



The Complexities of Protecting Children's Rights During Hybrid Warfare

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Abstract. Modern armed conflicts have intensified humanitarian crises, with hybrid warfare tactics amplifying the vulnerabilities of children. By blurring the lines between peace and war, hybrid warfare combines conventional military operations with cyberattacks, disinformation, and economic coercion. This creates unprecedented legal and humanitarian challenges, particularly in safeguarding children's rights. As of 2024, data from UNICEF reveals alarming increases in displacement, casualties, and educational disruptions among children in conflict zones, with over 473 million children – one in six globally – residing in affected areas. This paper examines the international legal framework for the protection of children, focusing on gaps in implementation during hybrid warfare. It emphasizes the urgent need for robust accountability mechanisms, stronger international cooperation, and child-centred policy innovations that address systemic inequalities. Protecting children in conflict requires immediate action to preserve their rights and foster a resilient future, even in volatile environments.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, protections of children, armed conflicts, children's rights, humanitarian law

1. Introduction

The year 2024 marks a devastating period for children affected by armed conflict, as global data highlights severe violations of children's rights in war zones. Conflicts now account for 80% of humanitarian crises,¹ depriving children of essential resources such as education, healthcare, and clean water. Over 473 million children currently live in conflict-affected areas, a figure that has doubled since the 1990s, with millions displaced due to violence.

1 See Hewitt, 2009; Majerčáková Albertová, 2024.

Children represent a disproportionate share of refugees and internally displaced persons, facing heightened risks of malnutrition, exploitation, and limited access to education. In regions such as Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan, school closures and healthcare system collapses have further deepened their vulnerability. The humanitarian implications of such wars are sadly well known. However, the relevant literature has seemingly awarded less significance to hybrid conflicts, when the rights of children suffer less visible, but perhaps no less harmful infringements. This paper explores the critical intersection between hybrid warfare and children's rights, analysing the international legal frameworks designed to protect children during armed conflict. It highlights the ongoing challenges posed by hybrid warfare's ambiguity and decentralized tactics, which complicate accountability and exacerbate children's suffering. The findings underscore the need for strengthened legal protection, improved monitoring systems, and collaborative international responses to uphold children's rights amid these complex conflicts.

2. War-Affected Children

This section will explore the roles that children, including boys and girls, play in armed conflicts and the impact of these roles on both their individual development and their collective identity. A thorough understanding of the realities children face during wartime is crucial for humanitarian and human rights practitioners. Such an understanding enables the development of comprehensive protection programmes, including advocacy campaigns and legal interventions, and supports efforts to engage children actively in their own defence.

Throughout history, children have been profoundly affected by warfare, whether through direct involvement in combat, suffering injury from stray bullets, or experiencing the socioeconomic consequences of a disabled soldier-parent's absence.² Armed conflicts not only define children's formative years but also shape their future trajectories. History reveals the recurrent presence of children in war, serving varied roles. For instance, children have historically been enslaved for sexual and economic exploitation, trained to defend territory, or assigned as aides to warriors. In European military tradition, for example, boys could become pages to knights as early as the age of seven, receiving combat training and advancing to junior battlefield positions.³

Ancient texts and iconography illustrate the prevalence of boys as combatants or entire units composed of youths. In the Roman Empire, young recruits formed an integral part of the military structure. However, debates regarding

2 Fonseka, 2001.

3 Baranovsky, 1997.

the appropriate age for military participation have persisted. The philosopher Plutarch referenced age thresholds for involvement, though historical armies commonly employed younger boys as support staff, including as drummers in the Napoleonic Wars and buglers in the American Civil War. By the 20th century, children's military roles evolved further, as illustrated by the Boy Scouts' origins in the Boer War and the militarization of youth organizations like the Hitler Youth during World War II.

During the 20th century, humanitarian responses increasingly framed children as innocent victims of war, necessitating protection and relief. This perspective catalysed the formation of organizations such as Save the Children (in response to the economic sanctions on World War I Germany), Plan International (responding to the plight of Spanish Civil War children), Oxfam (addressing the famine affecting Greek children), and UNICEF (established to provide post-World War II emergency aid). Family reunification efforts led by the International Committee of the Red Cross further underscored the recognition of children as wartime casualties deserving specialized care.

