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Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Recruitment of Children into Non-state Violent Armed Groups

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Abstract: Based on in-depth interviews with former child soldiers in Colombia, this article presents the findings from fieldwork conducted among demobilized child soldiers in Colombia. The findings add to the state of knowledge by going in-depth into the circumstances surrounding the processes and mechanisms of recruitment of children and adolescents into armed groups. The former child soldiers had generally joined the armed groups voluntarily. However; one of the challenges with a strong division between ‘voluntary’ and ‘coerced’ recruitment, is that it indicates a sharp dichotomy between two very different situations. This article argues that most cases of recruitment takes place in the grey zone between voluntary and coerced recruitment. However, the demobilization policies work under the assumption that even when the children classify themselves as voluntarily recruited it is considered force due to children’s inability to make a free or conscious choice. This indicates that demobilization programs are based on an assumption that is incorrect. The former child soldiers, both girls and boys, were affected by their involvement in the conflict. They did not, however, constitute a homogeneous group of passive victims, but rather a group of vital agents each one with their choices shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances.

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Introduction

The recruitment of children into non-state violent armed groups has traditionally been divided into two types: the children who are forced into the armed groups and the children who join voluntarily. Normally children's recruitment into non-state armed groups has been viewed as a result of poverty, family violence and lack of education (Brett and Specht 2004, Brett 2003, Wessels 2006, Schmidt 2007, Burgess 2009). The children are therefore described as passive victims of actions conducted by adults, and this is raising the issue of how child recruitment into non-state armed groups should be understood. One of the challenges with a strong division between 'voluntary' and 'coerced' recruitment is that it indicates a sharp dichotomy between two very different situations. In reality, most cases of recruitment take place in the gray zone between voluntary and forced recruitment, and the children make their choice based on the information available at the time of recruitment. Honwana (2006:4) argues that children affected by conflict, both girls and boys, do not constitute a homogeneous group of helpless victims but exercise choices that are shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances. Even when they make choices under a certain degree of coercion and from a position of weakness, which is not uncommon in most societies, they are still able to make choices. In situations where people find themselves exposed to extreme situations, they still find the ability to contest and to negotiate within the social and emotional sources they have available and are therefore able to cope with the most dreadful circumstances (de Smedt, 1998). It does not mean that they have an unlimited range of options they can choose from, but they are capable of acting within certain constraints and seize the opportunities that are available to them (Honwana, 2005; Honwana, 2006; Honwana, 2009). We should keep in mind that a fully informed choice is rarely an option in any real situation. Children therefore make a range of choices based on the limited information available to them before they are recruited into armed groups. However, this does not indicate that they have the capacity to understand all the consequences of becoming a child soldier or the ability to interpret all the information available to them.

In this paper I will therefore examine the recruitment of child soldiers into non-state armed groups in Colombia by investigating the complex and more nuanced mechanisms of recruitment in the

gray zone between voluntary and forced recruitment ². Whereas the phenomenon of child soldiers is well debated in the African context, the topic is subject to less attention in Colombia. Rather than assuming that they were recruited into rebel groups due to force, poverty or greed, this paper argues that the recruitment of child soldiers consists of degrees of voluntarism and degrees of coercion.

The Two Main Discourses on Children's Recruitment into Armed Groups

In the discourse on child soldiers, the recruitment of children into armed groups is explained both as a result of economic factors and as a socio-cultural phenomenon. The first is addressing the children's motivation for joining through pecuniary or non-pecuniary benefits or force. The pecuniary rewards consist of wages, opportunities to loot, and other tangible rewards such as alcohol and drugs. Non-pecuniary rewards are broken down into functional and solidary rewards with focus on the military as exciting and the comradeship that emerges within the groups. When force is involved, both non-pecuniary and economic incentives may be applied in order to keep the children within the group (Andvig and Gates, 2007).

From a socio-cultural academic perspective the phenomenon of child soldiers focuses on the relationship between cultural norms and practices both in peacetime and under the circumstances of war (Lee, 2009; Hart, 2005), meaning that socio-cultural aspects such as the position of child soldiers in the society, childhood and the children's own perception of war are factors behind their decision to join armed groups. It can be a way of acting out their responsibility by contributing to the society, as a 'rite de passage', or as an opportunity for upward social mobility from one position to another.

The two academic positions are somewhat different from the position of the majority of the humanitarian organizations. The organizations are addressing the phenomenon as a result of children's lack of social and political agency based on the fact that children are vulnerable³, and they consider recruitment of child soldiers as a barbaric violation against human rights. The children are therefore generally viewed as passive victims without the ability to voluntarily recruit themselves into armed groups (Lee, 2009). A survey among former child soldiers in Colombia indicated that as many as 80 percent had voluntarily enlisted themselves into the armed groups (UNICEF, 2005). However, the

² The definition of child soldiers used in this study is "...any child – boy or girl – under the age of 18 who is compulsory, forcibly, voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units or other armed groups. Child soldiers are used for sexual services, as insurgents, as force 'wives', messengers, porters or cooks" (Machel, 2000). In this paper child soldiers is referring to children who have been recruited into non-state armed groups.

³ Humanitarian organizations in general view vulnerability in terms of a person who lacks moral, physical and mental competence, and they therefore view all children as victims.

demobilization policies work under the assumption that even when the children classify themselves as voluntarily recruited, it is considered force due to the children's inability to make a free or conscious choice. This paper therefore argue that demobilization programs in Colombia are based on an assumption that is incorrect.

