The War Machine
and Global Health

A Critical Medical
Anthropological Examination
of the Human Costs of Armed
Conflict and the International
Violence Industry

Edited by Merrill Singer
and G. Derrick Hodge
In memory of two remarkable men
who struggled against murderous right-wing governments:

Oskar Schindler
and his munitions plant workers,
Jews from Krakow, and inmates of Plaszów concentration camp
who never produced usable munitions

and

Archbishop Oscar Romero,
whose struggle on behalf of the poor of Latin America
cost him his life at the hands of a right-wing paramilitary

And in solidarity with the group of remarkable women
led by Leymah Gbowee of the Liberian Mass Action for Peace
who fought peacefully to successfully end the
Liberian Civil War of 1989 to 2003
CHAPTER THREE
CHILDREN AND REVOLUTION
Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being of Child Soldiers in Nepal
Brandon A. Kohrt, Wietse A. Tol, Judith Pettigrew, and Rohit Karki

“I was thirteen years old when I joined the Party,” Asha, a girl from a Dalit “untouchable” Hindu caste in southern Nepal, said describing how she became associated with the Maoist People’s Liberation Army (PLA). “I was born into a poor family.” She pointed to a few pounds of cornmeal and then the one buffalo outside her thatched hut. “We just have this much, nothing more.” She continued, “I was a very good student [but] after I took my exams for fifth grade my parents told me: ‘We are very poor, we have no money so you have to leave school and take care of your brothers and sister.’ . . . Then, I left school.” Asha’s parents had forced her to leave school after fifth grade so that they could send her brothers to school.

Maoist women frequently visited Asha’s home and told her to join them rather than stay at home doing nothing. They told her that Maoist woman and men were equal, and they promised her an opportunity to continue her studies if she joined the PLA. A few months later, Asha attended a Maoist cultural program and was impressed by the rhetoric. “Both sons and daughters should be treated equally, the Maoist leaders said. Husbands and wives should work together, too . . . From that day, I didn’t want to go back to my house.” Believing that the Maoists were her only option for a future beyond domestic servitude, Asha, a slight girl of barely over four feet tall, left home to join the armed struggle.

During her time with the Maoists, Asha states that she was well treated, and the leaders encouraged her interest in art, enlisting her talents in painting propaganda signs. She encountered only one battle but
also saw a number of comrades killed. After more than one year in the PLA, Asha returned home for a brief visit to see her family. On arrival, her mother immediately married her to a man from a distant community to prevent her from returning to the Maoists. She was 14, and he was 22 years old.

Asha describes her marriage as endless abuse and suffering. She was raped throughout the marriage by her husband and beaten by her in-laws. After two years of this abuse, Asha attempted suicide. Her father-in-law caught her hanging from the ceiling. He cut her down, hauled her up, and said, “Go home and kill yourself.” Then he kicked her out of the house. Asha now lives once again with her mother. She wept, concluding her life story, “Maybe if I hadn’t joined the Maoists, my parents wouldn’t have forced me to marry, and I wouldn’t have had such a life of suffering. At 13 years old, what do you know? You just don’t understand” (Koenig and Kohrt 2009; Koirala 2007).

The ethnographic analysis that follows analyzes the psychosocial well-being of child soldiers, their recruitment into armed groups, their types of participation and exposure within an armed group, and their experiences on returning home. We integrate the ecological-transactional model of child development and its attention to the microsocial-level ties with the critical medical anthropological attention to the macrosocial-level political economy. Although the ecological-transactional model suggests that children’s participation in armed conflict grants them some agency on the micro-level, this agency is unbalanced and has serious long-term consequences for health and well-being. The data and our analysis indicate that since mental health is a social process, social scientific attention and political remedies should be sought on the level of its political-economic determinants, that is, on social rather than the individual level.

Background

One of the most pressing issues in global conflict is the exploitation of children by armed groups. An estimated 300,000 children across the globe are members of state militaries and other armed groups (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] 2003:4). The 2007 Paris Principles refer to child soldiers as “children associated with armed forces or armed groups” meeting the following criteria:

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 . . . 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. (UNICEF 2007:7)

Following this characterization, we define “children” as individuals less than 18 years of age. However, we acknowledge that local definitions of “children” vary within and between cultural groups. Although armed groups used children throughout history, the widespread availability of small arms has made it physically possible for children to participate in a more lethal manner and thus be of greater value to armed groups (Wessells 2006).

The Hollywood image and those that some organizations employ to raise funds to support intervention programs for former child soldiers depict rogue armed groups violently tearing children away from idyllic family settings (Wessells 2006). The story continues that these haphazard militias shatter children’s lives through the dehumanizing experiences of war, drugs, and crime, leading to severe psychological trauma and disability. Recovery and rehabilitation can be achieved through reunification with the children’s families. Although such portrayals are accurate in some cases, the experience of child soldiers is a far more varied and complex picture (Betancourt et al. 2008; Wessells 2006).

Contexts that promote recruiting children into armed groups are the result of larger national and international processes that produce local vulnerability. Poverty, gender and ethnic discrimination, and legacies of state-sponsored violence create circumstances in which children voluntarily join armed groups. Asha, in contrast to the typical media representation of child soldiers, voluntarily joined a highly organized revolutionary force that claimed to practice gender equality (cf. Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004; Yami 2007). Moreover, she considered the return home to be the most damaging part of her life, not her involvement in an armed group.

