

Victims, Agents, or Both? A Critique of the Global Humanitarian Discourse on the Subject of  
Child Soldiers

By  
Rawan Qadhi

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Approved:

Marc G. Doucet, PhD  
Professor, Political Science

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## **Abstract**

The phenomenon of child soldiers is one of the most pressing global humanitarian crises facing the world today. It concerns up to 250,000 children participating in several armed conflicts around the world. In the late 20th century, the international community started taking drastic measures to eliminate the recruitment and use of children, under the age of 18, in armed conflicts. The international commitment to protect children prompted international organizations (IOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governments to portray all child soldiers as vulnerable victims of armed conflict and forced recruitment. The victimization of child soldiers opens up a debate on whether all child soldiers should be considered victims given that several studies indicate that children are not always forced to join armed forces and groups, but rather, some among them deliberately choose to do so. Therefore, this essay seeks to question the narrative of the victim, often put forth by the global humanitarian discourse, as the dominant explanation of child soldiers' participation in armed conflicts. This essay argues that the narrative of the victim fails to fully capture the complexities of the definition of childhood, child soldiers' narratives, and the local realities that child soldiers face. This essay seeks to develop a holistic approach that takes into consideration both narratives of child soldiers and endeavors to provide a more profound understanding of the complexities of why and how children become child soldiers. The ambition of this research is threefold: first, to explore the existing state of child soldier recruitments and narratives, second, to address the determining factors behind child participation in armed conflicts, and third, to examine the effects of the global humanitarian perspective and practices on local African communities and former child soldiers.

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## ACRONYMS

<b>CRC</b>	<b>Convention on the Rights of the Child</b>
<b>CSI</b>	<b>Child Soldiers International</b>
<b>OPAC</b>	<b>Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict</b>
<b>ICC</b>	<b>International Criminal Court</b>
<b>OHCHR</b>	<b>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Right</b>
<b>IOs</b>	<b>International Organizations</b>
<b>NGOs</b>	<b>Non-government organizations</b>
<b>UN</b>	<b>United Nations</b>
<b>UNICEF</b>	<b>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</b>
<b>ICRC</b>	<b>The International Committee of the Red Cross</b>
<b>SALW</b>	<b>Small Arms and Light Weapons</b>
<b>UNCRC</b>	<b>The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child</b>
<b>DDR</b>	<b>Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration</b>
<b>DDRR</b>	<b>Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation</b>
<b>TRC</b>	<b>The Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission</b>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts continue to be among the most pressing global phenomena of the Twenty-First Century. According to recent data gathered by the United Nations, more than 250,000 child soldiers participate in armed conflicts around the world (UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2015). The use of children in armed conflicts is prevalent among many developing countries with the issue being at its worst in sub-Saharan Africa. Child soldiers are often found in countries struggling with a long history of political instability and internal conflicts. In such conditions, children become strategic targets for state armed forces and non-state armed groups that recruit them for political, ideological, and personal purposes. Some children are abducted and forced into joining armed forces and groups, while others deliberately join them to escape precarious socio-economic conditions.

### **I. Child Soldiers in the Global Humanitarian Discourse**

One of the main objectives of this essay is to understand how child soldiers are being depicted and addressed by the documents, reports, and humanitarian programs of international organizations (IOs) and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Throughout my research, I refer to this depiction as the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers. Before exploring the portrayal of child soldiers in the global humanitarian discourse, it is important to understand the development of the subject of child soldiers as it pertains to this discourse.

The use of children in armed conflict has not always been a pressing issue for the global humanitarian discourse (Lee, 2009, p.6). In the past, child soldiering was viewed as a common feature of war. That is especially true during the two World Wars when

children's military participation was considered as acts of heroism and patriotism. Different perceptions of age, childhood, and heroism justified the use of children in armed conflicts throughout history (Steinl, 2017, p.14). One of the major events that changed the global humanitarian discourse on the subject of child soldiers is the report of Graça Machel, the widow of both South African President Nelson Mandela and Mozambican President Samora Machel, on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children released in 1996. The report reflected on Machel's investigative journeys to conflict zones to meet with children, families, and local officials to understand the impacts of wars on children (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2016). The report, at the time, noted that nearly 300,000 children under the age of eighteen were participating in more than 31 armed conflicts which prompted the international community to address in formal terms the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts as a crime against children and a grave violation of children's rights (Lee, 2009, p.6). Machel's report led to significant results in enhancing international attention, support, advocacy, and programming on the phenomenon of child soldiers (Lee, 2009, p.6). Moreover, her report encouraged the General Assembly to initiate the appointment of a Special Representative on children and armed conflict at the time (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 2016).

One of the first international humanitarian attempts to prohibit the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts was the 1997 Additional Protocol to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which sought to prohibit the recruitment and participation in armed conflicts of children under the age of 15. Following international negotiations in 2000,

167 states adopted the multilateral treaty of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC). The Optional Protocol is a global commitment to raise the minimum age for voluntary recruitment to 18 years of age.

Ever since, international humanitarian organizations and agencies have strongly advocated for the protection of child soldiers as victims of wars who are forced into joining armed forces and groups. The victimization of child soldiers became an approach rooted in many international policies and legal frameworks. For instance, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict states that "regardless of how children are recruited and of their roles, child soldiers are victims," (2019). Similarly, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) suggests in a report that "children who have been unlawfully recruited and who are accused of having committed domestic or international crimes during armed conflicts should be regarded primarily as victims, not as perpetrators" (2012, p.9). This led to the development of the dominant current global humanitarian discourse that views child soldiers as vulnerable victims of armed conflict and forced recruitment.

The Cape Town Principles of the international convention on *the Rights of the Child* adopted in 1997 formed what is considered to be the first universal definition of child soldiers. The Cape Town Principles define a child soldier as the following:

[A]ny person 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 those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. (UNICEF, 1997, p.12)



At the time that it was adopted, the definition from the Cape Town Principles was the predominant and official definition of child soldiers among humanitarian and human rights organizations. However, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reviewed some of these principles leading to a new definition of child soldiers, which formed the basis of the Paris Principles adopted in 2007. The Paris Principles of child soldiers aimed to fix some critical flaws of the Cape Town Principles, such as those children who are recruited for sexual purposes (Steinl, 2017, p.6). As a result, a child soldier is currently defined as:

[A]ny person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to children, boys and girls, used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. (the Paris Principles, 2007)

The definitions of the Cape Town Principles and the Paris Principles feature several important elements. First, they distinguish children from adults based on the chronological age of 18. Second, they include both the recruitment of children by state military forces (regular armed forces) and non-state armed groups (irregular armed forces), such as guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and rebel groups. Third, they highlight that child soldiers can include both males and females. Finally, they illuminate the different roles of child soldiers in armed forces and groups. As indicated in the definitions above, the tasks of child soldiers are not limited to participation in violent combats. Instead, they can be recruited as cooks, messengers, spies, and for sexual purposes.

## **II. The Problematic**

The narrative of the victim, as an exclusive explanation of child soldiers' involvement in armed conflicts, opens up a number of critiques in the academic literature as many studies suggest that children are not always forced to join armed forces and groups, but rather, some children deliberately choose to do so. The victimization of child soldiers has led to a growing controversy in the academic literature in that scholars are divided between the narratives of child soldiers as victims versus those who maintain that children can often demonstrate agency and become perpetrators of violence. On the one hand, some researchers who study the criminal responsibility of child soldiers adopt the humanitarian approach of IOs arguing that the victim-based analysis influence foreign policies and increasing sympathy, and support toward child soldiers. On the other hand, other scholars problematize the victimhood approach as it addresses the phenomenon as a moral issue and focuses on a single explanation of child soldiers' participation in armed conflicts: the child as a victim. Such an approach tends to neglect child soldiers' autonomy and agency, causing a gap between the global humanitarian discourse and the local understandings of child soldiers.

## **III. The Purpose of the Research**

This essay recognizes the strong international commitment toward the protection of children affected by armed conflicts and the global efforts put forward to eliminate the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. The essay, in no way, seeks to normalize and justify the use of children in armed conflicts. However, the goal of the essay is to question the tendency of the current global humanitarian discourse to portray all child soldiers as victims of armed conflict and forced recruitment. Therefore, this

essay seeks to develop a holistic approach that takes into consideration both narratives of child soldiers and endeavors to provide a more profound understanding of the complexities of why and how children become child soldiers. A holistic approach to child soldiers aims to examine the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers' victimhood and the academic critique associated with it. This essay argues that the narrative of the victim fails to fully capture the complexities of the definition of childhood, child soldiers' narratives, and the local realities child soldiers face. The ambition of this research is threefold: first, to explore the existing state of child soldier recruitments and narratives, second, to address the determining factors behind child participation in armed conflicts, and third, to examine some of the effects of the global humanitarian perspective and practices on local African communities and former child soldiers.

