

INTRODUCTION

This study is an explorative, descriptive as well as analytical account of the problem of child soldiering in Africa, based mainly on literature reviews. It also draws extensively on programme and conference reports as well as newspaper and journal articles. Primary fieldwork is not included. Examples used in the study will focus on Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda and Mozambique as well as Liberia and Angola.

Section 1 reviews the phenomenon of child soldiers by situating it within a historical and universal context, as well as by examining the changing nature of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War and the extent to which, this has facilitated the use of children in conflicts. Section 2 outlines the background to some of the wars in Africa and the economic and political agendas that incite and prolong them. Section 3 then proceeds to analyse the use of children in modern day African conflicts and examines the consequences of child soldiering on children and their communities with a particular focus on Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Uganda, Mozambique, Angola and Liberia. Finally, Section 4 considers the much-neglected subject of the specific experiences of girl combatants during civil wars in various African countries.

Background

The end of the Cold War, which had dominated regional and world politics from the 1950s to the early 1990s, raised hopes for an end to super power conflict and its attendant proxy wars in various parts of the world. However, in reality, it signified the intensification of the modern conception of civil wars, which tend to be fought internally, within the boundaries of a state and between one or more insurgent groups and the ruling government. In this new environment civilians bear the brunt of the violence as the statistics clearly illustrate: 90% of victims are non-combatants—mainly women and children. During the 1990s more than two million children died as a result of war and more than 3 times that number were permanently disabled or seriously injured. Additionally, 20 million children are among the refugees and internally displaced scattered

around the world.¹ The main sphere of violence now tends to be the village or the town centre rather than a far-flung battlefield typical of conventional warfare.² As a result, entire communities are drawn into the conflict either as aggressors, victims or both at different times. The horrors of the atrocities carried out in modern wars are emphasised by the fact that very often, they are committed by former neighbours, friends or fellow village members. Light weapons such as the Soviet AK-47 and the G-3 feature prominently in post-Cold War conflicts, transforming local conflicts "into bloody slaughter."³ This, in turn, facilitates the incorporation of children into what are often referred to as 'adult wars'.

It was during the 1980s that the phenomenon of child soldiers first attracted widespread international attention. Over 20 years later it is estimated that at any one time there are around 300,000 children under the age of eighteen years (male and female) currently participating in conflicts in more than 30 countries worldwide either as combatants or as auxiliaries.⁴ Consequently, the cumulative total is staggering. In all, the last decade has witnessed the active participation of one million children in various wars. However, due to the scarcity of reliable documentation and the fact that most armed groups, including government forces, deny their existence, the exact number of child soldiers is difficult to assess and thus, they remain 'invisible'. While most child combatants are aged between fifteen and eighteen years, the youngest recorded age is seven.⁵

Of the estimated 300,000 child soldiers in the world, 120,000 can be found in Africa alone. This fact is of particular concern because Africa is not only the world's poorest region, but it also consists of its youngest populations. According to Peters and Richards, whilst five to twenty-five year olds account for only 25% of the population in Europe and North America and for 35% in Asia, in Africa they comprise an overwhelming 45% of the population.⁶ This deadly cocktail of violence, poverty and large numbers of disaffected youth does not bode well for the welfare and development of children, their communities, nations and the future.

Much contention has surrounded the definition of the terms 'child' and 'childhood', with postmodernists such as Dasberg and Veerman leading the 'cultural relativist call' for acknowledging the differences between peoples and societies and the need to respect and maintain these differences. This monograph will adopt a human rights perspective based on the argument acknowledged by RE Howard that, although not universal in origin, human rights are now, in principle, universally applicable.⁷ One international legal instrument

renowned for its 'universality' is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and made binding to States Parties in September 1990. The Convention has now been ratified by all countries except two (the United States and Somalia), emphasising for many, its universality. According to the Convention, a child is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."⁸ Since the geographical focus of this monograph is Africa, it is necessary to note that the definition of a child stipulated by the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, produced by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU),⁹ is consistent with that of the UNCRC.

