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Season 1 Episode 6 – Exploring harms against children in the context of their involvement in armed conflict

List of Acronyms: CH=Charu Hogg; PK=Patrick Kumi; EH=Erica Hall

Hello and welcome to In The Centre, produced by All Survivors Project. This broadcast aims to deepen and broaden dialogue by addressing conflict-related sexual violence affecting men, boys and LGBTI+ people. We bring together victims and survivors, researchers, and policy makers from around the globe to talk about their work and experiences and to explore key themes around prevention, care and support for survivors through national and international level responses.

My name is Charu Hogg, and I am one of your hosts with my colleagues from All Survivors Project. Let's get started.

Episode 6: Exploring harms against children in the context of their involvement in armed conflict

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with Charu Hogg,
ASP

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CH: Hello all, and welcome to the sixth episode of 'In the Centre'. In previous episodes we have explored various key themes around conflict-related sexual violence against men, boys and or including LGBTI+ people such as justice, health and issues concerning diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics. In today's episode will look at the intersection of children and armed conflict with other violations.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the UN Security Council children and armed conflict mandate. Despite the concerted attention, the lives of tens of thousands of children continue to be shattered by violence in armed conflicts across the globe. In fact, children seem to be at greater risk than ever of being recruited and used in hostilities. Child recruitment and use is the violation with the highest number of recorded incidents in the UN Secretary-General's latest annual report on children and armed conflict. All

too often, children lose the nurturing and protective environment they have a right to and instead are forced to serve as combatants and in multiple other military support roles. However, despite these very difficult experiences, children across the world show remarkable resilience and agency in recovering from such experiences and emerging as empowered and powerful advocates for young people.

Children's association with armed forces or armed groups exposes children to many harms, including conflict-related sexual violence. These risks are gendered and can be heightened due to a range of intersecting factors. Girls and children of all genders can experience conflict-related sexual violence in a variety of settings. The risk of conflict-related sexual violence to boys for example is heightened in certain situations including when they are deprived of liberty for their actual or alleged association with opposing forces, where sexual torture has been used to punish, humiliate and extract confessions from them. There are also documented cases of boys being subjected to conflict-related sexual violence in the context of their association with armed forces and armed groups. However, children (predominantly girls but also boys) are also highly vulnerable to sexual violence in other situations including when forcibly displaced, or in other situations of extreme humanitarian need.

We are honoured to have with us today Patrick Kumi, a youth activist in Uganda and Erica Hall, who is Strategic Advisor and Policy Manager with World Vision. Patrick is based in Yumbe, West Nile, Uganda since he left Sudan at the age of 17 due to the outbreak of conflict in 2016. He is a Youth Advocate who is passionate about supporting mental health of young people and peace building. Patrick has participated in local, national and international advocacy campaigns and in 2019, Patrick and his friends founded a youth-led organisation called "Similar Ground". Patrick and his team work with children and youth with a mission to ensuring children and youth are valued. Erica Hall is the Policy Manager at World Vision UK and has nearly 20 years of experience working for non-governmental organisations and the UN on human rights policy and programming. She has worked in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda, amongst other countries. She has a particular focus on the rights and protection of children in armed conflict. Erica is also a qualified American lawyer and also a deployable civilian expert for the UK government.

Patrick, I would like to start with you. Children's association with armed forces or armed groups exposes children to many harms, including conflict-related sexual violence. Patrick, would you like to share your thoughts on how work on preventing harm to children in conflict situations can be improved? As someone who was caught up in this precise situation, what do you think is the answer for better prevention?

PK: We can prevent or support people affected by armed conflict in different ways. I first appreciate what international local humanitarians are doing, they helped them a lot and they are trying their best to improve the services. However, we still need more and more. When it comes to policies we need to work on the policies. Policies based on children, on how we can respond. There are so many policies that are put in place like the Convention on the child rights. This policy is not really known by so many people, especially South Sudan, my country, so many people doesn't know that there are policies that exist of child protection or policies that support children affected by armed conflict. If these policies are put in place, translated or a lot of time is invested to ensure that so many people know the policies that would respond at and it will support or it will give people the knowledge that these policies exist and we need the most especially the armed conflicts they will understand that it is very bad to recruit soldiers in our operations. Second one is we need to ensure people are hold accountable for all the crimes that they have

