



Exploring the Root Causes of Child-Soldierhood in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah Is Not Obligated* and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*

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Received: 25 Sep 2024; Received in revised form: 20 Oct 2024; Accepted: 25 Oct 2024; Available online: 31 Oct 2024
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Abstract— Conflicts usually turn upside down the norms of societies, and as such, young people lack references. Since family units and social tissues are severely damaged or even broken, children are left to themselves without any guidance and safety. So, the destruction of social entities is fully accompanied by the total demise of customarily living standards where children are protected and considered to be innocent and defenseless people. That being said, it can be argued that it is the changing nature of conflicts that has brought children into its core as indispensable fighters. Since most countries were wrecked internally in the last two centuries, this collapse set communities within these territories against one another, as no social component was spared of the wrath of war.



Keywords— conflict, civil war, child soldier, Sierra Leone, Liberia.

I. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of children fighting during conflicts and wars as soldiers is a recent phenomenon that began during the 20th century and went all the way to the 21st century. This unusual newness during conflicts has extensively been covered and condemned by media, writers, decision-makers, and policy-makers because it went against children's rights as human beings. The exploitation of children as fighters was and continues to be denounced and criticized worldwide by people defending children's rights as this fact constitutes a serious abuse of their rights. The fact of using children as cannon fodders, untold violent perpetrators, and blood-coldly killers is believed to go against social norms, standards, and state laws. Thus, voices have arisen from global, regional, and national institutions to publicly declare this practice wrong in all its aspects as innocent children are coerced to do things they do not wish to do such as torturing and killing innocent and defenseless civilians. It is this strong international and public

disapproval of this praxis that made Ahmadou Kourouma argue that “*Child soldiers are the most famous celebrities of the late twentieth century.*” (Kourouma, 2007, p.87)

The presence of children in the war arena has to do with the changing face of the war, that is, the very idea of war as conceived traditionally changed completely. Before the 20th century, most wars throughout human history took place between different countries. In this case, countries were obliged to deploy state soldiers trained for this purpose. These soldiers were trained to defend their countries and fellow countrymen. This kind of war was qualified as an inter-state war since it opposed two countries that did not share the same political and ideological stances. However, the deployment of children as combatants began with the shift from inter-state conflicts to intra-state ones. Danso corroborates this shift from interstate to intrastate conflicts and attributes it to the increased use of children as fighters, a phenomenon that was almost unpopular in the past centuries:

The end of the Cold War, which has dominated regional and world politics from the 1950s to the early 1990s, raised hopes for an end to superpower 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. (Danso, 2000, p.7).

It should be known that the use of children during conflicts is intimately related to the wrecking of conflict-ridden societies. If communities are at war, individuals belonging to these communities sustain enmity relationships as well. No individual, no matter what their age and gender, is spared due to their belonging to a particular group. Children usually find themselves in this chaotic situation where they feel trapped by the course of events. Unconsciously and involuntarily, they are dragged into a conflict they did not trigger nor wish for. During these moments of tension between neighboring communities, children become vulnerable and easy preys due to precarious living conditions. As Afua Twum Dan says:

The problem of child soldiers appears as incomprehensible and aberrant breakdown of civilization; the norms and values that protect children seem to have vanished, or worse, never existed. Within a historical and universal context, however, a picture emerged in which families', communities', and states' ability to protect and nurture children is chronically undermined. Children have become the object of predatory rebel movements and governments alike, for a lack of adult manpower, and for the ease with which they can be politically and militarily mobilized. The recruitment of children is a symptom of socio-economic and political instability. (Danso, p.5)

In this paper, we discuss the different pull factors of child soldierhood in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Ahmadou Kourouma and Ishmael Beah pay closer attention to the various modes of child-soldier conscription, that is, how they are indoctrinated to join the ranks of rebel groups or

state armed forces. A particular attention is also drawn to the different survival techniques and strategies of child soldiers in the battlefields.

II. MAKING OF CHILD SOLDIERS: FRUITS OF THE CIVIL WAR?

It is significant to provide an extensive explanation of what a child soldier is before covering the different reasons that transform innocent children into soldiers. A child soldier is, firstly, a child who is forced to take guns and use them to commit atrocities against innocent people. The age of these children oftentimes ranges from seven (7) to eighteen (18) years old. Most of the children enrolled as child soldiers are teenagers who are unable to make critical decisions by themselves. They are not mature enough to go to that length. The decisions generally made by them are enforced upon them, and they undergo these decisions instead of being their own decision-makers. Any child enrolled in armed groups, whether they are insurgents or state army, is automatically considered a child soldier since they do not have the legal age to make decisions by themselves regarding the law. In many countries, children become legally entitled to take actions and decisions only when they reach 18 years old or older. Since countries do not have the same legal status regarding the turning age of a child from adolescence to adulthood, this relatively complicates the qualification of some children as child soldiers in some countries.