Studies of Child Soldiers in Colombia

Two main studies have addressed the issue of recruitment of child soldiers in Colombia. Brett (2003) conducted a study for the Human Rights Watch (HRW) among former child soldiers and reports that the majority of children in Colombia were voluntarily recruited into irregular armed forces, although there is some evidence that forcible recruitment has also taken place. The report is the first comprehensive account of children in the guerilla and in paramilitary groups in Colombia. The recruitment of child soldiers is described as an exploitation of the children's vulnerable situation with promises of money and a better future. According to Brett, most children join armed groups because they escape from domestic violence, poverty, desperation, lack of alternatives such as education or work, or because they are searching for increased status among their peers. Some children become soldiers because their families cannot afford to support them, or children recruit themselves as an escape from domestic violence and physical or sexual abuse. Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín (2007) conducted a paper on why minors join non-state armed organizations, based on the case of Colombia, where he debated the push and pull factors of child recruitment. He concluded that children are motivated to join by a range of factors, including proximity, vengeance, fear, family conflicts, coveting local power and visibility. The findings in this analysis support the results of the study conducted by Brett (2003) and Gutiérrez (2007), but it adds to the debate on child recruitment by going more in-depth into the degree of voluntary and coerced recruitment.

The following sections will explore case studies from fieldwork in Bogotá, Colombia, in order to further analyze the narratives of children who were recruited into armed groups and to investigate how they acted within their limited boundaries and given set of choices. Often there are a variety of acting partners involved in the process of recruiting a child into an illegal group. This study seeks to further understand the factors behind recruitment into the armed groups.

Demobilization Programs in Colombia

The Colombian government currently runs two separate demobilization programs for former child soldiers. Since 1999 The Colombian Family Welfare Institute (ICBF) has provided assistance to former child soldiers from all armed groups who have been captured by the army or have deserted and handed themselves in to the authorities. In addition, the Ministry of the Interior runs a Reinsertion Program to assist former soldiers from the guerilla groups, but this program is only for adult ex-insurgents (FARC

and UC-ELN). The ICBF program is divided into three stages. First, the children receive medical attention, counseling and psychological support before they are moved to specialized care centers run by local NGO's that are contracted by ICBF (Brett, 2003). During this period ICBF tries to establish contact with the families of the former child soldiers. In the third stage of the program the children either reunite with their families or relatives, live together with other former child soldiers under supervision of a mentor, or continue the support through The Juvenile Referral Centers (CROJ). When they are 18 years old they are free to leave the program.

In 2006 the Childhood and Adolescent Code was modified, which allowed ICBF to provide services for demobilized children after they had turned 18. CROJ are located in the main urban centers of the country. They provide support when the former child soldiers leave ICBF's DDR program after the age of 18. The main function of CROJ is to monitor and guide the social insertion of the young people in the transition phase from the DDR program to their independent lives. The centers also coordinate the work between the two guiding institutions (ICBF and the Interiors Ministry's Program for Reincorporation into civilian life) in the area of assistance to demobilized young people.

3700 children left the armed groups and joined DDR programs in the period from 1999 to 2008. 80 percent of these children handed themselves in to the authorities, and the remaining children were recovered from the armed groups by local authorities. More than half of these children came from FARC (54 percent), 28 percent from AUC, 14 percent from UC-ELN and the remaining four percent were from other groups (Carballo, 2009).

The Conflict in Colombia

Colombia became independent in 1821. It is a country with extremely high inequality; while the richest 10% earn 46.1% of the country's income, 49.2% live below the poverty line (Human Development Index, 2009). Colombia has a long history of conflict and violence. During the first half of the 20th century, which was dominated by confrontations between the Liberals and the Conservatives, there were many different stages. The peak was reached in the civil conflict that is known as *La Violencia* (roughly from 1948-1958). Since the end of the 1990s the main actors of the conflict have been the rebel forces The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), The National Liberation Army (UC-ELN⁴), and the paramilitary group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC). Some of the

⁴ Historically there have been other subversive groups as the M-19, the EPL and the Quintín Lame, among others, but they have disappeared either by military defeat or because they engaged in peace negotiations leading to their demobilization.

crudest by-products of this conflict have been the selective killings and massacres involving the civilian population and the 2.5 million people who have been displaced (Ibáñez and Moya, 2009).

Both the guerilla and the paramilitary groups are involved in the production and sale of narcotics, mainly cocaine. However, the ways in which the finances are distributed within the two groups vary, and they have different acts of violence. There are different organizational mechanisms that drive the FARC and the paramilitary. The FARC, and to a large degree the UC-ELN, are like armies and enforce strong discipline within their fighting units. The majority of the guerilla groups consist of peasants, female insurgents and younger people, and their insurgents are in general poorly educated. FARC is characterized by verticalism with a clear line of command, and any act of disobedience may be punished with death. The paramilitary groups have a more flexible internal scale of punishment. They are more like a 'cadre army' and led by members of the legal or illegal economic elites. While the FARC is an oppositional group, the paramilitary has strong links to the state and are considered more pro-governmental (Gutiérrez, 2008).

