



Children and Conflict: An Interview with Katrina Lee-Koo

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Katrina Lee-Koo discusses how children both struggle within and shape conflict zones.

Q. Your work has examined the various ways in which children are affected by war and other forms of armed conflict. Is there any international consensus on how “child” or “children” should be defined, particularly in relation to armed conflict?

The international consensus regarding who constitutes a child has been set by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In its first article, it describes a child as being “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”

Drawing from this, states generally adhere to the idea that “children” become “adults” at the age of eighteen. But there are a number of important caveats to this. The first is legal: across the world there are a range of activities that we might consider to be adult activities – like work, drive a car, drink alcohol, or marry – that can be legally performed before (or after) the age of eighteen. Sometimes this age might even vary across states or territories in the same countries.

Second, we must also consider the ways in which childhood and adulthood are socially constructed ideas. In some cultures adulthood is not so much a universal age as it is a state of being. For instance, adulthood may be attained

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when a person marries, leaves the family home, enters puberty, or undertakes a ceremony or rite. These things may also be gendered, meaning that girls and boys will be considered adults in different ways. The idea that adulthood is associated with an age is a particularly liberal and western notion.

Q. What are some of the ways in which armed conflict affects children?

It's important to remember that a child's experience of conflict can be shaped by a number of factors. These include children's own intersectional identity, such as their age, gender, ethnicity, race, nation, or socio-economic class. For instance, a fifteen year old will have a very different experience of conflict than a six month old. We must also consider their location and proximity to the fighting. Children who live in active warzones are at far greater risk of direct harm. However, we may also consider children who live in military families in non-conflict affected zones. For instance, statistics in liberal democracies such as the US and the UK routinely suggest that family violence is higher in military families. Therefore a child may not need to live in a conflict zone to experience conflict-related violence. For those children in conflict zones, however, their familial status can play a major role in their experiences. Children who are under the protection of parents and guardians may have quite different experiences to those that are orphaned or unaccompanied.

In an attempt to provide focal points for their experiences, the United Nations Office for the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict [has adopted the 'Six Grave Violations against Children in Armed Conflict'](#). These are types of violence that have been identified as being particularly pernicious and widespread across conflict zones. These violations are:

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1. the killing and maiming of children;
2. recruitment or use of children as soldiers;
3. sexual violence against children;
4. abduction of children;
5. attacks against schools and hospitals and;
6. denial of humanitarian access.

While these are undeniably important, we could also add the forced migration of children and the separation of children from their families, as major issues, among others.

Q. How widespread is child soldiering today?

Child soldiering remains a pervasive concern. In his [2019 annual report](#) to the UN Security Council, the Secretary-General outlined the ongoing recruitment of children in state and non-state armed forces in seventeen conflict sites around the world.

Children remain vulnerable to forcible recruitment in a number of ways. They may be abducted, bribed, threatened or coerced into recruitment. They may be seen as valuable soldiers because of their size, ability to move freely around a community without raising suspicion, and because they may be seen as relatively compliant. The UN Secretary-General noted in his 2019 report that “children continued to be forced to take an active part in hostilities, including to carry out suicide bombings against civilians. Others were used in support roles, for example as sexual slaves or as human shields.”

Children may also choose to enlist in armed groups for various reasons. These may include a political commitment to a cause, but voluntary recruitment may also be a means of securing money, protection, a sense of community, or even adventure and opportunity for power and authority.

Q. The news media has arguably played an important role in raising awareness of child soldiers to general publics in the West. But how accurate are these depictions of child soldiers by media outlets? Do these portrayals have political consequences?

