

Child Recruitment by Armed Groups in Yemen

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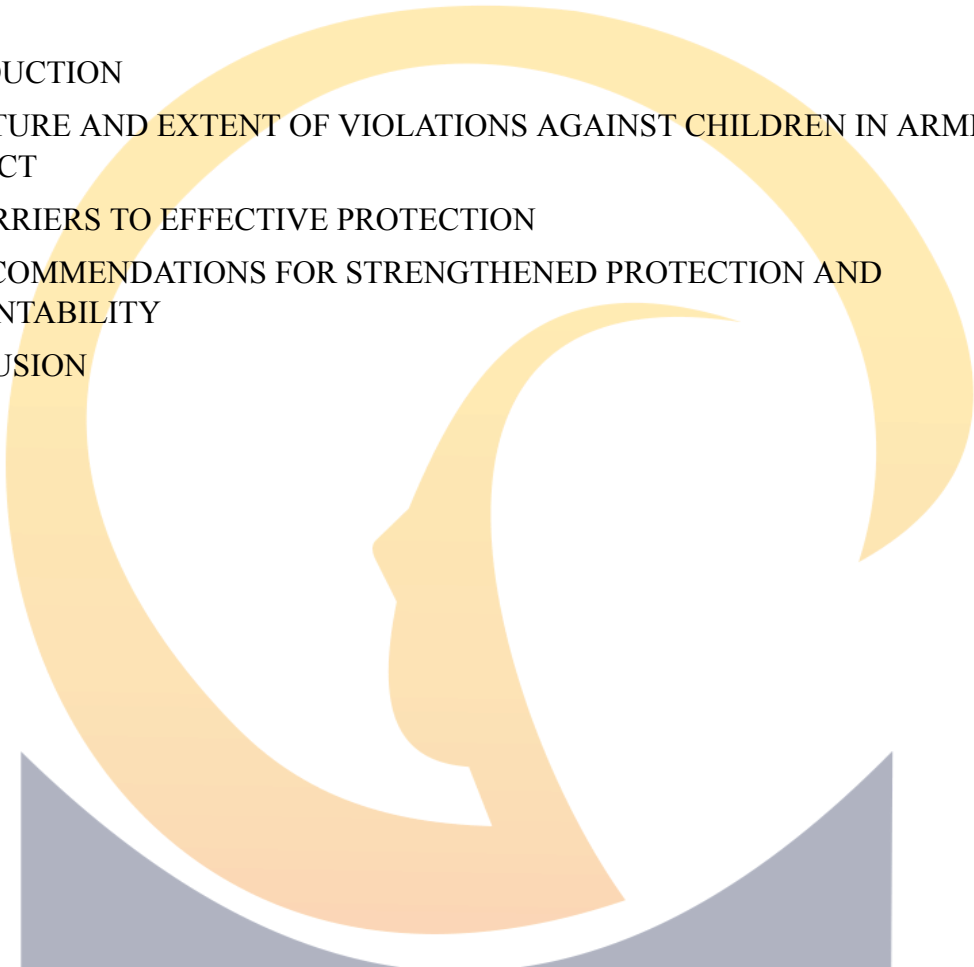
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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has precipitated a grave humanitarian crisis, with children suffering some of the most severe consequences. Among the most alarming violations is the recruitment of children by armed groups, including the Houthis, government forces, Al-Qaeda, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). This practice not only robs children of their childhood but also exposes them to violence, exploitation, and profound psychological trauma. This report will explore the nature and extent of these violations, the specific abuses faced by children, the barriers to effective protection, and provide recommendations for strengthening accountability and safeguarding the rights of vulnerable children in Yemen.

1. Nature and Extent of Violations Against Children in Armed Conflict

Children in Yemen face pervasive human rights violations as a result of the country's prolonged conflict and the actions of multiple armed groups, including the Houthis, government forces, Al-Qaeda, and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). These violations significantly undermine their rights, safety, and futures across territories controlled or influenced by these groups. Child recruitment stands out as one of the most egregious abuses, with devastating psychological, physical, and social consequences.