The release of the report titled *Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*⁴ by rapporteur Graça Machel marked a pivotal moment in increasing global attention on children in conflict zones. Policymakers, academics, and media alike have since dedicated greater focus to normative protective frameworks for children. Yet, despite normative progress, the enforcement of these protections remains inconsistent, particularly during active conflicts. Recent UNICEF data indicates that over one billion children live in conflict-affected regions, with many of them being under the age of five.

Reports from the United Nations Secretary-General highlight serious violations against children in conflict zones, including murder, abduction, recruitment as soldiers, sexual violence, and attacks on schools and hospitals. Evidence also indicates that children are often deliberately targeted to demoralize or terrorize adversaries. The use of landmines, cluster munitions, and child human shields exemplifies this disregard for child safety. The Beslan school hostage crisis in Russia vividly demonstrated this grim reality.⁵

The proliferation of lightweight, inexpensive weaponry in recent decades has exacerbated child recruitment, as noted in global reports documenting child soldiers in numerous conflict zones. The data shows that in any active conflict, child soldiers are almost inevitably involved.⁶

The correlation between heightened sexual violence and the presence of armed actors is a long-standing issue that has become more strategically utilized

4 United Nations General Assembly, 1996.

5 United Nations, 2009.

6 Spielmann, 2019.

in recent conflicts. In Darfur,⁷ for example, rape has been used as a deliberate tactic to humiliate and displace communities, while in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, all parties to the conflict have been implicated in widespread sexual violence against children.⁸

3. The Impact of Conflict on Children

The repercussions of armed conflict on children are vast, affecting their physical health, emotional resilience, and psychological development. In some regions, cycles of conflict persist for so long that children reach adulthood having never experienced peace.

Humanitarian access to children in conflict zones is often obstructed, as evidenced in recent crises in Sri Lanka and Sudan. Denial of such access deprives children of essential resources, including food, water, and medical care, violating their right to survival and development. The disruption of daily life during warfare can lead to violations of children's fundamental rights, including education. Conflict-related attacks on schools have surged in recent years, resulting in school closures and systemic educational collapse.

Children's inability to attend school due to curfews, sieges, or school destruction increases their vulnerability to recruitment and exploitation. Schools often serve as stabilizing forces during crises, providing a semblance of normalcy and helping mitigate trauma. Therefore, establishing educational and recreational programmes post-crisis is critical for children's psychosocial recovery.

Armed conflict also impacts children's sense of identity⁹ and belonging, as familial and social bonds are severed. Displacement uproots children from familiar environments, forcing them to relinquish symbolic personal items that serve as cultural touchstones. The breakdown of protective social structures increases the risk of exploitation and violence. Alcohol and substance abuse, often used by adults to cope, further destabilizes households, leading to an uptick in domestic violence and neglect.

Conflict can force children into exploitative labour or survival-based transactions, including artisanal mining or transactional sex. Family separations amplify these risks, particularly for children with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as orphans and those with disabilities. Child soldiers, in particular, endure extreme physical and psychological trauma from exposure to violence, torture, and sexual exploitation. The reintegration of former child combatants poses significant challenges due to community stigma and the lingering impacts of trauma.

7 UNICEF, 2023.

8 Terry, 2012.

9 Nemeth, 2002.

Sexual violence remains a devastating weapon of war with profound consequences for children. Cultural stigmas often prevent open discussions about these assaults, compounding victims' isolation and emotional distress. Girls who bear children as a result of rape face further marginalization. Counselling services, whether formal or informal, play a crucial role in their recovery, though access remains limited in many conflict zones.¹⁰

4. Legal Protection of Children in Armed Conflict

The alarming statistics and situational analyses presented in the previous section highlighted the severe impact of armed conflicts on children. These figures not only call for urgent humanitarian action but also underscore the critical importance of legal protection in ensuring the safety and rights of children. International Humanitarian Law (IHL) establishes a clear framework for shielding children from the consequences of war, even under the most challenging circumstances.¹¹

International humanitarian law provides comprehensive protection for children during armed conflicts, whether international or non-international in nature. Children, as part of the civilian population not engaged in hostilities, are entitled to humane treatment and safeguarded under legal provisions regulating the conduct of war. Recognizing their inherent vulnerability, the Geneva Conventions of 1949¹² (GC III. and GC IV.) and their Additional Protocols of 1977¹³ (AP I. and AP II.) have established specific measures for their protection. Even when children directly participate in hostilities, these protections remain applicable. Notably, the Additional Protocols and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, along with its Optional Protocol, impose stringent limitations on children's involvement in hostilities.

