
Child Soldiers

Lessons from the Civil War in Sierra Leone (1991–2002)

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Introduction

The exploitation of children in armed conflicts represents one of the six violations of international law recognized by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).^① Although the United Nations (UN) and the international community have officially condemned the recruitment of “child soldiers,”^② hundreds of thousands of minors are still being assassinated, sexually assaulted, and maimed in ongoing conflicts across the globe today.^③

The recruitment of minors represents a serious problem, which has gained momentum over time and encouraged international cooperation. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has raised concerns about the possibility of former child soldiers becoming a “lost generation,”^④ that is too traumatized to function properly in a post-conflict context.^⑤ On behalf of UNICEF, this report is addressed to the international community, revealing key lessons drawn from the ongoing debates in the existing literature across disciplines on child soldiering. Accordingly, the question that this policy paper aims to investigate is:

What can the international community do to stop the recruitment of children in armed conflicts?

In order to better understand this phenomenon, the case of the Civil War in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) is introduced to understand the dynamics that lead to child soldiering. In fact, Sierra Leone represents an emblematic case for two main reasons: (1) for the first time, individuals involved in the forced recruitment of children in armed forces were tried and found guilty by an international court; (2) many leading scholars

① Ferguson, Sarah. “UNICEF Is Working to Free Child Soldiers Around the World.” *UNICEF USA*, June 9, 2020. <https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/unicef-working-free-child-soldiers-around-world/35474> (accessed December 11, 2021).

② In order to address the contested interpretations on the conceptualization of ‘child soldiers,’ in 2007, UNICEF announced its standard definition: “a ‘child soldier’ is any child – boy or girl- under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members.” Roos Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” *Third World Quarterly* 40, no.1 (2019): 85.

③ Ferguson, “UNICEF Is Working to Free Child Soldiers Around the World.”

④ UNICEF, *Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (New York, NY: UNICEF, 2003).

⑤ Roos Haer and Tobias Böhmelt, “Child soldiers as time bombs? Adolescents’ participation in rebel groups and the recurrence of armed conflict,” *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no.2 (2016): 409.

in conflict resolution have analyzed the causes and the consequences of child soldiering through ethnographic studies and interviews with former child soldiers who fought during the Civil War in Sierra Leone.

The paper is structured in the following way. First, the historical background of the Civil War in Sierra Leone is briefly summarized. Second, the current situation with a focus on *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* (DDR) programs is explained. Third, the current interdisciplinary debates on the reasons behind child soldiering are illustrated. Fourth, an analysis of the shortcomings of existing explanations is proposed and some policy suggestions are put forward. Finally, some conclusions are drawn from the case of Sierra Leone to shed light on the larger debate on child soldiers, discussing how the international community can continue to prevent this problem from happening around the world.

Executive Summary

Since 1999, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has labelled the exploitation of child soldiers as one of the “predefined worst forms of child labor.”^① According to the current estimates, almost 300,000 children are conscripted worldwide, with the majority being recruited in developing countries, especially in the sub-Saharan region in Africa.^②

Precisely, the recruitment of children into armed forces indicates the forced, mandatory or voluntary enlistment of children in any sort of armed group.^③ In particular, the tasks and roles for girls and boys can differ greatly, including serving as combatants, cooks, spies, messengers or sex slaves.^④ Regardless of a “near-universal condemnation from the international community,”^⑤ soaring numbers of youth are continuously being enlisted into governmental military organizations, militias and rebel groups, and the phenomenon has become especially acute over the past few decades.^⑥

In this regard, the historical case of child soldiers during Sierra Leone’s Civil War (1991-2002) can shed light on this intricate issue. Some valuable lessons can be drawn from the eleven-year intrastate conflict in Sierra Leone: first, perpetrators can be held accountable for their actions and be punished by law; second, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like UNICEF, have to continue to cooperate with local authorities to jointly create programs to reintegrate former child soldiers back into society.

The issue of children recruited as soldiers has gained increasing attention over time, leading to the creation of new international regulations to protect minors from forced conscription. For instance, “the

① Alexandre J. Vautravers, “Why child soldiers are such a complex issue,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27, no.4 (2009): 97.

