



Rebel Child Soldiering and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

CHRISTOPHER M. FAULKNER 
US Naval War College, USA

AND

BLAIR WELSH 
University of Essex, UK

Why do some rebel groups perpetrate sexual violence in armed conflict while others do not? A growing literature explores factors impacting the occurrence of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). We contribute to this literature, arguing that the composition of rebel groups can provide insight into patterns of sexual violence. We contend rebel groups that use child soldiers, and especially those that rely heavily on coercive child recruitment practices, are more prone to engage in wartime sexual violence than groups who do not recruit minors. While children are rarely the ideal soldier, they have become a crucial resource for many rebel groups. Yet, their recruitment can impact internal group dynamics. Sexual violence can serve as a tool for conditioning children to violence, intragroup cohesion-building, and an instrument for combatting defection. We test this argument with data on 245 rebel groups active in armed conflicts between 1989 and 2011. We supplement the quantitative analyses with an illustrative case study on the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. Our results suggest groups that recruit child soldiers are more likely to inflict CRSV. This effect is magnified when children are recruited forcibly.

¿Por qué algunos grupos rebeldes recurren a la violencia sexual en los conflictos armados y otros no? Hay cada vez más literatura que analiza los factores que llevan a la violencia sexual relacionada con los conflictos (VSRV). Contribuimos a esta literatura, argumentando que la composición de los grupos rebeldes puede proporcionar una visión de los patrones de violencia sexual. Sostenemos que los grupos rebeldes que utilizan niños soldados, y especialmente los que dependen en gran medida de las prácticas de reclutamiento coercitivo de niños, son más propensos a ejercer la violencia sexual en tiempos de guerra que los grupos que no reclutan a menores. Si bien los niños rara vez son el soldado ideal, se han convertido en un recurso crucial para muchos grupos rebeldes. Sin embargo, su reclutamiento puede afectar a la dinámica interna del grupo. La violencia sexual puede servir como herramienta para condicionar a los niños a la violencia, para crear cohesión dentro del grupo y como instrumento para combatir la desertión. Comprobamos este argumento con datos sobre 245 grupos rebeldes activos en conflictos armados entre 1989 y 2011. Complementamos los análisis cuantitativos con un estudio de caso ilustrativo sobre el Frente Revolucionario Unido (FRU) en Sierra Leona. Nuestros resultados sugieren que los grupos que reclutan a niños soldados tienen más probabilidades de recurrir a la VSRV. Este efecto se amplía cuando los niños son reclutados a la fuerza.

Pourquoi certains groupes rebelles exercent-ils une violence sexuelle lors de conflits armés, et d'autres non? Un nombre croissant de travaux explore les facteurs favorisant les violences sexuelles liées aux conflits. Avec cet article, nous contribuons à ces recherches et avançons que la composition des groupes rebelles peut aider à comprendre les mécanismes de la violence sexuelle. Nous affirmons que les groupes rebelles ayant recours à des enfants soldats, et notamment ceux utilisant massivement le recrutement par la force, sont davantage enclins à exercer une violence sexuelle lors de conflits que les groupes ne recrutant pas de mineurs. Si les enfants constituent rarement des soldats idéaux, ils sont devenus une ressource clé pour de nombreux groupes rebelles. En outre, leur recrutement peut avoir un impact sur la dynamique interne d'un groupe. La violence sexuelle peut en effet être un instrument permettant de conditionner les enfants à la violence, de renforcer la cohésion au sein du groupe et de combattre la désertion. Ces affirmations s'appuient sur des données portant sur 245 groupes rebelles actifs dans des conflits armés entre 1989 et 2011. Aux analyses quantitatives s'ajoute une étude de cas, à savoir le RUF en Sierra Leone. Nos conclusions suggèrent que les groupes recrutant des enfants soldats sont plus enclins à exercer des violences sexuelles liées aux conflits, et que cette corrélation est plus nette encore lorsque les enfants sont recrutés par la force.

Introduction

On March 14, 2012, Thomas Lubanga Dyilo became the first person to be convicted and sentenced by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The Court found Lubanga guilty of conscripting and using children in hostilities during an armed intrastate conflict. As leader of the *Forces Patriotiques Pour la Libération du Congo* (FPLC) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Lubanga recruited hundreds of children—even developing a “Kadogo unit,” consisting primarily of children under the age of 15. While Lubanga’s

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Christopher M. Faulkner, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the US Naval War College. His research focuses on issues in irregular warfare with specific attention on rebel recruitment and militant financing and tactics.

Blair Welsh is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. Their research focuses on militant violence and restraint, with particular attention to militants’ tactic selection, target selection, and use of terrorism in civil war.

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use of child combatants was alarming, accounts of other atrocities perpetrated by members of the FPLC uncovered particularly egregious events. According to one ICC Prosecutor, Lubanga's crimes affected "hundreds of children" who were "routinely used to fight in conflicts [to] kill, rape, and pillage" (ICC 2011, 4). In one case, a 12-year-old child soldier was forced to rape a 60-year-old woman (ICC 2009, 69).

As the case of the FPLC demonstrates, rebel groups are frequently involved in the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Further evidence suggests that many of these groups are also common perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). While a growing literature exists on the logic and consequences of CRSV (Askin 1999; Wood 2006, 2009; Cohen 2013; Cohen and Nordås 2014; Nagel and Doctor 2020), and scholars have devoted significant attention to investigating patterns of child soldier recruitment (Bakaki and Hinkkainen 2016; Haer and Böhmelt 2016; Tynes 2018; Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020), these two literatures have remained largely distinct.¹ Our study bridges this gap, contending that by examining patterns of rebel child soldiering—specifically the scale and nature of child recruitment—we can better understand patterns of CRSV.

We argue groups that recruit child soldiers and do so through coercive means are more likely to inflict CRSV. While children may provide an organization with some degree of strategic value (e.g., Haer and Böhmelt 2016), they are generally less capable than adults. Scholars argue that rebels are willing to forego this potential loss in capability in exchange for children's unique characteristics that may offset their deficiencies as soldiers, such as increased loyalty and allegiance (Beber and Blattman 2013). Achieving loyalty, however, is not guaranteed and rebels adopt a variety of strategies to ensure compliance with, and commitment to, an organization. For groups that recruit children, CRSV can serve a multifunctional purpose, used as a conditioning tool, cohesion-building measure, and an instrument for combating defection.

We test our argument quantitatively with data on 245 rebel groups in armed conflicts between 1989 and 2011. We supplement our quantitative approach with an illustrative case study on the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. We find robust support for our argument: groups that rely on child soldiers, and especially those that recruit children by force, are more likely to inflict CRSV. The case of RUF unveils alternative mechanisms including emulation and children's agency. Overall, the results highlight the complexities of child soldiering and the multifaceted nature of engagement in sexual violence for armed groups.

The findings hold important implications and contribute to existing research in several ways. First, child soldier recruitment remains a significant feature of contemporary warfare, with the number of armed conflicts reported to feature child soldiers doubling in the last decade (United Nations 2018). We highlight a severe consequence of child recruitment on organizational dynamics and civilian targeting. In doing so, we add to growing discussions on the role and agency of children in violent organizations (Gates and Reich 2010; Beier 2015; Cohen and Nordås 2015; Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020; Nagel et al. 2021). Second, our research refines previous work on CRSV. We indicate how the unique constraints of child soldier recruitment can drive CRSV as an intentional strategy, even and especially

in cases of forced recruitment, a known determinant of CRSV (Cohen 2013, 2016). Finally, we provide meaningful evidence for policy discussions on security. CRSV is a grave human security issue, particularly in terms of personal security, and carries significant long-term effects for survivors, perpetrators, and communities (Paris 2001; Østby, Leiby, and Nordås 2019).