done. So many people are involved in crimes, they kill children, they arrest children, they does a lot of negative things to children. But these people are not brought to, they are not called upon for what they have done. If these people are taken to jail, some people who have the same ideas will learn from the lessons but if we leave these people go, you commit you kill a child, you arrest a child, you recruit children... but these people are not hold accountable. We will not stop some of these things from happening. We also need to work on the integration part of it. If children are disarmed from conflict and these children will come back home, these children will not have any future at all. The school part of it is very bad. When these children come these children want to go to school but there is no school. The distance to schools is very bad, it's very far. So this child will lose the morale. When this child comes from armed group, this child needs psychosocial support or mental health services but some services are not there. How can we make our services to reach to different people or different children if a child leaves armed group this child will have some problems with the parents. The parents will start fearing this child because the parents have that idea that this child is really dangerous and this child will harm someone. How can we ensure that these parents tend to love their children? The community where the child is going to stay, how can we ensure that this community respects and supports the child? So this one it needs a real awareness, it needs, it requires a full, a joint operation, joint support so that these children and the family and the community are aware of what is going on and also so there is serious support, mental health support services that is provided for the particular community so that they know that it is not... when a child comes from armed group or a child is disarmed it's not, the child is not no longer soldier, this child will no harm so when we adjust and work on that area, we will be able to ensure that so many children or children who comes out of conflict are supported. But also children are not allowed to go or to join. Sometimes the children who goes, who willingly go and join the armed force, how can we ensure that these children are not interested to join? We can bring in some early interventions like the livelihood concept of it. If the children are given opportunities to go to school, these children are given opportunities to go and learn different skills then someone will not have that interest. A child of 14/15 might not really be performing well at school and this child will lose hope and the only option that they will come with is to go and join armed force. How can we prevent that? The child is not, the child is not performing well at school and the child is not really interested longer at school, can we ensure that this child is taken to learn skills other than having that interest to going to join armed group? I think we work on that area and last but not least, invest a lot of money, put money in the areas that really alarming, especially the recruitment of children, it's really very high. If a lot of money is put in that area, we will be able to reach so many children or bring children out of war or prevent them from joining armed forces and if we can also work with the government and the local actors it is very important. These people play bigger role and they are known by their own community. They know the directions of their own community, the map they know it so they are able to reach so many number of children in a particular area. Thank you.

CH: Patrick, thank you so much for a very comprehensive response. You have touched on so many key issues here: sensitisation and awareness raising, accountability, the reintegration, investment in reintegration as preventative mechanism working with local communities. Indeed funding as well. Thank you that was a great and very comprehensive response to my question.

Erica, if I may turn to you, you have been involved at the field and policy level on child protection. Could you identify the key gaps in relation to the prevention of violence against children in the context of conflict and whether there are any measures to take into place or take into account the gendered harms that children suffer?

EH: Thanks Charu. Those are two big questions. I think, so Patrick has already identified quite a number I think of the key gaps that we see in prevention and the way I like to think about it, that I find it useful is... and child recruitment is a good example but is only one form of violence but it is about addressing both sides of the coin if you are talking about prevention so you need to hold those who are perpetrating violence against children to account and also to change their behaviour. So that's one side of it so that they stop trying to whether it's recruit children, abduct children, you know, commit sexual violence against children... so you are changing their behaviour and holding them accountable. And then on the other side as Patrick said it is about really creating a positive and protective environment around children so that they are less vulnerable to violence and, for examples, less likely to join an armed group. And I know when I did some research a few years ago talking to children in different countries particularly Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo and a lot of the children were saying some exactly what Patrick is saying, you have these different factors that are pushing them in. Whether it's the community that thinks they are old enough to be able to defend their community or they don't see any other options, they don't have schooling, they don't have even, you know, perhaps protection of a family, they are separated from their family or they don't have access to food or shelter or any of those things and that joining an armed group is not really voluntary, it's seen as a means of survival and really no other options are seen there. So I think that's one thing that we need to be thinking about when we talk about prevention and I think we often don't look at both sides of that coin. Another area that I and others have been working on for some time is really to be looking at how do we strengthen the child protection system and by that I mean this protective environment around children not just the formal system as we think about it say in the UK but that includes the agency of children, that includes the skills and support to parents and it includes the legal and policy framework as well as these formal structures and the social norms is really a part of that as well. So what we need to be doing is really to be looking at that and focusing on that in every context all the time so that we are not just, you know, seeing the eruption of a conflict and then saying "Oh gosh, the child protection system has disappeared or it's really weakened or it was never very strong to begin with and now it's even weaker". So if we start strengthening those across the board then when you run into, when you have a growing conflict or repetitive conflict the system is already more protective of children. And then I would say the other gap that Patrick also touched on is this siloing that we see in humanitarian responses, you know, where you have the education cluster or education sector and the protection sector and the health sector and all of these are very separate but children don't live their lives in sector and so it is about how do we combine that education and protection, for example, and making sure that all of our education programming has a protection component and all of our protection work also has an education component. And then your other question, are there measures in place to take account of gendered harms? I think sometimes there are but I think when we talk about gendered harms the focus tends to be and the automatic reaction to that is what we are talking about are the harms faced by girls. I think the idea of gender sometimes gets a little bit lost in that there are harms that occur both because you are a girl and because you are boy and so I think that sometimes gets lost. I do think we have seen some really good advancements in programming on reintegration that does start to take account of, again it is more specifically on girls, for example, girls who have left an armed group and have left with children and how do we adapt to making sure that they receive this support that they need. So we have seen some I think some progress in that but there are still challenges around understanding what the gendered impacts are on children both boys and girls and also making sure that girls don't get caught up in the "women and girls" as one category because obviously their needs are often very different and their agency is very different and so there is a lot more that needs to be done in that.