#### **IV. Research Question, Methodology, & Outline**

The main question of this essay is, *how does the global humanitarian discourse address African child soldiers, and how does it capture the complexity of child soldiers' narratives?*

One of the reasons that influenced me to conduct a research on the portrayal of child soldiers in the global humanitarian discourse is the complexity brought to light by the Dominic Ongwen's case, the first former child soldier to be tried at the International Criminal Court (ICC) as both victim and perpetrator. His case in 2016 sparked my interest as it captures some of the key elements of the tension between the two narratives of child soldiers, the impacts it has on the global humanitarian discourse, and academic research on child soldiers.

Based on the question above, this research is an exploratory essay that seeks to provide an analysis of the global humanitarian discourse in addressing the complexities of African child soldiers' narratives and recruitments. The reason why my research is focused on African child soldiers is because the phenomenon is at its worst in sub-Saharan Africa where most of the world's armed conflicts are taking place and because of the central role played by children in the conflicts of sub-Saharan Africa (Jézéquel, 2006, p.5).

To conduct the research, I will use data from both primary and secondary sources, including various online documents and reports from IOs and NGOs as well as peer-reviewed journals. This research uses primary sources to shed light on the global humanitarian discourse and practices on African child soldiers while it uses secondary sources to provide alternative views that demonstrate the limitations of the global discourse. The research mostly focuses on qualitative studies on African child soldiers because qualitative studies, unlike their quantitative counterparts, are more adequate in explaining and capturing the complexities of child soldiers' narratives. Qualitative studies bring more depth to the critique of the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers as they avoid addressing the phenomenon of child soldiers from a black-and-white approach.

This research mostly focuses on studies that are undertaken after the Cold War which marked a time of significant interest in the phenomenon of child soldiers by scholars, IOs and NGOs. Throughout my research, it was challenging to find current academic journals that critically analyse the global humanitarian discourse making

documents and reports from IOs and advocacy groups the most used source for information on child soldiers.

This essay is divided into four main parts. Through Chapter One, the essay explores issues with the conceptualization and definition of childhood and child soldiers. Here, I will present the current definition of child soldiers to explain the debate on forced and voluntary recruitments and the discussion on the narratives of child soldiers as victims and agents/ perpetrators. Through Chapter Two, the essay addresses the debate of the primacy of structure and agency as well as the interconnectedness between structure and agency through structuration theory. The structure-agency debate is intended to explore what determines children's participation in armed conflicts. The explanation of structural forces addresses the historical, global economic and socio-cultural contexts that push children toward armed forces and groups whereas the primacy of agency focuses on the capacity of children in armed conflicts to act independently even in times of armed conflict. Under the primacy of agency, the research refers to the agency of young people in their "adolescence period" and not all groups of children. Through Chapter Three, the essay addresses the global humanitarian perspectives and practices on African child soldiers as well as the consequences of the global discourse on former child soldiers and local communities. Finally, the essay provides final concluding remarks and discusses the main findings and contributions of the research.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**The Landscape of the Debate**

**I. Child Soldiers Recruitments and Narratives**

This section aims to explain how recruitment plays a role in forming the narrative of child soldiers as either victims or perpetrators. Scholars studying the recruitment of child soldiers tend to address the recruitment of child soldiers as a dichotomy in that children who join armed forces and groups are either forced or volunteer. However, Schmidt notes that some scholars tend to reject the idea of the existence of voluntary recruitment as children who "volunteer" to join armed forces and groups may lack the ability to make a judgment under the horrific conditions of war and poverty. In other words, children who may volunteer to join armed forces and groups "may not be forcibly recruited in a physical way," but "structural or emotional factors may force them to volunteer" (Schmidt, 2007, p.56). As a result, Schmidt suggests that the discussion between voluntary and forced recruitment should be looked at as something that "happens along a spectrum," rather than "a dichotomy where everything that cannot be considered 'forced' recruitment automatically has to be voluntary" (2007, p.56).

Nevertheless, the contemporary humanitarian global discourse tends to focus on forced recruitment as the primary explanation of child soldiering. In contrast, studies by Brett and Specht (2004) and Dumas and De Cock (2003) have investigated volunteer recruitment among child soldiers in Sub-Sahara Africa. Their findings are very influential in child soldiers' studies as they indicate that many child soldiers associate themselves with volunteer recruitment. Such a claim contradicts the common assumption held by international humanitarian organizations that "child soldiers participate in wars almost exclusively because of forcible recruitment" (Schmidt, 2007, p.50). Moreover, it

contradicts the human rights-based approach of IOs that emphasizes the innocence and victimhood of child soldiers in conflicts. The upcoming section is interested in the main components and assumptions of the debate of child soldiers' recruitment as they influence the discussion of the status of child soldiers' as either victims or perpetrators.

### *Voluntary Recruitment*

Child soldiers' voluntary recruitment is defined as "an exercise of free will on part of the recruit" (Steinl, 2017, p.15). As Steinl states, some scholars, "claim that the recruitment of child soldiers can never be considered as truly voluntary because children lack the capacity to volunteer to join armed forces or groups" (2017, p.15). However, Steinl argues that disregarding the reality of voluntary recruitment is problematic in that it neglects children's roles and perspectives in times of war. Steinl states that "acknowledging and accepting the concept of self-defined voluntary recruitment is of great importance in acknowledging child soldiers as capable social actors" (2017, p.16). The question remains: why do children willingly join armed forces and groups?

The study of Brett and Specht (as cited in Schmidt) seeks to explain the factors behind voluntary recruitment among child soldiers. They identify three main factors that are social, environmental, personal and trigger factors. First, they state that there are six social, environmental factors ranging from "material needs, ideology, the prestige of the army, feeling of exclusion, desire for vengeance, and fear" that entice children toward armed forces and groups (Schmidt, 2007, p.51). Moreover, social factors such as a lack of education and familial connection can lead children to seek social identity within armed forces and groups, which give them a sense of belonging (Schmidt, 2007, p.51). Second, children's characteristics contribute to explaining voluntary recruitment. Here, they argue

that personal experiences and reaction to the environmental factors shown above differ from child to child. Some children are highly influenced by the surrounding environment and easily motivated by friends joining armed forces and groups, while others are not (Schmidt, 2007, p.51). The third factor is a trigger event which they describe as not "an isolated event so much as a specific moment in a chain of interrelated factors that have cumulatively put the young person at risk" (Schmidt, 2007, p.51). These trigger events mostly work in the presence of war since without war, "young people would find different ways to cope with structural and personal constraint" (Schmidt, 2007, p.52).

Analyzing what prompts some children to volunteer and join armed forces and groups is important. However, it will be more "enlightening to find out what encourages resilience or rational choices against volunteering in others" because there are not enough studies that explain why children living under similar economic, educational and socio-political environments choose not to be a part of armed forces or groups (Schmidt, 2007, p. 54). Therefore, the argument that children "choose" to volunteer themselves to join armed forces and groups is very complicated. The subject of voluntary recruitment remains very important as it influences the narrative of the perpetrator/agent and the legal discourse of accountability associated with it.

### ***The Narrative of The Perpetrators/Agents***

Scholars tend to use the narrative of the perpetrator/agent because it understands the child as carrying a level of responsibility and autonomy. Steidl indicates that child soldiers who "actively participate in inflicting violence against other persons and commit serious human rights violations and criminal offenses "should be held accountable as perpetrators under international law (2017, pp.18-22). Steidl, like many other scholars,



argues that former child soldiers should be held accountable for their actions to ensure better psychological recovery and effective reintegration into their communities. That is because of their active participation in armed conflicts "amount[s] to a crime under international law" (2017, p. 22).

Steinl argues that holding child soldiers accountable is beneficial for many reasons. First, accountability promotes reintegration by "addressing communities' feelings of fear and anger and providing redress for crimes committed against them" (Steinl, 2017, p.36). Second, on the personal level, accountability "form an important part of the personal recovery process of child soldiers and help(s) to alleviate feelings of guilt or remorse experienced as a result of the participation in violence" (Steinl, 2017, p.36). Third, on a societal level, not holding former child soldiers accountable for their actions "might not serve as a good starting point for restructuring a peaceful and just society" (Steinl, 2017, p.36). Fourth, from a children's rights perspective, "the status of children as rights-holders could be strengthened by assuming a relationship between rights and responsibilities" (Steinl, 2017, p.36).