Children who are not combatants are afforded *general protection* under GC IV. and AP I. during international armed conflicts. These include guarantees to life and prohibitions against coercion, corporal punishment, torture, and reprisals. In non-international conflicts, similar protections are outlined under common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Article 4 of AP II., which emphasize the principle that civilians, including children, must not be the object of attack. Acknowledging children's unique needs, IHL mandates their *special care and protection* against abuse. This includes provisions for evacuation, access to medical care, family reunification, education, and humane treatment if detained or interned. Key provisions also prohibit the death penalty for offences committed

10 Tóth, 2017.

11 International Committee of the Red Cross, 2011.

12 Geneva Conventions I–IV, 1949.

13 Additional Protocols of 1977.

while under the age of 18. These measures collectively affirm children's right to an environment that mitigates the adverse impacts of armed conflict.

Despite extensive protection,¹⁴ children are often involved in armed conflicts. The 1977 Additional Protocols were pioneering in addressing this issue, restricting direct involvement in hostilities for those under 15 years and encouraging recruitment prioritization among older adolescents. AP II. goes further, explicitly banning both recruitment and participation of children under 15, whether direct or indirect. In the unfortunate case of their involvement, children under 15 remain entitled to special protections even as combatants.

The 1989 Convention¹⁵ broadens the scope of child protection in armed conflicts, urging states to ensure children under 15 are not directly involved in hostilities and prioritizing older youth in recruitment. However, these provisions are less stringent than AP II's outright prohibition. Adopted in 2000, the Optional Protocol¹⁶ to the 1989 Convention strengthens these protections, raising the minimum recruitment age for voluntary service and prohibiting compulsory recruitment under 18. The International Criminal Court Statute of 1998¹⁷ further criminalizes the recruitment or use of children under 15 in hostilities, ensuring accountability under international law.

Thus, through sustained international and national efforts, the protections afforded by IHL aim to shield children from the ravages of armed conflict and ensure their rights are preserved.

5. The Changing Nature of Warfare

The nature of armed conflict has evolved significantly, moving away from the traditional concept of wars fought between nation-states with clear military objectives and battlefield engagement. Historically, conflicts such as the Crimean War and the First World War were characterized by formal declarations of war, structured combat, and adherence – albeit imperfectly – to agreed conventions regarding the protection of non-combatants. However, modern armed conflict has become increasingly complex, diffuse, and less regulated by traditional norms.

The term 'war' has largely been replaced by 'armed conflict' in international discourse, reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary violence. According to IHL principles, armed conflicts are classified as either international – those involving hostilities between two or more states – or non-international, where violence occurs between governmental forces and non-state actors, or

14 United Nations, 1966a; 1966b.

15 United Nations, 1989.

16 United Nations, 2000.

17 International Criminal Court, 2021.

between such groups. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) specifies that non-international conflicts must exhibit a minimum level of sustained violence and organizational structure to meet this classification.

Modern conflicts exhibit several defining features:¹⁸

1. *Targeting of Civilians:* Unlike traditional warfare, where combatants and military infrastructure were primary targets, contemporary conflicts often see civilians as direct targets of violence. This may involve the strategic use of civilian populations as human shields or retributive violence against communities accused of supporting opposing factions.
2. *Multiplicity of Armed Actors:* The proliferation of non-state actors, including insurgent groups, paramilitaries, and criminal organizations, has blurred the distinction between combatants and civilians. These groups may engage in political or criminal activities interchangeably, complicating their legal classification under IHL.
3. *Prolonged Conflicts and Resource Exploitation:* Conflicts in resource-rich areas often endure due to the financial incentives associated with control over natural resources. Warring factions may prioritize securing economic gains over achieving political objectives, as seen in regions like eastern Congo and Nigeria.
4. *Fragmentation of Command Structures:* Non-state armed groups often lack formal hierarchies and may shift allegiances frequently, making it difficult for external actors, such as peacekeepers, to engage or negotiate effectively. The absence of clear leadership exacerbates lawlessness and impedes accountability.

