

# Labor Markets in Contexts of War: Recruitment and Trafficking of Child Soldiers in Colombia

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**ABSTRACT. Objective/context:** The article aims to analyze child recruitment as a form of human trafficking. Beyond the theoretical perspectives that focus on security or rights, it addresses the topic as a form of unfree labor. By means of a case study focused on child recruitment by right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia, the paper analyzes how children *entered* and *exited* illegal armed groups, the *functions* they performed, and the *exploitation* they endured. The research argues that child recruitment operates as a large-scale labor-market uptake in the wartime social order, where the “employers” are paramilitary groups, and the labor force, in part, consists of children and adolescents. **Methodology:** This case study relies on different sources of information: a database on child recruitment provided

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by the special Justice and Peace Unit of the Colombian Attorney General's Office (989 cases between 1981 and 2005), sentences of Peace and Justice, testimonials given by victims in judicial processes, and semi-structured interviews with different actors. **Conclusions:** The paper shows that child recruitment as a form of trafficking is functional to wartime social order in contexts of poverty and inequality. There is demand and supply; thus, both girls and boys, who worked as soldiers, are not only victims but also agents that make decisions in challenging conditions. Therefore, if the socioeconomic options for these children, even after their demobilization from the armed group, are still a choice between bad and worse, joining a violent (no longer "armed" but "criminal") group will remain a feasible alternative. **Originality:** The article contributes to the academic literature on a recent topic, such as the overlapping between child recruitment and human trafficking in armed conflict and post-conflict situations. It also contributes to the literature on "unfree labor," as the study focuses on an actor (illegal armed groups) that has not been analyzed until now. Finally, the research demonstrates the limits of understanding human trafficking (and child recruitment as a form of trafficking) as a problem of security or rights entitlement. It highlights the analytical and political advantages of categories such as "unfree labor" to provide effective solutions for the prevention and reintegration of child soldiers.

KEYWORDS: Child recruitment; human trafficking; unfree labor; armed conflict; Colombia.

## Mercados laborales en contextos de guerra: reclutamiento de niños soldado en Colombia

RESUMEN. **Objetivo/contexto:** el artículo propone analizar el reclutamiento de niños, niñas y adolescentes como una forma de trata de personas. Más allá de las aproximaciones teóricas que enfatizan las dimensiones de seguridad o derechos, este estudio aborda el tema como una forma de trabajo no libre. Mediante un estudio de caso, centrado en las prácticas de reclutamiento por parte del paramilitarismo en Colombia, el artículo se enfoca en la *entrada* de los niños, niñas y adolescentes al grupo armado, la *salida*, las *funciones* que cumplieron y las formas de *explotación* a las que fueron sometidos. Esta investigación sostiene que el reclutamiento en Colombia opera como un mercado laboral a gran escala en un orden social de guerra, donde los "empleadores" son grupos paramilitares y la fuerza de trabajo está conformada, en parte, por niños, niñas y adolescentes. **Metodología:** el estudio de caso se basa en diferentes fuentes de información: la base de datos de reclutamiento ilícito facilitada por la unidad especial de *Justicia y Paz* de la Fiscalía General de Colombia (989 casos de niños y niñas reclutados entre 1981 y 2005), sentencias de Justicia y Paz, audiencias de las víctimas en el proceso judicial y entrevistas semiestructuradas a diferentes actores. **Conclusiones:** el artículo muestra que el reclutamiento, como forma de trata, es funcional al orden social de la guerra en contextos de pobreza y desigualdad. Existe una oferta y una demanda; así, los niños y niñas que "trabajaron" como soldados no sólo son víctimas sino también agentes que tomaron decisiones en contextos difíciles. Por tanto, si las condiciones socioeconómicas de estos niños y niñas, incluso tras su desvinculación, siguen ofreciendo una decisión

entre “lo malo y lo peor”, su incorporación a un grupo violento (ya no “armado” sino “criminal”) seguirá una opción viable. **Originalidad:** el artículo contribuye a la literatura académica sobre un tema actual, como el solapamiento entre tráfico humano y reclutamiento infantil en situaciones de conflicto armado y postconflicto. También contribuye a la literatura sobre “trabajo no libre” al enfocarse en un actor (grupos armados ilegales) que no han sido analizados hasta ahora. Finalmente, el artículo demuestra los límites de entender el tráfico humano (y el reclutamiento de niños como una de sus expresiones) como un problema de seguridad o titularidad de derechos. Subraya las ventajas analíticas y políticas de categorías como “trabajo no libre” para buscar soluciones efectivas en materia de prevención y reintegración de niños soldados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: reclutamiento de niños; niñas y adolescentes; trata de seres humanos; trabajo no libre; conflicto armado; Colombia.

