

Research Study

Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict – The Driving Factors

(A Study of Children Who Worked For Militants)

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Abstract

Community Motivation and Development Organization (CMDO) conducted a research study that aimed to explore the causes and factors that compel children to engage in armed conflicts. The study further explored roles and responsibilities of children while they were working for militants. The study was based on Mixed-method research design where detailed information was collected from a total of 30 children who were captured by security forces from Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province and the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Findings of the study revealed that the majority of children came from poor socio-economic background. Parents, especially mothers, of the children had never studied in a formal school setting. Due to low level of education, parents of most of the children were involved in unskilled labour where they earned very less. All the children interviewed quit their schools as early as before completing their elementary education, and joined the militants as young as 12.

Strong religious affiliation and unfriendly household were other reasons that compelled children to engage in militancy. Children shared that their parents and older siblings rarely talk to them and they found themselves confined in their households. Daily routine of the children prior to joining the militants, though there was no striking difference to other children, was that they used to watch *Jihadi* videos and attend religious gathering organized by the militant. These were found motivating factors which according to the children encouraged them to be part of the war against *Kafirs*(non-muslims).

Children were either directly approached by the militants or were mainly assisted by friends, teachers from *madrassa*, parents or close friends to join the insurgents. It is interesting to mention that the majority of children interviewed revealed that they were unaware of the consequences of joining the militants. Many of the parents interviewed shared that although they knew about the involvement of their children, they were unhappy about their children decision of working for militants.

Children also informed that they were gradually passed on through different stages by the militants. In the beginning they used to attend lectures which provoked them to fight to death against the *Kafir*. Some of them were responsible for serving tea to the militants and do other small chores. Majority of the children revealed that they never participated in any fight and they were mainly used for spying.

Children revealed mixed responses about the funding sources of the militants. Some children perceive that foreign countries like India and the United States funds militants, while others believe that all the funds came through donations from locals in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They perceive that people feel pleasure in donating to militants because they feel that the militants are protecting Islam through *Jihad*. Other sources they believe are ransom collected by the militant through kidnapping rich and wealthy people.

Last but not the least, children were probed on things they liked and disliked about the militants. Few of the many characteristics they liked about the militants included: bravery, promptness, justice, love for Islam, promoting *Jihad*, and feud against wealthy people. Things they disliked included: Inhuman behavior against civilian, destruction of schools, despising women, kidnapping, and anti-Pakistan stance.

Context:

Under international law, the participation of children under 18 in armed conflict is generally prohibited, and the recruitment and use of children under 15 is a war crime. According to Amnesty International, "Approximately 250,000 children under the age of 18 are thought to be fighting in conflicts around the world." Moreover, though many child soldiers are between ages 15 and 18, significant recruitment starting at age 10 and the use of even younger children has been recorded.

A UN report in September 2007 found that Pakistan remained an important source of human and material assistance for the insurgency in Afghanistan generally and suicide attacks in particular. Madrasas served as an alternative to the failing public school system in many areas for those unable to afford private education, and also attracted those seeking religious instruction for their children. Many madrasas failed to provide an adequate education, focusing solely on Islamic studies, and there was no regulation or oversight of the education given in numerous unregistered madrasas. Some madrasas reportedly continued to promote religious radicalism and violence, and were used for military training, although madrasas were not the sole recruiting grounds for insurgents and the majority were not involved in militancy.

Methodology

The research study was based on a Mixed-Method Research Design (Creswell, 2010) where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected from the target respondents. A total of 26 children, with an average age of 30, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, were identified as subjects for this study. In order to triangulate the information provided by the children, parents and family members of the children were also interviewed.

A team of experienced researchers participated in the data collection process. Prior to data collection, field researchers were trained on the purpose of the study, as well as the methodology and the use of data collection instruments. The data collection process was completed in one month, commencing in the last week of February 2011. The data was properly managed and entered into a database. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative data was analyzed for recurring themes.

Major Findings:

85% of households (HH) of the target children were headed by the father. The remaining 15% of HHs were reported to be headed by either a mother or an uncle. It was found that, on average, the HH head studied only up to grade two. Almost all the children reported that their mothers had never studied in formal schools, and were illiterate. The lack of education of the parents is believed to be one of the main factors that encouraged children to stay out of school. The study found that, on average, children had studied up to grade 7. Many of the respondents stated that they had never been to formal schools. The majority of these children belonged to poor families. The study found that 60% of the HH heads of the target children were engaged in small-scale farming or daily wage labor. The study revealed that the average HH monthly income of the target children was 11,500 Rs. Some of the HHs reported monthly income as low as 3,000 Rs (which is equal to 1.2 \$/day). The study showed that, on average, each child had less than 6\$ a month as pocket money. Almost all the children stated that they did not have enough money to meet their needs.

It was also found that two thirds (63%) of the children interviewed belonged to families with strong religious beliefs. In addition, 55% of the children stated that their HH environment was quite reserved, and children were not allowed to speak openly in front of elder family members. The study further revealed that two thirds of the children had friends who belonged to families with strong religious affiliation and also had a conservative home environment. The parents of these children agreed that they never allowed their children to discuss things with them freely. It is common in the majority of *Pukhtoon* HHs that the parents and elders do not encourage their children and youth to talk freely with them.

