

From Outrage to Action

Up In Arms Conference

Presentation by Kathy Vandergrift, Children and Armed Conflict Working Group

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Introduction

Let me start by expressing appreciation for the name you chose for this conference - "Up in Arms." It focuses on action as well as awareness. In keeping with that, I have titled my remarks, "From Outrage to Action." I hope to give you a quick overview of why we should be "up in arms" and what our current challenges are on the national and the international scene. In a workshop later today I will go into details on the status of the various components that make up the campaign to achieve protection for the security and rights of children threatened by armed conflict.

Let's begin by listening to the voices of young people:

"I was fifteen when I was abducted by rebels. I lived in captivity for almost three years. Three days after my abduction I was given to a soldier to be his fourth wife. He was quite old and was a bad man who was harsh and rude. Twice he beat me and I almost died. I had a baby girl. Despite this I was given a gun and sent to the war front to fight with my baby strapped to my back."

A former child soldier,

Uganda, 1998

"When I was killing, I felt like it wasn't me doing these things. I had to because the rebels threatened to kill me."

12 year-old boy from

Sierra Leone

Our concern is not just child soldiers. Other children are also affected by war.

Children are left homeless; millions wander in displaced person camps. Listen to one of these:

"We left our village when the bombs began falling. The bombs were like earthquakes that didn't stop. We spent many years building our house, and then, in one moment, it is destroyed."

17-year-old,

Azerbaijan

There is the loss of education – for this youth it has been six years:

“For six years my school has been a railroad car. It is difficult to learn. There is no glass in the windows. During winter I wear all my clothes. I don’t have any gloves, so it is terrible to write. After one or two lessons in the cold, the teachers usually let us leave.”

17 year old, Azerbaijan

Then there is the psychosocial impact:

“It is very difficult to live in war. You just wait for the moment you will die.”

12 year old in Bosnia

The stories are heart-rending. Each experience is different and we need to avoid generalizations. That is why we start by listening to the children in each case.

The trends, however, are worrying. And the facts are shocking. You have heard the statistics. I want to probe a bit deeper, asking a few ‘Why’ questions.

Why this concern now?

Youth have always been victims of wars. But something is different. Explore that a bit:

The causes of war run deep within social structures that are unjust, creating grievances and a desire for revenge. Greed is a major underlying factor in modern conflicts. I would like to highlight three things that contribute to the involvement of youth.

1. The nature of contemporary conflict

When village streets become battlefields, children become targets and participants as well as unintended victims. When warlords fight for control of land, resources, or power, it makes sense to terrify villages into submission and deliberately destroy the social fabric of society. If the goal is to destroy a people, raping women and girls becomes a weapon of war. In World War I, 90% of the victims were military; in contemporary conflicts, 90% of the victims are civilians, and one-third of them are children.

2. Easy access to cheap, small weapons

We have all seen the image of a small child holding an AK-47 or other light weapons. These are the weapons of choice in modern warfare. Children can learn to use them quickly and they make the use of children as soldiers more productive. In some countries, these weapons cost less than a chicken or a textbook.

3. Few choices for adolescents in impoverished countries.

Some youth are forced into battle through abduction. Others are sent by their families as a matter of honour. Some are forced to join armed groups in order to get food, because there are few alternatives for economic livelihood.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable when they are out of school, have few options, and may be socially marginalized. Street kids, children separated from their parents, youth who are socially marginalized, youth from extremely poor families – youth at risk in normal times are most at risk of being caught up in armed conflict. When they join an army, they have food, power, social status, and access to sexual partners.

If we want to prevent children from being involved in war, we have to address the root causes, as well as provide short-term protection and rehabilitation.

Why focus on children and youth?

Children are part of the larger civilian population affected by war. But they warrant special focus for the following reasons:

1. Boys and girls are affected differently by war because of their vulnerability and the fact that they are still in the formative stages of personal growth. What happens during childhood and adolescence shapes one's understanding of the world and future roles in society.
2. Children who grow up living in violence are more likely to turn to violence themselves as a method of problem-solving. Investing in the prevention of violence for children is an investment in human security for everyone.
3. Children represent the majority of civilians affected by armed conflict and the number is growing.
4. Failure to protect children calls into question the primary ethical values of civilization. Positively, focusing on protection for children can be a powerful way to break down barriers, restore community values, and contribute to peacebuilding.

As General Roméo D'Allaire has stated, using children in armed conflict should be as much a taboo as using chemical weapons or nuclear bombs. That is our goal.

That goal is bringing people together into an international movement, similar to the landmines campaign. This conference is an example of what is needed. In Montreal this weekend there is a group of people, similar to yourselves, focusing on the situation of girls in armed conflict. In Canada we come together in the Children and Armed Conflict Working Group, and I invite you to become active participants. Internationally there are two major coalitions, with sub-groups. These are the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers. More details on these groups will be provided later. You are part of a larger movement around the world – that's important to remember.

Why emphasize the rights of children?

