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Despite the push and pull factors they stayed: A secondary data analysis of ecological causes, consequences and responses to girl soldiering in Africa

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Abstract

Notwithstanding robust international legislative frameworks underpinning the prohibition of child soldiering, the number of at-risk girls and boys continues to grow, with girl soldiering remaining a particularly neglected area. Through a secondary data analysis, this paper critically analyses some of the key contributing factors and consequences of girl soldiering in Africa as well as prevention and response measures. Analysis is theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and a child rights-based approach. The findings point towards a complex interplay of various elements within and across different system levels engaging multiple actors, where girls' rights to participation are often pushed aside. It is argued that for the complexities of girl soldiering to be better addressed, an effective operationalization of a systems approach is needed. To this end, an Ecological Systems Model of Prevention and Response Measures to Girl Soldiering, where communities and girls' voices are of central importance, is proposed.

Keywords: Girl soldiering, causes, consequences, prevention, response, ecological systems.

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1 Introduction

1.1 *Girl Soldiering: Setting the Scene*

The profound impact of armed conflict on children, including the risk and impact of child soldiering (CSing), attracted much policy, research, and practice attention, especially since the ground-breaking 1996 UN “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children” Report (Machel, 1996). The report emphasized the role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and particularly its Art. 38 and 39 for strengthening protection of children affected by armed conflict. An academic interest in researching children’s trajectories in and out of armed forces and armed groups kept steadily growing following the adoption of the Optional Protocol (OPAC: United Nations General Assembly, 2000) to the UNCRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, which increased the age for direct participation and compulsory recruitment from 15 to 18 years of age (OPAC Art. 1). Notwithstanding robust legislative frameworks underpinning prohibition of CSing within international humanitarian law, international human rights law, and international criminal law, the number of children at risk of being recruited and/or being used by armed forces or armed groups continues to grow. According to the latest estimates, in 2020 337 million children were at risk of being recruited as compared to 217 million estimated in 2018, with Africa having experienced a significant increase in this period (Østby et al., 2023).

While the phenomenon of CSing is centuries-old, the concept of “child soldier” underwent many changes throughout the past decades (Denov, 2019). One of the latest changes

came in the broader conceptualisation of a child associated with armed forces or armed groups. The Paris Principles (2007, p.7) acknowledged the multiplicity of roles both boys and girls can perform while soldiering, stating:

“A child associated with an armed force or 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, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not *only* refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.

Although war is predominantly considered a male preserve, women and girls take part in warfare to a far greater extent than is generally recognized (Brett, 2002). While calculating the exact number of CSing is challenging, estimating the number of girl soldiers (GSs) specifically is nearly impossible (Vastapuu, 2019). Nevertheless, estimates suggest girls make up between 6% to 50% of CSs (Spellings, 2008). It is argued that in international discourse, girls are invisible in terms of their unique needs and, simultaneously, too visible as “super-victims” (Parker et al. 2021, p. 316). Both voluntary and forced recruitments are possible avenues for girls into soldiering (Denov, 2008). Although OPAC Art.3 lists minimum safeguards that would render child recruitment voluntary, this qualifier remains much contested (Coomaraswamy, 2010). It was argued, however, that a “voluntarily” joining stems from a multitude of interconnected reasons, e.g. seeking shelter, seeking revenge, be in a need of food and/or healthcare, being guided by their political beliefs or religious callings (Denov, 2008). When back to their families and communities, girls face

many of the same problems as boys, with girls' situation being arguably even direr due to their value-laden status in society (Brett, 2002).

While the exploitation of children by armed groups is among the most critical issues in armed conflicts at a global scale (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015), this article keeps its focus on the African region for several reasons. Firstly, considering that many of the African countries studied are in the process of transitioning from war to peacetime, it was feasible for the researchers to engage in the primary data collection from pragmatic and logistical perspectives, which is not the case elsewhere. Secondly, the sufficiency of empirical studies on the contributing factors, consequences, and prevention/response measures to GSing in Africa is, in turn, beneficial for drawing valuable evidence-informed lessons learned and recommendations for prevention/response programming in other world regions. Finally, it was observed that a dearth of longitudinal studies on CSing generally, and girls soldiering specifically, exists globally. Available studies have largely been conducted in Africa. Zooming in on this specific continent is beneficial for a better articulation of the long-term consequences of the phenomenon and, by extension, informing child rights-based and longer-term support efforts.

1.2 Ecological Systems Theory

This article is theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory which conceptualizes the ecology of human development as a life-long accommodation between the individual, the changing immediate environment, and the larger formal and informal social contexts. The ecological environment is conceived as a

nested arrangement of structures defined as a microsystem (web of relations between the individual and their immediate environment), mesosystem (interrelations between major settings within which the individual is located), exosystem (formal and informal local structures that, while not containing the individual directly, have major influences on their immediate settings), macrosystem (overarching economic, social, education, legal, and political systems; Bronfenbrenner, 1977), and chronosystem (the function of time and its influence on events and experiences on the individual and collective levels; Eamon, 2001). Due to limitations in the scope of this paper and the availability of empirical data, a direct analysis will be focused on some key elements within each system. As such, a direct analysis will be provided of GSs' peer and family environments (microsystem), their economic, educational and contextual safety environments (mesosystem and exosystem) and cultural and legal landscapes, UNCRC and OPAC in particular (macrosystem). Chronosystem analysis will be integrated throughout, while mesosystem analysis is presented jointly with exosystem. It should be acknowledged that such an analysis presents inherent difficulties in straightforwardly placing contextual facts in any given system. Importantly, however, a primary focus here is an analysis of interactions between and across ecological systems and the impact they have on one another. It is, thus, the permeability and fluidity of the systems rather than their rigid classification that form a primary lens of analysis.

