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Jessica Tassava

Butler University, [jesidtassava@gmail.com](mailto:jesidtassava@gmail.com)

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## The Portrayal of Child Soldiers in Documentaries and Hollywood Film

### Cover Page Footnote

The author thanks Dr. Katherine Novak for all of her assistance throughout the school year.

## **THE PORTRAYAL OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN DOCUMENTARIES AND HOLLYWOOD FILM**

JESSICA TASSAVA, BUTLER UNIVERSITY  
MENTOR: KATHERINE M. NOVAK

### **Abstract**

People in the United States are becoming increasingly mindful of child soldiers, with film being a critical means of bringing about awareness. However, awareness can be dependent upon media representation since most individuals in the U.S. do not have direct experiences with child soldiers. The purpose of the present study is to discover how the media has portrayed child soldiers in Hollywood films and documentaries, with an emphasis on the portrayal of violence, the role of women, and the reintegration experiences of child soldiers that are shown. Through a combined qualitative and quantitative content analysis, this study explores the depictions of young children in armed forces as a way to better understand society's perception of child soldiers. Five Hollywood films and five documentaries were selected at random from an initial pool and viewed by two coders. The coders discovered that while women were portrayed more often than expected, the unique challenges faced by female child soldiers were not represented with great accuracy. Reintegration was depicted in most films; documentaries were more likely to focus on long-term reintegration and Hollywood films were more likely to focus on short-term reintegration. Hollywood films were also more likely than documentaries to portray violent action and show changes in the attitudes and emotions among the child soldiers over time.

### **Introduction**

The use of children in military combat is a phenomenon that occurs all over the world. Many children witness the harsh reality of conflict in their everyday lives. Whether joining voluntarily or forced into the military, children of varying ages must enter combat, become combat leaders, cook meals, become spies, and participate in other duties (Boothby & Thomson, 2011). A child soldier is defined as:

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. (Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups 2007, p.7)

Recruitment of children for the armed forces occurs in more than 86 countries worldwide (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). While the typical recruit is a young boy, girls are often recruited and forced into the armed military and experience many of the same hardships that boys do. However, there are some experiences that are unique to female child soldiers. Of particular note, is the fact that females often experience sexual harassment and rape. Young girls are also often forced to become captive “wives” to older, superior men in the military. As a result of their loss of virginity, they are often ostracized from the community upon reintegration (Denov, 2012; Grétry, 2011; Mazurana & McKay, 2004). The loss of a young woman’s virginity is often seen very negatively in society, leading to social and psychological harm, as well as the risk of becoming pregnant and having to care for small children at a young age.

There are several ways in which a child can leave the army and reintegrate into society, including fleeing voluntarily or with help from the Unity Program For Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (UPNDDR), the process that is supported by the government and international NGOs (Grétry, 2011). According to UNICEF, more than 100,000 children have been reintegrated into their communities since 1998 (2011). While having so many children released from armed conflict is a positive occurrence, there can be a number of negative consequences as the result of the reintegration of child soldiers back into the community. Child soldiers often face psychological, economic, and emotional consequences, such as being unable to continue with their education and experiencing depression (Annan et al., 2013). They frequently exhibit behaviors such as demonstrating aggression with other children, being withdrawn, and/or experiencing recurring thoughts and memories of their most traumatic experiences (Boothby & Thomson, 2011; Grétry, 2011; Mazurana & McKay, 2004).

The issue of child soldiers is gaining greater attention in the United States because people are becoming increasingly aware of this issue through different media formats. Much of this is due to a 2012 social media campaign by the group Invisible Children which released a thirty-minute video about

Joseph Kony's use of child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army. The video became a sensation and reached one hundred million views in just under a week (Briones et al., 2013; Karlin & Matthew, 2012). Other media representation has occurred in documentaries, such as *A Perfect Soldier*, and Hollywood films, such as *Blood Diamond* and *Johnny Mad Dog*.

Previous research regarding the representation of child soldiers in the news media has discovered that they are portrayed as dangerous but helpless victims, creating stark contrast and ambiguity (Brooten, 2008). Further research has demonstrated that public perceptions mirror the media portrayal (Denov, 2012; Grétry, 2011; Lee-Koo, 2011).