President Pastrana's (1998 - 2002) attempt to negotiate with FARC failed in 2002 (Azcarate, 2003), and Álvaro Uribe Vélez took over the presidency in 2002. He started negotiations between the government and the paramilitary and subsequently 30,000 members of the paramilitary demobilized from 2002 - 2008. The government claims this as a success, but in the aftermath of the paramilitary demobilization the level of success has been debated. Human Rights Watch has reported that new groups have been developed to continue the criminal operations that the AUC leaderships previously were in charge of. The successor groups recruit members among young people and former paramilitary insurgents. They frequently target civilians and perform many of the former AUC activities, including massacres, killings and rapes (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The demobilization process of the paramilitary is an example. The paramilitary groups partially demobilized, but many of the leaders, mid-rank officers and their squads remobilized. The government attempted to disguise the partial failure of the process by renaming the groups "emerging bands" or "black eagles", arguing that these are not paramilitary despite the fact that they are formed by many former paramilitary members. Even if some of the former paramilitary groups still aim to fight the non-government rebels, most of them were formed as private armies working for drug lords to control the production and distribution areas. They were usually fighting against the guerilla (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Methodology and Fieldwork Organization

In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven former child soldiers in Bogotá, Colombia. The duration of the interviews depended on the availability of the informant, but average time was two hours per interview. Two of the respondents were re-interviewed, enabling a more in depth analysis of

their stories. The main focus of the interviews was the way in which they were recruited into the armed forces, but military vs. civilian life was also discussed. This research was conducted with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Colombia, which provided contact with the demobilized children.

When analyzing former child soldiers, certain limitations should be kept in mind. The response from the children who have participated in the DDR program is likely to be influenced by the training they have received in the aftermath of their time in the illegal armed groups. As pointed out by Gutierrez (2008:20), the children's motivations for joining the armed forces are extremely difficult to pin down and understand. The interpretations of the motives have both political and judicial value, which can lead the former child soldiers to alter the 'real' reason for their recruitment. It is important to be aware of the fact that only child soldiers who have left the armed groups can tell their stories. Three groups of informants have not been interviewed: the children who did not survive the struggle, the children who deserted without going through the DDR program and the children who are still fighting. Their story may or may not be different. We simply do not know.

The following sections will present the findings from the study.

Recruitment into Non-State Armed Groups

The majority of child soldiers come from rural villages, which is not surprising, as most of the conflict activities have taken place in rural areas. The informants' own perception was that children from rural areas were more fit for life in the jungle than children from urban places. Their previous exposure to hard work in the farms had prepared them for life in the jungle; they were more immune to diseases and were physically more fit than children from urban areas. Some of the children had been hunting with their fathers from an early age and were accustomed to the use of rifles.

Both the guerilla and the paramilitary groups have been recruiting child soldiers in rural areas. However, the recruitment methods were different in the urban and rural areas. From an analytical point of view the children in the rural villages had fewer opportunities for upward social mobility than children in urban areas and were therefore more attracted to life in the armed groups. However, marginalized young people in the urban areas were also targets for recruitment by the paramilitary groups and the guerilla groups.

Voluntary vs. Forced

The majority of the children in this study reported that they voluntarily joined the armed groups. Only a few of them were forced to join. However, if the alternative is no work and no money, the prospect of joining an armed group may seem like a better and more attractive option for some young people. As pointed out in the introduction, poverty and marginalization affect the children's choices as they move from being a child to becoming a child soldier. The children's decisions to join the armed groups were based on their individual background and received information. A common trait among the children who were recruited voluntarily is that they were not able to fully foresee or understand the long-term consequences of being a child soldier. The children made decisions based on the available information at the time of recruitment. However, as the following case studies illustrate, the children made a range of choices in the process of recruitment.

Voluntarily Forced

'Voluntarily forced' recruitment refers to the group of children who had few options or choices in the recruitment process. However, based on the decisions they made prior to the recruitment, their final decision to enlist with the army was based on a set of voluntary choices. Nevertheless, in the twilight zone between voluntary and coerced recruitment they are closer to coerced recruitment. As a consequence, I have chosen to address this as 'voluntarily forced' recruitment.

Hugo was 12 years old when he joined FARC. He explained that he was forced into joining when he attended a party arranged by FARC in the rural part of the village. They were serving alcohol, and Hugo got drunk. The following morning he woke up to the 'status' as a child soldier. He was told by the guerilla that he had recruited himself into FARC the previous night. He felt that he was not in a position to withdraw from the armed group.

Hugo's background may explain why he became a child soldier. He was a normal boy who lived with his grandparents. He went to school and worked part-time on the farm. Although he grew up in a village with a low level of conflicts, he knew about FARC's activities. He knew that they killed innocent people and that children were enlisted as soldiers. He did not get on with his uncle who lived with his family, and he looked for an opportunity to be 'his own boss'. To the children the insurgents represented a life of freedom and mobility, and the party FARC arranged was a symbol of this lifestyle.

Hugo's reason for going to the party was not necessarily to recruit himself into FARC, but he was attracted to the image of the freedom. Hugo seized the opportunity to get to know the insurgents despite the warnings from his grandparents. He did not choose to enter into the group, as the recruitment took place when he was drunk and unable to understand the consequences of his own actions. However, his

recruitment was a consequence of the choice he made by going to the party. He put himself in a position where he was at risk of being recruited based on limited information. He was 'voluntarily forced' to join FARC.