Child Soldiers and Civil War

Over 25 years have passed since Graça Machel's (1996) pathbreaking report on the impact of armed conflict on children. Despite it highlighting the prevalence of child soldiering and the importance of developing protections, the recruitment and use of children remains a frequent occurrence in civil war. Several scholars note that over two-thirds of rebel groups are likely to recruit child soldiers at some point during an armed conflict (Lasley and Thyne 2015; Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020). Within their assessments, child recruitment is often viewed as either a function of opportunity or a consequence of organizational demands.

Opportunity arguments suggest structural conditions can impact the available supply of children, increasing the likelihood of their recruitment. Structural conditions include youth population bulges, limited educational and/or employment opportunities, as well as a large number of vulnerable groups such as orphans, internally displaced persons, and refugees (Brett and Specht 2004; Achvarina and Reich 2006; Wessells 2006). Under these conditions, children may join organizations due to familial, social, economic, or political ties (Angucia 2009). While important, structural conditions rarely account for the adjacent effect: these factors might also increase an available adult population from which to recruit. Structural conditions are thus insufficient for uncovering the fuller picture of operational complexities in child recruitment across rebel groups over time and space (Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020).

Arguments on structural conditions often unearth a discussion on the degree of rational decision-making for children's choice or agency upon joining an organization (e.g., Beier 2015).² Many scholars indicate that children's experiences in armed conflict are far from homogenous; their relegation exclusively to positions of victimhood negates the importance of their agency in navigating the disruptive nature of conflict. Put differently, treating all child soldiers as victims invalidates children's ability to pursue "an autonomously reasoned survival strategy" in times of war (Beier 2015, 6). In particular, scholars emphasize the importance of reconceptualizing the stereotype that all children are predestined to be passive victims in conflict and, instead, acknowledge "the possibility that the young may engage voluntarily in military action" (Hart 2006, 224; Hanson and Molima 2019, 112; Beier and Tabak 2020) and consciously make decisions about the types of violence they engage in, prior to and within an organization. This standpoint is debated among scholars as well as human rights advocates and international lawyers.³

Demand-side arguments assume that children are actively pursued because they provide some strategic advantage or fulfill organizational deficiencies. Some have equated

²Agency refers to the "capacity or incapacity of making autonomous decisions" (Hanson 2016, 471).

³While we refrain from theorizing on the direct agency of children, we return to this debate in the alternative pathways section, which highlights the complexities of children's experiences in wartime and offers qualifications to our theory and findings.

¹Important exceptions include Cohen (2017), Cohen and Nordås (2015), and Moberg (2017).

child soldiers to a military innovation, capable of improving rebels' fighting capacity and, as such, prolonging conflict (Haer and Böhmelt 2016, 2017; Tynes 2018). As nontraditional combatants, children offer a "comparative advantage" for militants in asymmetric conflicts by surprising the enemy on the battlefield or performing tasks that allow more capable adult soldiers to focus on fighting (Haer and Böhmelt 2016; Bloom 2019, 195; Faulkner and Doctor 2021). Scholars also argue that children are "in demand" when rebels pursue lootable natural resources because they can assist in resource acquisition while simultaneously being given less, or kept completely from, the pecuniary benefits (Faulkner, Powell, and Lasley 2019; Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020).

A frequent demand-side explanation is that children are recruited because of their ease of recruitment, malleability, and levels of obedience (Beber and Blattman 2013). In this view, children become a low(er)-cost risk for rebels seeking to staff their ranks. Their lower levels of cognitive development means they can be "more easily molded" or influenced once part of an organization and it may take less effort to "create solidarity norms" because of children's "tendency towards altruism and bonding to a group" (Andvig and Gates 2010, 82; Gutiérrez-Sanin 2010, 129–30). This can be especially attractive for rebel commanders who seek to exploit these characteristics.

The Determinants of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is well-documented in civil war.⁴ While issues of underreporting make accurate assessments difficult, recent scholarship points to significant variation in the frequency of its perpetration over time, as well as its occurrence within and across armed conflicts (Wood 2009; Cohen 2016; Nordås and Nagel 2018; Nordås and Cohen 2021). Amid growing concerns from scholars and policymakers, many have sought to understand which organizations are more likely to engage in CRSV once fighting begins. This is a vital question as CRSV is a distinct form of civilian victimization with traumatic implications for victims and perpetrators alike (Benson and Gizelis 2020; Nordås and Cohen 2021).

Scholarship on rebels' infliction of CRSV generally centers around two diverging arguments: the tactic is either ordered (i.e., organizational policy) or tolerated (i.e., practice). Explanations of the former emphasize that CRSV is a top-down strategy, designed to promote cohesion and/or increase commanders' control over their forces (Baines 2014; Marks 2014; Schneider, Banholzer, and Albarracin 2015; Johansson and Sarwari 2019). Several contend that CRSV can be used for tactical purposes, as a "weapon of war," particularly in conflicts marked by ethnic cleansing or by organizations with strong ideological ties (e.g., Benard 1994; Reid-Cunningham 2008; Revkin and Wood 2021). Rebels and states alike may also seek to inflict CRSV because of its demoralizing effect—especially in societies with strong-held social beliefs on "women's honor and sexual purity" (Leiby 2009, 449). Aside from its promotion, organizations can also enforce combatant restraint through control of and accountability for CRSV (Butler, Gluch, and Mitchell 2007; Hoover Green 2016, 2018; Moncrief 2017; Whitaker, Walsh, and Conrad 2019). This is more likely in organizations where leaders are elected since elections mitigate principal-agent problems (Sawyer, Bond, and Cunningham 2021). Overall, rebel leaders may both promote or discourage CRSV as an organizational policy.

⁴We define sexual violence in detail in our research design section.

The alternative perspective points to CRSV as a practice that is tolerated rather than overtly directed. While rebel commanders typically have tactical and strategic reasons to target noncombatants, justifications for CRSV as an organizational policy are seen as atypical (Cohen 2013, 2016; Hoover Green 2016; Loken 2017; Wood and Toppelberg 2017; Wood 2018; Nagel 2019; Doctor 2021). As Cohen, Hoover Green, and Wood (2013, 1) note, "Wartime rape is often not an intentional strategy of war: it is more frequently tolerated than ordered". Put differently, the narrative that rape is a "weapon of war" is viewed as limited. For example, soldiers interviewed in the DRC explained that rape was never directly ordered or "systematic" (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009, 514). Instead, sexual violence appeared to be tolerated, stemming from masculine heterosexuality that manifested as a soldier's "right" to engage in CRSV to fulfill their self-proclaimed needs.

While vertical interactions within rebel organizations point to some instances of CRSV as a conscious wartime strategy, many scholars emphasize the importance of horizontal interactions for understanding patterns of CRSV (Sanday 2007; Cohen 2013, 2016; Loken 2017; Wood 2018; Nagel 2019). Group composition, social pressures, and organizational norms, including misogynistic socialization practices, can create conditions that lead soldiers to encourage or constrain their comrades from perpetrating sexual violence (cf. Wood 2009; Loken 2017; Mehl 2020). Leiby (2009, 459) highlights that in Guatemala, soldiers were socially ostracized, "insulted and made fun of," if they refused to participate in acts of CRSV.

