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Legal Protections in Theory, Absence in Practice: Street-Connected Children and the Collapse of International Obligations in Eastern DRC

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Abstract

Despite the extensive international legal architecture designed to protect children in armed conflict—including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Geneva Conventions, and the UN's Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda—children in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continue to live and die in conditions that blatantly contravene these binding commitments. Nowhere is this failure more visible than in Goma, where thousands of street-connected children navigate a landscape defined by chronic conflict, militia activity, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, disappearances, and structural abandonment. Drawing on field data collected in partnership with World Hope Givers (WHG) in 2024-2025, as well as the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) model of chronic, conflict-related trauma, this article examines the stark gap between international law's normative promises and their practical implementation. The findings reveal a persistent protection vacuum produced by systemic weaknesses: collapsing state institutions, the impunity of armed groups, the militarization of public space, the economic interests of global actors in the mineral war, and the bureaucratic invisibility of unregistered children. These structural conditions nullify the rights theoretically guaranteed to every child, including protection from violence, access to humanitarian assistance, and the right to survival and development. This article argues that international law's failure is not due to insufficient normative clarity but to the absence of enforceable mechanisms capable of restraining armed actors, compelling state compliance, or prioritizing children's rights over geopolitical and economic interests. The case of Goma's street-connected children exposes

a broader global paradox: children are more protected in international law than in any other historical period, yet those living in the world's most violent regions remain the least protected in practice. It is also crucial to explain from the beginning the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) as a political-psychological framework that conceptualizes conflict-related sexual violence as a lineage-disrupting, community-level trauma embedded in legal, economic, and institutional collapse rather than as an individual psychiatric disorder.

Keywords

Children in Armed Conflict, Street-Connected Children, Eastern DRC, Goma, International Humanitarian Law, Child Rights, Protection Gap, Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV), WRSS—War Rape Survivors Syndrome, International Criminal Law, Mineral War, Humanitarian Failure, Structural Violence, Displacement, Trauma Ecology

1. Introduction: The Paradox between Law and Reality in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (2025)

International law has never been more explicit, expansive, or normatively ambitious in its commitment to the protection of children affected by armed conflict. Across global treaties, regional charters, and United Nations resolutions, children are formally recognized as rights-holders whose protection is declared non-derogable, even in contexts of war. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) articulate unequivocal prohibitions against child recruitment, torture, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, and denial of humanitarian access (United Nations, 1989, 2000). These protections are reinforced by international humanitarian law, as outlined in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, which mandate special respect and protection for children in situations of armed conflict (ICRC, 1949, 1977). Within the African context, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child further expands these guarantees, explicitly addressing the vulnerabilities of children in conflict, displacement, and postcolonial contexts (OAU, 1990). The United Nations Security Council has repeatedly reaffirmed these obligations by identifying six grave violations against children—killing and maiming, recruitment, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access—as threats to international peace and security (UNSC, 2005).

On paper, no generation of children has been protected by a more comprehensive legal architecture. Nevertheless, for children living in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), particularly in the city of Goma, these protections remain largely theoretical. Goma functions simultaneously as a humanitarian hub and as an epicenter of one of the world's most protracted and violent resource-driven conflicts. Within this setting, thousands of children survive entirely outside

formal protection systems. They sleep in abandoned buildings, markets, and open streets; they construct informal micro-societies as survival strategies; they form alliances with older youth, armed actors, or criminal networks for protection. Many are subjected to sexual violence, trafficking, forced labor, and arbitrary arrest. Some are detained alongside adults in military or informal detention facilities, while others disappear after arrest, absorbed into a landscape of impunity shaped by armed groups and fragmented state authority. These children occupy a legal limbo: they are neither combatants nor protected civilians in any meaningful operational sense. Their very existence exposes the limitations of the legal categories that purport to safeguard them.

The central argument of this article is that international law is normatively strong yet functionally absent in precisely those contexts where children require protection most urgently. The failure does not stem from a lack of legal standards but from the absence of enforceable mechanisms capable of operating within fragile, militarized, and resource-exploited environments. In eastern DRC, armed groups, state forces, and extractive economic interests operate with near-total impunity. International monitoring mechanisms are constrained by insecurity, restricted access, political pressure, and chronic underfunding. The civilian protection mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), while extensive in theory, remains structurally insufficient and increasingly contested by local populations who experience little tangible protection. The result is a protection vacuum in which international obligations dissipate upon contact with the material realities of conflict, displacement, and institutional collapse. Children fall through these gaps not because the law fails to recognize them, but because the institutions charged with enforcing their rights are absent, overwhelmed, or, in some cases, themselves implicated in violence.

Street-connected children in Goma—often referred to locally as *shégués* or *washege*—constitute a distinct and legally neglected population whose vulnerabilities reflect intersecting structural forces. Their trajectories are shaped by armed conflict and repeated displacement, the collapse of family and caregiving systems, pervasive sexual violence against women and girls, the militarization of adolescence, chronic poverty linked to the global mineral economy, and sustained neglect by state institutions. Many of these children were born during or immediately after episodes of extreme violence. Some were conceived through wartime sexual violence; others fled militia attacks or lost caregivers to conflict-related deaths. A significant number lack formal identity documents, rendering them legally invisible and effectively outside the jurisdiction of both national and international protection regimes. In this context, the CRC's prohibition of arbitrary detention becomes meaningless when children can be jailed with adults for sleeping in prohibited areas. OPAC's ban on child recruitment offers little protection when militias recruit through coercion, survival pressure, or force. The Geneva Conventions' prohibition of torture does not reach unmonitored detention sites where boys are beaten, raped, starved, or disappear altogether. United Nations

resolutions condemning sexual violence offer no shield to girls assaulted in streets, markets, or by armed men acting with impunity. The dissonance between rights and reality becomes so vast that international law risks functioning as mythology—an aspirational narrative disconnected from material protection.

The failure of international law in eastern DRC cannot be understood without acknowledging the colonial and postcolonial structures that continue to sustain violence in the region. Colonial extraction established patterns of resource exploitation that persist through the influence of multinational corporate interests, regional political actors, and global demand for minerals essential to contemporary technologies. Armed groups compete for control over coltan, cobalt, gold, and tungsten, financing their operations through taxation, extortion, forced labor, and systematic violence against civilian populations. Within this political economy, violence against children is not incidental but structurally reproduced. International legal commitments are routinely subordinated to geopolitical and economic interests that benefit from instability. Children's suffering becomes an externalized cost of a global system dependent on cheap minerals, deregulated extraction, and weakened state institutions. The resulting protection gap is therefore not accidental but systemic. Children are abandoned not because of legal ambiguity, but because the enforcement of their rights is outweighed by political expediency and economic gain.

While international legal frameworks focus primarily on discrete violations—rape, recruitment, torture, abduction—the lived experiences of street-connected children in Goma reflect continuous exposure to cumulative structural violence. To account for this reality, this article draws on the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework, developed through extensive fieldwork with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. WRSS conceptualizes trauma as ecological rather than episodic, emphasizing the collapse of relational, social, and institutional systems; the chronic activation of survival-based nervous system responses; the normalization of violence as an environmental condition; and the intergenerational transmission of fear, grief, and social fragmentation (Rebecka, 2021). Applied to street-connected children, WRSS reveals that their suffering cannot be reduced to isolated events. Instead, it emerges from a trauma ecosystem in which violence permeates every layer of daily life. Military aggression, sexual abuse, hunger, homelessness, forced displacement, and the absence of adult protection intersect to shape developmental trajectories in which trauma becomes atmospheric—embedded in the social environment rather than confined to memory.

The urgency of this analysis is heightened by the systematic absence of street-connected children from legal and humanitarian scholarship. Existing literature tends to focus on child soldiers, survivors of sexual violence, or displaced children in formal camps, while those living entirely outside institutional frameworks remain underexamined. This omission is particularly troubling in light of field observations from World Hope Givers (WHG), which document a sharp escalation in arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings of

street-connected children during 2024-2025. Children as young as five navigate heavily militarized urban spaces; both girls and boys face increasing sexual violence; arrests by the national army (FARDC) have intensified; at least twenty children are documented as having disappeared following military detention; humanitarian access has continued to shrink; and community-based protection systems have progressively eroded. These realities contradict the foundational principles of international humanitarian and human rights law, exposing a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the global child protection regime: rights without enforcement do not function as rights, but as aspirations.

This article examines the structural failure of international law in eastern DRC through the lens of street-connected children in Goma. It seeks to demonstrate the profound gap between legal protections and lived reality, trace the political, economic, and colonial forces sustaining this protection vacuum, and analyze children's experiences as systemic rather than isolated violations. It introduces WRSS as a framework for understanding chronic, intergenerational trauma produced by sustained legal abandonment and argues for a reconceptualization of child protection in conflict settings that prioritizes enforceability, local partnerships, and trauma-informed strategies. While Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) has advanced trauma theory by recognizing prolonged and interpersonal harm, it remains primarily a clinical construct focused on intrapsychic symptomatology (Herman, 1992; Cloitre et al., 2013). WRSS departs from this orientation by situating trauma within the context of political betrayal, economic exploitation, and the erosion of legal recognition. In the context of Goma, WRSS enables analysis of a trauma ecology in which children's suffering is produced not only by violence itself but by the systematic nullification of the protections promised under international law.

