



By: Stephen Harwood

Where to Go - The Lost Childhood of a Child Soldier



"The potential possibilities of any child are the most intriguing and stimulating in all creation"

Ray L. Wilbur, third president of Stanford University

It is the 20th November, 2025. This is **World Children's Day**. It allows us to remember and reflect upon the **rights of children**.

A child is defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a person below the age of eighteen unless applicable legislation says otherwise.

The 'Declaration of the Rights of the Child' was first agreed in 1924 by the **League of Nations**, with its extended version adopted by the UN on the 20th November 1959, which we today celebrate.

These rights include the right to a happy childhood, the right to "develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity", the right to receive care and be protected, as well as the right to education. What an idyllic vision.

However, how many of us are lucky to have these rights?

Indeed, for how many is this notion of a happy childhood a distant reality?

Multidimensional poverty

UNICEF reports that there are nearly 900 million children who are experiencing multidimensional poverty.

In other words, these children are suffering from "poor nutrition, lack of health services, deprivation in education, or a lack of access to quality housing, water and sanitation".

The **world's population** is just over 8 billion. In 2023, **UNICEF** reported that there were 2.4 billion children in the world.

In other words, over 10% of the world's

population are children who are experiencing multidimensional poverty, this comprising around 38% of all children. Moreover, this is mainly in low- and middle-income nation states.

To put this into contrast, **Forbes** reports that there are 3,000 billionaires in the world, with many in the US, China and India, in decreasing order of number.

Child poverty in the US was 16%, mainly in southern and eastern states

The US is the **world's largest economy**, accounting for over a quarter of global GDP.

However, for 2023, **child poverty** in the US was 16%, mainly in southern and eastern states. Converted into numbers, of the 74 million children in the **USA**, 11 million live in poverty.

The statistics are alarming. Moreover, the **Sustainable Development Goals Report** for 2025 suggests that efforts to reduce poverty are hampered by the impact of COVID-19, economic instability, and climate change, with sub-Saharan Africa being the worst affected.

Yet **sub-Saharan Africa** is where the global population is expected to grow the most.

Grave violations against children

What is the outlook for being a child in the future? How many will experience poverty and hardship? How many will not have their possibilities realised?

Further, this is against a backdrop of increasing conflict around the world.

ACLED reports that conflict has doubled over the last five years. Nevertheless, in principle, children should be protected from conflict.

Indeed, **six grave violations against children**

have been identified and agreed upon within the UN.

These are “child recruitment and use; killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; attacks on schools and hospitals; abductions; and the denial of humanitarian access”.

Nevertheless, we hear about atrocities, especially the killing of children, in [Palestine](#) and [Sudan](#).

The ‘recruitment’ of children by armed groups for use in conflict had increased

Moreover, children are not just passive victims. The [UN](#) reported at the end of 2024 that the ‘recruitment’ of children by armed groups for use in conflict had increased.

Imagine that you are abducted at the age of nine along with others in your village, at gunpoint by heavily armed militia and are subjected to grave violations as well as coerced to engage in atrocities.

What happens if compliance is your only option for survival? What happened to all your ‘child’s rights’? Moreover, what is your future?

This is a reality.

Child soldiers

Alarming, the [Myanmar military](#) is highlighted for its growing use of child soldiers.

This is despite the UN [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict](#), which came into force in February 2002.

Whilst most governments are perhaps adhering to this Convention and not using child soldiers, this does not stop armed groups.

One place where there has been a significant recruitment of children, both boys AND girls, is in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

[Save the Children](#) report that over 400 were recruited by armed groups in January and February this year. The June report of the [UN Secretary-General](#) reveals many armed groups. More significant is that 797 children were reported to be used in combat roles.

However, the official statistics may underplay the reality. For example, a contact reports that in one village there are ‘no boys from 9-20 years old’.

Being rounded up leads to an unknown fate, with resistance resulting in death, perhaps by a bullet or perhaps by a machete.

Boys might be taken to work in coltan mines or made to join the armed group. Girls become victims of sexual violence.

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A sixteen-year-old girl remembers being taken by the M23.

They asked me for my ID, I told them I was still a minor, they asked for my child's ID card, unfortunately, I didn't have it. They immediately put me in the truck where there were many people, some from my neighbourhood and others I didn't know....

The horror of her experience is captured in this quote.

My mother told me, "My daughter, to be stable..., you have to accept one of their

commanders as your lover so the others will leave you alone." ..., that's what I did. Otherwise, the way we were raped is inexplicable; every soldier who wanted to, every moment, no one ... had control over their own body. Many girls died there; as for the men, let's not even talk about it.

This contains so much, about a mother-daughter's relationship, being a girl, being a boy, the attitude of soldiers.

Escape was risky.

After the suffering became so intense, a group of girls and boys planned an escape. They contacted me to participate. I was terrified; I thought, "This is certain death." A few days later, on the day we were supposed to wash, this group of over 60 people all managed to escape. We couldn't. Back at the base, oh my God, we were whipped! I lost consciousness right there. Some died, and others were even murdered on the spot, saying they knew about the escape. I woke up again, but this time next to two corpses and a dying young boy.... Then I started to take an interest in the escape plan because I am here, I am dead, but if the escape succeeds, I am saved.

Where to go?

However, even if there was escape, then the question arises of where to go. **Reintegration** into families and communities can be a challenge, with distrust and stigma leading to rejection, whilst others may find it difficult to fit in, burdened with the trauma of their experience.



On this World Children's Day, let us not forget those who are not privileged to the happiness and everything else that is a child's right

The former child soldier recalls the difficulty of living in the community and the rejection by his family and community. He lived in the streets alongside many others who had nowhere to go.

However, if conflict surfaces, some find themselves back in an armed group, perhaps having been rounded up yet again.

One of the issues is a lack of support for the reintegration of these former child soldiers, possibly due to a lack of understanding of their experiences.

This account underplays the horror and risk of not only existing as a child soldier, to be raped and whipped, but being active in a combat role when you might be attacked: "Les balles raisonnaient de partout, jusqu'à ce que DIEU nous a aider", translated, "Bullets were ringing everywhere, until God helped us".

On this World Children's Day, let us not forget those who are not privileged to the happiness and everything else that is a child's right.

My attention is upon one group of children amongst the others who deserve attention – this group being the child soldiers.

However, talking to the former child soldier who now helps children affected by conflict, "there is hope if you stay strong".