



DALLAIRE CENTRE  
OF EXCELLENCE  
FOR PEACE AND SECURITY



# A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ENHANCING CHILD PROTECTION IN PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS



April 2024

## Land Acknowledgement(s):

We acknowledge that we were given the opportunity to continue our research on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territories of the Musqueam people at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. We recognize and acknowledge the history of displacement, violence, and systemic oppression on these lands unto the Indigenous peoples and its impact on generations. Recognizing that two key components of our study are human rights and dignity, we acknowledge that we are indebted and thankful to the Musqueam people, whose nation continues to have an enduring connection to the land on which we engage in our academic pursuits.

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Our team acknowledges the sacrifices of all Indigenous peoples whose lands we inhabit here in Canada and elsewhere. We remain committed to educating ourselves and fostering an environment of respect.



**Left:** Uruguayan flag, Montevideo.  
*Image source: own photos*



**Right:** A Totem pole at the UBC Vancouver campus

## Other Acknowledgements:

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## Meet the Dallaire Global Policy Project (GP2) Research Team:

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[SPPGA profile/LinkedIn profile](#)

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## Executive Summary:

Recent reports reveal an estimated 468 million children lived in war zones and many were subjected to various forms of human rights abuses in 2022 alone.<sup>[2]</sup> Save the Children reports that approximately 200 million children live in some of the world's *most lethal* armed conflict zones, reaching levels of severity not seen in over a decade.<sup>[3]</sup> Therefore, this report has been prepared for the Dallaire Centre of Excellence for Peace and Security in response to these grim statistics. It delves into the intricacies of child protection in conflict zones, particularly from the perspective of peacekeepers, who often serve as the first point of contact with children in such volatile environments. The considerations outlined within this report seek to enhance child protection and child agency. However, this report goes beyond gaps and shortcomings within child protection in lethal war zones from the vantage point of peacekeeping troops; it encompasses gaps, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing child protection on the part of all actors involved in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Children's words, thoughts, and deeds are determined by all actors who claim to represent them (e.g. advisors, researchers, guardians, ad infinitum). By remaining dependent on this approach, we exclude children from decision-making and disempower them. Furthermore, this report elucidates the role of gender dynamics in peacekeeping from the scope of child protection, such as gender-based violence and children's interactions with peacekeepers and human rights/civil organizations, which has become readily apparent.

Our team conducted desk work and fieldwork through qualitative interviews, literature reviews, and focus groups to gather insights and cross-check findings with subject matter experts worldwide (*See appendix 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5*). This report highlights six main considerations for enhancing child protection within UN peacekeeping missions, which are further categorized into two groups. The first set of three considerations is tailored for the peacekeeping armed forces, and the second set of considerations is for partnership-driven initiatives between UN peacekeeping forces and other stakeholders.

### Considerations earmarked for the armed forces (peacekeepers) include:

- (1.1) Youth Agency - Direct Collaboration & Involvement for Decision-Makers
- (1.2) Reporting Mechanisms & Develop Child-Friendly Material for Ease of Reporting,
- (1.3) Centering Gender Equality Through: Incorporating Women in Military & Non-Military Roles

### Considerations earmarked for partnership-driven initiative with other stakeholders include:

- (2.1) The Need for Local Community-Based Initiatives & International Cooperation,
- (2.2) Normalization and Reintegration (of Children),
- (2.3) Livelihood Provisions & Skills for Youth

This report is deeply rooted in the examination of the United Nations' six grave violations against children, as well as the values outlined in the Vancouver Principles. It aims to propel progress towards Sustainable Development [Goal 16](#) (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and [Goal 5](#) (Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment), which were unanimously adopted by all United Nations members in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## **Part I - Introduction:**

The critical issue of child protection in conflict-ridden regions demands urgent attention and comprehensive policy reform. In conflict zones across the globe, including Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Venezuela, the Congo, Colombia, Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, and Afghanistan, children remain vulnerable to grave violations of their rights, as they are killed, maimed, exploited, recruited, and subjected to various forms of abuse by armed forces and militant groups. Often, policies and decisions regarding children's welfare in conflict zones are made without appropriate consultation with the children. They are likely to be perceived as victims or perpetrators, instead of social actors that need to be heard and engaged to determine their best interests. Children's exclusion from decision making processes in child protection matters not only jeopardizes their well-being but also perpetuates disempowerment. Children in conflict zones face the risk of being marginalized further due to their gender, race, social standing, and any potential physical or mental limitations. Considering the intricate and complex dynamics at play, our findings have identified an evident need for more targeted, gender-inclusive, and culturally appropriate responses to genuinely meet child protection requirements.

In 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted the [first resolution on children and armed conflict](#) by identifying and condemning six grave violations that disproportionately affect children during wartime. The six grave violations serve as the basis to gather information and report on violations affecting children and are: [Killing and maiming of children](#); [Recruitment or use of children as soldiers](#); [Sexual violence against children](#); [Abduction of children](#); [Attacks against schools or hospitals](#); [Denial of humanitarian access for children](#). The existing institutional standards within the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions are often disconnected with the harsh on-ground realities faced by children in war zones. This project explores some of the key considerations for child protection issues that can be addressed due to this disconnect across high-risk scenarios, specifically war zones, spanning across the Middle East and Africa. We propose the adoption of child-centric approaches to prioritize children's needs, rights, and perspectives to strengthen child protection practices within peacekeeping missions.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What are the key considerations and barriers to youth agency that can inform UN peacekeeping personnel to provide protection that meets the requirements of children in high-risk zones?
2. How can soldier experiences inform the on-ground adoption and education of the UN's six grave violations among stakeholders?
  - More specifically, how do gender roles and stereotypes impact child protection responses within peacekeeping missions, particularly in terms of the ethical dilemmas faced by soldiers who must balance adherence to UN child protection protocols with their country-specific mandates?

These research questions are focused and tailored to address specific aspects of child protection within peacekeeping missions, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the identified critical areas. Our key research questions guided our understanding of the on-ground realities and considerations that require policy attention, based on the soldiers' knowledge of and adherence to the UN's six grave violations as per their training in peacekeeping missions (*See appendix 1.6*). Our team conducted desk work and fieldwork through qualitative interviews, literature reviews, and focus groups to gather insights and cross-check findings with subject matter experts worldwide (*See appendix 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5*).

### **Client Description: Dallaire Centre of Excellence for Peace and Security (DCOE):**

[The Dallaire Centre of Excellence for Peace and Security](#) is named after General Roméo Dallaire, who served as Force Commander for the 1994 [UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda \(UNAMIR\)](#). DCOE is a component of the [Canadian Armed Forces \(CAF\)](#). It works to support the CAF in its operations, focusing on broader human security as a forum for research and learning. Moreover, the Centre plays a pivotal role in informing the CAF and the [Department of National Defence](#) on topics related to child protection in high-risk scenarios and peacekeeping missions such as the [United Nations \(UN\) peacekeeping missions](#).

### **UBC GP2 Students' Mission Statement:**

Our team is driven by an unwavering commitment to child protection. Our core values are rooted in the principles of respect, integrity, equity, inclusivity, and diversity in all facets of our research. This commitment is integral to our mission to further equitable child protection in peacekeeping missions worldwide and extend these protections to the most vulnerable.

### **Urgency for Incorporating Child Protection Measures in Peacekeeping:**

Globally, there is an increasing need for child protection as conflict levels rise, considering the number of children living in conflict areas has almost doubled since mid-1990s.<sup>[4]</sup> There has also been a rise in violence against children in conflict-ridden nations. Across the world, one child out of six (approximately 468 million children) lived in a conflict zone in 2022 and many were subjected to various forms of human rights abuses.<sup>[5]</sup> A total of 27,638 verified grave violations were committed against children in 2022 (13% increase over 2021), marking the peak in recorded history since reporting began in 2005.<sup>[6]</sup> Due to significant under-reporting of these violations, it is estimated that this number would be much higher. In order to effectively protect children living in conflict zones, measures for their protection must address both the direct and indirect effects of war.<sup>[7]</sup> Death, physical torture, and mental torture, such as trauma, are examples of direct effects. During a conflict, many children can be sexually abused and/or recruited as combatants. For example, UNICEF reports that over 19,000 children in South Sudan have been enlisted in the armed forces and militia groups.<sup>[8]</sup> Indirect effects include living in dangerous conditions, being cut off from family, starving from a lack of food/ intentional man-made famine, long-term health issues, and denial of education.<sup>[9]</sup>



While some pessimists may say that child exploitation in war is a wicked problem with no solution, it is essential to remember that discussing child protection issues and the needs of children during the peace process can be an effective starting point to generate the political will needed to resolve or mitigate conflict.<sup>[10]</sup> However, there is a robust international framework for child protection and addressing child protection issues, enshrined in UNSC's [Youth, Peace, and Security agenda](#) (YPS), established in 2015 (as the "first international policy framework" that acknowledges the positive role young people play in improving security and peacebuilding). This has the potential for modernizing and strengthening the protection requirements of children in conflict zones (*See: appendix 1.2*).

### **Study Objectives:**

The primary objective of this research endeavor was to perform a comprehensive exploration of the intricate dynamics in child protection and endangerment that exist within the multifaceted landscape of peacekeeping missions. We have elaborated on the study objectives in the appendix section, but these objectives can broadly be broken down into the following goals (*See appendix 1.8*):

- 1) Aim to develop and convey effective strategies for enhancing child protection
- 2) Assessing any gaps of child protection in peacekeeping operational processes
- 3) Examining the role of gender dynamics and understanding ethical/moral dilemmas

### ***Navigating Research Through a Decolonized Approach***

In our research, we made conscious efforts individually and collectively as a team not to stay confined within traditional Western-centric and Eurocentric understandings of what ought to be and not to be, whose voice ought to be heard and whose not to be, whose voice outranks the others, and what schools of thought are superior. Instead, we focused on what is feasible and aligned with international law without violating any country's, nation's, or people's sovereignty. We sought to understand and learn what works and does not depending on cultural, religious, societal, or political contexts and structures. Our approach was not to go in and impose ideals of how a people ought to think or behave. We also made it a point not to go in assuming we know better than the very people and communities that have experienced human insecurity, a mistake many predecessors have made repeatedly.<sup>[11]</sup> Unfortunately, this is still commonplace.<sup>[12][13]</sup> Suppose we are to thrive as a world community. In that case, we must leverage solutions that can be implemented in various societies and countries amid the nexus of human and political complications. This is to achieve human security without violating human dignity and cultural integrity in due process.

Therefore, in this report, you will find the considerations and rationale from a people-centric approach. For instance, a child holding a gun in a conflict zone cannot be automatically categorized as a child soldier, as it is very common in some societies to take up arms for the protection of cattle or property. Each situation requires careful consideration, as war ages the children and makes them appear older beyond their years. This can also translate to greater emotional maturity and capacity for decision-making. People affected are this report's foundation and driving force to ensure a sustainable transition from maintaining peace to laying the building bricks for lasting stability – to go beyond peacekeeping. Our prime decolonization research strategy for inclusive and constructive

peacebuilding was to incorporate findings from the global North and South among academics, peacekeepers, civil society, and policy leaders for a more holistic understanding.

## **Defining Child Protection, Child Agency, & Child Soldiering in the Context of Peacekeeping in Complex Environments:**

### *Child Protection*

Child protection can be described as a set of policies, principles, or measures that are aimed at safeguarding or enhancing the rights, well-being, dignity, and future of children.<sup>[14][15]</sup> This involves adopting measures that prevent and respond to risks or situations in which children are susceptible to harm, including neglect, child abuse, exploitation, and violence.<sup>[16]</sup> Based on our interviews we have categorized these measures into three categories:

1. Preventative Measures: These include but are not limited to initiatives aimed at raising awareness of children's rights and needs, potential risks to their safety and development, and available parenting supports (e.g. parenting workshops and early intervention strategies).
2. Intervention & Support: These include mental health supports for children such as counseling and therapeutic services for those who require additional care and attention as many children are vulnerable to neglect on the part of a guardian; physical and psychological abuse; trauma; and various forms of violence. Intervention and support also consist of the creation and provision of safe spaces and shelters for children at risk of immediate danger. This also includes communication channels such as helplines dedicated to children in place to receive calls for help from children as well as bystanders seeking support or expressing concerns about instances of abuse.
3. Legal Frameworks: These refer to child protection laws and legislation that work to safeguard the rights of children, define offenses, and prescribe punishments in violation of these. These also include measures to safeguard child offenders, such as through age-appropriate treatments, and to separate them from adult offenders through juvenile justice reforms.

### *Child Agency*

Child agency refers to the sense of and capacity for control that children have to make their own choices and participate in matters that impact them.<sup>[17]</sup> It concerns the rights of children in the decision-making process to express their views and for these to be considered.<sup>[18]</sup> Again, based on our interviews, agency can also be categorized into three types:

1. Participation: This refers to the involvement of children in the process of coming to a decision at various levels, be these family, societal, or legal.
2. Advocacy: This refers to the rising phenomenon of children advocating for their rights and needs.
3. Empowerment: In the instance of children, this refers to equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to make informed decisions and exercise self-

autonomy. This will vary according to the age of the child.