This movement is based on the rights of children. Four reasons why this is important are:

1. It recognizes that children are actors, people with dignity, not just objects, to be used by others.
2. Focus on adolescents. The legal definition of children is everyone under 18. Often adolescents have been ignored – also in NGO programs – e.g. focus on primary education, through grade 4. When there are large populations of adolescents with few constructive alternatives, it can contribute to youth involvement in armed conflict. More attention to the rights of adolescents – creating space for them to contribute to society – can help to prevent their involvement in violence. We have learned that in Canada – the same is true in other countries.
2. A rights-based approach means listening to young people and allowing them to participate – according to age – in decisions that affect them, but also in peacebuilding. We are learning that children can be effective agents of change and contribute to building peace. In one project in Sri Lanka, for example, children, after learning about their rights, took action to mobilize the community and build a shelter for a child and family who had come from a conflict zone because it was that child's right to have shelter, even if he was a stranger in the village. This is the kind of action that builds peace and prevents conflict between peoples.
3. Respect for the rights of children puts them on the political and economic agenda, as well as the humanitarian agenda. Children were considered a community or humanitarian agency problem – let agencies like World Vision and Save the Children look after children's issues. Charities cannot do it alone. The impacts of political decisions on children need to be considered. Often they are invisible to decision-makers.

Let me give you an example: We have worked hard to put children on the agenda of the Security Council because the decisions it makes – or its failure to make decisions – have huge implications for children. We have had some success. Young people have addressed the Security Council – a recognition that they have a place in peace and security discussions. NGOs are making sure that children are considered in deliberations about specific conflicts, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola.

By working at all levels, from work with individual children to international advocacy, we can make a difference. Action on all levels is needed, to keep this a priority – for that we appreciate the interest of this group.

What have we achieved so far?

1. We are raising awareness.

There is more focus on the situation of youth in coverage of conflicts, from Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and northern Uganda.

2. We have put security on the children's agenda

The 1990 World Summit for Children did not address the protection of children and there were no commitments on this subject in the first international Action Plan for Children. At the 2001 UN General Assembly Special Session for Children young people themselves, with the support of the NGO community and friendly states, made sure that the situation of youth threatened by conflict was addressed. *A World Fit for Children* has strong commitments and in Canada we are working to translate those commitments into Canada's Action Plan for Children.

3. We have put children on the security agenda

Children are on the agenda of the Security Council and regional security agendas. We have four Security Council resolutions on children and armed conflict – each stronger than the last. There is another session on children coming up in January. This one faces the major challenge of moving from general statements and hortatory calls to taking specific action in specific situations. How it responds to the current challenge will signal whether the world is serious about all the commitments made to young people.

4. We have strong international commitments

We have the Convention on the Rights of the Child; A World Fit for Children; Four Security Council Resolutions. We succeeded in getting a new Optional Protocol to Stop the Use of Children in Armed Conflict, which addresses child soldiers. Geneva Conventions. The lack of law is not the problem. Implementation of the law is the challenge.

5. Implementation is the Challenge

During the workshops we will focus on implementation on a wide range of aspects of the problem. Let me just highlight a few now:

a. The right of access to humanitarian assistance

Most deaths of young people result from malnutrition and preventable diseases – causes that could be prevented in many cases if the right of children to receive assistance were implemented. The trend is the opposite. Humanitarian assistance is often manipulated as a factor of war. Denial of food aid and health care has become a weapon on war. The recent resolution calls on states to respect fully the relevant provisions of the four Geneva Conventions with respect to children.

All of us need to join forces to stop the erosion of the principles of protection of children during armed conflict. With the focus on Iraq, strong voices are needed not to forget about the armed conflicts elsewhere that are equally devastating for children. Children in Sudan, Angola, the Congo, Myanmar, need our solidarity – one of the fears they voice to us is that they are being forgotten.

b. Right to education

Some progress has been made in our campaign to include education in humanitarian assistance. A whole network has developed on “Education in Emergencies;” it shares materials for workers in remote locations and provides advice for front line staff.

Contemporary armed conflicts often continue for years; disruption of education harms children for a life-time. Often, as soon as war breaks out, the country is deemed ineligible for funding for education. That is changing. Creative ways are being found to provide non-formal education, even when it is not safe for children to gather in schools.

Example: Perhaps many of you saw the pictures of animals carrying emergency supplies into remote corners of Afghanistan. What is less known is that some of those bags included educational materials, especially for groups committed to the education of girls, who were not allowed into the schools.

Education, of course, can contribute to war as well as contribute to a culture of peace. A second focus has been on peace education. Young people are effective leaders in the movements to change curricula that perpetrate division, stereotypes, and hatred against others. In Bosnia, for example, in some cases children were being divided into separate ethnic groups for history class. Hardly the way to build a culture of peace.

c. Access to small arms

When purchasing an AK-47 costs less than purchasing a chicken, it is not surprising to find young people, who need to survive, armed with deadly weapons. Easy and cheap access to small arms contributes to the involvement of children in armed conflict. Stopping the sale of small arms is often named by young people themselves as one of the top priorities on their agenda. One group has adopted the slogan: No Small Arms for Small Arms.