The perpetrator narrative aims to criticize and influence the legal and international discourse which labels former child soldiers as merely victims and focuses only on children's protections rather than children's autonomy. Children, as agents, are politically competent to participate in wars and political unrest. In other words, "children have to be recognized as actors exercising free will, even if they differ from adults in so far as the information they possess and their ability to weigh one choice against another may be more limited" (Schmidt, 2007, p.60). According to Schmidt, there are many examples of child soldiers in countries, such as Mozambique and Angola, who are actively

participating in conflicts and rationally managing the risks. As Schmidt states, "Children found ways of protecting themselves and coping with the hardships of war by deceiving their commanders through outright lying, playing tricks or obscuring the truth," (2007, p.61).

### ***Forced Recruitment***

Forced recruits are defined as recruits forced to join armed conflicts by being physically threatened and abducted at a very young age, or born into an armed group (Steinl, 2017, p.15). Forced recruitment is often advanced by the international community as the reason for children participating in armed conflicts regardless of the many studies that indicate that most children identify themselves as volunteer recruits. Scholars who disagree with voluntary recruitment adopt the commonly held assumption of the global humanitarian discourse and suggest that most children are forced into joining armed groups. As Schmidt states that forced recruitment is "commonly associated with abductions (individually or in groups), death threats (to the children themselves or their family and peers) as well as severe punishment for desertion," (2007, p.56). Furthermore, it is not necessary that children are physically forced into joining armed forces and groups, but they can be forced to volunteer themselves due to structural and emotional factors.

As quoted earlier, Schmidt highlights that the discussion between forced recruitment and voluntary recruitment often relies on a clear division in which recruitment that is not forced is necessarily considered as voluntary (2007, p.56). He goes on to suggest that recruitment should be understood as something that "happens along a spectrum" (2007, p.56). Still, the majority of scholars identify forced recruitment as an opposite to

voluntary recruitment, which fails to address the complexity of the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts even when this recruitment falls under the category of 'forced'.

### *The Narrative of the Victim*

The narrative of the victim aims to portray child soldiers as helpless victims of war who are forced to take part in arm conflicts. There is a tendency to portray former child soldiers as helpless victims by the national and international agencies as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations (Steinl, 2017, p.12). That is because the victimization of child soldiers "goes well with the image of abduction and cruelly forced recruitment, frequently seen as the result of child-specific powerlessness" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 64).

Schmidt reflects on some studies that highlight the rationale in portraying children as victims. First, she states that portraying children as weak victims of war can increase and mobilize resources. The international community, both institutional and private donors, are more sympathetic when the suffering of child soldiers is emphasized. Second, the narrative of the victim tends to increase "political attention and support" for child soldiers. Third, Schafer in 2004 argues that the narrative of the victim "facilitates understanding and tolerance between former opponents as it helps relieving ex-combatants of responsibility for their actions," (Schmidt, 2017, p. 64). Finally, the victimization of child soldiers facilitates child soldiers' protection and the process of demobilization, disarmament, reintegration and rehabilitation (DDRR). As Schmidt states that the victimization of ex- child soldiers "makes the life of agencies working in the field of DDRR ...easier as only few, both on the donor as well as on the community side, will argue against helping those who involuntarily have suffered through tremendous atrocities"

(2007, p.65). However, Steinl states that portraying children as passive victims impacts child soldiers themselves, their rights, and their communities. At the personal level, the narrative of the victim affects child soldiers in that it can have the impact of freezing child soldiers' identities to a state of permanent victimhood (Steinl, 2017, p.9). At the level of children's rights, the passive image diminishes children's capability as social actors and as full citizens with full rights (Steinl, 2017, p.27). At the level of receiving communities, Steinl argues that the passive victim image "often does not resonate with these communities" (2017, p.28). In other words, since child soldiers are highly rejected and stigmatized when reintegrated into their communities, receiving communities carry feelings of grief, anger, or fear. Therefore, "if these feelings are left unaddressed— as is part of the passive victim approach—community rejection and stigmatization are left unaddressed as well and might even be exacerbated" (2017, p.29).

In terms of the legal argument, since IOs emphasize that children are forced into joining armed conflicts and are victims of war, they should not be punished for their actions. As indicated by Quénivet that "the non-legally binding Paris Commitments encourage states to consider children 'primarily as victims of violations against international law and not only as alleged perpetrators'" (2017, p.435). There are two problems associated with the international law's predominant victim-approach of child soldiers. First, it overemphasizes the narrative of child soldiers as vulnerable victims who are in need of protection and fails to acknowledge child soldiers' agency, and second, the victimhood approach can become counterproductive in the reintegration process at the local level (Derluyn et al., 2015, p.4). These two issues will be explored in further detail in Chapter Three.

## Chapter 2 The Primacy of Structure vs. the Primacy of Agency

Do structural and systemic factors determine child participation in armed conflicts, or does human agency? It is a question usually raised among scholars who seek to understand the differences between forced and volunteer recruitment. The question reflects on a standing debate in the academic literature about the primacy of structure versus the primacy of agency. The previous chapter touched upon how the global humanitarian discourse often addresses child soldiers as mere victims of forced recruitments. As an approach, not only does this discourse neglect children's political agency in times of conflict, but also minimizes the complex local contexts and realities involved. This chapter aims to explore the complexity and realities of the phenomenon of child soldiers in Africa through the debate of the primacy of structure and the primacy of agency. The structure-agency-debate provides two different explanations to the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts: one is based on structural and systemic factors, and the other based on human agency for children in their adolescence period.

### **I. The Primacy of Structure:**

The primacy of structure focuses on scholars interested in investigating the impact of structural and systemic factors on children in the context of armed conflicts through a conjunction of historical, economic, socio-cultural contexts. This section shows how a long history of economic, socio-cultural, and political upheavals limits children opportunities and leaves them at risk of recruitment.

### *Child Soldiers in the Historical Context*

Even though the use of children in armed conflict is a global phenomenon, child soldiers on the African continent make up 40% of all child soldiers globally (Dudenhoefer, 2016). In investigating the complexity of the issue of child soldiers in Africa, Jean Jézéquel argues that African decisions are not merely the causation of the current upheavals of armed conflicts in Africa. Instead, they are also the outcomes of foreign interference into African affairs through colonial political and economic practices.

The work of Jézéquel explores the phenomenon of child soldiers through a historical survey that links African conflicts to Western colonial practices that left African societies torn with ongoing internal conflicts creating an environment that was likely to encounter child soldiering. For Jézéquel, the phenomenon of child soldiers does not indicate a "barbaric atavism exclusive to African societies" (2006, para.14). Jézéquel states that exploring the histories and relations of Africa and the West deconstruct the global discourse that promotes African child soldiers as "a foreign category" and as "exclusively the product of contemporary African crises" (Jézéquel, 2006, para.8). Jézéquel argues that such a historical exploration sheds light on a number of issues regarding the development of child soldiers in Africa (2006, para.14).

Throughout Jézéquel's historical survey, he sheds light on the impact of the slave trade on child soldiering. He states that some historians argue that the mobilization of children as a workforce in African societies increased due to the slave trade that "deprived many societies of their workforces" (2006, para.21). This led to an increase in child labour to meet the needs of African communities. As a result, in many African

societies, children became an essential source of labour that could be mobilized in times of conflict. On the other hand, some historians argue that children were victims of the slave trade themselves. David Eltist's study (as cited in Jézéquel) shows that "between one-quarter and one-third of the slaves exported to the New World were children under fourteen" (2006, para.21). This demonstrates the historical impact of the slave trade on African children. Jézéquel, at the end of the research, calls for the importance of conducting more historical surveys to reflect on the impacts of past colonial practices on the current issue of child soldiering in Africa.

