“If there is any lesson we can draw from the experience of the past decade, it is that the use of child soldiers is far more than a humanitarian concern – its impact lasts far beyond the time of actual fighting.” (Kofi Annan)

What is a child? Such definition ranges differently from culture to culture. However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines “child” as “every human being below the age of 18 years.”

In relations with children associated with armed forces or armed group, the 2007 Paris Principles defines a child soldier as:

“Any 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. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities.”

Unfortunately, the world is abundant with children that fulfill these criteria. Civil wars not only bring pain, poverty and suffering, but also an increase in number of children caught up in the conflict. Therefore, it is essential to understand the scope and character of this phenomenon on account of which so many children in the world became soldiers while loosing their innocence.
Facts:

- According to Amnesty International, approximately 250,000 children under the age of 18 are estimated to be fighting in conflicts around the world, and hundreds of thousands more are members of armed forces who could be sent into combat at any time.
- Nowadays there are said to be an approximate number of 300,000 child soldiers around the world in over 30 countries.
- The youngest among them are only six to seven years old.
- Even though child soldiers can be found throughout the world, West Africa is the forerunner in this respect.
- Sierra Leone brought the problem of children soldiers to the international spotlight and made it an urgent matter to be addressed by the United Nations.

Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

The break out of the civil war in Sierra Leone in 1991 brought an immediate shock to the international community due to the level of brutality involved in the conflict to the point that it was labelled by some scholars as a new epicenter of “barbarism”. It also differs from other civil wars that African region already witnessed because the conflict was neither ethnically nor religiously motivated. The absence of these two components made the uniqueness of the civil war in Sierra Leone. Scholars have concluded that the war was driven solely by economic motives – namely the control over diamond resources.

As in many civil war conflicts, children were used as a tool in the war, and the civil war in Sierra Leone was not an exception. There are numeral reasons for the recruitment of children during the Civil War in Sierra Leone. Mostly, children usually possess more energy, they are easily manipulated and at least at the beginning, they show excitement. Their minds are easily influenced and formed. According to Rachel Brett - the author of “Girl Soldiers Challenging the Assumptions” – children are more likely to obey their commandants and will not question the orders, as they do not have a moral consciousness. Also, children pose a greater danger to the adversary in an attack since they are more quick, sneaky and mobile in carrying out their task.

In the early 90s, the world was inundated by images of children from Sierra Leone, holding guns and being merely about 7 years old. In spite of the fact that it is an offense against
customary international law, these children were recruited by all sides of the conflict (from The Revolutionary Unit Front (RUF), the Sierra Leone Army (SLA) and the Civil Defense Force (CDF)). Out of 19,000 demobilized combatants half were children. It is highly controversial whether most of them were recruited forcefully or participated voluntarily. However, from the part that were recruited forcefully, most of these children were abducted during raids carried out on villages. They were also randomly selected and picked up from the streets, playground or schools.

Once recruited, the children underwent a thorough “initiation procedure” which included their beatings, long parades and showing to them depressing scenes of killings in order to introduce them to the culture of violence and terror. The exposure to such terrible scenes usually affected the children in a way that they were more likely to commit cruelties. By making the children watch Western horror movies like Rambo and also applying drugs, the commandants created the conditions to form a merciless killer out of an innocent child.

By the time the children were demobilized, many of them had been so heavily brainwashed and abused that they forgot where they came from and also the reason for fighting with their unit. Simultaneously, the military unit literally replaced the children's lost family.

Thus, it is not surprising that children were the ones that committed the worst atrocities during the war. In some cases before the execution of certain tasks, the children were given specific drugs to enhance their performance. Refusal to take the drugs was considered a sabotage and therefore resulted in a severe punishment. Once thrown into the fights, children usually did not receive any different treatment than adults.

Child soldiers are largely used throughout the world conflicts as a weapon of choice for war. The movie “Blood Diamond” depicts the issue of involving child soldiers in Sierra Leone. It shows how children, either orphaned or kidnapped, end up
accepting the rebel soldiers as their new families while becoming "drug-addicted killers, without pity or fear." These children are caught up in the war and thus become victims of the conflict themselves. Instead of learning how to read or write or even how to enjoy their childhood, children in these conflicts are learning how to fight and use an AK47.

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Unfortunately survival became especially hard for former female child soldiers due to their stigmatization as sex-slaves during the conflict or because of the violent acts they did commit. But with your donation we will be able to help former female child soldiers in Telu Chiefdom to have a future!

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