

Received on: 16 June 2024

Revised on: 24 June 2024

Accepted on: 30 June 2024

**Examining the plight of children in the armed conflict in Manipur:
A review**

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ABSTRACT

Armed conflicts in Manipur are using children as soldiers, and the problem is slowly but discretely having an impact on the state's youth. Children in Manipur are known to be drawn to wield guns and join armed groups, many of which are organised along ethnic lines, owing to the culture of violence created by decades of strife. Owing to the dire levels of destitution or internal discord among diverse ethnic factions, numerous children opt to enlist in armed factions because of profound despair. Children who join armed groups have been denied access to education, frequently ejected from their homes, or torn apart from their families. Many individuals remain unaware of the severe consequences associated with the involvement of children in armed conflict. These children experience psychological trauma and are socialized with violence, creating significant barriers to their successful reintegration into society. The impact when they come back into civilian society is worth knowing. This study aims to understand the psychological status of child soldiers and the challenges faced by them in re-integrating into civilian life.

Keywords: Child Soldier, Psychological Effects, Violence, Socialization, Manipur

INTRODUCTION

One of the most egregious forms of child labour involves the inadvertent involvement of children in tasks that are unsuitable for their age, such as the recruitment of child soldiers in conflicts involving armed groups. In almost every major armed conflict around the world today, there are several children under the age of 18, some of whom are much younger.

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "*Child*" refers to any person less than 18 years of age. The 'Paris Principles 2007' quotes, "*A child associated with an armed force or*

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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, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (Asian Centre for Human Rights, 2013).

When it comes to conflicts, Manipur is not an exemption. Over the past fifty years, Manipur has been witnessing a variety of conflicts, encompassing ethnic tensions as well as clashes involving governmental and non-governmental entities. The region has been plagued by diverse forms of conflict for a considerable period. Besides prolonged armed struggles instigated by insurgent groups, conflicts also emerge from ethnic animosities among different factions residing within the state. Manipur is home to more than 30 militant organizations operating across its hills and valleys, sparking conflicts that have endured for a minimum of five decades in the North Eastern part of India, where the utilization of child soldiers is widespread. The issue of child soldiers in Manipur has not been a topic of discussion in societal discourse, contrasting with the attention given to other matters (Ningthoujam, 2008).

Manipur is not innocent as far as conflicts are concerned. In Manipur, over the last five decades, various forms of conflict have taken place ranging from ethnic conflicts to conflict between the state and the non-state actors. Different forms of conflicts have been ravaging the state for a long time. Besides the long-drawn armed conflicts induced by insurgency, there are also conflicts borne out of the ethnic feuds among various communities in the state.

In Manipur, there were 1251 cadres of different organisations who surrendered to various authorities between 2004 and 2014, and 270 (21.58%) of them were minors when they joined the armed outfit. Between 2009 and 2014, the Manipur Observation Homes identified 238 children as having legal issues. About 66 of all these (27.73%) were found to be child soldiers. According to the stated data, there are expected to be between 11,000 and 13,000 cadre members in Manipur's armed groups, meaning that 24.04 per cent of them are child soldiers. It is estimated that about 6.1% of the total child soldiers would be female (Laishram, 2017). The primary factor contributing to the escalation of child soldiers' participation in domestic conflicts is predominantly attributed to the prevailing conditions of poverty. The states located in the North East region of India are notably positioned at the bottom of the ranking scale in relation to both infrastructural and economic advancements, consequently leading to the recruitment of a significant portion of child soldiers from impoverished households (Sen, 2014). In Manipur, vague economic opportunities and the assurance that their parents would be cared for in exchange for their labour for the armed

group would entice child soldiers. In October 2012, the Extrajudicial Execution Victims Families' Association of Manipur and other NGOs filed a case with the Indian Supreme Court pointing out that between 1978 and 2012, security personnel in Manipur killed 1,528 civilians, including 98 children. However, thousands of cases were disregarded due to the insurgent groups' threats, another reason none of these persistent concerns were handled (Sen, 2014).

The ongoing conflict in Manipur has inflicted severe repercussions upon its children, encompassing displacement, exposure to violence, disrupted education, psychological distress, familial separation, and, alarmingly, coerced involvement in armed engagements prevalent within the state. A distressing number of children are compelled into frontline participation, undergoing militarization through arms training, thus exacerbating the gravity of their predicament.

