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CHILDREN AS AGENTS OF WAR – A STUDY OF RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS IN SOMALIA

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Abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
ASWJ	Ahl Sunna Wal-Jama'a
AU	African Union
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
ICRC	International Red Cross Committee
ILO	International Labour Organization
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OPAC	Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict
OPSC	Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Children Prostitution and Child Pornography
SNA	Somali National Army
TFG	Transitional Federal Government
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNPOS	United Nations Political Office for Somalia
US	United States
USDS	United States Department of State

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the number of children living in countries affected by conflicts was 240 million (Child Soldiers International, 2018). Graça Machel, in her ground-breaking report to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, defined the mere fact of living in a conflict area as a violation of “every right of a child – the right to life, the right to be with family and community, the right to health, the right to the development of personality and the right to be nurtured and protected” (Machel, 1996: 15).

One of the chief violations of children’s rights in the context of armed conflict is their recruitment and use by armed forces. While the phenomenon of child soldiers is not a new one, and it has been a conventional practice throughout history, it has recently escalated along with the evolving characteristics of war. The social framework in most modern conflict areas has worsened, making children more vulnerable to recruitment. What is more, weapons have become smaller, lighter and easier to use, even without the possession of specific competences (Kaplan, 2005). Because of the recent increase in the use of child soldiers, the international attention to the phenomenon gained more impetus. As shown in Figure 1, according to the UN Secretary-General’s report, in 2017, ten countries were listed as those recruiting and using the highest number of children; Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria were placed in the first positions (World Vision International, 2019: 8). Child soldiering is therefore still a major issue that has severe repercussions for children’s rights, which are gravely violated on multiple levels. The phenomenon also relates to broader mechanisms and strategies of war, and the current and future societies that live in conflict-ridden areas.



Figure 1. Top Ten Countries in the World for Child Recruitment (Source: World Vision International, 2019: 8).

The year 2020 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC has been almost universally ratified with 196 parties to the convention, and it laid out the universal norms and principles concerning children's rights (UN General Assembly, 1989). Two additional protocols were annexed to the CRC: the Optional Protocol to the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC) and the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict (OPAC). The latter specifically addressed child soldiers, setting the minimum age of recruitment at 18 years and declaring states as responsible for taking all feasible measures to prevent and halt the phenomenon (A/RES/54/263). The CRC was an extremely important step towards child protection. Nonetheless, although the number of confirmed cases has globally decreased in recent years, considerable progress has not been achieved in many countries at the national level (A/HRC/43/38).

At a normative extent, the international community has designed a substantial amount of legal tools to prohibit and prevent child soldiering, included in both international humanitarian law, such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols; and international human rights law, such as the CRC and the OPAC. Moreover, a number of UN resolutions and international treaties have been produced over the years to strengthen the norms around the issue¹.

Some of these treaties have been signed and ratified by the vast majority of the world's nations. Nevertheless, a number of these same states that formally agreed to comply with the set of rules outlined in the treaties clearly deviates from them, thus not only violating the international norms but committing grave violations of human rights.

The practice of child soldiering is unfortunately common in African countries, where heads of state are not always compliant with their ratifications and, especially in countries afflicted by war, children's rights are often neglected. Achvarina and Reich (2006: 130-131) argue that, since 1975, Africa has witnessed the largest number of conflicts, the increase of non-state armed groups and consequently, the most rapid intensification in the recruitment and use of children, thus becoming the core scene of child soldiering.

¹ A list of the international norms, conventions, and treaties concerning the issue of child soldiering can be found in Appendix 1.

In particular, in 2017, Somalia was identified as one of the countries with the highest number of children (931) killed at war, and the highest number of recruited and used children (2,127) in conflict (A/72/865-S/2018/465). Once more, in 2019, the UN Human Rights Council reported Somalia as the state with the highest number of verified cases² of child soldiering (A/HRC/43/38).

Somalis have experienced instability in their land for decades. They endured a war with neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, a civil war that ended in 1991 with the ousting of the then-dictator Siad Barre from power, and a famine that caused deaths and widespread diseases (Lee Hogg, 2008). Furthermore, in 2007, a new extremist Islamist organization, al-Shabaab – ‘youth’ in Arabic - emerged from the ashes of the ‘Islamic Courts Union’ and opposed the government, prompting another conflict, first against the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and from 2012 onwards, against the new Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and its Somali National Army (SNA)³. The war has also been fought by numerous Somali clans and smaller militias associated with either one of the factions and by external actors, such as the regional peacekeeping mission under the name of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) (BBC, 2018). In this constant climate of insecurity, whilst al-Shabaab continues to be the primary-responsible group for employing children in war, all the parties engaged in the conflict are to blame for children participating in their armies (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This reflects the non-compliance of Somalia with international law as well as with international and regional treaties and conventions that the country signed and ratified over the years⁴. This constitutes a clear deviation from the norms that urge states to adopt all necessary measures to not only prevent the use of child soldiers, but also to stop the phenomenon altogether.