### ***Child Soldier in the Global Economic Context***

The economic context explores the relation between current economic issues and the use of children in armed conflicts in Africa. Here, the phenomenon of child soldiers is seen as a symptom of the nature of the current global economy. First, the work of Honwana (as cited in Haer in 2019) indicates that social and economic crises caused by globalization enhance further inequalities in developing countries and weaken the social fabric. Social and economic crises driven by globalization diminish the capacity of households as well as communities to protect children. Eventually, Honwana argues that such crises have resulted in the "instrumentalization" and "commodification" of children as a source of labour (Haer, 2019, p.76). Second, Bowler in a BBC article published in 2018 is interested in how globalization facilitates cross-border trading activities in goods and services, such as the trading of small and light weapons. Bowler sheds light on the impacts of the technological advancement of weaponry and the proliferation of small weapons on African countries. As Bowler states, there are at least 800 million small arms and light weapons in circulation in the world (2018). Children growing up in politically

unstable countries, such as South Sudan, Rwanda, and Somalia, can be targeted by different military forces and guerrilla groups that have access to small arms and light weapons (SALW).

In addition, the failure of domestic institutions in multiple African countries, like in Somalia, makes it a challenge to fight the accessibility of small weapons that are used by rebels, militia, and guerilla groups. Nevertheless, the issue is that SALW continue to be supplied irresponsibly by significant powers in developed countries. Countries like the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France, which are also the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, continue to be the biggest suppliers of SALW in the world (Bowler, 2018).

### ***Child Soldier in the Socio-Cultural Context***

Addressing the phenomenon of child soldiers from a socio-cultural context explores the influential roles played by combining structural social and cultural factors. Lee, in 2009, investigated the impact of African norms and practices on the spread of child recruitment and use in armed conflicts. Lee seeks to understand how many societies normalize the use of children in armed conflicts based on social conceptualization and standards of childhood. Lee's socio-cultural analysis shows the conflict and gap between local understandings of 'young adults' and the global humanitarian discourse that portrays the recruitment of children under the age of 18 as "a barbaric and universal violation of human rights" (2009, p.16).

Lee discusses how many societies conceptualized childhood based on social standards rather than chronological age. She reflects on the work of Tefferi in 2007 in East Africa that shows that the transformation from childhood to adulthood is based on



different cultural customs and practices that must "indicate and confirm" the social status of an individual (Lee, 2009, p.14). Most of the social definitions of childhood are generated from practical experiences. For example, in Sierra Leone, children know their age without being registered at birth. Therefore, according to some researchers, certain African societies struggle to accept the chronological age of 18 as an indication of adulthood (Lee, 2009, p.14).

Further, Lee discusses the social definition of childhood that encourage children to be "competent young adults" that have to handle "social, economic, and political responsibilities" for their communities (2009, p.14). Lee states that local understanding of adolescence conflicts with Western societies that understand adolescence as "a period of liminality, lack of responsibility, and education" (2009, p.14). For many local societies, military participation and recruitment is a step forward into becoming an adult. Encouraging those under the age of 18 to join armed conflicts will foster the transition to adulthood. Tefferi's field study in 2007 shows that in many eastern African communities, children are trained to enhance physical strength; a requirement that ensures "tolerance for pain and hardship" (Lee, 2009, p.14).

### **I. The Primacy of Agency**

As shown above, structural understandings of the phenomenon of child soldiers rely on economic, socio-cultural, and political factors to explain the use and recruitment of children in armed conflicts. However, structural explanations fail to fully capture the complexity of child soldiers as they neglect children's agency and views their participation in wars a result of violence and manipulation. This section focuses on studies that address African child soldiers as rational agents who are capable of making

strategic decisions within the context of wars. Moreover, this section investigates the agency-based approach that focuses on the capacity of individuals in armed conflicts to act based on their free will, autonomy, and conscious towards political and social transformations. Here, the focus is on a specific group of children that are young people in the adolescence period and not all children. The narrative of child soldiers as agents who voluntarily join armed forces and groups is mostly driven from the primacy of agency as it addresses children's role as rational actors in responding to wars and armed conflicts.

The best way to understand child agency is through pull factors that make joining armed forces and groups appealing to them (Haer, 2019, p.76). For example, many children in times of wars choose armed forces and groups as they provide them with food and security. That is especially true for displaced children who need such protection. Other children may have different reasons for joining armed forces and groups, such as seeking adventures, a sense of belonging, fame, and revenge (Haer, 2019, p.76). To investigate in depth some of these pull factors, I will focus on the rationality and motivations behind children's voluntary recruitment.

### ***Rationality***

As discussed in Chapter One, the global humanitarian discourse tends to disregard children's political and social agency, and it addresses "voluntary recruitment" as a direct result of "poverty, desperation, and separation from family" (2009, p.19). This led to children's voluntary participation in armed conflicts to be explained in terms of "helplessness," "desperation," and "manipulation". Nonetheless, Lee argues that the ways in which young people navigate and negotiate difficult circumstances during war reflect

on their ability as rational actors who can make a rational decision in the context of wars (2009, p.24). That is especially true when children and their families consider and choose military recruitment as the best option to fulfill their socio-economic needs in times of wars and conflicts.

For example, the work of Stavrou in 2004 shows that in Sierra Leone, the government provided a large amount of funding to the army, while the society and economy suffers. Therefore, joining the government army became an opportunity and a "popular alternative to a subsistence way of life in the context of war" (Lee, 2009, p.24). By 1992, participating in the army was a very popular choice among children and young people in Sierra Leone to the point that they were politically active to protest against the government for rejecting their enlistment applications (Lee, 2009, p.24).

### *Circumstances & Motivations*

First, children and young adults under the age of 18 may join armed forces and groups voluntarily to fight for social revolution against the existing social hierarchy, or to demand greater freedoms and political rights. Lee reflects on the study of Utas and Shepler that shows that with growing economic instabilities in many African countries, "gerontocratic elites" take over resources causing "resentment among the adolescents who needed those resources to attain their social adulthood" (2009, p.21). Drawing on Richards (1996) and Shepler's (2005) field research, Lee states that former child soldiers in Sierra Leone have said that the motivation for their enlistment was mostly driven by anger and resentment at their elders. Furthermore, Utas (2003) notes that child soldiers in times of war seek to "appropriate and control every possible means of violence" to gain

total control of the social space and to have the ability to transform their identities from "victims of gerontocratic violence" to "masters" (2009, p.21).

Moreover, young people may join armed forces and groups to fight for social justice and their communities. The work done by Read (2002) shows that some young people do not fight alongside armed forces and groups out of poverty and desperation. Instead, they struggle to achieve socio-economic and political justice in the country (Lee, 2009, p.20).

As one former child soldier explained:

We had forgotten the things of childhood like playing. We had achieved such a high morale, that we weren't children anymore. We felt ourselves rightfully to be men. We didn't think that we would be happy in parties, but rather we thought about a better future, with [our] participation, a future we would forge, a future to fight against weaknesses and vices. (Lee, 2009, p.20)

In the case of girl combatants, Lee states that studies suggest that they join armed forces and groups to seek freedom from social orders (2009, p.22). For example, the study of Harry West's (2000) on the ex-female soldiers in Mozambique and the study of Angela Veale's (2003) on female ex-child combatants in Ethiopia found that women who joined armed forces and groups consider their war experiences to be "meaningful and empowering in terms of the freedom it offered from colonial rule as well as from the male-dominance in the society" (2009, p.22).

Second, children and young adults under the age of 18 may enlist in the military to address their socio-economic needs in circumstances of war. Under the social agency discussion, Lee aims to explain the relationship between voluntarily recruitments of young people and political and economic crises of African countries. She argues that such

crises leave children uneducated, unemployed, and searching for opportunities in political violence. For example, Lee reflects on the socio-economic agency of African youth by examining how they address the impact of the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) of the 1980s that were imposed by international financial institutions. The SAPs initiated significant cutbacks in the public sectors, which affected young populations who were highly dependent on public education and healthcare. Yet, young people across Africa held public protests against the process of economic adjustment (Lee, 2009, p.22). This example illustrates the agency of African youth who are raising their concerns about the challenges and process put forward by the global economy.

The study of Ebo, Aning, and McIntyre (as cited in Lee) indicate that issues of "economic governance" continued to be regulated by the "donor agenda, and postcolonial regimes" that distribute wealth and power based on a system of "patrimonial politics...ethnicity, geography, or simply personal connections" (Lee, 2009, p.23). In this case, young Africans find relief in joining anti-government movements to express their anger. Lee states that it is important to understand that not all young people join armed forces and groups due to economic and political crisis. Instead, most young people choose to take up arms when they have been affected personally by economic and political crisis.