Ultimately, the failures observed in Goma are not anomalies but manifestations of a broader global pattern in which international law breaks down precisely where children are most at risk. The Eastern DRC thus serves as both a warning and a call to reimagine international law not as an abstract system of norms, but as a lived practice that requires political courage, global accountability, and community-driven intervention.

2. Legal Framework: What International Law Promises

International law constructs one of the most ambitious protection systems ever created for children affected by armed conflict. Across global and regional instruments—including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, its Optional Protocols, the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the United Nations' Children and Armed Conflict agenda—the international community has articulated a clear and binding commitment to ensure children's survival, dignity, and development even in the midst of war. These laws reflect a broad consensus that children, owing to their particular vulnerability, are entitled to heightened protection norms that

cannot be suspended during emergencies or conflict. In theory, such norms should act as a shield for children in places like Goma. However, the lived experiences of street-connected children in eastern DRC reveal how fragile and often illusory these protections become in contexts of prolonged instability, economic exploitation, and fragmented governance.

2.1. The Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) is the cornerstone of contemporary child rights legislation and remains the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. It affirms children's non-derogable rights to life, survival, protection, education, and identity (United Nations, 1989, arts. 6, 7, 19, 28). Crucially, the CRC does not permit states to suspend these obligations during war or national emergency, which makes it a central instrument for assessing state failures in conflict-affected regions. Article 38 explicitly states that states must respect international humanitarian law relevant to children in armed conflict and ensure that no child under fifteen is recruited or directly participates in hostilities (United Nations, 1989, art. 38).

The CRC therefore establishes a dual obligation: the state must both refrain from harming children and actively protect them from violence perpetrated by state actors, armed groups, or the wider conflict environment. In eastern DRC, however, these obligations remain largely aspirational. Despite the normative clarity of the treaty, children in Goma continue to experience forced displacement, arbitrary detention, violent policing, sexual violence, and recruitment pressures—conditions that directly contravene the protections guaranteed under the CRC.

2.2. The Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict

The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) (United Nations, 2000) expands the CRC's protective scope by explicitly prohibiting the compulsory recruitment of anyone under eighteen by state forces and banning any recruitment of children by non-state armed groups (United Nations, 2000, arts. 1-4). It also requires states to adopt legal, administrative, and practical measures for the demobilization, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of former child soldiers (United Nations, 2000, arts. 4, 6).

In theory, OPAC should prevent the enlistment of children into militias in eastern DRC and guarantee care for those escaping armed groups. In practice, recruitment—both forced and coercive—remains widespread in conflict-affected territories near Goma. The protocol presupposes that states possess both the political will and the institutional capacity to enforce prohibitions against armed actors. Yet in eastern DRC, where state authority is fragmented and dozens of armed groups operate autonomously, OPAC's provisions lack operational traction. The children who roam Goma's streets—many of them fleeing militia violence—rarely benefit from reintegration programs, which are under-resourced, inconsistently

implemented, and inaccessible for unregistered or displaced children.

2.3. Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 remain the foundational legal instruments governing humanitarian protections during armed conflict. Children occupy a special category within these frameworks. They must not be targeted, tortured, subjected to degrading treatment, or used as instruments of war. The Conventions mandate humane treatment, access to humanitarian aid, and the separation of children from adult detainees.

For children in Goma, these principles are systematically violated. Reports of children detained with adults, beaten during arrest, exploited by soldiers, or denied humanitarian access are direct contraventions of the Geneva regime. The gap between the law's promise and the reality on the ground reveals a fundamental flaw: the Geneva Conventions depend on state compliance, yet they lack enforcement mechanisms capable of restraining armed factions operating outside state control or within corrupt state structures. When state forces themselves are implicated in violations—as documented in eastern DRC—the protective force of the Geneva framework collapses.

2.4. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

At the regional level, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) (Organization of African Unity, 1990) provides some of the strongest child protection provisions globally. It prohibits the recruitment of children, mandates protection for children in conflict zones, and includes explicit articles regarding child refugees, internally displaced children, and those affected by harmful cultural practices (Organization of African Unity, 1990, arts. 21-23). In several respects, the Charter exceeds the CRC by recognizing the particular vulnerabilities of African children living under war, political instability, and displacement.

Despite this robust regional framework, children in eastern DRC experience conditions that violate nearly every article of the ACRWC. Mass displacement, systematic sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, hunger, and the absence of functioning institutions all reflect a structural disregard for the Charter's obligations. The ACRWC depends on both state capacity and regional oversight, neither of which adequately reaches conflict-affected areas around Goma. Moreover, children who lack official documentation—such as many street-connected children—are often excluded altogether from regional protection mechanisms, rendering their rights invisible at both state and continental levels.

2.5. UN Security Council Resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict

The United Nations Security Council established the Children and Armed Conflict (CAAC) agenda in 1999, creating a specialized monitoring and reporting mechanism Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) to document six grave

violations: killing and maiming of children, recruitment or use of children by armed forces or armed groups, rape and sexual violence, attacks on schools or hospitals, abduction, and denial of humanitarian access (UNSC, 1999, 2005). Subsequent resolutions reaffirm and expand this framework, requiring states and armed groups listed in the Secretary-General's reports to develop action plans aimed at ending violations.

Again, in theory, the CAAC mechanism should offer a degree of international accountability for violations occurring in eastern DRC. In practice, however, the monitoring system struggles with limited access to conflict zones, insufficient resources, security constraints, and political pressures. Violations against children in Goma—especially arbitrary killings, disappearances, sexual violence, and military detention—often go undocumented or are reported years after they occur, diminishing the possibility of timely intervention. The CAAC system also relies on states to investigate and prosecute grave violations, an expectation unrealistic in contexts where state actors are themselves implicated in abuses or where judicial systems have effectively collapsed.

2.6. The Structural Failure of Legal Protections

Taken together, these instruments provide an extraordinarily comprehensive framework for protecting children. At the normative level, international law leaves little ambiguity: children must be shielded from the violence of war, must not be recruited, must not be detained with adults, must not be tortured, and must have access to humanitarian assistance, identity, education, and recovery. Theoretically, a child in Goma possesses the same legal rights as a child in any peaceful nation-state.

Yet the experiences of street-connected children in eastern DRC demonstrate that the existence of rights does not guarantee their realization. Legal protections depend on a state's capacity, functioning institutions, effective enforcement mechanisms, political will, and international oversight. In eastern DRC, these elements are overwhelmingly absent. The state cannot extend its authority across militia-controlled territories; police and military forces are frequently perpetrators of violations; humanitarian actors face structural barriers; and international mechanisms lack the power to compel compliance.

The result is a system in which rights exist in theory but collapse in practice—a protection gap so severe that it exposes the limits of international law itself. For children living in Goma's streets, the normative strength of the CRC, OPAC, the Geneva Conventions, the ACRWC, and UNSC resolutions offers no material safety. Instead, these instruments form a legal promise that remains perpetually deferred, overshadowed by armed conflict, displacement, extractive economies, and institutional breakdown. Taken together, these treaties create a comprehensive global protection architecture. Nevertheless, as the next section demonstrates, these protections collapse immediately when confronted with armed fragmentation, economic exploitation, and institutional breakdown in eastern DRC.

3. The Protection Gap: Why These Laws Fail

The protection gap refers to the structural distance between the legal rights children hold under international law and the material conditions in which they live. Despite the extensive legal protections afforded to children under international humanitarian law, human rights law, and regional African instruments, the lived reality in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo reveals a profound and persistent protection gap. This gap is not accidental; it is sustained by structural weaknesses in the international legal system, the erosion of domestic governance, entrenched economic and colonial legacies, and the social disintegration resulting from decades of war. The situation of street-connected children in Goma exemplifies the collapse of a legal architecture that, while normatively ambitious, is practically incapable of restraining violence, preventing neglect, or holding perpetrators accountable. This section examines the core reasons behind this failure, demonstrating how legal promises remain unrealized in a context marked by fragmented sovereignty, chronic conflict, and systemic exploitation.

A central reason international child protection norm fail in eastern DRC is that international human rights and humanitarian law lack independent enforcement mechanisms. Treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, and the Geneva Conventions impose clear and binding obligations on states, yet they provide no supranational authority with automatic enforcement powers capable of compelling compliance (United Nations, 1989, 2000; ICRC, 1949, 1977). Instead, international law relies fundamentally on state consent, domestic implementation, and good-faith compliance. In contexts where the state is fragmented, overstretched, or directly implicated in abuses, as in eastern DRC, this reliance becomes untenable, rendering child protection norms largely aspirational rather than operational.

In eastern DRC, the state does not possess a monopoly on the use of force. Armed groups operate freely, sometimes controlling territory more effectively than the government. The national army (FARDC) itself has been repeatedly documented as a perpetrator of child rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and recruitment pressures. The paradox is stark: the international system expects the very institutions accused of abusing children to ensure their protection.

International monitoring mechanisms also face significant restrictions. The UN's Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for grave violations against children depends on access to conflict zones, cooperation from armed groups, and functional partnerships with state institutions (UNSC, 2005). In eastern DRC, monitors cannot reliably reach militia-controlled territories, making it impossible to verify violations in real time. Reports are often delayed, incomplete, or based on limited eyewitness testimony. Consequently, many abuses—especially disappearances, killings, and sexual violence against street-connected children—remain undocumented or are reported months or years after they occur, diminish-

ing the possibility of intervention.