## *Child Soldiering*

The [Implementation Guidance for the Vancouver Principles](#) uses the term ‘child soldiers’ as a shorthand and interprets it broadly, in alignment with the definition established in the Paris Principles (*See appendix 1.7*). It states that a child soldier (or 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, 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”.

*“You never would think that a child would participate in an armed group.” (A Female Peacekeeper, Based on Fieldwork Interview, 2023)*

Child soldiering refers to the recruitment, conscription, and use of children, whether on a voluntary or forced basis, to serve either as fighters in times of conflict or to play supporting roles that endanger their lives and place them in vulnerable situations from which they may or may not be able to break free.<sup>[19]</sup>

*“They are told the UN is bad. You have to see these kids are victims.” (A Female Peacekeeper, Based on Fieldwork Interview, 2023)*

For instance, some children are born into rebel groups and grow up knowing war as the only way of life, unaware of their own exploitation and the abnormality of their circumstances.<sup>[20]</sup> Additionally, contrary to the widespread notion that child soldiers are by and large boys, girls too serve as child soldiers.<sup>[21]</sup> However, girl soldiers happen to be less visible than their male counterparts as they are usually confined to less visible support roles.<sup>[22]</sup> They are also generally the least educated and from the poorest areas.<sup>[23]</sup>

In entirety, child soldiering is a violation of international law and has visible and invisible social, physical, and psychological consequences for children that are, in some cases, permanent.<sup>[24]</sup>

## **Defining the Boundaries of Children, Peace and Security:**

### *Defining “Child”*

*“Everyone talks about ‘the impact of war on children.’ But how do you measure the impact of war? Who suffers the greater horror, the child who is violated or the child who is forced to become a perpetrator? We are the victim, the perpetrator, and the witness, all at once.” —Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report for the Children of Sierra Leone 2004.*

This project uses the terms “child” and “youth” interchangeably for individuals ages 18 and below,<sup>[25]</sup> unless otherwise specified, to acknowledge varied perspectives without bias and recognize the evolving nature of individual development. We use this fluid terminology to address the needs of

all individuals within this demographic, given that age thresholds for adulthood vary by region and context.

Moreover, over the past decade, the presence of child soldiers has been particularly salient in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.<sup>[26]</sup>

### **Recognizing Child Agency:**

Child/Youth Agency within the realm of child protection emphasizes the voices and agency of young individuals at the forefront, particularly within the challenging contexts of armed conflict. This recognizes the imperative need for direct collaboration and active involvement of children and youth in influencing decisions that significantly impact their lives. In this way, there is recognition of the inherent capacity of children to actively participate in decision-making processes, particularly in the complex settings of armed conflict.

The United Nations and various child rights organizations have also emphasized the inclusion of children in policy and decision-making processes for sustainable peace. The UN Security Council has not only underscored the importance of safeguarding children's welfare and rights during peace transitions but has actively advocated for their direct participation in these processes.<sup>[27]</sup> Children's engagement in the shift from conflict to post-conflict stages is a crucial mechanism for documenting human rights violations, allowing children to share their experiences and contribute to reconciliation efforts and to holding perpetrators accountable. This participatory approach aids in deepening the awareness regarding the impact of conflicts on children, fostering their role as engaged and empowered citizens.<sup>[28]</sup>

The framework of Child/Youth Agency also holds a nuanced understanding of intersectionality on the ground. This approach would involve considering diverse perspectives and examining various factors that shape the experiences of children and youth, recognizing the complexity and uniqueness of each situation. Cultivating trust within the community is central to fostering connections and collaboration.<sup>[29]</sup> Trust will empower young individuals to provide their perspectives in a respectful environment, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.

Recognizing young people as active contributors unleashes untapped potential, envisaging a transformed world where they play key roles as involved participants and citizens.<sup>[30]</sup> Examining the intricacies of decision-making emphasizes that thoughtful processes engaging youth present numerous possibilities. Empowering youth promotes self-worth, self-acceptance, and self-reliance, cultivating social connections, acting as a beacon of hope for the future and instilling present confidence.<sup>[v]</sup>

Advocacy emanating directly from youth contributes to public discourse and actively works towards creating more comprehensive post-conflict policymaking. Integrating children's insights, amplifying their voices, and restoring their agency will provide greater context for informed policymaking.

## *Women's Role in Aiding Children as Agents in Peace & Security Processes*

While there exists a plethora of data and insights into the safekeeping of women and children in all kinds of high-risk environments, the concept of viewing women and children as active agents in the context of peace and security is relatively recent.<sup>[31]</sup> Though they are most vulnerable they are nevertheless critical actors in the conjunction of fostering resilient and sustainable societies,<sup>[32]</sup> and solutions should be implemented with them not about them.

*“The seeds of success in every nation on Earth are best planted in women and children” (Former President of Malawi, Joyce Banda, Farm to Market Alliance, 2022).*

Therefore, their inclusion in resolution, decision-making, and long-term security will be a decisive determinant in the longevity of peacekeeping efforts and agreements. Several steps can be considered to enhance and empower women and children so that they are able to contribute to peace and security:

- Legal Protections & Considerations: Women and children are more vulnerable to gender-based violence which includes sexual and physical violence and other forms of exploitation,<sup>[33]</sup> and so it is imperative to put measures in place during and after conflicts, wars, and genocides that provide them with essential safe spaces and support. It is even better to have measures in place before a situation escalates into a high-risk environment. Protecting them from harm is essential for sustaining peace.
- Education, Awareness, and Empowerment: These opportunities should be leveraged for women and children. For instance, with an education women can break free of their dependency on others, and this increases their chances of coming out of the cycle of poverty.<sup>[34]</sup> Awareness of women's well-being, healthcare, and reproductive rights is necessary to prevent miscarriages, stillbirths, and other fatal or irreversible health problems that may impact the woman or her child, particularly in high-risk scenarios.<sup>[35]</sup> Women are often caregivers for children, particularly in patriarchal societies, and to empower women is to empower the children they nurture.

Additionally,<sup>[33]</sup> women often remain with their children in situations where they are in danger due to economic dependency. Empowering women economically will lead to empowering them socially and politically. Similarly, empowering children through education is important as both women and children should know their rights as the absence of this knowledge is often a barrier that keeps them in harm's way.

When we asked peacekeepers what they felt based on experience that effectively empowers women and children, one remarked, *“Education is your best gun” (A Female Peacekeeper, Based on Fieldwork Interview, 2023).*

- Community Engagement: Working with women and children alone will not empower them if they must battle with their families, communities, and society at large. It is vital to engage with communities to work towards gender equity and awareness of rights and protections in place for women and children.



(Image sourced from change.org petition “Stop the Use of Child Soldiers across Central African Countries,” Vanessa Mutai, March 12, 2016. <https://www.change.org/p/president-of-the-united-states-stop-the-use-of-child-soldiers-across-central-african-countries>).

### **The Women, Peace & Security Agenda:**

Women and girls play an integral role in sustaining peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts in the context of child protection, and in certain situations, women are responsible for decision-making concerning youth. The [Women, Peace, and Security \(WPS\) Agenda](#), enunciated by the United Nations Security Council, seeks to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls. This agenda strives to promote the active engagement of women and girls within peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes. A gender lens should be incorporated into peace and security policies involving peace negotiations, reconciliation, transnational justice, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration for transformative efforts.<sup>[36]</sup> The WPS Agenda underscores the need to safeguard the human rights of women and girls to prevent and tackle instances of conflict-related gender-based violence. The aim is to meet their unique needs and ensure that they have equal access to humanitarian and development aid. For an extended period, men, holding the primary positions in armed groups and public decision-making, were traditionally viewed as key figures in conflict and its resolution. UN Women (2024) reports that women and girls are often disproportionately affected by conflict.<sup>[37]</sup> Furthermore, the WPS agenda can include integrating gender perspectives, fostering inclusivity, and upholding integrity.<sup>[38]</sup>

Resolution 1325 recognizes the pivotal role of gender equality in global peace and security.<sup>[39]</sup> This resolution notes the importance of women's equal role within decision-making processes, incorporating gender lenses into policy analysis, and conducting sex-disaggregated research for peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives. Although there have been advancements in women's role in peacebuilding, women comprise an estimated 9% of uniformed peacekeepers.<sup>[40]</sup> Their involvement remains crucial for peacebuilding efforts of building trust and essential advocates for youth rights.

Implementing the National Action Plan (NAP) to enact Resolution 1325 underscores the importance of recognizing the valuable perspectives of regional and local communities, along with Indigenous communities, regarding the particular needs and vulnerabilities of children and ensuring that responses are culturally sensitive and appropriate.<sup>[41]</sup>

### **Defining Human Security at the Legal Level:**

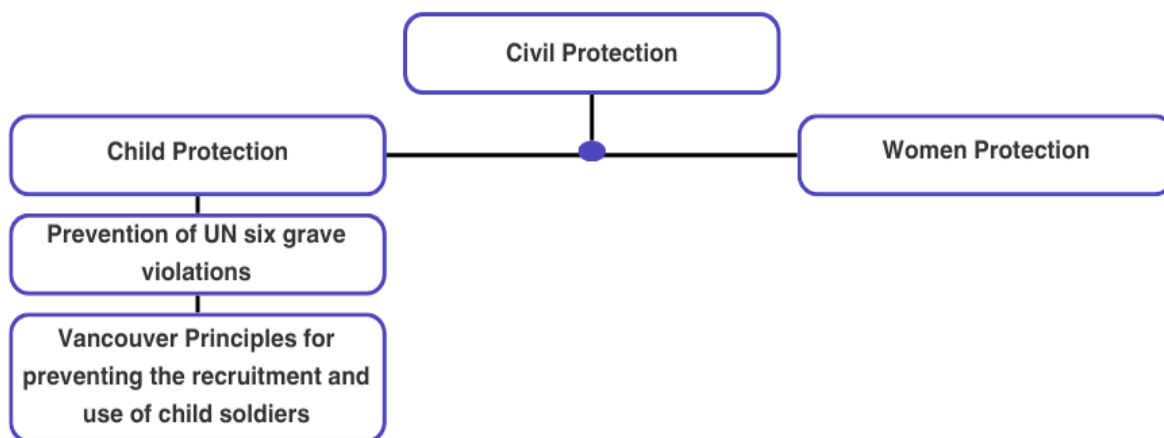
[The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security](#) defines 'human security' as a people-centric analytical framework for preventative measures and comprehensive responses to risks and developments that threaten people's lives and livelihoods. Moreover, a [European Commission Horizon](#) project outlines that the human security approach is context-specific and extends to economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political securities. The [1994 Human Development Report](#) describes human security as freedom from fear and want, and the right to live with dignity.

### ***Women & Children in the Context of Human Security***

According to the United Nations Human Development Report (1994),<sup>[42]</sup> human security is defined in terms of economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political needs. It captures the essence of human security through this quote:

*“The child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced” (UNDP, 1994, p. 22).*

The report also states that despite the hard-earned progress in gender equity advancement, there is a “dark shadow of insecurity cast on the majority of the world's population: women” (p. 101).



Human security is inherently a people-centered process. Under the giant civil protection umbrella, child and women's protection are interconnected and imply overlapping potential policy solutions. The prevention of UN Six Grave violations falls under the child protection mandate, and its interlinkages with civil protection reiterates that it takes a global village to raise a child in today's age of conflict.

*“Child protection can benefit from a model that, from the beginning, thinks about the ecosystem not in the physical space but also in the virtual space. Collaboration is key – it does not take a village to raise a kid now– it takes a whole global village. Children are our future, not just in country x or y, it is global. We have to work together.” - Canadian Ambassador to Latin America.*

Beyond protecting vulnerable populations, it is essential for any human security approach to consider the long-term implications of living in conflict zones and make arrangements to empower vulnerable populations. As long as these communities struggle with food, clothing, and shelter, their dignity will continue to be impacted due to their dependency on other actors. Hence, the ultimate objective of any human security approach is to uplift communities by empowering them to live an entire life of dignity<sup>[43]</sup> in safe circumstances.



*“No bullets. One rose for each child.” stated a 10-year-old child called Majd during a psychosocial session delivered by UNICEF and partners in Sudan*  
 Source: UNICEF Sudan/2023/Mohamdeen



Cultural norms in conflict zones impose challenges in providing medical assistance or aid, as often the women and children are not exploited openly but in the privacy of their homes, making their exploitation invisible to other actors. Preconceived notions regarding males (due to societal norms or previous exploitation) may prevent children and women from approaching male officers for assistance. In certain countries, women and girls past a certain age are not allowed to venture out without being accompanied by a male member of the family, and even then, another male is not permitted to touch the female, making it difficult for these women and girls to get medical assistance from male doctors. These cultural issues can be addressed by integrating more female peacekeepers in military and non-military roles to cater to vulnerable populations and improve women's and children's protection in conflict zones. There is a need for female medical personnel too.