Research that pursues a more realistic and nuanced picture of child soldiers and the political, social, and economic processes that drive recruitment of minors is crucial for two reasons: first, to develop the most effective policy and advocacy to end the conscription of children into armed forces, and, second, to address the mental health and psychosocial needs
of child soldiers. While it might be assumed that removing a child from an armed group is the best approach, it is not a panacea to ensure psychological well-being. The very focus of reintegration programs operates with an assumption that former child soldiers were previously integrated into their communities. In reality, some child soldiers join armed groups because they feel excluded from society. Moreover, the tremendous variation in exposure to traumatic events during involvement with armed groups and in resilience among child soldiers throws into question whether psychological trauma is a universal response (Wessells 2006).

Setting

Nepal is a landlocked country north of India and south of the Tibetan autonomous region of China, with a population of almost 28 million. Nepal’s history represents a legacy of political, economic, and cultural processes that have marginalized large sectors of the population who recently have become the backbone of the Maoist revolution. Nepal ranks 142nd on the human development index—near the bottom of the medium human development category (United Nations Development Program 2007). This rank conceals strong inequalities by region (e.g., in agricultural production), gender (e.g., in literacy), and urban versus rural areas (e.g., in infant mortality) (Government of Nepal 2007). Thirty-one percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Moreover, Nepal has the highest income gap between rich and poor in Asia with the Gini coefficient having increased from 0.34 to 0.41 in the past decade (World Bank 2007). The population consists of more than 60 ethnic and caste groups, with a long history of hegemonic dominance by the Hindu high castes (Brahman and Chhetri) of minority ethnic groups (Janajati, who are predominantly Buddhist and shamanist) and also of those deemed to be low caste (Dahit). Although some of Nepal’s ethnic groups have rejected caste ideology, no group has remained uninfluenced by it.

Nepal was unified as a Hindu monarchy in 1769. Against the backdrop of the autocratic Rana regime, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) was founded in Kolkata, India, in 1949. From the 1960s through 1980s, the CPN split into multiple factions that were involved in the fight for a multiparty democracy (Hachhethu 2002; Hoflin et al. 1999:238). In 1990, Nepal became a multi-party democratic Hindu monarchy. The CPN, which formed in 1991 and included Prachanda and Babu Ram Bhattarai, rejected a November 1990 constitution promulgated by the Rana, referring to it as an inadequate basis for genuine democracy. The organization continued to demand a constituent assembly, the formation of a plan to draft a new democratic constitution, and eventually the formation of a People’s Republic of Nepal (Karki and Seddon 2003). In 1994, the CPN divided into two parties: the CPN (Unity Center) and the Maoist Party (CPN [M]). The latter Maoist Party, headed by Prachanda, boycotted the elections.

In January 1996, Babu Ram Bhattarai presented a 40-point demand on behalf of CPN (M) to the Nepali government headed by the Nepali Congress party leader Sher Bahadur Deuba. The points dealt largely with rectifying economic and social injustices, abolishing monarchy, and establishing a constituent assembly and have been described by several non-partisan commentators in terms such as “reasonable and not dissimilar in spirit to the election manifestos of mainstream parties” (Thapa 2004:53). Bhattarai insisted that if no progress was made toward fulfillment of the demands by February 17, 1996, there would be no choice but to resort to armed struggle against the state. When these demands were not addressed, the CPN (M) went underground and began its agrarian revolution. On February 13, 1996 (four days before expiration of their deadline), the CPN (M) declared a People’s War in Nepal, issuing a leaflet that called on the people of Nepal to “march along the path of the People’s War to smash the reactionary state and establish a new democratic state.” Violence commenced with the CPN (M) attacking police posts and a state-owned agricultural development bank.

Over 13,000 people were killed during the People’s War, with the majority of deaths at the hands of the Royal Nepal Army and the government’s police force (Mehta 2005). The war ended in November 2006, when the CPN (M) signed a peace treaty with the government, leading to the inclusion of the CPN (M) in the national government. During the April 2008 elections, the CPN (M) won a relative majority and now occupies the major posts in government.

During the war, children were recruited into the CPN (M)’s PLA and the Royal Nepal Army as soldiers, sentries, spies, cooks, and porters (Human Rights Watch 2007). Local groups estimate that at the conclusion
of the war, approximately 9,000 members—one third of the PLA—consisted of 14- to 18-year-olds with 40 percent being girls (Human Rights Watch 2007), and an even greater percentage of PLA soldiers now over the age of 18 years likely had joined before they were 18. Ten percent of the Royal Nepal Army during the conflict was under the age of 18 (Singh 2004).

**Theoretical Approach**

The social determinants of health model of critical medical anthropology (CMA) (Baer et al. 2003) and the ecological-transactional model of child development (Bronfenbrenner 1979) are complementary. Within the CMA theoretical model, the *macro-social level* represents the institutions, structure of social relationships, and processes that drive socially patterned experience. This level, known as the macrosystem in the ecological-transactional model, includes economic, manufacturing, and corporate institutions that dictate employment availability and create niches of poverty (Cicchetti and Lynch 1993). In the work of Baer et al. (2003), elements of the macrosocial level include corporations and the medical-industrial complex.