The horizontal nature of CRSV therefore functions as a method of informal socialization that influences the social dynamics of rebel units (Wood 2018). Work by Nagel and Doctor (2020) shows that CRSV increases organizational cohesion at the battalion level, though such practices can jeopardize groups' overall integrity and durability. Thus, the volatility of conflict leads some actors to tolerate acts they otherwise might avoid—some organizations may do what they determine is necessary in the short term, even at the risk of jeopardizing longer term objectives. To this view, Wood (2018, 526) introduces the concept of deliberate ambiguity, in which CRSV may be promoted by commanders, but orders are intentionally left unclear, often in an effort to avoid accountability in a post-conflict setting. These "partial orders," can be vague and/or strategically coded, where CRSV becomes "tolerance as a form of implicit order" (Richardot 2014; Park and Sim 2022).

Overall, the conflict environment is complex. Leaders "often must balance between independent imperatives, simultaneously facing a complex set of conflict-level constraints and organizational management concerns ... the agency of socialization can embody either a top-down or bottom-up process, or both" (Doctor 2021, 71). Sexual violence can therefore occur, within and across conflicts and organizations, as a policy and/or practice.

Child Soldiering and CRSV

To link the recruitment of children with the perpetration of CRSV, we align our theory with previous research, arguing that CRSV can be both a policy and practice. CRSV provides organizations that recruit children with a multifaceted tool that serves an important strategic function, increasing its likelihood. Our argument differs from previous work in that it suggests that the intentionality and strategic exposure and coercion of the perpetration of CRSV are particularly unique for organizations that recruit child soldiers. It

reinforces and builds on earlier work through its focus on social interactions among combatants.

Our theory is derived from three non-mutually exclusive mechanisms: sexual violence as (i) a conditioning tool; (ii) cohesion-building measure; and (iii) instrument for combating defection. In what follows, we first consider children as combatants and the unique organizational constraints therefrom. Next, we outline our three main mechanisms for the relationship between child recruitment and the increased likelihood of CRSV before considering the mode of recruitment.

Recruiting Children in Armed Conflict

Children are rarely the ideal candidates for recruitment, yet, during armed conflict, can become an attractive resource. In addition to fighting, they may undertake auxiliary roles, serving as spies, messengers, or guards. They are often viewed as desirable because they are perceived to be easier to catch, coerce, punish, and manipulate. Evidence also suggests that children can be more aggressive, more risk-taking, and less rational in decision-making, in part a consequence of their lower levels of cognitive and emotional development (Andvig and Gates 2010; Tynes 2018). Thus, once within an organization, they may become more obedient soldiers, a feature rebels can exploit (Beber and Blattman 2013; Haer and Böhmelt 2016).

Despite some of these potential benefits, child recruitment is “never optimal under basic principal-agent assumptions” (Beber and Blattman 2013, 69). As soldiers, they are typically too young, underdeveloped, and/or inexperienced—they are generally less able as combatants than adults, which can be costly.⁵ The younger and more inexperienced a child, the more problematic this can become (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2010, 123). However, much of the literature on child recruitment overlooks the interactions between existing members and an influx of newly recruited children in such a way that considers how veteran members respond to child recruits. While often assumed that child soldiers are readily welcomed, their introduction can threaten internal relations. Their age and general inexperience in conflict can raise concerns among veterans about children’s utility and capability in battle. Doubts surrounding their loyalty may also arise. For example, evidence illustrates how children recruited by the PKK in the 1990s were “more likely to die in battle ... [and] more likely to run away,” while former child recruits in Burma describe being “too afraid” and “trying to run” upon exposure to combat (Heppner 2002; Marcus 2009, 170).

While scholars have challenged this notion, arguing that children are less likely to defect (e.g., Andvig and Gates 2010; Beber and Blattman 2013), evidence from Uganda, Myanmar, South Sudan, and Syria paints a less conclusive picture, emphasizing that children attempt to escape, often several times, with varying degrees of success (Blattman and Annan 2010; Briggs 2016; Holt 2019). A former child soldier in the Sudan People’s Liberation Army explained that he and nearly 400 other child soldiers actively planned and carried out their escape, though few survived (NPR 2015). Groups that recruit many child soldiers, therefore, may face larger risks of internal divisions and, as a result, are likely to be more aggressive in the adoption of tactics to combat it.

⁵ Several scholars argue that children are capable fighters and, even if not, they can take on roles that allow adults to focus on combat (Haer et al. 2020). Several groups have also exploited children as suicide bombers because they arouse less scrutiny (Bloom and Horgan 2019).

Overall, the interjection of children into the rank-and-file, while potentially beneficial for overcoming participation constraints, ushers in a unique set of challenges surrounding the conditioning of children to violence alongside concerns of jeopardizing organizations’ internal dynamics. Sexual violence offers a multifunctional solution.

Sexual Violence as a Conditioning Tool

The process involved to socialize children into rebel groups (to deal with issues of acclimation to violence, cohesion, and defection) is distinct from the process of socializing adults. We argue this makes CRSV especially likely in groups that recruit children. Kressel (2002) describes the pre-conditions for violence as achieved through encouraging, routinizing, and dehumanizing. Upon the recruitment of new combatants, Cohen (2016, 55) describes rape as a *group* strategy; stemming from “a violent socialization process that takes place among the rank-and-file.” In this consideration, engagement in CRSV becomes important for socialization processes.

There are arguable differences, however, in socialization processes for adults and children. Wood (2008, 546) argues that adult soldiers experience military socialization through exposure to violence as perpetrators, witnesses, and victims. This internalizes group norms and de-individualizes the new recruit.⁶ The introduction of children into rebel organizations, however, demands a more *intentional* socialization process as children represent distinct socializing agents (Vermeij 2014). Even if children volunteer to fight, insurgents are likely to amplify violence in an effort to “condition” children to the nature of it. While rebels seek to normalize violence for all recruits, they are especially attentive to the need to do so when recruiting children. They can achieve this by exploiting the malleability of children to switch off the emotional burden of inflicting violence or exploiting their lower levels of cognitive development (e.g., Brim 1968). Vermeij (2014) argues this is possible in organizations’ mirroring of parent–child socialization processes. This unveils a “far more open and continual use of power, so that the child can hardly avoid realizing that it is the weaker party ...” (Brim 1968, 558). Children are therefore likely to experience socialization directly upon recruitment, and thereafter, in which violence is “routinized” within a repetitive conditioning process. Whereas adults may be exposed to violence in battle, which “bonds” combatants (e.g., Cohen 2016), children often experience a strategically penned initiation process, where violence is used to condition them to the nature of war and the realities of a group’s hierarchy.

Children can also be easily coerced into committing various atrocities during times of armed conflict (Singer 2006). A frequent narrative is that children are forced to kill upon recruitment to “prove” oneself. A seven-year-old recruit in Colombia stated, “They give you a gun and you have to kill the best friend you have. They do it to see if they can trust you” (HRW 2008). As this narrative suggests, rebels are often aware of the stakes when recruiting children and have pursued strategies that allow for a more expansive recruitment process while guarding against threats to cohesion and recruit loyalty. Children have also been forced to kill family members or commit acts of violence in their own local community in order to “sever bonds” that make returning home difficult (Andvig and Gates 2010, 78). The RUF,

⁶ This relationship of indirect socialization for adults is contingent upon several factors, including the mode of recruitment (see Cohen 2013). We return to this point in our discussion on the mode of recruitment.

for example, often forced children to kill in the presence of the entire village, rupturing societal bonds (Shepler 2014).