CH: Erica, thanks so much and also for touching on these, what I would define as very critical issues, you know, how we lump categories of beneficiaries and populations together for ease of programming and don't take into account the intersectional realities of age, gender and how they play out in these contexts.

Patrick, as someone who is now advocating for the rights of young people and children, we would love to hear your thoughts on the issue of responses. Do you think current responses for children associated with armed forces and armed groups take into account the differences in relation to gender? For example, are there differences in the way children receive care and support after they are released from armed groups? So are girls treated differently from boys?

PK: Thank you. In my context, African context, when a child, a boy child is released from armed conflict and a girl, yeah, they are treated a little bit different because a boy, they consider a boy to be harmful to the community now and when the boy comes because it is out of experience that when a boy child comes from armed conflict and this child will have a mere or bad behaviour, this child still have the behaviour of killing people, of robbing people, of destroying things or even stealing while a girl has not really, don't have much of all those. Girls sometimes, what they sometimes does is to steal but they are not really harmful now because the community tends to react a little bit harder to a boy child because of experience that they got. The both sexes are treated a little bit different, good compared to boys, the girls are really are in that good shape. And when come to response from humanitarian workers, humanitarian workers or humanitarian organisations mostly respond to girls, they support girls compared to boys or without knowing that these people came from the same area and instead of responding to the boy who is having a very bad behaviours or are killing people, robbing, stealing and other things, instead they are focusing much on the girls so in the few years that I have been advocating I realised that there is a favour girls a put more in the frontline compared to boys but yet they need the same services. From humanitarian workers as well they are trying their best to invest. In the recent years now I have seen that governments and international organisations, national and/or local are investing a lot of time to respond to child protection particularly so that who is really a good, that is a very good focus though it takes a lot of time for some other things to be put in place apart from talking but we also require something to be put in place into practice, not making recommendations again and again and again and again, having same debates again and again on the same thing without implementing or without an action on all our recommendations that we have done. In terms of investment so many partners so many governments from different countries, international countries, have tried and they are putting a lot of resources most especially in the education area and that which is really good and most especially like the UK government they have invested a lot of money in South Sudan to construct schools, to build and renovate health centres which is very important and it is supporting. Yeah, in general I realise there is a good response towards child protection in the recent years. Thank you.

CH: Thanks very much, Patrick. My next question is also for you: How do you think the views of girls, boys and young people can be better heard in conflict settings? So that's the first thing, you know, how can you hear them better? how can you listen to them more? and why does it matter?