Additionally, women in conflict or post-conflict settings play important roles in peace-building activities, such as setting up formal and informal groups involved in demobilizing and reintegrating former soldiers, demilitarization and disarmament, and peaceful political development.<sup>[44]</sup> They also tend to emphasize areas that are neglected in more militarized international peace-building missions, such as the role of local-level peace building, and the communities' psychosocial, relational and spiritual needs. Women are more able to interact with and win the trust of other women in society when they are allowed to work as police officers, which increases overall safety.<sup>[45]</sup>

### *Transformative Feminist Perspectives on the Erosion of Human Security*

In our research we recognize that gender dynamics are at play in the context of human security and that the experiences of men, boys, women, and girls differ in high-risk environments such as in conflicts.<sup>[46]</sup> Feminist scholars argue that traditional notions of security are exclusionary and limiting because they do not consider that both genders (men and women) experience human insecurity differently.<sup>[47]</sup> This is as women and girls stand at a disadvantage that has been ingrained and maintained and will not be easy to eradicate and continues to be further perpetuated through power inequities and gender stratification, a component of which is female subordination.<sup>[48]</sup> Women and girls are often less educated, more susceptible to economic poverty, food insecurity, and gender-based violence compared to their male counterparts.<sup>[49]</sup> Besides, women and children are often portrayed only in the context of victims and rarely as agents.<sup>[50]</sup>

However, another very real danger UBC Professor Erin Baines identifies is that the reverse is also possible, meaning that in striving for gender equity there is a possibility that we may grant privileges to women over men, which is equally bad.<sup>[51]</sup> For instance, we found that to evoke empathy in their audience reports by reputable institutions and media outlets covering high-risk situations tend to emphasize the deaths of women and children and harms to them but often sideline the very same experiences of men and male casualties.<sup>[52]</sup> This is particularly so in instances when tensions escalate and unfold in the global South due to deep seated systemic ongoing legacies of Western superiority over the coloured and the interpretations of coloured lives as lesser in value.<sup>[53][54]</sup> Societal expectations about how men are more resilient than their female counterparts and therefore less vulnerable may contribute to this distortion. Therefore, in the context of human security it is essential that a gender analysis is not skewed in favor of one gender or the other.

## Militarized Masculinities in the Context of Child Protection:

### *Defining Militarized Masculinities*

Militarized masculinities in the armed forces seep into the design and operational processes in peacekeeping deployment zones and can leave a lasting impression on children who may internalize these regressive gender norms. These may translate into further aggression and violence against women and girls as children may seek to mimic the behavior they see peacekeeping forces exhibit, thereby, aggravating gender-based violence in conflict zones.

When we report on militarized masculinities, we refer to the traits and behaviours traditionally associated with masculinity that military institutions promote.<sup>[55]</sup> The focus on militarized masculinities in this report is largely within the context of peacekeeping corps. Our research explored the intersection of gender and behavioral expectations within peacekeeping and operational duties. Examining militarized masculinity has been integral to understanding the experiences, learnings, and thought processes of the peacekeepers we interviewed, particularly female peacekeepers. This was necessary as we had to comprehend how an ideal peacekeeper or soldier ought to behave as per the perceptions of those in their combat boots.

Militarism has traditionally been grounded on hierarchies of gender, race, and class.<sup>[56]</sup> For instance, wives, mothers, and sisters, women in general, have historically been expected to portray the roles of supportive family members who take care of the soldier's home in his absence so that he has a home to return to, something to fight for.<sup>[57]</sup> Women have long been projected to be the weaker, more emotional gender, and men as comparatively better positioned and programmed to practice resilience.<sup>[58]</sup> Today, while many militaries have adopted more progressive views towards the inclusion of women in this institution, these continue to be shaped by binaries such as gender norms.<sup>[59]</sup>

*“They didn't know what to do with us.” (A Female Peacekeeper, Based on Fieldwork Interviews, 2023).*

Women can now serve in combat roles. Many militaries have also embraced initiatives to increase female representation; some even use this to enhance their image as more inclusive.<sup>[60]</sup> Joining the military is often marketed to women as an opportunity to become empowered and self-sufficient. However, much like at home, these women, when deployed, often play support roles.<sup>[61]</sup> The women are often expected to cook and clean,<sup>[62]</sup> much like the civilian women in the soldiers' homes,<sup>[63]</sup> instead of being delegated the same responsibilities as their male counterparts. This is not to say that all militaries approach security and gender norms the same way.

### *Navigating Gendered Challenges in a Struggle Against Stereotypes in Militaries*

Before addressing gender-based challenges within these conflict zones among the affected population, particularly children, it will be more effective for the UN peacekeeping forces to first look inwards and ensure they too are upholding these values and expectations of gender-inclusivity. After all, the military is perceived largely as a male domain, which can negatively impact the agency of marginalized groups caught within this structure, particularly women.<sup>[64]</sup>

Before many military women battle with external forces, they must fight to find their place within the military institution they serve. Many have or continue to face a lack of opportunity in career advancement opportunities, and many fields remain reserved for men alone.<sup>[65]</sup> However, this is not the case in every military across the globe. Even so, in countries where gender equality has progressed further, women still find themselves battling with gendered stereotypes related to their physical capabilities, emotional intelligence, or perseverance.<sup>[66]</sup> Therefore, women serving may find themselves feeling pressure to exert masculinity in an attempt to be taken seriously. Thus, increasing the representation of women within a military does not necessarily feminize it but may lead to the masculinization of these women as they find themselves trying to navigate a male-dominated environment.<sup>[67]</sup>

*“There is no question in my mind that women have to deal with more discrimination, in particular, in the military. The gender imbalance that exists there and I think the institutional culture pervades that. So, the real question is how you mitigate those.” (A Policy Leader, Fieldwork Interview, 2023).*

Military training includes “exaggerated” stereotypes of masculinity encompassing physical strength, emotional suppression, and aggression, ingraining hypermasculinity as a characteristic of the ideal soldier.<sup>[68]</sup> This emphasis on hypermasculinity has impacts on the women serving alongside these men.<sup>[69]</sup> These ideals make it even harder for women to be accepted by their male counterparts, let alone be seen on equal footing. It raises questions about their competency as they do not necessarily possess these ideals seen as essential for success. The consequences of hypermasculinity do not end with women; they also impact men who do not conform to the hypermasculinity mold or lack some of the ideals associated with it.<sup>[70]</sup> The pressure that comes with embodying these traits associated with manhood can create hostile environments for those regarded as more empathetic and expressive or those perceived as being physically weaker.<sup>[71]</sup> Interestingly, some studies find that in war men get emotional.<sup>[72]</sup>

### *Militarized Masculinities & Human (In)Security*

This militaristic culture has been found to seep into peacekeeping missions and has been reported to have implications for the local populations.<sup>[73]</sup> It has contributed to cases of and the broader normalization of sexual misconduct in peacekeeping missions in the absence of law enforcement, specifically in secluded areas such as the Congo. Secluded destinations often lack reporting mechanisms.<sup>[74]</sup> Militaristic culture additionally also strips women and girls of their agency. They are seen through the lens of objects to be protected or reduced to victims of greater male desires.<sup>[75]</sup> In doing so, militaristic culture undermines the female capacity for independent decision-making. It reinforces the notion that women and girls play passive roles in their safekeeping, thereby undermining their agency and right to exercise it.

Children tend to imitate the behaviors the adults around them exhibit. In a militarized context, if they see women confined to subservient roles, there is a risk that these children may internalize these gender “norms.” They may then reinforce these stereotypes that will continue to perpetuate a cycle of gender power imbalance. These risks having a negative educational impact on

impressionable children if they do not witness women in leadership positions and this may limit their understanding of gender roles. It may also impact their aspirations in life as they internalize these harmful beliefs and may even affect how they choose to display their emotions. To enhance child protection, it is therefore important to address such stereotypes. This can be done by having women in more diverse positions during deployment especially leadership roles rather than limiting them to serve as supporting figures. It will encourage children, especially girls, to envision a broad spectrum of opportunities for themselves.

### *Gender Integration & the Evolution of Militaries*

With the increasing integration of women into military structures, some of these institutions have resorted to changing their teachings or training to address deeply ingrained ideals of hypermasculinity in an effort to normalize the presence of women. For instance, some militaries have brought in gender advisors to improve the gender imbalance.<sup>[76]</sup> This has been done partly in the interest of enhancing security at the local level. The incorporation of a gender perspective is paramount in peacekeeping missions. For instance, the presence of female peacekeepers in missions helps in understanding gender needs and differences. Gender sensitivity not only helps recognize instances of misconduct, such as sexual abuse at the hands of male soldiers, but also improves the effectiveness of humanitarian initiatives. Naturally women and men alike bring their own approaches to gender sensitivity. However, somehow, the burden of incorporating a gender perspective in military settings rests with female peacekeepers.

*“It is not the sole responsibility of women in any organization let alone in the military to provide a gendered lens...No one is talking about how gendered advisors don’t have to be women.” (Former Deputy Director at Global Affairs Canada, Based on Fieldwork Interview, 2023).*

During the interview, this policy leader also emphasized that while women are “well-suited” to do so considering their positionality and lived experiences, men should be held to the same expectation to use a gendered lens when looking at a situation. The policy leader added that the Government of Canada’s [Gender-Based Analysis Plus](#) has been made a requirement within the government for most employees for this reason.

### **Peacekeeping: Unpacking Challenges & Opportunities:**

#### *Deployment of Women in Peacekeeping*

In terms of gender equality, the number of women being enlisted into military roles for UN peacekeeping is commendable.<sup>[77]</sup> However, to what roles these female peacekeepers are deployed matters, especially for enhancing security for women and children. The role allocation of these female peacekeepers has profound implications for the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations. For instance, women and children prefer to turn to female peacekeepers for their concerns and safety.<sup>[78]</sup> A high-level policy official shared that perhaps this is the result of these communities having experienced most of the violence they know at the hands of men and even male peacekeepers. When there is already a language barrier, it is much more challenging for peacekeepers, male and female alike, to build trust with the local population.<sup>[79]</sup> Peacekeeping

missions also include soldiers from many different countries, which adds another layer of complexity since soldiers from different countries may have different expectations around gender roles. However, in actualizing the opportunity that female peacekeepers present in enhancing child protection, we risk reinforcing another gender stereotype. The roles allocated to female peacekeepers now include military leadership roles in some progressive military institutions such as Uruguay, where women can drive tanks and wield machine guns.<sup>[80]</sup> Although the objective is not to increase militarization but rather to reduce the need for it, the inclusion of women in this way and at this level is a significant step towards gender equality. However, most of the roles assigned to women in peacekeeping operations in most countries are limited to support positions or staying within the camp.<sup>[81]</sup> For instance, women from such countries, predominantly situated in the Global South in Asia, cannot participate in patrols or carry out the duties their male counterparts are delegated in the countries they are deployed to.<sup>[82]</sup> Women and children in such high-risk environments need to witness men and women working collaboratively shoulder-to-shoulder to achieve gender equality effectively. It is impossible to achieve gender equality merely by increasing the number of women deployed. The deployment of female peacekeepers calls for considerable attention. For instance, when interviewed, a female peacekeeper from Uruguay reported that almost all of the translators deployed for the peacekeeping missions she served on were men. She stressed the importance of having female peacekeepers in this position. She explained this was because local populations are more likely to feel more comfortable conversing with female peacekeepers, especially as there is already a power imbalance in these conversations. Similarly, in some cultures, it is not permissible for women to converse with men they perceive as strangers or outside the family circle. This is particularly the case for Islamic cultures.

In another interview, a male peacekeeper who had commanded several battalions pointed out that in his experience, he learned that there must always be a 50:50 ratio of women to men in each role. He explained that, for instance, in the case of doctors deployed to serve in peacekeeping missions, these are almost always men, and this is a significant barrier when it comes to the protection of women and children. Again, in some cultures, usually in predominantly Muslim countries and communities, it is not acceptable for women and girls to be speaking, let alone touched or treated by a male doctor.<sup>[83]</sup> The peacekeeper elaborated that, for instance, in his case, a little girl was brought to their camp in Syria by her family who needed urgent medical care due to severe burns across her body, and it became a tense situation when the family learned that there was no female doctor. However, the child needed treatment to survive, so they had to settle for allowing the girl's father to sit in while she was treated. The peacekeepers later found that spilling hot water onto children was a standard disciplining method for children when they were perceived as misbehaving. The peacekeepers also explained that they could not change an entire culture, but having women in all positions at every level could enhance child protection.

### *Considering the Circumstances Under Which Women Are Deployed*

It is only sometimes possible to increase the number of deployed female peacekeepers. One barrier in recruiting and ultimately deploying female peacekeepers to go on these missions is the general perception of peacekeeping as masculine. This perception of peacekeeping dissuades women from applying. Another layer adding to the misconception of peacekeeping as inherently masculine with no space for femininity. For this reason, there needs to be more information dissemination to counter the existence of misinformation. Given that the ratio of female to male peacekeepers is

significantly disproportionate, women in military service do not always know any women in proximity who have previously served as peacekeepers, and this is predominantly where a lack of information comes in.<sup>[84]</sup> The stories they have heard are from their male colleagues whose needs and bodily requirements differ from those of women. Male peacekeepers cannot be expected to know what support and resources are available to women. Therefore, many women go into these missions packed with essentials they were wrongly told would be unavailable in the locations they were being deployed to. Very little information is available even when they know they will serve.

