Children born of war (CBOW) is a term that refers to minors and adults fathered by enemy soldiers in times of war through conflict-related sexual violence or consensual (or mixed) relationships. The growing attention to CBOW in research and advocacy has contributed to a greater awareness of this group of war-affected children. Yet, there are clear discrepancies between how CBOW are conceptualized by academics and how they are approached by policy makers. This divide between research and policy risks hampering the support CBOW urgently need. At the same time, many adult CBOW have mobilized for recognition of their experiences. This policy brief suggests that examining the actions of CBOW themselves might provide critical insights for solving the divide.

**Brief Points**

- CBOW is evolving as a concept. Given the term’s expanding use and potential overlaps with other categories of war-affected children, the scope of the concept merits re-evaluation.

- Policy makers are paying increasing attention to children fathered by enemy soldiers, but refer solely to “children born of rape,” thereby diverging from findings that CBOW face severe disadvantages irrespective of conception and that associating them with rape could be stigmatizing.

- The discrepancy between policy and research approaches to CBOW, including associated terminology, highlights potential knowledge transfer issues which can potentially impede support for this group.

- CBOW have increasingly raised their voices in various countries and continents and expressed agency beyond societal and political preconceptions.
**Children Born of War in History**

Children have been born of war throughout history and across cultures and continents. Often, these children face stigmatization even before birth. Irrespective of individual circumstances, conflict dynamics and cultural specificities, CBOW today and in history have faced exclusion and discrimination, often extending from childhood into adulthood. In post–World War II Germany, children of German mothers and Soviet soldiers were called “Russentodt” or “Russentodt” (trans. Russian dead, Russian bastard). Children born following mass rapes in the 1971 war of liberation between Bengali separatists and the Pakistani military junta were called “enemy children.” Some women raped during the Bosnian war were told they would give birth to an “Ustaša” (trans. Croatian ultra-nationalist). From the name-calling, it appears that communities have treated these children in similar manners irrespective of conflict dynamics and historical background. Researchers and policy makers have developed their own approaches to understanding and defining this group, and so have these children themselves.

**Children Born of War in Research**

Children fathered by enemy soldiers emerged as a research field in the mid-1990s with researchers in Bergen, Norway conducting the first investigation into the life experiences and systemic discriminations of these groups. The term “children born of war” (CBOW) had been used by R. Charli Carpenter and others since 2005 in relation to children born of conflict-related sexual violence. At a joint expert meeting in 2006, Ingvill C. Mochmann suggested to use the term on all children irrespective of their birth circumstances with the intention of having a shared and neutral terminology to address this group. The term comprises children of a foreign or opposing soldier and a civilian, local parent. Scholars from different disciplines have since adopted the term.

Mochmann proposed four categories of CBOW based on their parentage: children of enemy soldiers, children of peacekeepers, children of child soldiers and children of occupation forces. This conceptualization emphasizes the profile of the parents in the context of armed conflict. In 2016, the categories were slightly broadened and adapted to modern warfare by stating that CBOW could be fathered by anyone directly participating in hostilities, thereby also including CBOW fathered by members of non-state armed groups. The concept of CBOW may not be exhaustive. It also sometimes overlaps with other groups of war-affected children, like child soldiers. For instance, CBOW can include children who join armed groups as minors or are born into such groups and become child soldiers while also being CBOW.

Researchers have also labeled children born to European foreign fighters associated with groups like the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) as CBOW, even though both parents are usually members of ISIS, albeit not both always with strictly military roles. Similarly, researchers have categorized children born to mothers who were abducted and forced to join armed groups as CBOW, as seen in the context of Uganda. Albeit ascribed rather different roles and tasks, both girls and boys were part of the structure of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), an extremist armed group active in Northern Uganda between 1987 and 2006. Due to the deliberate LRA system of forcing girls to marry and reproduce, researchers have commonly categorized the children born of these relationships as CBOW, implying that their mothers are perceived as civilians even though they were part of the armed group. This begs the question of whether there is a risk of under-acknowledging the fact that, in many cases, neither parent joined the LRA of their own volition and that also girls were constructed by the LRA to be essential to their war efforts.

The cases of LRA- and ISIS-related CBOW arguably expand the bounds of the prevailing CBOW definition according to which only one parent is associated with an armed group, possibly indicating biases regarding the roles of women and girls in conflict, especially in the case of ISIS, as approaching these children as CBOW “de-militarizes” the mothers.