Moreover, even when grave violations are confirmed, the international community lacks coercive powers to compel perpetrators to change their behavior. Sanctions, naming-and-shaming strategies, or conditional aid have had minimal impact on armed groups whose economies are not dependent on international legitimacy. As a result, international law's normative strength collapses at the moment it encounters actors who reject its authority or benefit from violating it.

3.1. Resource and Governance Collapse

The failure of international law in eastern DRC cannot be understood without examining the collapse of domestic governance. The protection of children relies heavily on the functioning of institutions, including police, courts, social services, child protection agencies, and community welfare systems. In Goma and the surrounding regions, these institutions are either absent, underfunded, or compromised by corruption.

Local police forces often target street-connected children as "public nuisances", conducting violent sweeps, confiscating belongings, demanding bribes, or detaining minors with adults in violation of both international and domestic law (Organization of African Unity, 1990, art. 17). Instead of serving as protectors, the police frequently contribute to the violence children experience. Girls are particularly vulnerable during police operations, with reports of sexual assault during nighttime patrols or within detention facilities. When children are arrested or disappear, parents—if they are alive—have no institutional mechanism through which to file complaints or request investigations.

The judiciary suffers from equally profound dysfunction. Courts often lack the necessary resources, oversight, and trained personnel capable of applying child rights standards. Cases involving violence against children rarely reach prosecution, and when they do, perpetrators often evade accountability through bribery or intimidation. For children without birth registration—estimated to be a significant percentage of Goma's street-connected population—legal invisibility exacerbates the problem. Without documentation, they cannot formally access protection services, enroll in school, obtain medical care, or be recognized as rights-bearing individuals within the justice system (United Nations, 1989, art. 7).

Child protection agencies—both governmental and non-governmental—operate under immense pressure. Many rely on international donors whose funding fluctuates with geopolitical interests, donor fatigue, or shifting humanitarian priorities. Social workers lack basic resources, shelters are overcrowded or unsafe, and reintegration programs for children escaping armed groups are chronically underfunded. The result is a system in which the protective institutions envisioned by international law exist only nominally. For many children in Goma, international protections remain an abstract ideal with no material presence in their daily lives.

3.2. Colonial Legacies and the Mineral War Economy

The enduring violence against children in eastern DRC cannot be explained solely

through institutional weakness. It is also the product of a deeper structural system tied to colonial legacies and the contemporary global demand for minerals essential to modern technology. Eastern DRC contains some of the world's richest deposits of coltan, gold, cobalt, and tungsten—minerals used in smartphones, batteries, electric vehicles, and global electronics supply chains. The international economy relies heavily on these resources, which are often extracted under conditions of exploitation, corruption, and violence (Autesserre, 2010).

This mineral economy creates a perpetual cycle of conflict. Armed groups fund their operations by controlling mines, extorting miners, taxing trade routes, and smuggling minerals across borders. Because conflict itself sustains economic interests, stability becomes a threat to those who profit from chaos. In this environment, violence becomes structurally embedded rather than an aberration. Children, who make up a significant portion of the displaced and impoverished population, are among the most harmed by this system.

Many street-connected children in Goma originate from mining regions where families were displaced by militia attacks or forced to flee environmental degradation caused by extractive operations. Others were born to mothers who experienced conflict-related sexual violence in mining areas—violence often used strategically to destabilize communities and consolidate territorial control. Still others are directly exploited within the mining economy, performing hazardous labor in informal artisanal mines or working in transportation networks that facilitate the smuggling of minerals.

International law offers mechanisms for regulating business and human rights, but these regimes remain weak and largely voluntary. Efforts such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidelines or the EU Conflict Minerals Regulation depend on corporate transparency rather than binding oversight. As a result, multinational companies can maintain plausible deniability regarding abuses in their supply chains (Seay, 2012). This economic structure limits the political will of powerful states to pressure the DRC government or armed groups to implement child protection norms. When global technological consumption depends on DRC minerals, holding perpetrators accountable becomes secondary to maintaining access to valuable resources.

3.3. Social Disintegration as a Feature of Prolonged War

The collapse of legal protections in eastern DRC is also rooted in profound social disintegration produced by decades of conflict. Families have endured displacement, chronic poverty, militia recruitment, sexual violence, and the death or disappearance of caregivers. The cumulative effect of these stressors disrupts the social networks and caregiving structures that traditionally protect children.

Children enter street life for many reasons: the death of parents, the inability of families to provide food, domestic violence, accusations of witchcraft, or the pervasive insecurity that characterizes rural and peri-urban communities. Girls who

become pregnant after rape, especially by militia members, are often expelled from their homes. Boys perceived as potential combatants may be pushed toward the streets as a perceived safety strategy—to avoid recruitment or being beaten for refusing it.

Once on the streets, children navigate a violent environment shaped by survival economies, exploitation, and the absence of adult protection. Group formations among street-connected children—sector-based micro-societies observed in Goma—may provide some solidarity but also reproduce hierarchies, coercion, and internal violence. Social disintegration reverberates across generations: children raised amid chronic instability develop coping mechanisms centered on vigilance, mistrust, and emotional suppression, patterns consistent with the chronic trauma dynamics conceptualized in the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework (Rebecka, 2021).

International law assumes the existence of stable families, functional communities, and coherent caregiving environments. When these assumptions collapse, legal protections become hollow. A child without a caregiver cannot access reintegration programs. A child without a home cannot benefit from laws protecting domestic privacy. A child without a school cannot invoke protections against attacks on education. A child without a guardian cannot navigate legal procedures. The absence of social structure thus renders international norms practically inaccessible.

3.4. A System Designed to Fail the Most Vulnerable

Taken together, these factors—structural failures of international law, governance collapse, economic exploitation, and social fragmentation—create a comprehensive system that consistently fails street-connected children. The international legal regime is not inherently flawed; rather, it is structurally incompatible with environments characterized by chronic conflict, fragmented sovereignty, and geopolitical disinterest. International law presumes the existence of order, institutions, and accountability. The eastern DRC offers none of these.

As a result, legal protections exist primarily in theory. Children in Goma inhabit a space where rights are recognized on paper but denied in practice. The protection gap is therefore not a temporary wartime aberration—it is a systemic condition produced by the intersection of local instability and global economic structures. International law promises that children shall not be harmed. The global mineral economy, the collapse of governance, and the structural inertia of the international system ensure that this promise is routinely broken.

4. Case Study: Street Children of Goma

4.1. Methodology: Ethnographic, Trauma-Informed, and WRSS-Guided Fieldwork

This case study is based on fieldwork conducted between October 2024 and October 2025 in collaboration with World Hope Givers (WHG), a Congolese hu-

manitarian organization based in Goma. The methodological approach integrates ethnographic and trauma-informed case study methods with WRSS-informed relational and trauma ecology principles. This combined methodology reflects the ethical, psychological, and contextual complexities of conducting research with highly vulnerable children living in conflict-affected, militarized urban environments.

Despite extreme precarity, children in Goma form self-organized micro-societies characterized by shared survival strategies, informal caregiving, and collective protection. Recognizing these forms of agency does not diminish their vulnerability; rather, it exposes how international systems fail to support existing resilience and instead leave children to cope with trauma alone.

Fieldwork involved participant observation during WHG's weekly Sunday Feeding Program, a longstanding community initiative where street-connected children gather for food, hygiene, play, and psychosocial accompaniment. These Sundays offered a rare opportunity to observe children in a protected social environment—one of the few predictable spaces in their otherwise precarious lives. Observations focused on social interactions, emotional regulation strategies, group dynamics, signs of trauma, survival behaviors, and the impact of police or military presence near WHG premises.

In addition to observation, the study drew on informal, trauma-informed conversational interviews with children aged approximately 6-17. Interviews were voluntary, brief, and child-led. No child was directly asked to recount traumatic events. Instead, conversations unfolded naturally through drawing activities, storytelling prompts, or simple questions about daily routines. This approach adhered to international guidelines for interviewing war-affected children, emphasizing safety, non-intrusion, non-pathologizing, and the child's right to silence (IASC, 2015).

Given the instability of the environment and the risk of surveillance by armed actors, no audio recordings were made. Data were documented through field notes, reflexive journaling, and post-session analytic memos. All children's names in this text are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been modified to protect confidentiality.

The methodological orientation draws heavily on the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework (Rebecka, 2021), which conceptualizes trauma not as a singular event but as an ecological condition shaped by chronic exposure to violence, social fragmentation, stigma, and institutional failure. Within this framework, children's narratives are understood as symptoms of a trauma ecosystem, not merely as individual experiences. This orientation guided both the interpretation of testimonies and the ethical stance of the research, foregrounding *the importance of bearing witness, relational safety, and contextualizing suffering within the broader* political and structural histories.

This methodology recognizes children not simply as research subjects, but as **knowledge holders** whose lived experiences expose the disconnect between inter-

national legal protection frameworks and the realities of conflict-affected childhood in Goma.

4.2. Who Are Goma's Street Children? Social Worlds Shaped by War, Loss, and Survival

Street-connected children in Goma—often referred to locally as *shégués* or *washege*—constitute a fluid and heterogeneous population shaped by decades of armed conflict, forced displacement, and extractive economic violence. These terms do not operate as neutral descriptors. *Shégués* is commonly associated with delinquency, moral contamination, and disposability, while *washege* evokes social abandonment, exclusion, and the erasure of belonging. Together, these labels serve as powerful mechanisms of symbolic violence, transforming structural abandonment into perceived deviance and recasting survival as a form of transgression. By framing children through stigmatizing linguistic categories, social responsibility is displaced onto the child, while systemic failures of protection, care, and accountability are rendered invisible. In this way, language itself becomes an instrument through which violence is normalized, institutional neglect is justified, and the everyday exposure of children to harm is socially sanctioned.