*“In the middle of the jungle, women worry how it is going to be with menstruation” (A Female Peacekeeper, Based on Fieldwork Interview, 2023).*

Another barrier found through the fieldwork is that the duration of the missions has also been unattractive, especially for married women who must fulfill their marital duties alongside their military service. Women are already disproportionately burdened by marital expectations, which oftentimes include the unpaid labour of homemaking and caring for the child.<sup>[85]</sup>

Additionally, Uruguay's approach stood out when examining different militaries' approaches to encouraging or having more women serve in peacekeeping missions. In Uruguay, peacekeeping is entirely voluntary, an essential distinction from the usual protocol of mandating peacekeeping service. The circumstances under which women are deployed impact their ability to carry out their responsibilities diligently. One of the female peacekeepers interviewed, when probed, hesitantly explained that the women she saw from other countries that mandated peacekeeping for women were miserable, and their situation was "terrible."

While efforts to increase the involvement of women in peacekeeping seemingly align with gender equality objectives, it also results in tokenism. This does not result in genuine empowerment. It can also jeopardize the safety and mental well-being of female peacekeepers and undermine the effectiveness with which they perform their duties in peacekeeping operations.<sup>[86]</sup> Consequently, the toll of mandatory peacekeeping service risks spilling from their professional lives and can compromise the safety of the very local populations they aim to protect.<sup>[87]</sup> It is essential to have more women peacekeepers, but female soldiers shouldn't be ordered to serve in this way.

Another dimension of mandating peacekeeping for women is the negative impact it has on the well-being of their children, who may be left behind without their mothers below a reasonable age.<sup>[88]</sup> For instance, the absence of available support by these families or financial means places an undue burden on the mothers and fathers who are mandated to serve or any guardian.<sup>[89]</sup> The situation is even more dire for the well-being of children who are under a certain age.<sup>[90]</sup> When peacekeepers face circumstances that impact their families' well-being without a supportive environment, this can compromise the mission's success.<sup>[91]</sup>

### *Empowerment Project: the Elsie Initiative*

The Elsie Initiative is a mission within Peacekeeping Operations to encourage and facilitate a substantial increase in the meaningful participation of women in United Nations peacekeeping operations.<sup>[92]</sup> Aligned with the United Nations Security Council's goal of doubling the rate of women's participation in police and military contingents by 2020 compared to 2015, the initiative

operates in harmony with the UN Department of Peace Operation's Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018-2028.<sup>[93]</sup>

Launched on March 28, 2019, and set to operate for a renewable period of five years, the Elsie Initiative is hosted by UN Women.<sup>[94]</sup> The project was initiated and led by Canada's Global Affairs Department. The Initiative represents a vital step forward in promoting innovation and overcoming barriers to accelerating uniformed women's integration in peace operations.

The Elsie Initiative is an innovative financial mechanism that provides assistance and incentives to Troop and/or Police Contributing Countries (T/PCC).<sup>[95]</sup> It encourages these countries to identify and address obstacles preventing the deployment of qualified and trained uniformed women peacekeepers, spanning military contingents, formed police units, and individual deployments like police officers, military observers, and staff officers.

Moreover, the initiative extends its support to projects submitted by UN organizations. These projects aim to implement and test innovative approaches that enhance the meaningful participation of uniformed women in UN peace operations. The Elsie Initiative is recognized as a vital tool in advancing gender parity and fostering a more inclusive and effective peacekeeping environment. In the broader context, this initiative connects to the protection of children in conflict zones and the promotion of youth agency by creating a safer and more gender-inclusive peace and security landscape. As women play vital roles in peace operations, their increased participation creates environments more conducive to the well-being and protection of children and youth affected by conflict. Additionally, by challenging traditional gender norms, the Elsie Initiative promotes a more inclusive and diverse environment, fostering the agency and empowerment of women and youth in the peace and security sector.

### *The Challenges Peacekeepers Encounter When Battling Faced with Dilemmas*

Sometimes, the peacekeepers we interviewed would find themselves in scenarios where they experienced conflicting emotions when they had to choose between their ethical, moral, and religious principles or abiding by the protocols assigned to them. For instance, one male peacekeeper explained that in Latin American culture, it was impossible to display a lack of empathy towards children, so they would sneak biscuits and water to children in the Congo, even though they were not allowed to give starving populations any food. The UN believed soldiers might exchange these items for questionable favours that could risk sexually exploiting women and children who found themselves in desperate and vulnerable positions.

Another case is of two peacekeepers on patrolling duty who came across a weak older woman caring for her infant grandchild whom she was struggling to look after. They were impoverished, and she could only feed the child with red beans and, to quench his thirst, drink the water in these. The child the peacekeepers could deduce would not survive if they did not bring him back. When they called for permission, they were told they could not touch the child and the woman should carry the child herself to the camp, which was many kilometers away; she would not have survived it herself. So, the soldiers carried the child and brought them to the camp where he received medical care, but they did not inform the UN. Instead, they explained that they had made it to the camp, knowing the locals were not allowed inside. The peacekeepers did not mention that the child

was already receiving medical care. They waited until a helicopter could airlift the child and his grandmother from their secluded location to get proper care. The peacekeeper explained such cases are not unusual. Another peacekeeper explained that it hurts their hearts, but they cannot do anything and are filled with grief when they must leave.

### *Defining the Ecosystem of Stakeholders*

Set against the backdrop of conflict, several stakeholders are often restricted in carrying out their operations for child protection. War is a result of the vested interests of various powerful actors seeking to get a hold of the resources of the conflict region, and innocent civilians often get in the crossfires of a fight that is not their own. While children are the primary stakeholders in child protection matters, they often lack the knowledge of their rights and have low power to advocate for their safety. Children's needs must be prioritized, and their voices should be incorporated in every stage of policy development to ensure all risk factors are addressed. The burden of healing is not the sole responsibility of the victim but of the larger institutions and systems that inflicted violence and trauma on innocent lives. Children in conflict zones must be empowered to utilize reporting mechanisms and available resources so they can seek assistance and escape oppressive circumstances. UN peacekeepers are often the first line of engagement for children in conflict zones. However, they are restricted in their capacity to help vulnerable populations due to international protocols and chapter-specific requirements for the conflict zones.

*(See: Stakeholder matrix on the next page)*



*Stakeholder Matrix for Child Protection Issues in Conflict Zones:*

Stakeholder	Interest	Power	Stance
<b>Children in conflict zones</b>	<b>High</b> – Security, accountability, and healing from the trauma experienced	Low	Primitive needs of food, clothing, shelter, and security to be prioritized
<b>UN Peacekeepers</b>	<b>High</b> – Ensuring child protection in conflict zones by adhering to protocols and understanding cultural nuances	Medium- to- High	Contributing to child protection efforts while maintaining adherence to protocols
<b>Local Governments</b>	<b>Low</b> – Resolving conflicts, strengthening social institutions, and ensuring children's safety by devoting research and funding	Medium	Lacks information, resources, or political will to tackle exploitation of children
<b>International humanitarian + Local civil society organizations</b>	<b>Medium</b> – Implementing relief measures, ensuring effective reporting procedures for six serious violations against children, and engaging in community programs	Medium	Advocacy for incorporating children's voices in peacekeeping
<b>Actors profiting from wars</b>	<b>Medium</b> – Primarily motivated by financial and political gain, with possible links to operations such as human trafficking	High	Indifferent or potentially contributing to child security issues
<b>Militant groups</b>	<b>Low</b> – Pursuing financial and political interests	High	Potentially contributing to child protection issues
<b>Policymakers</b>	<b>High</b> – Bridging gaps between policy and practice	Medium	Aim to align policy with the needs and experiences of vulnerable groups and peacekeeping forces

## **PART II - Considerations Based on Findings from Research:**

Based on our interviews with peacekeepers, academia, policymakers, civil society organizations, and diplomats with experience in human rights and security, we have outlined some factors that require international and local cooperation to improve child protection in conflict zones. These considerations have been bifurcated into two approaches – (1) considerations for UN peacekeeping forces, and (2) considerations for partnership initiatives between UN peacekeeping forces and local actors, including governments, non-governmental organizations, and the local communities.

### **1. Considerations for UN peacekeeping forces:**

#### ***Consideration 1.1 - Youth Agency - Direct Collaboration & Involvement for Decision-Making:***

*“Child agency means making sure children are a part of the development process for their policies. It is not the victim's responsibility to communicate their needs to you; some children may speak up, but others may not. Either way, they simply need support—you are not expected to provide all the answers. Saying that we provided support, but the kids remained silent is an additional illustration of power disparities.” – Representative of a child safeguarding NGO.*

Effective child protection requires placing children at the epicenter of all policymaking decisions concerning the past, present, and future of the children in conflict zones. While determining the best interests of the children, it is essential to directly engage with the children to hear their concerns, requests, and support requirements to develop measures for targeted protection policies. As the socio-economic conditions and services of established institutions are quite unstable in conflict zones, it is even more crucial to continually engage with children to ensure that the child protection policies are relevant to the changing conditions and timely, without bureaucratic delays that may cause inefficiencies in the processes and further marginalize these vulnerable populations. Simultaneously, care must be taken that amendments to existing policies and the introduction of new measures are not rushed, by ensuring sufficient engagement with the various communities of youth, following democratic processes to maximize their efficiency.

Mediators and child protection activists use three interrelated albeit non-hierarchical levels to incorporate child protection concerns and children's participation; “in the room,” “around the room,” and “outside the room” of formal peace negotiations. The approach used has been adapted from Altiok and Grizlej (2019).<sup>[96]</sup>

The **first layer “in the room,”** enables children to actively participate in formal peace discussions, offering their stories, needs, and perspectives by creating a safe environment for children to express themselves. Their involvement can take the form of conveying messages to conflicting parties. The purpose is to influence decision-makers (including local governments), ensuring that children's needs get accounted for in areas comprising the reintegration of child combatants, support for those disabled during conflict, psychosocial assistance, education, family tracing, and the reintegration of displaced children.

The **second layer includes children who participate in formal or informal negotiations** for peace near the main peace negotiations. Children affected by armed conflict can voice their concerns in national discourse through child and youth-specific committees. Child-centric NGOs in Nepal launched the "Schools as Zones of Peace" campaign, aimed reducing the fear regarding schools in post-conflict context. The initiative also centered on drawing up a school code of conduct by engaging directly with children, parents, teachers, and school administration to derive insights on improving the safety environment of schools.<sup>[97]</sup>

**“Outside the room” layer** of formal negotiations involves children participating in peace efforts through informal and alternative approaches. Providing justice to abusers and respecting child victims is critical for peace restoration and sustainability. Children in Sierra Leone actively participated in the peace process by attending special hearings and closed Truth and Reconciliation Commission sessions. Some of their recommendations included the provision of free youth programs to prevent and stop drug addiction, enacting legislation to make 18 years the age of maturity, and imparting educational and vocational skills to girls who did not benefit from the National Commission for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration. Consequently, the Commission advocated on the behalf of the children and compiled these findings in a child-friendly report to share their accounts and prevent further violations by creating awareness.<sup>[98]</sup>

According to Altiok and Grizlej (2019), the principles<sup>[99]</sup> to be followed by mediators, parties to the conflict, and other stakeholders during the peace process are as follows:

1. No child should be discriminated against based on the child's gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, physical abilities, or any other protected status; neither should the status of her, or his parent or legal guardian be taken into account (Article 2 of CRC).<sup>[100]</sup> However, we find that the process should treat children of different ages differently based on the child's social, emotional, and physical development. Cognitive development is essential when weighing the consequences of what this may entail for the child. Keeping the Children Safe experts mentioned that children with unique or special needs should be assessed on a case-by-case approach so that they are not further harmed in the process.
2. Consider children's best interests during peace negotiations in all decisions that directly or indirectly affect them (Article 3 of CRC).<sup>[101]</sup> An expert from Keeping the Children Safe opines that the interest of the child should be prevalent and that should decide whether children or parents are taking decisions as context and culture matters and is a sensitive issue to navigate with no one-size-fits-all approach.
3. All actions undertaken and decisions made for the protection of children, should respect the principle of "do no harm."<sup>[102]</sup> We find that this is not always done in practice, and instead those in charge often end up deciding which harm done and to whom will be least objectionable.

**Potential Obstacles:** While engaging with youth to understand their problems in order to develop targeted protection policies, UN peacekeeping forces may struggle to establish trust with at-risk youth. Here, peacekeeping forces can leverage their contacts within the local community to build meaningful relationships with the youth. Additionally, there is the possibility of re-traumatizing youth when engaging with youth and encouraging them to talk about their experiences. Therefore, the provision of psycho-social support through availability of experienced psychologists and

child-friendly resources for mental health are strongly recommended.