The *intermediate social level* represents the institutions that translate global and national processes into regional variations in experience. The intermediate social level, also described as the exosystem, comprises the “formal and informal social structures that make up the immediate environment in which children and families function,” such as neighborhoods, social support groups, and employers (Cicchetti et al. 2000:697). In the CMA model, this includes hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and community clinics (Baer et al. 2003).

The *micro-social level* is the domain of immediate experience, which, in transaction with the individual, shapes experience through the amount of agency and/or resources an individual mobilizes. Belsky (1980) considers this level, named the microsystem in Bronfenbrenner’s scheme, the family environment. Cicchetti et al. (2000) extend “the conceptualization of the microsystem to include any environmental setting that contains the developing person,” including the home, school, and workplace. Baer et al. (2003) define the micro-social level as the interactions within the health care system between patients and physicians, medical translators, and nurses.

The **individual level** reflects children’s different histories, personalities, and psychobiological states. This ontogenetic development examines how developmental history and genetic composition contribute to behavior and health through interactions with the social and physical environment (Cicchetti and Lynch 1993).

Many researchers have employed the ecological-transactional model to understand the well-being of children exposed to violence (cf. Belsky 1980; Cicchetti and Lynch 1993), including political violence (cf. Beaucourt 2005; Tol et al. 2009). We propose that the synthesis of this ecological-transactional approach with the CMA social determinants model elucidates the multicausal reasons for why children are recruited into fighting forces as well as the psychosocial consequences of being a child soldier.

**Methods**

In our research, we employed a mixed-methods approach with qualitative and quantitative tools to understand the mental health and psychosocial consequences of children’s participation in armed groups. Three of the authors (Kohrt, Karki, and Tol), working with a Nepali nongovernmental organization (NGO), Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal, conducted a study in 2007 of mental health and psychosocial needs among former child soldiers reintegrating into civilian communities. The qualitative component of the larger study included participatory approaches (with a technique known as Child Led Indicators, in which children developed their own psychosocial indicators of distress and well-being), narrative focus group discussions (*N = 25* groups) with children and community members, key informant interviews (*N = 152*) with children and community members, and case studies (*N = 8*) of child soldiers. Study participants were identified through local NGOs involved in child protection (for a full description of the study selection process, see Kohrt et al. 2008). We highlight three of these case studies in our analysis (pseudonyms are used for all child case studies presented).

Data were gathered by a Nepali research team employed by TPO Nepal with a background in field research who received a monthlong training session on qualitative and quantitative data collection as well as on the ethics of research with vulnerable children. All interviews were translated
into English and analyzed using Atlas.ti with a codebook developed by three independent coders (intercoder agreement: percent agreement = 0.90; Cohen’s κ = 0.82). The qualitative data were further contextualized by drawing on Pettigrew’s long-term ethnographic research in central Nepal, dating back to 1990 (Pettigrew 2003, 2004, 2007; Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004). An additional source of information was interviews conducted for the ethnographic documentary film Returned: Child Soldiers of Nepal’s Maoist Army (Koenig and Kohrt 2009) that were reviewed employing the codes developed for the primary study. The quantitative psychosocial epidemiological study was an assessment of 142 child soldiers and 142 matched children who were never conscripted by armed groups (Kohrt et al. 2008). We employed instruments developed in Nepal—some developed by former child soldiers—or adapted for use in Nepal using a standardized transcultural translation process (for a full description of instruments and psychometrics, see Kohrt et al. 2008).

Experiences of Child Soldiers

Joining the PLA

As described in the introduction to this chapter, Asha identified herself as voluntarily joining the Maoists at the age of 13 to pursue an education and also to escape poverty and gender discrimination in the home. The two cases presented here depict other motivations for children to become Maoists. Raj, also a Dalit, is a boy from the western hills of Nepal who was conscripted at 14 years of age. Shova, a Chhetri (high caste) girl from the southern plains of far-western Nepal, joined at 13 years old and spent three years with the PLA:

In 2003... my father was plowing his field. Maoist boys and girls and their commander came and started beating my father so badly that he almost died. My father was innocent, but they said he had spoken against the Maoists... I was so helpless. I could not do anything for my father because I was scared that the Maoists would kill me. My father lost consciousness. The Maoists came into our house and threatened to kill my father if I did not go with them. I told them that I wanted to continue my schooling, but they did not listen to me. I was forced to go with them... I was only fourteen at that time. They took me... and I started training in their army. (“Raj” from Kohrt and Karki 2007)

I was thirteen years old. I was a very shy girl who wouldn’t speak with people other than my mother... In our village, people used to come to ask my hand in marriage even when I was very young. Every mention of marriage gave me a headache. I hated it! I wanted to avoid marriage in any way possible. I have a slightly older friend in the village. Against her will, her father married her off at a young age. She was miserable. She often said she would go to India or join the Maoists. She would die there, if need be. At least, she would be free from marriage. Like her, liberation was what I needed. At the time, many Maoist activities used to take place in our village... I liked their cultural programs. Very entertaining! What a wonderful life—I would often think—I would have if I became a Maoist. I would get to travel a lot and wouldn’t have to be forced into marriage. Besides, I would also have a lot of friends! (“Shova” from Adhikari and Shrestha 2007)

Experiences during Participation in Armed Groups

The experiences of children during their association with the Maoist forces varied tremendously. While some children were in the military wing, children also were cooks, porters, spies, sentries, messengers, and performers in Maoist propaganda cultural programs. In our study, we found that children assumed multiple roles within the Maoist forces: 21 percent of the children conscripted by Maoists were part of the PLA, 47 percent were cooks, 35 percent were porters, 54 percent were sentries, 12 percent were spies, and 39 percent took part in cultural programs (total percentage is greater than 100 because of assuming multiple roles). However, as the following cases illustrate, the role alone did not determine a child’s experience during association with the Maoists. Rather, each child was impacted differently based on the interaction of the personal life history, which they brought into their identity as a soldier, combined with variation in exposure and opportunity during participation.