Systems thinking, noted for its holistic, anti-oppressive, and empowering nature (Payne, 2014), is valuable in examining factors, consequences, and responses to GSing. A

holistic view is crucial for acknowledging deeper political and economic issues (Vautravers, 2009); however, ecological analysis can lead to over-assessment of involved systems (Teater, 2014), complicating decisions on intervention levels within time and resource constraints (Payne, 2014). Ecological systems theory currently underpins international child protection policy and practice (Wulczyn et al., 2010), guiding child protection in humanitarian settings (The Alliance, 2019) which is the drive for including this as the theoretical lens. However, as the following analysis will show, the girl's voice and agency, exemplified by UNCRC Art. 12, may be overshadowed by other system elements. Future analyses of GSing, and the driving international theory in child protection, could benefit from bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), which emphasizes the individual's active role in their development.

1.3 Methodology

A secondary data analysis was conducted spanning contributing factors for girl soldiering, consequences for GSs, and current prevention/response measures for girl soldiering. The search of the literature was done through the EBSCOhost Academic Complete database and incorporated searches on Google Scholar, the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action ('The Alliance'), and chain referencing. Dates for studies ranged between 2000-2023. The year 2000 is associated with the adoption of the OPAC which increased the age of direct participation and compulsory recruitment to 18. The search limits were set to only include African countries and peer-reviewed works published in English. Although there is a considerable number of studies that involved both girls and

boys in their samples, only these that provide and discuss their findings through a gender lens were included.

A cumulative account of the studies included indicates a reasonable mixture of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, with the latter being more prevalent. Although the literature on GSing is available from different world regions, the highest concentration of studies is from Africa. On reviewing identified literature, it is all too apparent, that in its overwhelming majority, authorship is by researchers, and/or is funded by, the Global North. Additionally, limited studies were located which investigated the factors contributing to girls joining armed forces or armed groups from their own perspective. While it can be assumed that probing retrospectively into children's motives for joining might trigger difficult emotions in them, a strong focus on abduction and forced recruitment in Africa might be too simplistic. Only a few studies took account of girls' agency, capabilities, coping capacities, and resources with a disproportionate emphasis on their vulnerabilities, difficulties coping, and (re)integrating. A dearth of longitudinal studies on the subject matter should be mentioned too. Finally, studies investigating supports available tend to focus on the recovery and reintegration of GSs with a lack of consideration of how Gsing should be prevented in the first place.

2 Contributing factors of girl soldiering in Africa

The lived realities of conflict-affected girls differ greatly both across and within national contexts (Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013). As such, girls' experiences that contributed to them joining armed forces or armed groups cannot be generalizable across all African settings, nor are they exhaustive. Although OPAC Art. 3 lists minimum safeguards that would render child recruitment voluntary, this concept is much contested (Coomaraswamy, 2010; Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013) and remains a blind spot in the issue of CSing (Ndongo & Derivois, 2022). It is this "voluntary" form of soldiering that the current section is more focused on. Each sub-section here first analyses some of the key factors contributing to CSs of different gender identities and then dives deeper into intricacies specific to girls' experiences.

2.1 Microsystem factors

One of the key themes linked to CSing is the association with children's sense of physical and emotional unsafety in their families, which they should be protected against by UNCRC Art. 19. The role of abusive family relations in contributing to children's decision to join armed groups was highlighted by Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan (2015) who link children's exposure to abuse and domestic violence with caregivers' high rates of alcohol consumption. This line of thinking was also supported by more recent research conducted in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Ndongo & Derivois, 2022). Although this study does not specify the gender of former CSs interviewed, it provides some valuable insights because they were expressed by the children themselves. The issue of family abuse was

cited by most children interviewed, having led them to leave their family environment in search of a new family (Ndongo & Derivois, 2022).

Several studies inquired into factors of soldiering specific to girls. An influential qualitative study by Keairns (2002) found that girls were unwilling to remain in their homes if they were subject to sexual exploitation or violent treatment by a family member. Drawing on this work, and triangulating its findings with other research studies, Brett (2002) argues about high levels of association between experiences of domestic abuse or exploitation for girls' motivations to join armed groups. The important role of physical and emotional safety was also highlighted by Denov & Ricard-Guay (2013) in their overview of the existing knowledge base on the subject matter. Importantly, acknowledging the importance of providing a space for girls' voices to be heard, their work is authenticated with the experiences and voices of former GSs from Sierra Leone (Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013). Similarly, the results of interviewing former GSs (Brett and Specht 2004) suggest that a very high incidence of exploitation and domestic violence was the main or the only reason for joining cited by girls. A microsystem-level violent home environment in its interaction with macrosystem-level discriminatory and exclusionary gendered societal attitudes creates circumstances where girls have few avenues for escape other than joining armed groups (Brett and Specht, 2004).

Another example of an uncondusive family environment involves neglect, which directly contradicts Article 19 of the UNCRC. The vulnerability of children to be recruited into armed groups is closely linked with situations of endemic poverty, whereby children and

their families struggle to have their basic needs met (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015; Keairns, 2002). While having one's basic needs met is strongly manifested and most felt at a microsystem-level, it is important to acknowledge its strong interplay within the exosystem when poor economic conditions and high unemployment rates are pervasive at national and regional levels. Moreover, not only experiences of physical neglect but also emotional neglect have to be acknowledged. Being specific to girls, an illustration of this can be found in a participatory research study by Keairns (2002) that highlights girls' experiences of being marginalized in their family structures and not having a voice on matters affecting their lives which runs counter to the requirements of UNCRC Art.12.

While abusive and neglectful experiences within children's households increase the vulnerability of both girls and boys, the experience of child marriage or the risk of it seems to bear a particularly strong gendered dimension. Numerous articles highlight experiences of girls joining armed groups in their attempt to escape forced marriages (Denov, 2008; Spellings, 2008; Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013; Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015) listed among harmful practices by the UNCRC General Comment No. 18 on harmful practices due to their endemic nature. In relation to a chronosystem, it may be hypothesized that as girls get closer to the marrying age, the risk of CSing increases too. The girl's personal experience of child marriage strongly reverberates with, and is impacted by, prevailing social, cultural and gender norms located in the macrosystem (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015).