Research has also been conducted on representation of child soldiers in film from an analytical perspective rather than an empirical perspective. These studies argue that movies and news media involving child soldiers often use the children as a means of portraying Africa and the East as savage or underdeveloped societies and tend to undermine the struggles involved with reintegration and the complex lives of child soldiers (Brooten, 2008; Martins, 2011; Lee-Koo, 2011). These studies have also noted that girls are rarely shown in these films and they are not accurate representations of the experiences that children have in countries of conflict (Denov, 2012; Booker, 2007; Mazurana & McKay, 2004).

It is important to understand how child soldiers are portrayed in films in the United States because their portrayal can affect society's understanding of the issue. People in the United States rely heavily on media representation to understand issues with which they are personally unfamiliar. The western media can reach a large audience and media portrayals of child soldiers can be seen and accepted by audience members without questioning the reality of the representations. If the media portrays child soldiers as dangerous and aggressive, this may cause the public to fear these individuals and prevent them from integrating in a positive manner (Denov, 2012). Also, if the public does not accurately understand the complex hardships that children face during times of conflict, this could "lead to the creation of post-war reintegration programming that corresponds to dichotomous portrayals and fails to meet the intricate needs of former child soldiers" (Denov, 2012, 291).

Previous studies have examined the experiences of many child soldiers from different backgrounds and regions of the world. Some of these studies have specifically looked at the reintegration experiences of former child soldiers while others examined the unique experiences of young women in the armed forces. However, a number of these studies have been analytical in na-

ture, focusing on one or two films and do not offer a representative sample of media featuring child soldiers. Empirical studies have focused largely on the news media. A content analysis of the portrayal of child soldiers in film will provide a more accurate understanding of how films are likely to shape the public's understanding of this issue.

This paper looks at the representation of child soldiers in documentaries and Hollywood films using a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach. Both categories are important as they tend to have different goals. Documentaries often attempt to entice an emotional reaction from viewers, whereas Hollywood films attempt to entertain the audience. Previous research has not examined the differences in the portrayal of child soldiers in these two forms of media. This paper focuses on the portrayal of female child soldiers, as well as children's reintegration experiences, as these are two areas that are frequently misrepresented by the media (Denov, 2012; Booker, 2007; Grétry, 2011; Lee-Koo, 2011). The main research question addressed in this study is: What are the differences in the portrayal of child soldiers in documentaries versus Hollywood films? This current study also examines two sub-questions: 1) What aspects of young girls' experiences as child soldiers are portrayed? 2) To what extent is a child's reintegration into society depicted?

It is expected that the representations of child soldiers will be different between documentaries and Hollywood films because of their different goals. Documentaries may portray different attitudes of the child soldiers to evoke certain emotions in the audience. Hollywood films may have more violent action because violence tends to entertain audiences. It is also expected that female child soldiers will rarely be shown in Hollywood films, but will be more accurately represented in documentaries. Finally, it is hypothesized that reintegration will not be a focus of most documentaries and Hollywood films, despite its importance in the life of a child soldier.

## **Method**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

A content analysis of the portrayal of child soldiers in Hollywood films and documentaries was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. A coding scheme was developed to measure the frequency of occurrence of key aspects of the portrayal of child soldiers including the level of violence, gender and gender roles, and reintegration experiences. The study is partially qualitative as some themes emerged during data collection that

were not anticipated and were not adequately captured by the codes initially created.

### **SAMPLE**

To be included in this study, documentaries must have been released within the past ten years and child soldiers must be shown throughout, interviewed, or discussed within the film. For a Hollywood film to be used in this study, it must have been released within the past ten years and it must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- 1) The storyline is centered on child soldiers,
- 2) The film featured a child soldier as one of the central characters, or
- 3) The film featured child soldiers as minor characters that participated in the plot line of the story.

The list of eligible films was obtained through several strategies. The primary strategy was an advanced search in WorldCat Discovery, looking specifically for DVD videos, using “child soldiers” as the subject phrase. From this search, a list of movies released in the past ten years was developed. These movies were checked in Internet Movie Database (IMDB). If they were listed on IMDB, they were included in the sampling frame. If films are listed on IMDB, this means that they are more likely to be incorporated into the popular culture of society and therefore, it is more likely that the everyday citizen would have seen the film. IMDB was also used to determine if the film was labeled as a documentary or a Hollywood film for this study. Additional Google searches and the IMDB suggested movie feature were used to find additional movies to add to the sampling frame that were not part of WorldCat Discovery. Movies found through Google searches were checked in IMDB to see if they met the parameters for this study. Previous studies regarding child soldiers in films were also used to identify movies for the sampling frame (Denov 2012; Booker 2007; Martins 2011; Lee-Koo 2011).

