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Child Trafficking and Recruitment in Armed Conflicts: Exploring the Worst Forms of Child Labour from a Colombian Perspective

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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between human trafficking and the recruitment of children in armed conflicts, with a focus on Colombia as a case study representative of Latin America. Drawing on global data from the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons and local reports, the study highlights the convergence of “child trafficking” and “child recruitment” in conflict regions, framing these practices as severe violations of children’s rights and some of the worst forms of child labour. Employing an inductive method and documentary analysis, the research identifies key socioeconomic and political drivers of these practices in Colombia, emphasising their broader impact on Latin American society. The findings underscore the need for integrated international and local efforts to address the vulnerabilities of children in conflict settings and propose strategies for mitigation.

Keywords: armed conflicts; child recruitment; Colombia; exploitation; human trafficking; worst forms of child labour



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1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a crime that occurs on a widespread scale in most countries and has global consequences, affecting society as a whole. It is also recognised that the forms of human trafficking may vary depending on the age, origin, social class, gender, or other characteristics of the victims.

Among the regulations addressing the issue is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The title of the protocol itself reflects its special focus on children, which is also the focus of this analysis.

Due to their vulnerable nature, children are subjected to exploitation in various forms of human trafficking. This research will focus on children involved in the context of armed conflicts. In light of this, armed conflicts in Latin America will be addressed, with a specific focus on Colombia. Particular attention will be given to the six grave violations identified by the United Nations in conflict scenarios. To achieve this, the Reports of the Secretary-General to the UN Security Council on the promotion and protection of children’s rights and violations of these rights in armed conflicts will be analysed.

The analysis begins by examining the influence of armed conflicts on human trafficking at a global level, highlighting international documents and global reports. It presents data on conflicts and human trafficking, particularly focusing on the exploitation of children within the military power of armed groups, aiming to provide a broad contextualisation of the topic. Following this, it explores the intersection of child trafficking and child recruitment for armed conflicts and the worst forms of child labour. This section again references international documents and clarifies specific aspects of children’s exploitation,

such as the dimensions of recruitment (whether forced or voluntary), different perspectives on child labour, the general reasons for enlistment, and child vulnerability. The focus then shifts to the Latin American perspective on child recruitment for armed conflicts as the worst form of child labour, particularly through the lens of the Colombian case. It presents the conflict scenario in Colombia, the primary tactics armed groups use to recruit children, the nature of the labour relationship, the types of activities children are forced to perform, and data on grave violations verified in the country.

Thus, the objective is to examine whether there is a relationship between child trafficking and the recruitment of children as subjects of war in Latin America, its connection to the worst forms of child labour, and the consequences of these actions on Latin American society.

Accordingly, the research question is as follows: how can the recruitment of children for armed conflicts in Latin America, particularly in Colombia, be understood as a manifestation of human trafficking and one of the worst forms of child labour, considering the specific vulnerabilities of children and the social implications of this practice?

The inductive method will be employed to reach the main conclusions, and the methodology will be based on the analysis of primary sources (particularly, United Nations reports on human trafficking and documents related to armed conflicts and child exploitation), as well as secondary bibliographic sources on related subjects.

Initially, based on the context of human trafficking outlined in the Palermo Protocol and other international documents, along with the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, information is provided on the global context of human trafficking, with a specific focus on the recruitment of children in armed conflicts for exploitation, leading to the presentation of specific details on the topic.

The collection of materials for this study focused on Latin America, identifying the region's main conflicts and linking them to reports prepared for the United Nations on the recruitment of child soldiers in conflicts. Among the countries mentioned in global reports, only Colombia is highlighted from Latin America, which is why it becomes the focus of this analysis. Consequently, the review of previously published articles on conflicts in Colombia and their connection to the recruitment of children for exploitation was initiated. It is worth noting that this work originates from the Research Group "Public Policies as an Instrument for the Realisation of Citizenship" at Mackenzie Presbyterian University.

Finally, research on sensitive topics, such as child recruitment and trafficking, involves ethical challenges that require a careful approach. A fundamental ethical concern is the protection of vulnerable populations, particularly children, whose rights and well-being must be prioritised. Additionally, the misrepresentation or oversimplification of the complexities surrounding child recruitment can perpetuate stereotypes or lead to policy missteps. In this context, the dissemination of findings on the subject should avoid sensationalism and take into account the potential repercussions for the populations studied, as well as prevent the disclosure of sensitive information that could put individuals or groups at risk.

This paper adopts a human rights-based framework to analyse the interplay between child trafficking, recruitment for armed conflicts, and their classification as one of the worst forms of child labour. This approach underscores the universal rights of children as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which asserts that every child has the right to protection from exploitation, violence, and abuse (United Nations 1989). Furthermore, it leverages the Palermo Protocol's definition of trafficking to highlight the systemic violation of children's rights in conflict zones, particularly their dignity, development, and safety.

By situating the discussion within this framework, the paper emphasises that child recruitment and trafficking are not isolated phenomena but rather interconnected violations

that reflect broader structural inequalities and institutional failures. This lens also aligns with the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 182, which categorises the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for armed conflict as one of the worst forms of child labour, recognising it as a severe breach of fundamental human rights ([International Labour Organization 1999](#)).

Through this theoretical lens, the paper evaluates the Colombian context, examining how the persistence of armed conflicts exacerbates these rights violations. The human rights-based approach enables a nuanced analysis of both the causes and consequences of these practices, highlighting the need for international cooperation and comprehensive prevention strategies to uphold the fundamental rights of children globally.

2. The Influence of Armed Conflicts on Child Trafficking at a Global Level

The seriousness of human trafficking is highlighted by several documents, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which, since 1998, in Article 7(2)(c), has established that human trafficking constitutes a crime against humanity ([International Criminal Court 2021](#), pp. 3–4). Despite the gravity already recognised in such documents, the formal conceptualisation of human trafficking in international law only materialised in 2000, with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, also known as the Palermo Protocol, in Article 3 ([United Nations 2000a](#)).

Some possible forms of exploitation can be inferred from the definition, as it is not an exhaustive list, given the constant changes surrounding this crime. Notably, “exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” ([United Nations 2000a](#)). In this context, broader forms of crime are highlighted, without explicitly mentioning, for example, the exploitation of children in armed conflicts—the central theme of this study—which is, however, implicitly included within the other forms of exploitation cited by the Protocol.

The exploitation of children in armed conflicts is declared a war crime by Article 8 of the Rome Statute, which defines it as “conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or using them to participate actively in hostilities” ([International Criminal Court 2021](#), p. 8).

In addition to the definition, Article 3 also clarifies that, for the purposes of the Protocol, a “child” is any person under the age of eighteen ([United Nations 2000a](#)). Similarly, the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups ([UNICEF 2007](#), p. 7) define a “child” as any person under eighteen years of age, in accordance with Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ([United Nations 1989](#)).

As defined in subparagraph (c) of Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, child trafficking is considered “the **recruitment**, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the **purpose of exploitation**” ([United Nations 2000a](#)) (authors' emphasis). Given that child trafficking constitutes a consistent violation of human dignity and always entails breaches of fundamental human rights, the dangers to life and safety are particularly severe for those in conflict zones, with “serious risks to physical health, but also special and severe forms of mental health threats associated with witnessing and participating in violence” ([Beyrer 2004](#), p. 16).

To provide a foundation for gathering information and reporting violations affecting children, the United Nations has identified six grave violations, namely the following: killing and maiming of children; recruitment or use of children as soldiers; sexual violence against children; abduction of children; attacks against schools or hospitals; and denial of

humanitarian access for children (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict n.d.).