2.2 Mesosystem and exosystem factors

Thus far, the mesosystem factors contributing to CSing generally and GSing specifically are one of the most underexplored areas of research. What is known, however, is that some girls joined armed groups following significant others who were already part of such groups (Keairns 2002) and pursued some political motives (Brett and Specht, 2004).

One of the most prominent exosystem factors contributing to both girls and boys joining armed groups is poverty. Poor economic conditions, limited employment opportunities, and difficulties to meet basic needs in the community were cited as reasons for children joining (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015). Confirming this view, Brett and Specht (2004) indicate that those working in the field usually indicate poverty as a key factor leading girls and boys in Africa to participate in conflicts. They warn, however, that such a ubiquitous explanation is perhaps too simplistic. While poverty may create general vulnerability to being recruited, in and of itself it cannot be the sole factor (Brett and Specht, 2004). Being specific to girls, this view was supported by Keairns (2002) who demonstrated that while many girls from impoverished backgrounds become soldiers through their own (however restricted) choices, many do not.

The economic and educational opportunities, in turn, do not exist in a vacuum. In situations conducive to children joining armed groups, they are nested in contexts of violence. Considering the high levels of sexual and physical abuse that characterize some armed conflicts, it is more pronounced for girls to opt for joining for their own protection (Brett, 2002; Brett & Specht, 2004; Ndongo & Derivois, 2022). This, in turn, begs the

question as to why girls side with armed groups for their own protection, considering that the legal frameworks, which are aimed at protecting and promoting their rights in times of conflict as much as in times of peace, such as the UNCRC and the OPAC among others, are already in place. This leads now to turning the attention to some of the key macrosystem considerations.

2.3 Macrosystem factors

It has been a while since the amalgamation of children's rights was crystallized in the form of the UNCRC which is, at present, the most ratified international human rights treaty (Hackett, 2015). Freeman (2014) maintains that UNCRC is a critical document in its ability to form attitudes towards children as active subjects of rights rather than passive objects and recipients. Although this legal instrument is seen as a significant progression towards having children's rights protected and promoted, Freeman suggests that it is still a 'work-in-progress' (2014, p. 12). Indeed, the adoption of the OPAC was exemplary of such progress. Notwithstanding robust legislative frameworks underpinning the prohibition of CSing within international law, the number of children at risk of and/or being involved in CSing continues to grow. Echoing Freeman's (2014) perception of UNCRC as a "work-in-progress", a similar argument is that the UNCRC's ratification by the state does not warrant a guarantee that children's rights are enforced (Hackett, 2015). Enforcing this line of thinking, Francis (2007) questions the relevance of legal frameworks in their ability to protect and reintegrate CSs in Africa. He holds the view that this lack of relevance is associated yet with other macrosystem factors.

It has commonly been assumed that the contexts favourable to promoting the recruitment of children into armed groups result from an interplay of larger international and national processes that cause local vulnerability (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan 2015). Kiyala (2018) holds the view that the phenomenon of CSing in Africa is closely associated with the postcolonial legacies in Africa and the processes of globalisation. He argues that the exacerbating inequalities, exhausted capacities of households to raise and protect their children, depleted social fabric and eroded African traditional values and social norms are just some manifestations of such larger-scale processes (Kiyala, 2018). Moreover, Francis (2007) considers child soldiering to be the “new face” of child labour traditionally practised across much of Africa. Together, it could be stated that CSing is rather a symptom of economic, social, and political issues at a deeper level (Vautravers, 2009).

The way children – and girls specifically – are seen within a given context, and what meanings and values are attributed to them by their family, community and society would impact the risk level of being recruited into armed groups. It is well-established that the way children are defined locally differs across and within cultural and social groups, and across time, implying that individuals defined by humanitarian actors as a “CS” may be perceived and treated like adults within their social ecology (Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan, 2015). This view is supported by others who consider that the notion of “CS” has problematic connotations, and does not cover complexities and varieties of roles that children, especially girls, play in armed conflicts (Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013). Francis (2007) links the lack of effectiveness of international legal frameworks, including UNCRC, to prevent

and address CSing in Africa with Western-centric definitions of what constitutes a child and childhood within these frameworks. Arguably, such definitions run in parallel to lived realities of children in Africa and the cultural and traditional perceptions of a child and childhood (Francis, 2007). These differing practical realities and local perceptions relegate international legal frameworks to ‘paper protection mechanisms’ (Francis, 2007, p. 1) resulting from a complex interplay between exosystem and macrosystem factors.

The local perceptions of the child and the girl, in turn, have an impact on their status in society and the responsibilities they are expected to fulfil. While not the sole reason for girls’ joining, Brett (2002) maintains that some girls join because of their willingness to prove their equality with boys which, at least on paper, is already accorded to them by the virtue of UNCRC Art. 2 on non-discrimination. Similarly, Kohrt, Rai & Maharjan (2015) consider gender discrimination a profound factor in girls tipping the balance in favour of joining due to gender differences in the burden of labour and levels of compensation. As such, in societies enforcing confining and rigid gender roles, joining the armed groups may be perceived by girls as an avenue for empowerment and emancipation (Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013).

3 Consequences of girl soldiering in Africa

Whereas girls and boys face many of the same consequences in their post-soldiering lives, it is the girls’ status in society that shapes their experiences in distinctly different ways (Brett, 2002). Consequently, the analysis here will first acknowledge some common experiences of CSs, and then delve deeper into the consequences more pronounced for

GSs. Former GSs are a heterogeneous and diverse cohort (Denov & Ricard Guay, 2013) which makes generalizability across contexts and across unique lived experiences highly problematic. As such, the analysis of the consequences of GSing can be considered neither exhaustive nor universally applicable. Nonetheless, this consideration remains necessary for clarifying effective recovery and reintegration measures outlined in UNCRC Art 39. Moreover, the consequences of CSing and the complexity of girls' post-conflict realities are best considered in their dynamic interaction with internal and external resources (Vindevogel et al. 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Gustavsson et al. 2017). While the scope of this article prevents a comprehensive strengths-based analysis, this note of caution is important to avoid depriving former GSs of their intrinsic resources, agentic capacities, and rights-holder status.