Although these are some issues as regards the delimitation of the age of child soldiers across countries, the commonly accepted and agreed age group for a child soldier is between 7 and 18 years old. Danso notes that a child as defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is considered as “*every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier or after*”. (Danso, p.9). In addition, she also provided a clear definition regarding who a child soldier is based on the Cape Town Principles, which was an agreement adopted during a symposium organized by UNICEF in Cape Town in April 1997. In this agreement, it is stipulated that 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. (Danso, pp.8-9)

This definition covers multiple aspects of child soldierhood that contrast the traditional conception of the function of a child soldier. Traditionally, child soldiers were only considered to be children who took up guns, whether voluntarily or coercively, to kill innocent and defenseless people and commit monstrous crimes. Children who used to carry ammunition, spy on the other warring side, and cook were not seen as child soldiers. These were perceived as lesser roles compared to children who participated in actual killings and went to the front. Also, in the past, whenever scholars talked about child soldiers, they generally referred to boys instead of girls while overlooking the fact that girls were also used as child soldiers in many conflicts occurring after the end of the Cold War. Girls' experiences as child soldiers were then undermined, and were thus invisible or ostracized. But this definition brings to the fore the full and active participation of girls as child soldiers during conflicts. It puts an end to the invisibility status of girls as child soldiers. Based on this definition, we can argue that both boys and girls were and are still being used as child soldiers in conflict theaters across the world.

The use of children as combatants is due to the shortage or lack of adult manpower during the war. At some point in the war, all the warring sides are likely to run out of valid and committed fighters. And the only social component available at this particular moment of the war is children since adults are busy fighting at the front. It is this scarcity of fighters that drives both the state army and armed groups to recruit these children. In many African countries, children were recruited as fighters in the national army when these countries were atrociously afflicted by civil war. Among these countries, are Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, DRC, and Somalia. Regarding insurgent groups fighting against the state army, the majority of fighters enlisted in their ranks are children from mostly poor and uneducated backgrounds. Most of them also originate from rural areas where there is endemic poverty and where parents have difficulties taking care of their own children.

However, it is also possible to find some fairly educated children in armed groups. Because of their vulnerability and obedience, rebel groups recruit children as they tend to submit themselves to the authority of their commanding officers without much protestation. Instructors also find it easy to brainwash these children to rally them to their destructive and life-annihilating agenda. These are some reasons why children are the favorite fighters for armed groups and the state army as well. But it is significant to clarify here that the state army tends to use children less than armed groups. The survival of most armed groups depends entirely on these innocent child soldiers. In Sierra Leone, child soldiers constituted more than 80 % of the warlord Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front.

In Liberia, the different warlords mainly relied on child soldiers to fight against the state army. In Somalia, the Shabaab also uses child suicide bombers to attack and inflict serious damage to governmental forces and civilians as well. In these three countries, child soldiers were always deployed on the frontline while entrusting them all impossible missions. It is the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of child soldiers in these conflicts that pushed the authors, whose works are being explored, to extensively address this critical question. In fact, the depiction of child soldiers is a way for them to warn people about the dangers of exploiting children as fighters and the short and long-term consequences that such a practice may have on society during and after the war. Ahmadou Kourouma and Ishmael Beah purpose to question the moral grounds upon which children are deployed as fighters and its collective and individual consequences on people, especially children.

Indeed, the novels under study covering civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone provide us with insightful information about the recruitment process of child soldiers. These novels closely "*examine the methods of recruitment of child soldiers, reasons behind their recruitments by both the government forces and armed groups, the treatment they receive and their contributions to armed forces and opposition groups.*" (Danso, p.34)

Various factors push children to join either the armed forces or armed groups as fighters. The decision to be a child soldier is always rooted in a particular precarious life situation during the Civil War. These fragile situations are usually multiform since child soldiers are animated by different reasons when they decide to be part of armed groups. The various reasons that force children to be child soldiers depends surely on their personal life stories and experiences as each child soldier follows a unique life trajectory. Children generally decide to become members of armed groups when war takes away everything valuable to them, that is, their families, relatives, friends, and any means of survival. They find themselves trapped in precariousness without any life assistance offered to them. It is the basic survival instinct amid a chaotic environment that motivates desperate children to become child soldiers as they strongly believe that armed groups will compensate for the loss of their loved ones. It is the feeling of not belonging that usually guides these already broken children into child soldiering. In a devastated war-ridden environment, the only means of survival available for children seeking safety and security is through either being part of the state army or armed groups which constitute their new safety net. Joining either of these groups enables them to live through wartime until truce is reached.

Nurrudin Farah illustrates this case by leaning on the strategies used by the Shabaab to recruit children. He points at frail and vulnerable children as the main targets of the Shabaab as these children do not sustain any hope during wartime. Their vulnerability originates from the destruction of the social leverage aimed at protecting them. Due to this total absence of social security, they find themselves at the mercy of armed groups like the Shabaab. Farah expounds that most of the suicide bombers used by the Shabaab are handpicked from these bewildered youngsters. Put shortly, the Shabaab use hopeless and poor young people to do their dirty operations: *“That’s why they look for orphan kids from broken homes to draft into Shabaab. They rely on the ill-informed and ill-supported to do their bidding”*. (Farah, p.136).