Third, increasing economic and political crisis can prevent young people from making a transition to social adulthood due to the economic and political crisis (Lee, 2009, p.23). The work of Twum-Danso shows that such a delay in the social transition to adulthood leaves young people with no reliable income, unable to fulfill social responsibilities and to be independent. In this situation, the work of Utas and Shepler states that young

people, like in the case of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans, choose military service to fulfill their social adulthood as well as social status and adult dignity (Lee, 2009, p.23). On the other hand, Lee reflects on studies that suggest that young people in Africa join armed forces and groups as they cannot acquire the social status of being "modern" due to the economic and political crisis. Lee reflects on the work of Utas (2003) that notes that for some young people, "the gun itself symbolised their reconnection to the modern world," Therefore, to achieve the goal of being modern, young people in Africa either immigrate to other developed countries or gain modern commodities that allow them to acquire "the socio-cultural status and pride" of being modern (Lee, 2009, p.24).

## **II. Structuration Theory**

The complexities of determining how children join armed conflicts are centered in the structure-agency debate as many scholars tend to argue that structural and systemic forces created in times of war are the ones that prompt voluntary recruitment where children can "practice" their agency. In other words, some can argue that the 'agency' of children is only conditioned by structural and systemic factors. That relates to a point made earlier in Chapter One. In the context of war, it is challenging to determine whether children participating in armed conflicts is an act of pure volunteerism. Therefore, many scholars, especially in the field of criminology, rely on structuration theory, that takes into consideration the primacy of both structure and agency together, to explain why and how children become child soldiers and commit unspeakable crimes.

For example, Maclure and Genov in their studies provide an analysis through the lens of structuration theory to understand child soldiers' recruitment in Sierra Leone (2006, p.119). During their studies, they avoid depicting child soldiers in "singular

perspectives" that are either victims of structural forces or as fully rational agents.

Instead, they investigate the interconnectedness of structure and agency to explain how and why children join armed forces and groups (2006, p.119). While this essay makes use of the structure-agency debate, it is beyond the scope of the analysis to investigate in detail the interconnectedness of structure and agency.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **The Global Humanitarian Discourse vs. Local Realities**

As previously discussed, the global humanitarian discourse tends to focus on forced recruitment as a primary explanation of children participating in armed conflicts, which in turn creates the narrative of child soldiers as victims. The brief structure-agency discussion in Chapter Two addresses not only different explanations of why children engage in armed conflicts but also highlights the gap between the global humanitarian discourse and the local realities in sub-Saharan Africa. Several studies suggest that such a gap is mostly created by the global humanitarian explanation of child soldiering that is based on a Western understanding of childhood.

This chapter explores the consequences of the dominant narrative advanced by the global humanitarian discourse which tends to emphasize the victimization of child soldiers. These consequences are illustrated by taking into consideration the local contexts in which child soldiers live. This chapter is, in part, inspired by Lee's analysis in 2009 and her critique of the global humanitarian discourse through a series of ethnographic studies. It aims to reflect on Lee's analysis that sheds light on the particular local meanings of child soldiering that can be at times neglected by the global humanitarian discourse. As Lee states "it is insufficient to talk about the 'use of child soldiers' simply as a clear case of barbarity and abuse of children" (2009, p.19) without taking into consideration the local realities, cultures, and understandings. By doing so, this chapter seeks to provide a more holistic approach to child soldiering in order to offer an alternative view on child soldiers from the perspective of the local level.



## **I. Locating the Gap between Global Discourse and Local Realities**

Through several ethnographic studies, Lee (2009) discusses how the issue of child soldiering is addressed within local African contexts, mainly in Sierra Leone and Liberia, to demonstrate the gap between the global discourse and the local realities. This gap was briefly mentioned in the first chapter through the discussion of the narrative of child soldiers as innocent victims; a narrative inspired by a modern Western conceptualization of childhood and children's rights. Several scholars found the current definition of child soldiers to be the problem because of its strong liberal views on childhood and child soldiers. This is illustrative of the fact that there are a number of controversial areas in the ways in which child soldiers are represented in the contemporary global humanitarian discourse. This section mostly refers to the work of Alice Schmidt (2007), Claire Breen (2007), and Ah-Jung Lee (2009) to highlight some critiques of the current definitions of childhood and child soldiers.

### ***The Global Humanitarian Perspective***

The conceptualization of children as innocent victims is highly emphasized in the international humanitarian discourse and practices which aim to protect children and eliminate the use of children as soldiers in times of conflict. However, the global humanitarian discourse is criticized for failing to take a cultural perspective that addresses Africans' beliefs, views, and attitudes toward child soldiers. Rather than understanding African child soldiering from the local African contexts, the global humanitarian discourse often explains African child soldiering based on a set of universal criteria of childhood and children's rights that may not fully reflect African cultural values and beliefs.

This is evident in the United Nations' *1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), an international treaty that sets specific international rights for children. The UNCRC advocates for a number of universal rights that every child is entitled to have. Here are some examples of the rights listed by the UNCRC: first, every child has the right to be protected from any form of abuse and harmful substances. Second, every child has the right to provision for education, health care, and an adequate standard of living. Third, every child has the right to have a connection and relationship with their parents (UNICEF, n.d.).

The CRC seeks to ensure that these rights are embedded in the global humanitarian discourse and practices. Implementing these rights at the local level is challenging. This is due to the fact that the global humanitarian discourse puts its efforts on the protection of children as a vulnerable population and fails to acknowledge the local realities and beliefs of African communities that may conflict with the universal rights of children (Lee, 2009, pp.25-26). Even though the Convention, under Article 29, recognizes the right to one's culture (OHCHR, n.d.), international humanitarian aid programs are challenged by the different local views on childhood and child soldiers making such programs counterproductive as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. Under the global humanitarian perspective, I will discuss the following: first, the Straight-18 standard, second, the helpless victim perspective, and third, the issues with the Straight-18 Standard.

As mentioned earlier, *the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict* (OPAC) seeks to restrict the minimum age of recruitment to 18 years old and prohibit the military recruitment of those under this minimum age. This approach has

been known as the Straight-18 standard. A number of scholars criticize the Straight-18 standard adopted by humanitarian and human rights organizations for several reasons. On the one hand, it is inspired by a liberal conceptualization of childhood that views children and child soldiers based on the chronological age of 18. As Lee states, the reason behind the Straight-18 standard is that "the upper age of eighteen as defined in the Cape Town Principles corresponds to the threshold between childhood and adulthood defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child" (2009, p.8). Lee argues that the straight-18 standard is inadequate because it fails in explaining why those under the age of 18 in particular should be considered children and, therefore, prohibited from military participation while those who are 18 years old are considered adults and permitted military participation (2009, p.8). Such a failure is significant as it shows the weaknesses and limitations of the current definition of child soldiers that are merely based on the chronological age of 18. On the other hand, the Straight-18 standard seeks to establish a universal definition of childhood, and a fixed age for military recruitment, which in turn leads to some questions. First, does the chronological age of 18 capture the "the formal transition" from childhood to adulthood? Second, what do people consider as an appropriate age for military participation at the 'local level'? (Lee, 2009, p.8).

As a result of the Straight-18 standard and the current definition of child soldiers adopted by global humanitarian and human rights organizations, all children under the age of 18 are addressed as "innocent, weak and in need of protection rather than as agents of their own and significant contributors to social and political life" (Schmidt, 2007, p.57). The victimization of child soldiers became a narrative and a theme among global humanitarian frameworks. For some scholars, this victim-based narrative is aimed at

increasing international protection, sympathy, and funding (Schmidt, 2007, p.65). Some IOs take a step further and use the victim narrative "to explain away the violence children commit during the war and abdicate their criminal responsibility" (Lee, 2009, p.9). However, the victim narrative has led to significant challenges in addressing the victimhood and perpetrator-hood of former child soldiers which in turn has made achieving successful social reintegration more challenging.

The global humanitarian conceptualization of the child as an innocent victim who needs protection fails to capture the realities of children in war-torn countries because it "assumes and embodies a particular vision of a normal childhood and places military recruitment outside the domain of children" (2009, p.12). Such a vision views childhood as "a period of innocence, education, and adult care" (Lee, 2009, p.12). Therefore, the use of children in armed conflicts becomes "an antithesis to a normal or ideal childhood" (Lee, 2009, p.12). The liberal vision of a normal childhood "may be justified in politically stable and prosperous societies that offer extensive educational opportunities and long life expectancies" (Schmidt, 2007, p.57). It is less practical in war-torn countries, "where poverty is the norm, reasonable-quality education only exists for an elite and lives are short" (Schmidt, 2007, p.57). Not only does this vision of childhood create a contradiction among child soldiers who perceive themselves as adults but also among national institutions in African countries that share a different perspective of childhood such as defining childhood based on the so-called social age (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 57-58).