3.1 Microsystem consequences

As far as microsystem is concerned, the impact of soldiering on mental health of children is profound. A study of 330 former CSs in Uganda with 49% of the sample being girls did not reveal major differences in mental health outcomes across gender (Klasen et al., 2010). An interesting interplay between the measured psychological symptoms of former CSs and the exosystem-level factors was demonstrated by the work by Vindevogel et al. (2013). Their study of the records of 424 former CSs in northern Uganda, one-third of which were female, demonstrated a strong association between the psychological symptoms and post-soldiering variables, such as limited access to food, difficulty accessing schooling, and experiences of being insulted and stigmatized (Vindevogel et

al., 2013). Likewise, such exosystem-level elements like stigma and social order were found to play an important role in shaping the mental health outcomes of former female and male CSs in Sierra Leone (Betancourt et al., 2014). When incorporating chronosystem analysis, it appears that the mental health difficulties and challenges with social functioning continue to endure into the adult lives of former CSs (Betancourt et al., 2020). Additionally, feelings of fear appear to permeate post-conflict social interactions in northern Uganda and eastern Congo with community members and former CSs fearing actions of each other (Schiltz et al., 2016; Tonheim, 2014).

While some of the consequences of soldiering are common across genders, others appear to have a stronger gendered dimension, rendering GSs more vulnerable. One of the key themes in the literature relates to the physical health of former GSs (Brett, 2002; Burman and McKay, 2007). A qualitative empirical study conducted by Denov (2010) is a good illustration of how former female and male CSs in Sierra Leone narrated their stories of being impacted by severe physical injuries and disabilities (Denov, 2010). Moreover, the practice of physically branding children's bodies with the letters of an armed group interplays with further consequences on their psychosocial well-being which is vividly accounted for by a former GS, '[This brand] is the most [psychologically] painful part of my life right now' (Denov, 2010, p. 797). The consequences of having survived sexual violence, and having undergone such "branding", span beyond microsystem-level physical body pains and discomforts. In a complex interplay within macrosystem social norms that surround gender and the stigma attached to CSing (Betancourt et al., 2010),

the exosystem-level consequences of educational exclusion and economic destitution are produced (Burman & McKay, 2007).

The consequences on the physical health of former GSs are, in turn, further compounded by the implications on their mental health and psychosocial well-being (Klasen et al., 2010; Betancourt et al., 2011; Vindevogel et al., 2013). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Betancourt et al. (2010) with a total of 273 former CSs in Sierra Leone with 29% of the sample being female. The results of this study revealed that former GSs, in comparison with boys, scored significantly higher on depression and anxiety while scoring lower on their levels of confidence and prosocial attitudes (Betancourt et al. 2010).

In addition to physical and mental health challenges, the relational and social consequences of GSing feature prominently in the literature (Denov, 2010; Vindevogel et al., 2013; Tonheim, 2014; Schiltz et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2021). Former GSs were found to be at an elevated risk of relational and social challenges (Vindevogel et al., 2013) which mirror macrosystem perceptions of violated gender norms and transgressed gendered expectations (Burman and McKay, 2007). Experiences of being insulted and treated with suspicion were narrated by former GSs in Uganda (Gustavsson, Oruut & Rubenson, 2017). The discriminatory treatment in girls' homes and more severe rejection they face from their family members, as compared to boys (Tonheim, 2014), appear highly concerning in light of the finding that familial supports and parental advice are among the key resources of former CSs (Vindevogel, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2013; Vindevogel et al., 2014).

3.2 Mesosystem and exosystem consequences

Within the scope of this secondary data analysis, difficulties were encountered in locating mesosystem consequences of girls soldiering in Africa. Nevertheless, recognizing a nested and interactive nature of individuals' social ecologies it is deemed relevant to reflect on some mesosystem factors that might have an impact on the post-conflict adjustment. A qualitative study by Klasen et al. (2010) explored the effects of both war-related experiences and domestic violence on the mental health of former CSs in northern Uganda. Although this study is not generalizable to all former CSs in Uganda, it is instrumental in having been the first of this kind aimed to address domestic violence in former CSs (Klasen et al., 2010). The study's findings revealed that sampled former GSs, upon their return to their home environment, were subjected to caning (54.4%), burning (19.4%), being locked and tied up (16.3%), verbal sexual insults (15.6%), sexual touching (10.6) and rape (8.1%). As such, exposure to domestic violence in tandem with war-related traumatic experiences and community violence were found to be significant predictors of emotional and behavioural problems and the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Klasen et al., 2010). While these results demonstrate interactions between different microsystem elements, they also raise intriguing questions regarding mesosystem elements. For instance, which elements of the social ecologies of family members of former GSs contribute to them committing acts of violence against former GSs or, vice versa, make them resourceful for girls.

As far as the exosystem is concerned, challenges with education and economic opportunities were reported among the most significant across genders for both former CSs and children without direct involvement in soldiering (Vindevogel et al., 2013). A rigorous study of challenges confronting children in a post-conflict setting in northern Uganda suggests that having missed school lessons, experiences being bullied at school, and being denied access to class are common-source concerns for every child in a war-torn setting (Vindevogel et al., 2013). Moreover, the effects of such exclusionary exosystem-level experiences reverberate in the microsystem of individual children having significant implications on their psychosocial well-being (Vindevogel et al., 2013). In a similar vein, an interplay between microsystem and exosystem elements was demonstrated by another empirical study that reported an association between difficulties accessing schooling and the prevalence of long-term psychological symptoms (Vindevogel et al., 2013). Looking from a strength-based perspective, education, knowledge, and skills are within a repertoire of the most prominent resources able to positively contribute to the microsystem psychosocial well-being of former CSs (Vindevogel et al., 2014). While these findings were found to apply across genders, they were also echoed by a range of studies looking into GSing in more detail, including from girls' own perspectives (Keairns, 2002; Denov, 2008; Denov & Ricard-Guay, 2013; Parker et al., 2021).