Asha described her experience with the Maoists as generally positive. She especially enjoyed the opportunity to engage her artistic talents:

They taught me painting and writing. I distributed papers, printed pamphlets, and painted slogans throughout the villages. They liked me. They treated me well... They taught me how to deliver speeches. They would encourage me to speak like them... They didn’t tell us anything
about the Party’s principles. They would tell me to speak with everyone the way they did. (“Asha” from Koernig and Kohrt 2009)

Raj reported a very different experience. During his involvement, a young comrade accidentally shot Raj in the leg. In another battle, Raj’s friend was killed. The most painful memory from his war experience was his inability to give water to this dying friend:

When I was with the Maoist armed forces, there were clashes from both sides and I feared all the time that I might get killed by the government army. . . . We had four young girls with us. When we were going to another village, the government army surprised us. They captured us and took two young girls from our group. They raped them, cut them with knives, poured chili powder in their wounds, and then killed them. We ran away, otherwise they would have killed us, too. . . . Many of my friends were dying, but I was so helpless that I could not do anything for them. . . . I still get scared and sweat when I think of that day. I cannot do any work if I think of that day. I get very disturbed and want to be just by myself in a quiet place. I need to keep myself busy to forget about that day. . . . When I think of those events, I still get very scared. I do not even want to think about those for a second. (“Raj” from Kohrt and Karki 2007)

Shova, in contrast to Raj, reports initial difficulties which were overcome through her perseverance. The experience allowed her to find an identity as an activist for women’s rights:

At first, I felt lonely because I didn’t have friends. I couldn’t mingle with people. Soon after, however, 15–16 other girls from my village also came to the Party. So eventually things were alright. At the beginning, I couldn’t speak much, but slowly I improved. . . . Whenever there were at least two to four people, we used to practice our oratory skills. One person would play the chairperson, the other the guest, the third the audience, and the fourth, the speaker. . . . They got me involved in the women’s organization. There, my job was to mobilize women. . . . Although I didn’t miss home too much, I often regretted dropping out from school. . . . But as time passed, I adapted to the environment and gained a lot of political knowledge. Then I became actively involved in uniting women (“Shova” from Adhikari and Shrestha 2007)

Experiences of Return to and Reintegration into the Civilian Community

As described in the introduction to this chapter, the abuse Asha suffered at the hands of her husband and in-laws after returning from the Maoists eventually led to a suicide attempt and being kicked out of her husband’s house. Asha now lives in her parents’ two-room hut but has little life beyond that. She describes that it is difficult to talk with or be with others. Asha says that these problems started after she was married and abused by her husband and his family. She wants to live alone:

I didn’t feel like coming home either. My mother told me that I made a mistake by leaving my husband. I always get nightmares. I feel as if somebody is threatening to kill me. I feel as if someone is yelling at me. I find myself terrified at times, but don’t know why. Nowadays, I am passing time by doing household work, weeping, and thinking too much. I have no friends, and the friends I used to have do not talk with me. I think my life is worthless. Some people say that I am an unnecessary burden for my mother. Society does not try to understand my feelings. Why has god written such a fate on me? (“Asha” from Koirala 2007)

Raj, similarly, describes difficulties after returning home. He struggles with his inability to obtain employment, which he attributes to his caste status—a statement that echoes Maoist rhetoric about caste-based exclusion from economic opportunities. In addition, Raj, who is a traditional shamanic healer (abani-jhanki), says that he is afflicted by uncontrollable possessions and can no longer heal people after his activities with the Maoists:

Just yesterday, villagers were having a discussion about giving me a guard job in the community forest near my house, but they rejected my request for the position. I thought that if I would have that work, I would earn some money, and it would help me to run my family. They did not hire me because I am Dalit. . . . People do not give us an opportunity to participate in village activities because we are low caste. . . . When I was with the Maoists, I had to carry dead bodies and I started being possessed in a way I could not control. (Kohrt and Karki 2007)

Shova, in contrast, describes positively her life after returning despite some regrets. She reports how she uses her newfound talents for speech
making and mobilization on behalf of the historically mainstream Communist Party, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist Party) (CPN [UML]):

First of all, I lost my education. I joined the Party when I was thirteen, at a time when I should have been going to school . . . . My friends who continued their studies have done well. But because I dropped out early, I feel I have lost an important part of my future. To do any job, one needs a good education or knowledge of English, both of which I lack. So when I think of my future, I feel sad . . . . [However,] the community here is very supportive. Although I had shocked them initially by joining the insurgency, they said I had done a good thing by returning home at last. They encouraged me to go back to school. They said I should do good things now that I was back . . . . Although they were not able to help me in material terms, they have given me their emotional support. . . . I have become capable of mobilizing women politically. For that reason, and also because I am able to speak up for women's rights, I have become a leader of the District Women's Organization of the UML ("Shova" from Adhikari and Shrestha 2007).