The Houthis are the primary perpetrators of child recruitment, accounting for over 60 percent of documented cases. Since 2021, more than 10,000 children have been recruited through coercion, financial incentives, and ideological indoctrination (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor & SAM Organization for Rights and Freedoms, 2021). Their methods include indoctrination through ideological programs in schools and camps, coercion of impoverished families, and forced recruitment, sometimes without parental knowledge. Boys as young as ten are deployed to the front lines, tasked with carrying ammunition, gathering intelligence, or guarding checkpoints. Girls are often recruited into the Zainabiya unit, where they serve as informants, prison guards, and ideological enforcers.

The psychological and physical consequences of such recruitment are profound. Children face severe trauma, injuries, and even death. For instance, a 12-year-old boy lost an eye and a leg after repeated combat deployments, while girls endure coerced participation in tasks that strip them of their childhood (Mayun Organization for Human Rights, 2024). The Houthis' systemic exploitation of children erodes their innocence through violent indoctrination and forced maturity.

Despite pledges to end child recruitment, the Yemeni government is also complicit, with approximately The United Nations (2021) reported that 16 percent of child soldiers are recruited by government-affiliated forces.

Economic hardship drives families to enlist their children, often through financial incentives or the enlistment of children of deceased soldiers. In these roles, children perform logistical tasks, guard checkpoints, or engage in combat, often at great personal risk. A documented case involves a 14-year-old boy who died while handling unexploded ordnance after being forcibly conscripted, and another case highlights 14-year-old Sumaya, who was forced to work long hours at a military checkpoint to support her family (Together We Rise Foundation, n.d.).

Al-Qaeda exploits children in impoverished regions, particularly in Abyan Governorate, where boys are used as combatants and girls are forced into exploitative ‘jihad marriages’ (France 24, 2014). Reports indicate that girls as young as 13 are married to fighters, reflecting Al-Qaeda’s systematic abuse of vulnerable children and families. Boys face indoctrination, exposure to violence, and forced participation in combat, which disrupts their development and exposes them to significant risks.

The STC is also implicated in child recruitment, accounting for 14 percent of cases. Families in poverty are often compelled to offer their children for recruitment, with children primarily tasked with guarding facilities, performing logistical support, or occasionally engaging in combat. For example, a 16-year-old in Marib was exploited as an ammunition transporter, highlighting the systemic abuse of economically vulnerable children (National Committee for the Investigation of Alleged Human Rights Violations, 2024).

The broader impacts of armed conflict on children are immense. Immediate consequences of forced recruitment include injuries, disfigurements, and trauma, with many children experiencing violence firsthand, either as combatants or as victims of exploitation. Armed groups frequently target schools for recruitment, disrupting access to education and limiting future opportunities. Additionally, recruitment and conflict separate children from their families, leaving them vulnerable to further abuse.

In the long term, the loss of education and exposure to violence perpetuate cycles of poverty and instability. Many children suffer from PTSD and other mental health issues, hindering their reintegration into society. Recruitment practices, such as using nicknames to instil loyalty, erode community ties and traditional values.

The human rights violations against children in Yemen, primarily through recruitment and exploitation by armed groups, reflect a profound crisis with immediate and long-term consequences. Both state and non-state actors exploit vulnerable children, robbing them of their childhoods, education, and safety. These violations call for urgent international intervention to protect children’s rights, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure sustainable solutions for rehabilitation and reintegration. Safeguarding Yemen’s children is critical for breaking cycles of violence and ensuring the country’s future stability.

2. Barriers to Effective Protection

The ongoing conflict in Yemen, exacerbated by the actions of state and non-state actors, presents significant barriers to fully prioritising the rights of children, particularly their best interests, as a primary consideration. These barriers are multifaceted, rooted in structural issues, socio-economic conditions, political instability, and systemic violations of international humanitarian law. The recruitment and exploitation of children by armed groups are emblematic of these challenges, as detailed below.

First, we will discuss structural and institutional barriers. The prolonged conflict in Yemen has resulted in weak governance and a lack of rule of law. This erosion of governance structures has made it challenging to implement child protection mechanisms. The Yemeni government, despite signing international agreements such as the 2014 UN action plan to end child recruitment, struggles to enforce these commitments. Corruption, weak military oversight, and lack of accountability within government forces further undermine the protection of children. Government-affiliated forces continue to recruit children, often exploiting their vulnerability through financial incentives to families or enlisting children of deceased soldiers. A documented case involves a 14-year-old boy conscripted by the 203rd Mechanized Infantry Brigade, who later died handling unexploded ordnance.