Gender-specific intricacies were revealed regarding the availability and accessibility of employment opportunities by former GSs and their economic marginalization. This is

exemplified by the work undertaken by Parker et al. (2021) in northern Uganda which revealed that 93% of female respondents relied on subsistence agriculture for their survival in addition to engaging in supplementary work. Other lessons from northern Uganda, Mozambique, Angola, and Sierra Leone indicate that former GSs live in impoverished conditions with limited financial opportunities: being mostly engaged in agriculture, petty trading and low-pay jobs (Denov, 2008). The economic marginalization of girl mothers in Sierra Leone was even more profound, pushing them to economic, social and psychological margins, as voiced by one of the girls interviewed; ‘...no other way, no other sources to get income, only God’ (Burman & McKay, 2007, p. 319).

Even in situations when girls were able to participate in skills training programs, they were confronted by further issues located at different levels of their social ecology. A complex interaction between microsystem factors (difficulty of a single mother to combine parental responsibilities with attending the training), exosystem factors (shortages of supplies in small villages, widespread poverty, post-war destructions) and macrosystem factors (socially dictated gendered behaviours being a barrier to obtaining non-traditional skills, thus violating one of UNCRC fundamental principles of non-discrimination) create conditions of profound economic destitution (Burman & McKay, 2007).

3.3 Macrosystem consequences

As mentioned, the individual, relational, and social consequences for former GSs in Africa as well as their educational and economic opportunities in a post-conflict life are heavily influenced by macrosystem factors. While stigmatization of former CSingis experienced

by both girls and boys, Burman and McKay (2007) argue that for girls, experiences of post-conflict stigmatization are even more inescapable due to perceived violations of gender norms and traditionally defined gender roles. Likewise, Brett (2002) asserts that although girls and boys suffer many of the same post-conflict consequences, it is the status of girls within society that makes their experiences distinct. Consequently, it is important to recognize that the stigma inflicted on girls and boys may vary (Betancourt et al., 2010). Macrosystem social stereotypes surrounding girls' expected roles within society and the lack of enforcement of UNCRC Art.2 (non-discrimination) trickle down to the microsystem and exosystem; impacting their prospects of marriageability, employment and education (Brett, 2002).

What seems intriguing, however, is whether such detrimental societal influences on girls' post-conflict lives can be reduced through a chronosystem perspective. In support of this reflection, a longitudinal study of former CSs in their adulthood (Betancourt et al., 2020) found that former GSs started experiencing greater community acceptance with time contrary to their male counterparts who perceived limited acceptance. The authors suggest that this may be explained by increased social pressures on boys, as compared to girls, as they are increasingly expected to provide for their families following the transition from childhood to adulthood (Betancourt et al., 2020). As it currently stands, longitudinal research into the long-term consequences of GSing is in its embryonic stage.

4 Prevention/response measures to girl soldiering in Africa

Response programming for CSing is in its nascent state, particularly in terms of longer-term rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes, despite UNCRC Art.39 highlighting the right to special support for child victims of armed conflicts. While the current efforts of child protection programming in humanitarian settings strongly lean towards response measures, a recent development in the form of the Primary Prevention Framework for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action is yet to be fully operationalized (The Alliance, 2021). Finally, as the reintegration programming differs significantly depending on the context (Wessells, 2019), the current section analyses only some examples.

4.1 Microsystem prevention/response measures

As far as the microsystem is concerned, the main outcomes expected from reintegration processes of former GSs are child rights-based and associated with improvements in their safety and care, family situation, education, empowerment, and economic self-sufficiency as well as their physical and mental health (The Alliance, 2020; 2023a; 2023b). Having UNCRC as its primary legal reference point, the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (The Alliance, 2019) features the specific needs of girls in Standard 11 which emphasizes the importance of specialized responses and gender-specific considerations in designing and implementing programming with former CSs.

An exemplary study on microsystem response measures is from Ertl et al. (2011), which investigated the efficacy of community-based programming for former female and male CSs in Northern Uganda. A total of 85 ex-CSs diagnosed with PTSD were randomized

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into the groups of narrative exposure therapy, academic catch-up classes, or were placed on a waiting list. The most important finding of this study was that narrative exposure therapy, compared to catch-up classes and a waiting list, was shown to be more effective for former CSs with PTSD symptoms. Moreover, although the authors acknowledged the need to treat this finding with caution, there were some indications of narrative exposure therapy extending its positive results from a microsystem to an exosystem-level by decreasing community stigmatization. Another important interplay between microsystem and mesosystem levels was vivid in the importance of locating PTSD treatment of former CSs within their communities, and the possibility of it to be provided by non-specialized community-based lay counsellors (Ertl et al., 2011). In fact, this evidence aligns well with numerous guidelines and tools in the field of humanitarian programming that emphasise a key role of child rights-based and community-based approaches in providing mental health and psychosocial support services (The Alliance, 2019; 2020; United Nations Children's Fund, 2022).