III. DISINTEGRATION OF SOCIAL TISSUE AS A DRIVING FACTOR OF CHILD-SOLDIERHOOD

When war breaks out in a given country, it disintegrates the social, political, and economic structures of this country. All the foundations of the country collapse. Therefore, war brings the country to a standstill. Citizens become exposed to the wrath of warlords and insurgent groups who torture and brutalize them to the fullest extent. This violence inflicted on civilians results in the destruction of family units and social components. Consequently, civilians live in total precariousness, and their very existence is threatened. During this hectic and unruly period, parents are usually decimated with their offspring by rebels who seek to inflict the most painful evils on civilians. In some instances, some children are spared or escape killings. But what is common during these lawless and dreaded moments is that most children are separated from their parents when their cities or villages are brutally attacked. Some children never see their parents or their relatives again in their lives. The luckiest ones may fall upon a relative somewhere at the end of the war, but this possibility is forever remote. After being separated from their relatives, these children fall prey to recruitment for both armed groups and the state army. In light of this argument, Afua Twum Danso contends that *“choices facing child soldiers are to join the military, become a street child, or die.”* (Danso, p.38)

A great majority of children predominantly opt for the first choice which is to be part of the military. Neither of the last options was considerable because this would mean instant death. Children, who generally decide to remain in the street, run the risk of being abducted by rebel forces and coerced to join their ranks. Any refusal of being a child soldier and fighting for their interests is a signature of one’s death warrant. Rebel groups kill rebellious children who

choose not to join on the spot. The only way to make it through the war alive is to ultimately join an armed group willingly or coercively. Danso argues that *“in the case of Sierra Leone, a substantial number of child soldiers joined the RUF because they had no other means of survival.”* (Danso, p.26)

The above argument implies that some children join armed groups voluntarily whilst others are forced to become child soldiers unwillingly. This idea stipulates that child soldiers can be categorized according to their willingness and unwillingness to join armed groups. Children belonging to the first category are conscious of their decision to become child soldiers. They do not undergo any external pressure to become child soldiers. Even though they are not pressured to make such a decision; nonetheless, it is the stress and insecurity resulting from the war that impose the decision of joining armed groups upon them. This situation supposes that their choices are not free. No matter what, these children’s decision to be killers is forced upon them by the unexpected and inexplicable social changes engendered by the war that takes everything dear to them and ruin their lives.

Even though some scholars advocate the idea of ‘free agency’ regarding the choice of children engaging in armed groups, this agency is nonetheless influenced by wartime brutal realities. This willingness to be a child soldier is triggered by the sad and savage unfolding of war atrocities. Without the breaking out of war, the total collapse of the society and state apparatus characterized by the incapacity of the state to protect people and their belongings, and the loss of their relatives, these children would not perhaps engage in such a child soldierhood journey. They do it against their own will even if they voluntarily join armed groups.

“A desire of revenge, adventure, fun-seeking, a sense of belonging and peer-pressure, but most of the evidence points to survival as the primary reason for enlisting.” (Danso, p.25). In addition, another reason why children voluntarily join armed groups stems from self-pride, i.e., the mere desire to have a gun in their hands which they probably think provide them a sense of security against abusers. Still, arguing about the factors that drive children into child soldiering, Peters and Richards come up with two main reasons. They stated that children are more likely to enroll as child soldiers when the family unit is wreaking havoc and the education system of the country fails. It is this collective social failure that provides a gateway for the militia to take hold of these children. What the society could not offer them, this is what militia groups promised them during and after the war. They indoctrinate children by giving them false hopes which include: the pursuit of their halted

education, the promise of a better future in the aftermath of war, the provision of survival and safety during the war, and above all, their social ascension and political and economic empowerment through their guns.

The second category of child soldiers consists of children who are abducted by rebels to increase the number of their combatants. Rebels usually recruit forsaken children during the war. Most parents run away for safety when rebels start pulling the trigger before entering a city. During a civil war, to herald their arrival, armed groups generally fire shots at people and randomly. They also launch RPGs against runaways to stop them from escaping, but the end goal is to kill them. As soon as a city's dwellers hear rounds of gunshots from a distance, they are dreaded and thrown into panic. As a result, people try to run away to save their lives, and in this general commotion, many adults leave their children behind. It is these children that are kidnapped and forced to join rebels. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the ranks of the RUF were swollen by abductees. This implies that forced enrolment was the favorite recruitment strategy used by the RUF. In light of this argument: "*One of the tactics used by the RUF when it invaded Sierra Leone was to capture youngsters as they attacked the village.*" (Danso, p.26)

