my school. I loved every single second at that class. My school has a sister-school in Mae Sot, Thailand, which takes in refugees escaping the war in Burma. They are all mostly just children who had to run from the soldiers with their families, but there are cases of former child soldiers in the school too. As the class progressed, I realized how many conflicts around the world are putting children in danger. As we watched movies and documentaries I knew that not enough was being done for those children; I was shocked that some countries in the world were violating all 30 articles in the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights.

Later in the year, an artist named *Maung Maung Tin*, living in Mae Sot, but originally born and raised in Burma, came to visit our school to give a speech and presented a new film that was being released about him and his journey fighting for his country.

Hearing his stories and other people's stories in person moved me to tears. I could not begin to understand how people were treated this way and forced to leave everything in their country to walk across the border to get to a "fairly" safer place. When this man talked to the class, we could see how important it was for him to let us know what is happening out there. He knew that spreading the word was the first step on taking action. At the beginning of my research I only knew about the Burmese conflicts, but now I see that these violations are taking place all over the world, and these violations are what contribute to child abuse and child soldiers.

All the books and movies I have read and watched that have real stories and interviews with these children are what made me become more interested in the topic, I wanted to find out more about the cruelty that is being done in these countries without the rest of the world noticing. I know that I can do something in the future when I get the chance to travel to these countries and volunteer in orphanages and schools that take care of former child soldiers and children that have no family. With actions as little as teaching them English, people can change the future of these children. They are very hurt and we can do so much about it. I think it all started with the image of a child with a gun. I thought to myself, "How can the word child and the word soldier have a meaning when being put next to each other? How is it possible for that to make sense? When I *Googled* it, I was not very surprised by the outcome of my search was. I already knew about abductions, I knew about rape and sex slaves, I knew about war and the armed forces, so the only thing left to add to that depressing equation was the children. I began with four main questions: *What are the conditions in the countries that create child soldiers? Why are children the easiest target to get? What are the differences between girl and boys in this field? Why do I care about this?*

I felt like this was not being talked about. How can people not know about a topic in which its two main words are, *Child* and *Soldier*? We are talking about guns, wars, murders, sex slaves, mutilations, and in the majority of cases, lifetimes of rehabilitation. And all this for boys and girls that can be as young as eight and as old as 18.

I think this issue is way more complicated than it seems. When I start finding answers about one of these questions, it connects to some other topic that is much more complicated and further away from the key component. I start looking at Poverty and that took me to Climate Change, then to Population, then to the role of Western Civilizations, then to Wage Slavery, and it keeps going. A wave of these horrible topics slides through my computer screen. A child shouldn't fight an adult's war.

It is heartbreaking to read the stories of former child soldiers and former sex slaves in these countries and it is impossible to even start to realize how much pain they have been

through at such a young age, and all of this because those countries are in the worst conditions and children are the easiest target to get.

Poverty and war are the two of the leading causes for the recruitment of child soldiers in countries like Burma, Colombia, Iraq, and Uganda. “The difficulties in implementing them are due to the fact that, in most cases, child soldiers are present in the context of failed states, of internal conflicts, non-state actors, paramilitary organizations, organized crime, minorities and vulnerable groups, and/or mobile or displaced populations,” according to a Refugee Survey conducted by the Oxford Journals. After comparing the four leading countries in the world on child soldier abuse, I found out that civil wars and government conflicts are a huge influence on the creation of militia, rebel and independent groups. One country can have up to 30 different military and rebel groups recruiting children. In a country like Colombia, a study (*Como Corderos Entre Lobos*) showed that 81% of the former and current child soldiers they interviewed claimed that their recruitment to the rebel groups was voluntary. 18% claimed to have been forced into it.



The Goldin Institute curated the map pictured above. All the countries affected by this issue are the countries with the most natural resources and the most history of imperialism and colonialism. Those countries are most likely to be under the influence of a corrupt government and conflicts between native tribes.

Child soldiers are also the result of a lack of people in the army and the rebel groups. What I personally think are the causes for child soldiers in Burma, Colombia, Iraq, and Uganda (and many other countries) is their economic status, their political situation and their status as the racial minority. A country with a broken political system is most likely going to severely affect its economic system, and when this happens terrorist and rebel groups start forming. These groups are against the government and want a change, and since the government is so corrupt, the only way they see the change happening is by starting a war and doing harm. When these rebel groups need to recruit soldiers they go for children; they are vulnerable and cheap and that makes them the perfect fit for the armed groups.

The definition the UN has for Child Soldiers is: *A child associated with an armed force or armed group refers to any person below 18 years of age who is, or who has been, recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children,*

boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. The age group of most recruited children in a country like Colombia is 12 to 15 years old. In Burma the majority of the children are 14 to 16 years old and in Uganda the range is 10 to 18 years old and the Syrian war has recruited younger children, some as young as seven. More than half of children recruited in cases verified by UNICEF in 2015 were under 15.

After reading this definition by the United Nations, I thought; Are the children that volunteer to serve these forced groups also considered child soldiers? "Children report being actively encouraged to join the war by parties to the conflict offering gifts and 'salaries' of up to \$400 a month," John Davidson said in an article about Syrian refugees. In most countries the children are recruited by telling them they will get money for it, telling them they will go to jail if they don't join, telling them they will get killed or just simply by abductions and forced recruitment. But there are also so many children that leave their houses and *voluntarily* decide to join those groups. The vast majorities of these children come from extremely poor families and suffer from some level of malnutrition. To the ones that had the opportunity to go to school, they had to leave the education they were given there due to migration problems or their families needing them to contribute economically to the household.

Indigenous children in countries like Colombia are 674 times more likely to be affected by the war or to be recruited by an army group. And apart from that: "There are an estimated 250,000 child soldiers in the world today. It is estimated that 40% of all child soldiers are girls." is the data the organization called War Child gathered. In the wars happening in Burma, 4 out of 10 soldiers are girls.

"People would think these girls are only kept as sex slaves and spies or cooks." Dr. Miryam Denov of McGill University writes that in certain war-torn regions of Africa, girls are particularly valued because "they are perceived as highly obedient and easily manipulated, they can swell the ranks if there is a shortage of adults, and ensure a constant pool of forced and compliant labor." In other circumstances, young girls hope armed groups will provide protection from poverty, sexual abuse, forced marriages, and state or rebel-inflicted violence.

Now that I can see all the facts and numbers written down in this paper I can feel like I have accomplished something, to spread awareness about this problem. It is sad to know that there are millions of problems out there that need to be heard and there might not be enough of us to talk about them or even know about them, but I feel very happy to have done my final project on a topic that inspires me so much and makes me want to learn more and more about it. I will continue doing work for this cause and many others as long as I am able to, voices around the globe need to be heard and they deserve the chance to speak up about their experiences so that the world can learn and make a change. We just need to start speaking up. I hope to spread the voices of the 300,000 child soldiers that lose their childhoods to armed groups.

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