The body of research on CBOW is ever-growing and has contributed to gaining an understanding of sociological, historical, legal, psychological, and other concerns relating to this group. Research groups and projects were founded on the topic, such as the International Network for Interdisciplinary Research on Children Born of War, now merged with the foundation “Children Born of War Project”, the BOW i.n. project and the PRIO-affiliated EuroWARCHILD project. All of these have contributed to the current conceptualization of CBOW. Some researchers have focused on the circumstances of conception in their research approaches to this group, focusing on CBOW conceived through rape. Other researchers have raised concerns regarding the scope of the prevailing CBOW definition, applied a broader understanding of it, or described obstacles they have faced in applying this definition.

**“Children Born of Rape” on International Policy Agendas**

International policymakers have not consistently used a specific term to refer to children with an enemy soldier parent. In 2013, the United Nations (UN) included this group in discussions of “current and emerging concerns” referring to “children born of wartime rape,” claiming that there is “little to no information” available about them, thus disregarding research findings already available at that time. Policymakers emphasize the violent conception of these children in their terminology, while many researchers reject linguistically and conceptually associating them with sexual violence, as stigma and legal barriers faced by CBOW are usually attached to the militarized identity of the father rather than the act of conception alone. The apparent unawareness of these concerns among many policymakers, particularly at the international level, could suggest a lack of knowledge transfer between academic research and (international) political practice.

In 2019, the Security Council adopted the first UN Resolution mentioning children fathered by enemy soldiers, but here again referring only to “children born of rape,” yet again departing from the common academic understanding of the concept of CBOW. Another reference used by UN bodies to discuss children fathered by enemy soldiers is “survivors and their children,” suggesting that CBOW in the eyes of the UN are not seen as survivors nor as victims, thus constructing a hierarchy between mothers and children regarding the urgency of their needs and experiences.

The focus of policymakers on children born of rape excludes many CBOW, including so-called “peacekeeping babies”—children fathered by UN personnel, oftentimes under coercive
circumstances. Sexual exploitation by UN peacekeepers, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, remains under-acknowledged, while many of the children born as a result face extreme disadvantages. The UN’s focus on children born from conflict-related sexual violence is excluding these children and many others from access to support and political acknowledgement. Making the provision of support and acknowledgement dependent on mothers and the method of conception undermines children’s rights and ignores patterns of discrimination faced by all CBOW, irrespective of the circumstances of their conception.11

Further, several international policymakers and UN bodies increasingly associate “children born of rape” with other war-affected children, like child soldiers, potentially creating unhelpful associations.5 Linking CBOW to child recruitment, a matter firmly entrenched in international policy agendas, appears to be an effort to bring the concerns of CBOW into the immediate spotlight through association. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that child recruitment is a concern for only a minority of CBOW. Drawing on child soldiers to promote support for CBOW might overly conflate the lines between these distinct groups, potentially leading to oversights in the overall process.

The UN’s references to “children born of rape” further undermine researchers’ efforts to find a non-derogative, neutral terminology for children fathered by enemy soldiers. Not only does research show that discrimination can be just as severe or even more so for children born out of love relationships, it also finds that derogative name-calling can have negative effects on the children.11 The lack of acknowledgement of the terminology of CBOW appears to suggest a lack of knowledge transfer between research and policy—or a conscious disregard on the side of policy makers, reflecting their political priorities. Either way, the narrow understanding by policy makers has produced limitations in policy responses and humanitarian support and could even reproduce harmful stereotypes towards the children.

Voices of Children Born of War

CBOW, as individuals or through founding their own associations as early as three decades ago, have increasingly pushed into the public sphere, seeking recognition and understanding of their experiences. These groups have different focus areas of work, different organizational structures and different conceptions of their own self-identification and membership. But despite their unique experiences, many of their voices are unified through similar struggles over identity, history, and justice and are gradually having a real impact on policy changes at the national and international level.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Norwegian-German CBOW formed several groups in Norway. These included “Krigsbarnforbundet Lebensborn” (trans. War Children Association Lebensborn, referencing the National Socialist Lebensborn organization), “Norges Krigsbarnforbund” (trans. Norwegian War Children’s Association) and “Landesforeningen Rettferd for Taperne” (trans. National Association of Justice for the Losers). These groups have pushed for justice and economic compensation. Their struggle for their rights and the publication of their stories have inspired other groups. These organizations include members conceived consensually, illustrating that the current international policy focus on rape-conceived individuals is not in line with the practice of at least some of those affected.