In addition to the above trends, contemporary armed conflicts are influenced by the following developments:¹⁹

1. *Urban Violence and Insurgency:* Conflicts have increasingly moved from rural battlefields to urban settings, resulting in more civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure. Insurgency tactics, such as bombings and guerrilla warfare, thrive in densely populated areas.
2. *Terrorism and Counterterrorism:* The rise of terrorism has introduced a new dimension to warfare, where non-state actors often target civilian spaces and critical infrastructure. In response, counterterrorism measures can also negatively impact civilian populations, particularly when they involve mass detentions or indiscriminate use of force.

18 Reperger, 2013.

19 Stepanova, 2009.

3. *Use of Proxy Forces and Private Militias:* States increasingly outsource military operations to private security firms or paramilitary groups, thereby reducing direct accountability for human rights violations. These groups, often less disciplined and regulated, contribute to heightened brutality in conflict zones.

Peace negotiations are – as a result of the changing landscape of conflict – becoming increasingly complex, involving multiple factions with competing interests.²⁰ Partial peace agreements that exclude key actors often fail to achieve lasting stability, as seen in conflicts in Sudan and Colombia. Additionally, humanitarian operations face credibility crises due to incidents of misconduct by peacekeeping forces, including allegations of sexual exploitation. Efforts to build sustainable peace are further undermined by the economic motivations of some conflict actors.

The evolving nature of armed conflict necessitates a reevaluation of traditional frameworks for war and peace. While the underlying use of violence to achieve political or economic objectives remains a constant, the actors, methods, and consequences of contemporary conflicts have changed dramatically. Effective responses require an adaptable approach that addresses the root causes of violence, strengthens accountability mechanisms, and prioritizes the protection of civilian populations, particularly children. International actors must also ensure that peace processes are inclusive and address the needs of all stakeholders, including marginalized groups and non-combatants.

6. Hybrid Warfare: Characteristics and Differences from Conventional Warfare

Hybrid warfare has emerged as a prominent and complex form of conflict in the modern era, blurring the lines between war and peace and challenging traditional military doctrines. By merging conventional and unconventional tactics, hybrid warfare seeks to exploit an adversary's vulnerabilities across military, political, economic, and informational domains. Hybrid warfare encompasses a wide spectrum of tactics, from traditional military engagements to irregular and asymmetric approaches, including cyber operations, disinformation, economic coercion, and the use of proxy actors. Unlike conventional warfare – typically characterized by open, large-scale confrontations between state militaries – hybrid warfare aims to operate in a 'gray zone', remaining below the threshold that would trigger formal declarations of war or military retaliation.²¹

20 Baranovsky, 1997.

21 Hoffman, 2009.

Frank G. Hoffman describes hybrid warfare as a deliberate combination of conventional military forces and unconventional means, such as political subversion, guerrilla tactics, cyberattacks, and economic sabotage, employed to confuse, weaken, and destabilize adversaries. In contrast to the distinct separation of civilian and military spheres in conventional warfare, hybrid warfare deliberately targets civil institutions, public trust, and social cohesion.

Key characteristics of hybrid warfare include the following:

1. It occurs in a multiplicity of domains. Hybrid warfare extends conflict beyond traditional battlefields, targeting digital, economic, and societal systems. While conventional warfare is often confined to land, sea, and air domains, hybrid warfare leverages cyberattacks, media manipulation, and economic sanctions to create a multidimensional offensive. Modern hybrid actors recognize that disrupting financial systems, information networks, and political processes can be as effective as military force in undermining an opponent's stability. Conventional warfare traditionally involved controlling physical territory, whereas hybrid warfare focuses on dominating information spaces, influencing public opinion, and destabilizing governance.
2. The separation between civilian and combatant is blurred: In conventional warfare, combatants are typically identifiable by their uniforms, ranks, and adherence to rules of engagement. In hybrid warfare, non-state actors, paramilitary groups, and disguised operatives are often used to achieve plausible deniability. Civilians may also be co-opted or inadvertently drawn into conflict, either as pawns in disinformation campaigns or as casualties in false-flag operations designed to obscure the aggressor's identity. Conventional military engagements sought to minimize civilian involvement, at least in principle, whereas hybrid warfare often weaponizes civilian populations, making them central to the conflict dynamic.
3. Information operations and disinformation campaigns are significant. The strategic use of disinformation and propaganda is a hallmark of hybrid warfare. Information operations aim to sow confusion, erode public trust, and manipulate narratives to weaken political cohesion. Hybrid actors often use social media, false news reports, and cyber influence campaigns to distort reality and undermine institutional credibility. While propaganda has long been a part of warfare, hybrid warfare places unprecedented emphasis on digital platforms and instantaneous information dissemination. In contrast, conventional warfare relied more heavily on formal communication channels and long-term psychological operations.
4. Use of proxy forces and unconventional actors is prevalent. States engaged in hybrid warfare frequently rely on non-state actors, including private military

companies, insurgent groups, and local militias, to conduct operations on their behalf. These proxies provide a layer of deniability and complicate international responses, as their activities can be framed as internal conflicts or rogue actions rather than state-sponsored aggression.²² Traditional wars were generally fought by state-sanctioned military forces with clear lines of command and accountability. Hybrid warfare, however, relies on dispersed networks of actors with ambiguous affiliations and fluid alliances.

5. Economic pressure and resource weaponization are used. Hybrid warfare often involves economic coercion, such as sanctions, trade restrictions, and the manipulation of resource access, to destabilize adversary economies. By targeting critical supply chains and energy resources, hybrid actors can inflict significant damage without resorting to military action.²³ Economic blockades and resource control were historically used in conventional warfare, but hybrid warfare incorporates these measures as standalone or preliminary tactics within broader conflict strategies, rather than accompanying direct military engagements.
6. Technological integration and cyberwarfare are pursued. Hybrid warfare heavily integrates cyberattacks and digital surveillance as offensive tools. Cyber operations may target government databases, power grids, and communication systems to disrupt critical infrastructure. These attacks are often anonymous and difficult to attribute, complicating legal and military responses. Conventional warfare relied primarily on physical confrontation and conventional weaponry. In contrast, hybrid warfare leverages technological advancements to engage in 'invisible' battles that can cripple national systems without firing a single shot.
7. Ambiguity and plausible deniability are paramount. One of the defining features of hybrid warfare is the use of tactics that obscure the aggressor's identity and intentions. Through tactics such as false-flag operations, staged protests, and covert cyberattacks, hybrid actors can delay or prevent attribution, making it difficult for affected states to mount a coordinated defence or seek international recourse. In conventional warfare, the identities of belligerents were typically clear, even in cases of subterfuge or deception. Hybrid warfare, however, thrives on ambiguity, making traditional deterrence strategies less effective.

Hybrid warfare presents significant challenges to international law and the principles of just war. The existing legal frameworks governing warfare, including the Geneva Conventions, struggle to address conflicts that fall outside traditional categories of interstate war. For example, cyberattacks and disinformation

22 Porkoláb, 2016.

23 Berzins, 2015.

campaigns often do not fit the legal definitions of armed aggression, raising questions about how and when states can lawfully respond.²⁴

The use of proxy forces and private military companies further complicates accountability, as it becomes difficult to trace responsibility for human rights violations and war crimes. Hybrid actors exploit legal gray areas to conduct operations that are both highly effective and difficult to prosecute. This ambiguity necessitates a reevaluation of international legal norms to ensure that states can respond to hybrid threats without undermining human rights or escalating conflicts.

In conclusion, hybrid warfare represents a significant departure from conventional warfare, characterized by its multidimensionality, the use of unconventional actors, and its emphasis on disinformation and cyber operations. By operating in the 'gray zone' between peace and war, hybrid actors challenge traditional notions of conflict and evade conventional deterrence mechanisms. Understanding the defining features of hybrid warfare is essential for developing effective counter-strategies that address not only military vulnerabilities but also political, economic, and informational weaknesses.