In light of this, and in pursuit of a broad contextualisation of the topic, the latest Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022, published in January 2023, is analysed to highlight key data on child victims of conflicts and armed groups¹.

The Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022 estimates that, in 2020, there were 56 state-based conflicts occurring globally. The report shows that of the total number of victims from conflict-affected countries, 6% are from Central America and the Caribbean, and 6% from South America, totalling 12% in the Americas. It also highlights that 6% of human trafficking victims detected in conflict zones are from the Americas. The Report reaffirms, as in previous editions such as the 2018 edition, that armed conflicts increase people's vulnerability to becoming victims of human trafficking. It further notes that in 2020, the UN documented the recruitment of approximately 5000 children by armed groups (UNODC 2023, pp. 52–53). In this context, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres (2022), remarked that “for predators and human traffickers, war is not a tragedy. It is an opportunity”.

Furthermore, the Global Report highlights that criminals are finding new opportunities for trafficking, identifying two distinct categories: (1) trafficking operated by armed groups within conflict areas, and (2) traffickers exploiting people fleeing conflict zones. Children recruited and exploited in conflict areas are involved in armed violence, including acts of terrorism and war crimes, making it difficult for them to always be recognised as victims of trafficking. Although girls are also victims, the majority of those recruited are boys, representing 14% and 86% of victims, respectively. As the Report illustrates, based on conflicts occurring around 2020 or more recently, girls were used as spies, to carry out intelligence gathering in their communities or to attract other combatants, while older boys—between 10 and 15 years of age—are typically used as fighters or to transport explosives or other materials to support troops. Younger boys are assigned other tasks, such as guarding military checkpoints, handling mines, acting as spies or messengers, working as porters, and performing domestic duties (UNODC 2023, p. 53).

According to UN data, in 2020, approximately 8% of children recruited in conflict zones were trafficked by official government forces—4% by national armies and 4% by police forces—while 92% were recruited by unofficial militias or armed groups that either oppose or support government forces (UNODC 2023, p. 54).

The exploitation of children serves not only to enhance the military power of armed groups but also for sexual exploitation—most victims are girls, although boys are also affected by this violation. The report highlights that in 2020, the United Nations documented sexual assaults against more than 1200 children worldwide, directly linked to conflicts. It is important to emphasise that both government and non-governmental forces perpetrate forced marriages and sexual slavery in conflict zones. The Global Report also notes that there are records of migrant workers being trafficked to countries in conflict and having their labour exploited on military bases (UNODC 2023, pp. 54–55).

When addressing the issue of recruitment in conflict environments, it is also necessary to mention the figures of refugees and victims of forced displacement. As these individuals leave their homes, families, and jobs, fleeing situations of war and persecution in search of survival, they become easy targets for criminals (Villas Boas and Graça 2020). In this context, the report indicates that traffickers exploit the desperation and urgent need of these individuals to move to safe countries, deceiving and exploiting them. The situation becomes even more acute when the need to relocate is sudden, leaving people more unprepared and vulnerable (UNODC 2023, pp. 54–55).

The report *Current Dynamics of Child Recruitment in Colombia*, published in 2022 by the Managing Exits from Armed Conflict (MEAC) project conducted by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR), highlights that, among the rural municipalities surveyed, there are more reports of child recruitment in areas where groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—a self-defined political-military movement for revolutionary national liberation, with a Marxist-Leninist ideology—are present. It also notes that the recruitment of Venezuelan migrant and refugee children varies by municipality and stresses that the lack of visibility regarding migrant and refugee recruitment may have led to underreporting (Downing et al. 2022, p. 3). In this regard, it indicates that, with the increase in the Venezuelan migrant and refugee population in Colombia, the number of migrant child victims has risen (Downing et al. 2022, pp. 7–8). As of January 2022, 1.84 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees were present in Colombia, including migrant and refugee children travelling unaccompanied by adults, which increases their vulnerability and the invisibility of the phenomenon (Downing et al. 2022, pp. 12–13).

In a report presented to the General Assembly of the UN Security Council covering the period from January to December 2021, it was noted that 19,165 children in armed conflicts suffered grave violations (13,633 boys, 5242 girls, and 290 of unknown sex) across 21 different situations. This included 2515 killings and 5555 maimings, representing 8070 children, along with the recruitment and use of 6310 children, as well as 3945 incidents of denial of humanitarian access. The report also highlights that 2864 children were detained for actual or alleged association with armed groups, including those designated as terrorist groups by the United Nations or for reasons of national security (United Nations 2022, p. 2).

In this context, non-state armed groups were responsible for 55% of violations, state forces for 25%, and 20% resulted from crossfire, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, landmines, or were committed by unidentified perpetrators. Among the child victims, 2257 were the result of improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, and landmines (United Nations 2022, p. 3).

Furthermore, it was presented to the General Assembly that approximately 70% of victims are boys, although this number has shown a decline alongside an increase in the number of girls who are victims of murder, maiming, abduction, and sexual violence—the latter of which continues to be underreported due to stigma and fear of reprisals. The report also highlights that children with disabilities and displaced children are particularly vulnerable and notes a 5% increase in the number of attacks on schools and hospitals, a situation that has been aggravated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (United Nations 2022, p. 3).

The UN Human Rights Council, in a report on children and armed conflict, highlighted that between December 2022 and December 2023, thousands of children have been affected and have suffered abhorrent abuses and violations of their most basic rights as a result of protracted and multidimensional armed conflicts and chronic humanitarian crises around the world. Furthermore, the Council points out that the monitoring and reporting of grave violations, as well as the provision of services to children affected by conflict, have been hampered by challenges in accessing conflict-affected areas (United Nations 2023a, p. 3).

In this regard, it is noteworthy that children with disabilities are at greater risk of recruitment and use by armed forces and groups, as well as being killed or maimed, abducted, and victims of sexual violence in armed conflicts. This occurs because the difficulties they already face in their daily lives, along with pre-existing challenges such as lack of access to schools and other services, are exacerbated by the destruction of infrastructure in conflict zones (United Nations 2023a, p. 7).

In the report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, published in 2024, covering the period from January to December 2023, the following were verified:

32,990 grave violations, affecting a total of 22,557 children (15,847 boys, 6252 girls, and 458 of unknown sex). The highest numbers of violations were 5301 deaths and 6348 maimings (totalling 11,649 children), followed by the recruitment and use of 8655 children, 5205 incidents of denial of humanitarian access, and the abduction of 4356 children. Additionally, 2491 children were detained for actual or alleged association with armed groups, while over 10,600 children formerly associated with armed forces or groups received protection or reintegration support during 2023 (United Nations 2024a, p. 2).

The main findings regarding the influence of armed conflicts on child trafficking and their relationship with the academic context are as follows: (1) the legal recognition of child trafficking as a human rights violation, aligning with academic literature that highlights how the lack of consent, combined with vulnerabilities in conflict zones, exacerbates physical and mental health risks for the children involved (Beyrer 2004); (2) armed conflicts as catalysts for child trafficking, supported by academic research indicating that institutional fragility in conflict areas facilitates the operation of criminal networks, intensifying the recruitment of children for purposes such as military use, sexual exploitation, and forced labour; (3) children are multifaceted victims of trafficking, with connections to the 2023 UN Report describing children as easy targets for recruitment by state (8%) and non-state forces (92%), often without explicit recognition as victims. This is further corroborated by literature, such as Villas Boas and Graça (2020), which discusses how forcibly displaced populations, including refugee children, are particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to the loss of familial support and urgent survival needs; (4) international responses and protection gaps, highlighting that despite efforts like UN Human Rights Council reports, logistical challenges and limited access to conflict zones hinder effective child protection. This is evidenced by the increased attacks on schools and hospitals, exacerbated by the pandemic, emphasising the urgent need for robust support infrastructure in conflict-affected areas.