## Mercados de trabalho em contextos de guerra: recrutamento e tráfico de crianças-soldados na Colômbia

RESUMO. **Objetivo/contexto:** o artigo propõe analisar o recrutamento de meninas, meninos e adolescentes como um tipo de tráfico de pessoas. Além das aproximações teóricas que enfatizam as dimensões de segurança ou de direitos, esse estudo aborda o assunto como uma forma de trabalho não livre. Através de um estudo de caso sobre as práticas de recrutamento por parte do paramilitarismo na Colômbia, o artigo foca a análise na *entrada* de crianças e adolescentes nos grupos armados, sua *saída*, as *funções* que realizaram e as formas de *exploração* às que foram submetidos. A pesquisa argumenta que o recrutamento na Colômbia opera sob as dinâmicas de um mercado de trabalho em escala ampla e numa ordem social de guerra, onde os “empregadores” são grupos paramilitares e a força de trabalho é composta, em parte, por crianças e adolescentes. **Metodologia:** a pesquisa consiste num estudo de caso baseado em diferentes fontes de informação: a base de dados de recrutamento ilícito disponibilizado pela Unidade Especial de Justiça e Paz da Procuradoria-Geral da Colômbia (989 casos de meninas e meninos recrutados entre 1981 e 2005); sentenças de Justiça e Paz, audiências de vítimas num processo na justiça e entrevistas semiestruturadas com diferentes atores. **Conclusões:** a pesquisa aponta que o recrutamento, como forma de tráfico, é funcional na ordem social de guerra em contextos de pobreza e desigualdade. Há uma oferta e uma demanda. Assim, meninas e meninos que “trabalharam” como soldados não são apenas vítimas, mas também agentes que tomaram decisões. Em consequência, o estudo salienta que, se as condições socioeconômicas dessas crianças continuarem se limitando a uma decisão entre “o ruim e o pior”, mesmo após a sua desvinculação, a sua incorporação num grupo armado ilegal, num contexto de guerra ou de criminalidade, continuará sendo uma opção viável. **Originalidade:** o artigo contribui para o desenvolvimento da pesquisa acadêmica sobre uma questão incipiente, tal como é a sobreposição entre tráfico e recrutamento de crianças em situações de conflito armado e pós-conflito. Igualmente, o artigo contribui às pesquisas sobre “trabalho não livre”, aplicando esse conceito a um ator pouco estudado nesse âmbito – os grupos armados ilegais. Finalmente, o artigo ressalta os limites de compreender o tráfico (e, assim, o

recrutamento como uma forma de tráfico) como um problema de segurança ou de titularidade de direitos. Salientam-se, desse modo, as vantagens analíticas e políticas do uso de categorias como “trabalho não livre” para procurar soluções eficazes que visem à prevenção e reintegração de crianças-soldado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: recrutamento de meninas, meninos e adolescentes; tráfico de pessoas; trabalho não livre; conflito armado; Colômbia.

## Introduction

The relationship between child recruitment and trafficking has been a growing concern for international political agendas. In 2016, the United Nations Security Council addressed the issue for the first time in Resolution 2331.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict stated that “the recruitment and use of children nearly always constitutes trafficking.”<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, there are few academic studies on the topic (Conradi 2013; Fenton *et al.* 2020; Hurtado *et al.* 2018; Tiefenbrun 2007; Valentine 2003), and, like international institutions, they tend to address child recruitment as a form of trafficking from liberal and realist perspectives: the first one focuses on the problem of the rights of those who are victimized and the second on trafficking as a threat to the security of states.

A legal approach argues that both trafficking and recruitment include the same elements that constitute the offense: abduction, exploitation, and transfer, within a country or across borders (Tiefenbrun 2007; Valentine 2003). In addition, this legal interpretation usually insists on the need to enforce the victims’ rights, as they are considered especially vulnerable groups.

The security perspective, instead, pays attention to criminal and terrorist actors. The UN, for instance, focuses mainly on girls captured by Islamist terrorist groups (i.e., Daesh, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, or the Lord’s Resistance Army) and emphasizes their sexual exploitation, including forced marriage and sexual slavery as sources of funding for the armed groups.

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1 The UN Security Council issued Resolutions S/RES/2331 (2016), S/RES/2388 (2017), and S/RES/2427 (2018). See also the Report of the Secretary-General on trafficking in persons in armed conflict pursuant to Security Council resolution 2331 (2016), November 10, 2017 (S/2017/939); the Report of the Secretary-General on trafficking in persons in armed conflict pursuant to Security Council resolution 2388 (2017), November 21, 2018 (S/2018/1042); and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018).

2 Annual Report on the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. Human Rights Council, 37th Session, January 8, 2018 (A/HRC/37/47), pp. 6-7.

Likewise, authors such as Conradi (2013) demonstrate how human trafficking is used by illegal armed groups to sell child soldiers to other groups, even transnationally, once the armed conflict ends.

Nevertheless, these legal and security approaches—ultimately focused on criminal justice or the threat against states—often reinforce a deeply held assumption about trafficking: that victims are essentially weak, naïve, and helpless (Agustin 2007; Doezema 1999; Piscitelli 2015; Weitzer 2007 and 2014). However, this obscures the nuances and socio-economic dynamics of this practice. We argue that, in a war-torn zone, there is a close relationship between a demand for manpower (by illegal armed groups) and a supply side (there are children in precarious conditions). Even if humanitarian and police agencies try to rescue children from the scourge of human trafficking, they miss the point that, in many occasions, children have to choose between bad and worse alternatives to survive and solve everyday problems.<sup>3</sup>

Different armed conflicts in the world, such as Colombia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, demonstrate that becoming involved in an illegal armed group often includes displacement, violence, and abuse. However, it can also provide child soldiers with a means for empowerment, protection from other armed actors, an escape from intra-family violence, and/or a source of income (Drumbl and Barret 2019).

This article seeks to understand child recruitment as trafficking from an unfree labor perspective. Beyond assumptions about war as chaos, violence, and anarchy, we address armed conflicts as social orders that produce particular forms of recruitment and allocation of labor (Durrenberger and Martí 2006). How does child recruitment, as a form of trafficking, operate as a part of labor markets in wartime social orders? Focusing on relationships between right-wing paramilitary groups and children in Colombia, we seek to understand better the agency of children in joining and leaving an armed group, the kind of work they carry out, the exploitation they are subjected to, and different forms of resistance or survival strategies they adopt.