Another example of what was done within the microsystem is provided by the study of the Photovoice community-based participatory research in Sierra Leone (Denov, Doucet & Kamara, 2012). This study aimed to engage former girl and boy soldiers, and local youth affected by the war more generally, in exploring some of the strengths and challenges present in their communities by means of photography. This was expected to support children's post-soldiering reintegration experiences. The study reflected on various interactions between different microsystem elements as well as the interactions between

the microsystem, exosystem, and chronosystem. By way of example, the mentorship component was found to be significant. The adult mentors, who were engaged in CSing in their childhood and now are well integrated in a mainstream society, accompanied child researchers in their Photovoice journey. Importantly, these peer-to-peer supportive relationships extended beyond the lifetime of the project. The microsystem-level positive outcomes for the children, however, were found to be negatively influenced by other levels of the system. As such, children's ability to concentrate and pay attention during the project activities significantly suffered due to difficulties accessing food, circumstances of violence, and other daily struggles stemming from the exosystem. Moreover, the photo exhibitions that were crucial for former CSs to engage policy makers in discussing difficulties in having their basic needs met, did not materialize in tangible outcomes (Denov, Doucet & Kamara, 2012). As such, the lack of commitment among duty bearers to support rights-based access to essential services for children (exosystem and macrosystem) combined with the challenges former CSs face in advocating for their needs in line with UNCRC participation rights (microsystem and macrosystem), demonstrated the limits of Photovoice intervention.

While being mindful of significant barriers to effective implementation of microsystem interventions located in the exosystem, the importance of keeping children and their UNCRC rights to participation at the center of reintegration efforts was emphasized and explored in other prominent studies (Veale et al., 2013; Brownell & Basham, 2017; Worthen et al., 2019). A notable example is presented by the phenomenological research

conducted by Brownell & Basham (2017) that was concerned with the meaning of reintegration as perceived by former CSs in Liberia. A concerning finding of this research was that those adult women and men who went through reintegration processes in their childhood expressed feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction with their reintegration experiences. There were voices of former CSs around a range of exosystem obstacles, including a perceived lack of support from their government, lack of financial resources, and unemployment (Brownell & Basham, 2017). Although the unique nature of this study invites its replication in other contexts and with a larger sample (Brownell & Basham, 2017), these disturbing findings raise concerns about the ethical and child rights-based aspects of reintegration programming led by exosystem actors (Wessells, 2019). The analysis of microsystem response measures demonstrated numerous influences on the microsystem of individual GSs coming from elements largely outside of their influence. Importantly, the depth and breadth of such influences was better grasped when their rights to participation were respected.

4.2 Mesosystem and exosystem prevention/response measures

Empirical research of a psychosocial rehabilitation programme provided to female and male former soldiers in rehabilitation centers in the Democratic Republic of Congo is one of a few exceptions to a dearth of mesosystem-level studies (Kiyala, 2018). By employing mixed research methods, this study found that psychosocial rehabilitation programmes have the potential to improve the psychosocial well-being of former CSs, positively impacting their human growth as well as decreasing their aggressive behaviour (Kiyala,

2018). Here mesosystem elements are built into the programme to positively contribute to the outcomes for former CSs as they interplay with other systems. In the rehabilitation centers studied, such mesosystem-level response measures included interactions between the centers and children's families, between families and traditional leaders, and between families and team leaders of recreational activities for children (Kiyala, 2018). It is important to highlight, however, that most children studied in this research were still in the process of rehabilitation. Consequently, it is unclear to what extent their positive outcomes were sustained over time within the function of a chronosystem (Kiyala, 2018). Moreover, upon release from the facility to their communities of origin, positive microsystem-level outcomes might deteriorate as children increasingly come in interaction with discriminatory social and gender norms located in the macrosystem or limited educational and employment opportunities in the exosystem.

With regard to the exosystem, an example analyzed here is a multi-stakeholder effort that combined both prevention and response elements. A recent high-profile Oslo Conference on Protecting Children in Armed Conflict took place in June 2023 (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023) which provided a platform for exosystem actors, such as the states, international and national governmental organisations, and UN agencies, to mobilize their political, financial, and humanitarian commitment to protecting children in situations of armed conflict (The Alliance, 2023c). The Conference can be considered prominent for several reasons. Firstly, this exosystem-level event had a strong interplay within the microsystem which was demonstrated by rich preparatory works having directly consulted

over 300 children in 10 war-affected countries (The Alliance, 2023c). Secondly, a priority was given to discussing the importance of prevention, especially by means of strengthening child protection systems, and building capacities of local and national actors (The Alliance, 2023c). This was a highly welcome development considering the progressive shift from issue-based child protection programming to more systematic approaches (Wulczyn et al., 2010). Finally, the Conference underlined the importance of not only having legal and policy frameworks in place but stressed the need to ensure they are implemented by the states both during conflict and peacetime (The Alliance, 2023c). The difficulties associated with incorporating international legal instruments aimed at protecting children into domestic laws feature prominently in the academic literature (Hackett, 2015; Lister, 2015). Francis (2007) expands on this point, and links some of the key difficulties in preventing and responding to CSing in Africa through legal mechanisms with the factors located at the macrosystem, discussed more below.

4.3 Macrosystem prevention/response measures

This secondary data analysis demonstrated an impeding impact of macrosystem factors standing in the way of effective prevention/response measures to GSing. In particular, this impact is strongly felt along the lines of differing conceptualisations of what constitutes a normative “child” and a normative “childhood” in Western and African societies. Francis (2007) argues that the Western-centric definitions do not echo cultural and traditional perceptions in and across Africa. This argument was supported by the Columbia Group for Children in Adversity (2011) when the findings of their ethnographic

study indicated that community members in Sierra Leone defined childhood through the lens of children's activities, roles, and levels of dependency rather than through their age. The interaction of macrosystem factors with exosystem factors results in significant difficulties to enforce existing and ratified international legal standards aimed at protecting children; relegating them to the level of 'paper protection' (Francis, 2007, p. 207). Moreover, an uncaredful top-down imposition of the concepts of child protection, as conceptualized by the global North, and child rights, as codified in the UNCRC and OPAC, risks being perceived disrespectful to indigenous communities and running contrary to their social customs (The Columbia Group for Children in Adversity, 2011). These interactions look even more intertwined considering the limited extent former GSs can influence social norms pertaining to childhood and the value locally attributed to girls due to difficulties to exercise their rights to participation. A recently enhanced emphasis of the global child protection humanitarian sector on the importance of the centrality of child participation in their own protection and their UNCRC-defined status of rights holders (The Alliance, 2023d) is a promising development. Moving forward, it will require strong and progressive evidence as to its effectiveness across different systems levels.