3. Highlighting Perspectives on the Growing Connection Between Child Trafficking, Child Recruitment for Armed Conflicts and the Worst Form of Child Labour

When addressing war crimes against children in Article 8, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court refers to the recruitment or enlistment of children under the age of fifteen for active participation in hostilities (International Criminal Court 2021, pp. 8–9). However, for the purposes of this study, the most accurate approach is considered to be that of the Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, which refers to “child soldiers” or “children associated with an armed force or armed group” as follows:

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, p. 7)

This aligns with the aforementioned definition of “child” in the Palermo Protocol and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Furthermore, it encompasses both direct participation in hostilities—where children engage in combat operations and the use of weapons—and active participation—where there is no direct involvement in combat, but other essential wartime activities are performed, such as espionage, bodyguarding, and surveillance. It also includes indirect roles, such as cleaning, cooking, transportation, messaging, or exploitation for sexual purposes (Hurtado et al. 2017, p. 944, 2023, p. 75). In this sense, it seeks to include children beyond those covered by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Although Article 38, paragraph 3, of the Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that States Parties refrain from recruiting children under the age of fifteen into their armed forces, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict ([United Nations 2000b](#)) raises the minimum age for recruitment and participation in hostilities to eighteen years, for both compulsory (Article 2) and voluntary recruitment (in the latter case, where exceptions apply, minimum safeguards must be guaranteed—Article 3, paragraphs 1 and 3). When referring to armed groups distinct from State armed forces, recruitment is prohibited under all circumstances (Article 4, paragraph 1). These stipulations highlight the Protocol's aim of effectively contributing to the principle of the best interests of the child and addressing the special needs of those particularly vulnerable to recruitment or use in hostilities.

The combination of child trafficking and recruitment behaviours can be recognised through the interpretation of the purposes outlined in the Palermo Protocol. Firstly, according to Article 3, subparagraph (c) of the Palermo Protocol, it is emphasised that territorial mobility is not essential, as the mere recruitment of a child for the purpose of exploitation is sufficient to be considered trafficking. From this perspective, as noted by Carl Conradi, the criminalisation of child smuggling becomes irrelevant, since children are “considered too immature to understand the implications of being smuggled” ([Conradi 2013](#), pp. 1210–11).

Secondly, although the Protocol typically associates human trafficking with threats, the use of force, or other forms of coercion, child recruitment is recognised even if it does not involve these general means, and may result in either forced or voluntary enlistment. In this regard, the distinction drawn by [Hurtado et al. \(2023\)](#) is insightful. They differentiate forced recruitment, where threat or violence is used, from voluntary recruitment, in which the child may be motivated by “economic or related to the war context (e.g., searching for revenge or protection) or family matters (such as escaping from domestic violence)” ([Hurtado et al. 2023](#), p. 75).

As a logical inference, recruitment may still be considered unforced even if it involves persuasion or deception (and not force or other forms of coercion), since a child is deemed too immature to fully understand its consequences, thereby classifying the act as both recruitment and trafficking. This is because decision-making capacity involves the ability to process complex information, which children are unable to do in certain contexts, as they have not yet reached their full cognitive potential and lack the full capacity to make informed decisions as adults ([Kühn 2019](#), p. 37). Therefore, children lack the full capacity to voluntarily enlist in the armed forces:

Due to children's lack of cognitive and physical development, their decision-making capabilities, their capacity to obtain informed knowledge about their rights are further reasons as to why child soldiers are not autonomous and are not able to give informed consent when joining armed forces. ([Kühn 2019](#), p. 38)

The exploitation of children through recruitment to serve in the armed forces or armed groups in any capacity is a significant issue in the realm of humanitarian labour protection. The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 ([International Labour Organization 1999](#)) is a critical legal instrument that defines the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict² as one of the worst forms of child labour (Article 3, subparagraph a). This is closely linked to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 ([United Nations n.d.](#))³, particularly target 8.7, which aims to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, including the recruitment and use of child soldiers.

In line with the commitment to ending child labour, particularly its worst forms, and to monitor progress toward achieving target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the International Labour Office released a report as part of an inter-agency effort under

Alliance 8.7⁴. The report highlights the strong connection between child labour and conflict scenarios, revealing that “the incidence of child labour in countries affected by armed conflict is 77 per cent higher than the global average, while the incidence of hazardous work is 50 per cent higher in countries affected by armed conflict than in the world as a whole” (International Labour Organization 2017, p. 12).

As Md Mahmudul Hoque illustrates, defining and conceptualising child labour broadly is a complex task that must take into account “heterogeneous socio-cultural views and their different implications in various contexts” (Hoque 2021, p. 36). While a thorough analysis of these complexities exceeds the scope of this paper, it is crucial to provide a fundamental understanding to effectively contextualise the worst forms of child labour.

The (International Labour Organization (n.d.)) clarifies that not all work performed by individuals under eighteen is considered child labour, and therefore subject to suppression. Work is permitted, within protective standards, as long as it does not harm health or personal development or interfere with schooling. For example, activities like “assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays” are seen as positive for building skills and experience. This distinguishes acceptable work from child labour, which the Organization defines as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”, that can be “mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children” or “interferes with their schooling”.

A clear way to understand the distinctions and nuances that transform child labour (hereinafter referred to as “child employment”) into the worst forms of child labour is succinctly illustrated by Nicolás Brando (2020, n.p.) across four progressively severe levels: the first is **Child Employment**, encompassing “work in any form of market production and certain types of market non-production” which can be “formal/informal; paid/unpaid; in/out of family”; the second is **Child Labour**, which “deprives them of their childhood, potential, dignity, and that is harmful to their development”, being “mentally, physically, socially and morally dangerous; interferes with school”; the third is **Hazardous Labour**, which “by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of the children”, and is often “used as proxy category for ‘worst forms’”; the fourth and most severe level is **Worst Forms**, where children are “enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves”, involving activities such as “slavery, prostitution, illicit activities, armed conflicts”.

It is important to recognise that the International Labour Organization (ILO) further categorises child labour into two distinct classifications: hazardous work and the worst forms of child labour. As previously noted, the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict is classified as one of the worst forms of child labour (ILO, Convention No. 182, Article 3, subparagraph a).

Questioning the reasons that contribute to children submitting themselves to such harmful conditions as the worst forms of labour is inevitable, especially regarding voluntary participation. From a philosophical perspective on the exploitation of children, Amartya Sen considers the following:

(...) there is an embedded issue of slavery and bondage, since many of the children working in exacting tasks are forced to perform them. The roots of such servitude may go back to the economic deprivation of the families from which they come—sometimes the parents are themselves under some kind of bondage vis à vis the employers—and on top of the nasty issue of labouring children, there is also the barbarity of children being forced to do things. The freedom to go to school, in particular, is hampered not only by the weakness of primary

educational programs in these regions, but in some cases also by the lack of any choice that the children (and often their parents) have in deciding what they want to do. (Sen 2000, pp. 114–15)

With a more objective approach, Md Mahmudul Hoque argues that child labour does not originate exclusively from poverty. Although this remains a fundamental aspect, “evidence shows that, along with subsistence poverty, market imperfections, global supply chains, family and parental characteristics, macroeconomic characteristics, national and international political factors, and lack of implementation of laws and policies” (2021, p. 37) may influence child exploitation.