② *Ibid.*, 96.

③ UNICEF, “Six grave violations against children in times of war,” *UNICEF*, August 26, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-under-attack-six-grave-violations-against-children-times-war> (accessed December 3, 2021).

④ *Ibid.*

⑤ UNICEF, *Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict*.

⑥ Haer and Böhmelt, “Child soldiers as time bombs?” 409.

protection and welfare of child soldiers also is now being included in the international community's peace and security agenda through several UN Security Council resolutions."^① While the existing literature acknowledges the gradual progress at the international level, much more work has to be done at the local level. Hence, this policy paper suggests the following key messages: it is important to (1) understand the causes to find a common narrative to child soldiering as a global phenomenon; (2) implement recovery and reintegration strategies for former child soldiers; (3) prevent child soldiering as a by-product of deeper structural problems by monitoring ongoing disputes and post-conflict stability in failed states; (4) have a more targeted and locally-focused international response.

Historical Background

The decade-long Civil War of Sierra Leone officially started in 1991, but already in the decades preceding to 1991, a series of triggering events led to the escalation to armed conflict.^② After being a former colony under British rule for over a century, Sierra Leone gained its national independence in 1961.^③ During the post-colonial period, the political and economic powers were concentrated in the hands of a kleptocratic governing elite: corruption and mismanagement steadily led to long-term economic stagnation, high rates of unemployment, the gradual decline of civil society^④ and the collapse of the educational system.^⑤

In brief, due to a vicious cycle of institutional failure and gradual impoverishment, the civic institutions of Sierra Leone had been replaced by militarized entities, who performed aberrant acts of violence.^⑥ Hence, it is commonly argued that the Civil War in Sierra Leone (1991-2002) stemmed from deeply rooted institutional problems accumulated since its colonial past under British rule, followed by its strenuous post-colonial integration process in the modern international system.^⑦

Afterwards, the tensions in the country were further exacerbated in March 1991, when the conflict in neighboring Liberia spread to Sierra Leone.^⑧ As a reaction to state corruption and repression, together with the widespread resentment due to high levels of youth unemployment, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) came into being, which was a militarized resistance movement considered the main rebel group that

① Neil Boothby, "What happens when child soldiers grow up? The Mozambique case study," *Intervention* 4, no.3 (2006): 244.

② Amber Pariona, "Civil War In Sierra Leone And The Role Of 'Blood Diamonds,'" *World Atlas*, April 25, 2017. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/civil-war-in-sierra-leone-the-role-of-sierra-leone-s-blood-diamonds.html> (accessed December 11, 2021).

③ Ibid.

④ Myriam Denov and Richard Maclure, "Turnings and Epiphanies: Militarization, Life Histories, and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," *Journal of Youth Studies* 10, no.2 (2007): 245.

⑤ Pariona, "Civil War In Sierra Leone And The Role Of 'Blood Diamonds.'"

⑥ Denov and Maclure, "Turnings and Epiphanies: Militarization, Life Histories, and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," 245.

⑦ Ibid., 245.

⑧ Christopher Fyfe, "Sierra Leone: Civil War and Post-Civil War," *Britannica*, March 10, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sierra-Leone/Civil-war> (accessed December 3, 2021).

triggered the civil war.^① In this regard, the conflict officially broke out on March 23, 1991, once the RUF troops invaded Sierra Leone from Liberia.^②

The RUF was led by a former Sierra Leonean army corporal, Foday Sankoh, and Liberian warlord Charles Taylor. The initial goal of the RUF was to be a movement to promote freedom and democracy in Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, Sankoh's vision did not receive much public support and the RUF's mission soon incorporated "the goals of wealth, power and control of the country's diamond mines."^③ Interestingly, some scholars argue for "resource curse" being the cause of the civil war:^④ while the existing scholarship has contrasting views whether this was the case, it is commonly acknowledged that "blood diamonds" were highly indispensable during the conflict, as "an invaluable funding source to sustain the RUF's warfare."^⑤ To sum up, what started as a dispersed group of dissatisfied youth rapidly turned into "an increasingly militarist and rapacious organization that embarked on a decade-long campaign of terror and indiscriminate brutality" targeting civilians.^⑥

