

Child soldier trauma in Uganda shares similarities with Northern Ireland

February 11 2011

Psychology students at Queen's University have discovered similarities between child soldier trauma in Uganda and those children caught up in Northern Ireland's Troubles.

Post-graduate students from the Doctoral Programme in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology at Queen's recently travelled to Uganda to a school for ex-child soldiers. Their study analysed the levels of post-traumatic stress among ex-soldiers, explained the symptoms of trauma to the children and offered psychological therapy to the most traumatised children.

The children in the school were former abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army, a group notorious for kidnapping children, brutalising them and forcing them to become soldiers and sex slaves. Over 35,000 children are estimated to have been abducted over the last twenty-four years.

Paul O'Callaghan, one of the students leading the study said: "We screened 205 children for [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD), anxiety and depression. We found that even four years after witnessing traumatic war events, rates of [psychological distress](#) were very high with 58 per cent of the children showing PTSD symptoms and 34 per cent having depression and anxiety.

"The study highlighted a large prevalence of 'traumatic bonding' – where children adopt an abuser's views, attitudes and behaviours. The study

found that over time some of the children began to identify more and more with the values and attitudes of their captors and even began to blame the victims for the violence they were subjected to.

He added: "Most remarkably our research showed that the most disturbing thing for the [child soldiers](#) was not the murders, massacres, torture or atrocities that they witnessed, instead, it was the death of their mothers during the war. The trauma and psychological distress of those who had lost their mother was much greater than those who had not.

"Although this research among child soldiers in Uganda may seem far removed from the lives of children in Northern Ireland there are strong parallels in the shifting sense of identity that can occur with children here who may initially have been coerced into joining criminal or paramilitary organisations but then go on to internalise the values, justifications and methods of these organisations over time."

The multi-disciplinary research team at Queen's School of Psychology are continuing their work pioneering a group-based mental health intervention specifically designed to treat psychological distress among child soldiers the Democratic Republic of Congo this summer.

Their work is being released in advance of 'Red Hand Day', a worldwide annual commemoration day on 12 February to draw attention to the plight of the 250,000 children who are currently forced to serve as soldiers in wars and armed conflicts, and to remember the thousands who have lost their lives as a result.

Provided by Queen's University Belfast

Citation: Child soldier trauma in Uganda shares similarities with Northern Ireland (2011, February 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-02-child->

soldier-trauma-uganda-similarities.html

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