In some villages where the guerilla or/and the paramilitary were in control, 'voluntarily forced' recruitment was evident. The families were expected to send their sons into combat and the children were told that it was their duty as citizens to protect their local areas. Benjamin was 13 years old when he started preparing for a life as a child soldier with FARC; *"At first they tried to persuade us and lead us into joining, but when we did not join they started recruiting us. They told us to go to certain meetings and to the training because we needed to protect our area and we all needed to be ready to fight. That's how they started, and in the end they brought us to the group. We had to go to certain meetings and to the training because they needed to protect that area and we all needed to be ready to fight. [...] You know that if you live there your sons will be permanently recruited into the group. That's how things were, and you could not do anything about it"*.

The pressure on the families would vary from village to village, depending on the stronghold of the group. In particular, FARC used this method to recruit children and allowed them to live at home during the training period. This period could last up to two years, and then the children were permanently moved into the armed group. The children were voluntarily forced as they felt obliged to join and feared the consequences of rejection. However, the child soldiers who grew up under such circumstances had a sense of fighting for a cause. They were able to protect their families; they fought for their rights and during the training period they were influenced by the ideology taught by the guerilla or paramilitary forces. They were trained to become child soldiers from an early age.

Proximity to the Conflict

Close proximity to non-state armed groups made it possible for the children to establish networks with the insurgents. The demobilization programs recognized this to be one of the main problems in areas where the armed groups were dominant. Close contact with the armed groups gave opportunities for recruitment, but it also enabled the children to take more informed choices as they entered into the groups. Many children had established close friendships with the insurgents and knew about life within the armed groups. The insurgents' frequent visits to the farms and their presence at the schools increased the children's knowledge about the militias. However, it is debatable whether the information the insurgents shared with the potential recruits were true or not. Pedro said: *"...you get used to see a lot of armed groups - The FARC, the Paramilitary, the ELN... You kind of grow up seeing that"*. He grew up in a village that was controlled by the FARC and the paramilitary AUC; *"...well, the town was*

in between, but it had more influence from the paramilitary. For example, the business owners had to give money both to the guerilla and the paramilitary, if not they would get killed. You could find more influence from the paramilitary inside the town because it was harder for the guerilla to come inside, and people who lived in the slopes or in the mountains supported the guerilla and the ones in the valley supported the paramilitary. That was normal [...] If you did business near the mountains you had to pay the guerilla, and if you did it in town in the valley you had to pay the paramilitary. [...] Most of all I was scared of the paramilitary because at that time they were killing with chainsaws”.

Initially Pedro did not want to join any of the groups as he had a good job and sufficient income, but due to the nature of his work as a mechanic he performed services for both groups. Due to his friendship with paramilitary insurgents, FARC accused him of being an informant for the paramilitary and threatened to kill him. His boss fired him because of fear for FARC, and Pedro feared for his own life. As a response to the threats Pedro decided to join the paramilitary in order to protect himself from a potential revenge attack from the guerilla. He was scared of the paramilitary methods, but still he chose to join them for his own protection. He had other alternatives than joining the paramilitary; He had the opportunity to stay with his strict grandmother who lived outside the village, but he chose not to. He knew the main differences between the guerilla and the paramilitary and made a strategic choice when he joined the paramilitary. He knew how they were fighting, and he knew the risks of being a child soldier. However, he assumed that being a child soldier would be less dangerous than being threatened by the FARC.

Was Pedro’s recruitment voluntary or forced? His choice was a response to the immediate conditions the conflict had created both in his community and his life situation. However, he made a choice to voluntarily join the paramilitary after considering all options. His initial motivation was not the economic benefits he would receive in the paramilitary. He needed protection. This is similar to a study in Liberia where the majority of the ex-insurgents listed security as one of the main reasons for joining non-state armed groups (Bøås and Hatløy, 2008). Pedro’s story illustrates how voluntary recruitment is driven by fear and the need for security, and how he moved from what he felt was an unsafe position into a dangerous one that offered him the illusion of security. However, he decided to become a child soldier because it enabled him to better control the risk factors; He was part of a fellowship and was equipped with weapons to defend himself. His story is not only a story of suffering and hardship, but also one that reveals the search for personal protection and economic benefits. He was not forced to join the paramilitary or to stay in the group, but nevertheless chose to and advanced

to higher ranks and greater responsibilities. He did not attempt to leave the paramilitary; He joined the DDR program only because he was caught by the army and sent to Bogotá.

The Twilight Zone between Fear and Respect

People living in conflict areas were in close contact with the guerilla and the paramilitary, as described above. The children did not necessarily fear for their own safety as the armed groups acted as a protecting force within the communities they were in control of. After fighting near a village, FARC would visit the local schools and escort the children back to their homes in order to keep them safe. On other occasions the guerilla or the paramilitary would arrange celebrations and festivals that increased their popularity. This does not mean that children in the rural areas glorified the presence of the guerilla and the paramilitary, but it was a part of their 'normal' life when they grew up. This ambiguous relationship with the guerilla and the paramilitary is well described by Sarah: *"Well, when they [FARC] first arrived [in town] I was really scared because we are used to the army or the police, and when they got there they killed some people because of suspicions. They started doing what they call social cleansing; killing drug addicts and homeless people or punishing those that killed animals or damaged trees. They told us they were protecting 'mother nature', but one has to acknowledge things as they are and after the guerrilla arrived, the town did change a lot. It was for the better in some ways as it was safer and you didn't have to worry about your things. So it had some sort of positive effect. And as long as you didn't mess with them it was alright, but you did feel fear"*.