The working definition of the term 'child soldier' used in this monograph is encapsulated in the Cape Town Principles, an agreement adopted by participants attending a symposium organised by UNICEF in Cape Town in April 1997. Thus, a child soldier is:

Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, only refer to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.¹⁰

Since the problem of children in armed conflict has only recently been pushed onto the international stage, theoretical discourses on the subject are relatively few. Most of the work that has been done in this area has been based on fieldwork research and linked to the programmes of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Thus, there is a growing need for a theoretical framework within which the discussion, design and implementation of programmes for the prevention and rehabilitation of child soldiers can be situated.

The existing theoretical framework lends itself to a powerful debate on various aspects of the subject. Firstly, Brett and McCallin¹¹ emphasise the 'invisibility' of child soldiers. This factor underlines one of the main problems associated with researching the subject—the dearth of reliable and valid information about this category of children. Secondly, using existing reliable information, Honwana¹² dispels the myth that child soldiering is a modern or African phenomenon by incorporating a historical and global account into her study as well as focusing specifically on Angola and Mozambique. Thirdly, with regards to the reasons behind the use of children in conflict, Abdullah and

Muana highlight the importance of socio-economic factors, which not only lead to violent conflict, but also facilitate the participation of children and youth in war. Fourthly, the Coalition against the Use of Child Soldiers offers yet another useful perspective by linking the phenomenon to a deliberate military strategy adopted by some armed groups and governments. Fifthly, whilst Richards (1996) and McConnan respectively argue that in Sierra Leone young people volunteered for war for their own clear and rational reasons, including survival, Machel amongst other commentators, dismisses the idea of 'volunteerism', arguing that when the only options are survival or death/poverty, the choices of the children can hardly be called free and fair. Sixthly, with regards to the involvement of girls in wars, Nordstrom emphasises 'the silences and empty spaces' surrounding discussions on the impact of armed conflict on girls. Finally, Mazurana and colleagues criticise the available documentation on this group of girls for its insistence on focusing on them as mainly sex slaves and victims of sexual terror and not taking into account the other roles they play including that of active combatants.

On the wider subject of children's rights, proponents of cultural relativism have criticised the UNCRC by arguing that childhood is a relative concept that changes "according to historical time, geographical environment, local culture, and socio-economic conditions".¹³ With specific regard to children in armed conflict, this camp has argued that the practice of recruiting child soldiers can be justified as an African cultural tradition.¹⁴ However, Bennett questions this perspective and turns to history for an answer. He cogently asserts:

The successful justification of a morally suspect social practice on the grounds of culture needs an audience sympathetic to cultural relativism...more specifically to persuade a human rights activist that using children in armed combat is right or legitimate would require a high degree of tolerance for deviation from the clear prohibition laid down in the international code of children's rights.¹⁵

These are indeed valid debates that have underlined numerous academic works, conferences and reports, illustrating the growing importance of children involved in armed conflicts in the international arena since the adoption of the UNCRC by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989.

This monograph is situated within this broad theoretical framework with a view to furthering the discourse and paving the way for considerations of alternative analytical frameworks on the phenomenon of child soldiering. In

order to reach a satisfactory understanding certain key questions must be considered: Can the use of children in African armed conflicts be attributed to culture and thus, tradition? Or can we attribute it to the political and economic agendas often driving the conflicts? What, if anything, has gone awry with the notion of childhood in Africa to allow children to be involved in conflicts? And in reversal, what impact does child soldiering have on the notion of childhood in Africa? Important sub questions are: why do children join wars in many African conflicts? Are they forced or do they have their own agency and volunteer? To what extent do girls experience conflict differently from their male colleagues and how do they contribute actively to warfare?

The evidence suggests that the use of children in armed conflict is a socio-economic phenomenon, often representing pragmatic and deliberate military strategies. It also suggests that the incorporation of thousands of children into conflicts across the continent is not a result of African tradition or a dysfunctional notion of childhood in Africa; rather child soldiering itself is affecting culture.