Regardless of any of these understandings, Nicolás Brando (2020) draws attention to circumstances that must always be considered when discussing child labour: the fact that children do not possess the capacity to understand what it means to be subjected to labour and are, therefore, vulnerable to manipulation, as well as to serious mental and physical harm. This further decreases their bargaining power vis à vis any employer, resulting in undeniable exploitation. In addition, absence from school causes significant harm, affecting both short-term interests (such as a “normal” childhood) and long-term interests (limiting future opportunities based on education).

Relating this argument to child recruitment, Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) demonstrated that, although poverty plays a significant role, as “the poorer the municipality, the less likely it is that forced recruitment will be zero” (p. 478), conflicts themselves constitute elements of vulnerability for children, showing that “child recruitment is more likely to occur in municipalities where armed groups operate” and that “the demand for fresh recruits increases as warfare gains intensity” (p. 481). Furthermore, Blattman and Miguel (2010) suggest that “the distribution of income and wealth—whether across individuals or sectors—is central in explaining the economic incentives for rebellion” (p. 10). Dixon (2009), for instance, points out that “the most widely accepted relationship between economic factors and civil war is that high-income nations are less likely to experience civil wars than low-income nations” (p. 714).

Thus, Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo (2016) challenge the argument of poverty as a sole factor by considering that “most civil wars take place in low-income countries and therefore it might well be that the actual cause of child soldiering is war, not poverty” (p. 469). Colombia, as the country under analysis, fits this description as a low-income country marked by poverty and social inequality (its Gini index in 2021 was 55.1, the worst in South America, followed by Brazil at 52.9; Ecuador at 45.8; Paraguay at 42.9; Argentina at 42.4; Bolivia at 40.9; Uruguay at 40.8; and Peru at 40.1) (World Bank Group n.d.).

Another significant indicator to consider when arguing that war is the actual cause of child soldiers is the accounts of indigenous children in the Colombian region of Chocó who took their own lives to avoid being recruited by armed groups. In March 2022, according to the General Adviser of the National Indigenous Organisation of Colombia (ONIC), reports indicated that at least 20 children had died by suicide as a form of “protection” to avoid being forced into illegal armed groups—and this number could rise for over 30 due to underreporting caused by fear of retaliation (Angarita 2022). This scenario highlights the grave dangers of forced recruitment by armed groups and the devastating impact of war on local communities, driving child victims of recruitment to take extreme measures to escape the horrors of conflicts.

With this in mind, analysing the specificities of a given global region is valuable for understanding exploitation related to child recruitment for use in armed conflicts.

As the main findings on the growing connection between child trafficking, child recruitment for armed conflicts and the worst form of child labour, and its relation to the academic context, it was possible to identify the following: (1) The normative and concep-

tual definitions derived from the Rome Statute, the Palermo Protocol, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Paris Principles for understanding the scope of the term “child recruitment” reveal how children are utilised in armed conflicts across various roles. This broader interpretation extends beyond the Rome Statute’s definition, which is limited to direct participation in hostilities (UNICEF 2007; Hurtado et al. 2017). (2) The interpretation of the Palermo Protocol establishes that recruitment for exploitation is sufficient to characterise trafficking, even without displacement (Conradi 2013). Moreover, in cases of voluntary recruitment, it is considered that children lack the cognitive maturity to fully comprehend the consequences of such decisions, thereby classifying the practice as both exploitation and trafficking (Kühn 2019). (3) The classification of forced recruitment of children as one of the worst forms of child labour (International Labour Organization 1999) aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 8, target 8.7, which aims to eradicate forced labour and the recruitment of child soldiers. However, ILO data (International Labour Organization 2017) reveals that the incidence of child labour in conflict zones is 77% higher than the global average, reinforcing the strong connection between armed conflicts and child labour. (4) Beyond poverty, social inequality, institutional failures, and the presence of armed groups heighten children’s vulnerability to recruitment (Vargas and Restrepo-Jaramillo 2016; Blattman and Miguel 2010). In Colombia, for instance, the coexistence of armed conflicts with high levels of poverty and inequality (Gini coefficient of 55.1 in 2021) exacerbates this dynamic. (5) Child exploitation is addressed both philosophically, with Amartya Sen emphasising the relationship between poverty, slavery, and the lack of educational freedom (Sen 2000), and pragmatically, with Brando (2020) and Hoque (2021) discussing how manipulation and the absence of bargaining power exacerbate the conditions of child exploitation.

4. Recruitment for Armed Conflicts as the Worst Form of Child Labour in Colombia

The Report of the Secretary-General to the UN Security Council on the promotion and protection of the rights of the child, specifically addressing violations of children’s rights in armed conflict, for the period from January to December 2021, presents information on more than 20 countries, including Colombia (United Nations 2022). The Report for the period from January to December 2022 also presents information on more than 20 countries, including Colombia (United Nations 2023b). Finally, the Report for the period from January to December 2023 presents information on almost 30 countries, including Colombia (United Nations 2024a). From the three Reports under analysis, it can be seen that the only country in Latin America for which data are presented is Colombia.

The Colombian case is emblematic in Latin America and has been ongoing, especially since the consolidation of the Colombian State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 1964. The FARC, originated in Colombia between the 1940s and 1950s as a guerrilla movement, consolidated in 1964 and reached twenty thousand members in the 2000s, financed by kidnappings and extortion, as well as the cultivation and trafficking of illicit drugs (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, Ejército del Pueblo 2016) (Cruz n.d.).

Negotiations to sign the Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace (Colombia 2016) lasted from 2012 to 2016 and resulted in the establishment of a Commission for Truth, Coexistence, and Non-Recurrence (Comisión de la Verdad n.d.), whose final report was released on 28 June 2022 (Venegas 2022). The report is divided into thematic approaches, one of which is titled “It’s Not a Lesser Evil” and addresses the impacts of the war and violence on people under eighteen years old, delving into the

connection of children to armed actors as an intentional and systematic phenomenon of the Colombian conflict (Colombia 2022).

After decades of living in a state of armed conflict and enduring acts of violence, torture, kidnappings, and massacres, Colombia has been left with a history of killings that has inflicted generational trauma, creating a legacy of pain and resistance (Venegas 2022, n.p.). Even after FARC's demobilisation, the country is not in a state of peace, as former dissident members have continued the guerrillas' activities. Armed conflicts persist, albeit with new denominations for their actors.

Regarding the 2016 Peace Agreement, Badrán (2024, p. 182) highlights that among the gaps in the Agreement's implementation and execution are reasons such as social rejection and polarisation, which failed to unify the national aspirations of Colombian citizens, as well as the absence of full participation from FARC leadership in the disarmament and peace signing. In this sense, he suggests that the Peace Agreement does not mark the beginning of the end of the conflict, nor does it lead to the effective achievement of peace in Colombia, even though it has transformative potential. Instead, it acts as a catalyst for warfare in the country, a mechanism for the reissue and transformation of the internal Colombian conflict, and its impacts, for example, reveal flaws in national security and defence policy, as it failed to secure effective territorial control by military and police forces, especially in areas of historical FARC presence, which are commonly zones with a high tendency for illicit crop reproduction and border strips (Badrán 2024, p. 191).

When analysing the concrete reality of child recruitment into armed conflicts, poverty once again does not appear to be the only motivating factor. In Colombia, although economic factors are often cited as the main motivation, children join armed groups for reasons involving other structural conditions, such as limited access to education, lack of employment and prospects, domestic violence, and social exclusion. However, motivations can also extend beyond these, including an interest in weapons and military life, family background, and political conflicts (Hurtado et al. 2023, p. 79).