It was in the twilight zone between respect and fear that many of the children joined the armed groups. Their development as people was defined, to a large extent, by their close contact with the conflict. In addition, the insurgents were role models for the children. Pedro described life in the country like this: *"[...] At eleven years old you start to work every month, so it is pretty common to be working when you are eleven or twelve because you start working at the farms. For example, if you cannot find any work in town or you go to the farms and work, milking cows, herding, carrying water, they do not pay you that well, but they give you food and a place to stay"*.

Children who are bored with their lives may be more interested in joining the armed groups. If they stay at home their options are few and not very encouraging. Life as a child soldier is portrayed as more exciting with the opportunity to achieve a higher (and, to some, more respected) position within the society.

Network between the Children and the Insurgents

The non-state armed groups actively used the farms for lodging and food. The families who were approached by the insurgents did not necessarily host them out of willingness, but they knew that the

consequences would be severe if they refused to host them. However, in most cases the insurgents would do little harm and move on after a few days. These visits to the farms enabled the children to have personal contact with the insurgents and learn about life in the armed groups.

Alejandro grew up with a father who did not want to cooperate with the guerilla. He tried to protect his children from recruitment by selling their farm and moving from Caquetá to Manizales - an area where the conflict was less intense. This protective measure could have been effective, but Alejandro's older sister rebelled against their father and joined the guerilla when Alejandro was very young. She had fallen in love with an insurgent. She was a role model for her brother as she had left home and followed her dreams and left home. When Alejandro was twelve years old the guerilla visited his school in order to recruit new child soldiers, and Alejandro decided to join them. He knew that he had to leave his family, and he was well aware of FARC's activities as he knew about the conflict between his father and the guerilla. He was motivated by other factors; Instead of the hardship on the farm, he searched for new opportunities as a child soldier. However, the high expectations for life as a child soldier were not fulfilled when he joined the group; *"Childhood and toys ended when I joined. My only toy was my rifle [...] ...because you suffer a lot from mistreatment and hunger"*.

The majority of the children who were interviewed told similar stories. They voluntarily left their homes in order to get access to weapon and power, but found themselves caught in a misery once they were enrolled. Understanding the reality of their new situation is not possible before they are enlisted in the group. Nevertheless, the children's decision to volunteer was based on the available information and they left their home environment in search of new opportunities. As soon as they enrolled as child soldiers they were not able to leave. Hard discipline and threats of punishment and execution were the consequences of disobedience. The children had to find new coping strategies in order to survive in extreme circumstances. However, as discussed previously, this does not relate to all child soldiers due to the fact that the children who did not survive cannot tell their stories. The children who were interviewed told stories about execution of child soldiers who did not perform well, who complained too much or rebelled too much against the commander. To be a good fighter is a prerequisite for survival for every insurgent and child soldier, regardless of age.

Voluntarily Recruited

Anna grew up in a village with the presence of the paramilitary, the guerilla, the army and the police. She had experienced the conflict close to her home. Fourteen years old she visited a relative's farms during the summer and established personal contact with the insurgents from UC-ELN. Her uncle had warned her against talking with them and asked her to use a false name, but she was curious about life in the insurgency and asked many questions. She felt stuck in her life and expressed that she wanted to

join them. They told her to consider it for 20 days before she made a decision. As her family had tried to prevent this from happening, she had other options. She was enrolled in the school and moved to her grandparents for protection. She needed to consider what she wanted to do. Five days later she called them and scheduled a time and place where they could pick her up. She packed a few necessary things and left the house without saying goodbye. Her only fear was that her grandparents would discover her plans and stop her.

Anna was looking for action, and life as a child soldier seemed like a chance to move away from her loneliness. To what degree a fourteen year old girl made this choice voluntarily is debatable. She had three other siblings who did not join the guerilla; they were married and had their own families. Anna was more attracted to the insurgency and followed her dream of becoming a child soldier. She did not know the long-term consequences of being a child soldier or the hardships she would experience in the fighting unit, but she knew about the activities of UC-ELN and was familiar with the fighting in the neighborhood. Her motivation to join was the search for excitement and a very different life. Relatives and grandparents were not able to stop her when she had decided to join the group. She acted upon the opportunity given to her. Although Anna experienced both challenges and hardship as a child soldier with UC-ELN she did not want to leave the group. She was ambitious and worked hard in order to achieve a good position within the commission, a small team of 12 - 15 people. There was a strong sense of comradeship in her group, and the commander of her commission protected her. Due to an ambush against her squad she was forced to flee and was caught by the army.

The majority of child soldiers are resourceful young people who use their skills both to be recruited as child soldiers and to adapt to the hardship of life in the insurgency. In situations where families were able to protect their children from recruiting themselves, the children could contest their parents' decision and run away.