This study examines the Colombian case for two reasons. Firstly, Colombia has experienced a prolonged armed conflict (more than fifty years)

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3 “[R]oughly two of every three child soldiers have some sort of initiative in their own recruitment” (Singer 2006, 61); “The best evidence available indicates that significant numbers of children join armed groups without explicit coercion...” (Wessells 2004, 514); “[T]he vast majority of child soldiers are not forcibly recruited or abducted into armed forces and groups” (Rosen 2007, 298-299); International Labour Office (2003, viii); “A number of recent studies from Sub-Saharan Africa show that the majority of children and young people join armed groups voluntarily for a number of reasons” (Schmidt 2007, 49); UNICEF (2002, 19) (cited in Drumbl 2012, 100).

in which child recruitment has been practiced systematically by all the illegal armed actors. In fact, in some regions, young people have no reference to “peaceful times,” and illegal armed actors exert authority. They provide justice, security, and jobs. Secondly, Colombia’s war reveals an overlap between political and criminal violence due to the existing links between illegal armed actors and unlawful trade (drugs, illicit mining, and even trafficking). However, human trafficking and child recruitment have usually been addressed legally and politically as different facts and unrelated social practices (Hurtado *et al.* 2018).

There are many studies on the recruitment of children in Colombia. Different researchers have analyzed the push and pull factors of recruitment. In terms of push factors, they mention conditions of poverty, domestic violence, and lack of education under which some children live (Bienestar Familiar 2013; Bretch 2002; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo 2016). The pull factors include motivations related to the war context that lead children to join an armed group, such as the lure of weapons, receiving a salary, gaining protection, and the like (Arjona *et al.* 2012; Gutiérrez 2010). Various authors have also recognized that recruited children are more than passive victims; on the contrary, they exert certain agency and have great resilience (Bjørkhaug 2010; Downing 2014; Herrera and Porch 2008; Kaplan and Nussio 2018; Lugo 2018).

However, little research has been done on child recruitment as a form of human trafficking in Colombia. Hurtado *et al.* (2018) question the dichotomy between human trafficking (as something related to organized crime) and child recruitment (as something confined to armed conflicts) and argue that recognizing an overlap between these two crimes would provide higher legal protection to victims and help formulate better reintegration policies. In this direction, this study aims to deepen our comprehension of child recruitment as a form of trafficking from a labor market perspective to understand how this practice reproduces itself, becomes sustainable in the social order of war, and could be avoided.

This research seeks to make an empirical contribution. On the one hand, it provides new evidence on human trafficking and child recruitment in Colombia, which complements the findings of other case studies. This helps in part address some criticism that the human trafficking literature includes scant, low-quality, or inconsistent evidence (Brace and O’Connell 2018; Doezema 1999; Kotiswaran 2017; Weitzer 2007; Yea 2017). On the other hand, this study provides information to decision-makers and judges in charge of child recruitment cases in the context of transitional justice.

The article is structured in four parts. The first section describes the theoretical framework. It focuses on unfree labor as the analytical category to address child recruitment as trafficking in wartime social orders. The second explains

the methodology, highlighting its scope and limitations. The third part presents a case study and a discussion on child soldiers in the Colombian armed conflict. It focuses on children's entry into and exit from the armed group, the functions they performed, and the nature of their exploitation. Finally, we close the article with some conclusions.

## 1. Addressing Child Recruitment as Trafficking: The Unfree Labor Perspective

Unfree labor is a form of adverse labor incorporation for poor and vulnerable people that often entails a salary, but those involved always work under dangerous conditions and forms of coercion and manipulation designed to make workers toil harder and for longer hours and less money (LeBaron and Phillips 2019; Morgan and Olsen 2015; Phillips 2013; Strauss 2012).<sup>4</sup>

Some authors have begun to think about trafficking as a form of unfree labor (LeBaron and Phillips 2019; Morgan and Olsen 2015; Phillips 2013; Strauss 2012; Yusriza 2020). They explain human trafficking as exploitative practices that, far from being a vestige of pre-capitalist social relations, are forms of forced labor integrated into, and developed within, a contemporary large-scale global economy.

Thousands of irregular migrants or persons from disadvantaged backgrounds have been trapped in informal labor markets (De Lauri 2016; Phillips 2013). Their precarious legal status (or lack of one) prevents them from organizing to secure their labor rights (Ferguson and McNall 2015), while their economic situation impedes them from accumulating sufficient capital to pay the debts they have accrued (Phillips 2013). Similarly, their social status prevents them from aspiring to improve their conditions, particularly in societies where being a woman, child, or a member of another stigmatized social group is grounds for discrimination (Mezzadri 2016).

According to the Palermo Protocol of 2000, trafficking involves an action (the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons), a means (including fraud, deception, threat or the use of violence), and an end

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4 The concept of “unfree labor” comes from the field of political economy, in particular, Marx’s articulation of a distinction between work and labor in capitalist economies. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, people were separated from the means of production and subsistence, thereby becoming “free” to commodify their labor. Under the liberal legalism of the nineteenth century, “freedom” implies the capacity to sell your own labor, enter into a contract with a labor purchaser, and receive an agreed-upon wage. This was understood as a form of freedom compared to serfdom or slavery, though Marx defended the notion that commodified labor under capitalist production relationships was not truly free (Strauss 2012, 139).

(exploitation). In the case of a child, however, only two elements are necessary to constitute the offense: an action and the end of exploiting them. In other words, human trafficking involves uprooting (within or outside the country) and exploiting a person. Both elements are present in the case of child recruitment.<sup>5</sup>

From a political economy perspective, the literature on child recruitment has focused on the relationship between supply and demand. Regarding supply—in this case, children—there are different factors that motivate them to leave their homes and join illegal armed actors. Structural conditions, such as unemployment, poverty, limited access to education, social exclusion, and lack of prospects, in addition to the lure of guns and military life, family backgrounds, and political violence, are factors that make children vulnerable and likely to join armed groups (Brett and Specht 2004; Human Rights Watch 2003; Gates 2011; Honwana 2009; Singer 2010; Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo 2016; Wessells 2006). On the other hand, the literature that focuses on the demand side—that is, illegal armed groups—emphasizes strategic criteria: cheap labor for more years. Additionally, children are easily approachable, more obedient, easier to manipulate and indoctrinate, and can perform some activities more skillfully than adults (Beber and Blattman 2013; Faulkner *et al.* 2019; Faulkner and Doctor 2021; Gates 2002; Haer and Böhmelt 2017; Nussio and Ugarriza 2021; Lievens *et al.* 2005; Singer 2006).