### ***Consideration 1.2 - Improve Reporting Mechanisms & Develop Child-Friendly Material for Ease of Reporting:***

*“Communities and children need to be engaged and make sure they have child-friendly version of the resources. Right person should talk to the children for thorough risk assessment and policy development. We must be open about our commitment to child protection.” – Representative of a child safeguarding NGO.*

There is an inherent imbalance of power when an adult and a child find themselves in any situation. Furthermore, a child may be more vulnerable if they have certain mental development challenges and/or physical injuries or disabilities. All organizations must strive to respect their rights while attempting to protect them and ensuring that all children have access to means of communication. To create child protection policies, a thorough risk assessment must be conducted at all stages of policy development, and an appropriate person from the humanitarian unit should speak with the children to garner insights. It is irrelevant if the only means of communication with the organization is email, and a five-year-old child who cannot read or write is also unable to communicate his/her needs. Agents of child protection must give special attention to making all communication kid-friendly, considering that internet access might not be available.

### ***Risk Identification for Reducing Vulnerabilities***

Intersecting issues of gender and societal class division often exacerbate the risks faced by children, with girls facing heightened risks of sexual violence, while boys may be targeted for recruitment into armed groups. Addressing these gendered vulnerabilities requires a comprehensive study of the risk factors that surround a child in any given situation e.g. walking alone while going to school vs walking with a group of friends to reduce vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Incorporating a gender-responsive approach by identifying these gendered and socio-economic risks can help strategize and develop practices that reduce the vulnerability of children. Additionally, risk assessment needs to be carried out at various stages periodically to develop intervention and support mechanisms that meet the evolving needs of the children in conflict and post-conflict situations.

United Nation’s approach for risk management<sup>[103]</sup> in its peacekeeping missions is focused on:

- i. Prevention of misconduct,
- ii. Enforcement of the UN standards of conduct
- iii. Remedial action, including support to victims and children born from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Ensuring that risk management strategies are incorporated in the design of the peacekeeping mission is vital to identify early signs of grave violation. Regular patrols to scan the conflict area and identify high-risk zones, and holding community engagement meeting to identify risks that are not easily visible to foreign individuals are necessary to help prevent the violation of children’s rights. Follow-up visits by non-military professionals, along with local language translators, may be required to establish familiarity and encourage vulnerable populations to seek assistance.

### *Making Reporting Mechanisms & Engagement Initiatives More Accessible*

Peacekeeping missions can also work along with civil society organizations to communicate their commitment and support for children through accessible media. Existing reporting mechanisms need to be strengthened and adapted to meet children at their level. It does not help anyone if the only means of reporting a violation to a human rights organization is through email, as the children may not have the ability to communicate via email or accessibility to an internet-activated device. Additionally, creative avenues of engaging with children in conflict zones can be explored to develop trust and encourage them to seek assistance. For instance, children can be made aware of their own rights and protection through oral storytelling (radio) or comic books in local languages. These mechanisms serve as lifelines for children to communicate their concerns, seek assistance, and report violations of their rights to a trusted agent.

A prime example of engaging effectively with the vulnerable populations was the focus group initiative by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) <sup>104</sup>, along with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and non-governmental organizations across 18 nations affected by armed conflicts. Children who have endured the brunt of these conflicts shared their personal stories, highlighting gaps in child protection that can be addressed to prevent future violations. UNICEF and partners took great care to provide an environment of psychological safety and utilized local language translators in some cases to foster a sense of comfort among participants. The initiative also considered the diverse challenges in each region and the selection of the appropriate medium the participants would be most comfortable while sharing their stories. The request made by focus-group participants in Rwanda was to be able to convey their thoughts in writing, preferring this method to avoid re-opening emotional wounds in a group setting. Meanwhile, in Somalia, a focus group discussion was conducted via a radio broadcast, allowing over 140 children and young adults to dial in and share their experiences.<sup>105</sup>

Effective child protection goes beyond passive reporting; it demands active involvement of children in decision-making processes. Despite their current absence from formal decision-making structures in conflict zones, children possess an undeniable presence as their needs continue shaping the dynamics of conflict-affected communities. Recognizing children as agents of change, peacekeeping initiatives must prioritize their participation, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to strategies aimed at safeguarding their rights. Listening to children's perspectives and concerns is a strategic necessity for establishing sustainable peace in conflict zones.

**Potential Obstacles:** While engaging in child-protection initiatives to empower children and encourage reporting of violations, peacekeepers may find resistance from the community as they could perceive the efforts as an attempt to impose Western ideals on the children. Existing cultural and religious norms must be respected to strengthen reporting mechanisms and develop resources that are accepted by the larger community. For instance, the presence of women in military and non-military roles could help in encouraging young girls to speak up for the violation of their rights in communities where inter-sex interactions are frowned upon.

### ***CONSIDERATION 1.3 - Centering Gender Equality Through: Incorporating Women in Military & Non-Military Roles***

The recent increase of women in peacekeeping should not be misconceived as a step towards empowerment when it is reduced to a half-hearted effort to check off the [UN's goal 5 to "achieve gender equality and empower all women."](#) Women's presence is reduced to tokenization in this way. Another way women are perceived as useful is that they can be assigned the responsibility of "attending to" the needs of women and children in peacekeeping. This is generally not expected of their male counterparts. As a Uruguayan peacekeeper who served as the head of his country's peacekeeping corps observed, women's mere presence in the peacekeeping corps in cooking, cleaning, administrative, and childcaring roles is not enough. One cannot expect to effectively address child protection concerns in peacekeeping nor claim to have achieved gender equality goals when overlooking the value and expertise each female peacekeeper has to offer. Women should not be regarded as an instrument for furthering national or international gender equality objectives. The peacekeepers interviewed, regardless of gender, in their individual experiences found this not only to be regressive but also harmful.

Our findings above revealed how gender equality within peacekeeping missions still falls short. As outlined in earlier sections, there is a disproportionate burden on one gender, in particular, women. Women in peacekeeping continue to face circumstances in which their male counterparts or superiors undermine their ability to execute their duties as efficiently as their male counterparts. For instance, one peacekeeper deployed in Lebanon explained that she was stationed to drive higher-ups from another more conservative country, who tested her ability to remember the route back by purposely misleading her stating she had turned the wrong way as they did not think a woman should be assigned the role of a driver. When she remained calm and confident in herself, the superiors admitted to testing her and being shocked by her ability as a woman to recall the route in a foreign country. Another female peacekeeper explained that the superior she was assigned to assist, who in this case also belonged to a conservative country, was disappointed to have been assigned a woman. He did not think women could handle situations as efficiently as men. Through the quality of her work, she eventually convinced him otherwise and changed his perception of women's place in peacekeeping.

The perception of women as inferior has an adverse impact, specifically in the context of child protection in peacekeeping. Women continue to be seen as soft and sensitive. While these are not bad traits to have, they have become an excuse for some militaries to resort to sexist divisions of roles. This is still the case in many militaries, and these still consider women's presence and participation in peacekeeping corps in a superficial light. Seen in unequal standing to their male counterparts, the roles many women in peacekeeping are consequently assigned to are generally cooking, cleaning, or administrative support roles.

Our findings suggest that the basis for placing women in peacekeeping roles requires attention. Interviews revealed that while increasing the number of women in peacekeeping is much-needed, particularly through the scope of child protection, painting gender equality as the main motive for this is false. It is known that some peacekeepers have been found guilty of causing harm to the civilian populations they were meant to safeguard. Women in peacekeeping are, therefore, also seen as an antidote for softening the dominant culture of masculine violence long embedded within

military structures. This is an exaggeration of one gender's ability to lead the change and is an unfair burden upon women to fix something they have not caused. The decision to increase the number of women in peacekeeping was at the time seen as an antidote for mitigating such [scandals like in the Congo](#) that worsen the trust of locals in these foreign peacekeepers and the perception of UN peacekeepers in the broader international community.<sup>[106]</sup> To center gender equality, it is suggested that men and women should be held to the same moral and professional standards.

Locals perceived notions of male peacekeepers as dominating or untrustworthy based on their experiences of violence at the hands of men, including peacekeepers, require trust-building. One female peacekeeper explained that when children and locals see the presence of a female peacekeeper alongside a male peacekeeper the children and locals are most trusting of her male counterparts, and they are more likely to seek assistance. Additionally, the peacekeeping officer delegated the responsibility to oversee his national troops, who elaborated on the concerns held by local populations and local norms in Muslim areas or countries like Syria, explained there need to be women in all roles, be these that of a translator, medical doctor and staff, administrative or operational. Women ought to be assigned to military and non-military roles if the objective is to effectively achieve child protection and gender equality.

Additionally, as explained, some countries are resorting to the mandatory drafting of women in response to the decision to increase the number of women in peacekeeping. For women who do not wish to be deployed to peacekeeping missions, mandatory drafting then negatively impacts their mental well-being when serving. This not only impacts the health of such peacekeepers but also the ability of these peacekeepers to perform the tasks delegated to them. It has a trickle-down impact on the peacekeeping team that these personnel are assigned to and risks compromising the mission. While said countries may have their reasons, this is an important consideration, especially in the context of preserving human life.

One of the reasons, female peacekeepers reported women generally do not wish to serve as peacekeepers is due to the lack of information on the availability of necessities such as menstruation and other hygiene products in the deployment regions such as the Congo, which peacekeeping corps must be airlifted to in a helicopter to reach the jungle. However, such necessities are available on the ground to support the deployed troops and sustain their stay.

Moreover, when receiving feedback from peacekeepers during our interviews, all the peacekeepers seemed to be in agreement that their learnings and training could be upscaled by leveraging the rich knowledge base of experienced peacekeepers elsewhere through virtual training sessions given technological advancements. The peacekeepers felt that it would be more beneficial for them to have the opportunity to engage in discussions and exchange views with peacekeepers from different contributing countries as opposed to training with their local colleagues who are more inclined to share similar perspectives, resulting in an Echo chamber.

Taking inspiration from these conversations, our team concluded that peacekeeping training institutes, such as ENOPU, can leverage remote learning sessions (virtual training) in two major ways in addition to this.

- The second use can be to allow female peacekeepers, those aspiring to serve, or female military officers, in general, to engage with female peacekeepers elsewhere from their countries and others as a mechanism to overcome misinformation and more successfully recruit more women into peacekeeping troops.
- The third can be to hold standardized sessions for peacekeeping troops from all contributing countries to educate male peacekeepers about gender equality and ease women's integration into military and non-military roles within deployment zones. This is one mechanism for centering equality and involving men as active participants in dismantling the longstanding patriarchal cultures and biases that exist in militaries around the globe.

Another, more serious concern shared by female peacekeepers is the length of time they are expected to serve. This duration has historically been one year of deployment. Female peacekeepers, like other women, also find themselves restricted by societal gender norms of homemaking and tending to other marital duties. Married female peacekeepers or women in general who are responsible for household responsibilities expressed concerns that if they do not tend to these responsibilities effectively, they worry this may cause a strain on their relationships. Duration is also a concern for female peacekeepers who act as their parents' or in-laws' caretakers for whatever reasons. Additionally, duration is just as much of a concern for those female and male peacekeepers alike, who are either single parents or the sole guardians of children, especially in instances in which children are still below age 10. The duration of the guardian's absence from the child and the financial cost that comes with trying to place a child in good care during the deployment period become factors in making peacekeeping an unappealing venture. These concerns have been recognized and are already being addressed by the Elsie Initiative through the option of shorter deployments (6 months) and financial support(s) as of late 2023.

Nevertheless, our research team suggests that an extra, albeit unorthodox, approach could be contemplated to incentivize greater female participation in peacekeeping endeavours. However, depending on each country's protocols, this will be a case-by-case situation. In the Canadian Armed Forces context, those in the Regular Force tend to serve between three to nine years but are expected to serve much longer if their education is paid for, approximately a minimum of five years. We are aware that there is a disproportionate representation of women in the majority of the world's armed forces versus men for the most part, and here, we assume this is partially because women are less inclined to enlist for whichever reasons. Additionally, serving within the armed forces for these many years may be perceived as overwhelmingly long for non-military women, and those within the armed forces, too, are hesitant to enlist for peacekeeping due to duration, especially those with familial responsibilities. For this reason, what if peacekeeping was opened up to non-military women, given that while women may be overwhelmed to serve for several years, they may be more open to deployment for six months to a year? Opening up peacekeeping enlistment to women outside of the military could ease the burden of recruiting more women for peacekeeping and help fill in positions of translators, doctors, and others more easily.



## 2. Considerations for partnership-driven initiatives between UN peacekeeping forces and local governments, NGOs, and communities:

### *Consideration 2.1 - The Need for Local Community-Based Initiatives & Multilateral Cooperation:*

Children in conflict areas frequently experience the worst effects of violence and disturbance, as well as difficulties that jeopardize their growth and well-being. Before any international humanitarian organization or local civil society introduces engagement programs for children in conflict zones, it is essential to address access to food, clothing, and shelter. Often, children in these conflict zones may be hesitant to accept aid due to a variety of factors, including their allegiance to the rebel groups or a drug addiction that keeps them from escaping the clutches of rebel groups. Not only do these rebel groups focus on the recruitment of child soldiers through drugs, but they keep them high on a regular supply so that they feel invincible and ready for war, often coupled with the belief that they will be reborn immediately so they can continue fighting. Additionally, it is important to address the needs of children in conflict zones who do not participate in rebel activities but might use drugs as a coping mechanism and need to be weaned off through rehabilitation and psycho-social support from the community.