In the past, numerous researches were conducted by scholars and academic communities. In this study, selected literature are critically analysed and categorised thematically to understand children who are exposed to these vulnerabilities. Thereafter, findings are synthesised to draw comprehensive perspectives on conflict and children with conflict by offering implications and recommendations.

Impact of armed conflict on children: experiences and psychological consequences

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as broadly encompassing *"an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled retentive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena"*(Caruth, 1991). Children ensnared in armed conflicts may suffer from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of witnessing atrocities and assaults on their loved ones. Long-term PTSD brought on by armed conflict can impair a person's mental growth which impacts their learning during their formal school years and consequently affects their future socio-economic status (Goswami, 2024). Survivors of trauma often face difficulties in trying to understand the reason for undergoing trauma and what has made them victims. But, children who are trauma survivor tends to develop self-blame behaviour. Despite their egocentric perspective on the world, individuals may attribute the trauma they have endured to their actions. Consequently, they may feel deserving of mistreatment and may internalize feelings of inherent negativity, shame, guilt, and self-blame, which can endure into adulthood. Nevertheless, the impact of trauma on survivors is profound and irreversible, forever altering their lives. The individual develops new beliefs and perceptions about the world. Some might develop positive outcomes by

adopting a sense of appreciation for themselves, while others might interpret a negative outcome by developing feelings of hopelessness, self-doubt and vulnerability throughout their life (Kaminer and Eagle, 2010). There is a profound change in the personality and worldview of the young adults involved in armed groups as they have experienced conflict at a very young age. Therefore, the undocumented and inexpressible traumatic experiences impact the development of the mental health of child soldiers (Dickson-Gómez, 2002). Analysing the aspects of the abducted and non-abducted child soldiers, the ones who are forced into combat have higher chances of suffering from mental health disorders. The development of mental and physical ill-health is highly influenced by chronic and traumatic stress. As child soldiers are exposed to combat and life-threatening events, it hampers their psychological condition to the extent that they face certain difficulties while reintegrating into civilian society (Kochanowski, 2021).

The accumulation of traumatic experiences significantly exacerbates the mental health stressors experienced by children in the web of armed conflicts. Moreover, a prevailing characteristic among them is the enduring sense of fear, persisting even in post-conflict scenarios. Even upon leaving the life of a child soldier, fear remains deeply entrenched in their psyche. The precarious nature of their circumstances exposes them to a multitude of fears, including the fear of losing loved ones, facing repercussions from their leaders, engaging in acts of cruelty, and being subjected to further attacks or threats.

Effects of social stigma and environmental factors on self-esteem

Child soldiers are raised in such environments which only contribute towards severe violence. The life of a child soldier changes naturally after being a part of the armed groups. There is an immense change in their personality as they experience and witness violence towards a larger extent. They are traumatised by the incidents that consist of inhumane acts and cruelties of the worst kind. All these exposures deprive them of the skills and behaviour for healthy development. They tend to face difficulties while reintegrating into civilian society as a fully functioning member due to a lack of socialization skills in society. It becomes difficult for them to get along with the civilians as they lack self-confidence and possess low self-esteem.

Child soldiers often express a sense of guilt for the wrongdoing they engage in, even though society tends to perceive them as lacking responsibility. The guilt experienced by child soldiers does not stem from self-condemnation, but rather from their internal struggle to reconcile their morally questionable motives. These children are forced to commit acts of violence due to the internal justifications provided by their own emotions, as they comply with the demands of their captors. To alleviate their "*sense of guilt*," it is imperative to prohibit the involvement of child soldiers in violent conflicts (Thomason, 2016). Shah in his paper portrays an incident where he witnessed a scenario in which a boy was asked what he

wanted to become when he grew up and a little boy with obvious pride answered that he wanted to become a 'terrorist'. According to the little boy, being involved in armed groups would be adventurous as he would have to climb the mountains. Growing up in an environment that is rooted in conflict, it is not surprising that children will choose the path of insurgency (Shah, 2022). The breakdown of social structures in modern conflict zones has made it easier to recruit children into armed groups. The social structure of the environment where child soldiers are socialized becomes one of the many factors that make them child soldiers. If the child is brought up in a conflict zone, then there is a certainty that the child will be associated with conflict later on. The matter can be recognised as a risk factor for the involvement of child soldiers in armed groups. Therefore, the social structure and the environment in which the child soldiers are brought up also contribute to the reason behind their recruitment (Kaplan, 2005). The failure of successful reintegration into civilian life can serve as a significant contributing factor leading children to re-engage in the role of child soldiers. Instances arise where children opt to return to their former militant existence due to feelings of neglect and societal non-acceptance, thereby opting to persist in their roles as child combatants. The inability of children to navigate and manage the societal stigma and discrimination they encounter further complicates their reintegration process. Societal perceptions often cast these children in a negative light, resulting in their marginalisation and stigmatisation.