Unfree labor offers analytical advantages to help understand how child recruitment as trafficking operates as a practice of labor power relations in contexts of conflict (Banaji 2003; Breman *et al.* 2009; LeBaron 2018; Lerche 2007; Rioux *et al.* 2020; Taylor and Rioux 2017). This concept approaches local practices (in our case, the recruitment of children for war) and relates them to a global economic dynamic (such as the illicit drugs business).

The concept of unfree labor includes three analytical elements (entry, exit, and exploitation) in a way that critically addresses liberal assumptions in the international legal definitions of child recruitment and trafficking. It offers another possible understanding of the entry of children in illegal armed groups, the functions they develop, and their exit from the armed groups. Firstly, although entry into this type of “employment” is considered “unfree,” this is not necessarily due to the use or threats of violence. Instead, children under precarious conditions must choose between bad and worse employment options. As Robert J. Steinfield (2001) observes, we are normally “talking about situations in

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5 According to the Paris Principles, a child soldier is “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 children, boys, and girls used as 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, Prin. 2.1).



which the compelled party is offered a choice between disagreeable alternatives and chooses the lesser evil” (14). Unlike forms of unfree labor in prisons and concentration camps, in Colombia, many children end up joining illegal armed groups because they do not have other sources of economic gain.

Secondly, unfree labor implies a relationship (of employment) where the worker cannot leave; or, in the words of Phillips (2013), “[...] unfreedom is primarily constituted not by coerced entry but by precluded exit” (178). This may be for various reasons: physical impediments, the need to pay off a debt, or simply because it is more dangerous not to be linked to a specific employer in certain areas (as in the case of territories controlled by illegal armed groups, drug traffickers, or mafias of various kinds). Thirdly, it entails exploitation as it is a form of employment that involves precarious, even inhumane, conditions that violate the labor and human rights of individuals. In addition, it traps these people in relationships that damage and progressively reduce their hopes for a better quality of life. As illustrated in the next section, many Colombian children perceive working in illegal armed groups as an activity no worse than other alternatives available to them.

Literature on human trafficking as unfree labor mainly focuses on the private sector (local and multinational companies) and the state (Le Baron and Phillips 2019; Yusriza 2020). This article contributes to this literature by focusing on the role of different actors, that is, illegal armed groups that also engage in exploitative practices in wartime. The recruitment of children for war is a local practice connected to drug trafficking, which is part of the global economy.

## **2. Methodology: Difficulties of Conducting Research on Child Recruitment in Colombia**

Colombia’s partial peace processes during the twenty-first century have allowed the government and various NGOs to gather data about child soldiers. However, the information is still scarce, hardly systematized, and difficult to access.<sup>6</sup>

This case study relies on different sources of information. To begin with, it analyzed eight sentences (which include the highest amount of child recruitment

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6 As of 2005, the right-wing paramilitary groups identified as part of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) were demobilized. Around 32,000 people laid down their arms (Restrepo and Bagley 2011). In 2016, the government of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos signed a peace agreement with the guerrillas identified as the FARC-EP, and about 8,400 fighters disarmed. It is estimated that the number of recruited children ranges between 6,000 and 18,000 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018; Human Rights Watch 2003).

cases in Colombia)<sup>7</sup> and 33 testimonials given by child recruitment victims in judicial processes (10 women and 23 men).<sup>8</sup> In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with judges and state officials in charge of preventing and countering illegal recruitment<sup>9</sup> and an interview with the former paramilitary commander of the *Bloque Elmer Cárdenas*, Fredy Rendón (alias “The German”), convicted for the recruitment of 307 children.

Additionally, this research gained access to the database on child recruitment of the special Justice and Peace Unit of the Colombian Attorney General’s Office. This database includes 989 testimonials from victims recruited by paramilitary groups, of which 85 were girls and 904 were boys (8.6 % and 91.4 %, respectively). The database refers to child recruitment facts that occurred between 1981 and 2005 but were prosecuted between 2006 and 2016.<sup>10</sup>

While the information registered by the Attorney General’s Office was relevant input, this research identified several problems. Firstly, the information was not unified; that is, data on perpetrators and victims were distributed in 19 different matrices. Each one was disaggregated into 82 variables and focused on the demographic profile and socioeconomic conditions of the victim, the recruiting armed group, the place where the events occurred, and the *modus operandi* of the illegal armed group, among others. Unifying the information in a single database was challenging, as the matrix presented the variables in different orders. In addition, there were typographical errors, record duplications, and a large number of missing values in the Attorney General’s database that we had to correct.

To analyze the information through the category of unfree labor, this research structured three new variables. First, the way of entering the illegal

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7 The judicial processes analyzed correspond to those with the highest number of child recruitment victims until January 2021. The members of the paramilitary groups convicted were Ramiro Vanoy Murillo, Fredy Rendón Herrera, Salvatore Mancuso Gómez, and others; Iván Roberto Duque Gaviria and others; Rodrigo Pérez Alzate, Javier Alonso Quintero, and others; and several members of the Héctor Julio Peinado Becerra Front.

8 Testimony from a victim of illegal recruitment by the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc (AUC) in a public hearing before the Bogotá Justice and Peace Tribunal, November 3 and 4, 2011.