While inflicting lethal violence is clearly a strategy rebels have used to condition child recruits, rebels typically retain a “repertoire of violence” (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017). Forcing child recruits to perpetrate and/or witness sexual violence, among other atrocities, is a recurring strategy within the conditioning process. A former child soldier from East Timor recalled, “The first time they took me from my home we had to rape a woman and then kill anything we could find, like animals and people. They ordered us to rape. We did this together.” (UNICEF 2002, 43).⁷

Sexual Violence as a Cohesion-Building Tool

In addition to conditioning children, CRSV can foster cohesion. While challenges to group solidarity are multifarious, rebels’ recruitment patterns have been identified as exceedingly influential on the strength of bonds among fighters (e.g., Gates 2002, 2017; Weinstein 2005; Eck 2014; Cohen 2013, 2016). Cohen (2013, 464) argues that the influx of new recruits results in a climate where fighters have little information about one another and are unlikely to feel kindred with fellow recruits. Here, CRSV can help facilitate social cohesion. Doctor (2021) suggests a similar logic, arguing that the arrival of foreign fighters, a distinct category of recruit, can disrupt internal group dynamics. As he notes, “The incorporation of outsiders ... can pose a potent threat to its cohesion” and CRSV, whether by “policy or practice,” provides a practical solution to improve prospects for organizational cohesion (Doctor 2021, 72).

While children and foreign fighters differ in important ways, the recruitment of child soldiers comes with several similar risks. A key distinction is that children rarely have battlefield experience. Thus, their recruitment can be consequential as veteran members seek to ensure new recruits are not only capable of inflicting violence, but are committed to the cause. Lack of confidence in new recruits’ ability and/or mental and physical fortitude can undermine a unit’s cohesiveness and with it, jeopardize an organization’s political ambitions.

There are several pathways for overcoming limitations in children’s real or perceived capabilities and their reception by existing members. Combat training can improve fighting proficiency and quell concerns about recruits’ capabilities. This requires time and resources that are frequently in short supply. As interviews with former child soldiers abducted by the LRA in Uganda suggest, it took significantly longer to train children in basic combatant skills like operating firearms (Beber and Blattman 2013).

Alternatively, groups can nurture cohesion through the use of selective forms of violence. Sexual violence, whether as a shared or ordered experience, can foster social relations among members, which promotes mutual trust and creating bonds (see Cohen 2013). Like being forced to kill, “sexual violence occurs because combatants have to prove to their fellow combatants that they are strong” (Haer, Hecker, and Maedl 2015, 619). For children, generally seen as weaker and lacking credible battlefield experience, this tactic can improve prospects for acceptance among an organization’s veteran base. In the Lubanga trial, for example, an ICC prosecutor stated, “child soldiers were exposed to the sexual violence perpetrated by Thomas Lubanga’s men in unspeakable ways ... young boys were instructed

to rape ... A former boy soldier stated that commanders had instructed the boy soldiers to rape civilian women, and confessed that he followed these instructions” (ICC 2011).

Sexual Violence to Combat Defection

In addition to conditioning and cohesion building, CRSV can also deter defection. Like adults, children weigh consequences, both formal and informal, of attempted escape and rebel leaders can “exploit a child’s lower expectations of successful escape and community acceptance” (Beber and Blattman 2013, 101). While the logistics of escape may be difficult, one’s participation in violent atrocities can severely diminish the perceived accessibility of outside options. As interviews with former child soldiers in Boko Haram reveal, “the more gratuitous the violence—gang rape, ceremonial sacrifice, mutilating and murdering neighbors or family members—the harder it becomes to contemplate returning home” (Topol 2017).

Coming to terms with one’s participation in violence is a notoriously difficult task, particularly for children who must reconcile their participation in violence internally and with the communities that they seek to return. Given their age and (im)maturity, children’s perception of the stigmatization they will receive upon returning to civilian life can be amplified, making such a return especially challenging (Betancourt et al. 2010; Derluyn, Vindevoel, and De Haene 2013). Denov and Marchand (2014, 231) highlight how exiting an armed group and returning to civilian life “represents an abrupt shift in relationships, behavioral patterns, and expectations [that] ... entails the reshaping of identities.” Navigating these complex processes can be difficult even for adults. Rebels’ promotion and/or toleration of CRSV can muddle an already complicated environment for child soldiers who may already fear the consequences of their association with a group (Akello, Richters, and Reis 2006).

It is important to also consider that sexual violence is a traumatic event not only for the victim(s), but for child recruits who are forced to engage in, or witness such events. Participation in or witnessing of violent atrocities like rape and murder may further trigger a “dissociative mechanism” which Wessells’ (2006) contends is a way for children to “exist in a state somewhere between their previous selves and the reality of their new life” (Topol 2017). As a result, the adoption/toleration of CRSV by rebel commanders serves a strategic function where rape as a “weapon of war” is turned inwards as a means to further exert control over child soldiers. As the special prosecutor on gender for the Lubanga trial noted, “Lubanga made boys into rapists and girls into sex slaves in order to make them into soldiers he could command and use at will” (MacKinnon 2009, 5).

While we anticipate any group that recruits children will be more likely to inflict CRSV, the scale of child recruitment varies widely across cases. This can influence patterns of violence. For instance, children in the RUF, a group that recruited thousands of child soldiers, were particularly violent (Mitton 2012). As a result, we align our argument with Gates’ (2017) work on civilian targeting and argue that an increased reliance on child recruitment as a principal recruitment strategy can amplify issues related to defection, combatant experience, and organizational cohesion.⁸ Thus,

⁷In this way, CRSV can be used in tandem with lethal violence, though CRSV offers additional benefits for an organization.

⁸Gates (2017, 683) argues the “norms of extreme violence against civilians are likely to be limited to groups with a large proportion of children.”

we expect the practice and scale of child recruitment to be strongly associated with CRSV.

H1: *Groups that recruit child soldiers, and do so at high levels, are more likely to engage in CRSV, all else equal.*

Sexual Violence and the Mode of Child Recruitment

While our first hypothesis speaks to child recruitment in general, the mode of recruitment can play a critical role in understanding rebel-inflicted CRSV. We argue that coercive child recruitment strategies exacerbate concerns of recruit capability and are increasingly likely to threaten group cohesion. Such concerns must be quickly reconciled. As Cohen (2013, 465) observes, “rape is part of the process of hazing new recruits and of maintaining social order among existing members.” This effect may be especially pronounced in groups that forcibly recruit child soldiers.⁹

While Cohen (2013) focuses specifically on gang rape as a socializing tool, we argue the intentionality and strategic exposure and coercion of the perpetration of any form of CSRV is particularly unique for organizations with child soldiers for two reasons. First, existing members may be more emboldened to demand new recruits prove themselves when those new recruits are children. Second, when interjected into a new environment and “trapped in a group of hostile strangers, individuals are more likely to choose participation in costly group behavior over continued estrangement from their new peers” (Cohen 2013, 465). All else equal, children have a strong(er) social desirability bias and rebels can exploit this characteristic.

For children, however, “fitting in” may be more than simply social desirability and instead, a rational strategy. A forcibly recruited child in the RUF’s Small Boys Unit (SBU) was “slammed against a wall, forced to eat feces and made to lie in the sun all day with his eyes open as punishment” for disobeying orders to rape (Oosterveld 2019, 79). Similar accounts have been identified in the DRC. When pressured to engage in atrocities such as gang rape, the “commander says you must do this because they are in a group and everybody is going to do so ... if somebody says I can’t do that, they shoot him” (Trenholm et al. 2013, 214). Given the consequences of non-compliance, children are quite literally left with a life or death decision that can influence behavior.