Children are not simply abducted by rebels during their attacks. They are kidnapped after their parents and relatives are blood coldly murdered in front of them. To make these children homeless and without any sense of family, rebels decide to eliminate their family members before their very eyes. The luckiest ones are made to witness these atrocities directed towards their parents in front of them. However, the unfortunate ones among them are persuaded to murder their parents and relatives by force and at gunpoint. This form of abduction and recruitment is the worst scenario that can happen to these children because this implies that they have cut all ties with their communities and remaining relatives. They are condemned to live as child soldiers in the remaining days of their lives. Even in the aftermath of the war, these children are not likely to be accepted by their communities. They are systematically ostracized for life. "*They killed my parents in front of me, my uncles' hands were cut off and my sister was raped in front of us by their commander. After all this happened, they told us, the younger boys, to join them.*" (Singer, 2006, p.14)

Rebel groups are not the only people who recruit youngsters as fighters. Most of the state armies have also recourse to the same recruiting technique when they run out of manpower or when they are overwhelmed by insurgent groups. In these troubled moments, they go down the same path as the rebels by selecting and training children to become child soldiers. Usually, in countries where there is a

large recruitment of children as child soldiers, most of the fiercest fights take place between them since they fight for different camps. These young combatants are mostly sent to the forefront. They carry out all the intelligence-gathering missions and are used by adult soldiers as cannon fodder given that the most endangered tasks are confided in them. The clash between youngsters is common in places where both armed groups and state armies deploy them.

Opposed to the RUF/SL was an ill-equipped government army, the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Force (henceforth RSLMF). Inexperienced war-front junior officers quickly learned to survive by copying RUF/SL guerrilla tactics, including the recruitment and training of underage irregulars. Much of the fighting was done by these locally recruited irregulars, less daunted than RSLMF soldiers by RUF/SL cadres prepared for combat with fear-inhibiting drugs. (Singer, 2006, p.14)

The authors emphasized the open exploitation of children by both the state army and armed groups. Both groups used them to serve their purpose to the fullest extent by indoctrinating them with hate speech against one another. Besides, they all lured these children with false promises such as safety, security, the pursuit of their education, a better future after the war, and inner satisfaction by killing the murderers and torturers of their dead relatives. All these words are used to lead and trick children into a deadlock, which some of them never escape. Only a few of them come out of the war alive. A great number of them are either killed or impaired for life. Brooke Breazeale in his insightful essay also addresses the question of the exploitation of child soldiers during conflicts in Africa. He evokes the fact that children are threatened or enticed to participate in killings in what follows: "*Utilizing extreme indoctrination and fear tactics, warlords have been able to transform impressionable, dependent youth into loyal, ferocious armed forces capable of overtaking comparatively powerful, well-equipped governmental forces. Governmental forces have followed suit, placing young children on the front lines to fight against their peers.*" (Breazeale, p.25).

The thereof stated arguments about the recruitment processes of children lead us to consider them as both victims and agents. On the one hand, they show some agency, i.e., they join the armed forces deliberately. On the other hand, a great number of underage combatants are persuaded to enter the world of child soldiers by force and through threats. This double standard in the recruitment process drives Danso to affirm that: "*recruitment methods*

vary from the brutally coercive to the subtler and political form. From any approach, children are forced to make decisions beyond their years, whether facing the barrel of a rifle or facing exclusion, hunger, and hardship. Children become simultaneously victims and perpetrators of violence.” (Danso, p.5). Arguing in the same direction, Peters and Richards evoke the fact that a majority of participants in the Sierra Leone war can be considered ‘victims’ of military manipulation despite a growing branch in the literature about children’s owning free agency during their recruitment. Whatever decisions children make under 18, are considered null and void before the law and such decisions are mostly enforced upon children. If they are not coerced by rebels, they are tossed into child soldierhood by unfavorable circumstances where they have limited options. They do not have many alternatives from which to choose other than give in. That is the reason why many scholars argue that child soldiers cannot possess and enjoy any form of agency during their recruitment process. They are labelled the status of ‘victimhood’ because they are forced or manipulated to execute abominable tasks and missions they are not ready for. Paradoxically, some of them begin to like their new status of “young soldiers” as time goes on due to the power their guns confer upon them.

A major cause of child soldiering in Africa brandished by scholars is the large-scale availability of weapons to insurgent groups. During the Cold War, Africa was a continent where the Eastern and Western blocks waged a proxy war against one another as each of them wanted to extend its influence upon African countries. The enmity relationship that existed between these two ideologically opposed camps hurt the internal security of many African countries. Many African countries saw their sovereignty deteriorating drastically due to the antagonistic relationships that existed between components of the same country because of their ideological opposition. It happened that within the boundaries of single countries, there were strong advocates of the Western democratic and capitalistic ideology and Eastern socialist ideology as well. Countries like Angola, Uganda, and Mozambique fell victim to such ideological war between the East and the West. When such a situation occurred in a country, each block provided financial, military, and political assistance to its Ally. The military support was mainly materialized through the delivery of weapons, ammunition, fighters, instructors, and intelligence. During this period, millions of weapons were poured into African countries without knowing their final destination during and after civil wars. There was no control over what these weapons would become and used for during the war. The only thing that mattered for each block was to assist their allies by equipping them.