The Civil War was officially declared over in January 2002, with an estimated toll reaching up to at least 50,000 casualties, hundreds of thousands of individuals suffering from the widespread violence and another 2,000,000 displaced people.^⑦ In the aftermath, the Special Court for Sierra Leone was jointly established by the UN and the local government, with the mission of trying "those bearing the greatest responsibility for crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law during the conflict in Sierra Leone."^⑧

In June 2007, the Special Court for Sierra Leone started the trial of former Liberian president Charles Taylor. He was accused of "crimes against humanity, war crimes and other serious violations of international law committed in Sierra Leone, including the recruitment and use in hostilities of child soldiers under the age of fifteen."^⑨ Former President Taylor went on trial in the Dutch city of The Hague by a trial chamber of the Special Court, in order to avoid the possible insurgence of local disruptions in case he was tried in West Africa.^⑩ In April 2012, Taylor was sentenced to fifty years in prison for committing war

① Se Young Jang, "The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War," *E-International Relations*, October 25, 2012. <https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/25/the-causes-of-the-sierra-leone-civil-war-underlying-grievances-and-the-role-of-the-revolutionary-united-front/> (accessed December 3, 2021), 2.

② *Ibid.*, 8.

③ Denov and Maclure, "Turnings and Epiphanies: Militarization, Life Histories, and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," 246.

④ Pariona, "Civil War In Sierra Leone And The Role Of 'Blood Diamonds.'" 3.

⑤ Jang, "The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War," 3.

⑥ Denov and Maclure, "Turnings and Epiphanies: Militarization, Life Histories, and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone," 246.

⑦ Fyfe, "Sierra Leone: Civil War and Post-Civil War."

⑧ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, London. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/67012B7F8EB991888525744F0069863A-Child%20Soldiers%20Global%20Report%202008.pdf> (accessed November 25, 2021), 300.

⑨ *Ibid.*, 297.

⑩ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, 214.

crimes and crimes against humanity, since he was found guilty for providing support to the rebel forces behind those crimes.^①

More importantly, the Special Court of Sierra Leone had sentenced another three former commanders of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) to between forty-five and fifty years of imprisonment as a punishment for their crimes, including the use of child soldiers.^② This represented a historic milestone, as it was the first time that an international criminal tribunal punished individuals for recruiting children in armed combats.^③ Remarkably, children had explicitly been ruled out from being tried, as the Court considered children both as the perpetrators and victims of political violence: as such, single individuals could not bear sole responsibility.^④

In conclusion, the militarization and prolonged fighting in Sierra Leone had significantly affected the local youth, as many children were forcefully recruited to be part of paramilitary forces or the RUF.^⑤ Since 2002, joint efforts from the government and the international community have annihilated the RUF, launching an operation of demilitarization^⑥ and engaging in post-conflict stability projects.

Current Situation

Regarding the case of the Civil War in Sierra Leone, much of the scholarly attention has been devoted to the forced recruitment of child soldiers by the RUF and their extremely aggressive actions targeting civilians.^⑦ Thousands of minors had to forcibly participate in violent acts, many times after being coerced, abducted or threatening their families.^⑧ The child soldiers were then groomed in extremely violent conditions, for instance, having to “perform violent raids against their own villages in order to prove their loyalty to the movement”^⑨ and being forced to “carry mass mutilations,”^⑩ among others. However, there is no consensus on the precise number of enlisted children in the war and the current estimated figures change based on the agencies.¹¹ For example, UNICEF estimated 6,000 children conscripted into the conflict, while the data from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) rounded up to 10,000 minors.¹²

① Fyfe, “Sierra Leone: Civil War and Post-Civil War.”

② Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, 300.

③ *Ibid.*, 300.

④ *Ibid.*, 300.