A UN peacekeeper interviewee who was stationed in Sudan highlights that children try to steal food by shedding their clothes and covering themselves in a coating of oil/blood to create a slick layer on the skin that makes it difficult to grab a hold of them. Disrobing makes these children increasingly vulnerable to exploitation, emphasizing the need for providing adequate necessities including nutritional and medical care. The primary focus of any community-based program developed through international collaboration or local networking should be to provide these kids with a safe environment with provisions for food, clothing, access to education, and rehab in countries where drug dependency is a major concern amongst the youth. Here, local communities play a crucial role in designing programs specifically suited to the needs of children living in conflict zones because they have a deep understanding of the situation.

For instance, Liberians have been pressuring the Government of Liberia to treat the issue of drug addiction among youth as a national emergency. Consequently, the state announced the introduction of a national fund<sup>[107]</sup> for the rehabilitation and empowerment of At-Risk Youth in Liberia as a joint initiative with the United Nations. For youth in Liberia who are considered to be at risk, the program seeks to offer employment opportunities, social integration, skill development, and rehabilitation. Another inspiring initiative rooted in the community was the "[Gaza Sunbirds](#)" project,<sup>[108]</sup> a para-cycling team in the Gaza Strip that is using its resources to support the community. The initiative is focused on providing bicycles for people who have experienced limb amputations due to conflict-related injuries. These bicycles serve as a means of mobility and symbolize resilience, providing a glimpse of hope for the children amid trying circumstances. The Gaza Sunbirds is still an active venture for the surviving children and adults of Gaza.

### *Education & Awareness as a Preventative Measure for Raising Awareness Among Children to Prevent Grave Violations*

Educational opportunities remain imperative to offering children a sense of hope and childhood normalcy to allow them to envision a future for themselves. Education will meet the needs of children who have been out of school as a result of their situations during times of war where they must choose between their safety and education. Here, education can serve as an effective empowerment and normalization approach to streamline their childhood as a long-term antidote. In this way, education can be seen as a sustainable mechanism for disseminating information about their own rights and place in society, which is a preventative measure as opposed to reactive measures.<sup>[109]</sup>

Renowned trauma specialist Gabor Mate reports that, *“Children don’t get traumatized because they are hurt. They get traumatized because they’re alone with the hurt.”*<sup>[110]</sup>

From a relational-based approach, the facilitation of reintegrating children into community in a non-discriminatory way will be imperative. The importance of education is also that it can serve as a vital tool for the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers into society as has been highlighted throughout several of the interviews. For this we must also work to educate children already in school to be careful not to discriminate against or further stigmatize a child introduced into their setting that was a child soldiering victim or born into rebel groups and is trying to start anew. Accordingly, child reintegration denotes a transition process whereby children seamlessly integrate into civil society, assuming meaningful roles and identities as civilians. This process involves receiving acceptance and support by their families and communities.<sup>[111]</sup> It is important that these child victims do not feel alone and isolated from their peers as a sense of belonging is crucial for their proper reintegration and healing journey, especially at such a vulnerable and impressionable age. Reintegration will be key for the full realization of the rights of a child and in promoting equity and creating a more inclusive society.

#### *One Way This Can Be Implemented: Creating Child-Friendly Spaces to Ameliorate Education & Awareness*

Schools provide youth in conflict zones with child-friendly spaces, making them more aware of grave violations and setting boundaries.<sup>[112]</sup> Education psychosocially benefits children by encouraging them to socialize, build support networks, and create a sense of meaning within their communities.

Furthermore, within these child-friendly spaces, schools implement structured programs incorporating conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and tolerance education.<sup>[113]</sup> Through such initiatives, children learn to understand the complexities of their surroundings, empathize with others, and develop critical thinking skills necessary for navigating challenging environments.

Moreover, within these child-friendly spaces, schools implement structured programs that emphasize the awareness of grave violations, such as the recruitment of child soldiers.<sup>[114]</sup> By educating children about the dangers and consequences of such actions, schools empower them to

recognize manipulation tactics and resist recruitment efforts. Through interactive workshops, role-playing scenarios, and discussions, students learn to assert their rights, advocate for themselves, and seek support when faced with coercion or exploitation.<sup>[115]</sup>

Educators and counsellors play a crucial role in facilitating these discussions, providing age-appropriate information, and creating a safe space for dialogue.<sup>[116]</sup> They equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify warning signs, assert their autonomy, and seek assistance from trusted adults or authorities. By fostering a culture of awareness and resilience, schools not only protect children from recruitment but also empower them to become agents of change within their communities.

Additionally, schools collaborate with local communities, NGOs, and international organizations to ensure comprehensive support for children affected by conflict.<sup>[117]</sup> This multi-stakeholder approach facilitates access to resources such as mental health services, psychosocial support, and recreational activities, further enhancing the holistic development of children in these challenging circumstances.

Schools become agents of positive change by prioritizing education and awareness within conflict zones. They empower children to break the cycle of violence, contribute to peacebuilding efforts, and rebuild their communities. Through education, these children gain knowledge and skills and hope for a brighter and more peaceful future.

Remember education should be approached with great sensitivity to the local populations and their customs of knowledge sharing while respecting local language preferences, especially in conservative societies where some language might stir distaste or controversy, leading the people to reject the intervention.

**Potential Obstacles:** The development of local initiatives to benefit marginalized populations requires intense coordination between peacekeeping forces, local levels of governments in conflict zones, and multilateral humanitarian agencies. Operating in a conflict zone is rife with instability and threat to life, causing potential fragmentation in efforts and difficulties in getting various actors to coordinate. Additionally, lack of political will and limitation of resources to invest in child protection measures can hinder the feasibility of these initiatives.

## Consideration 2.2 – Normalization and Reintegration



(Photograph from research fieldwork when observing Uruguayan children assert their agency in relation to their health needs in discussions with adults. The image translates to “He/She who does not dream has no future.” Event organized by [Asociación Civil Cippus](#). This Dallaire team strongly believes that we must not break children’s dreams. Nurturing a child’s imagination is salient for his/her development and overall health. The children are the future of these communities, and their hopes and innocence must be preserved).

The recruitment of vulnerable children into a life of crime has deep implications both for the individual child and society at large. There is a need to decrease the vulnerability of children who join armed groups and criminal organizations. Cultural context is imperative for effective reintegration strategies.<sup>[118]</sup> Recommendations advocate for engaging with local communities to better understand the context, underscoring community-based approaches as key to successful rehabilitation. To ensure sustainable reintegration necessitates placing children, young people, and their communities at the forefront of the policy process. Multilateral cooperation involving UN agencies, and other local and international non-governmental organizations is key. In one of the interviews, a Canadian ambassador stressed on areas for improvement to engage with other countries to enhance and strengthen child protection within their countries. These recommendations included:

## *Psychological Support*

It is important to note that there is a need to recognize that medical and psychological support is essential for child soldiers who were most likely exposed to traumatic experiences. For instance, an academic proposed that psychosocial experts could accompany peacekeepers or physicians on the ground. Additionally, a UN peacekeeper suggested that psychological support should also be extended to families of child soldiers who often have a hard time coming to terms with what the child went through, who the child was with during the child's absence from his loved ones, and what the child may have done during this time unto others.

However, psychological and medical supports should only be taken up after careful understanding of the local cultural context and in collaboration with local specialists to avoid the potential of the colonization of native healing cultures by Western systems of knowledge and expertise. Efforts should prioritize working in partnership with local populations to ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive.

## *Vulnerabilities*

It will be crucial to address the issue of vulnerability from the places where it stems from early on in a child soldier's life. Here, understanding how poverty and inequality exacerbate the issue is needed.

The interviewees have noted that it is important to examine areas of food insecurity, lack of housing, and family problems that would be fundamental to addressing the issue. An infantry combat veteran in Sudan explains that famine was a factor in why certain children chose to take up arms, as rebel groups generally entice children through promises of food and security.

He also notes that drug addiction could also be contributing to vulnerabilities. The interviews reveal that the absence of a strong family base such as neglect or absence of active parenting can push children to take up arms. One peacekeeper explained that in some cases, rebel groups make children kill their families in a you or them sort of scenario and in other cases children are told to join the rebel groups or they will kill the child's family. This veteran reflected on his experience witnessing that rebel groups then take on the role of the family or parental figure where children then have little choice but to look at these figures as providers and establish a close relationship with them.

## *Reconciliation*

Society may not fully accept these children back into society. Changing the narrative of the local population to improve their relationship with these youths and addressing the stigma will be fundamental. For instance, in the case of the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army, one of the wives of Joseph Kony, Evelyn Amony, explained how even though she was only 12 years old when abducted by him, raped, and forced to bear his children, and when she finally returned to her community, she was seen as complicit in his crimes many of which she was unaware of.<sup>[119]</sup> What Amony did, she did for survival with little choice at the time. Amony's expertise expanded to assisting parents whose children had been abducted without causing these missing children further

harm by ensuring efforts to reach them did not alert their kidnappers.<sup>[120]</sup> Additionally, children and women who escaped rebel groups were reassigned to Amony to care for.<sup>[121]</sup> These are some examples of local knowledge and leadership in effectively tracing missing children. Furthermore, in her book, Amony explained the importance of communication and journaling to explain to her people and her children why she did what she did.<sup>[122]</sup>

This tells us that how important it is for one's society to have the narrative shared for true reconciliation. Through her testimony, we also gathered that that reconciliation does not only take the form of accepting these individuals as victims but also through proper supports many of which depend on financial sustenance to provide for their children as single mothers. Here, conditional cash transfers are not always effective as the conditions outlined are not always possible to follow every time. For instance, if the mother falls ill and cannot take her children to school as a result, she will not receive a cash transfer which mandates that the parent must take children to school every day. No excuses are accommodated.

Indeed, justice and reconciliation can be expressed in various ways. Considering a place-based approach that addresses housing insecurity, which offers security and stable living environments by granting land settlement, can contribute to a sense of belonging helpful for their reintegration.<sup>[123]</sup> This is in cases where identity is tied to the land of one's ancestors as is the case in many African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities, essential for social acceptance. For instance, for men who surrender or are held accountable they can be expected to provide the women they raped and impregnated part of their land as child support and provision of identity to the child essential for his movement in social norms. Further, from a needs-based approach, it can focus on meeting their fundamental human needs such as education, healthcare, housing, food.

**Potential Obstacles:** Although there are efforts to change societal narratives and reduce stigma, communities may still harbour resentment or distrust towards former child soldiers. It will take time and consistent effort at the individual and community level(s) to overcome/shift the narrative and rebuild trust between reintegrated former child soldiers. Additionally, multilateral cooperation involving various stakeholders will be key for effective reintegration efforts. Some potential challenges could include coordination, competing agendas, and may face bureaucratic obstacles, which is outside the scope of our research.

### ***Consideration 2.3 - Livelihood Provisions & Skills for Youth:***

#### ***Creating Skills & Hobbies for Youth Through Jobs & Art***

Livelihood provisions and upskilling training for youth are integral strategies in conflict zones to prevent children from being recruited into armed groups.<sup>[124]</sup> By offering opportunities for youth to explore hobbies, develop skills, and pursue interests, these initiatives provide constructive alternatives to involvement in violence and conflict. Participatory art plays a crucial role in this context, serving as a vehicle for self-expression, personal development, and community engagement.<sup>[125]</sup>

In conflict-affected areas, many young people face limited access to education and economic opportunities, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and recruitment by armed groups. However, by investing in vocational training, apprenticeships, and creative workshops, communities can empower youth to build sustainable livelihoods and pursue meaningful careers outside conflict.<sup>[126]</sup> Hobbies such as painting, music, theatre, and crafts provide avenues for artistic expression, teach valuable technical skills, foster creativity, and instill a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Moreover, engaging in hobbies and developing skills can protect against recruitment into armed groups.<sup>[127]</sup> By channeling their energy and talents into constructive pursuits, youth are less susceptible to the allure of violence and coercion. Participatory art projects, in particular, offer opportunities for social interaction, mentorship, and positive peer influence, creating supportive networks that help young people resist negative influences and make informed choices about their futures.<sup>[128]</sup>

Furthermore, hobbies and skills acquired during conflict can serve youth well after hostilities have ceased.<sup>[129]</sup> Providing opportunities, including extracurricular activities like sports, writing or drawing, provides a creative outlet for children as it is essential to keep them engaged productively so they do not fall back into harmful patterns of abuse or violence. These abilities can be leveraged in post-conflict settings to rebuild communities, promote reconciliation, and contribute to sustainable development efforts. For example, young artists may use their talents to beautify public spaces, commemorate the past, and inspire hope for the future. Likewise, individuals trained in trades such as carpentry, tailoring, or agricultural techniques can play vital roles in infrastructure reconstruction, economic revitalization, and livelihood diversification initiatives. Writing or drawing, for example, may support children restoring a sense of normalcy by creating secure environments for play and artistic expression. A female peacekeeper in Uruguay stressed the importance of keeping children busy and engaged.<sup>[130]</sup>

By investing in hobbies and skills development for youth in conflict zones, communities prevent recruitment into armed groups and lay the foundation for long-term peace and prosperity. Empowering young people to pursue their passions, cultivate talents, and contribute positively to society enhances their well-being and strengthens the resilience and social fabric of communities emerging from conflict. Through participatory art and skills training, youth become agents of positive change, shaping their own futures and rebuilding their communities from within. Ultimately, the incentives for children to not engage with armed groups must be greater and this is an area that needs further attention.