9 In March and April 2018, we conducted interviews with Judges Uldi Teresa Jiménez and Eduardo Castellanos, as well as Luz Marina Zamora, who was the judge for the Execution of Sentences in Justice and Peace. In addition, the Colombian Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization, the Ombudsman’s Office, and the Delegated Attorney for the Support of the Armed Conflict Victims and Demobilized Persons were interviewed in March 2018. We also held two interviews with the Director of the NGO *Renacer* in November 2016 and August 2018.

10 This database includes only cases of child recruitment due to a paramilitary group demobilization process. In this sense, it represents a selection bias in terms of omitting children that are still enrolled or who died while being child soldiers.

armed group (“voluntary” or forced)<sup>11</sup>; second, the manner of exiting from the illegal armed group, whether it was open (due to a political process) or closed (e.g., escaping, being captured or deserting); and finally, the form of participation of recruited children in the illegal armed group (direct and active, or indirect).<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Child Soldiers in Colombia: Analyzing Entry, Exit, Functions, and Exploitation

#### a. Pre-Entry: “Opportunities” amidst Precariousness

I entered when I was 17. At that time, I lived with my mother who sold merchandise. I was not studying, and I had a girl [...] I joined the group because I felt very bored and wanted to know what it felt like to belong to that group.<sup>13</sup>

I lived with my parents and eight brothers [...], my father worked harvesting and I helped him. I was not studying. When I was 16, I saw the boys from the paramilitary groups. They were walking around, and I offered to go with them.<sup>14</sup>

The previous testimonies illustrate part of the demographic profile and socio-economic conditions of children recruited in Colombia. Apparently, they lived in considerable poverty, some with their extended family (11%), some in the care of older siblings, and even some children on their own.<sup>15</sup> A few children were in a primary school. However, all the cases studied were noticeably behind in their schooling; 59% of the sample was between 14 and 17 years old and, at most, finished the primary school level. Other children did not attend school and were

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11 This study considers entry as “voluntary” if: 1) the motivation claimed by the child for entering the group was economic or related to the war context (e.g., searching for revenge or protection) or family matters (such as escaping from domestic violence); and 2) the method of recruitment employed by the recruiting group involved persuasion or deception. When the method was threat or the use of violence, the entry was considered forced.

12 Active participation refers to combat actions or activities linked to combat—e.g., making and planting landmines, scouting, serving as spies, bodyguards, and sentinels. Indirect participation refers to those tasks that child recruits are often obliged to perform, such as washing, cooking, collecting firewood, transporting products, or responding to a commander’s sexual desires.

13 Testimony of a boy collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General’s Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

14 Testimony of a boy collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General’s Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

15 There were 41 cases of children living on their own; 9 of them were girls. Of 46 cases, 41 entered the ranks of paramilitaries.

employed before joining the armed groups (39%), though always under informal and unsafe circumstances. Even worse, some children (20%) neither worked nor studied prior to their entry.<sup>16</sup>

This situation is not necessarily uncommon in other countries of the Global South or Latin America. The peculiarity is that they were children immersed in zones of armed conflict where the state's presence had historically been precarious and illegal armed groups controlled large swaths of territory (González 2009; González *et al.* 2002). Both paramilitary groups and guerrilla organizations have disputed territories and fought over controlling illegal businesses that would finance them, such as drug trafficking.

During the period covered in this research, the global cocaine market was worth approximately US\$ 71 billion, and Colombia was one of the largest producers, where 70% of the coca was cultivated and 90% processed (Rangel 2005). The guerrillas exercised greater control over the coca leaf cultivation and coca paste and base production, while the paramilitaries had more influence over the marketing stages. For this reason, the latter sought to control coastal and more economically developed areas for laundering assets, such as the Departments of Antioquia and Cesar, among others (Duncan 2005).

As mentioned before, recruited children eventually became part of a “labor market” where asymmetric power relationships stand out. On the supply side of the equation, the children were in a precarious condition; on the demand side, the illegal armed groups looked for a “workforce,” that is, soldiers expected to fight the war for at least ten years. These groups had enough economic and political power to make decisions about the life and death of recruited children and their relatives.

## b. Open Entry

I was unhappy in my family and the choice was either to work in a bar or go and join the AUC [a paramilitary organization]. I chose the second option.<sup>17</sup>

Against widespread assumptions, much of the recruitment of children in Colombia has not been mediated through force, threats, or intimidation. In fact, 78% (768 children) entered the illegal armed groups “voluntarily”; nevertheless,

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16 The percentages for these variables are as follows: Family nucleus prior to recruitment, 643 children; Level of education, 878 children; Pre-recruitment activity, 904 children.

17 Testimony of a 16-year-old girl soldier from the Department of Antioquia included in the judgement of the Superior Court of the Judicial District of Bogotá, Chamber of Justice and Peace, December 16, 2011.

as Bjørkhaug (2010) argues, child recruitment in Colombia occurs in the gray area between “voluntary” and coerced recruitment.<sup>18</sup>

In many occasions, the child’s consent could have been manipulated (e.g., using deception), but it is remarkable how many cases exist where children joined these groups’ ranks with a fairly clear idea about the activities they would carry out and the conditions in which they would live. Most recruited children were from Colombian territories historically marked by violence, such as the Departments of Antioquia (26%), Santander (17%), and Magdalena (7%).

In territories under the control of paramilitary groups, like those managed by guerrilla and/or drug trafficking groups, the dynamics of violence have been relatively familiar and usual. Relatives, friends, or neighbors often followed the same patterns of behavior in the face of coercion from or even in the mere presence of armed groups. They often chose to move out of the territory or join these groups’ ranks. In addition, armed groups not only inflict terror on local populations but also frequently exercise informal sovereignty and create a social order (Arjona 2014). Illegal armed groups provide forms of security, justice, and even employment (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).<sup>19</sup> An indicator of how normalized war can become in such regions is that, according to the Attorney General’s database, paramilitary groups used the radio or public announcements to recruit child and adolescent laborers.