⑤ Arthur Abraham, “Dancing with the chameleon: Sierra Leone and the elusive quest for peace,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 19, no.2 (2001): 205-28.

⑥ Denov and Maclure, “Turnings and Epiphanies: Militarization, Life Histories, and the Making and Unmaking of Two Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone,” 246.

⑦ Jang, “The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War,” 1.

⑧ Pariona, “Civil War In Sierra Leone And The Role Of ‘Blood Diamonds.’”

⑨ *Ibid.*

⑩ Pariona, “Civil War In Sierra Leone And The Role Of ‘Blood Diamonds.’”

11 Jang, “The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War,” 1.

12 *Ibid.*, 1.

Despite the war ending almost two decades ago, many minds of Sierra Leoneans are still deeply scarred. After the war, *Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration* (DDR) programs were introduced to help the reintegration of former combatants into their communities. The DDR programs are divided into three phases to assist the removal of combatants from military contexts and their reintegration into society.

First, the disarmament stage aims to downsize the armed forces, by gathering information on their profile and the quantity, location, and type of weaponry at their disposal. At a later stage, the ex-combatants are reunited and transferred to disarmament locations, where their arms are voluntarily surrendered and either stored, moved elsewhere or completely destroyed.^① Second, the combatants are separated from their “command and control structures.”^② After a screening procedure, the combatants get official discharge papers as a proof of their past military activity, their current approval for demobilization and their follow-up reintegration process. For instance, they can be provided with monetary support by means of cash to pay for their immediate basic needs.^③ Third, the most delicate phase is the reintegration stage, where former combatants undergo a series of activities to gradually readjust to a civilian lifestyle. In particular, the final stage of the DDR program encompasses support activities such as “counseling, health check-ups, ‘catch-up’ education, microcredits, and public works projects.”^④

For former child soldiers who are still minors when they enter the DDR program, the procedure is similar to the one for former adult combatants. However, they receive special attention on educational and recreational activities, counseling and psychological services and different types of life-skills training.^⑤ Indeed, much attention is dedicated to the treatment of trauma following war and disaster, where youth post-conflict programs focus on psychosocial care.^⑥ Their reintegration stage begins at the Interim Care Centers, which are temporary facilities to assist NGOs to have enough time to prepare their families and communities to welcome back the children.^⑦ All in all, much emphasis is put into raising awareness on this problem, so to fight the stigma surrounding former child soldiers. Accordingly, local communities also receive targeted assistance to empower them to look after the youth.^⑧

① Roos Haer, “The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no.2 (2017): 451.

② *Ibid.*, 451.

③ World Bank, “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration,” *Social Development Department. Conflict, Crime & Violence*, February 2009.

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/776831468324547527/pdf/514150NWP0DDR0no01190Box342027B01PUBLIC1.pdf> (accessed December 11, 2021).

④ Haer, “The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation,” 451-52.

⑤ *Ibid.*, 452.

⑥ Christopher Blattman and Jeannie Annan, “The consequences of child soldiering,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92, no.4 (2010): 883.

⑦ Haer, “The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation,” 452.

⑧ Inter-Agency Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Working Group (IDDRWG), “Children and DDR,” *Better Care Network*, October 4, 2005. <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Children%20and%20DDR.pdf> (accessed December 3, 2021).

Debates

The unsolved dilemma of child soldiering has aroused the curiosity of both scholars and policy analysts alike, opening a heated debate regarding the causes behind this phenomenon that still affects numerous communities in developing regions around the world. Among the literature on child soldiers, this section presents a key publication titled *the Machel Report*, and the debate around the notion of agency. Subsequently, the supply and demand sides of child soldiering are mentioned to explain the main causes leading to the forced recruitment of minors in armed conflicts: first from the perspective of children (5.2.), then from the perspective of recruiters (5.3.).