7. The Challenges of Protecting Children's Rights in Hybrid Warfare

Children's rights have evolved significantly over the past century, moving from the margins of legal and political discourse to the forefront of international law. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)²⁵ represents a landmark achievement, establishing that children have distinct and non-negotiable rights, including the right to education, health, protection, and participation. However, the practical application of these rights remains inconsistent, particularly in conflict zones where state structures collapse and international laws are violated. The document outlines key international legal instruments, such as the Geneva Conventions and regional human rights charters, as foundational to protecting children. It further addresses the responsibilities of state and non-state actors in preventing violations and ensuring access to justice for child victims. The document emphasizes that, despite the legal recognition of children's rights, conflicts often exacerbate vulnerabilities due to displacement, separation from families, and direct violence. Among the primary obstacles to the protection of children are:

²⁴ Dinstein, 2001.

²⁵ Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989.

1. Weak governance and accountability mechanisms: In fragile states, government institutions often lack the capacity or political will to enforce children's rights, allowing violations to occur unchecked.
2. Non-state armed groups: The rise of non-state actors in modern conflicts complicates the enforcement of international legal norms, as these groups often reject or are not bound by international agreements on children's protection.
3. Resource constraints: Humanitarian organizations tasked with ensuring children's welfare frequently face funding shortfalls and logistical challenges, limiting their ability to deliver essential services such as education and healthcare.

The document highlights the importance of legal and institutional mechanisms in addressing violations of children's rights. International courts and tribunals, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), play a critical role in holding perpetrators accountable for crimes against children, including recruitment as child soldiers, sexual exploitation, and forced displacement.²⁶

Furthermore, the document outlines the significance of national legal systems in enforcing children's rights. However, it points to disparities in legal frameworks across states, with some nations lacking adequate laws to protect children or failing to implement existing protections. This disparity is particularly evident in cases involving displaced children and refugees, where host nations may not fully extend legal protections due to political, economic, or social pressures.

The right to education and participation are emphasized as central to empowering children and mitigating the long-term impacts of conflict. The document notes that education not only provides knowledge but also restores a sense of normalcy and safety for children in post-crisis environments. Yet, educational institutions are often targeted in conflicts, either as symbols of state authority or as strategic sites of control.²⁷

Participation, as articulated in the CRC, ensures that children have a voice in matters affecting their lives. The document argues that involving children in decision-making processes can foster resilience and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian and legal interventions. However, meaningful participation requires culturally sensitive approaches that recognize children's diverse experiences and developmental stages.

International organizations, such as UNICEF and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), play pivotal roles in advocating for and protecting children's rights. The document underscores their efforts in monitoring violations, providing emergency assistance, and supporting policy development at the national and

²⁶ Lattmann, 2018.

²⁷ Ibid.

international levels. Additionally, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are highlighted as critical partners in implementing grassroots programmes that directly support affected children.

Emerging threats to children's rights include cyber exploitation, climate-induced displacement, and the weaponization of misinformation,²⁸ itself a tool of hybrid warfare. These challenges necessitate adaptive legal frameworks and innovative policy responses. For example, the increasing prevalence of online exploitation demands enhanced cybersecurity measures and international cooperation to track and prosecute offenders. Several recommendations can be made for strengthening the protection of children's rights, such as strengthening legal frameworks (harmonizing national laws with international standards and ensure robust enforcement mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable), enhanced monitoring, as well as long-term investments in education, psychosocial support, and community development are crucial for rebuilding children's lives after conflict.

Ultimately, the protection of children's rights in the context of conflict and displacement remains a critical and complex challenge. While significant progress has been made through international legal instruments and humanitarian interventions, gaps in implementation and enforcement persist. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that prioritizes accountability, resource allocation, and the active involvement of children themselves. By fostering international solidarity and adopting child-centered policies, the global community can better safeguard the rights and well-being of children affected by crises. All these measures are applicable to hybrid conflict and increase societal resilience to such aggression.