The portrayal of children (through photographs, video footage, stories, etc) is often very political, regardless of whether it is 'accurate' or not. When general audiences see examples of children being abused in conflict, it generates an emotional and moral response. We might recall the US population's response to the [1972 photo](#) of nine-year-old Kim Phuc running naked down the street after her village had experienced a napalm bombing. This image generated national debate on the human costs of the Vietnam War. More recently, the [2015 photo](#) of three-year-old Syrian Alan Kurdi, whose lifeless body had washed upon the shores of Turkey, similarly prompted public debate on the responsibilities to protect refugees. These responses are because we tend to see children as entirely innocent of conflict and requiring protection.

In the case of child soldiers, the media plays an important role in constructing how most people think about them. On the one hand, it raises awareness of the issue, however, there have been some tendencies to portray child soldiers in certain ways that can negatively impact our understanding of the issue.

In the first case, child soldiers are often depicted as boys. They are not only boys. The 2007 Paris Principles describe a child soldier as a child “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, spies or for sexual purposes.” Under this definition, it is estimated that there are equal numbers of boys and girls.

In the second case, child soldiers are often depicted as African, or the issue is seen popularly as an ‘African problem.’ This is a racialised and problematic stereotype. As the Secretary-General’s report notes, children are currently being recruited all over the world.

In the third case, child soldiers are often assumed to be armed combatants. However, like any military, not all child soldiers engage in combat. As the Paris Principles suggest, child soldiers play a variety of roles, many of which are support or non-combatant roles.

It is important to avoid these types of stereotypes if we are to ensure that the issue is recognised as one that is global, and affects boys and girls, and manifests in a variety of ways. This is imperative for legal protections and prosecutions, but also for rehabilitation and support for child soldiers themselves.

Q. How do children contribute to peacebuilding? Are institutions like the UN doing enough to support this work?

Children contribute to peace in a variety of productive ways. If we understand peacebuilding in an “everyday” sense – that is everyday actions that people do

in communities to end violence and foster peace – then children can be as productive as other members of the community.

First there are several examples of children actively and consciously engaging in peacebuilding activities. Children in conflict zones across the world have built “peace clubs”, been the architects of “peace mandates”, actively sought friendships with children across the conflict divided, and worked to establish their schools as “zones of peace” during times of conflict. The [Children’s Peace Movement](#), which operated in Colombia in the late 1990s and early 2000s is one such example. Similarly, the “[children as zones of peace](#)” campaign in Nepal actively involved children in efforts to protect schools from being targeted by belligerents.

Second there have been individual children who have become global leaders for peace. An obvious example of this is Malala Yousafzai who – as a teenager – was an advocate for girls’ education in Pakistan’s Swat Valley. Following her survival from a violent Taliban attack in 2012, Malala continued her advocacy and was later the youngest ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Third, children can contribute to peace through everyday activities that will re-establish and sustain peace in their communities. This might include something simple like attending school and gaining an education. It might also involve extra-ordinary activities like maintaining households, caring for sick family members, rebuilding community relationships and participating in peace processes including truth and reconciliation commissions.

Numerous local and international NGOs exist to support children in these activities. Like any sector, there are some whose work has productive and sustained outcomes, while others don’t. When assessing this work, one of the

key things to consider is how groups think about children and their contribution to peace.

For example, the Office of the Special Representative (noted above) tends to conceptualise children primarily as victims of conflict. Their efforts are focused predominantly upon issues of protection. While this is obviously important, it is unbalanced in that it doesn't identify the agency children have in terms of participating in peacebuilding. Other groups recognise children's peacebuilding potential and seek to support their work and build their capacity to contribute to peace in the present and for the future.

Image credit: [Zoriah/Flickr](#).

About the interviewee

Associate Professor **Katrina Lee-Koo** lectures in [International Relations](#) and is Deputy Director of [Monash GPS](#) (Monash University's Gender, Peace and Security Research Centre). Her most recent book publications are: *Children and Global Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2015 with Kim Huynh and Bina D'Costa) and *Ethics and Global Security* (Routledge, 2014 with Anthony Burke and Matt McDonald). She has a forthcoming book (co-edited with Lesley Pruitt) on *Theorising Young Women's Leadership* (2020).

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