The Machel Report and the Notion of Agency

In 1996 Graça Machel, Mozambique's first post-independence Minister for Education and a women and children's advocate,^① published the pivotal UN report, *The Impact of Armed Conflict upon Children* (also known as *the Machel Report*).^② *The Machel Report* represented a milestone publication and is considered today as "a template for virtually all human reporting on child soldiers."^③ In detail, the report revealed the reality of modern warfare in postcolonial societies, which is characterized by the breaking of all common standards and the creation of a feeling of chaos and disruption.^④ According to Machel (1996), this was the reason behind the formation of blurred lines between civilians and combatants, leading to extremely high rates of violence – e.g., ethnic cleansing, forced recruitment of children into armed forces and the use of systematic rape.^⑤

One key debate in the child soldier literature is around the question of agency – i.e., whether children are mere victims or also perpetrators of violence. On one side, one view highlights the forced recruitment, therefore depicting child soldiers as victims. For instance, Boothby (2006) discussed how "children see the protective fabric around them collapse as homes are destroyed, families are uprooted, schools and health services are ransacked, and communities become consumed by violence."^⑥ On the other side, Haer (2019) argued how children are not only passive victims of armed conflicts, as once they join armed forces they will steadily take on "both ancillary and more active combat roles."^⑦

① UN Children and Armed Conflict, "Graça Machel and the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children," *UN Children and Armed Conflict*. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/about/the-mandate/mandate/the-machel-reports/> (accessed December 11, 2021).

② Graça Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (London: Hurst & Co., 2001).

③ David M. Rosen, "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood," *American Anthropologist* 109, no.2 (2007): 298.

④ Rosen, "Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood," 298.

⑤ Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, 9-10.

⑥ Boothby, "What happens when child soldiers grow up? The Mozambique case study," 244.

⑦ Haer, "Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past," 74.

Put differently, earlier assumptions about the passivity of children have been contested by the narrative^① that the minor is “a subject of rights who is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions.”^② Overall, arguments that children engage voluntarily and actively in the practice of political violence are frequently dismissed by citing *the Machel Report* (1996): “rather than exercising free choice, these children are responding more often to a variety of pressures – economic, cultural, social and political.”^③

Supply Side of Child Soldiering: Lack of Educational/Employment Opportunities, Promises of Money and Security

In order to understand the reasons behind the conscription of children in armed conflicts, it is crucial to differentiate the supply side and the demand side of this phenomenon. On the supply side of child soldiering, both push and pull factors are largely discussed in the literature. Precisely, push factors are the negative reasons that “push” children to join armed warfare, while pull factors are the positive incentives that motivate them.^④

According to a 2006 report by the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA),^⑤ high rates of unemployment, especially among the youth, put the stability of the western African region at risk.^⑥ For instance, in the case of Sierra Leone, Jang (2012) emphasized how in the aftermath of the degradation of social welfare, the marginalized youth with no proper education nor employment was an easy target for the recruitment by rebel forces.^⑦ Indeed, social factors like precarious living conditions of poverty due to ongoing disruption or dislocation pose the highest risk among children. For example, children without guardians and children living in refugee camps are the most vulnerable to forced conscription.^⑧

Among the pull factors, some positive rewards include the promises of security and money.^⑨ According to a 2005 study by Human Rights Watch,^⑩ the majority of former child soldiers in West Africa was incentivized by the promise of financial gains and many were not able to express the political aims of the groups they were associated with.^⑪ Yet, some studies show that children are motivated by the “‘adventure’,

① Jason Hart, “Displaced children's participation in political violence: Towards greater understanding of mobilisation,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no.3 (2008): 279.

② M. Santos Pais, “Child Participation and the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” in *The Political Participation of Children*, ed. R. Ranjani. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, Harvard University, 2000), 3.

③ Machel, *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children*, 11.

④ Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 76.

⑤ UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA), *Youth Unemployment and Regional Insecurity in West Africa* (2nd ed. August 2006).

⑥ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, 211-12.

⑦ Jang, “The Causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War,” 8-9.

⑧ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, 26.

⑨ Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 76.

⑩ Human Rights Watch (HRW). *Youth, Poverty and Blood: The Lethal Legacy of West Africa's Regional Warriors*. March 2005.

⑪ Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: Global Report 2008*, 211.