Based on these strategies, a sampling frame of 17 eligible films was identified. Of these seventeen films, ten were randomly selected by drawing names out of a hat (see **Table 1** for a complete list of films included in the study): 5 Hollywood films and 5 documentaries.

**CODING SCHEME**

A coding scheme was developed to measure the portrayal of child soldiers in documentaries and Hollywood films. Coding variables were grouped into several categories: Demographics, Gender, Reintegration, and Violence. The majority of the coding was quantitative, however, some parts were qualitative in order to gather unanticipated information.

Each child soldier participating in the plot line of the films was recorded as a principal character or a supporting character. A principal character was defined as one around whom the plot centers or who is essential to the story and a supporting character was defined as one with a significant relationship to and active impact on some aspect of the principal character’s life (Smith 1999).

Documentaries	Hollywood Films
A Perfect Soldier	Ezra
Invisible Children	Beasts of No Nation
Grace, Milly, Lucy ... Child Soldiers	Heart of Fire
Kassim the Dream	War Witch
Uganda Rising	Blood Diamond

**Table 1.** List of Films Used in the Study.

Since each character was categorized as either a principal or supporting character, a character’s exact time spent in the film was not recorded. Background characters were not be recorded and the researcher was able to compare the numbers of female principal and supporting characters versus male characters, offering an estimate of the differences in time spent in film based on gender. Each character was coded for gender, female roles, reintegration characteristics, and violent characteristics.

**Female characters.** A coding scheme was used to determine the roles held by each female principal and supporting character while in the armed forces. Several options for this role included food producer, cleaner, fighter, and sexual slave, among others. Coders were asked to describe the female’s attitude (if apparent) towards each role. For example, if a female character was por-



trayed as reluctant or excited to fight, this was recorded. Coders were also asked to describe sexual harassment and/or rape of a female character in the film and note the extent to which a female was ostracized for the loss of her virginity.

**Reintegration.** Coders rated the overall experience of the character's reintegration on a scale from "very negative" to "very positive." Character experiences with reintegration such as physical issues, economic issues, psychological issues and emotional issues were recorded. These issues were ranked for each character to see which affected the reintegration experience of the character the most. The method used to leave the armed forces was also recorded as well as the level of reintegration, with each character categorized as fully reintegrated, almost fully reintegrated, somewhat reintegrated, or beginning to reintegrate.

**Violence.** The level of violence committed by each principal character and supporting character was coded by recording the target of a child soldiers' violence, the target's relationship to the character, the weaponry used by the character, and the level of destruction against the target. These elements were coded based on violent scenes on film and the discussion of violent acts committed by a character. The coder was also asked to describe the character's attitude at the time of the violence to indicate how the child soldier is portrayed. For example, if the child soldier is shown feeling extremely guilty and distraught over killing someone, the child is portrayed as a victim. If the child is seen rejoicing after committing a violent act, the child is portrayed as dangerous. The context of violence involving a child soldier was also recorded to understand the nature and context of the violence. Committing a violent act in war is different than starting a fistfight with a fellow soldier, though both contexts are important to understand the experiences of child soldiers.

To ensure the study's reliability, two coders, the researcher and an additional coder, were used to test agreement between responses. The coder recruited by the researcher was trained and both tested the coding schemes on several films not selected for the sample. This ensured the coding schemes were reliable and user-friendly. After coding sheets were filled out for each character, the researcher checked agreement between the two coders for each question. If there were a large number of disagreements, that question was thrown out and not used in results. In the end, only one question, rating the level of integration, was thrown out due to low agreement. If there were only one or two disagreements for a question, then the answers were examined and the researcher would select one answer.

## Results

The first sub-research question concerned the portrayal of the female child soldier's experience in the armed forces. Over all ten films, there were five female principal characters, four male principal characters, one female supporting character, and five male supporting characters. Although there were more male characters, there were more female characters than expected. There were no statistically significant differences between the number of female characters portrayed in each film category (see **Table 2**).