We acknowledge that in some cases children do not have families to return to for whatever reasons such as losing them to war, in which cases, they are left to fend for themselves and find their own sources of livelihood. Here, they can again easily fall victim to predators or child labor abuses among other forms of exploitation. In such cases, Dr. Ketty Anyeko, an experienced academic and fieldwork specialist in aftermaths of war, in a conversation explained that we must explore ways to provide spaces for children to earn without impinging on their rights as children and to a proper childhood. For instance, civil organizations working in these areas can monitor the child in his/her livelihood activities to ensure their rights are protected and the conditions are safe.

Furthermore, for older children, our qualitative interviews revealed that livelihood provisions and upskilling training/employment for youth aged 16 and above can play a key role in facilitating their successful reintegration into society. Providing the tools and equipping young individuals with practical skills and opportunities for sustainable employment can offer viable alternatives to joining armed groups. However, it can also lead to their economic independence and social stability, can support long-term peace and security in conflict-inflicted areas.

**Potential Obstacles:** Youth may be hesitant to engage with skills development initiatives if they perceive they are better off associating with armed groups due to lucrative financial incentives or a drug dependency that is used as a recruitment strategy by some militant groups. Understanding the reasons why child soldiers engage with armed forces and developing appropriate strategies for providing them with necessities for survival (including food, clothing, livelihood skills) are required to help them build healthy, sustainable lives. There is an underlying risk of skill development initiatives being perceived as a form of child labour, instead of an avenue for promoting financial independence, especially in the absence of family and conventional social structures. Lack of opportunities to earn a decent livelihood in conflict zones and gender norms need to be considered while encouraging youth in conflict zones to participate in skill-based training programs.



## PART III: CONCLUSION

It is difficult to offer closing remarks on subject matter with issues that continue to affect youth globally. It is even more challenging to conclude something which is, in certain cases, still escalating and broadening in the scale of victims - human, animal, and environmental.

Issues such as abduction, manipulation, abuse, gender-based violations and more that continue to plague the globe echo the urgency and importance of addressing these challenges head-on through merging forces with actors at all levels – local, civil, military and beyond across the international realm. While this research may have come to an end, the kaleidoscope of issues that this team and all those who contributed to the making of this report encountered are far from resolved. In the absurdity of life, victims can be perpetrators and vice versa. However, it is imperative to the mission of peacekeeping and security everywhere, to remember that children are victims first and foremost due to mental, physical, power-imbalance, and economic interdependence vulnerabilities and the underdevelopment of their thought processes in comparison to full-grown adults, as is scientifically proven.

As we reflect on our findings and experiences, it is more important than ever to recognize that our work is but a small part of a much larger contribution to the aftermaths of conflict resolution. Through our research and the works of all those before us, upon whose work we now build on with this report, we learn three valuable lessons, in particular:

One, all peacekeeping and security efforts must keep in mind the aftermath of what will be when these missions or wars alike come to an end – who and what will remain. We often forget to contribute to peace-building once the peacekeeping duration comes to an end. We in the conflict and resolution realm, who can be equally responsible for the harms and damage caused in the interim period. When a mission ends, peacekeepers and other actors return home to their lives and the normalcy they know, but what of those left behind, the children especially? What of their normalcy?

Two, effective peacekeeping calls for peace and security efforts to be driven by empathy and humanity, which it is easy to forget can work in tandem with rationale and all the calculations violence entails.

Three, peacekeeping and child protection cannot be allowed to fall victim to internal or external competition, if we wish for a security that is first established and then sustained. Competitions must be rooted out whether at the internal departmental or on-the-ground level or among organizations and countries working towards this common goal. The objective must be changed to prioritize collaboration on all fronts over rivalry in the race for recognition as is now commonplace across a variety of international organizations, in whose hands, the future of human security rests.

In concluding this report, our team wishes to reflect on a moment during our fieldwork, when we were nestled in a small classroom at ENOPU, the Uruguayan peacekeeping training center in Montevideo. Sat across from us was a female peacekeeper from the Uruguayan Navy, who was explaining how at the sight of her and her peers, children's eyes gleamed with joy. She remarked,

*“The mere sight of our UN blue berets made children feel safe and excited.”* We need these committed and courageous individuals in blue berets now more than ever, with the escalation of violence across the globe. With the blue berets, we also need collective action on all fronts centred by our common humanity, the pain and hope alien to no human.

### **Moving Forward - Directions for Further Research:**



*Our conversations with the UN peacekeepers indicate that they are learning about cultural nuances of child protection but there is scope for improvement through collaborative training exercises with peacekeepers from other countries*

1. Specialists who have the opportunity to engage in discussions with children under these settings or those having experienced them at some point can triangulate our findings with their interviews as we did not have [UBC’s Behavioral Research Ethics Board’s \(BREB\)](#) approval to do so.
2. The scope of drug use in children used either as a coping mechanism to numb their emotions or as a stimulant during war can require further research to better understand child protections in recent times as research seems outdated based on most recent reports dating to 2015.
3. Children’s access to health and education services can be improved through cash transfers to low-income families in conflict zones. Conditional cash transfers, such as the Brazilian Cash Transfer Program ([Bolsa Família](#)) and Peruvian “[Juntos](#)” Program can be studied to improve child protection in UN peacekeeping missions through financial support. For instance, what factors made Bolsa Família successful and what factors led up to Juntos’ comparative failure. During our research on child protection, our team concluded that conditional cash transfers lack much-needed flexibility, and their rigidity can lead to failure to meet desired child protection objectives. The factors that impact cash transfers require further research through the scope of child protection, if replicated in conflict zones.

## APPENDIX

### 1.1 Glossary of Abbreviations:

**BREB** Behavioural Research Ethics Board  
**CAF** Canadian Armed Forces  
**CRC** Convention on the Rights of the Child  
**DCOE** Dallaire Centre of Excellence for Peace and Security  
**DND** Department of National Defence (of Canada)  
**ENOPU** La Escuela Nacional de Operaciones de Paz de Uruguay – Peace Operations Training Institute  
**GBA** Gender-based Analysis  
**GAC** Global Affairs Canada  
**MOU** Memorandum of Understanding  
**MRM** Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism  
**NAP** National Action Plan  
**NGO** Non-Governmental Organization  
**PAHO** Pan American Health Organization  
**STC** Save the Children  
**T/PCC** Troop and/or Police Contributing Countries  
**UBC** University of British Columbia  
**UN** United Nations  
**UNAMIR** UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda  
**UNDP** United Nations Development Programme  
**UNDPO** United Nations Department of Peace Operations  
**UNFPA** United Nations Population Fund  
**UNICEF** United Nations Children’s Fund  
**UNSC** United Nations Security Council  
**VP** Vancouver Principles  
**WHO** World Health Organization  
**WPS** Women, Peace and Security  
**WPS FPN** Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network  
**YPS** Youth, Peace and Security

## 1.2 Motivation for Research:

This research project explores the intricate dynamics of child protection within peacekeeping missions and the key considerations that actors in the youth, peace and security space should consider. With a primary focus on understanding the influence of child agencies on the responsibility for safeguarding children, the study aims to unravel the moral and ethical dilemmas confronted by peacekeepers. Specifically, it will explore the challenges arising from the delicate balance between adhering to UN child protection protocols and fulfilling country-specific mandates.

The overarching purpose of this study is to identify potential barriers impeding adequate child protection in peacekeeping operations and to propose viable solutions. The research also seeks to investigate the agency of youth, placing a specific emphasis on discerning their expectations and preferences concerning the roles of soldiers in situations involving armed conflict, criminal warfare, and high-risk environments.

In approaching our peacekeeping, conflict resolution, and international security research in Montevideo, we adopt a feminist and decolonial lens that builds upon the foundations of past projects while carving its distinct path. Acknowledging the importance of feminist perspectives, we seek to unravel power dynamics, gendered implications, and the often-overlooked roles of women in shaping child security considerations.

Moreover, our decolonial approach goes beyond traditional narratives, recognizing colonialism's historical legacies and impacts on Uruguay's child security discourse. Building on the strides made by previous projects, our research stands alone by placing an intensified global emphasis on amplifying child agency, marginalized voices, questioning existing power structures, and fostering inclusivity in our exploration of Uruguay's contributions to child security. By intertwining feminist and decolonial perspectives, our project provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the intricate intersections between gender and contemporary child security policies, ultimately contributing to a more holistic and equitable global security dialogue.

The ultimate goal is to contribute to developing nuanced insights into the complexities surrounding child protection in peacekeeping missions. By doing so, the research aspires to inform and advocate for gender-sensitive and youth-inclusive strategies, fostering a more empathetic and practical approach to child protection within international peacekeeping efforts.

This project is not intended to issue directives or instructions to military personnel. Instead, it aims to underscore crucial considerations for the armed forces and relevant actors when engaging in child protection initiatives. The focus of our work remains centered on advocating for the best interests of the child within the context of security policies. We wish to make it clear that the goal is not to dictate operational procedures but to contribute insights that may inform decision-making processes, ensuring that the welfare and rights of children are prioritized. This acknowledgment is meant to contextualize our research within the broader child protection framework, emphasizing a collaborative and advisory approach rather than a prescriptive one.

### 1.3 Methodological Note: Research Design and Limitations:

#### *Field Research: Methodology*

We employed qualitative research methods by conducting interviews to gather data and insights. In this research, which centers on child protection and the [Youth, Peace, and Security agenda \(YPS\)](#) within UN Peacekeeping missions, we have organized our methodology into critical components.

We utilized the [snowball technique](#) when recruiting participants. The team has conducted an extensive literature review to synthesize and integrate existing theories, frameworks, and core concepts related to child protection and the YPS agenda in the military realm of UN Peacekeeping missions. This involves a textual analysis of newspapers, scholarly articles, reports from civil society and books.

Our team conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews to delve deeply into soldiers' perspectives concerning the role of armed forces in ensuring their protection during times of armed conflict.

A synthesis of literature and qualitative data was undertaken to derive meaningful insights, identify key trends, and present a nuanced understanding of child protection in peacekeeping missions. This entails systematically identifying, collecting, and organizing relevant academic papers, reports, policy documents, and other scholarly materials. This involved coding and collecting literature according to key themes, patterns, topics, and variables.

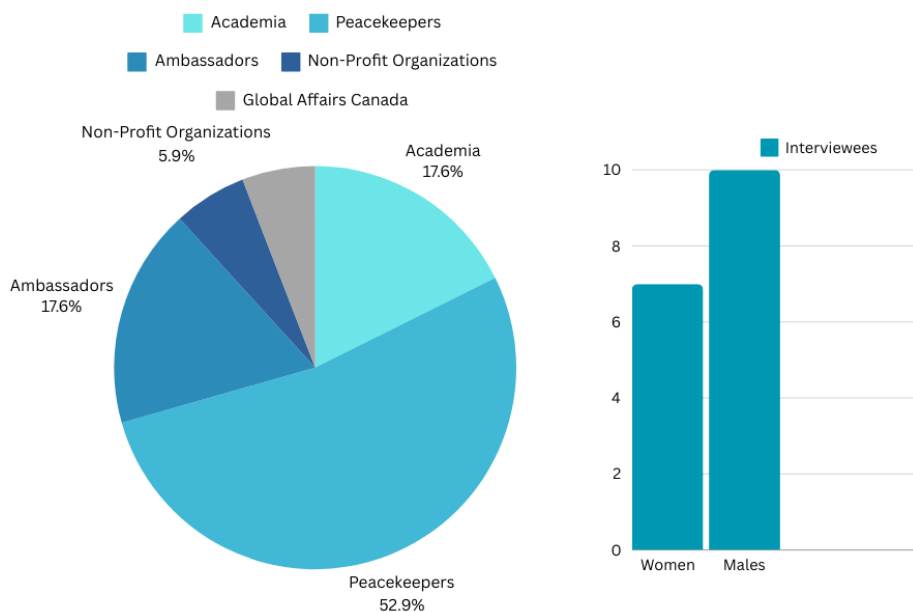
Moreover, we interviewed various key stakeholders, including academics, subject matter experts, military personnel, policymakers, ambassadors, and members of civil society. These interviews provided practical and on-the-ground insights into the challenges and implications of implementing child protection measures in peacekeeping missions.

Interviews conducted allowed for in-depth exploration of the subject matter, and open-ended questions and follow-up for detailed responses provided rich insights. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, attitudes, and emotions. Furthermore, interviews offer greater flexibility as they can be conducted one-on-one, accommodating participants' schedules and providing a comfortable and private environment for sensitive discussions.