It is these weapons that ended up in the hands of insurgent groups in many African countries. These same weapons were used to destroy countries in the African continent by various power-hungry political entrepreneurs. So, the accessibility of these cheap and easily used weapons gives rise to the conversion of a great number of vulnerable and disconnected children from their families and communities into low-cost and expandable soldiers. Breazeale affirms that:

The widespread availability of small arms has also contributed to the increase in child soldiering. Hundreds of thousands of weapons that flooded into Africa after the Cold War have proven to be a timely asset for fighting factions. In addition to the surplus of small arms circulating in the global market, excessive manufacturing and technological improvements have yielded accessible, lightweight, inexpensive machines that can be easily by young children. This dangerous trend has allowed even small rebel groups to emerge as powerful forces, mainly by tapping into the abundant supply of early accessible and expendable fighters – child soldiers capable of terrorizing, displacing, and murdering hundreds of thousands of citizens within their own states. (Breazeale pp.24-25)

Another overlooked factor regarding the recruitment of child soldiers is the existence of unsecured refugee camps. During a civil war, people tend to run away from war atrocities for safety. Some of these internally displaced people find refuge in displacement camps with these children. However, due to the scarcity of available manpower in the state army, no protection is provided to these camps. These camps are badly secured because there are not enough soldiers present to keep guard. When these camps are attacked, soldiers protecting them are oftentimes outnumbered, and they are therefore forced to retreat to save their own lives leaving the refugees at the mercy of rebels. When rebels usually take possession of these refugee camps, they generally turn them into training camps for youngsters they recruit. Unsafe refugee camps are ideal places for rebels to recruit child soldiers and train them on the spot.

Unprotected displacement camps have also contributed to the increased number of young combatants. The surge in armed conflicts and widespread violence in sub-Saharan Africa have caused an estimated 15.2 million people, with the majority

consisting of women and children, to seek refuge in protected camps within or outside their homelands. Although these new settlements have been intended to provide a haven for vulnerable populations, the lack of camp protection has inadvertently resulted in ideal training and recruitment camps for armed factions preying on vulnerable young transients. (Breazeale, p.26)

In *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Kourouma demonstrates that children have become an integral part of the fighting during African civil wars, mainly in Liberia and Sierra Leone. To show this fact, he uses Birahima to highlight the conditions of child soldierhood through characterization. Being a child soldier, Birahima takes it upon himself to orate the circumstances that pressured his companion child soldiers to join the ranks of rebels after their deaths. Although this narrative style seems to be sadistic, it is a viable means through which the narrator, Birahima, reaches this goal. In ensuring the funeral oration of his dead companions, Birahima takes the reader to explore the multiple conditions for which children become composed murderers and factors which contribute to the prevalence of the phenomenon of child soldierhood. He leans on the experience of each child soldier as each of them has a unique experience and life trajectory proper to himself. In his long and thorny journey, Birahima met many young soldiers fighting for their survival. He also got acquainted with child soldiers who deliberately joined rebel groups. To alert the underage status of these children exploited as fighters, Birahima labeled them as 'small soldiers' due to their young age. Child soldiers, with whom he came together, were all teenagers who were manipulated by warlords to fulfill their own personal financial and political interests.

But before telling the reasons that impelled other children to join rebel groups or armed forces, Birahima started the narration by relating the factors that got him into child soldierhood. It is significant to mention that Birahima is not originally from either Liberia or Sierra Leone. He is a stranger who is introduced into these civil wars through Yacouba, a money multiplier, whose duty is to help Birahima find his aunt Mahan in Liberia. This is how Birahima discovered the brutal Liberian and Sierra Leonean internal civil strife. Before heading to Liberia in search of his aunt, Birahima was parentless. He was an orphan and

given into custody to his aunt whom he never succeeded in finding in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Birahima was a hopeless street kid coupled with his orphan status. That made him easy prey for rebels even if he showed some agency in joining the RUF when he arrived in Liberia. Rebels are predominantly keen on recruiting children who have nothing to lose in their lives. These children are fearless, and above all no longer care for human life. They are emotionless, and it is this total despair that warlords exploit to turn them into killing machines.