8. Conclusions

The protection of children's rights during armed conflicts has always been fraught with challenges, but hybrid warfare amplifies these difficulties through its complex and multifaceted nature. Hybrid conflicts often blur the distinctions between combatants and civilians, between war and peace, and between state and non-state actors, creating legal, moral, and operational dilemmas for international institutions, governments, and humanitarian actors. As the analysis of recent conflicts demonstrates, children are disproportionately impacted, facing increased risks of death, injury, displacement, and exploitation. Despite the robust international legal frameworks established by instruments such as the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the realities of hybrid warfare highlight critical gaps in enforcement and accountability.

28 Gerasimov, 2013.

One of the defining features of hybrid warfare is its reliance on indirect, covert, and decentralized methods, including cyber operations, disinformation campaigns, and the strategic use of proxy forces. These tactics exacerbate the vulnerability of children in conflict zones. Unlike conventional warfare, where clear lines of engagement and accountability are maintained, hybrid warfare thrives on ambiguity, making it difficult to identify perpetrators of rights violations. For example, in many hybrid conflicts, schools and hospitals become targets – not necessarily because of their military value but to destabilize communities, disrupt social cohesion, and spread terror. The resulting destruction not only deprives children of essential services such as education and healthcare but also exacerbates their psychological trauma and long-term social dislocation.

Another critical issue is the use of information warfare in hybrid conflicts, which has far-reaching implications for children's rights. Disinformation campaigns can distort the narrative around conflict, hinder humanitarian access, and foster mistrust between local populations and international organizations. This undermines efforts to protect children, as it becomes increasingly difficult to provide accurate information and secure cooperation from affected communities. Additionally, children themselves become targets in the digital realm, with social media platforms used to propagate harmful content or recruit vulnerable youths into armed groups. International legal frameworks have yet to fully address the complexities of these digital threats, leaving significant gaps in the protection of children in hybrid conflicts.²⁹

Furthermore, hybrid warfare often operates in the 'gray zone,' where actions do not meet the formal threshold of war but still result in severe violations of children's rights. In such scenarios, traditional mechanisms of legal accountability and international intervention are often insufficient. Non-state actors and proxy militias, commonly employed in hybrid warfare, may not be signatories to international treaties and, therefore, do not consider themselves bound by conventions protecting civilians. This complicates the application of humanitarian law and necessitates new approaches to ensure that all actors involved in conflict are held accountable for crimes against children.

The humanitarian response to children's needs in hybrid conflicts is also hindered by logistical and political constraints. Humanitarian agencies often struggle to navigate the complexities of hybrid warfare, where access to conflict zones is restricted not only by violence but also by political manipulation and misinformation. Hybrid warfare's ability to disrupt supply chains and block aid flows leaves children particularly vulnerable to starvation, disease, and exploitation. In many cases, children are forced into survival strategies, including labour exploitation and recruitment by armed groups, further perpetuating cycles of poverty and violence.

29 Caliskan, 2019.

Monitoring and reporting mechanisms must be enhanced to ensure that violations against children's rights are systematically documented and that perpetrators are held accountable.³⁰ Additionally, national governments and international bodies must work together to bridge the gap between legal norms and practical enforcement. This requires not only the ratification of international treaties but also the development of national legislation that incorporates child protection measures into broader security strategies.

Moreover, the protection of children's rights in hybrid warfare necessitates a paradigm shift towards resilience-building and child-centred approaches. Efforts must be made to ensure that children's voices are included in peace-building processes and post-conflict reconstruction. Their perspectives provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of conflict and can help shape policies that prioritize their rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Investing in education, mental health support, and community programmes is crucial to fostering a sense of stability and normalcy for children affected by hybrid warfare.

After all, the protection of children's rights in the context of hybrid warfare represents one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary international law and humanitarian efforts. While significant progress has been made in recognizing children as independent rights-holders, the realities of hybrid conflicts demand more adaptive and integrated responses. The international community must move beyond reactive measures and adopt proactive strategies that address the root causes of conflict, strengthen accountability mechanisms, and empower children and their communities. Ultimately, safeguarding children's rights in hybrid warfare requires a collective commitment to uphold the principles of justice, dignity, and resilience in the face of an increasingly complex and unpredictable global security landscape.

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