Their identity as street-connected youth is not a stable category but a shifting response to cascading layers of instability. Many children move between the street, temporary shelters, market stalls, and short-term caregiving arrangements. Their connection to the street is therefore better understood as an adaptive survival strategy rather than a permanent social position.

The age range of children encountered at WHG was broad, from toddlers scarcely able to articulate their names to older adolescents hardened by years of street survival. A six-year-old boy, whom WHG staff referred to as "L.", offered a simple explanation of his presence on the street: *"I slept outside because my house is gone. Soldiers came. My mother ran. I don't know where she is."* His statement demonstrates the stark simplicity with which children narrate the collapse of their worlds.

Many children arrived from rural conflict zones—Masisi, Rutshuru, Walikale, Beni—areas where clashes between armed groups, military operations, and mining-related violence have produced cycles of displacement (Stearns, 2012). One boy, around 13, explained his journey to Goma this way: *"In the village, they take boys. If you do not go, they beat you or kill you. If you run, they burn the house."* For him, Goma represented not opportunity but escape from forced recruitment.

Girls often described even more complex trajectories shaped by gendered violence. A 15-year-old girl named "Amani" stated quietly during a Sunday gathering: *"They come at night, many of them. After that, my aunt said I brought shame. So, I left."* Her narrative highlights how sexual violence—whether perpetrated by armed actors or civilians—often leads to secondary victimization through family rejection, a pattern well documented across conflict zones (Mukwege & Nangini, 2009).

These children do not come to the street as blank slates; they arrive carrying histories of war, loss, stigma, and forced displacement. The label *shégué* obscures these histories, casting children as delinquent rather than displaced, aggressive rather than traumatized, and autonomous rather than abandoned by systems meant to protect them.

4.3. Child Homelessness as a Direct Consequence of War

The pathways into street-connected life reflect the interlocking effects of armed conflict, economic exploitation, and social fragmentation. Each child's story reveals different facets of the war's long afterlife.

Family rupture—through death, disappearance, or dispersal—was one of the most frequent themes in children's narratives. A 12-year-old boy stated, *"Papa died. Mama went to find food. She did not return, and people began to escape. I joined them."* His statement reflects a familiar pattern: parents vanish while searching for firewood, water, or food in insecure areas. The child's arrival in Goma is not a decision but a survival compulsion.

Sexual violence against girls—not only by militias but also by displaced men, traders, and security actors—was a major driver of street-connected life. Extended families often expelled girls who became pregnant. Younger girls who experienced rape often fled voluntarily to escape stigma or retaliatory violence.

A WHG volunteer recounted a conversation with a 14-year-old mother:

"She said the baby was from the camp… that people called her a curse. She walked for two days to reach Goma."

WRSS conceptualizes such trajectories as forms of **trauma displacement**, where survivors relocate not only because of violence but because the social fabric around them collapses (Rebecka, 2021).

Boys frequently mentioned fleeing villages to avoid recruitment. Their testimonies illustrate the impossible choices facing families in militarized contexts. One boy explained: *"When the group comes, if you do not join, they say you are with the army. If the army comes, they say you are with the group."* The circular logic of suspicion leaves children no path to safety except flight.

Several children described being taken to mining areas to work as porters or diggers, often under coercive conditions. One 11-year-old said, *"I carried stones. If you stop, they hit you."* These experiences align with documented forced labor practices in artisanal mining zones linked to global supply chains (Vogel & Raeymaekers, 2016a).

Across all testimonies, street-connected life emerges not as a lifestyle choice but as a last refuge in a landscape of war-induced collapse.

4.4. Violations Observed in Goma: Field Data and WRSS Trauma Ecology Analysis

The conditions faced by street-connected children in Goma constitute systematic violations of international law, and their experiences expose the full collapse of

child protection norms in eastern DRC.

One of the most alarming patterns documented by WHG was the arrest of children during nighttime police or military sweeps. Children were detained for sleeping in markets, near shops, or outside abandoned buildings—spaces that constituted their only shelter.

A 10-year-old boy recounted:

"They tied my hands. I was with big men in the cell. He was heavy. There was no food for a few days."

The detention of children with adults violates both the CRC and the ACRWC (United Nations, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990). WRSS interprets such events as forms of institutional betrayal trauma—harm occurring at the hands of those who claim to maintain order (Rebecka, 2021).

Children reported consistent patterns of physical brutality at arrest:

"They beat us with sticks."

"They made us lie down and stepped on our backs."

These acts constitute torture under international humanitarian law, and when directed against minors, they represent particularly egregious violations.

Sexual violence emerged as a pervasive threat. Girls spoke of soldiers, police, and older street boys demanding sex in exchange for safety or food. Boys reported covert assaults, often accompanied by threats to silence them.

A 13-year-old boy whispered during a drawing activity:

"A man came in the night. He said if I talk, he will kill me."

Such accounts show the normalization of sexual violence in militarized urban spaces.

Between late 2024 and May 2025, WHG documented at least 40 children who disappeared after being taken by the army or who were arrested and put in the adult penitentiary. Families—if any remained—had no recourse to trace them.

A volunteer described one case:

"The boys saw their friend being pushed into the truck. The next week, he did not return. They said the soldiers laughed when they asked."

Enforced disappearance is classified as a war crime, yet no investigations occurred. Most children lacked birth certificates. Without documentation, they could not enroll in school, access medical care, or prove their age during arrest. Legal invisibility rendered them unprotected by the very laws designed to safeguard them.

Children described going days without food, drinking from ditches or Lake Kivu, and sleeping under market stalls. Illnesses were common: fungal infections, open wounds, sexually transmitted diseases, respiratory diseases, untreated wounds, and gastrointestinal problems caused by contaminated water.

Under WRSS analysis, these conditions constitute trauma ecology—a multilayered environment in which deprivation, violence, and neglect reinforce each other to produce chronic dysregulation, mistrust, emotional numbness, and hypervigilance.

4.5. The Sunday Feeding Program: Humanitarian Care in a Landscape of Legal Abandonment

Against a backdrop of systemic violence, institutional collapse, and the functional absence of child protection law, World Hope Givers' (WHG) Sunday Feeding Program constitutes one of the few remaining spaces of consistent safety available to street-connected children in Goma. In a city where children's daily existence is shaped by arrest, assault, hunger, and exploitation, the program operates not merely as humanitarian assistance but as a fragile infrastructure of protection within an otherwise hostile legal and social environment.

Each Sunday, WHG transforms its modest compound into a temporary sanctuary—a place where children can enter without fear of detention, violence, or coercion. Within this space, WHG staff and volunteers provide a hot meal, access to basic hygiene, wound care, clothing distribution, and recreational activities. Equally important, the program offers relational safety, characterized by predictable presence, non-punitive interaction, and attuned caregiving. Within the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework, such relational safety functions as a core stabilization mechanism, enabling momentary deactivation of chronic survival responses and restoring a sense of embodied regulation (Rebecka, 2021).

Field observations consistently documented profound somatic and behavioral shifts during these gatherings. Children often arrived visibly exhausted, hypervigilant, or severely hungry. After eating, resting, and engaging in play, their posture softened, their affect shifted, and social engagement increased. As one volunteer observed, "On Sundays, their faces change. They breathe differently. They look so tired and relieved." These moments of physiological and emotional regulation underscore the extent to which children's distress is environmentally produced—and how even limited protective conditions can temporarily interrupt trauma saturation.

At the same time, the program exposes a stark institutional paradox. The very state actors responsible for harassment, detention, and violence against children are, under international law, those legally obligated to protect them. In practice, WHG—operating with minimal resources—assumes functions formally assigned to the state and to international child protection regimes. Through the Sunday Feeding Program, WHG provides food security, ensures a temporary safe space, protects children from immediate violence, monitors grave violations, and offers psychosocial containment. The children themselves explicitly recognized this displacement of responsibility. As one fifteen-year-old boy stated, "If problems happen, we run here. Nowhere else."

Despite its protective function, the WHG compound remains vulnerable. Armed actors have been observed near Sunday gatherings, and attempts to detain children outside the compound have occurred. Uniformed personnel periodically monitor or surveil the space, reinforcing the precarity of humanitarian protection in a militarized environment. These incursions highlight not only the lack of state protection for children, but also the absence of meaningful safeguards for non-

governmental organizations attempting to fulfill child protection mandates in the vacuum left by state failure.

This case study illustrates a profound collapse of international legal protections for children in eastern DRC. Through ethnographic observation, trauma-informed interviewing, and WRSS-guided analysis, it becomes evident that the violations experienced by street-connected children are not random, isolated, or accidental. Instead, they form part of a systemic pattern produced by prolonged armed conflict, extractive political economies, institutional disintegration, and the erosion of social worlds. In Goma, children live within a legal vacuum where the state is absent as a protector yet present as a perpetrator; where international law is normatively robust but operationally inert; and where survival depends not on rights, but on the fragile continuity of local humanitarian initiatives.