In general, rebel groups utilize economic benefits to trap young people who are naïve and mostly attracted by easy financial gains. The same method is used by terrorists in the Sahel region. All insurgents play on the leverage of material profits to seduce young people and lead them to commit atrocities against their own communities and countrymen. Insurgent groups indoctrinate systematically and radically these already fragile, disoriented, and uneducated children from poor family backgrounds. Poverty is considered as one of the many causes of child soldier recruitment.¹ Because of their vulnerability due to their poor living conditions, children like Birahima are easily taken into the heart of rebellions as fighters without much resistance. According to UNICEF, many children "are driven by poverty because compelled to generate income for their families and themselves."² The World Vision asserted that the push factors that facilitate the phenomenon of child soldierhood can be among many others: "extreme poverty, hunger, lack of access to education, and lack of hope for the future."³

IV. GIRLS' EXPERIENCES AS CHILD SOLDIERS

The majority of novels addressing the question of child soldiers in Africa do it from an exclusively male perspective, that is, the storylines in these novels are shaped around boy soldiers. Not many authors mention the presence of girl soldiers in their novels. This phenomenon is not only perceived in literature only. The oblivion of girls' experiences as child soldiers is pervasive in child soldiers' narrative accounts. Most reports and books generally tend to emphasize boy soldiers' experiences only, thus leaving girls behind. Over the last few years, it has been demonstrated that like boys, girls have also been recruited by armed groups as fighters, cooks, porters, sexual slaves, and caretakers. Their duties tend to overtake those of boys

¹https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292491800_Poverty_and_child_soldier_recruitment_A_disaggregated_study_of_African_regions on July 17, 2023 at 11:56 pm.

²<https://www.unicef.org/protection/children-recruited-by-armed-forces> on July 17, 2023 at 00:08 am.

³<https://www.wvi.org/stories/child-protection/child-soldiers-facts-and-foundations> on July 17, 2023 at 00:16 am.

because boys mostly only participate in fighting. But girls play many overlapping roles as cited above.

As a result, it is more than necessary to also highlight the many experiences of these girl soldiers during conflicts and civil wars. Talking about this non-representation of girl-soldiers' experience in the mainstream literature about child-soldiers, Coulter and al. claim that "*women are combatants in contemporary African wars. They also participate in a whole of different roles. However, by and large, they remain invisible to us.*" (Coulter and al., p.5). In their essay, they extensively underscore the massive participation of women and girls in conflicts in various African countries, and these conflicts were different. "*Women have been actively involved as fighters in African countries as diverse as Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia; Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe.*" (Coulter and al., p.8). In these countries, women have fought on all sides from the state, armed forces, and insurgent groups to militia forces.

Many young female fighters join armed groups for their own protection as the family and community security nets are broken by the war. And when such a thing happens, they are left to themselves. To survive in this chaos where girls are the primary targets for both army soldiers and rebels, many girls decide to be part of an armed group to be safe from gang rape. Although the fact of joining armed groups does not prevent the girls from being raped, it considerably lessens this possibility. There is strong evidence that commanders of armed groups usually rape girl soldiers. Many of these situations are usually frequent during the war. Girl-soldiers can also be raped by their own mates. But the main reason why many girls choose to be child soldiers is related to the security and safety that the AK-47 will provide them. They are likely to feel safer with their weapons in hand because it confers them some power. Many girls also affirm that "*their reasons for joining armed groups were to escape domestic violence, abuse, and poverty.*" (Kourouma, pp.10-11)

In *Allah Is Not Obligated*, Kourouma put forward the story of a girl soldier named Sarah who was a member of the NPFL led by Colonel Papa le Bon. The uniqueness of Kourouma's novel is that it addresses the experiences of both boy and girl soldiers, unlike many African novels where the narrative is gender-based. In Kourouma's novel, Birahima, who was also a companion of Sarah, explains the conditions that landed her into child soldierhood. Like Birahima himself, Sarah was an unprotected and forsaken child who went through a terrible childhood full of multiple mistreatments and abuses. From a very younger age, Sarah's mother was knocked dead by a drunk driver in Monrovia, and his father was an unsteady traveler. Sarah's father

handed her to his cousin in a village when her mother died. Sarah's aunt gave her to Madame Kokui who used her as a seller and house-girl. Sarah was badly treated by Madame Kokui as she beat and severely punished her for any misconduct. One day, when Sarah's bananas were stolen by a gang of boys, she started to beg in the streets to collect money and reimburse Madame Kokui for fear of being punished violently and repeatedly. As a result, Sarah became a street roamer begging for money and doing menial work to survive. During this survival journey, Sarah has been spotted by a man who lured and raped her violently. The violence inflicted on her was so much that she passed out and was left for dead. (Kourouma, pp.83-86)

Many young girls generally experience the same fate as Sarah when a country embarks on a civil war. It is estimated that children and women are the most vulnerable during the civil war, especially young girls. They constitute the object of adult men's sexual desire. As a result, they become exposed to multiple dangers such as rape, abduction, and corporal violence. Because of this prevailing dangerous situation, it is their very survival that is at stake. They are tracked and kidnapped by both armed groups and armed forces as sexual toys. Sarah's case is the epitome of the dangers that girls are usually subject to when a country is afflicted by civil war. War breaks all the social safety and security levers and nets created to protect girls from abuse. Once this safety net is totally broken, girls' existence is in total jeopardy.