Yemen also lacks robust legal frameworks to criminalise child recruitment and exploitation effectively. Existing laws are inconsistently enforced due to a fragmented judicial system influenced by political and tribal affiliations. For example, in regions controlled by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), children are recruited for logistical and combat roles. Despite international condemnations, these practices persist due to inadequate legal deterrents and enforcement.

There are a multitude of socio-economic barriers that cause children to be recruited into the armed forces. Economic hardship is one of the primary drivers of child recruitment in Yemen. According to Amnesty International (2017), families living in extreme poverty are often compelled to send their children to armed groups in exchange for financial incentives, food, or other basic necessities. For example, the Houthis offer families financial compensation ranging from \$80 to \$120 monthly for children who martyr themselves in combat. This financial lifeline, albeit tragic, is a survival mechanism for many impoverished families. In the case of Sumaya, a 14-year-old girl, her family sent her to work at a military checkpoint in exchange for income, underscoring the dire economic choices families face in conflict zones.

The conflict has devastated Yemen's education system, with schools destroyed, repurposed as military bases, or used as recruitment grounds. The lack of access to education leaves children vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation. For example, the Houthis systematically target schools for indoctrination and recruitment. Summer camps and religious schools are used to instil extremist ideologies and prepare children for military roles.

In Yemen, violence is so prevalent that it has been normalised. Years of conflict have desensitised communities to violence, and the use of child soldiers is often normalised within local cultures. Armed groups exploit this normalisation by portraying child soldiers as heroes or martyrs. The Houthis assign nicknames to child recruits, such as "Martyr Abu Lyth,"

fostering a premature sense of manhood and loyalty. Families are encouraged to take pride in their children's involvement in the conflict, perpetuating the cycle of recruitment.

In some regions, tribal affiliations and patriarchal values contribute to child recruitment. Boys are often viewed as defenders of familial honour, while girls are coerced into 'jihad marriages' or other exploitative roles. For example, Al-Qaeda exploits tribal culture and the absence of accurate birth registration to recruit boys under 18, using them as combatants. Girls, on the other hand, are forced into marriages under the guise of religious obligation.

The fragmentation of authority in Yemen has created an environment where various armed groups, such as the Houthis, Al-Qaeda, STC, and government forces, compete for control, often at the expense of children's rights. Each group uses children as tools of war, making a unified response to child protection nearly impossible. For example, the Houthis account for over 60 percent of documented child recruitment cases, while government forces and STC contribute to approximately 25 percent of documented cases. Al-Qaeda continues intermittent recruitment, particularly in regions like the Abyan Governorate. The ongoing conflict has rendered many areas unsafe, with no secure environments where children can be protected from recruitment or exploitation. Displacement and loss of family structures further expose children to recruitment risks. Internally displaced children are disproportionately targeted by armed groups. Reports indicate that 7 out of 53 documented child recruits from 2022–2023 were from internally displaced communities (Field Monitoring Coalition Team, as cited by Yemeni Alliance for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, 2024)

Yemen's situation has resulted in many challenges in international and humanitarian responses. Armed groups often block humanitarian aid or manipulate it for their own purposes, leaving children without the necessary support to resist recruitment or escape exploitation. For example, the Houthis have been accused of using humanitarian aid as leverage to pressure families into sending their children to recruitment camps.

Efforts to rehabilitate and reintegrate child soldiers also remain underfunded and poorly implemented. Without psychological and social support, many children struggle to reintegrate into society and remain vulnerable to re-recruitment. Reports highlight the lack of sustainable reintegration programs for demobilised children, leaving them at risk of further exploitation (Together We Rise Foundation, n.d.).

Despite international condemnation, there is minimal accountability for armed groups and state actors involved in child recruitment. Sanctions and legal actions are often insufficient to deter these violations. Houthi leaders, responsible for recruiting thousands of children, continue to operate with impunity, while efforts to hold them accountable are hindered by the complexities of the conflict.