Our team also conducted a focus group at the La Escuela Nacional de Operaciones de Paz de Uruguay (ENOPU) to facilitate interactions and discussions among participants, which led to the emergence of various viewpoints and shared experiences in a single session. Methodologically, focus groups have pros and cons. They allow researchers to talk to more people in a limited amount of time, and they often make apparent points of agreement and disagreement within a group. However, participants may have hesitated to share sensitive information in a group setting, potentially leading to self-censorship.<sup>[1]</sup> Although focus groups are efficient within time constraints, they might not delve as deeply as individual interviews. This rationale is the basis for facilitating both interviews and focus groups to achieve a comprehensive understanding.

Qualitative interviews aim to glean direct access to respondents' unique experiences, perspectives, and challenges, providing a deeper understanding of their journeys and the complexities they faced during their involvement in armed conflicts.<sup>[1]</sup> They can inform evidence-based policies, programs, and interventions aimed at rehabilitating and reintegrating former child soldiers into society.

### Participant Research Overview



Graph indicates the distribution of interview percentages by gender and the corresponding number of interviews.

## 1.4 Methodological Limitations

Our research team would like to acknowledge certain methodological limitations that could skew the findings from our research and interviews.

1. **Sampling Bias:** Our research may be subject to sampling bias as we primarily focused on policy leaders, civil society, peacekeepers, and ambassadors. This limitation may affect the generalizability of our findings to broader peacekeeping populations or alternative perspectives within Uruguay. For example, the research team's point of contact at the Uruguayan peacekeeping center hand-picked specific soldiers that were interviewed rather than the research team solely approaching peacekeepers we were interested in conversing with. Sampling bias is also generally acknowledged as a potential liability of snowball sampling.
2. **Psychological Sensitivity:** To maintain the psychological safety of our interviewees, and comply with UBC's interpretation of human subjects' regulations, soldiers were not asked directly about their personal interactions with children, and this may have shifted how

they answered questions.

3. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Despite our best effort at being aware of local sensitivities, there may have been cultural nuances that were not fully understood or appropriately addressed during our research, impacting the interpretation of findings.

Our team tried to mitigate these limitations when interpreting our research findings and to consider them in the context of the study's scope and constraints. Future research endeavors could build upon these insights to address these limitations and enhance the overall robustness of the study.

## **1.5 Background on Why Fieldwork Was Conducted in Uruguay: *Canada-Uruguay Bilateral Relations***

Canada and Uruguay established diplomatic relations in 1951.<sup>[131]</sup> The bilateral relations between the two countries are predicated upon a foundation of shared values and interests, encompassing principles such as democracy, human rights, gender equality and advocacy for multilateral institutions. Uruguay is recognized as a stable and thriving democracy, notable for successfully balancing social and economic priorities. The country boasts a commendable low corruption rate and demonstrates strong democratic governance. In parallel with Canada, Uruguay has enacted progressive legislation, including the legalization of abortion, recognition of same-sex marriage, and the decriminalization of the possession of cannabis for personal use.<sup>[132]</sup>

In 2020, Uruguay and Canada assumed the co-chairmanship of the [Women, Peace, and Security Focal Points Network](#) (WPS FPN). Furthermore, Uruguay, in collaboration with Canada, served as a co-host for the United Nations Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial (UNPKDM) held in Vancouver in November 2017. Demonstrating their commitment to international peacekeeping efforts, Uruguay has endorsed both the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers and Canada's [Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations](#).

Building on this momentum, the defence relationship between Canada and Uruguay saw a further enhancement in 2021 through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Dallaire Institute and the Ministry of Defence – National Peace Operations Training Institute of Uruguay.<sup>[133]</sup> One notable outcome of this MOU has been the establishment of the [Latin American Centre of Excellence for Children, Peace, and Security](#). The two nations have a history of close collaboration, particularly in their joint deployments to the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH).<sup>[134]</sup> This mission has since been completed. This is especially important in our research as many peacekeepers our team interviewed served in Haiti and provided insights into their experiences there.

Uruguay was specifically chosen as the country of choice to conduct our interviews as Uruguay was the first country to develop a child protection training manual. After viewing the effectiveness

of their manual, the United Nations collaborated with Uruguay and several other countries with specialized knowledge on child protection to provide additional guidance on child security guidelines.

Canada's representation in Uruguay is through the Canadian Embassy in Montevideo. At the same time, Uruguay maintains its representation in Canada through the Uruguayan Embassy in Ottawa and Consulates in Toronto and Montreal. This diplomatic engagement underscores the commitment of both nations to maintaining a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship.<sup>[135]</sup>

## **1.6 UN Six Grave Violations:**

The UN's Six Grave Violations refers to six potential ways in which children can experience violence in conflict zones.<sup>[136]</sup> The UN Security Council established the framework for addressing the Six Grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict through Resolution 1612, which was adopted on July 26, 2005.<sup>[137]</sup> This resolution marked a significant development in recognizing and responding to children's specific challenges in areas affected by armed conflict. These violations are:

### **1.Killing and Maiming of Children:**

- Children are often directly targeted or become collateral damage during armed conflicts, resulting in death or severe injuries.
- The intentional use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas can lead to a high number of casualties among children.

### **2.Recruitment and Use of Children in Armed Forces:**

- Armed forces and armed groups may forcibly recruit children as soldiers, exposing them to physical and psychological harm.
- Child soldiers are often used for various roles, including combat, espionage, and carrying out other dangerous tasks.

### **3.Sexual Violence Against Children:**

- Children are vulnerable to sexual violence during armed conflicts, being subjected to rape, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution.
- Sexual violence not only causes immediate harm but can also have long-term physical and psychological consequences.

### **4.Attacks Against Schools or Hospitals:**

- Deliberate attacks on educational and healthcare facilities can disrupt children's access to education and medical care.
- Using schools or hospitals for military purposes not only endangers the lives of children but also undermines the sanctity of essential civilian infrastructure.

### **5.Abduction of Children:**

- Children may be abducted for various reasons, including recruitment, ransom, or as a means to instill fear in communities.
- Abductions often result in separation from families and communities, causing significant emotional distress and trauma for the children involved.

### **6.Denial of Humanitarian Access for Children:**

- Blocking humanitarian assistance can exacerbate the already dire conditions for children



in conflict zones.

- Lack of access to essential resources like food, water, and medical aid increases the risk of malnutrition, disease, and overall deterioration of children's well-being.

Resolution 1612 created the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM), which aims to monitor, document, and report on six significant violations committed against children in armed conflict.<sup>[138]</sup> The MRM is designed to collect information on parties to armed conflicts that engage in these grave violations, hold perpetrators accountable, and work towards protecting the well-being of children affected by conflict.<sup>[139]</sup> The establishment of this mechanism reflects the international community's commitment to addressing the specific vulnerabilities and rights of children during times of war.

Efforts to address these violations include international advocacy, accountability mechanisms, and establishing international courts to prosecute individuals responsible for such crimes. One of the ways individuals with involvement in human rights violations are being held accountable is South Africa's recent decision on March 13th 2024 to arrest all individuals holding South African passports upon arrival if found having served in the Israeli Defence Forces and played a role in the man-made humanitarian crisis in what remains of Palestine.<sup>[140]</sup> Additionally, programs aimed at the rehabilitation and reintegration of child soldiers, as well as initiatives to support the psychological recovery of children affected by armed conflict, are crucial in mitigating the long-term impact of these grave violations. The international community is pivotal in raising awareness, implementing preventive measures, and holding perpetrators accountable to protect children's rights in conflict zones.

## **1.7 Vancouver Principles:**

The Vancouver Principles are a set of political commitments states make to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers in conflict situations.<sup>[141]</sup> These principles were introduced in November 2017 during a Vancouver, Canada conference titled "Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers."<sup>[142]</sup> Some primary architects for the Vancouver Principles include the Dallaire Centre of Excellence, the Canadian Federal government and the United Nations.

The Vancouver Principles consist of 17 commitments participating states agree to uphold in their peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts.<sup>[143]</sup> These commitments aim to enhance the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions in preventing the recruitment and use of child soldiers and to address the broader impact of armed conflict on children.

### ***Some key elements of the Vancouver Principles include:***

**1. Training and Capacity Building:** States commit to training their military personnel and

peacekeepers on child protection issues and preventing child soldier recruitment.

2. **Accountability:** The principles emphasize accountability for violations related to recruiting and using child soldiers, including holding individuals accountable for their actions.
3. **Child Protection Advisers:** States commit to integrating Child Protection Advisers into their military, police, and civilian components in peacekeeping missions. **Prevention and Early Warning:** The principles highlight the importance of early warning mechanisms and preventive measures to address the factors that contribute to the recruitment and use of child soldiers.
4. **International Cooperation:** Participating states commit to working together with international organizations, NGOs, and other partners to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

More than 100 countries have signed onto the Vancouver Principles with continuing efforts to expand their commitments to other countries.<sup>[144]</sup>

**Below is a condensed version that can be used for circulation:**

# THE VANCOUVER PRINCIPLES (2017)

*More than 100 countries have signed onto the Vancouver Principles, with continuing efforts to expand their commitments. The Vancouver Principles are a set of 18 political commitments to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers in conflict situations; participating states agree to uphold these commitments in their peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts. Some key elements of the Vancouver Principles include:*

## **1 TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING**

States commit to training their military personnel and peacekeepers on child protection issues and preventing child soldier recruitment.

## **2 ACCOUNTABILITY**

The principles emphasize accountability for violations related to recruiting and using child soldiers, including holding individuals accountable for their actions.

## **3 CHILD PROTECTION ADVISORS**

States commit to integrating Child Protection Advisers into their military, police, and civilian components in peacekeeping missions.

## **4 PREVENTION AND EARLY WARNING**

The principles highlight the importance of early warning mechanisms and preventive measures to address the factors that contribute to the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

## **5 INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

Participating states commit to working together with international organizations, NGOs, and other partners to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to prevent the recruitment and use of child soldiers

Source: Government of Canada: The Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers

## 1.8 Study Objectives:

The goal of this study was to develop and convey effective strategies for the peacekeeping armed forces to aid in enhancing child protection, tailored to the diverse high-risk environments in which peacekeeping takes place, often in the absence of law and order. During the data collection process research questions were tailored to evaluate various strategic entry points.

The objectives of the study were manifold. These ranged from assessing any gaps within operational processes to unveiling gender dynamics and understanding ethical quandaries, if any at all, experienced by peacekeepers who are tasked with child protection or who may have found themselves in such a situation.

A significant dimension of the research is to shed light on the moral dilemmas that peacekeepers face when their internal compass conflicts with the obligations and protocols outlined in their mission directives. Therefore, during data collection, it was equally important to differentiate how protocols vary depending on the chapter (the mandate assigned to different missions). The purpose here is to identify the limitations and barriers to child protection instead of prescribing a standardized list of child protection measures. In doing so, the study seeks to address the challenges that may arise in delicate situations when peacekeepers must strike a balance between keeping their own peace and adhering to UN protocols. The objective was to see if obstacles to child protection become more pronounced when peacekeepers must navigate different socio-cultural contexts that present challenges or depending on the chapter mission.

Another vital component of this study is the assessment of child agency in high-risk environments given that the understanding and legal definition of the term “child” and the age range thought to define childhood may vary across the globe. Thus, when factoring in strategies, we remain mindful that the age of responsibility also varies and that this may influence a child’s sense of agency. Therefore, the objective in this case was to understand the roles children play in such environments in the absence or presence of will or options to deduce their expectations from those deployed to protect and safeguard them. This objective is perhaps the most pertinent to this study as it contributes to developing a more holistic understanding of child protection complexities. Often children and their voices carry little weight - if any consideration at all is given to them in the decisions that directly concern them. From a legal standpoint and a human rights perspective, the objective of understanding child agency and the extent of child agency in high-risk environments is important for many reasons. The most crucial is that children are recognized as individuals with inherent rights, at least within the confines of international law including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

When delving into the intricacies of child protection one complication became apparent. In many societies the protection of women and the presence of women is interconnected with child protection. Therefore, another objective was added during the data collection process. This objective is the assessment of how the vulnerabilities of women and children intersect and what role women play in child protection. In doing so, a key consideration has been to ensure that no gender bias may inaccurately skew the findings and thus to mitigate any gender bias on the part of the researchers if there is any. This was done to ensure that the onus of child protection does not

fall onto women or men alone, recognizing DCOE's commitment to addressing discriminatory gender inequality practices and to avoid perpetuating other harms.

Therefore, another objective was to assess the roles different individuals, women and men, play whether as family, community, civil society, or peacekeepers in the broader context of child protection. In this context one of our objectives was to assess the impact of deploying female peacekeepers and the impact that increasing the representation of females within the peacekeeping corps might have on the protection of women and children. By exploring this, we sought to understand whether or not an increase in female participation within the peacekeeping corps correlates with improvements in the protection of women and children. Obviously, the answer to this question will to some degree depend on the particular cultural context.

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