This led to the formation of the research question: *Why is the use of children as agents of war, by each party involved in the conflict, a prevailing phenomenon in Somalia?*

The thesis will argue that among the various factors that seem to be valid in explaining child soldiering in Somalia, only two are found to be true for both the extremist organization al-Shabaab, and the government and their allied forces.

² The information provided by the government and the other belligerents are not reliable; thus, the actual number of child soldiers is estimated to be much higher.

³ From this point on, both the TFG and the FGS forces will be referenced as ‘government forces’, unless otherwise specified.

⁴ A list of signed and ratified laws by Somalia can be found in Appendix 2.

First, children may voluntarily join the army or be recruited by the commanders because they lack alternatives outside of the armed groups. Second, children in Somalia were born in a constant climate of violence and insecurity that normalized the concept of fighting, removing the sense of morality and justice from children that do not perceive enlisting as unlawful. Both factors can offer a clearer picture of why recruiting children is still a common practice in the Somali conflict.

The relevance of this thesis stems first and foremost from the seriousness of the themes it addresses. Child soldiering is an outrageous crime that still involves approximately 200,000 to 500,000⁵ children worldwide (Benrey, 2016). Singer (2010: 94) states that children are part of 40% of the world armed forces, including governmental armies, insurgents' groups and terrorist organizations, and they fight in 75% of the conflicts taking place globally. Participating in conflict results in children's potential injuries and death. Interviews with former child soldiers, who escaped or were liberated by the armies, showed that partaking in conflicts and witnessing brutalities such as killings, rapes, beheadings of innocent people and civilians, bombings, and combats on the first lines of battles is traumatizing and leaves physical and mental scars long after these children have been liberated (Schauer & Elbert, 2010).

Furthermore, a large body of reports and articles by the UN, international institutions and non-governmental organizations shows how child soldiering still constitutes a major concern at the international level. Yet, significant progress has not been made in regard to its resolution. The issue remains on the sidelines of the international community's political and security agendas, which have recently been primarily focused on matters of national security, nuclear weapons or terrorism (Achvarina and Reich, 2006: 130). Research on child soldiering has been conducted mainly by civil-society organizations or think-tanks and not by a large number of academics (Haer, 2019: 75). This is especially true in the case of Somalia, where the issue of child soldiering has been reported for decades and is still in place, but the vast majority of studies available have been conducted by non-governmental organizations. In addition, these reports and investigations always distinguish between the actions of al-Shabaab and the government. This thesis, in contrast, will first explain the factors of child soldiering for the two main sides to the conflict, and then describe the two elements common to both to

⁵ This figure is considered to be an approximation since it is very problematic to have an accurate number of all children recruited in armies at a global level.

understand the fundamental reasons for the widespread phenomenon in the country. Thus, the relevance is not only social, but it contributes to the existing literature by setting the analysis in the single case study of Somalia.

The topic of child soldiering is particularly relevant as it comprises flagrant violations of international law and ties in with a broader discussion on human rights, the obligations that states have in fulfilling them, as well as the consequences of non-compliance of governments and non-state actors. In addition, the subject reflects the immorality of the phenomenon of child soldiers, in that a generation of young people who grows up in the midst of violence and inevitably becomes involved in it, will turn into a generation of violent adults, posing grave threats to international security, stability and peace in the long term (Haer, 2019). Therefore, this thesis is significant as it takes into consideration not only the main perpetrator of the crime, al-Shabaab, but also all other sides to the conflict, trying to find the underlying factors of child soldiering that are true throughout the country and thus constitute the fundamental reasons for the phenomenon in Somalia.

The thesis is structured in the following way. In the next section, the literature review will introduce the main academic debates on child soldiering and the factors that have been found worldwide at the basis of the phenomenon. The theory and methods section will describe the theoretical foundations to better comprehend the answer to the research question, and it will explain which sources, data and research methods were used for the dissertation.

Afterwards, the thesis will be divided into two chapters of analysis that will answer the research puzzle. The first will review the different rationales for each side to the conflict to explain their use and recruitment of child soldiers. Subsequently, the second chapter will explore the findings of the research, namely the two common factors true for both al-Shabaab and the government's forces and allies. The final section will present the conclusions of the thesis, where the findings will also be considered in the broader discussion of the international discourse of child soldiering and conflict studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To better grasp the practice of child soldiering, it is important to explore the reasons that made the phenomenon globally persistent for decades. To do so, it is necessary to first define the term ‘child soldiers’⁶, also adopted in this thesis. The widely accepted definition originated from the 2007 Paris Principles and provided guidelines to protect and stop children from being recruited in armed forces; the text identifies 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” (UNICEF, 2007: 7).

Human Rights Violations

This thesis has affirmed that child soldiering is prohibited under different domestic, regional and international treaties and conventions and when it is still perpetrated by an armed group, it is considered a gross human rights violation. Although since the end of the Cold War, human rights have obtained increased international attention, a global observance of human rights norms is still far from being realized. In recent years, human rights have been codified and institutionalised in domestic and international legal structures, and the number of related covenants and treaties has risen exponentially. However, certain countries have seen a deterioration of human rights standards (Regilme, 2019).