During the Liberian civil war, orphanages run by nuns were not spared. Rebels attacked religious places with unprecedented violence and a high level of brutality. Many of the nuns were massacred during these multiple and unpredictable attacks. When these safe places were raised to the ground and their leaders assassinated publicly, children, who took refuge there for safety reasons, ran for their lives. For instance, Sarah was placed at an orphanage when she was raped. When the place was assaulted, she fled with other girls. Since they did not have any social assistance and they had to live, and therefore they began to prostitute themselves out of survival strategy: "*Sarah and four of her friends had been prostitutes before they joined the child soldiers, so as not to starve to death*" (Kourouma, p.86). It is therefore this lack of any form of social assistance that drives and forces young girls to engage in early sexual activity for survival. On the whole, young girls join armed groups for survival as they are dramatically exposed to all sorts of social abuses during the civil war. Most of them believe that they will find protection and safety in making this decision. Kourouma evokes here the circumstances of Sarah's willful conscription to armed groups.

V. FEAR AND FEELING OF REVENGE AS OTHER KEY DRIVING FACTORS

Birahima decides only to narrate the story of his companion child soldiers who died on the front irrespective of their gender. He gives the reasons why a particular child soldier has chosen to join armed groups or armed forces only when the latter passes away during combat. This funeral oration is a way for Birahima to celebrate and praise the bravery of these child soldiers by paying a special tribute to them. This particular narrative technique allows the reader to get detailed insights into the push factors of child soldierhood. He retraces the life experiences of all his companions fallen in the front during combats against either governmental forces or other rebel groups. It is in this respect that Birahima, being a child soldier, chooses to tell the story of Captain Kik, the Cunning who is a fellow child soldier. The reason why Kik's story is narrated by Birahima is due to the fact that Kik stepped on a mine during an ambush in a village.

Birahima explains the difficult conditions that propelled Kik into the world of child soldiers. Kik's village was attacked by rebels during which his whole family and relatives were massacred leaving him alone in a chaotic world. When his village was brutally assaulted, he and many other children were at school. They were heading for the forest for safety when they heard gunshots. After the gunshots died down, Kik and his comrades came back home to check on their families, where they only found the dead bodies of their parents and relatives bearing the signs of atrocities inflicted on them before their murder "Kik went back home to his family hut and found his father's throat cut, his brother's throat cut, his mother and his sister raped and their heads bashed in. All of his relatives, close and distant, dead." (Kourouma, 2007, p.90).

Undoubtedly, it is this kind of grievous situation full of hopelessness and grudge that pushes teenagers towards rebel groups to avenge their relatives by inflicting the same and merciless atrocities upon countless innocent people. Like Birahima, Sarah, and Kik, the great majority of child soldiers are parentless and have nobody to support them in life. For Kourouma, such a child "Who've got no one left on earth, no father, no mother, no brother, no sister, really young, just a little kid, living in some fucked-up barbaric country where everyone is cutting everyone's throat becomes a child soldier. What does he do? [He] becomes a child soldier, of course, a small-soldier so [he] can have lots to eat and cut some throats yourself; that's all [his] only option." (Kourouma, 2007, p.90)

In *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, Beah also exhibits how likely it is for children, who are separated from their parents or whose relatives are

murdered, to join either armed groups or armed forces depending on the side that killed members of their families. Children, whose kins are tortured and assassinated by the RUF militia group, associate with armed forces out of revenge. Their only purpose in doing so is to avenge their relatives' deaths by killing RUF rebels atrociously to satisfy their desire of vengeance. When enrolled in the armed forces, all their actions are geared towards inflicting the most inhumane pain possible on child soldiers enlisted in the RUF armed group. In light of this argument, we can affirm that revenge, loneliness, hopelessness and the desire for survival constitute some of the main reasons that throw children into the ranks of child soldiers.

For instance, Ishmael and his friends joined the Sierra Leonean Armed Forces after their homes were destroyed and families and communities massacred by RUF rebels. Ishmael and his friend took on a survival journey in the hope of finding their lost parents during the RUF attacks. But none of them ever met with a single relative until the end of the novel. Tired of always running away from death and public lynching as children were feared because considered to be monsters, Ishmael and his surviving companions joined the SLAF for survival although many of them perished during fights with the RUF child soldiers. Beah and his friends faced only one choice, that is, either take up arms on the side of the national army and fight or perish under the blows of the RUF or even be victims of public lynching from community self-defense groups: "Being in a group of six boys was not to our advantage. But we needed to stay together because we had a better chance of escaping the day-to-day troubles we faced. People were terrified of boys our age. Some had rumors about young boys being forced by rebels to kill their families and burn their villages. These children now patrolled in special units, killing and maiming civilians." (Beah, 2007, p.34)

Forsaken in a maddened environment where there is only death and suffering, these children are obligated to get into either armed forces or rebel groups for their safety because the war has already taken their childhood innocence away. Instead of being seen as defenseless beings, the war gives people another way of perceiving them as dangerous criminals capable of inflicting all kinds of atrocities on people. Civil war demonizes children, hence the end of their childhood innocence. They are left to themselves, everything and everyone seems to be against them. In short, civil war creates a chaotic environment where unharmed children are considered outcasts and social thugs people should rid of.