Claudia grew up in a stable family. Her father provided for his family and took precautionary actions to prevent his children from joining an armed group; *"It [joining the armed group] was not my only option because my dad paid for my school, but I did not really like to study, so my dad was going to send me to my grandparents in Barranquilla when he found out that I wanted to leave. I did not want to move to my grandparents, so I said to myself: If I do not run away, my dad will send me to Barranquilla. So I left"*. The girl had fallen in love with an insurgent and wanted to stay with him instead of studying. After her enrollment into FARC her father arrived at the camp and tried to persuade her to come home, but she wanted to stay. She was allowed to think about it for 15 days, but she did not change her mind. Initially Claudia stayed in the group out of her own choice. One year later

she regretted her decision, and three and a half years later she made her first attempt to escape. *“Well, I did understand what I was getting into. You do not know what might happen later on, and you are not old enough to foresee the future or the possible outcomes because of the immature person you are at that age. But you do know what you are up against [...] Noone is compelled to go, you joined because you wanted to. Also, you have different perspectives on the group before you join than when you are on the inside. You start to see things as they really are”.*

The School as a Recruitment Arena

The guerilla and the paramilitary were actively recruiting in the schools. They trained young school children as recruiters and paid their school fees. The young recruiters were equipped with small arms in order to impress potential child soldiers who were fascinated by weapons. To the children, particularly the boys, guns were symbols of power. The children were fascinated by the insurgents' stories about life within the armed groups with easy access to weapons and the opportunity to fight for their rights.

Miguel was 11 years old when he officially joined the guerilla. During his first year he recruited 55 children into his unit before he started to work in the urban militia. He was still living with his mother when he recruited new children into FARC, and at the tender age of nine he started doing voluntary work for the insurgency. Rumors of his connection with the guerilla circulated in the village, and he enjoyed the feeling of being someone important in the community. He felt empowered when people would listen to him and fear him. His motives for joining were vengeance against the army who killed his uncle and a wish for power, but most of all he wanted to gain a position within FARC. He worked hard to fulfill his duties for the insurgency. His mother sent him to his grandmother for protection, but at this point the guerilla considered him valuable as a future insurgent. They tracked him down at his grandmother's house and brought him to the camp. He was involved with FARC at an early stage through a non-committed relationship, and as his engagement increased it was difficult to withdraw from the group. His initial engagement was voluntary, and he was actively participating in the processes that eventually led him to a position within the insurgency.

In rural areas it is a common feature that children as young as 5 or 6 are required to help their parents in their daily work, even if they go to school as well. In the case of rural Colombia it seems like school attendance in itself is not sufficient to prevent recruitment. In fact, children who attend school are interesting for the armed groups as they can read and understand the groups' ideology, and they are therefore better suited for becoming good child soldiers in warfare. While lack of education can exacerbate children's situation and lead them into armed groups, the school is a recruiting ground for any military force.

Ideology

All child soldiers were well trained in the insurgencies' ideology. The level of information on the ideology before recruitment varied, but the children who were interviewed were attracted to the idea of fighting for their rights, their country and their freedom. *"They told us they were fighting for an ideal; that they loved this country regardless of what everybody said outside of the military. They also told us that they have their house, and they spoke about Venezuela and the fact that education is free, and they wanted that for Colombia too. There should not be a division between poor or rich people; all of us should be the same"* (Hugo). As described in a number of cases above, many of the children felt marginalized and deprived of their rights, which is not uncommon in a conflict setting. Joining the insurgencies was an opportunity for upward mobility within the society and to receive social benefits. Alejandro described his thoughts on the ideology; *"What was reinstated time and time again is that we were fighting for the people, that we were fighting against the current government so that the power could be given back to the people. We were fighting against corruption"*. This was equally described by Anna; *"They said that the government is killing us, stealing from us and that we have to defend the people at any rate"*. As described above, the reasons why children were recruited into the armed groups were influenced by the ability for upward mobility within the society and to receive social benefits as a result of their involvement.

Pedro talked about his options as he perceived them before he joined the paramilitary: *"Well, the stories the guerrilla told about fighting for the people caught my attention a bit more, but I also knew that you would not be paid for being in the guerilla. If you were there with the objective of helping the people, like the leaders of the people, they didn't pay for it. But the paramilitary did. And things were different over there, they had certain luxuries in the paramilitary that they didn't have in the guerilla. Maybe I sided more with the guerilla because I believed in what they were saying, but for money and all that I sided with the paramilitary"*.

Among the paramilitary groups, the children seemed to be attracted to the life of the paramilitary insurgents because of the financial benefits they would receive and the power they would have, more than ideological reasons for joining. Hector described his position as a child soldiers as beneficial; *"I felt very powerful because people respect you, it is the law of what you say [...]. I may say: 'I do not like you. Get away from here if you do not want to have problems'. You just hold your gun and people run away immediately. If not, you kill them. In that part you feel very powerful because you are in command - you think that you are more important than the others. You also feel proud of being a military officer; you feel proud of the ideology of using the camouflage and the armament. You're not*

going to be disrespected, otherwise you can take your rifle and kill them, and the hierarchy has to be respected”.

Female Insurgents

Young females were recruited into the armed groups as support workers or regular child soldiers. According to Schwitalla and Dietrich (2006) women and girls have suffered sexual violence during their time in the illegal armed groups. There have been reported cases of gang rape as a form of punishment for females who disobeyed commanders. This topic will not be discussed here. The recruitment of girls into the insurgencies was similar to the recruitment of boys: There were circumstances and choices that led them to join an armed group. The following two case studies illustrate that some of the female child soldiers managed to use the recruitment to their advantage. Not all female soldiers were forced to join the armed group or have regretted their decision.