Therefore, there are central elements that characterise a work relationship that is evident. In Colombia, the regular payment of wages (which, in general, are similar for girls and boys) and even effective maternity leave (as revealed by a girl's testimony who received payment during her recovery period after childbirth) have been reported (Hurtado et al. 2023, pp. 77–78).

The Final Report of the Commission for Truth (Colombia 2022, pp. 212–23) identified that armed groups recruited children through the application of various parallel or combined strategies. The main tactics considered were as follows: the use of force (with explicit or implicit armed intimidation), deception (making false promises of better living conditions for individuals and their families, and the possibility of abandoning armed life whenever they wished), persuasion (using imaginary speeches and proposals to exploit children's vulnerabilities), and sentimental manipulation or emotional pressure (primarily involving romance, with a predominant focus on teenage girls, supported by traditional notions of strong and providing masculinity, which are able to establish relationships based on power).

Emphasising the harmful conditions of this worst form of child labour, the Colombian Attorney General's Justice and Peace Unit, for example, from 2006 to 2016, collected testimonies from a seventeen-year-old girl who affirmed that she was forbidden to leave after the murder of a boy, subsequently being tied to a pole, forced to cook for months, and sent to a cocaine processing laboratory. In contrast, a sixteen-year-old girl suffered from malaria, food poisoning, and even a stroke, all within a period of fifteen days, yet she was obliged to continue her patrol activity (Hurtado et al. 2023, pp. 70, 72, and 77).

From the Final Report of the Commission for the Truth (Colombia 2022, pp. 223–29), it is noted that children were regarded as the property of armed groups, subjected to rigorous training and indoctrination with the purpose of preparing them for war. They were made to rise at dawn, learn to load and handle weapons, throw grenades, navigate in the dark, traverse swamps, and carry equipment. According to the testimonies, there were training schools where they had to learn torture practices, which, in itself, constitutes torture for the children. One striking testimony from a girl stated the following:

I had to see how they tortured, massacred and dismembered as if it were an animal, like a chicken. I also had to do it, it's either you or you. In total, there were 32 times. I wrote them down in the same notebook they gave me to keep notes of who entered and left the self-defence groups, and the weapons that were damaged. People were dismembered alive. It was better when the person had died, otherwise he would scream when you took out his viscera. I have that in my head, it is an image that will never be erased. (Colombia 2022, p. 230) (freely translated by the authors)

The Report (Colombia 2022, pp. 236–38) further emphasises that the recruited children grew up in camps and were compelled to assume combatant roles similar to those of adults. In some cases, their first combat experience occurred when they were less than twelve or thirteen years old. There are data indicating the following:

In 84.3% of the cases, the recruited girls, boys and adolescents were in combat; in 74.8%, participated in ambushes; in 72.5%, in intelligence work; in 61.5%, in armed takeovers; in 45.5%, in the manufacture and installation of explosives, and in 44.6%, in actions related to public order. (Colombia 2022, p. 238) (freely translated by the authors)

In a report by the UN Security Council covering the period from January to December 2021, among the information presented on grave violations in Colombia, particularly committed by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP), *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC), Colombian armed forces, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), dissident groups, and unidentified perpetrators, the following data were given: 231 grave violations against 192 children (136 boys and 56 girls), including 26 children who were victims of multiple violations; 123 children who were recruited and used as combatants and in support roles (98 boys and 25 girls); 45 boys and 25 girls (a total of 70 children) who were killed and maimed by gunshots, landmines, improvised explosive devices, explosive remnants of war, air strikes, and torture, as well as inhumane treatment; 11 girls who were affected by rape and other forms of sexual violence; six attacks on schools and three hospitals; three schools that were used by the Colombian armed forces; 16 children (11 boys and 5 girls) who were abducted, mainly for recruitment purposes, with 12 children later released; and two incidents of the denial of humanitarian access (United Nations 2022, pp. 8–9).

As for the developments and concerns, the report points out that, in January 2021, the Colombian government launched a strategy for the local implementation of the policy to prevent the recruitment and use of children and sexual violence against them, called “*Súmate por mí*” (Join Up for Me). Furthermore, the Secretary-General calls on the Colombian government to endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and to end the military use of schools. The report also states that 180 children (126 boys and 54 girls) have been separated from armed groups and entered the protection programme of the Colombian Family Welfare Institute. It highlights the ongoing concern regarding the continued increase in grave violations against children, mainly related to recruitment, use, and abduction by armed groups, particularly by FARC-EP dissident groups and the ELN. Finally, it calls upon the

government to ensure that adequate programmes are accessible to all survivors ([United Nations 2022](#), p. 9).

Following the information presented above regarding 2021, the UN Security Council report relating to the period between January and December 2022 in Colombia provided updated figures on grave violations, primarily perpetrated by the FARC-EP, dissident groups, the ELN, *Clan del Golfo* (also known as *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*), unidentified perpetrators, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, and the Colombian armed forces. The report indicates 290 grave violations against 209 children (122 boys, 83 girls, and 4 of unknown sex), including 12 Venezuelan and 4 Ecuadorian children, as well as 44 children who were victims of multiple violations. A total of 130 children were recruited and used as fighters and in support roles (77 boys and 53 girls), while 50 children were used in combat roles. Additionally, 84 children (53 boys, 27 girls, and 4 of unknown sex) were killed or maimed as a result of gunfire, explosive ordnance, air strikes, and torture; 18 girls were victims of sexual violence. There were also reports of 22 schools and 3 hospitals being attacked, with 10 schools being used militarily. Furthermore, 23 children (18 boys and 5 girls) were abducted in border areas with Colombia, primarily for recruitment; of these, 3 were killed, 15 escaped or were released, and 5 have an unidentified status. Finally, two incidents of the denial of humanitarian access were verified ([United Nations 2022](#), pp. 7–8).

As for the developments and concerns, the report commends the Colombian government for its progress in preventing and responding to grave violations against children, as well as for suspending air strikes against armed group camps where children may be present in August 2022. It encourages programmes aimed at preventing grave violations against children, particularly those that benefit indigenous and Afro-Colombian children. The report also welcomes the progress made by the Special Jurisdiction for Peace regarding the recruitment and use of children, alongside the recommendations of the Truth Commission, which focused on children in its June 2022 report. However, it highlights its concern about the increase in grave violations, notably the recruitment, use, killing, and mutilation of children by armed groups, particularly by FARC-EP dissident groups. There is also an alarming rise in the number of indigenous and Afro-Colombian girls and children who are victims, especially of sexual violence ([United Nations 2023b](#), pp. 8–9).

Following the information presented above regarding 2021 and 2022, the UN Security Council report for the period between January and December 2023 in Colombia has verified updated figures on grave violations, primarily perpetrated by the FARC-EP, dissident groups, ELN, *Clan del Golfo*, unidentified perpetrators, and the Colombian armed forces. There were 432 grave violations against 329 children (219 boys and 110 girls), including 6 Venezuelan children and 52 children who were victims of multiple violations. Also, 262 children were recruited and used (176 boys and 86 girls)—one child was recruited on two separate occasions by different armed groups. Furthermore, 38 were used in combat roles; additionally, 136 remained associated with the groups, 112 were released or escaped, and 14 were killed. According to the Colombian Family Welfare Institute, 213 children previously associated with armed groups entered its protection programme. Tragically, 63 children (47 boys and 16 girls) were killed or maimed as victims of explosives, targeted killings, combat, torture, unidentified motives, crossfire, and military operations. Additionally, 26 children (4 boys and 22 girls) were victims of sexual violence. There were 24 attacks on schools and 3 on hospitals; 18 schools were used militarily and subsequently evacuated. Furthermore, 32 children (23 boys and 9 girls) were abducted, mostly for recruitment, retaliation, or intimidation purposes; 19 children escaped or were released, 2 were killed, and the status of 11 remains unknown. Finally, 22 incidents of the denial of humanitarian access were verified ([United Nations 2024a](#), pp. 7–8).