This study establishes that enlistment in paramilitary groups did not, for the most part, occur under threat of violence. In many cases, children found that enlistment was a viable financial choice, as they received salaries. The principal motivation reported by children who voluntarily joined an illegal armed group was economic (68%); most of them joined looking for a job and even a salaried

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18 This finding is consistent with those from other experiences of armed conflict in countries such as Sri Lanka, Angola, and the Philippines, as well as with other studies on the Colombian situation (Keairns 2002). Many studies observe that 75% to 85% of child soldiers entered the armed groups “voluntarily” (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo 2016; Hurtado *et al.* 2018; Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia 2006, 2001, and 1996).

19 Among other cases, the Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Magdalena Medio (ACMM) stands out as an example. According to testimonies, some parents gave their children to the paramilitary leader Ramón Isaza to “discipline them.” The ACMM also carried out social cleansing tasks and punished drug addicts on the so-called “Island,” where these people were subjected to torture and later forgiven in exchange for joining the ranks of the paramilitary bloc (Superior Court of Bogotá).

position (Gutiérrez 2010).<sup>20</sup> While guerrillas did not pay their recruits, paramilitary groups did offer a regular monthly compensation/wage: US\$ 85/month to foot soldiers, US\$ 345/month to divisional officers or bodyguards, and US\$ 1,745/month to block commanders.<sup>21</sup>

[A man] asked me whether I wanted to work with them or for a farmer. He said that they would provide me with arms [...] I asked him how much they would pay me, and he said \$470,000 pesos (US\$ 188).<sup>22</sup>

When I joined, they did not promise me money, but I received several wage packets [...] the last payment was about 600 thousand pesos [US\$ 210] [...] the first payment was for about two months, with the same salary as foot soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

In general, girls received about the same salaries as boys. One girl even reported that she continued to receive her payment after giving birth and during recovery at home (that is, in effect, “maternity leave”).<sup>24</sup> In any case, contrary to dominant stereotypes, some girls and boys sought to join illegal armed groups. By doing so, they were exercising some agency. This is not supposed to imply that their decisions were made freely, as the literature on unfree labor contends. However, these findings show that an understanding of these children’s decisions should not be reduced to their legal condition as minors (i.e., due to lack of legal liability). Instead, they raise important questions about how children under these circumstances behave as actors when inserted into the labor force during times of war.

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20 Children also reported other non-economic motivations to join the armed groups. Some, for example, sought protection or revenge, and some had a “taste for weapons”; however, in most cases, these were not the only motivations but complementary to others. Family circumstances also influenced children’s decisions to join armed groups, ranging from desires to escape domestic violence or sexual abuse to pressure from parents to enlist. Although low in general (3.6% of the sample), such motivations were noticeably more pressing for girls. As Brett and Specht explain (2004), girls may be more frequently subjected to physical or sexual violence and domestic exploitation or simply more frustrated (“bored,” *aburrida*, as Colombian girls commonly express it) because of their lesser stature within the family unit.

21 Based on information taken from the database of the Office of the Colombian General Prosecutor and corroborated in an interview with the alias “El Alemán” (Bogotá, March 19, 2018).

22 Testimony of a girl collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General’s Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

23 Testimony of a boy recruited at the age of 13, collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General’s Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

24 Testimony from a victim of illegal recruitment by the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc (AUC) in a public hearing before the Bogotá Justice and Peace Tribunal, November 3, 2011.

### c. Exploitation

That day, they killed a boy from the Bloc. I wanted to leave but they said that I couldn't because they had paid for me. Then, they tied me to a stick. I was there cooking for three months and later they sent me to a cocaine laboratory processing where they also had a petrol lab.<sup>25</sup>

I was there about 15 days. I had malaria and food poisoning. I suffered a stroke, my mouth and chin twisted, but I had to patrol anyway.<sup>26</sup>

Child recruitment, as well as human trafficking, are some of the “worst forms of child labor.”<sup>27</sup> In these situations, girls and boys carry out jobs under conditions of exploitation, which might be oriented towards achieving an economic goal (i.e., producing profits through cheap labor) or other non-economic goals, such as exercising power (e.g., controlling the population in a territory) or personal satisfaction (e.g., child abuse or sexual violence).<sup>28</sup>

In any case, recruitment, interpreted as a form of trafficking, most often involves the performance of jobs that are dangerous to children and detrimental to their education, health, and physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.<sup>29</sup> In addition to exploitation, there are usually cases of ill-treatment and even torture as methods to discipline them according to the rules of the illegal armed group or to prevent desertion or abandonment of the group.

While children may have interpreted their entry into a paramilitary group as a job opportunity since they received a regular wage, they experienced an exploitative labor relationship. Girls and boys recruited by the paramilitaries worked long days for low wages and were subjected to relationships of authority that, in one way or another, hindered their growth, put their health at risk, and made their education difficult—often encouraging the children to drop out of school.

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25 Testimony of a girl recruited at the age of 17, collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General's Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

26 Testimony of a girl recruited at the age of 16, collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General's Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

27 ILO Convention No. 182 “Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour” (1999). Likewise, ILO recognizes slavery and similar issues, such as the trafficking of children, debt bondage, serfdom, and children in armed conflict, as the worst forms of child labor.

28 Neither the international legislation on human trafficking nor the international legislation on child recruitment offer a definition of “exploitation.” The concrete meaning of this word is usually provided by national legislation. In Colombia, the Criminal Code indicates that “exploitation” occurs in the case of persons “that obtain economic advantage or any other benefit either for themselves or for another” (Art. 188a).