The absence of engagement by MONUSCO further underscores this protection gap. Although MONUSCO maintains a visible and well-resourced presence in North Kivu, it has not intervened in any capacity regarding street-connected children in Goma. During the period under study, MONUSCO did not participate in protective removals from sites of violence, did not initiate referrals, and did not engage even when children were detained by local authorities or transferred to local jails. This non-engagement is not incidental but structural. Undocumented, street-connected children fall entirely outside MONUSCO's operational priorities and protection architecture. As a result, they remain exposed to daily violence, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and arbitrary detention without preventive intervention, monitoring, or legal follow-up. This institutional void illustrates how peacekeeping frameworks can render entire populations effectively invisible when they do not conform to formal categories of displacement, citizenship, or armed-group affiliation.

WHG's Sunday Feeding Program thus reveals both the resilience of community-led protection and the devastating consequences of legal abandonment. While the program demonstrates what relational, trauma-informed care can achieve even under extreme constraints, it simultaneously exposes the profound contradiction between the expansive promises of international law and the lived reality of children's lives in Goma. Only by confronting this contradiction—through enforceable legal reform, trauma-informed policy, and structural accountability—can the international community begin to repair the protection gap that has rendered these children systematically invisible.

4.6. The Legal Vacuum: Why Nothing Changes

Despite decades of international attention and an extensive legal framework designed to protect children in armed conflict, meaningful change remains elusive in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The persistence of grave violations—killings, disappearances, sexual violence, torture, forced labor, and institutional abandonment—reflects not only political instability but also structural conditions that weaken or nullify international legal protections. What emerges is

a legal vacuum, a space in which rights exist on paper but are systematically denied in practice. This vacuum is maintained through a convergence of global political interests, misclassifications of the conflict, bureaucratic exclusions, and deeply embedded forms of social normalization that render violence against children both ubiquitous and invisible.

This section examines four central forces that sustain the protection gap: the failure of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine; the international mischaracterization of the DRC as a "post-conflict" country; the administrative erasure of children without documentation; and the normalization of violence against children within both cultural and institutional settings. Together, these forces produce a landscape in which international law becomes symbolic rather than operational, leaving children to navigate survival without meaningful legal recourse.

4.7. The Responsibility to Protect Failure

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), adopted by UN member states in 2005, was envisioned as a transformative doctrine designed to prevent genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity (United Nations General Assembly, 2005). It articulated a three-pillar approach: the state's responsibility to protect its own populations; the international community's responsibility to assist states in fulfilling that obligation; and the obligation of collective action when a state is manifestly failing. In theory, R2P should apply forcefully to a context like eastern DRC, where mass atrocities, systematic violence against children, and chronic displacement have persisted for decades.

However, R2P has never been meaningfully activated in the DRC. Instead, the doctrine is selectively applied to conflicts that intersect with geopolitical interests or strategic alliances. Scholars have noted that R2P has been disproportionately invoked in high-profile crises with clear political stakes, such as those in Libya and Syria. At the same time, long-standing African conflicts marked by diffuse violence, fragmented actors, and economic exploitation receive limited international intervention (Bellamy, 2015). Eastern DRC exemplifies this selective application.

One reason for R2P's failure is the diffuse nature of perpetrators. Violence in the DRC involves over 100 armed groups, regional militaries, private security forces, and informal mining networks. Unlike clear-cut state perpetration, which triggers stronger international responses, the DRC's conflict is characterized by overlapping sovereignties and non-state actors who operate beyond the formal reach of the doctrine. R2P was not structurally designed to address decentralized violence, chronic instability, or "slow-burning atrocities" that unfold over decades (Straus, 2012b). More importantly, R2P is constrained by **global economic interests** in the region's minerals—coltan, cobalt, gold, and tungsten—widely recognized as essential to global electronics, battery technologies, and green-energy transitions (Vogel & Raeymaekers, 2016a). States that profit from or depend on these supply chains have limited incentive to confront the political economies that sustain violence. An intervention that disrupts mineral flows would carry eco-

nomic costs far exceeding the moral imperatives of protecting children. As a result, R2P becomes a rhetorical device rather than a legal instrument.

The doctrine also relies heavily on state cooperation, yet the DRC government often disputes the severity of abuses or attributes them exclusively to non-state actors, strategically shifting responsibility away from itself. Because R2P is a political commitment rather than a binding legal mechanism, international actors lack enforceable pathways to compel intervention.

In the case of street-connected children in Goma, the failure of R2P manifests in the absence of any coordinated international strategy to prevent forced recruitment, torture, sexual violence, or disappearances—violations that clearly fall under the categories R2P was created to address. The doctrine collapses in the face of chronic conflict, economic entanglement, and institutional denial, leaving children trapped in cycles of violence that the international community is theoretically obligated to prevent.

4.8. The Myth of the "Post-Conflict State"

Another sustained obstacle to meaningful intervention in DRC is the enduring classification of the country as being in a "post-conflict" phase. This designation emerged in the mid-2000s, following the formal signing of peace agreements and national elections, which led donors, international institutions, and states to shift from emergency responses to long-term development strategies (Autesserre, 2010). While this narrative aligns with diplomatic interests and donor fatigue, it is fundamentally at odds with conditions in eastern DRC, where conflict has not ceased but has transformed, fractured, and intensified.

The myth of post-conflict status creates policy consequences with direct implications for children. When a country is labeled "post-conflict", humanitarian funding decreases, peacekeeping mandates shift, and emergency protection mechanisms are dismantled or deprioritized. Instead of deploying child protection specialists, transitional justice teams, or early warning systems, donors promote institution-building, governance reforms, and economic development—initiatives that, while important, do not address the ongoing violence.

For example, funding allocated to child protection programming in the eastern DRC has steadily declined over the past decade, as international attention has shifted toward political stabilization and economic investment (UNICEF, 2021). The demobilization and reintegration programs that once targeted child soldiers have been downsized or dissolved despite continued recruitment by armed groups. Shelters for displaced children receive minimal support. Documentation campaigns have been deprioritized, leaving thousands of children without legal identity.

For street-connected children in Goma, the consequences of the post-conflict narrative are acute. The assumption of stability means they are no longer categorized as emergency-affected children, even though their daily experiences reflect active conflict conditions. As a result, they fall into a bureaucratic blind spot: too

vulnerable for development programs, yet not recognized as victims of war under emergency frameworks.

The post-conflict designation also distorts international reporting on grave violations. Because violence is conceptualized as criminality rather than conflict, abuses such as killings, torture, sexual violence, and disappearances committed by state forces or militias are not systematically recorded under international humanitarian law categories. This shifts the response from protection to policing, reinforcing punitive approaches that harm children rather than safeguarding them.

Thus, the myth of a post-conflict DRC functions as a discursive mechanism of erasure. It disguises ongoing atrocities, interrupts emergency protections, and obscures the need for sustained international engagement. This misclassification allows states and international institutions to distance themselves from responsibility while presenting the illusion of progress.

4.9. Invisible Children: Lack of Documentation and the Bureaucratic Erasure of Childhood

A profound but often overlooked driver of the protection gap is the absence of birth registration among street-connected children in Goma. Documentation is the foundational mechanism through which children are recognized as legal persons within the state apparatus and the international protection system. Without it, children lack formal identity, nationality, and proof of age—turning them into administrative ghosts.

Birth registration rates remain incredibly low in conflict-affected parts of eastern DRC due to poverty, displacement, a lack of civil registry offices, and the destruction of administrative infrastructure (UNICEF, 2022). For children born in camps, in transit, or conceived through conflict-related rape, registration is even less likely. Many street children have never had a legal name recorded in any official ledger.

The absence of documentation has profound consequences. A child without an ID cannot enroll in school, access formal healthcare, initiate legal proceedings, or be included in social protection programs. When detained, they cannot prove they are minors and therefore become vulnerable to imprisonment with adults, in direct violation of the CRC and ACRWC (United Nations, 1989; Organization of African Unity, 1990). When they disappear, no official record confirms they ever existed. Families cannot file missing person reports, humanitarian actors are unable to trace them, and authorities have no obligation to investigate.

International law depends on administrative identity to activate protections. A child must be *recognized* before their rights can be *enforced*. Consequently, undocumented children fall outside the legal imagination of both state and international actors. Their suffering becomes bureaucratically invisible; their deaths uncounted; their disappearances unrecorded.

One WHG volunteer described the case of a missing boy:

"We tried to ask at the police station, but they said: 'Do you have the capacity

to keep those children, feed them, and provide services? If we release them, it will be your full responsibility to take care of them.""

This statement encapsulates the structural cruelty of documentation regimes in conflict zones, where the very conditions that produce vulnerability also obstruct the creation of legal identity.

From a WRSS perspective, the absence of documentation exacerbates trauma by severing children's connection to social recognition and belonging (Rebecka, 2021). Identity formation becomes fractured when a child cannot claim a name, age, or family lineage in legal terms. This bureaucratic erasure compounds emotional abandonment and deepens the ecological trauma of persecution, invisibility, and stigmatization.

4.10. The Normalization of Violence against Children

The legal vacuum in eastern DRC is sustained not only by institutional failures but also by the **social normalization of violence against children**. Over decades of war, violence has become an ordinary, expected part of childhood. Communities exhausted by conflict may view beatings, exploitation, and hunger as inevitable realities rather than violations of rights. This normalization functions as a cultural and psychological barrier to accountability.