‘the sheer fun of belonging’, a desire to become ‘famous and admired’ or simply because they believe in what they are fighting for or want to take revenge.”^①

Demand Side of Child Soldiering: Troop Shortages, Universal Cause of Fighting and Children’s “Docile” Nature

As discussed by Tynes (2015), rebel groups usually resort to the recruitment of minors for practical reasons: to simply fill in ranks^② and replace their adult combatants, when the latter decrease in number during conflicts.^③ In a similar fashion, governments also follow this logic, in order to take this human resource away from rebel groups.^④ Accordingly, both rebel groups and governments are more incentivized to recruit child soldiers, the more intense a conflict gets.^⑤ Namely, as a conflict escalates, both warring sides may be encouraged to adopt tactics that were initially and commonly considered too unethical or costly,^⑥ like the exploitation of child soldiers.^⑦ Additionally, Gutiérrez-Sanín (2010) further explained that the inclusion of children in warfare has a political and moral connotation:^⑧ some rebel groups view child soldiering as a proof of the group’s ability to include different social classes, showing the universal reach of their mission.^⑨

Additionally, some scholars also believe that children are generally more submissive, therefore making them more easily indoctrinated compared to their adult counterparts.^⑩ An example is the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO), who purposefully engaged child soldiers, as they were seen as more obedient and easily manipulated from moral beliefs.¹¹ Another common instance across various testimonies of former child soldiers is the moment of forced recruitment: new recruits are forced to kill their family members and friends, in order to separate and alienate them forever from their communities.¹² Similarly, during their times with the armed forces, many former child soldiers recall episodes of sexual slavery, forced labor and abuse of drugs,¹³ which left severe and long-term physical and mental trauma.

① Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 76.

② Ibid., 77.

③ Robert Tynes and Bryan R. Early, “Governments, Rebels, and the Use of Child Soldiers in Internal Armed Conflicts: A Global Analysis, 1987–2007,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science, and Public Policy, De Gruyter* 21, no.1 (2015): 88.

④ Ibid., 88.

⑤ Ibid., 88.

⑥ Alexander Downes, “Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: The Causes of Civilian Victimization in War,” *International Security* 30, no.4 (2006): 152–95.

⑦ Tynes and Early, “Governments, Rebels, and the Use of Child Soldiers in Internal Armed Conflicts: A Global Analysis, 1987–2007,” 88.

⑧ Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín, “Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia,” in *Child Soldiers in the Age of Fractured States*, ed. Scott Gates, and Simon Reich. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 9.

⑨ Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 77.

⑩ Gutiérrez-Sanín, “Organizing Minors: The Case of Colombia,” 121-40.

11 Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 77.

12 Rosen, “Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood,” 298.

13 Ibid., 298.

To sum up, the ongoing debates on the notion of agency, the motivations of children to join armed forces and the reasons for recruiters to enlist underage combatants show how the reality is more complicated and nuanced than on paper.

Analysis

After illustrating the case of Sierra Leone and the overview of the ongoing debates, this section discusses some limitations identified in the existing scholarship on child soldiering. Precisely, the main arguments of this paper are: (1) child soldiering is a reflection of deeper structural problems, therefore it is important to identify them by monitoring the precarious situations in failed states; (2) international NGOs should continue to facilitate the recovery, reintegration and fight the stigma around former child soldiers through DDR programs; (3) it is essential to implement a more targeted response from the international community to tackle the issues that may differ from location to location.

Child Soldiering: A Reflection of Deeper Structural Problems

As shown in the case of Sierra Leone, the collapse of the educational system was listed as one of the systemic causes leading to the conflict escalation. Namely, as argued by Haer (2019), child soldiers spend “their formative years immersed in systems of violence and constructing their values and identities under the guidance of these armed groups, they can become vehicles of violence rather than citizens who can build peace.”^① Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that children grow up in a safe environment and are possibly enrolled in schools during their formative years. Overall, it is important to recognize and address the looming economic and political institutional problems before they spiral down in a vicious cycle.