The roles within the armed forces fulfilled by female child soldiers were examined to help understand how unique female experiences were portrayed. Females were depicted performing a variety of roles, such as cleaning, producing food, and caring for small children. All of the female characters were shown participating in military training and/or were said to have been prepared to participate in conflict. Sexual slavery and forced marriage are other important experiences of female child soldiers, but only two films (one documentary and one Hollywood film) and four characters were shown as captive wives or were said to have been captive wives. Only one film, *Grace, Milly, Lucy...Child Soldiers*, discussed the community stigma female child soldiers often face due to the loss of their virginity during armed conflict. Many communities view the female body as extremely sacred, so the loss of virginity is particularly significant (Denov 2012; Grétry 2011; Mazurana and McKay 2004).

Although many female characters discussed having fought in the armed forces, only one film, *War Witch*, showed a female character fighting in a conflict. The young female soldier in this film had the same experience as her male counterparts who participated in the fighting. There were three female characters depicted in Hollywood films, but only one was shown fighting. This is an inaccurate representation, as many young women participate in fighting.

The second sub-question for this research was concerned with the extent to which reintegration is shown in films featuring child soldiers. Many characters were shown or discussed as being back into society after spending time in the armed forces (see **Table 3**). There were many more characters reintegrated than was expected, with 86.7% of characters shown as fully reintegrated, almost fully reintegrated, somewhat reintegrated, or just starting to reintegrate.

	Principal	Supporting
Documentary	3	0
Hollywood Film	2	1

**Table 2.** Number of Females in Principal and Supporting Character Roles.

Unfortunately, it was difficult to find results that were statistically significant due to a small sample size of only 15 characters. However, there were a few sets of significant results (see **Table 4**). A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between type of film and level of reintegration. The relationship between these variables was significant, ( $X^2(3, N = 13) = 9.98, p = .019$ ). A significant difference in level of reintegration was found, with documentaries more likely to focus on long-term reintegration, while Hollywood films were more likely focus on short-term reintegration. For example, only documentaries showed characters having successful careers. For example, in *Kassim the Dream*, Kassim became a professional boxer after leaving the armed forces, and in the film, *A Perfect Soldier*, Aki Ra became a business owner in Cambodia. Only documentaries focused on the success stories some child soldiers experience.

Coders also looked at how the child soldier left the armed forces. This was considered answered if the child was shown or discussed as having returned to society. 85.7% of characters in Hollywood films escaped the armed forces and 42.9% of characters escaped in documentaries. Escaping is not the only way in which children leave the armed forces, as many are released or rescued by governmental or non-governmental organizations. Documentaries showed more variety in how children left the armed forces and it Hollywood films may have focused on escape for the entertainment value.

Hollywood films are more likely to have violent action,  $t(13) = - 2.90, p = .012$ . The total number of seconds that each character participated in a violent act was recorded, and the mean number of seconds for all characters in Hollywood films was 110.875, but this number was zero for documentaries. No characters in documentaries were shown participating in a violent act. Since documentaries had no character violence, many of the questions asked in the coding sheet became irrelevant. This data supports the hypothesis that there would be more violent action in Hollywood films.

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	13	86.7
No	2	13.3

**Table 3.** Number of Characters Shown or Discussed as Being Back Into Society.

	Documentaries	Hollywood Films
Fully Reintegrated	6	0
	85.7%	0.0%
Almost Fully Reintegrated	0	1
	0.0%	16.7%
Somewhat Reintegrated	1	3
	14.3%	50.0%
Just Starting to Reintegrate	0	2
	0.0%	33.3%

**Table 4.** Level of Reintegration Between Documentaries and Hollywood Films.

In analyzing qualitative data, Hollywood films show a greater variety and change in attitudes and emotion over time among child soldiers. Female characters' attitudes regarding the roles they participated in were recorded. Attitudes of characters who participated in violent acts were also recorded. Many characters in Hollywood films began their journeys as child soldiers with negative attitudes, with an attitude shift after spending time with the armed forces, and ultimately returning to extremely negative. Several characters who were depicted with changing attitudes were Komona in *War Witch*, Agu in *Beasts of No Nation*, and Dia in *Blood Diamond*. For example, in the movie *Blood Diamond*, after the rebel forces abduct Dia, he is forced to wear a blindfold and shoot a gun. Once he removes the blindfold, he discovers that he has shot and killed someone. Audience members can see the shock and disbelief on his face upon realizing this. Later in the film, Dia's father attempts to rescue him, but Dia has become wrapped up in his role as a child

soldier and pushes his father away and yells loudly hoping a commander will hear and know someone is in the camp who does not belong. At the end of the film, after his father has successfully rescued him and talks to him, audience members can see the reluctance and guilt on Dia's face as he begins to cry, realizing everything what he has done. This experience is not seen the documentaries included in this study because most characters were interviewed long after their time as child soldiers and audience members are only able to see their attitudes long after the fact.

