

"Child Soldiers" and International Efforts (III): @PKO

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In the previous article (No. 23), I focused on child soldiering from the initiative taken by the United Nations. In this article, I will take a special look at "girl soldiers" as an important part of the overall child soldier issue.

Girl Soldiers

When hearing the term "child soldier", many might have an image of a boy holding an AK-47. In reality, however, child soldiers are not only boys but often include girls (those under 18 years of age.)

In comparison with boy soldiers, girl counterparts may bear various roles. For instance, Maoist rebels in Nepal, who have since legalized and become a political party, included many girls. Since it was active in women's liberation and empowerment, basically these girls were trained as soldiers and engaged in the front line, similar to their male colleagues. Some even say that it was the only viable option for girls from socially vulnerable cohorts to take an active part under the strict cast society. In fact, one third its members are women or girls.

Reality of Girl Soldiers

The case in Nepal is, however, an exception. In Africa, where child soldiering is most serious,

the situation is significantly different. To begin with, plenty of children are forced or pushed to enlist or recruit and use as soldiers with the risk of being killed if they try to flee. In some cases, girl soldiers fight along with boy soldiers but, in many cases, they are "given" to commanders as if they were some sort of prize and used as a domestic worker; on top of that they often suffer sexual violence and are subject to sexual enslavement and forced marriage. Consequently, some girls unwillingly get pregnant and give birth to a child. Some Armed Groups deliberately kidnap girls in their early teens fulfill such a role.

Are "Girl Soldiers" Really "Soldiers"?

Looking into "roles", some may ask whether those girls can be called "soldiers". In fact, the International Criminal Court defines child soldiers narrowly. According to the Rome Statute of International Criminal Court (hereinafter referred to as Rome Statute) recognizes only those under 15 years of age who "participate actively in hostilities" as child soldiers.

On the other hand, looking into a general definition often used by UN documents, the Cape Town Principles were adopted by UNICEF in 1997. The definition of child soldier in this document means any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. **It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to "a child who is carrying or has carried arms"**(emphasis is mine).

Girl Soldiers and DDR -Role of Peacekeeping Operations

Whether to define "child soldiers" narrowly or broadly is not just a theoretical discussion; it has major real-life impact. Especially, after a peace agreement is concluded and the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) process is about to begin, if we are not careful, girls may not be included in the process nor their reintegration may be in trouble due to lack of understanding their special needs. Those girl children might not hold guns - making them ineligible for DDR in some cases - or they may be rejected by their own family

or community and have nowhere to go due to having their own children. Currently, most of the DDR process is led by the host government under partnership with Peacekeeping forces and civilian units as well as international organizations such as UNICEF. The deterrence that Peacekeeping Operations provides can create an environment for a smooth DDR process. Peacekeeping Operations need to take that into consideration and assist in broader and more inclusive DDR¹. There may be some cases in which girls are hesitant to show up to DDR because of their children. It may be expected that Peacekeeping Operations provide benefits of the DDR process to a more inclusive sense of "child soldiers" by providing flexibility to each situation with close cooperation among partners.

End Notes

¹ Support to DDR process by PKO is defined by each Mandate (Security Council Resolution.) In case of UNMISS in South Sudan, it is stipulated in Paragraph 3(c)(ii) of S/RES/1996(2001). It is emphasized that DDR should pay special attention to women and children.