In order to analyze the daily routines of the children included in the study prior to joining the armed group, the target children were asked about their daily routine. The study found no major difference in their daily routines compared to other children in their respective regions. The majority of the children reported that they started their day with prayers followed by breakfast. In the first half of the day, 60% of the children reported that they go to school or to a *madrassa*. 30% of the children stated that they used to stay at home, because they were not participating in any formal or informal schooling. Some of the children shared that as they were free, they started sitting with local militants. In the second half of the day, the majority of respondents shared that they used to attend the *madrassa* to learn religious teachings, and some reported that they played games and spent time with friends. During the night, some children mentioned that they used to watch videos about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some children shared that they used to attend religious gatherings organized by militants. It was also revealed that, on average it just took one year from the time they began to support the rebels, for these children to leave home and join the militants on a full time basis. Some of the children who joined the militants were as young as 12.

The research study reported mixed responses regarding persons who assisted these children to join militant groups. 30% of the children stated that they were assisted by the militants directly. Similarly, 29% of the children reported that close friends had joined militant groups before, and hence their friends assisted them in joining these groups. 11% of the children shared that their family members, for example, their father or brother, supported them in joining the militants, while the remaining 15% shared that their teachers from *madrassas* motivated and supported them to join the militants. The study found that 89% of the children were unaware of the consequences of joining the armed groups. They never thought that they will end up in the custody of the security forces. It was interesting to find out that only 7% of the parents/family members of these children admitted that they supported their children to join the armed groups. They also accepted that they were unaware of the consequences of involvement of their children in armed conflict. Of those parents who shared that they were unaware of their children's involvement in armed activities, 59% stated that they were not happy with the actions of their children. Almost all the family members interviewed for this research study were found to be quite worried, and they shared that they will never support any of their family members in joining armed groups in the future.

Children were also asked about their routines as well as their roles and responsibilities while they were engaged with the militants. A majority of the children stated that they used to start their day with prayers. These children regularly attended religious lectures by their seniors. Some children had participated in combat training; while some children stated that they were just responsible for serving tea and meals to the other group members. Some children shared that they used to spy and provided information to their leads about the assigned tasks. The majority of the children used to serve as security guards at night.

The study also enquired about the perceptions of the children about the funding sources of the militants. 37% of the children reported that they were unaware of the funding sources; 18% of the children interviewed perceived that foreign countries fund the militants. A few children specifically mentioned the names of countries like India and the United States as the sponsoring countries for the militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A large number of children (37%) shared that the militants generate funds from the locals, and that the majority of locals are happy to donate to the Taliban which they thought to be the best option for their donations. Some children also perceived that the government of Pakistan was supporting the militants. They provided no further details regarding the reasons why they believed that the government supports the militants. One of the children shared that the militants generate funds through kidnapping rich people from different parts of the country.

Finally, children were asked about things they liked and disliked about the militants. It was noted that children held mixed responses. Some children shared that they liked militants because they found them regular in prayers and because they follow religion. Some children perceived that the militants were serving religion and had a major role in spreading religious teachings. They also liked militants because they fight *Kafir* (non-Muslims) especially the armed forces from the West.

Some children shared that they liked militants because they used to provide quick justice and always support the poor and needy. According to them, militants were the only group who could challenge the local *Maliks* (landlords). Some of the children shared that they found the militants brave and courageous. Regarding dislikes, majority of them shared that militants were cruel and they killed civilians as well as security personnel. They also reported that the militants were against formal schools, and they destroyed lots of schools in the North as well as the South of Pakistan. Other factors included: discrimination against women, kidnapping, imposing Islam by force; illiteracy; killing of civilians and the anti-government attitude of the militants.

Discussion

The research study concluded that there were different factors that encouraged children to become engaged in armed conflicts. The study found that the majority of the children belonged to families where the HH heads lacked a formal education. The study suggests that illiterate adults are less interested in their children's education. That is why the majority of children interviewed were either found to be illiterate or to have very little formal education. The study also found that those children who were not attending schools and were freely moving all the time became easy prey for militants. It was also found that many of the children were supported by the teachers of *madrassas* where the children used to attend religious education. It is important to mention that due to extreme poverty, majority of parents of children included in the study could not afford to send their children to formal schools. On the other hand, *madrassas* offer free education as well as boarding facilities.

Unpleasant and unsupportive HH environments were found to be another factor in encouraging children to join the militants. The study revealed that the HH environments of the majority of the children interviewed were 'not friendly' for the children and they were unable to speak freely in front of their elders. A majority of the children had friends who belonged to similar families, and hence they reported that they were supported by those friends while joining the militants.

The study also revealed that, due to certain characteristics of the militants, such as speedy justice, bravery, and punishing the powerful, many of the children were attracted to them. The society in the region lacks justice and security. The poor in the areas where these children come from are always exploited by the rich. The majority of the population are illiterate, unskilled and hence unemployed. These are some of the main factors that compel the children to join armed groups. An interesting finding of the study was that there was increased awareness reported amongst family members and that they were convinced not to support any of their children in joining or supporting militants in the future.