The global humanitarian discourse on children and child soldiers advocates for a universal definition of childhood and seeks to enforce such a definition at the local level

(Lee, 2009, p.8). This goal is challenging for two reasons. On the one hand, the definition of childhood cannot be universal because it is socially and culturally constructed concept. For many war-torn countries in Sub-Saharan Africa "drawing a line between childhood and adulthood at the age of 18 strikes one as even more inappropriate than in other contexts" (Schmidt, 2007, pp. 57-58). Schmidt indicates that, in Africa, young people share different responsibilities and duties than in the west, and they are regarded in their early teenage years as adults once they have participated in cultural rites. For some sub-Saharan African societies, "persons under 18 may well be considered adults and ready for marriage, to provide for their wider family or indeed to fight" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 58). Thus, chronological age is not the only determining factor of childhood as indicated by global humanitarian standards. Some Sub-Sahara African societies distinguish children from adults in what so-called social age. Schmidt states that a social age defines children based on their size, experiences, wealth, and physical ability (2007, p.58). For example, in Liberia, "participation in war could be seen as a fast track into adulthood" (Schmidt, 2007, p. 57).

On the other hand, international institutions cannot force countries to adopt the Straight-18 standard for military recruitment. That is because, under international law, states are autonomous and have the authority to determine the age of children military recruitment based on their national legislation, which gives global humanitarian and human rights organizations little scope to set up a universal fixed age for military recruitment. The failure of such a goal is evident in an analysis by Claire Breen that reflects on a report by Amnesty International on the United Kingdom, "which has the lowest deployment age in Europe and which is the only European country to routinely

send under-18s into armed conflict" (2007, p.74). This report shows the limitation of the Straight-18 standard on restricting the minimum age of recruitment to 18 years old as it conflicts with what different countries consider as an appropriate age for military participation at the local level leading to a gap between the international efforts to set the age of recruitment at 18 and the local circumstances of recruitment of children into armed conflict.

### *The Local Perspective*

First, through the CRC, the global discourse emphasizes the importance of familial relationships and connection for children's development. However, some ethnographic studies show that separation from families and communities is not considered an abnormal and a traumatic experience within the local African contexts (Lee, 2009, p.18). Rather, it is common for children below the age of 16 to not live with their families. That is because the practice of fosterage is culturally acceptable and governed by the prevailing norms of patronage in many countries in West Africa. Moreover, the local perspective addresses the practices of fosterage and patronage as not only a form of education but also a form of apprenticeship (Lee, 2009, 18).

Shepler's fieldwork in 2005 (as cited in Lee, 2009), found that local Sierra Leonean communities and children understood military recruitment as a form of fosterage and patronage in times of war. Besides the practices of fosterage and patronage led many armed forces and groups to abduct children based on socially acceptable fosterage arrangements (p.18). Due to such practices, many orphaned and displaced children sought a patron within armed forces and groups for resources and protection in times of war (Lee, 2009, p.18). Lee argues that in this case, what the global discourse perceived to be

child soldiering was considered "a socially sanctioned means" to enhance one's protection and resources in the context of war (2009, p.18).

Second, various studies on Sierra Leone indicate that childhood is defined by different types of responsibilities and domestic labour. This conflicts with the predominant Western Perspective that defines childhood as a period of social and mental development, school education, and joyful living (Lee, 2009, p.17). Lee states that children in West Africa have always been involved in domestic labour from an early age and have assisted adults in the community. This is especially true in rural areas where children play a significant role in the workforce. Such an understanding of child labour has been rooted in Sierra Leone and many other African communities (Lee, 2009, p.17). According to Shepler in 2005 (as cited by Lee, 2009), many low-income families have children only so they can work for them and help them increase the family's income (p.17). A study done by Utas in 2003 indicates that child labour in Sierra Leone holds a more significant cultural meaning as parents who do not assign responsibilities and labour to their children are considered as lenient (Lee, 2009, p.17). Furthermore, Lee notes, from other studies, that many African local communities intentionally put their children in painful and dangerous situations to enhance their development and teach them to take on challenges (2009, p.17). Therefore, such local conceptualizations of child labour are likely to influence and normalize military recruitment in times of armed conflicts.

Due to the local understanding of child labour, armed forces and groups take advantage of children and recruit them to do domestic work, such as fetching water, doing laundry, and cooking. Based on Shepler's study in 2005 (as cited in Lee, 2009), the

majority of the young child soldiers in Sierra Leone participated in low-level domestic tasks that are regarded as acceptable for children to do within their local contexts.

Therefore, the local conceptualization of children's development, that is based on social responsibilities and labour, conflicts with the global discourse that advocates for 'regular' school education (Lee, 2009, p.18).

Finally, Shepler's study (as cited by Lee, 2009) indicates that local communities in Sierra Leone understood the use of children in the military as "a form of apprenticeship in the context of war" (p.18). However, as mentioned previously, the global humanitarian discourse emphasizes the role of school education as being a significant stage for social and cognitive development and the way to a "normal childhood" (Lee, 2009, p.18). In some African societies, School education is considered for the elite, and thereby, poor people seek alternative forms of education.

Furthermore, Lee indicates that from a military point of view, children's recruitment "had symbolic value as having a large number of apprentices traditionally meant a high standing of the master (Shepler 2005: 98)" (2009, p.19). Therefore, the use of children in armed conflict is considered by recruiters and recruited "as having a certain logic and continuity of apprenticeship in the context of war" (Lee, 2009, p.19). Such a logic that is accepted by recruiters and recruited shows how local conceptualizations of child soldiers conflict with the global humanitarian discourse that sees child soldiering as a barbaric experience that results from "exploitation" and "abuse of rights" (Lee, 2009, p.19).

### ***Why Do the Definitions of Childhood & Child Soldiers Matter?***

The definitions of childhood and child soldiers are of great importance in instance where a determination is needed to establish a former child soldiers' criminal



responsibility, legal standing to face prosecution, and process of reintegration into civilian society. For IOs, a universal definition of childhood is aimed to protect those under 18-year-old and ensure a just system of prosecution. However, as shown above, the Straight-18 standard has faced criticisms for neglecting the local understanding of childhood and for the lack of global consensus on the age of military participation of children. Schmidt argues that such inconsistency reflects on "the difficulties involved in defining and thereby protecting children" (2007, p. 58). Here are some examples that shed light on the inconsistency existing among IOs and international legal bodies in terms of youth military participation. First, Art. 38 of *the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) sets 15 as the minimum age for recruitment and use in hostilities (OHCHR,1990). Second, *the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (OPAC) (in line with international labour laws), sets 18 as the minimum age for recruitment, except for voluntary recruitment (United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, (n.d.).

Not only is the Straight-18 standard criticized for failing to acknowledge the ‘social age’ of child soldiers in some African countries, but also for leading to inconsistencies between different instruments of international law. As a result of the global discourse’s inconsistency of the definition of child soldiers and the age of military recruitment, there is a growing issue of the so-called three-year accountability/victimhood gap. This issue is made apparent in cases of international criminal prosecution such as those brought to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. The ICC is intended to prosecute individuals for international crimes such as genocide, crimes against humanity, and war

crimes. However, due to the poor definition of child soldiers, it can be challenging for the ICC to determine the victimhood and perpetrator-hood of former child soldiers. In such cases, child soldiers between the age of 15 to 17 fall "through the cracks of the ICC's legal framework and is neither a victim nor a perpetrator of war crimes" (Chaikel, 2015, para.5). The issue of the three-year gap results from Article 26 of the Rome Statute that "prohibits the prosecutor from investigating and prosecuting individuals who commit crimes when they are under the age of 18" (Chaikel, 2015, para.5). Throughout the three-year gap, former child soldiers "have no status as child soldier victims or as potential perpetrators, nor can they be considered the subject of child soldier crimes" (Chaikel, 2015, para.1). However, the moment a suspect turned 18, "he became a potential perpetrator of mass atrocities, since this is the earliest age a person can be prosecuted before the Court" (Chaikel, 2015, para.1). The three-year gap is a practical example of the failure of the straight-18 standard that does not capture the complexity of the definitions of childhood and child soldiers.

