

■ By Rhoda U. Viajar

Safety. Should anyone be asked about his/her opinion on the issue of child soldiers, one concern that will certainly surface, whether they find child soldiering justifiable or not, is the safety and security of child soldiers.

A former child soldier articulates the sensitivity of the matter. "You have a better life because you are safe," goes a former girl-child soldier's message to children her age.¹

Child soldiers serving either government paramilitary units or revolutionary armed groups are constantly under threat. Whether they work as messengers, lookouts or actual combatants, most of the children's everyday living are characterized with rife anxiety and unexpressed troubles. Some directly experience injuries, disasters, deaths. Situations of this sort, after all, involve armed clashes, ambushes and killings.

GIRL CHILD SOLDIERS

Irony strikes in the most paradoxical of ways. A number of child soldiers join armed groups precisely to search for security and safety. Yet many among them find themselves in the most insecure and unstable of conditions.

Safety and security concerns for child soldiers become even more compounded and precarious in the case of girl child soldiers who, aside from being exposed to "normal" dangers of armed conflicts, are also subject to sexual advances and abuses not only of their "enemies" but even of their "comrades."

Although Sonia could not point out a single reason for joining the New People's Army (NPA), she admitted that there were several factors that prompted her to seek shelter in the group. Her own family only brought her pain instead of sowing affection. There were threats of sexual abuse by an uncle as well as actual physical, verbal and emotional cruelty

from her older brothers and sisters. She was also being forced to marry an old man. To make matters worse, her mother was constantly being battered by her stepfather².

Sonia fled her unfriendly abode and sought the protection of the NPA. The group represented a safe haven. Aside from this, being part of an NPA planted fear in her mother's abuser.

"My stepfather stopped beating Mama when he learned that I joined the NPA...

Maybe he got scared....If I ever hear that he's hurting Mama again. I'll beat him and kill him."

She also adds "I liked it better when I was with the NPA than living with my parents."

While it may be true that Sonia thinks herself in a better position, it is quite sad to note the poor choices children like her have to make. It appears that violence is inescapable. The choice is not between violence





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or peace. The choice redounds to which violent situation is more bearable.

The dangers of child soldiering are magnified and take on other forms in the case of young girls being entangled in situations of armed conflict. Girls, particularly, endure gender-based violence.

Girl-children are always at risk of rape. One study on children who were tortured documented 21 girls who were raped. These sexual assaults resulted in the pregnancy of some girls. One girl was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as suffering from psychosis as a result of being raped by members of the CAFGU³. They also became very susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases⁴.

A study of girl child soldiers in Mozambique, Uganda and Sierra Leone show that girls are oppressed in countless ways. They work more hours than the boys, have lower literacy rates and suffer what could have been preventable deaths had they been provided with reproductive health care. They also perform traditional gender roles and tasks such as cleaning, cooking and serving men. Worse, many of them experience sexual exploitation and abuse in their communities by boys and men⁵.

Some parents would even pressure the girls to exchange sex for goods and money or force them to marry the men who raped and abused them.

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While it is true that conflict situations, military units and rebel camps are not the only sites of sexual violence, girls and women are undeniably highly vulnerable to assaults and violations in these arenas. Under these circumstances, girl child oppression and female subjugation are unashamedly justified, or even blatantly celebrated.

One child describes how it is. "I felt terrified when I was hiding in the graveyard. I was afraid the soldiers would capture and rape me. I knew a 16-year-old girl who was caught by the soldiers. The next day, we found her with her clothes torn off and her body riddled with bullets. One of us turned her over and it seemed to me that the bullets drew a picture on the earth."⁷

Susan McKay and Dyan Mazurana in their book "Where are the Girls?" tell that in contemporary and historical wars, armed conflict and militarism intensify sexism through extreme violence perpetrated by boys and men against girls and women, especially sexual violence.

Indeed, sexual molestation, abuse and rape are the usual stories of young and adult women. Those who survive, but who may not necessarily be deemed the "lucky ones", suffer from the trauma of these inhumane incidents.

According to researcher Elizabeth Protacio-de Castro, girl children who are victims / survivors of sexual torture usually showed neglect in maintaining hygiene. They have feelings of shame, fear, anger, denial, helplessness, and confusion. The harrowing experience also results in physical

and emotional numbing, shortened attention span, nightmares, panic attacks, flashbacks and chronic fatigue⁸.

These are the psychological effects on the girl child that social workers, counselors and all of society have to deal with as we help victims and survivors heal.

Children are the biggest stakeholders of the present and the future. They are inheritors of the world and the next movers of society. When they become adults, they will have their own share of responsibilities to realize and duties to perform. They will have rights to defend and protect. Yet as children, they too have rights that must be upheld and fulfilled. And they too must be given the opportunities to grow.

And most importantly to be safe. ■

Endnotes

- 1 A. Camacho, F. Balanon, A. Verba, "Case Studies: Child Soldiers of the New People's Army," as cited in E. Protacio-De Castro. "Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines," Kasarinlan (Vol.16, No.2), 2001.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 E.P. Marcelino, T. dela Cruz, A. Camacho, F. Balanon, "Torture of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict: The Philippine Experience," as cited in E. Protacio-De Castro. "Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines," Kasarinlan (Vol.16, No.2), 2001.
- 4 E. Protacio-De Castro. "Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines," Kasarinlan (Vol.16, No.2), 2001.
- 5 Graca Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: A Critical Review of the Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection of War-Affected Children*, 2000.
- 6 E. Protacio-De Castro. "Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines," Kasarinlan (Vol.16, No.2), 2001.
- 7 UNICEF. *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region*, 2002.
- 8 E.P. Marcelino, T. dela Cruz, A. Camacho, F. Balanon, "Torture of Children in Situations of Armed Conflict: The Philippine Experience," as cited in E. Protacio-De Castro. "Children in Armed Conflict Situations: Focus on Child Soldiers in the Philippines," Kasarinlan (Vol.16, No.2), 2001.