This is an area where countries that supply arms, or harbour individuals involved in arms trading, could make a significant contribution for the children of the world. The resolution calls on states to take action to control the illicit trade of small arms to parties in armed conflict who do not respect international standards for protecting children.

This was to be the focus of the Security Council debate this year. The report is weak. We will not let it drop.

d. Role of commercial activities in conflict zones

This issue must be flagged because of its importance, although there is not time to delve into it. Some small progress is being made. The Conflict Diamonds campaign is one example. There are others areas for further work, such as oil, gas, coltan. This is an area where we as Canadians can make a significant contribution. We can no longer say the wars that hurt children are over there; in some cases Canadian companies are implicated in these conflicts. Polls show that the Canadian public wants to see the federal government take action to ensure that Canadian companies are not fuelling conflicts that harm children. We need a new law to do that. We are working on it. I note that the Security Council called for this aspect to be assessed in the next report. This agenda is stuck – more about it later.

e. Participation of young people in Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration

This is another big area, with progress and challenges. It is now widely accepted in principle that young men and young women need programs designed with and for them. The practice is very uneven. Best practices in this area are to be included in the next report to the Security Council. Hopefully that will focus attention on this aspect.

f. Girls in armed conflict

The impact of war on girls is different than on boys. That is now widely accepted in principle. What it means in practice is a field of learning and practice. A recent report on the situation in Sierra Leone suggests we still have a lot to learn, even when the need is acknowledged. The sign of hope is that we are learning.

g. Participation of children in peace processes

Again, the principle is acknowledged as an important one, particularly in those situations where young people are a significant part of the population. Their participation is essential for the sustainability of peace.

There is a big gap between principle and practice. Many of us here can cite success stories of children as peace-builders at the community level. That is an important foundation on which to build; the challenge is to bridge the gap between community-level reconciliation and peace-building and the macro-level negotiations that can determine the future for communities and young people.

One positive step is the assignment of child protection officers to peace-keeping forces, to focus attention on children and young people. Active participation of young people themselves throughout peace processes is one of the goals of the advocacy community.

This is an area of focus for the CAC Working Group – invite you to join in.

h. HIV/AIDS and children and armed conflict

More attention is being focused on practical strategies that can work in the unstable context of countries in conflict.

The resolution calls for implementation of HIV/AIDS education, and the provision of testing and counseling services for peacekeepers, police, and humanitarian personnel. One small step – a good step – toward meeting a big challenge.

i. Prevention

Addressing the causes of the conflicts that destroy children has always been an integral part of the agenda. It was the hope of many of us that focusing on children would motivate greater attention to conflict prevention. From the beginning child advocates have taken a broad approach, including such issues as alternative livelihoods and education for young people so they are less vulnerable to recruitment. And when we approach these subjects, we cannot avoid talking about the policies of the World Bank and the IMF, which have forced countries prone to conflict to cut the kind of initiatives that engage young people in constructive activity. The links seem clear to child advocates, but less clear and certainly less welcome in the halls of power.

I think it is fair to say that this has been the most difficult objective to advance. Perhaps it will gain new energy with the recent moves here to focus attention on a broad-based conflict prevention initiative.

Persistence in Canada

What do we need? I will address this at a national and international level.

National level

- At the national level, we need persistence. Canada has been a leader, but it is important to be persistent.

We are going into a foreign policy review. We will get a National Security Strategy. In reaction to 9/11, there are signs of a shift in priorities in Canada. This is where we can make a big difference. We need a vigorous public debate and we need to ensure that protection of the most vulnerable does not get lost in preoccupation with protecting our own borders.

Protection of civilians needs a strategy as well as norms. The CAC proposals call for mainstreaming protection for the security and rights of children through all of Canada's foreign policy and international development. Security is being mainstreamed, but not security for youth. In fact, the war against terrorism has made it convenient to label youth as terrorists and justify brutality and death.

International level

- The challenge is to get specific action in specific situations.

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Canadian Peacebuilding Coordinating Committee**

First it was said there was not enough information. The Watchlist is now compiling information on specific conflict situations, showing what is happening to children in Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo – one coming on Colombia. Now that we have shown what can be done, we need the establishment of a system that will investigate and take action on reported violations. This can become a technical debate.

I have another challenge for you. That is the question of what effective measures could be applied to those who systematically violate the rights of children. Iraq showed that general sanctions hurt children. The focus now is on targeted sanctions, such as travel bans, arms embargoes. We need more creative ideas for incentives and measures to hold people accountable for compliance or failures to protect the rights of children. So I encourage you, as you go through your workshops, to surface your ideas.

Together we can ensure that we keep making progress until we do see the day when abusing the rights of young people is as unacceptable as the use of chemical and nuclear weapons.

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