29 Convention on the Rights of the Children, article 32.1.

Regarding their duties, both girls and boys performed the same tasks in the armed group. They developed direct and active roles in the war, including those involved in combat, security, and intelligence (90 %).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, both girls and boys carried out activities indirectly related to the armed conflict (5 %), such as washing, cooking, secretarial services, receiving extortion payments, or other income-generating activities (e.g., drug trafficking or mining).<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, for many girls, joining an armed group meant access to both better economic opportunities and a greater degree of gender equality than what was available in their civilian life (Denov and Ricard-Guay 2013).

The conditions and activities these child soldiers had to carry out permanently exposed them to high risks to their health and even to their life. Training was one of the activities where these children received notable punishment. The testimonials given by survivor child soldiers agreed when highlighting the ill-treatment received during their training and re-training.

[The punishment was] a week without sleep and whoever did the exercises badly would be beaten up; if we didn't learn the military choruses we would be beaten up.<sup>32</sup>

They beat us in the re-retraining. Sometimes we didn't eat for two days and didn't sleep for three nights as a punishment. I couldn't work for a month because of the re-training, but they just treated me right there with medication.<sup>33</sup>

Overcoming challenging physical exercises as a way of “professional training” was a necessary condition for joining an armed group. Likewise, the correct fulfillment of their functions might give the children access to different “labor promotion” forms (i.e., opportunities to acquire rank, salary, and positions of power). On the contrary, in cases of non-compliance, the penalty was severe and random under the paramilitaries. It basically depended on the decision of the commander.

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30 Herrera and Porch (2008) defend the same argument about the role performed by girls within the FARC-EP armed groups.

31 Nevertheless, the percentage of girls involved in indirect activities is slightly higher than that of boys (20 % compared to 3 %, respectively).

32 Testimony of a boy collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General's Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

33 Testimony of a 16-year-old girl soldier from the Department of Antioquia included in the judgement of the Superior Court of the Judicial District of Bogotá, Chamber of Justice and Peace, on December 16, 2011.



Regarding sexual exploitation, the present study has not found cases of children exploited sexually through prostitution as a source of income for illegal armed groups, as it happens with Islamist terrorist groups, such as Daesh, Boko Haram, or the Lord's Resistance Army. Nevertheless, it reveals experiences of sexual violence as entangled in other forms of gender-based labor exploitation. For instance, some girls became partners or concubines of their commanders and were forced to have sexual relations with them.

However, while “brides” were indeed forced in some cases, in others, they did fall in love (MacKenzie 2015; McKay and Mazurana 2004; Mouthaan 2015). Some witnesses claim to have had consensual relations, although, in reality, these could still be situations of coercion or intimidation. They could have also been pragmatic strategies to avoid certain activities (e.g., washing, cooking, or guard duties) or to achieve a more powerful position in terms of functions and self-protection. However, “equality traps” are also observed here. Although both girls and boys performed the same tasks in the armed group, they often perceived their freedom (or its absence) quite differently because of gender relations (Mezzadri 2016).

Sexual abuse and violence were daily realities for girls; however, there were also boys who suffered such experiences at the hands of (usually high-ranking) adult men from the paramilitary group.<sup>34</sup> In any case, this study reveals significant challenges to understanding the relationship between labor exploitation and sexual violence in the experiences of child soldiers. Although the sentences made by the Tribunals of Justice and Peace often incorporate a gender perspective, these often only consider acts of sexual violence committed by armed groups against civilians in non-militarized contexts. Thus, there is a gap in relation to sexual violence experienced by girl (and boy) soldiers within armed groups.

#### d. Closed Exit

They locked me up for one or two days in a sewer where they dumped all sorts of muck.<sup>35</sup>

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34 The sentence of the Superior Court of Bogotá, Chamber of Justice and Peace, against Iván Roberto Duque and others (2017) included five cases of boys and male adolescents between 13 and 16 years of age who were used as sexual slaves by paramilitary commanders. Their *modus operandi* was to force the boys to accompany them at all times and sexually abuse them under threat or after forcing them to drink alcohol. The Judgment of the Superior Court of Bogotá, Chamber of Justice and Peace, against Rodrigo Pérez Alzate (2013) also recognized one case of a recruited boy being a victim of sexual violence.

35 Testimony from a boy recruited at the age of 13, collected from the Database on Child Recruitment from the Colombian Attorney General's Justice and Peace Unit for 2006-2016.

The story above illustrates the sanctions some children suffered after failing to escape. Like in other cases of unfree labor, getting out of such a situation is often extremely difficult and dangerous due to the punishments and reprisals that trying to escape can entail.

Usually, the greatest obstacle to escaping from a trafficking situation is the existence of a debt, which acts as a tool of social control to restrict the worker's options. In child recruitment situations, no debts operate *per se*, but neither can children leave the illegal armed group; the absence of debt does not mean there is “freedom.” The lack of freedom is explained partly by the security risk an escaped former combatant represents for the armed group, as they could provide information to the authorities or even join the opposing side. However, illegal armed groups may not need to secure their workforce through debt because, as the testimonies show, their workers are already tied to those spaces, given that they have few viable economic alternatives and can, therefore, be paid a pittance.

However, despite extreme difficulties, the study did identify strategies for leaving (or attempting to leave) the illegal group, which included suicide attempts, desertion, and surrender to the authorities. One particular strategy for girls working within paramilitary groups was getting pregnant—especially if they were “romantic” companions of a commander. Some young women reported that they were sent back to their homes to have their babies; some returned, but others did not and were afterward cared for by their family units.