Challenges of child-soldiers in re-integrating into civilian life

Child soldiering is a troubling social and political phenomenon that has spread throughout the world and has had disastrous effects. The stability of the post-war political order and national security are both viewed as being at risk from child soldiers. Children have been exposed to an aggressive culture and a vicious circle of violence. They are affected in numerous ways, including their normal schooling and any disruptions to their social and moral growth. They have been engaged in conflicts both as perpetrators and as victims. Child soldiers are often viewed as a forgotten generation due to the prevalent neglect and abandonment they face. Efforts towards the social and psychological reintegration of these former child soldiers have been inconsistent and lacking dedication. Despite numerous international treaties and conventions, child soldiers continue to be at risk in conflict settings (Francis, 2007). Demobilized children in any case must be provided with a friendly environment making sure they do not fall back. They must be provided protection and more social reintegration programs, education, and other vocational training per their areas of interest and skills. Groundwork must also be laid down for their eventual return to their families and communities (Siddiqui & Nabila, 2014).

Facing difficulties in establishing meaningful connections within their communities, these children may ultimately gravitate back towards their former militant lifestyle as an

alternative means of coping with societal rejection and attaining a sense of belongingness. Furthermore, a sense of insecurity arises from the perceived loss of power experienced by former child soldiers upon reintegrating into civilian life. In addition to encountering societal rejection, they encounter difficulties in adhering to societal norms. Having been socialized within a violent milieu, they may internalize behaviours and norms that are antithetical to those of mainstream society.

Child soldiers and violation of child rights

Child soldiers should be considered the victims of institutionalized child abuse as they are subjected to psychological harm and human rights violations (Kimmel & Roby 2007). A serious breach of child rights and international humanitarian law is when children are recruited to participate in armed forces or groups. Between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were recruited as child soldiers. However, it is anticipated that a considerably higher percentage of children will be involved in militancy (UNICEF, 2021).

The United Nations (UN) adopted an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in May 2000, which states that the minimum age for participation in armed conflict is 18 years old in all circumstances, including recruitment by non-governmental armed groups and compulsory or forced recruitment. Despite ratifying the protocol, the United States failed to implement new policies, sending more than 50 soldiers under the age of 15 to Iraq in 2003 and 2004. An estimated 300,000 children serve as soldiers worldwide, with 33 ongoing conflicts involving children in combat. The recruitment of child soldiers frequently begins at the age of 10 (Becker, 2005).

Out of a total of 640 districts in India, 197 are now impacted by internal armed conflicts, and approximately 100 have been identified as being affected by left-wing extremism. Children who take part in armed conflict are not only denied the right to an education, but they are also deployed with troops fighting a counterinsurgency, meaning they have more experience with weapons like guns, grenades, and ambushes (Krishnan, 2013). According to the NCPCR (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) reports, the armed groups in the state of Manipur have been recruiting underage soldiers and are trained as fighters by the armed opposition groups. The report illustrates that the children are forcibly recruited with false promises for the benefit of the armed groups. Various NGOs have reported the use of children by armed opposition groups. However, the government has failed to develop effective strategies to protect children from being recruited into armed groups. Maisnam (2022) mentioned that every insurgent group in Manipur recruit child soldiers and the lowest age recorded is 11 years. When confronted with young soldiers, military commanders engaged in international armed conflicts must decide what targets to defend. This kind of issue is particularly common in non-state armed group conflicts where juvenile soldiers are forcibly recruited to increase their numbers. There are many child

soldiers among the armed groups, even though current international law forbids the recruiting of anybody under the age of fifteen into any armed forces. Although child soldiers are constrained by the current IHL (International Humanitarian Law) regime, which grants combatant status based on the ability to demonstrate membership in an armed force, the prerequisites for complete combatant status are likely beyond the means of underage child soldiers (Bosch, 2012). However, they continue to be categorised as civilians despite engaging in hostilities uninvited. All of these factors work against child soldiers since, in addition to being legal targets of hostilities, they also run the risk of being charged with a crime if they are captured.