5 Discussion

This article first analyzed some of the contributing factors of GSing in Africa. A holistic analysis of the contributing factors through an ecological systems lens revealed numerous interactions with and across system levels that drive girls' vulnerabilities. A microsystem-level abusive and neglectful home environment in its interaction with

macrosystem's discriminatory gendered societal attitudes in contradiction to UN CRC provisions and guiding principles create circumstances, where girls have few avenues for escaping, other than joining armed groups. Limited exosystem-level economic and educational opportunities in their interaction with macrosystem-level socially constructed conceptions of childhood and gender push girls into soldiering even further. The protective powers of one of the most prominent macrosystem elements, embodied by a range of international legal instruments, UNCRC and OPAC being among the strongest examples, do not seem to be sufficiently enforced in Africa. In their interaction with the social constructs of childhood and gender, they seem to dissipate when it comes to protecting girls. Moreover, macrosystem influences of globalization processes render CSing symptomatic of deeply-running economic, political, and social issues. Taken together, complex interactions between and within different systems manifest not only in numerous risk factors for girls, but also in their profound difficulties to meaningfully exercise their UNCRC-defined rights to participation across systems.

Secondly, this article focused on some of the consequences of GSing in Africa. It has been shown that the consequences span across different levels of girls' social ecology. The physical and mental health difficulties alongside relational and social challenges were found the most prominent at the microsystem. Under the pressure of macrosystem social norms surrounding gender and the stigma attached to CSing these consequences are exacerbated even further. A complex and dynamic interaction between the microsystem

and macrosystem makes exosystem consequences yet more challenging; pushing girls into educational exclusion and economic marginalization.

Thirdly, this article centred on the current prevention/response measures to GSing in Africa. It was demonstrated that the key desired microsystem outcomes for former GSs are associated with their sense of safety, physical health, psychosocial well-being, familial and communal bonds, and educational and economic attainment. Nevertheless, the extent to which these can be achieved is strongly influenced by numerous factors stemming from other systems levels largely outside of girls' immediate control and influence. Although exosystem-level national and international actors involved in child protection activities have a robust backup in the form of international legal framework, these do not seem to be consistently implemented by the states. Additionally, limited evidence exists as to whether and to which extent response measures are effective, especially when looking through locally defined indicators and girls' perceptions and experiences. Moreover, it came to prominence that despite some very recent initiatives at the global child protection level, at present, prevention programming is in its embryonic stage. What appeared strongly, however, for /prevention/response programming, is a significant influence of macrosystem elements, such as social constructs of a child, childhood, and gender, upon the effectiveness of micro-, meso-, and exosystem response measures. To a significant extent, differences between African and Western societies in interpreting these concepts constitute a strong barrier towards effective programming by humanitarian child protection actors.

6 Recommendations

Drawing on this body of knowledge, a set of recommendations for research and humanitarian child protection actors is proposed. These recommendations will need to be adapted depending on unique contexts within and across African states.

6.1 Research recommendations

It is first suggested that funding and educational institutions create favourable opportunities for researchers from conflict-prone countries to progressively lead on researching GSing. Such opportunities are needed to counterbalance a current dominance of Western-based researchers and sources of funding. This is crucial for enabling an effective engagement with conflict-affected girls and communities and avoiding the imposition of Western-centric concepts and values.

There is a need to investigate the factors contributing to GSing from their own perspective through participatory research methods. While probing retrospectively into children's motives for soldiering might trigger difficult emotions, a strong focus on forced recruitment as the reason for girl recruitment is too simplistic, thus the blind spot of "voluntary" soldiering warrants further research. Such research requires a careful balance in applying UNCRC-defined children's rights to both protection and participation that would protect them from further harm, while having their voices heard. This resonates with the need for investment in exploring girls' internal and external resources, and coping capacities. The

current disproportionate emphasis on their vulnerabilities and difficulties coping runs the risk of treating girls as passive objects of research and assistance as opposed to their rights-holder status.

While recognizing an interrelatedness of different systems, mesosystem and chronosystem-require the most research when it comes to contributing factors and consequences of GSing. Some mesosystem areas of research could explore connections between girls' parents and their work environment and its impact on parental capacity to support girls' emotional and physical needs. The social support systems girls' parents are part of is suggested for further exploration too, alongside parents' ability to access education in the past or in the present. Conflicting evidence as to the long-term consequences of GSing calls for increased interest in the chronosystem and investment in conducting longitudinal studies. It is also important to progressively engage with the macrosystem elements, for example, exploring contextually-derived beliefs and practices that can better protect girls in places where the language of UNCRC is not favourably perceived as well as exploring how girls' return to their families and communities can support the formation of more favourable social and gender norms.

Research efforts need to be scaled-up regarding the effectiveness of response measures to GSing by community members and humanitarian actors. These developments need to be guided by the experiences and perceptions of former GSs, they should be child rights-based, and they should apply contextually defined indicators. Finally, an increased need

to study prevention measures is one of the key gaps to address for girls vulnerable to (re)recruitment to state that despite the push and pull factors they stayed.

6.2 Ecological Systems Model of Prevention/Response Measures to Girl Soldiering

The nested nature of a girl's social ecology and multiple influences across and between them require humanitarian child protection actors to be well-versed in the practical application of an ecological systems theory. Acknowledging the central role of child rights-based and community-based programming and the centrality of girls' voices, a continuous and progressive practice improvement of humanitarian child protection actors is recommended. To support these practice improvement efforts an Ecological Systems Model of Prevention and Response Measures to Girl Soldiering is proposed (see Figure 1).

