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Children in Armed Conflict: A Human Rights Dilemma

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Abstract

Despite the efforts of the United Nations and other international organizations, more than 300,000 children worldwide are currently forced into active combat roles and encouraged to commit crimes against humanity. This paper explores principles of natural justice, human rights, and human dignity through classical political rationalism as it relates to the issue of children in armed conflict. In doing so, this paper aims to provide a rational and objective standard to counter the practice of destroying childhood innocence through forced participation in war crimes and thus encourage the world to no longer turn a blind eye to this human rights dilemma.

Introduction

War zones are dangerous environments and are in no way suitable for a decent life. Yet today, there are many children engaging in armed conflict around the world, active members in such environments. The Human Rights Watch reports that such children "are fighting with governments and armed groups in more than 40 countries and are recruited into government armed forces, paramilitaries, civil militia and non-state armed groups." Generally, humanitarian groups stress that children are abducted and forced into combat by some groups. This is true in some instances, for example, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda—whose leader is the now social media-famous Joseph Kony—has a renown reputation for kidnapping young people at night. However, set against a background of destroyed families and failed educational systems, militia activity offers young people an opportunity to make their way in the world, and therefore, some children seek out this life. Children are "conscripted" as child soldiers because they can be manipulated due to their vulnerability. After being recruited, they often suffer from child abuse, including physical labor, sexual slavery, and the forced use of drugs—and, sadly, murder.

For some of these children, the military seems to be the safest place for them and therefore they willingly trade any chance of childhood innocence for safety and survival but at terrible cost to their development into adulthood.



Methodology

This project will address the crisis of children engaging in armed conflict from the perspective of classical (pre-scientific) rationalism. While "classical rationalism" refers specifically to the philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, my work will also examine American political thinkers who combine John Locke's notion of natural rights with an Aristotelian tradition of natural justice. Classical rationalism recognizes that the most fundamental questions of politics are always concerned with justice and injustice and that the method used by political scientists should adapt itself to this subject matter. Classical political science discovered a rational ground for justice and morality through the study of nature, and in particular human nature. Humans can be distinguished from animals due to their free will, their capacity to reason, and their ability to make moral choices.

However if in the great chain of being, humans have a higher rank than animals, they are nonetheless still far from Divine. No human being has the perfection that we would attribute to God (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence) therefore no human being should rule over another human as if they were a god. It is because human beings are neither beasts nor gods that they possess natural rights and human dignity. Allowing children to fight subjects them to a form of slavery that denies them of their inherent human rights.



As of 2014, there are over 23 countries who actively use children in armed conflict. There are 40 others who still have the conscription age under age 18.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates why the use of children in armed conflict violates objective standards of justice. This cruel practice remains prevalent in at least 40 countries, and has recently been employed by the ISIS terrorist group among others. Classical rationalism stresses the need to recognize the difference between justice and injustice. It is demonstratively unjust to allow young children to take on a combat role. Some efforts have been made to secure children's rights, such as the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child—but they are not enough if every country is not upholding and enforcing this document. It is my hope that drawing attention to objective standards of justice that transcend culture is a step in the direction that leads to the eradication of this human rights dilemma.

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