As for the developments and concerns, the report commends the government for launching the national action plan for the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration. It welcomes the resumption of the work of the intersectoral commission to prevent the recruitment and exploitation of, and sexual violence against, children and adolescents by illegal armed groups and organised criminal groups in April 2023. The report highlights ongoing cases of sexual violence, particularly against girls associated with armed groups, and encourages the implementation of an intersectoral government strategy to prevent and respond to grave violations against children at the local level, with an ethnic, gender, and community focus. It highlights the need for child victims of recruitment to be referred to civil authorities and to have access to reintegration services without any discrimination. Furthermore, the report reiterates its serious concern about the ongoing grave violations, especially the recruitment and use of children by FARC-EP dissident groups and the ELN. It also expresses concern about attacks on schools and the widespread presence of explosive devices, highlighting that these violations have an even greater impact on indigenous children and children of African descent. Finally, it calls on armed groups to immediately cease violations and release all children (United Nations 2024a, p. 8).

In relation to the reports presented between 2021 and 2023, there was an increase in several grave violations in Colombia. For example, boys were more frequently subjected to recruitment and use, killing, maiming, and abduction, while the number of girls who were victims of conflict-related sexual violence also increased (United Nations 2024a, p. 3; 2024b, p. 1). This is demonstrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Comparison between grave violations verified in the period 2021 to 2023 in Colombia. Source: (United Nations 2022, pp. 8–9; 2023b, pp. 7–9; 2024a, pp. 7–8). Elaborated by the authors.

	2021	2022	2023
Grave violations	231 in total 192 of children (136 boys, 56 girls)	290 in total 209 of children (122 boys, 83 girls, 4 unknown sex)	432 in total 329 of children (219 boys, 110 girls)
Recruitment or use of children as soldiers	123 children (98 boys, 25 girls)	130 children (77 boys, 53 girls)	262 children (176 boys, 86 girls)
Killing and maiming of children	70 children (45 boys, 25 girls)	84 children (53 boys, 27 girls, 4 unknown sex)	63 children (47 boys, 16 girls)
Sexual violence against children	11 girls	18 girls	26 children (4 boys, 22 girls)
Attacks against schools or hospitals	6 schools 3 hospitals	22 schools 3 hospitals	24 schools 3 hospitals
Schools militarily used	3 schools	10 schools	18 schools
Abduction of children	16 children (11 boys, 5 girls) 12 released	23 children (18 boys, 5 girls) 15 released, 3 killed, 5 unknown status	32 children (23 boys, 9 girls) 19 released, 2 killed, 11 unknown status
Denial of humanitarian access for children	2 incidents	10 incidents	22 incidents

Beyond the grave violations, focusing on the recruitment of child soldiers by armed groups, Guarín Arellano (2024, p. 51) identified that among the various factors contributing to the increase in the number of recruited children are children in marginalised socioeco-

conomic situations, the proliferation of weapons, the number of available children, and he also pointed out that it is possible to associate this increase with desertions (unauthorised exit from an armed organisation), which can generate a higher demand.

To broaden the scope of analysis, it is worth noting that other Latin American countries are also affected by conflicts. Below, some of the specific consequences faced by children in these contexts are highlighted.

In Colombia, the persistence of armed conflict and the discrimination inherent in social structures have created a fertile environment for human trafficking. Nagle (2013, p. 2) highlights that the majority of the victims trafficked as a result of war are women and children, as war disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, once they are marginalised and excluded from access to a nation's resources, education, and protective policies, they are left disconnected from societal support systems. In the country, displaced women and children are likely targets for illegal armed groups, who exploit them to replenish their ranks of combatants and generate income—the trafficking of women and children for labour and sexual exploitation, for example, is a global crime worth billions of dollars, with reports estimating that forced labour alone generates approximately US\$31.6 billion in illicit profits annually, while sexual exploitation contributes around US\$33.9 billion each year (Nagle 2013, p. 18).

When addressing violent conflicts, forced displacement, and human trafficking, using Colombia as a case study, Acharya and Bryson Clark (2021, p. 3) **emphasise** how displacement forces women and children into precarious conditions, compelling them to take desperate measures for survival. These vulnerabilities create opportunities for criminal entities to exploit and abuse these groups, exposing them to exploitation and criminality. The authors point out that the situation is similarly dire for Central American migrants travelling through Mexico, where transnational criminal organisations, corrupt law enforcement officials, and unaffiliated criminals prey on migrants. Women, children, and LGBTQ+ individuals are particularly vulnerable, facing heightened risks of extortion, kidnapping, and forced labour (Acharya and Bryson Clark 2021, p. 3).

Acharya and Bryson Clark's study also highlights how Mexico's persistent narco-violence exacerbates these challenges. Over the past 15 years, widespread violence has displaced thousands of families, leaving them without social or communal networks in their new locations. This lack of governmental support **leaves** displaced populations, especially women and young girls, highly susceptible to trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation (Acharya and Bryson Clark 2021, p. 10). The study underscores the critical need for coordinated efforts at all levels of government, alongside partnerships with local and nongovernmental organisations, to address these vulnerabilities. By building protective networks and targeting resources in the most violent regions, such as Guerrero, the Mexican government can begin to mitigate the effects of displacement and trafficking. However, without substantial interventions to address the root causes of narco-violence and the proliferation of organised crime, forced displacement and vulnerability to exploitation will continue to rise (Acharya and Bryson Clark 2021, pp. 9–11).

The authors' findings call for a holistic approach to tackling violence and displacement across Latin America. Addressing the root causes of insecurity, strengthening institutional responses, and prioritising the protection of vulnerable groups are essential measures to curtail the cycles of exploitation and displacement that plague the region (Acharya and Bryson Clark 2021, p. 11).

For Central American migrants, including children, the journey through Mexico poses significant risks of exploitation within a region characterised by systemic violence and weak institutional oversight. Meyer (2010, pp. 5–6) highlights that organised crime groups prey on this vulnerable collective, subjecting them to kidnapping, extortion, and other crimes,

and the complicity or inaction of Mexican authorities further exacerbates this vulnerability, leaving migrants powerless. According to the author, these systemic risks underscore the urgent need for additional measures to protect migrants in transit. This includes addressing the involvement of drug-trafficking organisations in the kidnapping of migrants, combating corruption within the National Immigration Institute and police forces, and strengthening accountability by prosecuting authorities and third parties involved in attacks against migrants (p. 9).

When addressing why Central American children are fleeing their homes, [Kennedy \(2014, p. 2\)](#) reports that 59 percent of Salvadoran boys and 61 percent of Salvadoran girls identify crime, gang threats, or violence as primary reasons for their emigration. Boys often cite fears of assault or death for refusing to join gangs or interacting with corrupt officials, while girls predominantly fear rape or disappearance by the same groups. [Kennedy \(2014, p. 4\)](#) further explains that children and their families lack trust in the Salvadoran government's ability to protect them, with many believing that authorities are either ineffective or complicit with criminal organisations.