As described in the previous section, the existing scholarship has contested opinions regarding whether child soldiers are to be considered victims or perpetrators of violence. As discussed by Haer (2019), in contexts of war, the boundaries are often blurred, therefore it is difficult to determine whether a recruitment was forced or voluntary.^② Instead, this paper argues that this assessment differs on a case-to-case basis depending on personal circumstances and motivations as well. Yet, regardless of whether the recruitment was voluntary or not, the mere fact that minors are still actively engaged in warfare today is a violation of child rights and international humanitarian law.^③

More alarmingly, child soldiering is related to other problems like drug abuse and illegal trafficking. In this regard, children recruited by armed groups are often held under the influence of drugs, alcohol, and

① Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 74.

② Ibid., 81.

③ UNICEF, “Children recruited by armed forces or armed groups,” *UNICEF*, December 22, 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces> (accessed November 25, 2021).

other substances.^① In this way, regulating drug smuggling and illegal arms trafficking can also contribute to tackling the issue of child soldiering around the world.

As explained in the section above, the majority of the literature on child soldiers discusses how children are allegedly considered more obedient than their adult counterparts. Yet, more recent studies reveal how child combatants may be less disciplined and therefore have little to no tactical value.^② Relatively speaking, this represents a small body of literature and future research can further explore in this direction to prove the shortcomings of having combat units formed by minors, which would in turn dissuade recruiters and decision-makers from hiring them.^③

Recovery, Reintegration and Fighting Stigma Through DDR Programs

Boothby (2006) conducted a study showing the lives of former child soldiers in post-war Mozambique.^④ While some could conduct a relatively normal life, some still continued with a life of violence. Nevertheless, all of them were haunted by their past. Hence, DDR programs are fundamental for the recovery and reintegration of former child soldiers back into society. As identified by Boothby (2006), activities that reinforce the individual's coping skills for trauma and highlight regular life cycle milestones are proved to be the most helpful ones. This is especially relevant, if we take into account that former child soldiers lived at irregular life paces and in constant fear and insecurity. Unsurprisingly, activities that encourage self-regulation and instill a sense of social responsibility also assist in the reintegration process.^⑤ Yet, first and foremost, the former child soldiers have to be accepted by their communities, as some ex-underage combatants frequently struggled to be reintegrated back into their communities due to their troublesome past.^⑥ Therefore, it is fundamental to fight the stigma against former child soldiers, by preparing the communities to welcome them back through DDR programs.

Put briefly, the international community can help warring parties to reach a settlement, by acting as an external party and including some arrangements for former child soldiers in post-conflict negotiations – i.e., assisting in their reintegration into society with professional training.

More Targeted International Response

It is undeniable that the international community has successfully created a common set of international conventions against the use of child soldiers.^⑦ As seen in the case of Sierra Leone, for the first time in

① Vautravers, "Why child soldiers are such a complex issue," 106.

② Ibid., 105.

③ Vautravers, "Why child soldiers are such a complex issue," 105.

④ Boothby, "What happens when child soldiers grow up? The Mozambique case study," 244-59.

⑤ Ibid., 245.

⑥ Ibid., 254.

⑦ Haer, "Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past," 84.

history individuals have been accused by an international court and tried for committing crimes against humanity due to their involvement in the active use of children in armed conflicts – i.e., effectively criminalizing child recruitment. While this historical moment represented a major step forward, more than a decade has passed by and much more has to be done to ensure that the same international legal protocols are respected elsewhere and with a more targeted local focus.

More importantly, this paper argues that to fundamentally resolve this issue, the international community should intervene in conflict-prone contexts from their origins, otherwise child soldiering will always be a by-product. In this regard, international NGOs should continue to negotiate with rebel groups and local authorities, in both ongoing disputes and post-conflict settlements. Accordingly, “the most effective way to protect children is by preventing and resolving conflict and sustaining peace.”^①

As most of the existing analyses focus on single case or small-N comparative studies of child soldiering, it is difficult to generalize the results and trace universal patterns.^② Namely, identifying common traits would help to solve the problem and introduce preventive measures before the conflict escalates elsewhere. Remarkably, many present studies may be subject to selection bias, since they choose extreme cases that limit the possibility to detect shared commonalities to a broader context.^③ But even taking on a general perspective is problematic: the main flaw in the response from the international community to the problem of child soldiers is that it often overlooks the local contexts, focusing instead on legal solutions on a global scale.^④