In short, forcible child recruitment can exacerbate many of the group insecurities we highlight above. While debate exists as to the degree to which children can genuinely consent to join rebellion, forced recruitment is a frequent strategy among rebel groups that recruit children (Gates and Reich 2010). Yet, the extent to which groups rely on forced child recruitment varies significantly, with recent work identifying that upwards of 50 percent of rebel groups use forcible recruitment to acquire at least some percentage of their child soldiers (Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020).¹⁰ Central to this aspect of our theoretical argument, coerced recruits are often associated with an increased likelihood of desertion or defection (Gates 2002) and rebel commanders and members of the rank-and-file must either monitor these recruits and/or develop strong enforcement mechanisms that deter them. Though the threat of punishment can guard against would-be escapees, it is unlikely to

improve unit cohesiveness. CRSV can address multiple concerns simultaneously. Hence, we expect groups that forcibly recruit children to be especially prone to inflict CRSV.

H2: *Of groups that recruit children, those which do so through coercive recruitment practices are more likely to perpetrate CRSV, all else equal.*

Data and Research Design

We test our theoretical expectations with a series of logistic regression models on 245 rebel groups active between 1989 and 2011. We supplement our quantitative assessment with an illustrative case study on the RUF in Sierra Leone. In our quantitative approach, the unit of analysis is the conflict-dyad-period, where a government is connected to one rebel group in a particular conflict period. Any change in the dyad’s parameters leads to a new observation. In total, we have 299 conflict-dyad-periods. The data structure comes from the Child Soldiers Data Set (CSDS) (Haer and Böhmelt 2016). The CSDS records information on the use of child soldiers by rebel organizations listed in the Non-State Actors Dataset (NSA) (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013).¹¹

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable, *rebel-inflicted CRSV*, captures the prevalence of sexual violence by a rebel group during the dyad in question as recorded by the Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict (SVAC) Dataset (Cohen and Nordås 2014). We conceptualize CRSV based on the definition used by both the ICC and the SVAC Dataset. Sexual violence takes on seven distinct forms, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilization, sexual mutilation, and sexual torture. The SVAC Dataset only records sexual violence by armed groups against individuals *outside* of their organization, as opposed to sexual violence within a group against its membership.¹²

At the group-year level, the SVAC Dataset offers a four-point ordinal prevalence score of sexual violence: 0 equals no CRSV, 1 corresponds to isolated reports of CRSV, 2 is widespread CRSV, and 3 is CRSV on a massive scale. The scores are based on information from the US State Department, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. For this study, we aggregate the ordinal scale to create a binary variable, coded 1 if a rebel group was reported to have perpetrated any degree of CRSV as recorded by any of the three sources in the conflict-dyad-period, and 0 otherwise.

Collecting accurate data on the levels of CRSV is difficult and underreporting is likely (Davies and True 2017). Concurrently, “the sensationalist nature of sexual violence” can incentivize human rights organizations to emphasize or overreport (Nagel and Doctor 2020, 1238). These competing incentives highlight the uncertainty and potential biases in reports. In turn, researchers caution against constructing prevalence levels based on the three sources (e.g., Davies and True 2017; Hoover Green 2018). Our aggregation of the ordinal measure to a binary variable helps address these issues.¹³ In our data, rebel-inflicted CRSV is perpetrated in 56 conflict-dyad-periods (19 percent).

⁹Cohen (2013) references this point though is unable to test the argument in her analysis. Her inclination serves as a key motivator for this project.

¹⁰Scholars have generally assumed that child soldiering serves as a useful proxy for low group cohesion (Cohen and Nordås 2015). Our study illustrates, however, despite a majority of groups forcibly recruiting children (53 percent), at least a quarter of groups in our data refrain from the practice.

¹¹Given the nature of the conflict-dyad-period, it is possible for a rebel group to appear more than once in our data.

¹²The coding of CRSV outside of the organization (as opposed to within) reinforces the need for an organizational strategy of outgroup antagonism. It should not be confused with intragroup sexual violence, which is not possible to control for in the data.

Independent Variables

Our first independent variable—*child soldiering*—records the level of rebel child recruitment on an ordinal scale where: the rebel group did not use child soldiers (0); the group used some child soldiers (<50 percent of the overall membership—coded as 1); and the rebel group used many child soldiers (>50 percent of the membership—coded as 2). This measure comes from the CSDS, where a child soldier is any person below 18 “recruited or used by an armed force or group in *any* capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members” (Haer and Böhmelt 2016, 397).^{14,15} In our data, no children were recruited in 70 conflict-dyad-periods. The vast majority of conflict-dyad-periods saw rebels recruit at least some children, with rebels relying heavily on child soldiers in 51 conflict-dyad-periods.

The second independent variable—*forced child soldier recruitment*—records rebels’ level of forced child recruitment within each conflict-dyad-period. This ordinal variable comes from Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker (2020), with 0 indicating no evidence of forcible child recruitment, 1 meaning that fewer than 20 percent of all children in the group were forcibly recruited, and 2 denoting that more than 20 percent of all children were recruited forcibly.¹⁶ Importantly, a score of 0 is not the same as the absence of child soldiers; it is merely the absence of forced child recruitment. The measure captures several forms of coercive recruitment, including abduction, raids on schools, and “one family, one person” policies that obligate families to provide a child for the “cause” (Becker 2010, 110). In our data, children were not forcibly recruited in 102 conflict-dyad-periods. Conversely, groups forcibly recruited fewer than 20 percent of children in 86 conflict-dyad-periods, and groups forcibly recruited more than 20 percent of the children in 38 conflict-dyad-periods.¹⁷

Control Variables

As control variables, we include a number of group-, conflict-, and country-level factors.¹⁸ At the group level, we control for whether rebels have secessionist aims as well as Islamist or communist ideologies since these organizations may be more or less likely to commit CRSV as well as recruit children (e.g., Lasley and Thyne 2015; Hoover Green 2016; Revkin and Wood 2021). We also control for rebels’ central command strength, territorial control, foreign support, and exploitation of lootable resources. These factors may also influence child soldier recruitment and

¹³Employing the binary measure is important given the limited variation in the ordinal measure. In our data, an average of 20 conflict-dyad-periods (across three measures of CRSV) received a score of 2 or 3. This is a recommended practice in the literature (e.g., Nagel and Doctor 2020). In robustness checks, we report results using the ordinal measure. Results are robust and suggest *higher rates* of child recruitment are associated with *higher* levels of CRSV.

¹⁴This operational definition is drawn from the Paris Principles (UNICEF 2007). The coding of the ordinal variable is based on independent reports from sources including Child Soldiers International, Human Rights Watch, and the UN.

¹⁵It is worth emphasizing that child soldiers are not a homogenous group. A vast literature, one which we cannot devote sufficient attention to here, exists discussing the construction of *who* constitutes a child (e.g., Drumbi 2012).

¹⁶The 20 percent threshold reflects the threshold established by Beber and Blattman (2013).

¹⁷Forced recruitment data are missing for three groups in our data (RCD Faction, Lebanese Forces, and POLISARIO).

¹⁸Where applicable, control variables are averaged for the conflict-dyad-period. Sources and coding decisions for control variables are reported in the online appendix alongside descriptive statistics.

violence (e.g., Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Whitaker, Walsh, and Conrad 2019; Asal and Nagel 2021).¹⁹ At the conflict- and country level, we control for regime type, state-inflicted CRSV, and conflict duration to account for tit-for-tat strategies and political context.

Quantitative Results

Our models estimate the likelihood of CRSV based on observed levels of child soldiering.²⁰ To account for possible sources of heterogeneity, standard errors are clustered by rebel group. Across all models, we find strong support for our hypotheses. All else equal, organizations that recruit children are significantly more likely to inflict CRSV. When limiting our analysis to only groups that recruit children, those that do so forcibly are especially prone to engagement in CRSV.