Several interconnected forces contribute to this phenomenon. First, poverty and displacement produce conditions in which survival supersedes protection. Families struggling to feed themselves may deprioritize children's safety, inadvertently exposing them to exploitation, trafficking, or early marriage.

Second, witchcraft accusations remain a significant driver of child rejection. Children perceived as cursed—especially those born after sexual violence or during periods of misfortune—may be expelled from their homes and forced into street life. Witchcraft discourses often intersect with trauma symptoms; hyperactivity, withdrawal, or nightmares may be interpreted spiritually rather than psychologically, leading to punishment rather than protection (De Boeck, 2005).

Third, institutional normalization occurs when police, military, and justice actors internalize narratives that street children are criminals, rebels, or social parasites. These narratives legitimize torture, mass arrests, and sexual violence as acceptable methods of "cleaning the city". In such contexts, the state becomes not only a failing protector but an active agent of harm.

Ultimately, chronic conflict reshapes the moral frameworks of a community. Violence loses its shock value; suffering becomes mundane. Children grow up seeing bodies in the streets, hearing gunfire, or watching soldiers raid homes. As one 12-year-old boy stated during a WHG drawing session: *"When they beat us, it is normal. Everyone gets beaten."* His statement reflects a profound resignation that normalizes abuse as an expected part of life.

This normalization undermines legal enforcement. When violence is seen as ordinary, there is little community pressure to investigate abuses or demand justice. The erosion of moral outrage contributes to a climate where perpetrators act

with impunity. Under the WRSS framework, such normalization represents the collapse of social witnessing, where communities become unable to acknowledge or protest harm (Rebecka, 2021). Without accountability, there can be no justice, and without justice, law ceases to function.

The legal vacuum in eastern DRC is a result of the convergence of geopolitical, economic, bureaucratic, and cultural forces. The failure of the Responsibility to Protect, the misclassification of the DRC as post-conflict, the administrative erasure of undocumented children, and the normalization of violence all work together to nullify the protective promises of international law. These forces create a system in which children's suffering becomes structurally invisible and legally unaddressed.

Street-connected children in Goma occupy the extreme edge of this vacuum. Their lives are shaped by forces beyond their control and beyond the reach of current legal frameworks. Any effective protection strategy must therefore address not only the symptoms of violence but the structural conditions—including economic exploitation, institutional decay, and sociocultural trauma—that sustain it.

5. Psychological and Social Costs: A WRSS Perspective on the Collapse between International Regulations and Reality

International law constructs a clear normative vision of childhood during war: children must be protected from violence, separated from adult detainees, shielded from recruitment, provided access to education, and guaranteed psychosocial recovery (United Nations, 1989, 2000; Organization of African Unity, 1990). Human rights law and international humanitarian law jointly mandate that a child's dignity, identity, and development be protected at all times, even in situations of armed conflict. These obligations are non-derogable, binding upon states, and reinforced through numerous UN resolutions and monitoring mechanisms (United Nations Security Council, 2005).

Yet, the lived reality of children in Goma, as documented through WHG fieldwork, reveals an unbridgeable gap between these legal ideals and the daily psychological, social, and ecological conditions that surround their lives. This gap is not simply administrative or political—it is also profoundly traumatic, shaping children's bodies, nervous systems, relationships, and worldviews. International law imagines childhood as a protected developmental trajectory; conflict zones like eastern DRC produce childhood as a site of chronic threat, exploitation, and abandonment.

To understand this disjunction, the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) framework offers a powerful model. Developed through field-based research across conflict settings, WRSS conceptualizes trauma not as a singular event but as a layered, ecological, intergenerational condition shaped by violence, betrayal, displacement, stigma, and institutional collapse (Rebecka, 2021). When applied to the experiences of street-connected children in Goma, WRSS reveals how the breakdown of international protection regimes is not only a legal failure but also

a profound psychological and social catastrophe. The following sections analyze four central components of this trauma ecology: chronic trauma accumulation, survival performance, street-based trauma hierarchies, and long-term transgenerational effects.

5.1. Chronic Trauma Accumulation: When Protective Norms Collapse into a Daily Threat Landscape

International law is founded on the assumption that children are developing beings who require stability, safety, and nurturing. The CRC frames childhood as a period of "harmonious development" (United Nations, 1989, preamble). In Goma, however, children's development unfolds within a context of *layered, chronic trauma*, where violence, hunger, neglect, and exploitation intersect not as isolated events but as the structure of everyday life.

For girls—and increasingly for boys—sexual violence is a widespread reality. International law categorizes sexual violence against children as a grave violation, a war crime, and a crime against humanity when committed systematically (International Criminal Court, 1998). Yet for children in Goma, sexual violence is not treated as a crime but as an inevitable hazard of urban survival in a militarized economy.

During WHG activities, several girls recounted experiences of being coerced by soldiers or traders who demanded sex in exchange for food or a night of safety. These narratives demonstrate a collapse of protective norms: actors responsible for enforcing the law become perpetrators, and children's bodies become currency in an informal survival market.

WRSS conceptualizes such experiences as core trauma wounds, where violations are not only physical but relational and existential. Sexual violence fractures children's ability to trust others, to perceive themselves as worthy of protection, and to imagine a future beyond survival (Rebecka, 2021). International law recognizes these harms abstractly, but in practice, legal frameworks cannot prevent or remedy them, leaving children trapped in a cycle of trauma and erasure.

Boys frequently recalled encounters where armed groups attempted to recruit them, sometimes through threats, beatings, or the killing of relatives. These acts violate OPAC's prohibition of child recruitment (United Nations, 2000), yet enforcement mechanisms are nearly nonexistent in eastern DRC. One 14-year-old boy stated, *"If you refuse, they say you are the enemy. If you agree, they send you to die"*.

Such choices are themselves forms of trauma. WRSS describes these moments as "structural betrayals"—situations where every available option leads to harm because the social and political environment fails to offer protection. When forced recruitment coexists with army brutality, the child experiences double persecution, leading to profound neurobiological dysregulation.

Hunger was one of the most consistent themes across children's testimonies. International law obligates states to ensure children's right to survival and development, which includes access to food and basic care (United Nations, 1989, art.

6). Yet many children described going days without eating, drinking from gutters, or searching market stalls for discarded scraps.

A boy of about 11 explained, *"If you do not eat, you lie down and wait. Sometimes you wake up, sometimes not."* His statement captures the normalization of neglect, where the absence of care becomes an existential threat embedded in daily routines.

From a WRSS perspective, chronic deprivation is itself a form of trauma, reshaping the nervous system, impairing cognitive development, and reinforcing patterns of hypervigilance and impulsive survival behavior. This is not merely poverty—it is psychological wear produced by systemic abandonment.

The WRSS model emphasizes that trauma accumulation occurs not through single shocks but through the layering of multiple harms over time: sexual violence, displacement, hunger, beatings, illness, fear, and the persistent threat of arrest or disappearance. For children in Goma, these layers compound to form a total trauma ecology.

International law provides explicit prohibitions against individual harm, but it lacks mechanisms to address cumulative psychological effects. The law is structured to respond to discrete violations; the reality of children's experiences is continuous, chronic, and ecological.

5.2. Survival Performance: The Psychological Mask of Resilience under Threat

One of the most misunderstood aspects of children in conflict zones is the phenomenon of survival performance, where children appear fearless, hardened, or resilient in ways that mask profound psychological collapse. International law assumes that children are passive victims needing protection; in Goma, children often present as active agents of survival, which can obscure their trauma from legal and institutional actors.

Many boys in Goma exhibit behaviors that appear aggressive—such as shouting, fighting, or confronting adults. Girls may exhibit emotional withdrawal, sexualized behavior, or avoidance of authority. These behaviors can easily be misinterpreted by police, humanitarian workers, and even legal advocates as signs of delinquency or choice.

However, WRSS interprets such behaviors as performative adaptations—strategies that allow children to survive in hostile environments. Fearlessness is not the absence of fear, but rather the suppression of fear signals due to chronic stimulation of the survival nervous system. Aggression becomes a preemptive defense mechanism. Emotional numbness becomes necessary for psychological survival.

A 12-year-old boy once said to a WHG volunteer, *"If you show fear, they beat you. If you cry, they take your food. If you trust, they lie."* His insight illustrates how emotional suppression can become an adaptive survival tool, rather than a sign of deviance.

Legal actors and policymakers often mistake survival performance for resili-

ence. The CRC's emphasis on rehabilitation and reintegration presupposes that children can return to developmentally appropriate trajectories once violence ceases. Nevertheless, for children in Goma, the "cessation of violence" rarely occurs, and the trauma they carry is embedded in physiological patterns that cannot be undone simply by removing external threats.

The WRSS model emphasizes that resilience cannot exist without relational safety, which is often absent in street environments. Survival performance is therefore a façade: it protects the child from immediate harm but deepens long-term psychological consequences.

Chronic trauma disrupts the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and brainstem regulatory circuits, leading to hypervigilance, impulsivity, dissociation, and impaired emotional regulation (Arnsten, 2009). These neurobiological changes are not visible externally but shape children's responses to everyday stimuli.

International law does not incorporate neurobiological trauma into its protection frameworks. As a result, legal norms underestimate the psychological fragility of war-affected children and fail to integrate trauma-informed principles into child protection protocols.

