



After War, Child Soldiers Fight a New Battle

A graduate student explores how child soldiers in Nepal have the ability to heal after a lifetime of war.

By *Brandon Kohrt*

Fighting for the Maoist guerillas should have been the hard part – but for Asha, the real fight began when she came home.

As a 14-year-old in rural Nepal, facing an educational dead end and a forced child marriage, Asha (a pseudonym) joined the Maoist People’s Liberation Army, a communist rebel group battling to overthrow the king of Nepal and establish a republic. For two years, she fought alongside other teen recruits battling against the Royal Nepal Army.

Although Asha was in constant danger, the Maoists offered her a sense of empowerment, a way out of domestic slavery, and an opportunity to learn from women leaders. For Asha, even gun battles were better than what she faced back home. Given the choice, she would have never returned to her village.

In 2006, the decision was made for her. The Nepali government signed a peace accord with the Maoists, ending a decade of bloody fighting and sending more than 6,000 child soldiers home to families and communities unprepared and often unwilling to accept them.

Asha’s return brought shame on her family members, who quickly married off their runaway daughter to a 22-year-old man in a distant village.

“My parents thought it would be better if I married rather than continue with the Maoists,” she said. “I wanted to go back with the Maoists.”

The small, slight, former soldier no longer had a gun to defend herself against her husband’s repeated rapes and his family’s beatings. After a year of abuse, she tried to hang herself.

Sadly, Asha’s situation is not uncommon. Over the past year in Nepal, doing my MD-PhD research for Emory’s anthropology department, I have met many child soldiers like her.

I started doing anthropology and mental health research in Nepal in 1996, the year the Maoist People’s War began. Traveling between Atlanta and Kathmandu, watching

A Nepali child soldier guards a hillside. In 2006, a peace accord sent more than 6,000 child soldiers home after a decade of fighting. Many children face extreme emotional difficulty immersing themselves back into family life that they were forced to leave behind.

All photographs courtesy of Robert Koenig and Brandon Kohrt

Nepali friends and research participants endure the horrors of war, I felt despondent and powerless. I told myself that at least life would get better for them when the war ended. I assumed people disabled by depression and psychological trauma would begin slowly to heal when the guerillas put down their guns. After holding on to that hope for over a decade, I returned to Nepal in 2006 unprepared for what the child soldiers I interviewed were telling me: that peace alone was not going to heal everyone.

Working with Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), a nonprofit Nepali organization, I coordinated a study of 380 child soldiers across Nepal for UNICEF. I traveled to the villages of dozens of former child soldiers. In most cases, I found, it is not just the child who needs help – it is everyone around them.

With TPO and UNICEF, I helped develop a training course for women and men in the communities with former child soldiers. We trained them not only to assist child soldiers with emotional distress, but to work with teachers, families, and religious leaders, to stop forced child marriage, to promote education for girls, and to reduce the social stigma against the returned children. Schools were the best place for starting these changes. Teachers had been making the child soldiers sit on the floor. They mocked the children, “Hey little Maoist! Where is your army now?”

The local staff we trained worked with these teachers, often uncovering the teachers’ hidden fears of the child soldiers. Through development of coping strategies and increased insight into their own actions and discrimination, teachers felt more secure and began to support the returned children. Soon the students and other villagers began to follow the teachers’ positive examples.

Six months after her suicide attempt, Asha, now 17, is benefiting from one such offshoot of TPO work. Originally, she said, she joined the Maoist army because they promised her an education, a job, and a life of her own choosing. Now, with the help of a UNICEF-funded program, she’s beginning to realize these goals.

“There are people helping me now,” she said sitting in her family’s hut. “They are getting me sewing lessons so that I can earn money.”

I find hope in Asha’s story. But, support for Nepal’s child soldiers is continuously on the verge of collapse. Donors who fund programs for child soldiers favor emergency interventions rarely lasting more than six months. But, in a country with few health resources and endemic poverty, programs require years of support.

I realized that drawing international attention to the issue could be a step towards more support for child soldiers. Since October, I have been collaborating with documentary filmmaker Robert Koenig to help Asha and others tell their stories. We hope to complete the film, *Returned: Child Soldiers of Nepal’s Maoist Army*, later this year.

In my studies on the psychological effects of war, I have long focused on violence and trauma as roots of mental health problems. Talking with Asha and other child soldiers changed that. Now I see the importance of daily discrimination, poverty, lack of education, and domestic violence that can erode a person’s psychological being.

The flipside of that is the ability of strong community support to build healthy hearts and minds, even in the face of terrible trauma. Now back in Atlanta, I wonder about the effect of community-based mental health approaches here in the United States. If communities can heal through the ravages of a decade of widespread violence in Nepal, how could it transform lives here?

I hope community support will continue to increase for Asha and other child soldiers. And, ideally, mental health programs, whether in Kathmandu or Atlanta, will increasingly focus on communities because, ultimately, healing is something that we do together. ☸

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Left: Filmmaker Robert Koenig interviews a child soldier in Nepal for his documentary. Right: Brandon Kohrt conducts mental health and psychosocial training for Nepali villagers.