Only one of the ten films were randomly selected for this study took place outside of Africa. The documentary, *A Perfect Soldier*, took place in Cambodia. However, child soldiers are recruited and used by armed forces in more than 86 countries world wide, including countries such as Afghanistan, India, Thailand, and Columbia (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). This reinforces previous analytical research demonstrating that films involving child soldiers portray Africa as a savage continent. If the only films involving child soldiers take place in Africa, then many people may assume that African countries are the only countries with child soldiers.

### Discussion

Although there were more females depicted in the films than expected, there are still aspects of young girls' experiences that were not represented in film to the extent necessary for the public to understand their challenges. Many females in the armed forces as child soldiers are forced to be sexual slaves or captive wives to higher-ranking members (Denov 2012; Grétry 2011; Mazurana and McKay 2004). However, this was only shown and depicted in one documentary and one Hollywood film. Showing captive wives shown in 20% of films about child soldiers does not enable audience members to truly understand the experiences of female child soldiers. Although there were three Hollywood films (the only film category featuring violence) that featured female characters, only one character was actually shown fighting during a film. The other female characters in Hollywood films either refused to fight or discussed fighting but were never depicted as fighting.

Movies in the United States may not be comfortable depicting women fighting and participating in the military because many combat positions in the United States armed forces were closed to women until very recently (Vergun, 2016). Historically, society has not seen the roles of women and men equally and it has taken a long time for people to be comfortable with the idea of a woman fighting in the military.

There was only one female child soldier depicted fighting in the military in the ten sample movies, and that film, *War Witch*, was made in the Netherlands. In fact, only one film depicting female child soldiers was made in the United States. Women are frequently shown in American media playing roles that agree with society's ideas about the roles they should play. This helps explain why only one female was shown fighting in a film, why fewer females were depicted than males, and why certain challenges faced by female child soldiers were underrepresented.

Neither film category was able to represent child soldiers' experiences more accurately than the other. Each category depicted different aspects more or less accurately. Documentaries focused on the unique challenges faced by females more frequently than Hollywood films. Documentaries are also able to show interviews from real former child soldiers to tell a true story from actual experience and depict the long-term effects that experience may have on a person. Hollywood films did well in depicting characters' attitude and emotional changes over time and vividly depict the violent acts they often commit. There are still aspects of child soldiers' experiences that were not shown in films. The challenges child soldiers face and the complexity of the issue cannot be fully understood by watching a few movies.

These films could potentially skew an audience's perception of the issue or downplay the complexity of the issue of child soldiers. According to post-modernism theory within sociology, advancing technology has a direct effect on knowledge. Media is an extremely successful industry within the United States and the film industry in particular is very successful. Technology and the media can affect people's knowledge of issues being depicted. A sociological postmodernist theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1981), suggests society has become so dependent upon models and maps that individuals within society have lost contact with reality, and that representation becomes our new reality. Baudrillard states, "It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine..." (644).

As Baudrillard, and other postmodernists believe, the media is influential in creating our thoughts and beliefs on particular subjects. This is why representation of child soldiers in the media is so important. Until they are accurately represented in film and the media, the general public in the United States will most likely not have an accurate understanding of this important international issue. After watching a film about child soldiers, people may have inaccurate understanding of a child soldier's experiences. They

may not understand the extent to which female child soldiers are used as captive wives or the amount of violence that females take part in. They also may not understand the hardships that child soldiers face during reintegration. If people do not have accurate knowledge about these experiences, then they may not be inclined to help, such as donating to organizations that work to stop the use of child soldiers, like Invisible Children and Child Soldiers International.

Researcher bias and reliability are limitations of this study, as there were only two coders and one coder was the researcher who may have had preconceived notions about the results despite best efforts. Another limitation is the system for coding: one of the documentaries, *Uganda Rising*, did not feature any characters, so the codebook could not be filled out. All the notes taken for this film were used as qualitative data. External validity is another limitation, as the researcher may not have been able to obtain all films involving child soldiers created between the years 2005 and 2015. The three strategies used to identify films seemed to be the most appropriate means of obtaining films on the topic of child soldiers, so hopefully, external validity is high.

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