The barriers to effectively protecting children in Yemen's armed conflict are deeply entrenched in socio-economic despair, cultural dynamics, weak governance, and the complexities of a protracted war. Armed groups exploit these vulnerabilities, perpetuating cycles of violence and robbing children of their rights and futures. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing economic opportunities, providing education, and ensuring accountability for violators. Urgent international intervention and sustainable humanitarian efforts are essential to

safeguard the rights and well-being of Yemen's children and to ensure their best interests are prioritised in this dire context.

3. Recommendations for strengthened protection and accountability

The ongoing conflict in Yemen has exposed children to some of the gravest human rights violations, including recruitment and exploitation by armed groups. Addressing these violations requires a multi-faceted approach that prioritises the best interests of children through strengthened protection mechanisms, accountability for violations, and the inclusion of children's perspectives in conflict-related processes. The recommendations outlined below focus on these priorities, drawing from documented cases in Yemen to propose actionable solutions.

To protect children, it is critical for all parties in Yemen to adhere to international agreements, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. This includes prohibiting the recruitment of children under 18 years of age, demobilising those already recruited, and ensuring their safe reintegration into society. Prevention mechanisms are essential to halt recruitment efforts. Community awareness campaigns should be launched to educate families on the dangers and illegality of child recruitment while empowering them with knowledge and alternative livelihood options. Laws must be established to prohibit recruitment in schools, ensuring these spaces remain safe and free from military use. Collaborations with international organisations should aim to monitor and dismantle recruitment networks, particularly those operated by groups like the Houthis and Southern Transitional Council (STC). Additionally, safe zones and child-friendly spaces must be established in conflict-affected regions, providing essential services such as education, healthcare, and psychological support.

Accountability is key to addressing the systemic nature of these violations. Legal actions against perpetrators must include imposing travel bans, freezing assets, and referring cases of systemic child recruitment to international courts as crimes against humanity. Strengthening Yemen's judicial systems is equally important. Support must be provided to ensure national courts can effectively hold violators accountable, including training legal professionals to address violations against children. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms, such as the UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict (MRM), should be expanded to cover all regions in Yemen. Comprehensive data collection on child recruitment is necessary to ensure updated records and enable swift accountability measures.

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs play a pivotal role in addressing the trauma and challenges faced by children recruited into armed conflict. Tailored psychological care and long-term counselling should be prioritised to support recovery and reintegration. Additionally, rebuilding schools and ensuring access to quality education in conflict zones can help children regain a sense of normalcy. Economic support and vocational training for

families can alleviate the financial pressures that often drive child recruitment. These measures aim to break the cycle of violence and provide children with opportunities for a better future.

The perspectives of children must be systematically integrated into accountability processes. Establishing child-centred advisory committees allows children affected by conflict to share their experiences and inform policies. Safe and supportive avenues should be developed for children to provide testimonies in national and international accountability mechanisms, with their privacy and security being paramount. Legal and humanitarian actors require training to engage with children in age-appropriate, trauma-informed ways. Advocacy through education can empower children with knowledge of their rights and equip them to participate in broader reconciliation efforts.

Specific actions are required from various stakeholders. The Yemeni government should implement a national action plan for child protection, enforce strict penalties for child recruitment, and reactivate the National Committee for the Fight Against Human Trafficking to address child recruitment as a form of trafficking. Armed groups must immediately cease the recruitment of children, comply with international agreements, and collaborate with UN agencies to ensure accountability. The international community has a critical role in providing financial and technical support for child protection and reintegration programs, applying diplomatic pressure on perpetrators, and strengthening monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with child protection standards. Humanitarian organisations must ensure that aid is not exploited for recruitment purposes while focusing on long-term solutions, such as education and economic development, to address the root causes of child recruitment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the protection of children in Yemen requires coordinated and immediate action from all stakeholders. Addressing the root causes of recruitment, rehabilitating affected children, and holding violators accountable is essential to ensuring the best interests of children are prioritised. Amplifying their voices and integrating their perspectives into policies and accountability processes will create meaningful and lasting change. By strengthening local and international efforts, Yemen can safeguard its most vulnerable population and pave the way for a future free from the exploitation of children in armed conflict.

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