## **II. The Global Humanitarian Practices**

The goal of this section is to demonstrate the importance of addressing the gap between the global humanitarian discourse and local realities of child soldiering. That is because "failing to employ this kind of local engagement in programming may lead to negative consequences for the intended beneficiaries" (Lee, 2009, p.19). Further, applying a universal understanding of childhood and children's rights to the issue of child soldiers in Africa leads to humanitarian aid programs that can be perceived disadvantageous at the local level (Lee, 2009, p.25).

For that reason, Lee reflects on various field-based studies to explore the negative consequences of the gap between the global discourse and local understanding of child soldiers. Lee uses the example of child soldiers in Sierra Leone as it functions as a good example of the child soldier crisis presented in the global discourse and media. Therefore, this section seeks to explore how morally and well-intentioned global humanitarian programs for child soldiers can do more harm than good to local communities as well as child soldiers themselves.

As mentioned previously, the global definition of child soldiers portrays them as a vulnerable population and victims of forced military recruitment who need protection. Based on this perspective, international humanitarian organizations have made it a priority to protect children from armed forces and groups. The international community seeks to enhance child protection and eliminate their participation in armed conflicts, first, by limiting the age of military recruitment to the age of 18, and second, by initiating humanitarian aid programs. The former point opens up the debate of the age of children's recruitment, which was discussed previously in this chapter. This section will only focus on the impact of international humanitarian aid programs, such as the United Nations formal peace operations often known merely by its acronym "DDR". The DDR programs aim to Disarm, Demobilize, and Reintegrate children into their communities and thereby "contribute to security and stability in post-conflict environments so that recovery and development can begin" (UNDDR, 2005). This section uses the DDR programs in order to briefly illustrate the flaws of the global humanitarian aid programs in the local contexts.

The process of disarmament is the first part of the DDR program, and it seeks to collect and destroy weapons carried by former child soldiers. Dudenhoefer states that such a process is challenging as former child soldiers might have more than one weapon or may not have any weapons at all (2018, para.3). Machel Graça wrote in 2001 that in Liberia, the effort of disarmament was organized as *one man, one gun program*, which "worked against the best interests of children, especially girls, because rebel commanders confiscated children's weapons prior to their release" (Dudenhoefer, 2018, para.3). Some other examples of disarmament programs are gun buy-back which offers monetary rewards to collect guns from child soldiers. However, Dudenhoefer states that programs that provide financial rewards leave children vulnerable to adult exploitation (2018, para.3). That is because adult commanders take advantages of such programs and send child soldiers with their guns to DDR initiatives and strip the money from children later on (Dudenhoefer, 2018, para.3). Furthermore, Kees wrote in 1997 (as cited in Dudenhoefer) that such disarmament programs can only work for a limited period of time to avoid generating a trade of arms in the country (Dudenhoefer, 2018, para.3).

Second is the process of demobilization, which is described as a formal process of separating child soldiers from the armed forces and groups. Dudenhoefer states that such processes can be challenging as leaving armed forces and groups is stressful for children who will lose valuable psychological support (2018, para.5). Another challenge of the process of demobilization is known as the "security dilemma" that results from the lack of mutual trust between demobilisation initiatives and armed forces and groups. Such an issue makes armed forces and groups refuse the demobilization of their members (2018,

para.5). Therefore, Dudenhoefer states *that demobilization requires high professional training based on credible and strong authority* (2018, para.5).

Third is the reintegration process of the DDR. As Dudenhoefer states, reintegration is the most challenging and complicated part of the DDR program as reintegration requires a long time to achieve successful results, unlike disarmament and demobilization (2018, para.6). Dudenhoefer indicates that the difficulties of reintegration lay in the processes of adaptation of former soldiers and of rebuilding healthy families and communities where former child soldiers can have positive roles (2018, para.6). Moreover, reintegration is challenged by the processes of reconciliation and coexistence between former child soldiers, who are often viewed locally as perpetrators, and their communities.

### ***Consequences of the Global Humanitarian Practices***

Lee states that various studies indicate that the goals of these aid programs are to secure under-age soldiers after their release from detention centers, offer special rehabilitation assistance, provide multiple educational and training programs, and facilitate ex-child soldiers' family reunion and reintegration into their communities (2009, p.26). However, humanitarian agencies' well-intentioned programs are criticized for trying to restore a normal childhood to child soldiers based on a universal understanding of childhood. Such a conceptualization of childhood indicates that "the child... should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding" (OHCHR, n.d.).

### ***Negatives Impacts of Humanitarian Aid Programs on Ex-Child Soldiers***

Based on Lee's analysis, the global humanitarian aid programs, such as DDR, encounter significant difficulties leading to counterproductive results that affect ex-child

soldiers. Lee states these effects can disempower ex-child soldiers socially and politically as well as overlook the economic benefits and social respect associated with child soldiers. First, the DDR programs tend to enhance ex-child soldiers' dependency on adults in the family and their communities, leaving ex-child soldiers socially and politically disempowered (Lee, 2009, p.27). That is because, as mentioned previously, the DDR programs do not comply with the notion of children as human agents. Instead, these programs emphasize that child soldiers are victims who should be "rehabilitated and cared for until the agency could unite them with their families" (Lee, 2009, p.27). In addition, Lee states that international aid programs disregard the challenges of having to give up power due to the misleading assumption of children's forced recruitment and vulnerability. Most international programs are concerned about the reintegration process of ex-child soldiers into the community neglecting the psychological impacts of having to give up power (Lee, 2009, p.29). Many ex-child soldiers were exposed to high levels of violence, given AK- 47 and carried on difficult tasks. Therefore, it is normal for ex-child soldiers to feel frustrated by international aid programs that take their power away from them.

Here are some statements that describe the struggle of ex-child soldiers when having to give up power:

Some of these guys were big guns. They're big honchos during the regime ... I mean, during the regime, when they were there as kind of top brass, top guys. They have their vehicles. I won't talk of money. It's something they just dish out as and when they like. Not to count the number of women they used to have and they don't have now a dime or a cent to occupy their status which they've created

for themselves during the war period. How are they going to live in the same community? (Lee, 2009, pp.28-29)

Similarly, China Keitetsi, an ex-female child combatant from western Uganda, wrote in her autobiography:

I could not really feel at home there, it seemed as if everybody in the village was sloppy, never knowing what to do, and always talking before thinking. Despite that, I wanted to stay, but people failed to recognise me as the one I wanted them to see. I believed that I was above any civilian, making me to have the final say, but no one seemed willing to let me. (Lee, 2009, p.29)

As shown above, the main goal of international humanitarian aid programs is to reintegrate and reunite ex-child soldiers with their families and communities. However, these programs can fail to address the needs and realities of ex-child soldiers in part due to the implication of the universal conceptualization of childhood and children's needs.

### *Negatives Impacts on the Local Communities*

Aside from the international aid programs failing to capture the complex situations of ex-child soldiers, such programs also have negative impacts on the local communities. First, Lee states that international aid programs violate the local norms and beliefs regarding childhood and child soldiers, especially during the process of reintegration. That is because international aid programs fail to understand the challenges that communities have to face when reintegrating ex-child soldiers back into their communities (Lee, 2009, p.30).

In this case, international agencies are forced to convince communities "to change their attitudes," toward ex-child soldiers. Shepler's work in 2007 (as cited in Lee, 2009)

indicates that international agencies give away booklets to promote the UNCRC articles on children's rights and to change the local attitudes toward reintegration programs (p.30). Further, Shepler states that the international aid programs emphasize to local communities the idea of forced recruitment. That is meant to convince local communities that "child soldiers were forced to commit crimes during the war and that children had a right to be reunified with their family" (Lee, 2009, p.30). Such an approach conflicts with some of the local understanding of childhood and child soldiers in Africa. By promoting a Western understanding of what constitutes a normal childhood, the international aid programs violate the local norms regarding children's labour, and social responsibilities discussed above.

After destructive armed conflicts, local communities want to seek truth and justice, and thereby seek to punish ex-child soldiers who fought alongside rebels. However, the global conceptualization of child soldiers as innocent victims who should not be punished for their crimes hinders the local process of seeking truth and justice (Lee, 2009, p. 31). Rosen's work (as cited in Lee, 2009) gives the example of the establishment of the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Sierra Leone. Such a procedure "ended up letting most under-18 combatants walk free under the presumption of innocence and victimhood" which has led to "intense lobbying and negotiation between the United Nations, Sierra Leone government, and international humanitarian groups" (Lee, 2009, p.31). Based on the Straight-18 approach mentioned in Chapter One, the international humanitarian organization advocated against punishing individuals who were under the age of 18 at the time they committed a war crime. As a result of the global pressure and lobbying, the TRC freed most of those under-18 soldiers.