In other words, as further argued by Vautravers (2009), it is widely acknowledged that the international community has successfully created international legal standards over the past three decades, yet “progress is slow and uneven.”^⑤ The main challenge in applying these standards is that most cases involve failed states, civil conflicts, organized crimes and displaced populations.^⑥ Indeed, Tynes (2015) observed how casualty-intensive and prolonged conflicts are linked with higher rates of the use of child soldiers.^⑦ In this regard, this paper suggests that the international community should monitor closely these conflict-prone contexts^⑧ and reinforce its presence and cooperation with local agencies to safeguard the rights of the

① Stephanie Tremblay, “Ending the Use of Child Soldiers,” *UN Children and Armed Conflict*, February 12, 2017. <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2017/02/ending-the-use-of-child-soldiers/> (accessed December 11, 2021).

② Haer, “Children and Armed Conflict: Looking at the Future and Learning from the Past,” 78.

③ *Ibid.*, 78.

④ Rosen, “Child Soldiers, International Humanitarian Law, and the Globalization of Childhood,” 300.

⑤ Vautravers, “Why child soldiers are such a complex issue,” 97.

⑥ *Ibid.*, 97.

⑦ Tynes and Early, “Governments, Rebels, and the Use of Child Soldiers in Internal Armed Conflicts: A Global Analysis, 1987–2007,” 108.

⑧ *Ibid.*, 108.

children. Nevertheless, it is recognized that the external interventions can be costly and dangerous for the members of the international community, which is why they hesitate to be involved in the first place.^①

Overall, although universal standards should be rightfully implemented, local tactics need to be applied as well, which may differ from case to case. Hence, it is argued that it is important for the international community to continue to advocate for children's rights and learn from the past to guarantee a safer future for all children around the world.

Conclusion

Although more scholarly attention has focused on the study of child soldiers, the current statistics are still alarming. Previous studies have estimated that approximately 300,000 child soldiers are being recruited by both governmental military organizations and rebel groups in 86 countries around the world today.^② While the estimated data may vary from agency to agency, the pressing problem is still there and needs to be addressed in a timely manner. Above all, it is an issue that fuels conflict recurrence^③ and negatively impacts the economy of the involved societies,^④ as it has long-term consequences both for the psychological well-being of children and the local communities.

This paper illustrated the case of the Civil War in Sierra Leone and the forced recruitment of child soldiers as one of the most tragic by-products of the conflict. From there, the paper introduced the main debates regarding the causes of child soldiering as a global phenomenon. While the militarization of children has become an increasingly popular research topic across various disciplines and gained attention from the international community over time, the analysis claims that the progress is still uneven. Regardless of the improvement at the international level, it is important to continue to monitor displaced communities at the local level, where children are exposed to higher risks of recruitment.

At the same time, in cases where child soldiers are already present, international agencies should continue to introduce recovery programs, like the DDR programs, to help the transition of former child soldiers back into society. While the studies on Sierra Leone show that there is hope and redemption for former child soldiers, the reality is undoubtedly more nuanced and can vary from a case-to-case basis. However, the international community should still join forces and prevent child soldiering from happening by eradicating the problem from its root. More importantly, learning from previous case studies, international NGOs should continue to identify and intervene in critical contexts of failed states to avoid the issue of child soldiering as a by-product of deeper structural problems.

① Tynes and Early, "Governments, Rebels, and the Use of Child Soldiers in Internal Armed Conflicts: A Global Analysis, 1987–2007," 108.

② Haer, "The Study of Child Soldiering: Issues and Consequences for DDR Implementation," 450.

③ Haer and Böhmelt, "Child soldiers as time bombs?" 408-36.

④ Rachel Brett and Margaret McCallin, *Children: The Invisible Soldiers* (Stockholm: Rädda Barnen, 1998), 26.

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