In the same vein, a study on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) conducted by [Kids in Need of Defense \(KIND\) and Human Rights Center Fray Matías de Córdova \(2017\)](#), based on the cases of 96 Central American migrant children, has among its key findings the following: (1) Gang-based SGBV is widespread: In El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, gang-related SGBV is common and brutal. Victims, especially women and children, face sexual harassment, rape, and forced sexual relationships. Many are coerced into becoming gang members' "girlfriends," with threats of harm to themselves and their families if they refuse. (2) Sexual violence forces children to stop attending school: The threat of gang violence at or en route to/from school forces children, particularly girls, to stop attending. Girls living in gang-controlled areas report constant fear, and some drop out or limit their movements to avoid further harm and harassment. (3) Child protection systems fail to protect victims of SGBV: In El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, child protection systems are underfunded and lack the capacity to support child survivors of SGBV, especially in gang-related cases. Families threatened by gang violence have no access to safety due to the lack of resources and programmes.

This perception of insecurity and systemic failure reflects a broader pattern across Latin America, where displaced populations, particularly women and children, are pushed into vulnerable situations.

When addressing the challenges, progress, and trends in protecting children affected by conflict and seeking to end or prevent grave violations against them, the UN Human Rights Council points out the collaboration between the United Nations and Colombia—encompassing governments, civil society organisations, and the international community—in pursuing the prevention of serious violations against children:

In April 2023, the intersectoral commission for preventing the recruitment and exploitation of, and sexual violence against, children and adolescents by illegal armed groups and organized criminal groups resumed its work and issued a statement calling on armed groups to cease the recruitment and use of and sexual violence against children. In September 2023, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace opened case No. 11 on sexual and gender-based violence in the context of armed conflict. Some 35 percent of victims were children at the time of the commission of these crimes. ([United Nations 2023a, p. 4](#))

To gain a broader perspective beyond childhood and conflict, [Carl Conradi \(2013, p. 1209\)](#) explains that children vulnerable to trafficking and recruitment are affected not only before and during conflicts but also afterwards. He outlines a timeline linking abduction

and recruitment to a pre-conflict period; soldiering itself to the duration of the conflict; and in the post-conflict period, he emphasises continued soldiering and enslavement.

As one of the central concerns regarding children's well-being is their ability to develop in anticipation of the future, it is also significant to take into account the circumstances they face in post-conflict periods. In this respect, according to Carl [Conradi \(2013, pp. 1220–22\)](#), at least two ways in which children continue to be victimised can be considered.

In the first place, if "post-conflict" refers to a specific conflict that has come to an end, children can continue to be exploited as soldiers, either by the same armed group that subjected them as soldiers, by different groups, or even by the official military of the State. This can create a perpetuation of what can be described as a non-freely chosen career as a soldier, in the form of re-recruitment. This pattern is rooted in the fact that these individuals have undergone extensive military training, taking into account the time and resources invested in this training.

Secondly, even when it is considered that conflict contexts have been overcome, re-trafficking can occur, this time for different purposes, such as civilian enslavement. Recognisable circumstances include activities such as domestic slavery, young prostitution, or involvement in the drug trade. When the cost–benefit analysis is deemed favourable, the commanders of armed groups may sell the children, whom they regard as their property (as previously mentioned).

Overall, child trafficking and recruitment for use in armed conflict expose these small and fragile human beings, who are still in development, to extreme and horrific realities, compromising their physical and psychological health. This deprives them of the opportunities for improvement that could be achieved with appropriate education and living conditions, rendering them even more vulnerable to exploitation throughout their lives, as they remain exposed to dangerous circumstances and revictimization.

In recent years, the recruitment of children by illegal armed groups in Colombia has remained a persistent issue, despite international and national prohibitions and efforts. This raises important questions about whether the increasing number of reported cases reflects a genuine rise in child victims or improved monitoring mechanisms. As [Mendoza Tovar \(2021, p. 130\)](#) highlights, the continued use of children, despite legal prohibitions, underscores the ongoing challenge of curbing recruitment, as "illegal armed groups in Colombia continue to use child recruitment as an internal, widespread, and systematic policy; although its exact nature and magnitude are unknown, an increase in cases has been recorded" (freely translated by the authors). This debate is critical for determining whether the rise in figures is due to better detection efforts or a deeper failure to address the root causes of child recruitment in the country.

This persistent recruitment of children into armed conflicts in Colombia highlights the critical need for prevention strategies to protect them. Despite so-called efforts to reduce this practice, socioeconomic factors continue to push children towards armed groups. Preventive measures are essential, as they address underlying vulnerabilities before children are exposed to the harms of recruitment, after which the damage may be irreparable. Prevention efforts can serve as a stabilising force within affected communities, offering protection to children and fostering safer environments.

To mitigate the recruitment of child soldiers, [Whitman and Abidi \(2020, p. 29\)](#) emphasise that prevention must cover not only the "macro level (reducing insecurity, conflict resolution, addressing wider issues of inequality, strengthening national protection systems, and so on)", but also the "micro level (strengthening community-based child protection, access to education, intergenerational dialogue, social norm change, parenting skills, psychosocial support, livelihoods, and so forth)".

From this perspective, in Colombia, the “*Súmate por Mí*” project, as an initiative aimed at preventing and protecting against child recruitment in conflict zones, is based on the education and empowerment of children, families, and communities, employing a strategy that addresses structural risk factors leading to recruitment, such as socioeconomic vulnerabilities and limitations in access to basic rights, from macro to micro levels. The project includes, for example, training sessions for children and adolescents on the recognition of rights, where 96.13% declared themselves capable of identifying their rights, its content, as well as the spaces and mechanisms to demand and assert their rights in various situations of violation. Furthermore, 99.48% of participants recognised threats and risk situations to their well-being, thereby promoting self-care and mutual protection among peers (United Nations 2021, p. 7). Through 156 community networks and inter-institutional partnerships, including local authorities, the strategy reached 64 Colombian municipalities, consolidating community networks and assistance actions to ensure the continued protection of minors (United Nations 2021, pp. 7 and 9).

These initiatives by the Latin American country represent an important step towards preventing child recruitment, particularly in light of the idea that effective prevention requires careful planning and preparation. This entails that “countries must step up and be leaders in regions that require stability. Critically, it means understanding and recognising the early warning signs of conflict and the role children can play in sustaining or fuelling conflict” (Whitman and Abidi 2020, pp. 32–33).

However, when considering the previously mentioned cases of Colombian indigenous children who took their own lives to avoid being recruited by armed groups (Angarita 2022), it is clear that strengthening vulnerable communities and educational campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the risks of child recruitment, as implemented through the “*Súmate por Mí*” project, is a highly significant step but may not be sufficient on its own. When combining this conclusion with the argument that war is the actual cause of child soldiers, a peace education policy emerges as an essential element to be adopted alongside strategies for strengthening vulnerable communities and educational campaigns focused on the risks of child recruitment, to address both prevention and intervention strategies.

As stated by Wessells (2005, p. 363), Sierra Leone (where the armed conflict ended in 2002) is one example in which, especially “in the post-conflict context, effective peace education has a stronger practical than didactic focus, and it stimulates empathy, cooperation, reconciliation, and community processes for handling conflict in a nonviolent manner”. The study observed that offering constructive life opportunities and fostering peace-oriented socialisation, rather than promoting war, is an effective way to prevent a significant amount of youth violence. This can be achieved through the use of practical strategies to challenge extremist ideologies, which often bring violent and terrorist lifestyles into young people’s reality.