Like *Birahima in Allah Is Not Obligated*, Beah also explains to the reader the reasons that motivates each of his friends and child soldier companions to throw themselves

into the “jaws of the alligator”. As the writer-narrator, he looks into the various modes of children conscription as child soldiers and how they navigate in war settings. The first method of child soldiers’ recruitment in Sierra Leone during the war consisted in destroying villages and abducting children. These children were enrolled in the RUF rebel group by force at gunpoint. To cut all links with their relatives and communities, the RUF forced them to murder their family members or members of their communities. This way, they could never escape to return to their communities as they were banned from these communities for life. This was one of the brutal recruitment strategies deployed by the RUF which made the re-habilitation and re-integration difficult in the aftermath of the civil war. For instance, Beah narrated how he, his brother Junior, and his friends were about to fall victim to such a forced conscription that was not an common practice during the Sierra Leonean war.

Contrary to the brutal recruitment of the RUF, the Sierra Leonean Army Forces’ recruitment method was based upon instilling numbing fear in the hearts of children to force them to take up arms against rebels. This fear-instilling process is materialized through a long-planned indoctrination process. The SLAF used subtle techniques based on manipulating children by showing them that their only means of survival through the war was to join them. For it to work properly, they lectured children about how RUF rebels viciously tortured and assassinated their parents, relatives, and friends. The purpose of this brainwashing lecture was to frighten and blackmail them by telling them that the same things would happen to them if ever they refused to fight on their side. They brandished fear, panic, and the possibility of death as viable means of ensuring the enlistment of children in their ranks. In short, due to their youngness, children usually backed off and decided to fight for their so-called survival, not knowing that they were fighting for the very survival of their own army officers.

To ensure the participation of reluctant children in this vile endeavor, soldiers did not hesitate to kill some of them or people under their protection and impute the responsibility to rebels. It was a way to make hesitant children envision what would happen to them if they tried to escape or refused to take part in combats. Army officials triggered a psychological war against children to ensure their faithfulness and unwavering commitment to their new life, that of a child soldier:

“In the forest men are waiting to destroy all our lives. We have fought them as best as we can, but there are too many of them. They are all around the village.” The

lieutenant made a circle in the air with his hands. “They won’t give up until they capture this village. They want our food and ammunition.” He paused and slowly continued: “Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place to be. Well, it is not that safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe. If you do not want to fight or help, that is fine. But you will not have rations and will not stay in this village. You are free to leave because we only want people here who can help cook, prepare ammunition, and fight. There are enough women to run the kitchen, so we need the help of able boys and men to fight these rebels. This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families.” (Beah, 2007, p.88)

To take their fear to the next level and encourage them to participate in the fight against rebels, the lieutenant keeps reminding children about the kinds of atrocities rebels inflicted on their dead relatives and the humiliation they underwent before dying. It is for children to take up their courage and avenge their loved ones. That is to be their duty as survivors to honor the memory of their murdered relatives by killing their murderers. It is supposed to be the only means through which they could satisfy their desire for vengeance. To galvanize and mobilize fearing victim-children of rebels’ atrocities efficiently, army officers crown their speech with the demonization of child soldiers involved in armed groups. The sole purpose of this speech delivered by Lieutenant Jabati is to merely drag children into his ranks but also to turn them into bloody murderers with no respect for human life and dignity:

The lieutenant went on for almost an hour, describing how rebels had cut off the heads of some people’s family members and made them watch, burned entire villages along with their inhabitants, forced sons to have intercourse with their mothers, hacked newly born babies in half because they cried too much, cut open pregnant women’s stomachs, took the babies out, and killed them... The lieutenant spat on the ground and continued until he was sure that he mentioned all the ways the rebels had hurt every person in the gathering. They have lost everything that makes them

human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country. The lieutenant pulled out his pistol and fired two shots into the air. People began shouting: "We must kill them all. We must make sure they never walk this earth again." (Beah, 2007, pp.89-90)

VI. CONCLUSION

The RUF and SLAF in Sierra Leone and the NPFL in Liberia used violence, fear, and indoctrination to bend young people and force them into joining their ranks to use them as fighters. Kourouma and Beah extensively discuss the different recruitment methods deployed by armed groups to capture children and turn them into little monsters who are dreaded by all social components. By addressing the thorny question of children, they demonstrated in their literary works that the socio-politico-economic realities of each country are to be considered when examining the factors that thrush children into child soldierhood. These realities create and define the factors that push children into the hands of armed groups and state armies, which questions the issue of sustainable development in Africa, especially in war zones. The civil war and the impressment of child soldiers tread on human rights. When the guns that are used during the civil war are silenced, it takes a heavy toll on people and the environment as well. Today, the successful rehabilitation and reintegration of child-soldiers is the biggest problem that West African countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are facing. Overall, the question of child-soldiers has become a thorn under the feet of African countries plagued with terrorism and civil wars.

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