We evaluate the substantive effects of child soldiers on rebel-inflicted CRSV in Figure 1, which plots the predicted probability of CRSV given an organization’s proportion of child soldiers.²¹ The predicted values are shown with 0.95 confidence intervals. A cursory look at these relationships illustrates that groups that forgo child soldier recruitment have the lowest expected probability of perpetrating out-group CRSV. Where rebel groups recruit some children (<50 percent of recruits), however, the probability of CRSV against civilians is approximately 12 percent, a noticeable uptick. Moving across the *x*-axis, the probability of CRSV increases nearly threefold, to approximately 33 percent, when child recruits account for a substantial proportion of an organization’s overall membership (>50 percent), lending support to Hypothesis 1.²²

Figure 2 graphically depicts the substantive effects of the level of *forced* child recruitment on rebel-inflicted CRSV with predicted values shown with 0.95 confidence intervals. Our data are limited here to only those groups that recruit children to assess the mode of recruitment.²³ The scale on the *x*-axis ranges from groups who use children, but do not forcibly recruit them, to groups where <20 percent of child recruits were forcibly recruited, to groups that forcibly recruit >20 percent of their child soldiers. Results indicate that the probability of rebel-inflicted CRSV is substantially larger for groups that rely more heavily on forcible child recruitment than those where such recruitment practices are either less frequent or non-existent. Specifically, where rebel groups forcibly recruit some children (<20 percent), the probability of inflicting CRSV is approximately 17 percent. Conversely, the probability of CRSV jumps to approximately 40 percent when groups forcibly recruit >20 percent of their child soldiers.²⁴

Illustrative Evidence from the RUF in Sierra Leone, 1991–2001

While the quantitative analyses offer support for our hypotheses, we present an illustrative case study on the RUF

¹⁹Results are robust to the inclusion of a control for rebel exploitation of *any* natural resources.

²⁰We report main models in Tables A2 and A3 in the online appendix. The results are robust to several alternative estimations and specifications. We present these results in the online appendix.

²¹All substantive effects are calculated using Model 4 in Tables A2 and A3 in the online appendix, respectively. Controls are held at their mean.

²²*p*-values for the discrete increases are *p* < 0.001.

²³We conduct a robustness test accounting for differences across organizations in forced recruitment policies for adults and children (Table A9 in the online appendix). We find that the forced recruitment of adults (as opposed to children) is not a significant predictor of CRSV.

²⁴*p*-value for the discrete increase is *p* < 0.001.

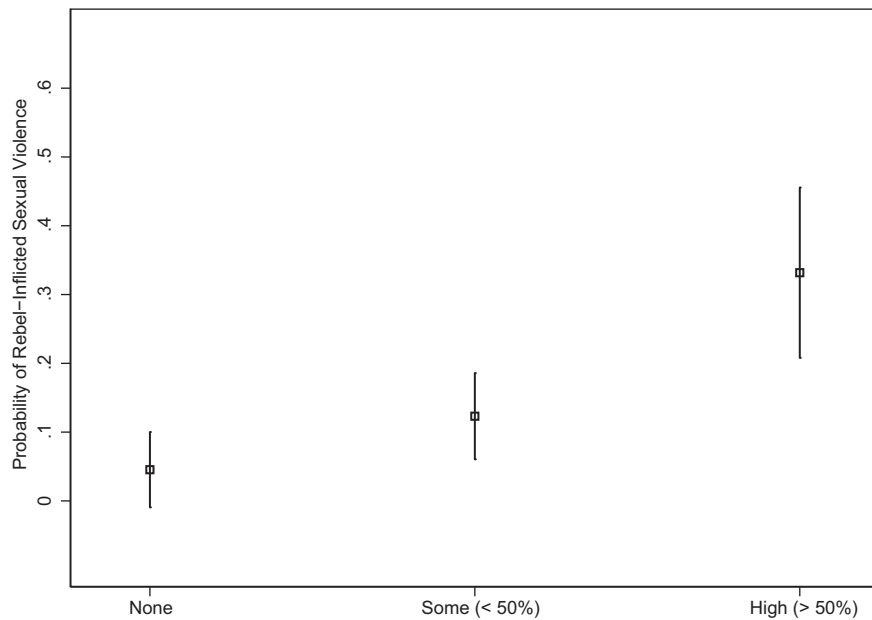


Figure 1. Child soldiering and rebel-inflicted CRSV.

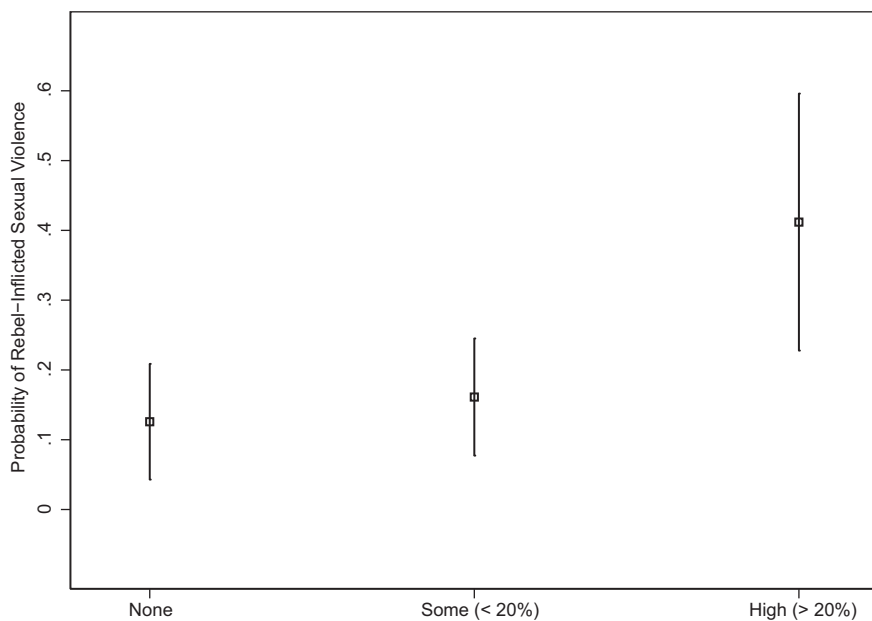


Figure 2. Forced recruitment of children and rebel-inflicted CRSV.

in Sierra Leone (1991–2001) to better probe theoretical mechanisms and demonstrate the plausibility of causality in our theory. The RUF was one of the most violent rebel organizations in post-Cold War Africa. Previous work has explored civilian targeting and CRSV using this case (e.g., Cohen 2013; Marks 2013). The RUF also forcibly recruited a large number of children, with some estimates noting that children comprised more than 50 percent of its force (Goodwin 1999; HRW 2000). While all actors in this conflict perpetrated CRSV, approximately 70 percent of rape cases reported to the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were perpetrated by the RUF (Cohen 2016, 255).

The RUF therefore presents an extreme case—one that unveils extreme values on the dependent variable and where its underlying causal mechanism, even when considered alone, should strongly determine a particu-

lar outcome as a paradigmatic example of the process (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring and Cojocaru 2016).²⁵ While the RUF attempted to regulate sexual violence to some degree in earlier periods (Marks 2013), there is substantial evidence that CRSV was employed strategically. As HRW (2003, 4) details, “Child combatants raped women who were old enough to be their grandmothers, rebels raped pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and fathers were forced to watch their daughters being raped.” Children were classified as “victim-perpetrators” by the TRC (2004, 286), where many were identified initially as reluctant to commit abuses, but then “... began to initiate heinous atrocities without having to be compelled to do

²⁵ We draw evidence from the TRC reports, the Human Rights Data Analysis Group TRC dataset (Gohdes and Ball 2010), and interviews with former child combatants in Sierra Leone (e.g., Denov 2010a, 2010b), among other sources.