**Child Soldiers' Experiences in a Broader Context**

The case narratives of Asha, Raj, and Shova illustrate variation in experiences. The challenge is to place them within broader social, cultural, economic, and political context.

**Push and Pull Factors**

The social determinants that drive children to join armed groups are known as "push factors" (Somasundaram 2002). The macro-social-level push factors involved in these cases include discrimination and marginalization resulting from a feudal legacy that concentrated wealth and political power among local elites based in Kathmandu, gender-based discrimination, and the marginalization of low castes and ethnic minorities (see figure 3.1). This has deprived many groups of education and full participation in the political process (Thapa 2005). At the intermediate social level, push factors include the failure to enforce child protection policies such as the ban on child marriages and the destabilization of communi-

**Push Factors**

- Maco-social - feudalism, gender & caste discrimination, state-sponsored human rights abuses
  - Intermediate social - lack of child protection policies, abusive local government security forces
  - Micro-social - ethnic discrimination in schools, gender discrimination within families, poverty

**Pull Factors**

- Macro-social - Maoist rhetoric of equality, local Maoist governments, expulsion of foreign groups
  - Intermediate social - local employment, local Maoist courts, wealth & land redistribution
  - Micro-social - food & clothing, revenge against upper castes, escape from child marriage, traveling with women leaders

*Figure 3.1. Social determinants of child conscription in armed groups.*
ties by government security forces through widespread state sanctioned human rights violations (Lykke and Timilsina 2002). Microsocial-level factors included local manifestations of the previously mentioned factors reflected in local historical, political, and ethnic tensions (cf. Shneiderman 2003) and other experiences of marginalization.

Maoist recruitment strategies, that is, “pull factors,” draw on individual experiences that occur within a specific microsocial context. For example, the women’s Maoist group that recruited Asha presented the macrosocial ideology of gender equality as an escape from her home situation. Shova also saw the Maoists as an escape from the ill fate of being forced into an arranged marriage as a teenager. In Shova’s case, her friendship was probably an important microlevel factor. For children that were exposed to sexual violence at the hands of police or army, joining the Maoist army afforded an opportunity to take revenge on the perpetrators and to work toward a new country where there would be a Maoist-led security and justice system. For children who wanted to be part of the political process, joining the Maoists was a pathway that would result eventually in a government post in the “New Nepal” society. One of the more powerful elements of Maoist recruitment, however, was simply the promise of a good time in which children could travel the country singing and dancing or learning karate. The Maoists channeled these recreational tasks into cultural propaganda programs. Thus, Maoist recruitment met individual drives that reflected macrosocial forces within a microsocial context.

The positionality of a child in relation to these push and pull factors has important consequences for psychosocial well-being. For Asha and Shova, the push factors focused on escaping repressive environments for girls, and the pull factors were opportunities for women to assume roles of power and autonomy within the Maoists. In contrast, Raj did not describe push factors driving him away from his home and village. Instead, it was the acute and violent pull factor of the Maoists threatening to kill his father. Thus, mental health problems for Raj were personally attributed to the association with the Maoists, whereas for Asha, her mental health problems are not described in relation to time spent with the Maoists.

Furthermore, agency at the microsocial level of a family dictates susceptibility to Maoist pull factors. In our larger sample, we found that children who report being forcefully conscripted generally are those in the most vulnerable positions because of the marginalization of their fami-

lies in the broader community context. Forcibly recruited children were distinguished from voluntary recruits by higher levels of family poverty. Among the poorest families, giving up a child was seen as the only option to meet Maoist demands. A resident of western Nepal explained, “Those who have money have to give them cash, those who have food have to give them rice, those who have clothes have to give them clothes, and those who have nothing have to give them one member of their family” (quoted in Ogura 2004:123–124).

These findings illustrate that participation, whether it be self-reported as voluntary or forced, of children within armed groups follows a predictable pattern based on the restriction of power and agency from the macrosocial all the way to the individual level in Nepali society. Understanding these power differentials is a first step to considering how to reduce the vulnerability of children to conscription in armed groups.

Unbalanced Agency

While push and pull factors interpreted in light of macrosocial through individual processes helps elucidate the process of recruitment, we propose the term “unbalanced agency” to understand the experience of child soldiers during association with armed groups and consequent impact on well-being. Unbalanced agency refers to the discrepancy between the benefits that children gain through participation in armed groups and the risks associated with this engagement. Many children we interviewed described some form of positive aspects about association with the Maoists. However, these came at the cost of loss of life or limb.

The benefits of participation described by Asha and Shova and echoed by other child soldiers highlighted “learning to speak better.” Children also described the benefits of being able to travel around the country, to learn more about Nepal, its people, and its history. Both the rhetorical skills and travel throughout the country represented agency within the sociopolitical realm. For many, this was the first time they felt part of larger sociopolitical processes from which they had been excluded in their communities. Children could engage in political debates and display knowledge of the country outside their village; these were traits previously monopolized by elite males. It was a pathway of connecting with modernity, which had been previously the province of urban youth (Pettigrew 2003). The
presence of these and other benefits may explain, in part, why child soldiers did not differ from never-conscripted children in our study on measures of positive psychosocial well-being. Child soldiers and never-conscripted children had the same levels of hope (a measure addressing children’s ability to think of and exercise solutions to problems encountered) and prosocial behavior (a measure addressing children’s positive social interaction with others).