5.3. Trauma Ecology of the Street: Social Worlds Shaped by Violence

The street itself is not merely a location—it is a trauma-generating ecology. International law assumes that children's environments consist of families, communities, and social institutions responsible for their welfare. In Goma, these structures have collapsed. Children's social worlds are produced instead through hierarchies, survival economies, and reciprocal violence that mirror the broader conflict.

Older boys ("sector leaders") often control access to food, sleeping spaces, and protection. Younger children must negotiate these hierarchies to survive, sometimes trading labor, stolen goods, or sexual favors. These interactions form an alternative social order with its own rules, punishments, and loyalties.

A 13-year-old boy described his relationship to the street hierarchy as follows:

"If you stay alone, you die. If you join the group, you must listen."

Hierarchies offer protection but also facilitate exploitation. International law has little precedent for addressing such informal, coercive structures.

Children participate in informal and illegal economies:

- carrying goods for traders;
- mining-related labor;
- washing motorbikes;
- collecting scrap metal;
- sex exchange.

These economies place children in constant contact with adults who exploit their vulnerability. From a legal standpoint, these forms of labor constitute hazardous work and sexual exploitation, prohibited under international conventions

(ILO, 1999). Yet local enforcement is nonexistent.

Violence circulates within street groups as a form of regulation: younger children are beaten for transgressions; older children enforce rules through intimidation. Emotional trust is dangerous, leading many children to adopt relational avoidance as a psychological defense.

A boy of about 11 explained:

"If you sleep, they steal from you. If you trust, they hit you. You must always be ready."

This hypervigilance is a hallmark of WRSS trauma ecology: children internalize the logic of conflict into their daily relationships.

Many children exhibit emotional flattening—a protective dissociation that shields them from overwhelming stress. International law does not account for these psychological states, which shape how children disclose abuse, engage with services, or navigate legal processes.

The street thus becomes a parallel society, structured by violence and neglect, where childhood development is replaced by survival conditioning.

5.4. Long-Term Transgenerational Consequences: Trauma That Becomes Inheritance

The WRSS framework emphasizes that trauma is transgenerational, passed not only through narrative silence but through attachment disruptions, epigenetic changes, social stigma, and institutional betrayal. Street-connected children in Goma already display patterns that foreshadow long-term intergenerational impact.

Several young mothers participating in WHG activities spoke quietly about giving birth in the aftermath of sexual violence. Their stories revealed not only the brutality of conception but also the complex emotional terrain they now navigate with their infants. During observations and interviews, their interactions bore subtle yet unmistakable signs of trauma-shaped attachment patterns. Some mothers struggled to meet their babies' gaze, their eyes drifting away as if prolonged contact might expose wounds too raw to name. Others appeared emotionally withdrawn, holding their infants with a protective but distant stillness, as though love itself had become fraught with danger. Several women remained intensely alert whenever men approached the communal space, their bodies tightening in instinctive vigilance shaped by past experiences of violation. Many expressed feelings of shame, confusion, or ambivalence about motherhood—an internal conflict born not from a lack of care, but from the unbearable circumstances of their children's conception and the social stigma surrounding it. Together, these observations portray a relational world marked by tenderness and fear coexisting in the same breath, where motherhood becomes both an act of survival and an arena where trauma silently reverberates.

International law guarantees children's right to parental care and protection, yet teenage mothers traumatized by violence struggle to provide consistent attunement. WRSS interprets these relational disruptions not as maternal failure but as

trauma reverberations that impair caregiving capacities.

Children born of rape experience stigma, identity confusion, and social exclusion. Without documentation, they face a life of legal invisibility. These children inherit not only the trauma of their mothers but also the structural violence of institutional erasure.

Research demonstrates that chronic trauma and stress can alter stress-response systems at a biological level, affecting future generations (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Children growing up in environments of fear, hunger, and instability may pass on heightened vulnerability to their children through both biological and social factors.

When childhood becomes defined by violence rather than nurturance, its psychological blueprint is altered. As one 15-year-old girl said, *"We were never children. We were only trying to survive."* This statement reflects not only personal grief but the erosion of cultural and familial structures that sustain generational continuity.

The WRSS-informed analysis demonstrates that the gap between international regulations and children's lived experiences in Goma is not merely a failure of enforcement but a profound psychological and social disaster. International law imagines a world where children are protected, nurtured, and supported. The reality in eastern DRC is a world where children accumulate chronic trauma, perform resilience as survival, navigate violent street ecologies, and bear intergenerational wounds.

Legal norms collapse because they do not account for trauma ecology. Psychological suffering is produced not only by acts of violence but by the absence of protection, the betrayal of institutions, and the normalization of harm. Until international law integrates trauma-informed principles and addresses structural violence, the gap between law and reality will remain insurmountable.

6. What Needs to Change: A Policy and Practice Roadmap

Closing the protection gap requires multi-level reform across legal, institutional, humanitarian, economic, and psychosocial domains. The following roadmap identifies the minimum structural changes needed to align international law with children's lived realities. The scale of harm documented in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) reflects a multifaceted crisis that encompasses legal, political, psychological, economic, and humanitarian aspects. Children endure ongoing violations despite a comprehensive international legal framework designed to protect them. This contradiction demands a fundamental reimagining of both policy and practice. The following roadmap outlines structural reforms that link legal mechanisms, accountability frameworks, humanitarian responses, and trauma-informed approaches rooted in the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) model.

At its core, this roadmap is grounded in a simple premise: international law cannot protect children unless it is implemented through durable, trauma-in-

formed, locally embedded, and globally accountable systems. Legal norms must be translated into structures that recognize the complexity of children's lived environments—structures capable not only of responding to violations but of preventing them. The transformation required in the eastern DRC cannot be achieved exclusively through humanitarian assistance or legal reform; it requires a multi-layered approach that addresses governance failures, institutional complicity, economic exploitation, and the deep psychological wounds inflicted on children through decades of conflict.

6.1. Legal Reforms: Building a Framework that Recognizes Conflict-Affected Children as a Distinct Category

Recognizing "conflict-affected children" as a distinct legal category would grant them immediate procedural rights, independent of their documentation status, including the right to emergency civil registration and legal identity for protection, access to healthcare, and accountability mechanisms—rights not guaranteed under existing refugee or IDP frameworks.

One of the central limitations of the current legal regime is its failure to formally recognize conflict-affected children as a protected legal category with specific rights, protections, and institutional protocols. Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols outline general protections in wartime, they do not articulate procedures tailored to children living in chronic conflict environments or failed-state contexts (United Nations, 1989, 2000). These children face risks that differ qualitatively from those of children in short-term emergencies or stable states.

In eastern DRC, a legal category recognizing conflict-affected children would shift responsibility from humanitarian organizations to the state and international actors. Such recognition would require rapid identification and registration systems, access to emergency social services, and specialized protection protocols—similar to those employed for refugees or children recruited into armed groups but extended to all children living in conflict zones.

Equally urgent is the enactment and enforcement of laws prohibiting the detention of children with adults. Although both the CRC and ACRWC already forbid this practice (United Nations, 1989, art. 37; Organization of African Unity, 1990, art. 17), enforcement in eastern DRC is nearly nonexistent. Legal reform must include not only restating these prohibitions but also building mechanisms that prevent police and military personnel from detaining minors without judicial oversight. Mobile legal aid units, detention monitoring teams, and child protection officers integrated within police divisions could function as immediate safeguards.

Finally, legal reform must address the pervasive issue of undocumented children. A mandatory, locally administered documentation mechanism—integrated with humanitarian programs and backed by international funding—is essential for ensuring that children have a legal identity. The absence of documentation renders them invisible to the law, untraceable in the event of deten-

tion, and excluded from essential services (UNICEF, 2022). Legal identity must be understood as both a right and a protective tool, without which all other protections collapse.

6.2. Accountability Mechanisms: From Impunity to Enforceable Responsibility

Legal protection without enforcement is symbolic. In Goma, impunity is the norm for perpetrators of violations against children, whether those perpetrators are armed groups, police, military units, or civilians. Accountability mechanisms must be restructured so that they are independent, empowered, and capable of acting beyond the state's political interests.

An independent oversight body dedicated to monitoring children's rights in eastern DRC is essential. Such a body could be housed within the African Union, the East African Community, or a hybrid regional mechanism, enabling it to bypass national political interference while maintaining regional legitimacy. The body would monitor detention centers, document violations, engage in public reporting, and issue binding recommendations.

Accountability must also include war crimes investigations focused explicitly on children. International criminal law recognizes murder, torture, sexual violence, and the forced recruitment of children as war crimes and crimes against humanity (International Criminal Court, 1998). Yet prosecutions in the DRC have been sporadic and limited in scope. Targeted investigations—carried out by joint national-international teams—could not only document violations but also establish patterns of abuse and command responsibility among FARDC officers and militia leaders.

Detention centers require regular international monitoring, similar to the oversight systems used in conflict zones such as Sierra Leone and Kosovo. Unannounced visits by trained child protection specialists, forensic social workers, and legal observers would deter torture, illegal detention, and disappearances. The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) established under UN Security Council Resolution 1612 provides a framework; however, its operational capacity needs to be expanded and locally embedded (UNSC, 2005).

Without accountability, legal protections remain aspirational. With accountability, they become enforceable.