In Germany, the experiences of children fathered by occupying soldiers in World War II sporadically penetrated public discourse and popular culture already in the 1950s, with films such as Toxi, telling the made-up and heavily racialized story of an Afro-American and German child born of war. But it was only much later that so-called “occupation children,” conceived for example by German mothers and Russian (Soviet) fathers at the end of the war and during occupation, found their own voices in post-war Germany and carved out spaces for their own storytelling. It was not until 2014 that interest groups of such German-Russian individuals formed in Germany in the context of a research project. The German-Russian occupation children’s more or less formalized interest groups comprise members conceived in rape, love affairs and unknown circumstances, emphasizing that membership in their group does not depend on the background of conception. These so-called “Russian children” have come together to share experiences, search for their biological fathers, publish autobiographical texts and organize public speaking events.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the organization “Zaboravljena djeca rata” (trans. Forgotten Children of War) was founded in 2015. The organization’s president, Ajna Jusić, was conceived in the early 1990s through rape, a fate suffered by most of the other members and beneficiaries of her organization. This group has advocated successfully for legal change and recognition. It has also engaged in experience sharing and outreach activities in order to make these individuals’ stories heard in the Bosnian public and beyond, including at high-level policy events. When founding the group, most members were in their mid-twenties and thus much younger than their Norwegian and German counterparts when they founded their organizations and groups. According to experts, there are three subcategories of CBOW in Bosnia: children born out of wartime rape, sexual exploitation and relationships by and with UN personnel, and trafficking of women and girls during and after the conflict.

Compared to many other African contexts, the situation of CBOW in northern Uganda has been subject to extensive research and has seen mobilization by CBOW and their mothers. Research on Uganda suggests that cases of abduction, rape, and impregnation of young girls by the LRA rebel group resulted in the birth of about 4,000–6,000 CBOW. Many of the children were named after the plight they were experiencing,14 such as Anenocan (I have suffered), Odokorac (things have gone bad), Komakech (I am unfortunate) and Lubanga Kene (only God knows). These names continue to be used for some children. In the communities, the CBOW are called “otino onywalo ilum” or “cino onywalo ilum,” which refers to children born in the bush. In other cases, the families called the children “atin luk” (illegitimate child).15 These names make the CBOW vulnerable to stigma and marginalization and raise concerns of identity and belonging.

Enemy-fathered persons from various geopolitical backgrounds and generations have faced derogatory name-calling. Common themes in how European war children refer to themselves reveal potential alternatives: Some German-Russian war children call themselves “Distelblüten-Russenkinder” (Thistle flowers-Russian children), reclaiming the derogatory term “Russenkind” (trans. Russian child) with pride and referencing the resilient thistle flower as a symbol for their strength. Bosnian counterparts identify as “forgotten children” while actively opposing this sense of neglect. The
Norwegian group “Landsforeningen Rettferd for Taperne” (trans. National Association of Justice for the Losers), which is the smallest Norwegian CBOW group, appears to re-appropriate the drastic misconception of them as “losers” to mobilize against stereotypes. These conceptualizations and the memberships of these organizations indicate that circumstances of conception do not play a critical role; none of these groups appear to desire a linguistic and conceptual association with violent conception. Nor does consensus conception preclude mobilization and membership in these organizations. Recently, enemy-fathered individuals have increasingly linked up across countries, suggesting that there are common grounds.

But do all these contexts pertain to one homogenous group, as is often the assumption in existing research? Or are the different contexts and the respective individuals mentioned in this brief in fact too diverse in terms of experiences and background to be understood as a single unit, thus necessitating distinct approaches in both research and policy? Does the inclusion of children fathered within an armed group to two militarized parents—such as in the LRA or ISIS—under the umbrella of ‘CBOW’ make sense, or does it reveal gendered biases as to the roles of men and women in conflict? How can we bridge the gap between the ways children born of war are conceptualized in research and how they are approached in practice?

**Conclusion**

There appears to be a disconnect between research and practice in approaches to CBOW. A major reason for this seems to be that both domains are conceptualizing this group differently. The comparatively narrow understanding of this group by policymakers is arguably hampering support for at least some of the concerns of children and adults and might foster inefficient and harmful practices. At the same time, researchers are currently also not using a fully uniform definition on this group. This policy brief proposes to consider the agency of CBOW as a guiding principle to solve this divide. We suggest developing a child-centered approach based on the group’s identification and its own prioritization of concerns. A CBOW-centered approach could be relevant to both policy and research activities, enhancing mutual relevance between the two. Such an approach should map public voices of CBOW. Additionally, efforts could be made to gather qualitative data to allow hidden CBOW voices to be considered which, due to age, safety, economic situation, cognitive ability, or other reasons, may not have made it into the public sphere. Conducting research with CBOW demands a heightened focus on research ethics and practices. It is essential to ensure that the research process does not inadvertently harm these individuals.

**Notes**


7. Carpenter, Born of War.