Lee argues that it is understandable why Sierra Leoneans would feel frustrated by the abdication of the criminal responsibility of ex-child soldiers. Given the fact that they understand the issue of child soldiers based on their local conceptualization of childhood that addresses children as responsible agents. Therefore, it is unacceptable that “anyone under the age of 18 is an innocent child and thus must be forgiven and provided with socio-economic resources for rehabilitation and reintegration” (Lee, 2009, p. 31).

Another reason why local people struggle to accept ex-child soldiers as innocent is that some communities might have witnessed how children willingly joined armed forces and groups to escape precarious social and economic conditions in their communities (Lee, 2009, p. 31). In this case, local people can find it challenging to accept that the crimes ex-child soldiers committed with armed forces and groups to enhance their social and economic status should be forgiven because of their age. Lee raises two important questions: *First, is it acceptable and adequate to oblige local communities to adhere to a particular vision of justice that was influenced by the global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers? Second, how can the process of reconciliation and political and social stability be achieved if local people are not convinced that justice is served to those who inflicted violence on them?* Here, Lee states that the current global humanitarian discourse on the subject of child soldiers has failed to provide answers to these two critical questions, but rather, it continues to silence these insights through the narrative of child soldiers as vulnerable victims (Lee, 2009, p. 31).

## CONCLUSION AND FINAL REMARKS

This essay discussed the recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts as a global phenomenon which as noted previously concerns up to 250,000 children around the world. The practice of child soldiering is spreading to roughly twenty countries with the situation being at its worst in Africa. Therefore, the goal of this research was to examine how the global humanitarian discourse addresses African child soldiers and whether it is able to capture the complexity of child soldiers' narratives. This research is limited to the case of African child soldiers and their narratives as presented in both the global humanitarian discourse and academic literature. The essay also sought to illustrate some of the potential effects of the global humanitarian views and practices on local African communities and former child soldiers.

As mentioned earlier, the international community started to recognize, in formal terms, the issue of child soldiers as a global phenomenon in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the report of Graça Machel's on *the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* presented before the General Assembly in 1996. Following Machel's report, a number of treaties and resolutions were put forward by the international community to eliminate the recruitment and use of children, under the age of 18, in armed conflicts. This led to the development of the current global humanitarian discourse that emphasizes the paradigm of child soldiers as vulnerable victims of forced recruitment. The global humanitarian discourse on child soldiers focuses on a Western conceptualization of childhood and children's rights making the current definition of child soldiers, that is based on the Paris Principles of 2007, problematic for several scholars.

One of the first critiques of the global humanitarian discourse is that most of the predominant reports and documents on Africa child soldiers put forward by IOs and NGOs focuses merely on forced recruitment, which can lead to misconceptions as to why child soldiers participate in armed conflicts. The aim of Chapter One was to explore the discussions on forced and voluntary recruitments and how they influence the narratives of child soldiers as victims and agents. Several studies have indicated that not all children are forced into joining armed forces and groups. Instead, some children do so for several reasons, such as seeking revenge or justice. This essay sought to avoid addressing the discussion between voluntary and forced recruitments as a simple dichotomy and sought to understand the complexities and the interconnectedness between the two types of recruitments.

In Chapter Two, the essay addressed the structure-agency debate as an analytical tool to understand how and why children become child soldiers. Under the structuralist perspective, the essay shed light on the historical, economic, and sociocultural elements that help to explain the structural and systemic forces that prompt the participation of children in armed conflicts. First, the essay used a historical approach to trace the issue of child soldiers to the European waves of colonialism and the slave trade in Africa. Through my research, I found that there is a link to be made between the Euro-Western interference in Africa, that led to drastic changes that left most regions in the continent weak and unstable, and the spread of child soldiers. Second, the essay highlighted how the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa are associated with the economic interests of major powers. Economic interests such as these can often harm international efforts to combat the recruitment of child soldier. Finally, the essay

considered the sociocultural context to explain how some African local cultures and norms influence child soldiers and act as structural factors that can drive the recruitment of children into conflict.

Under the agency analysis, the essay discussed the limitations of the structural understandings of the phenomenon of child soldiers and the importance of the agency analysis for a more thorough understanding of some of the factors that lead children to volunteer as soldiers. This section focuses on studies that address African child soldiers as agents who willingly join armed forces and groups. It explores the primacy of agency based on studies that examine the rationality and motivations of child soldiers. In the context of war, children may have different reasons for joining armed forces such as seeking revenge and justice, seeking social change, and advancing one's socio-economic status.

Chapter Two aimed to summarize the structure-agency-debate to demonstrate the complexities of child soldiers' recruitments in times of war. As shown at the end of Chapter Two, the interconnectedness between structure and agency makes it challenging to distinguish between voluntary and forced recruitments of child soldiers. Therefore, some scholars tend to use the lens of structuration theory to explain the overlap of structure and agency.

Another critique of the global humanitarian discourse was the Straight-18 standard that is based on the Optional Protocol on *the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* (OPAC). Scholars found that the Straight-18 standard was problematic as it addresses childhood and child soldiers based on the chronological age of 18 and it seeks to prevent military recruitment of children under the age of 18. Such an

approach not only conflicts with some of the local African understandings of childhood explored in this essay but also with some Western states' standards of what constitutes as an appropriate age of military recruitment. The essay gave the example of the UK, as it has the lowest deployment age in Europe, to demonstrate one of the limitations of the Straight-18 standard. As a result of the Straight-18 standard, global humanitarian and human rights organizations tend to focus on the narrative of child soldiers as mere victims of war. Such a conceptualization of childhood is embedded in the global humanitarian practices and aid programs such as DDR. The Chapter used the example of the DDR programs to illustrate the limitation of humanitarian aid programs and their impacts on local people and former child soldiers.

The goal of Chapter Three was to address the Straight-18 standard principle because it shows the complexities of the definition of childhood and child soldiers. Further, it shows the importance of reaching a global consensus on the meaning of child soldiers as well as the age of military participation of children because failing to do so will cause further legal complexities in determining the victimhood and perpetrator-hood of former child soldiers.

This research contributes to the academic literature on child soldiers in three ways: First, in Chapter One, the essay sought to rethink the global humanitarian discourse on forced recruitment as the only explanation of child soldiers' participation in armed conflicts. The chapter relied on different studies to demonstrate how both voluntary and forced recruitments are prevalent in times of conflict. The chapter suggested that looking at the two types of recruitments as a simple dichotomy is not useful as it generates singular perspectives or narratives on child soldiers. Second, the essay provided an

investigation of how and why children become soldiers through the analytical tool of the structure-agency debate. The essay suggested that more studies need to take into consideration the primacy of both agency and structure to understand the determining factors of children's participation in armed conflicts. I reflected on some scholars who use structuration theory to explore the interconnectedness of structure and agency. Third, the essay explored the limitation of the global humanitarian discourse on the definition of childhood and the age of military recruitment opening up the global humanitarian discourse on the subject of child soldiers to further critiques in the future.

In the end, the overall objective of this essay is to prompt future research to rethink the narratives of child soldiers and the ways in which they are being portrayed by international and non-governmental organizations which tend to depict all child soldiers as mere helpless victims. It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide solutions; however, given the focus of this study it is perhaps appropriate to conclude with the following reflections inspired by Lee's work. First, there is a need to work on new definitions of child soldiers and childhood that capture the complexities and realities of children and their local contexts. As shown above, the definition of a 'child soldier' as anyone under the age of 18 fails to capture the realities of child soldiers in Africa. The questions of *who is a 'child'* and *what constitutes an appropriate age of military recruitment* are challenging. Therefore, IOs and NGOs should not try to 'sensitize' nor persuade local populations to change their perspectives on childhood and the age of military recruitment (Lee, 2009, p.32). Second, we need to prioritize local contexts and young people's agency in programming for assistance (Lee, 2009, p.32). Taking local contexts and agency into consideration does not mean that we are legitimizing children's

military participation, but rather, it means that we are trying to understand the overall socio-economic and political conditions in which children 'choose' to join armed forces and groups (Lee, 2009, pp.32-33). Continuing to use the narrative of child soldiers as mere helpless victims will not help to achieve these goals and will leave many questions unanswered.

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