Despite some degree of reported increased agency attributed to being a Maoist soldier, this autonomy was far from complete. Although there may have been fewer gender- and caste-based restrictions, overall daily actions were dictated by Maoist commanders, not by children’s individual wishes. Whereas 54 percent of child soldiers said that they joined voluntarily, only 17 percent of the child soldiers said that they had control over their daily actions within the Maoists. Many children who joined voluntarily later felt disillusioned when the rhetoric of empowerment and freedom did not match the reality inside the PLA. And nearly all children forcibly conscripted did not report increased personal agency; they felt that they were used as “slave laborers.”

The greatest imbalance in agency associated with joining the Maoists was the threat to life. Raj’s account demonstrates the serious risks associated with being a child soldier. Moreover, although the majority of children—both civilians and soldiers—were exposed to life-threatening events during the war, the burden was considerably greater among child soldiers (Kohrt et al. 2008). Child soldiers on average were exposed to 2.54 life-threatening events compared with 1.44 events for civilian children. All children conscripted by the Maoists reported at least one traumatic event, 51 percent took part in combat, 56 percent experienced bombings, 29 percent witnessed or perpetrated violent deaths, and 29 percent witnessed, suffered, or perpetrated torture. This greater exposure to trauma played a major part in the mental health and psychosocial differences between child soldiers and never-conscripted children. Child soldiers had greater depression and posttraumatic stress symptoms, general psychological difficulties, and impaired daily functioning (Kohrt et al. 2008). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, before one interprets this as a general pathological effect for child soldiers as a group, it is important to stress that we found that the psychosocial difficulties were concentrated generally among those with a high trauma burden (i.e., those who experienced the most exposure to life-threatening events).

In sum, at best, children repositioned themselves outside the structure of their families and communities and replaced that social landscape with a highly regimented Maoist army structure. In other words, although engagement with the Maoists did provide a sense of agency with macro-social, intermediate, and micro-social processes, these often minimal changes in agency came at the threat to personal functioning through increased exposure to traumatic events and greater postwar dysfunction. Importantly, as we describe next, it is not traumatic exposures alone but also the experience on return to the community that influences mental health.

**(Re)integration**

When children return to the community, they encounter a shift in interrelationships of agency and power. They came back from a Maoist revolutionary world with different conceptualizations of social hierarchy and power divisions to communities that adopted these conceptualizations in different degrees—some resisting changes, some adopting them. For girls, this was most profound at the family level. Some families were able to accommodate an increased sense of agency and gender equality among girls. We found that this was most acceptable among ethnic minority groups who had a greater sense of gender equity compared to Hindu caste groups. But families varied, even within Hindu castes; for example, different levels of education and access to political and economic power resulted in different beliefs. Some families, such as Shova’s politically active family, were able to provide opportunities for Shova to move from the micro- to macro-social level by engaging in women’s mobilization. However, for girls in traditional families, there was significant conflict between the family’s and the girls’ models of gender equality and agency, which resulted, as with Asha, in high levels of psychosocial distress. School is also an area in which newfound child agency is contested. Many teachers actively forced returned child soldiers to sit on the floor rather than on benches with the other children. Teachers taunted former soldiers, “Hey little Maoist, where is your army?”

Involvement with the Maoists challenged prescribed intercaste social interactions. Community and family members often framed the difficulty
to accept former child soldiers in their communities in terms of the Hindu concepts of pollution (puhita) and purity (chhoka). The concept of ritual purity dictates where a person resides in the caste—and thus social—hierarchy. Community members stated that child soldiers became ritually polluted through putative involvement in activities such as entering the house of a lower caste, eating with a different caste, interacting with menstruating women, eating beef, carrying dead bodies, and sexual activity. Raj considered himself polluted because he carried dead bodies. Asha, Shova, and many other girls, in contrast, saw the Maoist experience as challenging the traditional notions of purity-based discrimination. They rejected these modes of thinking and behaving when returning home.

The reception and experience in the community on return has dramatic psychosocial consequences. Former child soldiers who described their families, friends, teachers, and neighbors as supportive and caring had low levels of psychosocial distress. This was particularly evident in ethnic minority communities. In contrast, children returning to more conservative Hindu communities described high levels of discrimination and maltreatment. These difficulties produced high levels of psychosocial distress even among individuals with low levels of traumatic experience during participation with the Maoists. One of the surprising findings of this research was that the distinction of voluntarily versus forced association did not predict differences in mental health and psychosocial wellbeing (Kohrt et al. 2008).

The success of reintegration of former child soldiers depends partly on the compatibility of nontraditional, Maoist revolutionary attitudes toward gender and caste inequality of returning children with the varying attitudes of the families and communities to which they returned. In other words, what the revolution set out to do—to effect changes at the macrosocial level—actually resulted in children returning to contested power relations at the intermediate and microsocial levels with differing effects on their well-being.