Sarah, 14, got pregnant, and the father of the child abandoned her and did not provide any support. *“I didn’t have any money and needed to feed and provide for my child. I heard that there were jobs in the revolutionary armed forces [FARC]. I wasn’t going to work in the battlefronts or anything like that, so I worked as an informant. I delivered documents without knowing the content. I did that for about two years. The lady who took care of my son spent more time with him than I did, so he called her grandma”.*

FARC provided Sarah with financial support. Her decision to join was not only a choice she made for herself, but also for her child. Sarah’s father had been abusive and her mother had moved to Bogotá. She joined the guerilla voluntarily, but she felt that her circumstances forced her to act; *“I felt like this was my only chance. When you are that young, there are not many opportunities, and basically I could not get any work because people respected my father, and when he decided to live with another woman he practically disowned me as his daughter and stopped caring about me. So the guerilla was my only option to get a job and receive the money that I needed”.*

She both feared and respected the guerilla’s presence in the village. Joining the armed group was a choice she made in order to protect her child. She was provided with a house to live in, a regular income and a nanny for her child. As long as she did not have to participate in combat, this was an arrangement that worked well for her. Later Sarah got a new boyfriend who was not a child soldier. She got pregnant again and escaped. She had to choose between having an abortion and leaving FARC, as the guerilla did not allow her to have a second child. This time she was able to find her way to Bogotá and was enrolled in the DDR program. She used the abortion as an excuse to move out of the village. Sarah could have escaped to Bogotá when she was pregnant with her first child, but it was more

convenient to stay and fewer risks involved when she worked for FARC. She remained in the armed group as long as she could accept the conditions, and she had the courage to desert when the circumstances made it too difficult for her to stay there.

Life as a Child Soldier

“Of course you are scared in the beginning. I cannot deny that, but once you start shooting, you gain more confidence.”

The recruitment into non-state armed groups is only the first step towards becoming a child soldier. The reasons for joining are different from the reasons for remaining in the groups. The hardship of life in the armed groups was evident in the stories of the former child soldiers in Colombia. However, once they were enrolled, the children made several choices every day in order to stay alive and cope with their situation in the armed groups: *“Those who could not handle the workout were executed, like if someone fractured his foot and complained about the pain, he was shot and left there. This made us understand the situation that we were in and the war that was being fought [...] Those who made mistakes like falling asleep when they were on guard, showed insubordination attitudes or tried to flee had no forgiveness and were executed [former paramilitary fighter].”*⁵

Once You Are In, You Cannot Leave

Joining the armed groups was a lifelong commitment. Initially this did not affect the children who had voluntarily recruited themselves, probably due to the excitement of becoming ‘someone’. The children had moved from a marginalized position in their home community to a new position as child soldiers with power to protect themselves. The uniform symbolized a new start, and they were given a new identity. Cook (1991) describes how important the training and ideological indoctrination is in order to make them good soldiers: Cutting off the emotional ties and learning how to target people as the enemy is crucial for the child if he/she will survive in the armed group. Indoctrination is the act of imbuing a child with the new worldview of a soldier (Singer, 2005: 70).

This section seeks to explain what coping strategies the children used in order to remain in the insurgency. In theory, once they were enrolled there was no way out except for death. The discipline was hard, but the children were not constantly supervised. If they wanted to desert, they could, but it involved great risks and - in worst case - death.

⁵ The act of punishment is not unusual in any armed military setting. Any soldier who desert will face court-martial, as this is a criminal action in the armed forces as well as in the armed groups.

There are a number of hypotheses on why the children choose to remain in the armed groups. It may be because they consider it a better position than the one they left behind and were motivated for upward mobility in the organization. It may be because the ideology and life as a child soldier is exciting to them. Some children stay because they do not believe they have anything to return to; they do not know if they will be welcomed if they return to their family and community. The last theory is that the children remain in the groups out of fear of being punished by the army if they are caught or if they return back to their home community. In the analysis of former child soldiers certain limitations should be kept in mind. One methodological challenge to be aware of is that only the survivors who have left the armed groups or have been captured can tell their story. In particular, three groups of informants have not been interviewed: the children who died on the battlefield, the children who deserted without going through the demobilization program and the children who are still fighting.

Trained for Life in Combat

The training period varied from one to eight months, depending on what unit the child soldiers were assigned to. They were given new identities as soon as they were enrolled in the group. The guerilla and the paramilitary slowly moved them away from their old lives, and the children in this study found a range of strategies for survival. Based on the testimonies of the former FARC child soldiers, the training and constant threats of severe punishment were meant to transform them into loyal and tough insurgents. This was necessary in order to defend themselves and to find their position within the insurgency. Hector had mixed feelings about life in the paramilitary: *“I would like to stay a bit longer, I had mixed feelings. One part of me really missed my niece, but I didn’t really care for the rest of my family. I wanted to stay because I was in the urban militia, I had to sell Coke, I had my gun, gasoline, and I had my two or three million pesos every day. In the end I was enjoying it a lot. I partied, I drank as much as I wanted to, everybody respected me and they even feared me”*. Nevertheless, the training prepared the children for life within the camps, and the transaction from life at home to life as a child soldier involved several choices for the children. Some of these choices are discussed below.

