

ACCOUNTABILITY OF CHILD SOLDIERS: BLAME MISPLACED?

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ABSTRACT

The word 'child' is an instinctive reminder of innocence and immaturity. However, when it is coupled with the word 'soldier', it assumes a status that is potent with complex and grave implications. Global statistics indicate that child soldiers range from the age of 10 to 18 years. Reports also reveal the heinous and widespread nature of crimes that are perpetrated by child soldiers when they participate in armed hostilities. The common acceptance is that there is a strong element of coercion involved within the phenomenon of child soldiers – both at the time of conscription and in ensuring their continued participation in hostilities. Considering the different reasons that prompt children within this wide age range to take up arms, is it fair to claim that all child soldiers are coerced into this role? Nevertheless, the rationale for setting the threshold at 18 years is that those below that age do not possess the level of maturity that is requisite of making sound judgements. Accordingly, should children who are 'coerced' into taking up arms be accountable for atrocities they commit during armed conflict?

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