**Nepal's Maoist Conflict In the Context of the War on Terror**

Before moving to the conclusions and recommendations, it is worthwhile to consider another macrosocial factor related to the People's War in Nepal. While we have discussed macrosocial issues at the national level, it is also important to reflect on global macrosocial processes. The U.S. War on Terror has been associated with increased violence and human rights violations in conflicts throughout the world beginning in late 2001 (International Commission of Jurists 2009). Amnesty International (2005) suggested that the U.S. War on Terror provoked increased violence worldwide, particularly through the use and condoning of torture, which, for example, was employed readily by the Nepali government against Maoists or those accused of being Maoists (Lykke and Timilsena 2002). After 2001, both the United States and the United Kingdom gave U.S.$20 million each to the government of Nepal to combat the Maoist threat; the United Kingdom restricted the use of its funds to nonlethal activities, whereas the United States did not (Mehta 2005:67). Bhattarai et al. (2005:671) also associate the U.S. actions with increased malignancy of the Nepali conflict:

Emboldened by the U.S. support, apparently provided within the framework of its global “war on terrorism,” the [Nepali] State intensified its counterattacks against Maoist insurgents. . . . With its confidence greatly boosted by huge amounts of military aid and the U.S. commitment, the [Nepali] government hardened its position, intensifying its counteroffensive against the Maoists. [This led to the government’s] ineffectual and violent response.

Mehta (2005:66–68) points out that the majority of casualties in the conflict were the result of Royal Nepal Army attacks from air. These were conducted with helicopters provided by India, the United States, Russia, and Poland with a technique adopted from U.S. military activities in Afghanistan known as *Tora Bora*, which is the free-fall delivery of mortar bombs from helicopters (Mehta 2005:17). Mehta suggests that this technique and the foreign-donated technology that made it possible drastically escalated the civilian casualties of the war. Bhattarai et al. (2005) also suggest that the War on Terror contributed to greater violence in the Nepali conflict. The recent report by Mary Robinson and the International Commission of Jurists, which investigated the transformation of the U.S. War on Terror into a global human rights crisis, also suggests that U.S. actions contributed to a climate wherein
the monarchy of Nepal could grossly infringe on the civil liberties of its people:

Maoist organizations were termed as terrorist organizations and the definition of terrorist acts was so ambiguous anything and everything was covered under the definition. Civilians, lawyers who were working for the detainees and even judges were considered as terrorists and the military detained them. So society became silent. Human rights activists and lawyers providing legal aid to detainees were threatened by both the security forces and Maoists as well. (Mandira Sharma quoted in International Commission of Jurists 2009:134)

Although associations of the former Bush administration's War on Terror with the human rights violations committed by the Nepal monarchy and security forces against Maoists and innocent civilians increasingly have been demonstrated, further information is needed to identify if and how this contributed to widespread recruitment of children into armed groups.

Implications for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support of Former Child Soldiers

Employing the CMA framework to discuss the experience of child soldiers led to the elucidation of the factors that make children in Nepal vulnerable to recruitment. Moreover, the CMA framework helps to trace the origins of mental health and psychosocial problems among child soldiers, which, as it turns out, are not universal to all children and are as related to conditions before and after the war as they are to war-related trauma. In the more traditional psychiatric epidemiology of war, analyses tend to focus on specific traumas or the cumulative burden of trauma in predicting posttraumatic stress disorder (cf. Miller et al. 2006). Although such an approach may identify specific clinical treatments needed for individuals, that type of research does not illuminate how broader interventions could reduce vulnerability to traumatic events. In contrast, the CMA approach discussed here traces the pathway of vulnerability all from the individual experience up to larger political economic processes. Thus, this type of research sets the stage for recommendations and implications ranging from clinical care to national and international policy. In addition, such identi-

ification of contextual influences on mental health provides opportunities to conceptualize social interventions to improve health and well-being, a possibly cost-effective strategy in societies with very little mental health infrastructure.

To prevent recruitment of child soldiers, interventions at the national macrolevel are needed to promote the inclusion of children's issues and voices. These efforts would be helpful if they could contribute to narrowing the gap between returning child soldiers' and communities' differing conceptions of power distribution. In Nepal, the media organization Search for Common Ground is helping to facilitate children's voices been heard on radio and through other media. Other recent events have provided an opportunity for children's participation in the political process, such as the constitutional assembly and recent elections. Moreover, through dialogue with policymakers, advocacy is needed for increased child protection to tackle abuses such as forced child marriage and child conscription in armed groups, as well as further capacity building of local institutions concerned with human rights protection, which currently often take place in a culture of impunity (International Center for Transitional Justice and Advocacy Forum 2008). Further initiatives are required whereby children's voices could be incorporated in planning, designing, monitoring, and evaluating child protection programs.

At the macrosocial level, there also needs to be interventions to address the issues of poverty, ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination, protection of human rights, and decentralization of power. Caste discrimination specifically is an area that desperately requires attention. Caste discrimination played a major role in Maoist recruitment tactics and in determining which families were most vulnerable to exploitation by Maoists. Caste-based dependencies have also been reported to play a role in continued violence following the peace agreement in the south of Nepal (Hattelbak 2007) despite the fact that elimination of caste-based discrimination was high on the Maoist agenda. If there were more nonviolent alternatives to reducing caste disparities in well-being, low-caste children may not be as vulnerable to violence and exploitation in the future. In our work with adults in a rural community in western Nepal, we found that addressing caste-based differences in access to income-generating opportunities and reducing exposure to stressful life events could eliminate the caste disparities in rates of depression, which were two
times greater in low-caste groups (Kohri, Speckman, et al. 2009). At the
intermediate social level, the main priorities should be locally enforcing
child protection (such as enforcing the child marriage ban), promoting
local safety and security, and distributing wealth between rich and poor
to curb the ever-increasing income gap. With regard to the latter, Deraniyagala
(2005) has shown that economic grievances were a driving factor in the
Maoist rebellion and that economic imbalances (partly caused by uneven
development efforts) intensified conditions for violence against the state.