Upward Mobility within the Group

The children who performed properly in combat could enroll into different and more specialized training. By doing so, the risk of being killed was reduced due to less exposed warfare. They did not fight in the jungle without protection and they were valuable soldiers who were well protected by the commander. The training varied according to the group the soldiers belonged to, and the activities ranged from financial and political training to handling of explosives, special task forces (a type of elite forces) and handling of heavier machine guns. According to the respondents, in most cases the training

was voluntary and basic knowledge was necessary. However, several of the former child soldiers in this study used these opportunities to gain a better position within the insurgency. In the paramilitary groups, those who moved upwards by participating in the training received higher payments according to the level they achieved. However, before attending the special training, it was important to become a good soldier. This is not an unusual phenomenon in any military setting and not an exception among the children in Colombia.

An important survival strategy was to comply with the rules. Discipline was the core value of the group and the young soldiers soon learned the consequences of disobedience. Punishment could take form in a variety of ways, ranging from a minor reduction such as lack of food or benefits to harsh punishment with permanent consequences or execution. There were no general rules across the different units, and in each unit the commander and the war council made the decisions. Hugo attempted to escape from the guerilla and was caught by the urban militia who brought him back to his unit. He avoided execution because he was the stepbrother of the commander's girlfriend. Nevertheless, he was severely punished. He had to do hard physical labor for six or seven months, and the rifle and ammunition were taken away from him for a period of eight months. He had to regain the trust of the commander before he got the rifle back. The punishment clearly had a preventive effect on him and he did not attempt to desert again for the next three years – until he finally succeeded.

Among Friends?

Contrary to the common features of warfare (Siebold, 2007), distrust was evident among the insurgents, particularly in the guerilla groups. *“To trust someone is very difficult. Let's say you confide in someone and tell him/her about your life and your things, and you don't know if that person is a friend of the commander and will tell him everything. Trusting someone is basically looking for trouble [...]. There was an instance where one of the members of the group confided in another and told him that he was going to desert from the group, and his 'friend' told the commander. They did a war council and executed the member because he was going to desert”*. Brett (2003:6) supports this finding, as he explains that ‘most [child combatants] have little concept of what life as a combatant entails until it is too late to back out. In exchange for comradeship, food and protection, children are exposed to disease, physical exhaustion, injury, sudden death, and torture at the hands of the enemy’. In most cases the children had a social network within the groups, but they trusted very few of their fellow child soldiers.

Getting Out

Several of the informants had deserted from the army. Some of them had survived their first attempt to escape and succeeded the second time. Courage and motivation was necessary in order to escape. Few

of the children knew about the DDR program, and they were convinced that they would be killed or sent to a minor's prison if caught by the army.⁶

The children had different reasons for escaping from the armed groups. "Fear" did not seem to be the main motivation. The pull factors for deserting were mainly exhaustion, homesickness, fatigue, longing for a different life outside the camp and lack of commitment to the fighting unit. It was an extremely challenging task for the young soldiers to plan their outlet. First, it was risky, as they knew that they could be executed if caught. Second, it would be difficult to team up with other co-soldiers due to the lack of trust. One of the guerilla boys described how he and a fellow child soldier were responsible for transportation of money. If they decided to team up and escape, they would manage with the money they transported. However, the boy did not even dare to suggest such an action. If the other child soldier did not agree, he could go back and tell the commander to win his favor.

As discussed above, there may be a number of reasons why children leave the armed groups. However, not all former child soldiers wanted to leave the insurgency. They had established a good position within the insurgency and did not see the opportunities at home as a better alternative. Pedro, a child soldier in the paramilitary group, had established a good relationship with the commander and was given the responsibility as a tax collector in the village. His fellow insurgents respected him, and people in the village treated him with both fear and respect. To demobilize from his group would put him back and he did not want to return to the life that he left behind. Due to a military attack he was captured and removed from his group. He made every effort possible to reunite with his former paramilitary unit.

Conclusion

Brett (2003) argues that most children get involved in war because the war comes to them; that few actually seek such a position. When war is the normal situation, enlisting into armed groups may be tempting for some children as they see it as an opportunity for employment, an escape from their families or a chance to fulfill a heroic dream of becoming a child soldier. Brett may be correct in the fact that the war comes to the children. They do not choose to live in a conflict area. However, as described in this report, children still actively choose to participate in the war. Clearly, they do not

⁶ Children who were caught by the army were sent to minors prison. However, this arrangement was banned in 2006 and all children are directed straight to demobilization programs once they are captured by the army.

know all the consequences of becoming a child soldier, but based on the choice between staying in the village and seeking better opportunities in the armed group, the children make an active decision when they recruit themselves into the armed groups. The narratives in this report illustrate how the children wanted to move from a marginalized position at home to the opportunities that the non-state armed groups could offer. This shows how they were able to make choices based on the available information and acted upon it.

The different degrees of voluntary and forced recruitment discussed in this study challenges the debate on recruitment of child soldiers. Both preventive and demobilization programs should be influenced by work of a more ethnographic nature, as the ongoing programs are based on the assumption of only forced recruitment, which is not present. In a country like Colombia where the conflict is ongoing, it is important to recognize the children's ability to make choices that are shaped by their particular experiences in order to create successful reintegration programs. The children do not constitute a homogeneous group of passive victims, but rather one of vital agents - each one with their own choices shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances. The way in which the children are enrolled falls into a gray zone between voluntary and forced recruitment, with elements of forced circumstances and elements of voluntary actions.



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