6.3. Humanitarian Interventions: Rebuilding Protection through Trauma-Informed, Community-Based Systems

While legal structures are essential, the immediate survival and psychological stabilization of children depend on humanitarian interventions, particularly those rooted in community organizations such as World Hope Givers (WHG). These organizations already perform many state functions: feeding children, documenting violations, providing psychosocial support, and creating safe spaces. Policy reforms must therefore strengthen—not replace—these local capacities.

The WHG Sunday Feeding Program provides a model for community-based

protection, incorporating predictable routines, relational safety, and essential services. Such interventions are not merely humanitarian; they are stabilizing environments that regulate children's nervous systems and reintroduce a sense of belonging, predictability, and dignity—core components of the WRSS stabilization model (Rebecka, 2021). Funding should be structured to provide long-term operational support to community programs, allowing them to scale up food distribution, medical care, and schooling without the volatility of donor-driven cycles.

Trauma-informed care must also be embedded into humanitarian practice. The WRSS model provides a framework for understanding chronic trauma accumulation, survival performance, and trauma ecologies. Combined with the SERS (Stabilization-Education-Redirection-Self-Awareness) method, this model allows children to receive care that first regulates the nervous system, then builds cognitive and emotional tools for long-term healing. This approach differs fundamentally from Western diagnostic models (e.g., PTSD) that assume discrete traumatic events rather than continuous threat environments.

Additionally, safe shelters explicitly designed for street-connected children are essential. These shelters must integrate trauma-informed principles, including low-stimulation environments, consistent routines, culturally grounded practices, and youth-led governance structures. Shelters must also address gender-specific vulnerabilities, providing safe houses for girls at risk of sexual exploitation and young mothers facing stigma or abandonment.

Humanitarian interventions must do more than respond to suffering—they must rebuild the protective ecosystems that international law assumes but does not create.

6.4. Economic Responses: Confronting the Global Drivers of Violence against Children

No policy roadmap for eastern DRC can ignore the global economic structures that sustain conflict. The extraction of coltan, gold, cobalt, and tungsten—the minerals essential to smartphones, electric vehicles, and batteries—remains deeply intertwined with child exploitation, displacement, and militia violence (Vogel & Raeymaekers, 2016b). Children are harmed not only by local actors but also by international demand.

Corporations involved in mineral supply chains must be held accountable through child-safe sourcing regulations. Existing efforts, such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidelines, rely on voluntary compliance and are insufficient for preventing child exploitation. Legally binding due diligence laws—similar to France's Corporate Duty of Vigilance Law or the upcoming EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive—must be expanded to include explicit requirements related to children's rights. These laws should require companies to map their supply chains, audit mines, and provide transparent reporting mechanisms that are accessible to NGOs and researchers. Economic responses must also include sanctions against armed groups and networks that exploit children, including com-

manders within the FARDC who profit from illegal taxation or mining partnerships. Sanctions should target not only individuals but also financial intermediaries, transport networks, and international buyers.

Finally, local economies must be rebuilt in ways that reduce children's vulnerability to forced labor. Employment programs for youth, livelihood support for caregivers, and reintegration pathways for demobilized children are essential for dismantling the economic structures that push children onto the streets.

The policy and practice roadmap presented here is not a catalog of recommendations but a call for structural transformation. Children in Goma do not suffer because international law is unclear; they suffer because legal and humanitarian systems have failed to adapt to the ecological, psychological, and economic realities of chronic conflict. Reform requires integrating legal accountability, trauma-informed care, community-based protection, and global economic restructuring.

Only through such a multi-layered approach—grounded in WRSS trauma ecology, empirical fieldwork, and enforceable legal mechanisms—can the protection gap be narrowed. The lives of Goma's children depend not on sympathy but on sustained, systemic, and courageous action.

7. Conclusion

International law provides one of the most comprehensive frameworks for child protection ever developed. Yet, the experiences of street-connected children in Goma reveal the profound disconnect between normative aspiration and lived reality. The laws exist; the violations persist. The gap between the two is not accidental, nor is it the result of isolated failures. Instead, it is the product of interconnected structural dynamics—political, economic, legal, psychological, and social—that converge to render children unprotected in one of the world's most violent and resource-exploited regions.

Throughout this article, the testimonies of children, the observations of humanitarian workers, and the analytical lens of the War Rape Survivors Syndrome (WRSS) model have demonstrated that the international protection regime collapses precisely where it is most needed. The lived experiences of children in eastern DRC demonstrate that international law fails not at the conceptual level, but at the levels of implementation, accountability, and political courage. The CRC, OPAC, ACRWC, and the Geneva Conventions articulate a robust vision of childhood; the structural realities of conflict, displacement, mineral exploitation, and institutional decay dismantle that vision daily.

Children in Goma inhabit an environment where legal protections are symbolic, where humanitarian services are insufficiently supported, where state institutions are often perpetrators rather than protectors, and where global economic structures profit from the violence that uproots their lives. This contradiction—between global legal commitments and local realities—exposes the limits of a protection system that relies on state capacity in contexts where states are themselves weakened, complicit, or absent.

The testimonies of children illuminate the sharp edge of this legal vacuum. Their words are simple, direct, and devastating: *"Mama ran and did not return." "If you show fear, they beat you." "We were never children."* These statements reveal not only the collapse of protection but also the psychological consequences of living in a world where the law does not function. WRSS helps us understand these consequences as cumulative trauma, relational rupture, and ecological threat. Children are not only victims of discrete acts of violence; they are shaped by an entire environment of harm—one that strips away predictability, belonging, and safety.

The street environment becomes its own trauma ecosystem: a place where hierarchies determine access to food or protection, where violence regulates behavior, where emotional expression can be punished, and where trust becomes a liability. International law is not designed to regulate such informal ecologies. It presumes the presence of functioning institutions, clear authorities, and enforceable norms. In Goma, none of these conditions hold. Instead, children live in a space where international norms carry moral weight but no operational traction.

The failure of the Responsibility to Protect further reinforces this collapse. Although R2P identifies the international community's duty to intervene when states fail to protect their populations, its implementation is constrained by political interests, particularly in regions where powerful states benefit from ongoing instability. The mineral economy that drives the global technology industry relies—directly or indirectly—on the unregulated extraction that fuels conflict in eastern DRC (Vogel & Raeymaekers, 2016b). Thus, intervention threatens economic interests, creating a structural incentive to maintain silence.

At the same time, the misclassification of the DRC as a "post-conflict" country reinforces international disengagement. Post-conflict narratives shift attention toward governance and development rather than emergency protection, leading to reduced humanitarian funding, weakened child-protection infrastructure, and diminished oversight of grave violations. For street-connected children, whose lives are shaped by active conflict conditions, being labeled "post-conflict" effectively erases them from the categories that mandate international action.

The administrative erasure of undocumented children compounds these failures. Birth registration, the fundamental gateway to legal personhood, remains inaccessible for many children born in displacement, in rural conflict zones, or as a result of wartime sexual violence. Without documentation, children cannot claim rights, access services, or be traced when detained or disappeared. International law requires identification, yet the conditions of conflict make identification impossible. The result is a bureaucratic disappearance that precedes and enables physical disappearance.

Against this backdrop of structural abandonment, local humanitarian actors—such as World Hope Givers—become the de facto child-protection system. Their work demonstrates that change is possible even in hostile environments, yet it also reveals the limitations of humanitarian interventions when they are forced to compensate for systemic failure. WHG's Sunday Feeding Program is more than a

site of nourishment; it is a fragile sanctuary of relational safety, predictability, and stabilization. Its existence illustrates the resilience of community-based protection while exposing the profound irresponsibility of governments and international systems that rely on under-resourced NGOs to perform state duties.

A trauma-informed perspective is crucial for understanding why legal reforms alone are insufficient. WRSS teaches that trauma is ecological, relational, and intergenerational. Children internalize not only the violence they witness but also the absence of protection, the betrayal of institutions, and the collapse of social worlds. Trauma affects the nervous system, identity formation, attachment patterns, and moral reasoning. It shapes how children engage with services, authority figures, and future relationships. Therefore, any child-protection system that does not address the psychological dimensions of harm cannot succeed. International law must incorporate trauma-informed principles—not as an afterthought but as a central operational requirement.

What emerges from this analysis is a truth both urgent and uncomfortable: international law is not merely failing children in Goma—it is structurally incapable of protecting them under current global conditions. Protection requires more than norms; it necessitates institutions that can operate independently of state failures, economic systems that do not profit from exploitation, and humanitarian infrastructures that are stable, trauma-informed, and adequately funded. It requires global accountability mechanisms capable of confronting militaries, militias, and corporations alike.

To repair the protection gap, the international community must recognize conflict-affected children as a distinct legal category. It must create independent regional oversight bodies, strengthen international monitoring of detention centers, and mandate documentation campaigns that restore legal identity to the invisible. It must support trauma-informed, community-based interventions that rebuild protective environments. Furthermore, it must confront the mineral economy that enables conflict to persist.

Ultimately, the conclusion of this article is not only a critique but a call to action. The lives of street-connected children in Goma embody the failure of the international protection system—and also the moral imperative to rebuild it. Their suffering reveals the limits of current legal frameworks; their survival reveals the possibility of transformation through relational care, structural accountability, and a trauma-informed vision.

Children living in the shadows of conflict are not beyond the reach of protection. They are beyond the reach of political will. The international community must choose—consciously and urgently—to extend the law into the spaces where children live, suffer, and hope. Only then can international child-protection norms move from aspiration to reality.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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