I became pregnant and received support from the father and the self-defense groups ... [“What kind of support?”, the judge asks.] They gave me the chance to go home, but I stayed.<sup>36</sup>

Without a doubt, it was political negotiation—or in the case of the paramilitaries, demobilization—that truly opened the door to escape for most children involved in illegal armed groups. Around 76% of the sample got a chance to leave their armed groups with the status of either *desvinculado* (“disengaged,” if under 18 years of age) or *desmovilizado* (“demobilized,” if of legal age). However, although beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that demobilization and reintegration processes pose several problems. If the economic options for these young ex-combatants are still a choice between bad and worse, joining a violent (no longer “armed” but “criminal”) group will remain a viable alternative even in a post-conflict situation.

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36 Testimony from a girl victim of illegal recruitment by the Elmer Cárdenas Bloc in a public hearing at the Bogotá Tribunal of Justice and Peace, 4 November 2011.

## 4. Discussion

Far from being a neutral category, human trafficking has been permeated by ideological, moral, and political agendas. For example, anti-trafficking policies have sometimes been shown to provide excuses to criminalize unwanted migration or opportunities to promote abolitionist crusades against prostitution (Cockbain 2020; Doezema 1999; Piscitelli 2015; Weitzer 2007). Some politicians and activists have often created “moral panic” by using unreliable numbers on human trafficking (Jiménez 2021; Keo *et al.* 2014; Kotiswaran 2017; Varela and González 2015; Yea 2017). However, in the case of child recruitment, empirical and systematic evidence allows establishing this practice as a form of trafficking given that it has both elements: transfer (or, better, uprooting) and exploitation.

When analyzing the dynamics of recruitment by paramilitary groups in Colombia from a non-free labor perspective, some elements that are difficult to see from the traditional stereotypes around trafficking become visible. To begin with, children living in rural areas often coexist with illegal armed groups. As Arjona and Kalyvas (2012) state, the recruitment of children seems to be endogenous to the presence of combatants: the presence of illegal armed groups and the development of illicit economies in some regions make joining these groups a life option. The recruitment of children is not considered an unusual practice but rather a common one in keeping with the social order and war economy.

Another aspect that is evident in relation to open entry and closed exit is the agency and resilience of these children. The limitations under which they make decisions in the context of war do not imply a total dissolution of their agency. Even if their consent to join an armed group is invalid under the law, this does not mean that their decisions are irrelevant or inconsequential. As Bjørkhaug (2010) puts it, “most cases of recruitment take place in the gray zone between voluntary and forced recruitment, and the children make their choice based on the information available at the time of recruitment” (2) or exercise “tactical agency” (Honwana 2009).

Acknowledging that recruitment is “voluntarily forced” (Bjørkhaug 2010) has important implications for policymaking. Understanding child recruitment from a broader perspective and recognizing children as decision-makers (rather than passive subjects) allow a better focus on prevention policies and rethinking reintegration programs, which could help build protective environments and promote guarantees of non-repetition and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

Like other forms of trafficking, child recruitment has been approached mainly from a legal or security standpoint. Undoubtedly, it is essential to guarantee access to justice and redress for the victims, as well as to prosecute the crime usually linked to other types of illicit businesses. However, these perspectives fall short of understanding other dimensions of this form of trafficking. From the unfree labor perspective, this article explains how child recruitment operates; that is, the process through which it reproduces and sustains itself within a wartime social order. Moreover, it demonstrates that both girls and boys, who worked as soldiers, are not only victims but also agents who make decisions in very difficult conditions.

In the case of paramilitary groups in Colombia, this research found that child recruitment operated as a labor market. There was a corresponding relationship between the supply and demand sides. In the cases of the 989 Colombian child soldiers considered in this investigation, 78% sought entry into the illegal armed groups in which they became members. Within the paramilitary groups, they had the opportunity to receive a monthly salary of US\$ 85 as foot soldiers. The recruitment methods ranged from using force to open calls for “work” through local radio stations. Because of this, many children joined the paramilitary groups as an employment option and for economic reasons. While these decisions were not explicitly “forced” in the sense of being under violent coercion or threat, neither were they “free” since they were always choices between greater and lesser evils.

Girls and boys mostly performed the same functions within the armed groups. Beyond generalized assumptions that reduce the experiences of girl soldiers to being victims of sexual exploitation, they also served in combat and performed intelligence and security services. Nevertheless, this study also revealed particular behaviors in girls, such as getting pregnant or becoming a commander’s girlfriend, which need further research from a critical gender perspective. Girls reported that they were not always “forced” to maintain sexual relations with paramilitary commanders. However, pregnancy and engagement are practices entangled in gender relations, which could be strategies to improve their labor conditions and/or survival.

Far from being atypical or a threat to the order from which it develops, child recruitment is functional within wartime social orders. This conclusion critically addresses criminal justice as one of the main tools with which states and multilateral agencies have confronted child recruitment. If the economic options for these young ex-combatants are still a choice between bad and worse, joining a violent (no longer “armed” but “criminal”) group will remain a feasible

alternative. In fact, in Latin America, the recruitment of children as a form of trafficking no longer applies solely to contexts of armed conflict, such as the Colombian case, but also to countries with significant problems of organized crime. Gangs (*maras*) in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala and drug cartels in Mexico and Brazil also recruit many children to carry out illegal activities. These children also experience the dynamics of open entry, closed exit, and inhuman and exploitative treatment. However, given that “technically” there is no armed conflict and, therefore, no crime of child recruitment, these girls and boys would be mainly perpetrators rather than victims. Thus, approaching this problem from a human trafficking point of view may be relevant.

From the perspective of unfree labor, the solution lies in another direction: improving the living conditions of at-risk populations and offering viable and empowering labor alternatives. Perhaps in this way, joining an armed group can become the worst option rather than merely the lesser of two evils.

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