Several literature described the various laws that have been passed to safeguard the rights of child soldiers and provided information on the problems that they face because these policies and laws are frequently not followed, which results in an alarmingly high number of child soldiers in various nations. The studies also provided a clear understanding of the importance of starting numerous programmes, including efforts to raise awareness of and prevent child soldiers as well as rehabilitation programmes. The absence of these programmes and the ineffective application of the Acts or laws in the conflict-prone region may be the cause of the factor that leads to the recruitment of children as soldiers. By implementing rehabilitation programmes and increasing public knowledge of child recruitment and its potential negative repercussions, the government needs to act. Strong legal defences and more action are required, but they alone will not put an end to the use of child soldiers. The strong and ongoing international condemnation that includes financial and other support for demobilisation and rehabilitation will be necessary for further development.

Child soldiers in the continuing conflict of Manipur

More than 70,000 individuals, with a minimum of 10,000 being children, have experienced displacement, resulting in approximately 200 casualties. Official governmental records indicate that around 4,694 additional properties have been demolished to date, with more than 220 churches being affected (although the United Christian Forum asserts that the number is over 500). The Kukis have been forced to vacate Imphal, the capital, while the Meiteis have been compelled to leave Churachandpur, the second-largest urban hub (Mamo, 2023). Relief facilities have accommodated more than 14,545 displaced students hailing from the five districts primarily impacted by the ethnic confrontations: Imphal East, Bishnupur, Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, and Imphal West. Juveniles in their early twenties are actively engaged in combat of Manipur. As a result of the current discord, the youth have access to firearms rather than educational materials (Goswami, 2024). Over 22,000 children are living in 351 relief camps in Manipur. Of them, 121 have been placed in children's homes, and 76 orphans are living with extended families (Pandey, 2023). Parents

and guardians who are part of the Kuki and Meitei ethnic groups express substantial worry about the future opportunities for their children, connecting this to the negative consequences of the continual conflict on both the people and students (Bishwajit, 2023). Numerous reports indicate the utilization of children as child soldiers within this particular conflict. Arms training has been administered to several adolescents who faced expulsion from educational institutions. The United Nations highlights grave transgressions against children's rights in the context of armed conflicts, encompassing the enlistment of children as soldiers, destruction of school infrastructures, prolonged cessation of educational activities, and insufficient provision of nutritional support (Goswami, 2024). Since December 11, 1992, India has ratified the UNCRC (adopted in 1989), and as such, it is obligated to uphold children's rights. Nonetheless, a lot of experts on child rights believe that our society is still implementing laws, plans, and policies ineffectively (Jajo, 2023). The United Nations published a report on June 27, 2023, titled "Children and Armed Conflict," which detailed the serious human rights abuses in armed conflicts worldwide in 2022. After 12 years, India's name was taken out of the report. Due to claims that some militant separatist groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir were recruiting minors, India was a part of it up until last year. The report also claims that Indian security forces had arrested children in Kashmir on suspicion of having ties to extremist organisations. Despite numerous reports of such violations from all warring parties, the UN report had not addressed child rights violations in these areas (Goswami, 2024).

The harrowing situation unfolding in Manipur underscores the urgent need for concerted efforts to protect the rights and well-being of children caught in armed conflicts. The displacement of tens of thousands of individuals, including a significant number of children, alongside the destruction of properties and schools, represents a grave violation of their rights. Despite India's ratification of the UNCRC and international obligations, the continued recruitment of children as soldiers and their exposure to violence highlight systemic failures in safeguarding their rights.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring the protection of children from recruitment into armed groups is an essential step towards breaking the cycle of violence perpetuated by the use of child soldiers. However, the prevailing socio-political environment in the concerned region presents formidable challenges to completely eradicating the phenomenon. In Manipur, many youths opt to relocate to other areas within or outside the state to escape the pervasive influence of armed groups and to pursue a more promising future. The looming threat of recruitment into these groups serves as a deterrent for those who remain, exposing them to a hostile environment conducive to recruitment. Additionally, the dearth of educational and employment opportunities within the state acts as a catalyst driving youth towards

engagement in armed conflict. As a consequence, many youths migrate to urban centres in search of better prospects, leaving behind a vulnerable population susceptible to recruitment. Despite the prohibition on the recruitment of children, armed groups persist in violating children's rights by involving them in conflict activities. Hence, efforts to abolish the practice of child soldiers must prioritize the protection of their rights. It is imperative to raise awareness among the populace regarding the realities and ramifications of child soldiering to garner support for effective intervention strategies.

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