PK: Generally we know when conflict broke out children, youth, additional women suffers most and so many sittings are being conducted on how we can like humanitarian workers, governments to respond or prevent children from being associated with armed conflict or how to stop war. Peace agreements have

been done, a lot of sittings have been conducted yet these children who are directly affected by this conflict, the youth, are not brought to the sittings to say, to listen from them and to ask from them what do they want, especially the youth who can understand, who can speak more, even the children can speak. We need, I recommend, when there is a sitting, agreements of peace and putting other things but children, we need to bring these children on board, bring these children, the youth on board, listen from them and they will be having a very good feedback for our intervention as well also when comes to planning like presenting a project for children, youth, we need to put a lot of time in that, we need to get more views from children, from youth, our services are going to help them, they will be able to tell if we need to adjust in our proposal, we need to adjust on our project or not. Putting children in all the process from the designing up to the implementation, even up to the evolution part of it to give us a view of how activities can run and that will enable us to reach so many children and children will be able to benefit from our interventions. We cannot sit and plan for someone very far away without coming down, especially the youth, the youth are experts of their own community, their own society, they can tell better than anyone else because they come from there, if they are brought on the tables and the run of the design and all of it, everything, every project meant for them they can give very good feedback. Working with youth-led organisations, community-based groups and the government as well it will be able for these people to reach so many of their colleagues, especially in armed conflicts, someone who comes from a different country is not able to reach into a conflict area because the people who lives there don't trust them but as someone who lives in the conflict area he or she is already know by his community, by the community so they have the trust. They are able to reach even in a very dangerous areas because they understand each other so when projects or contracts are given to the local actors we will be able to succeed in our projects. Thank you.

CH: Patrick, thank you so much for raising this really critical point about localisation and using capacity that exists within these settings and also soliciting, not only soliciting, but also absorbing, reflecting, implementing projects with the voices of those affected at the heart of these interventions. Thank you so much for this useful intervention at this point.

I will turn to you Erica for my last question: you have long been an advocate for the participation of young people who have suffered in conflict settings, you have long advocated for children to be involved in influencing the design of programmes not just in terms of participation for its sake itself but to influence programmes for the recovery of children associated with armed forces and armed groups. Could you talk a little bit about the considerations that we must bear in mind especially when it relates to a safe and ethical approach in working with children who have been traumatised in their experiences of conflict?

EH: Thanks Charu, yes, another big question. I think that safe and ethical approaches are obviously the key and there is sometimes a fear of not working with children and not involving them for the reason that we are afraid of are we going to do further harm. So I think we obviously do need to make sure that we are not doing any harm and that they are, that the children and young people who are involved in whether it is a consultation that leads up to how we define our, how we use funding to define it and define the programme or whether it's their involvement in the project itself. I think Patrick has already mentioned the need to make sure there is psychosocial help and support available and we need to be very mindful of that and I know in consultations that I've done before one of the key factors is, you know, as Patrick said is that there is a trust there and there is an understanding of people and that you are involved for the long term and not only coming in and asking some questions and then leaving but while you are doing

that making sure that there is someone who is responsible for watching and just keeping an eye on the children at, for example, in a focus group discussion so is not for the notetaker or for the person who is having the discussion to make sure that they are being very careful and picking up on what the children or young people might be experiencing, I mean obviously it is their role but to have someone who can stand back and really watch and watch for any signs of distress or any challenges. But I think that it is, it has to be a long term process and we see that you have to give children a voice in a way that is not tokenistic because I think we see that and we see that that just leads to further sense of, it further reinforces that trauma of a lack of control, you know, the sense that “we didn't start this conflict and yet this is happening to us and we've lost this and we've lost this” and what that does to them and then you come and if you are not engaging them in a way that is an ongoing way and also in a very meaningful way, you know, not just a here are their stories which are important but also to listen to recommendations and then work with children and young people to say “Ok, how do we, this is a great recommendation, how do we implement that, how do we make sure this can happen?” And my experience has been that when you really have that involvement in a very, in a very concrete way and a very ongoing way then that is not only beneficial for what you are trying to achieve but it also is really beneficial for the children themselves, children and young people. And I think we need to remember that, you know, children are our future, they are also our present but this cycle of conflict doesn't end unless we are putting children at the heart of our response to the conflict.

CH: Erica, thank you so much for these very valuable words of wisdom indeed which come from the many years of direct experience you've had and the meaningful work that you've done and continue to do. We are honoured to have you on our podcast today and Patrick I can't thank you enough for sharing your insights with us, for the foresight, wisdom and the experience that you've brought to today's podcast. I'm very very grateful to both of you. Thank you.

That brings us to the end of this episode of “In the Centre”! Thank you very much for joining All Survivors Project. We would like to give a special thanks to our sound editor Daniel Frankhuizen. If you found this discussion useful, please subscribe to and access all our monthly forthcoming episodes. We are also on Twitter and you can check out our website allurvivorsproject.org. We would very much like to hear your thoughts and suggestions for future podcasts—all views are welcomed, so please stay in touch, and see you next time!