Currently, macrosocial intervention at the international level is lacking
for the case of child soldiers in Nepal. Policy and advocacy are needed
to reduce small arms trade, which makes child soldiers more appealing,
and to reduce the provision of large arms to militaries, such as the Royal
Nepal Army, which, along with Maoists, was associated with torture,
“disappearances,” and other human rights violations, including torture
of children. With recent efforts by the U.S. Obama administration to redress
the human rights violations that characterized the Bush presidency, it
will be important to observe how this impacts or fails to impact human
rights protection in other regions, such as South Asia. With a Maoist-led
government now in place, one should observe if they fulfill their promises
to have more directly local benefits in areas that house these resources.
Moreover, there should be continued international political pressure to
encourage a more representative government inclusive of women, low
castes, and ethnic minorities. Already, the Maoists have included more
government officials from these groups than any other Nepali political
party. Inclusion by itself, however, is not enough, and there is an urgent
need to increase the active participation of these groups in government.

International political pressure is needed to ensure a transitional justice
process that allows for the involvement and participation of children and
youth. A clear mechanism for children to express their political rights,
such as in the Truth and Reconciliation Bill, and citizenship is needed to
supplant the system of child exploitation by political groups in Nepal and
throughout South Asia. International pressure and monitoring bodies,
such as the 1612 U.N. Task Force, can foster enactment of child-centered
legislation and ensure that political and legal processes in Nepal meet
international standards. As the new government moves forward, an important
step will thus be ratification of the Mine Ban Treaty with full adherence to
treaty provisions and further assurances to sign and ratify the Convention

on Certain Conventional Weapons, Protocol V on Explosive Remnants of
War. Children continue to suffer morbidity and mortality from unexploded
devices, many of which have been found around schools.

Interventions at the microsocial level should promote local pathways
to optimize the psychosocial well-being of children. One way to do this is
through facilitating dialogues in which community members are encour-
gaged to think about the processes by which children become child soldiers.

In Nepal, there are numerous arenas to do this, be it through community-
based organizations (mothers' groups, women's groups, youth clubs,
child clubs, and so on), street drama programs, or dialogues ritualized in
theatrical song and dance. Rather than focusing on blaming children, this
approach should foster discussions in which individual instances of child
recruitment are tied to larger social processes in the community and
country. This form of discussion may help to evoke possible micro-
or macrosocial initiatives to improve the well-being of children. Ultimately,
at the microsocial level, activities should promote empowerment of local
groups rather than top-down approaches that embody the marginalization
process that Maoists have been able to exploit.

At the individual level, one possible goal is to promote a sense of
efficacy and empowerment of children in ways other than through par-
ticipation with armed groups. Interventions that help children feel that
they are influencing other aspects of the ecological system—in a non-
vviolent manner—may contribute to building a society where children are
less vulnerable to recruitment. This could be through the representation
of individuals under 18 years of age in community activities such as in
community forest management, microfinance initiatives, and adolescent
health programs as well as local political representation and activities.
Education is crucial to this, as it builds skills that contribute to community
participation, health status, and employment opportunities. In addition,
helping children develop vocations (such as tailoring, driving, electronic
repair, and journalism) to be economically self-sufficient when they reach
adulthood could reduce the lure of involvement in armed groups. Simi-
larly, nonviolent forms of community and political engagement need to
be fostered through peace committees, local peace initiatives, and child
right's activism committees. In sum, children can be active agents for
social changes, and for this, children's participation in reconciliation and
peace-building initiatives should be prioritized.
Identifying contextual determinants of mental health, such as differences in (re)integration pathways, holds direct consequences for programs promoting the psychosocial well-being and mental health of former child soldiers. Currently, such programming has been divided by a nonproductive rift between an individually focused psychiatric paradigm versus a contextually focused psychosocial paradigm. Application of an ecological and CMA approach has the potential to integrate such efforts, by demonstrating the importance of considering former child soldiers' well-being within its larger social context. Identifying pathways through which individual health gets affected can aid in prioritizing target areas (e.g., areas where traditional notions and Maoist notions are likely to clash), target groups (e.g., girls in conservative Hindu areas), and types of interventions (e.g., attending to psychosocial distress for those exposed to traumatic events as well as facilitating integration efforts in families and schools).

Ultimately, researchers, interventionists, and policymakers need to address the broader political, economic, and cultural determinants of child conscription into armed groups both to improve former child soldiers' mental health and to work toward ending the recruitment of children into armed groups. CMA is one tool to help guide policy to guard the rights of children such as Asha, Raj, and Shova against exploitation by armed groups. Mental health is intrinsically a socially determined process and thus requires interventions that follow the pathway of vulnerability from individual cases through to broader macrosocial determinants of well-being.

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