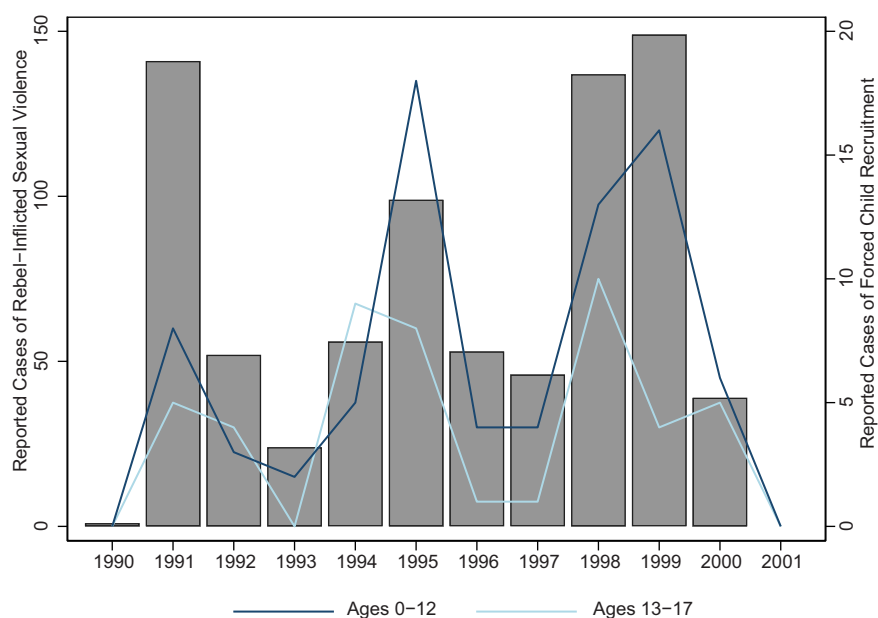


Figure 3. Reports to TRC of CRSV by RUF.

so.” Members of the SBU were reported to be notoriously violent in their infliction of CRSV among other atrocities (HRW 2003, 27). Figure 3 displays reported CRSV and forced child recruitment by the RUF.²⁶

Conditioning to Violence

The RUF used sexual violence as a conditioning tool. Denov (2010a, 116) describes the initiation process for child recruits as ceremonial, symbolic, and partly instructional; conducted in an effort to turn children into useful soldiers by “subjecting [them] to a number of terrifying experiences.” This included engagement in, and witnessing of, CRSV. Boys recruited by the RUF in Sierra Leone were often forced to rape their mothers, with refusal resulting in death. A former child combatant detailed:

“My commander captured a girl with her [baby] sister and her mother. He shot the mother and the little baby dead. He left the adolescent girl alive but told her to remove her dress and he raped her...He told us to form a circle around him and we all had to watch” (Denov 2010a, 122).

This practice of exposure to, or participation in, CRSV was not reserved exclusively for boys. A girl recruit explained:

“Sometimes we could assist when other women were raped. I held them down so they could not fight back when the boys took turns. I have seen RUF girls put the AK-47 in the woman’s vagina and other times, the girls forced some boys to rape their sisters” (Vermeij 2014, 181).

Such practices served as a means to desensitize child recruits to violence through direct exposure, illustrating how CRSV can be used to acclimate children to wartime atrocities. As witnesses, children were forced to become

accustomed to the RUF’s violent culture. One victim described child combatants as “cruel and hard hearted; even more than the adults,” explaining, “If you beg an older one you may convince him to spare you, but the younger ones, they don’t know what is sympathy, what is mercy ... They are wicked, those boy soldiers ...” (HRW 1999).

The exposure to CRSV also normalized the perpetration of it for children. A former child soldier revealed:

“I used to peep in while my boss was having his way with other women. I got one of the boys in my unit to come with me while I selected the woman I wanted [to rape]. I told the boy to bring the woman to me, just as my commander had asked of me... I felt more powerful because she was afraid. I got the woman to do exactly what I saw the commander do with his woman... If they weren’t willing I would force them. I felt good...” (Denov 2010a, 128).

Though CRSV was not exclusively a consequence of child recruitment, such evidence illustrates how CRSV served as a conditioning mechanism that reinforced its acceptability and established an expectation within the group. CRSV was routinized to the point where it became a perpetuating cycle.

Cohesion Building

The RUF also used CRSV to address internal cohesion issues. Cohesion building became imperative due to the group’s significant reliance on forced recruitment, particularly of children (Cohen 2013; Eck 2014). While evidence exists in support of Cohen’s (2013) argument on children’s heightened social desirability bias, a mechanism we borrow from, there are also multiple accounts of the RUF strategically imposing CRSV on children to prevent and/or rectify issues of intragroup cohesion.²⁷ As Marks (2013, 373) notes, theories on CRSV are not mutually exclusive.

First, evidence suggests the RUF adopted a culture of participation in gang rape, a tool known to promote

²⁶ Statistics come from the TRC and risk underreporting counts of sexual violence. We treat these as descriptive and merely the minimum number of allegations.

²⁷ We return to this discussion in the alternative pathways section.

combatant socialization and cohesion (Cohen 2013). Interviews with former combatants detail that such violence was rarely ordered but was clearly tolerated, with commanders often aware and willing participants (Cohen 2016, 124). Children often participated in gang rape with older, more experienced combatants. One victim recounted:

“There were ten rebels, including four child soldiers....I was raped by the ten rebels, one after the other....One of the child combatants was about twelve years. The three other child soldiers were about fifteen...” (HRW 2003, 28–29).

Such patterns of CRSV are illustrative both of children proving themselves (i.e., social desirability) and of children being forced/pressured to partake in CRSV, with veteran members testing children’s assimilation to violence as a means to ensure unit cohesiveness and trust. Following such events, combatants would “feel good ... discuss ... and laugh about it,” pointing to gang rape as an important bonding ritual (Cohen 2013, 475). In another instance, a survivor described how a group of four rebels (one child and three adult males) raped her. In recounting the event, she explained how the child was the first to rape her in front of others before the three adults took their turn, stating, “I do not know how young he was but he had not yet been circumcised. He was maybe as young as twelve” (HRW 2003, 36). The order of perpetrators in this instance stands in contrast to other accounts where “commanders would commonly be the first perpetrators and [children] would go last” (Cohen 2016, 123). It is suggestive of the imposition faced by some child recruits to inflict CRSV on victims while the group nature of the event speaks to its socially binding characteristics.

Second, Marks (2013, 373) emphasizes that a sort of entrepreneurial commander can find strategic value in the “benefits of rape” given its ability to “cow victims and their communities without killing the population.” For the RUF, attempts to regulate certain forms of internal CRSV, such as forced marriage, were distinct from the types of *outgroup* violence that occurred.²⁸ CRSV was encouraged to “demonstrate coercive power by abusing the most vulnerable members of a community, not for the purpose of the abuse itself (sex or retribution against the victim per se) but for the hazing ritual of collective violence it reinforces” (Marks 2013, 373). As reflected by an RUF combatant, “The entire unit watches ... It is a sign of celebration” (Cohen 2016, 122).

Combating Defection

CRSV became one of several tools the RUF adopted to combat defection. Alternative methods of ensuring loyalty included branding combatants with the organization’s initials and threats of lethal punishment. The group used this culture of violence to cultivate an environment that ensured it was difficult (if not impossible) for all combatants, but especially children, to leave. As Murphy (2003, 66) observes, a new social system of violence produced a *modus operandi*, which marked dependence as much as power for children and any degree of “initial enthusiasm” was replaced with “disillusionment.”