As the main findings on recruitment for armed conflicts as the worst form of child labour in Colombia and its relation to the academic context, it was possible to identify the following: (1) The persistence of child recruitment in armed conflicts in Colombia aligns with academic literature that characterises the recruitment of children in conflicts as a systematic violation of human rights. The disproportionate impact of conflicts on children is a widely discussed theme, along with analyses indicating that minors are used as strategic resources in protracted conflicts (Whitman and Abidi 2020). (2) The existence of structural and cultural factors that facilitate recruitment is related to studies such as those by Whitman and Abidi (2020), which emphasise the importance of preventive strategies at macro levels, such as security and public policies, and micro levels, such as education and community protection, to address the issue. (3) The conditions of forced labour confirm the ILO’s definition of the “worst forms of child labor” (International Labour Organization

1999), situating the Colombian case as emblematic in the literature on child labour in conflict contexts (Conradi 2013). (4) Impacts on children's development, characterised as systemic exploitation and structural vulnerability, considering that armed groups exploit economic and social vulnerabilities to recruit children. This aligns with Conradi's (2013) concerns, which highlight the persistence of child exploitation before, during, and after conflicts, whether through re-recruitment for military purposes or other forms of exploitation, such as domestic servitude or drug trafficking. (5) Gaps in the implementation of the 2016 Peace Agreement demonstrate failures in halting child recruitment and emphasise the complexity of rebuilding societies in post-conflict contexts. This aligns with Badrán's (2024) analysis, which argues that the agreement acts more as a catalyst for conflict transformation than as a framework for effective pacification. (6) Advances in preventive policies face persistent challenges. However, prevention remains a central strategy, as exemplified by the "Súmate por Mí" programme, which underscores the relevance of multi-level preventive approaches. This aligns with models proposed by Whitman and Abidi (2020), advocating for coordinated action among governments, communities, and international organisations. Furthermore, it connects with Mendoza Tovar's (2021) argument that, despite legal and institutional efforts, the root causes of the problem remain deeply challenging to eliminate.

5. Conclusions

The international classification of trafficking in persons, materialised through its characterisation as a crime against humanity in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and its conceptualisation in the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol), does not expressly include the exploitation of children in armed conflicts. However, due to its significance, it can be addressed based on the interpretation of the Palermo Protocol and other international instruments.

Children recruited and exploited in conflict areas are involved in armed violence, including acts of terrorism and war crimes, resulting in difficulties in being recognised as victims of trafficking. They are subjected to such harmful conditions due to both compulsory and voluntary recruitment, arising from a variety of conflicts, such as poverty, market imperfections, global supply chains, family and parental characteristics, macroeconomic conditions, national and international political factors, and a lack of implementation of laws and policies. Regardless, when discussing children, it must be considered that they are not fully able to understand what this submission means, increasing their vulnerability to manipulation, exploitation, and serious mental and physical harm. In addition, absence from school significantly affects both their short-term and long-term development and interests.

Armed conflicts increase vulnerability to trafficking in persons victimisation (as evidenced by the 2022 Global Trafficking in Persons Report), as well as the incidence of child labour and hazardous work (according to the Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and Trends 2012–2016). In this sense, it is clear that children (defined as anyone under eighteen years of age) recruited or used by an armed force or armed group (i.e., both by official government forces and unofficial militias or armed groups) in any capacity are considered victims of trafficking in persons and exploitation in one of the worst forms of child labour.

In Colombia, the scenario of decades of armed conflict and its atrocities has left a whole generation of people, including children, traumatised by this painful legacy. Economic factors and other structural conditions, such as poverty, limited access to education, lack of employment and prospects, domestic violence, and social exclusion, as well as interest in weapons and military life, family background, and political conflicts, have made children a central victim of conflicts, violence, and the worst forms of child labour exploitation.

The discussion aimed not only to highlight the issue of child trafficking and recruitment but also to examine its connection to the labour market and the economic aspects of exploiting these young individuals in the worst forms of child labour, introducing a new variable to the exploratory context.

Beyond the factors that increase children's vulnerability to trafficking and recruitment, this research suggests that effective political actions must consider both the conflicts themselves and the surrounding markets. The existence of armed conflicts, particularly civil conflicts, already presents a significant risk factor for children's exposure to trafficking and recruitment. In Colombia, despite the FARC's demobilisation, child recruitment and exploitation have continued as former dissident members have continued the guerrillas' activities, filling the void left behind by the FARC. In terms of markets, children exploited by demobilised armed groups are not necessarily freed from victimisation but may become targets for other forms of derived exploitation. Additionally, the emergence of dissident members and new groups is accompanied by new cycles of recruitment and enticement, generating an endless cycle.

Thus, it is concluded that while the context of children's vulnerability as individuals is significant, it is not a sufficient determinant on its own. It is also essential to consider the dynamics of conflicts and armed groups—their intensity, continuity, and adaptability—all of which influence the demand for recruitment. This understanding is consistent in Colombia, where recruitment includes voluntary enlistment, and where demobilised armed groups may continue to exploit the economic advantages of recruited children even after withdrawing from conflicts. Furthermore, new groups emerge to occupy the spaces left by previously dissolved groups.

Even after so many years of conflict and the efforts to prevent and protect child recruitment, the scenario of armed conflicts in Colombia has not improved, as the number of children who have been victims of grave violations continues to grow. This is demonstrated in the Reports of the Secretary-General for the years 2021, 2022, and 2023, presented to the UN Security Council, which address the promotion and protection of children's rights, particularly regarding violations of these rights in armed conflicts. Among the various violations suffered by children, it is evident that the entire society is harmed. This is especially clear when considering the military occupation of schools and hospitals, which can adversely affect local development, education, and health for the entire community.

Therefore, children must be protected from violations of their human dignity and breaches of their fundamental human rights, as the damage suffered by these children due to this exposure affects not only their current well-being but also their ability to develop for the future, taking into account the physical and mental health harm, especially regarding revictimization. This protection must be materialised through the total eradication of their recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups, acknowledging both aspects of war and labour violations.

In light of these findings, there are several implications for international stakeholders. Organisations such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization could strengthen global and regional efforts to combat child recruitment and trafficking by enhancing monitoring mechanisms, funding reintegration programmes for child victims, and fostering cooperation among nations to dismantle trafficking networks. Moreover, these findings underscore the need for international campaigns to raise awareness about the economic and social factors contributing to the exploitation of children in conflict zones.

For future research, this study highlights several avenues. Further investigation into the interplay between local and global market dynamics and child recruitment in conflict settings could provide valuable insights. Comparative studies focusing on countries with similar patterns of conflict and trafficking would enhance the understanding of shared

challenges and effective solutions. Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies and programmes in rehabilitating and reintegrating child victims could help refine intervention strategies, particularly in regions with persistent conflicts like Colombia.

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Notes

- ¹ The data presented in this study do not intend to precisely measure the problem of human trafficking, but to present an overview that allows conclusions to be drawn, especially because the information that makes up the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons is passed on to UNODC by States, and the information from the States themselves may not be accurate, as well as the report does not provide a connection, for example, between human trafficking and drug trafficking, which makes it incomplete in view of the need for a precise dimension on the subject (Villas Boas 2022; Villas Boas and Atchabahian 2021).
- ² It is important to note that the International Labour Organization Convention No. 182 does not use the term “child soldiers” in its definition, but rather the exact expression “forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict” (Article 3, subparagraph a).
- ³ Remembering that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) “were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity” (UNDP n.d.).
- ⁴ “Alliance 8.7 is a global partnership taking immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery, human trafficking and child labour, in accordance with SDG Target 8.7”. As main objectives, “the Alliance scales up solutions that work, drives innovation, and maximises the impact of resources through strengthening engagement at the global level and action in Pathfinder Countries” (Alliance 8.7. n.d.).

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