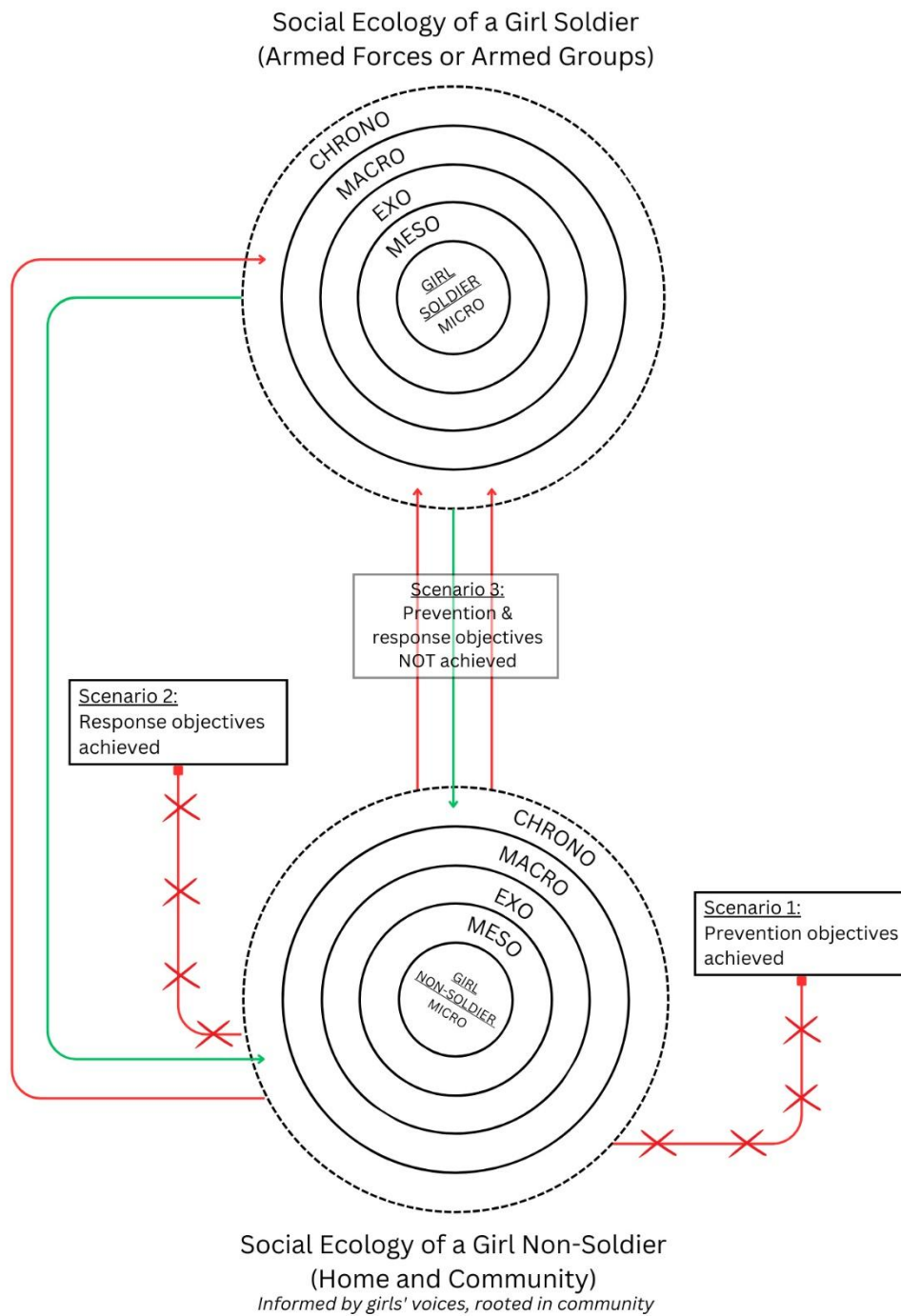


FIGURE 1 An ecological systems model of prevention and response measures to girl soldiering

The Model depicts two distinct social ecologies. The social ecology at the bottom is the one of a girl non-soldier; the one at the top is the one of a GS. It is argued that the social ecology of a girl non-soldier at home and in her community will be different from her social ecology in soldiering. In other words, ecological nests surrounding the girl will change depending on the context she is in. Then, the Model considers three potential scenarios. The first scenario takes place when the risk factors and protective factors at each system level are assessed, addressed, and inform preventive measures. If prevention objectives are achieved, the risk of soldiering is minimized, the girl is not recruited, and she stays within the ecological nests of her family and community. The second scenario refers to instances where, due to multiple interconnected causes, the girl joins armed forces or armed groups. Following her time in soldiering, she returns to her family and community, and is effectively and efficiently supported by rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. Here, response objectives are achieved, and, as a result, she is not re-recruited. The third scenario, however, considers situations when prevention/response measures to GSing are either absent or do not have sufficient impact. Here, the girl, following her soldiering experiences, returns to her home environment, but due to failed reintegration efforts, is re-recruited. It is suggested that the ability of humanitarian child protection actors to ideate, design, and successfully implement prevention/response measures can benefit from the offered Model. For these measures to be effective, they need to be based on a child rights-based approach, while being rooted in girls' communities and informed by girls' voices.

7 Conclusion

To conclude, this paper critically analysed some of the key contributing factors and consequences of GSing in Africa, as well as prevention/response measures. The analysis was theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and guided by a child rights-based approach, as set out in the UNCRC. The findings point towards a complex interplay of various elements within and across different system levels engaging with a multiplicity of actors, where girls' rights to participation in decision making processes are all too often pushed to the margins. It is argued that for the complexities of GSing to be better addressed, an effective operationalization of a systems approach is needed. To this end, an Ecological Systems Model of Prevention and Response Measures to Girl Soldiering, where communities and girls' voices are of central importance, was proposed. It is only then that conflict-affected girls will be able to say that despite the push and pull factors they stayed.

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