Perhaps the most glaring piece of evidence of CRSV employed as a strategic tactic to combat child defection was its use as a means of violating cultural and societal norms (e.g., HRW 2003). The RUF forced children to sexually assault and rape members of their local community, even forcing them to rape their own family members. Moreover, the

public nature of CRSV—regularly conducted in places of worship, in front of community members, with elder women or with women who were pregnant or lactating—dismantled community bonds (HRW 2003, 35–40). A former child soldier admitted that this ensured “you would have difficulty returning” (Denov 2010a, 104) and several accounts note the stigmatization faced by former RUF child soldiers upon returning to their communities. A former boy recruit stated:

“After the war, when I arrived back to my family, my mom was overjoyed to see me...When I told my family what happened to me, and that I had been with the rebels, they told me to leave...” (Denov 2010a, 798).

Evaluating Alternative Mechanisms

The case of the RUF illustrates several of our proposed theoretical mechanisms operating both individually and concurrently. CRSV was unmistakably part of a collection of violence used to condition children, cultivate social bonds, and combat defection. In examining the case, however, it is clear that the infliction of CRSV was far from monocausal and several alternative mechanisms are evident.

As referenced in the literature review, there is debate over the degree to which children should be viewed as passive victims or willing perpetrators during armed conflict (e.g., Beier 2018). Several note a need to “transcend sensationalism” to recognize that children’s experiences with armed groups are far from homogeneous (e.g., Drumbl 2014). Moreover, Cantin (2021) emphasizes the reality of conflict as one of “combatant heterogeneity and motivational diversity,” arguing for the importance of reflection on this point to better understand patterns of violence. Indeed, scholars note that the “generalized image of child soldiers as vulnerable ... without any agency ... often does not correspond to their actual experiences ...” and some “... turned out to be active survivors with a good sense of why they were fighting” (Mergelsberg 2010, 156–57). Similarly, Peters and Richards (1998, 183) emphasize that children may join rebellion “with their eyes open,” discounting the stereotype that all child soldiers are incapable of making their own decisions. Finally, Hart (2008, 281) notes the importance of considering context as, “a child who grows up in a politically fragile environment requiring her or him to negotiate serious threats on a daily basis will develop the competence to grasp issues around the use of military power, the morality of such usage and its consequences at a younger age than a child in a more stable socio-political setting.”

Several accounts of children’s experiences in the RUF reflect these dimensions. First, the allure of enhanced social status within the group, coupled with a survival instinct, increased some child soldiers’ “appetitive aggression” (Crombach et al. 2013). Children’s heightened aggression paid dividends, earning them rewards/respect and keeping them alive. As reported by the TRC (2004, 287), “children learnt very quickly that the more violently they behaved, the more they would be assured of protecting themselves ... and surviving.” Moreover, the RUF’s incentive structures rewarded violence. Participation in extreme forms of violence, including CRSV, increased their chances of rewards (Denov 2010a, 112). The case of children in the RUF underscores the multidimensional nature of CRSV where the strong association between child recruitment and the infliction of CRSV could simultaneously be driven by children’s agency, survival instincts, and/or motivations to inflict violence.

²⁸ Important to our study, forced marriage is excluded from the SVAC dataset.

Second, the RUF was well known for its use of drugs as a stimulant to force recruits to perpetrate violence. Coupled with children's malleability and psychological profiles, the deployment of narcotics may assist in deciphering patterns of CRSV. Child combatants were frequently given cocktails of gunpowder and cocaine that increased their brutality (e.g., Gberie 2005). Therefore, increases in the number of children could assist in understanding the strong association with amplified CRSV.

Finally, emulation could help in understanding the organization's frequent use of CRSV. This is evident in at least two ways. First, the RUF inflicted CRSV not only outside of the group but also internally. Witnessing CRSV both within and outside of the organization could be influential for child recruits who then sought to mimic such behavior. This is particularly likely for younger children as Cohen (2016, 123) notes, "boys as young as nine and ten ... would rape women in an effort to emulate their older peers." Second, and related, it is likely that the horizontal pressures were particularly acute for children. Sexual prowess earned combatants status. Those who raped were viewed as "more courageous" and were "respected by their peers" (Cohen 2013, 123).

Overall, the case of the RUF reinforces several aspects of our theoretical underpinnings while simultaneously illustrating the multidimensional nature of CRSV. Sexual violence is used by the organization as a conditioning tool, cohesion-building measure, and instrument for combating defection. It is also possible to understand patterns of CRSV through the lenses of individual emulation and children's agency. Nonetheless, our robust findings on forced recruitment, and qualitative differences in the forced recruitment of adults and children, illustrate the possible limitations of explanations relying exclusively on the alternative mechanisms discussed.

Conclusion

Our analyses offer important insights into the effect of group composition and recruitment practices on rebels' propensity to inflict CRSV. We illustrate the dynamic pathways leading to CRSV and demonstrate how rebels' recruitment of child soldiers, in scale and by method, can influence patterns of CRSV. While providing rebels with an alternative pool of recruits, the influx of children can jeopardize internal dynamics which demands rectification. Given the characteristics of CRSV, decisions to order or tolerate it can reduce internal tensions, foster social ties, and create a routinized conditioning process. Participation in CRSV can simultaneously eliminate children's perceived (or real) outside options, making allegiance to a group more likely. The vignette of the RUF further refines and reveals how children's agency and characteristics, along with rebel tactics, can influence CRSV.

The results hold important implications. First, we introduce an important dynamic for literature on armed group behavior by explicitly considering the consequences of child recruitment. With this, we contribute to theoretical discussions illustrating that CRSV can, at times, serve a strategic function (Moberg 2017; Doctor 2021). Second, our analysis reinforces and qualifies previous work on forced recruitment by empirically testing the assumption that abducted children may increase the likelihood of CRSV, given their need for social desirability (Cohen 2013). While children may inflict CRSV for acceptance and survival, they are also coerced into such acts. Third, we demonstrate the utility

of unpacking rebels' repertoire of violence, showing how targets and techniques of violence vary in conflict.

While our dataset ends in 2011, there are several policy implications. First, policymakers should closely monitor groups that recruit child soldiers, especially those who do so through force. Not only is the crime of child recruitment consequential, but its downstream effects are damaging for children and civilian communities. With the uptick in the number of children recruited over the last decade (United Nations 2018), our findings may help explain why "an increasing number of insurgent groups perpetrate sexual violence" (Nordås and Nagel 2018). Second, post-conflict efforts such as Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs should continue to provide resources to help child recruits process trauma—both witnessed and perpetrated. Such environments must also be prepared for the complexities of accountability and challenges communities will face given the inclination that groups that recruit children will inflict CRSV. Lastly, as Beber and Blattman (2013) recommend, it would be wise for children in states at risk for civil conflict to be offered escape training and provided counterpropaganda. While ongoing debate exists on the culpability of children as perpetrators of violence within armed groups (e.g., Drumbl 2012), legal concerns should not be a deterrent for children seeking escape from rebels.

Future research could complement this study in several ways. First, new data on the temporal patterns of child recruitment would provide a deeper understanding of its consequences. Second, better-quality data on children's roles within rebel organizations would provide a more complete picture of their wartime experiences. Along these lines, qualitative evidence highlights the variation in experiences for girl and boy soldiers, including their roles as perpetrators and victims of CRSV. Scholars could therefore disaggregate the scope of this study to consider gendered narratives in rebel organizations to examine the relationship between girl soldiering and CRSV (e.g., Loken 2017). The scars from child recruitment, and those who are victims of CRSV, extend well beyond the battlefield. It is important that scholars and policymakers alike continue to invest the time and resources necessary to improve our understanding of these practices in hopes of deterring both.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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