On the one hand, some scholars claim that domestic elements need to be closely observed to better understand the conditions under which governments comply with human rights norms. Simmons (2009: 154-155) theorizes that the most powerful mechanisms able to influence a state’s decision to comply with human rights treaties are litigations, new agendas and social mobilization. The author found that states were more likely to fulfil international norms, particularly concerning civil and political rights, when their populations had both reasons and means to succeed in fighting for their rights (ibid).

On the other hand, academics such as Regilme (2014: 1396) assert that when analysing human rights violations, it is necessary to take into consideration the interdependence between domestic, regional and transnational factors, which can be considered predominant causes for national political changes. The hypothesis maintains that the analysis on human rights abuses

⁶ The term also refers to minors who voluntarily decide to join an armed group.

cannot be entirely grounded on domestic politics. Instead, transnational and regional factors are important key elements that enable the academic, as well as the international debate, to discuss the role played by foreign aid, economic trade and political interventions in human rights abuses, especially in weak and small states (Regilme, 2014).

The Factors of Child Soldiering

Scholars have recognized multiple factors that can explain child soldiering. These elements are different and can co-exist in situations of conflict, hence they usually overlap and mutually reinforce one another, making the recruitment and use of children a persisting and evolving issue. These factors can be categorized into four groupings: domestic, material, ideational factors and inherent characteristics of children. In addition to these four categories, it is important to touch upon the academic debate on the international elements that affect the phenomenon. In fact, considering that states can decide whether or not they are willing to sign and ratify a certain protocol, it remains difficult to implement treaties, conventions and resolutions at the national level (Francis, 2007).

Domestic Factors

The category of domestic factors is related to the internal context of the country in which the crime of child soldiering is carried out. The majority of states in which this happens are fragile or failed states, wherein ethnic violence, civil war and corrupt governments lead to weak institutions, the collapse of most infrastructures, negative economic growth rates and the considerable lowering of the population living conditions (Barma, 2013). In conflict-ridden areas, children may decide to voluntarily join an armed group to seek food, a certain level of security that cannot be provided outside, money or material benefits, medical care and more generally, a means to survive. In this context, children often lack a stable education and viable alternatives and see the militias as their only way to provide for themselves and their families (Wessells, 2006). This was also explained in a report on child combatants in Colombia by Brett (2003), who found that most of the volunteer recruits joined the guerrillas to escape domestic violence, poverty, lack of education, thinking that an armed group could improve their status.

Moreover, when war is fought among civilians, children may witness their loved ones' deaths and suffering; another push factor to join the forces and fight the attackers (Beber & Blattman, 2013). In literature, however, this factor has been debated among scholars. Achvarina and Reich (2006), argue that it is an oversimplified motive since in some war zones

children are not in any case willing to join an armed organization, even when their living conditions could drive them to do so.

Material Factors

Material causes include those elements that bring about financial advantages to the army recruiting children, or that are push factors facilitating the use of minors in militias. One of the main advantages of using children in an army is that they are considered to be convenient, cheap and expendable tools. Children are easy to maintain, they do not require to be paid as adults, they do not need to be well-clothed or well-sheltered, and they can be easily replaced (Dallaire & Humphreys, 2011: 163). This is also sustained by a demographic element as in many developing countries, the majority of populations consist of underage youths (Vautravers, 2009). In this scenario, adolescents are believed to be particularly at risk as militias often recruit them due to their physical resemblance to adults that can, therefore, deceive monitoring mechanisms (Wessells, 2006).

Another important material factor is children's versatility. In fact, children are frequently used for non-combatant roles such as guards, cooks, spies, carriers, sex slaves, etc. (Kononenko, 2016: 95). As described by Becker (2010: 111), Maoist forces in Nepal abducted a vast number of children and principally used them as porters, spies, guards and to help the militias with political mobilization during the civil war.

Girl soldiers also perform a range of duties. On the one hand, in Liberia and Uganda, girls were mainly used on the battlefield, while boys were required to carry out sexual services (Thompson, 2001). On the other hand, in Sierra Leone, the commanders would raise their status by marrying the highest number of child brides (Mazurana & McKay, 2001: 33).

Additionally, technological advancements made in regard to military weapons further paved the way for the widespread use of children in conflicts. Rosen (2005: 14) argues that the humanitarian approach links the phenomenon of child soldiering to the trade of small, lightweight arms. Children can carry, deconstruct and assemble these weapons again, making it easy to use them during combat. Already in 2000, the Bamako Declaration on an African Common Position on Small and Light Arms Proliferation asserted that:

“we express our grave concern that the problem of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons continues to have devastating [...] consequences on children, a number of whom are victims of armed conflict, while others are forced to become child soldiers” (OAU, 2000).

Ideational Factors

Children have not yet built their own identity completely and are searching for a set of beliefs to adhere to and a community in which to belong. Therefore, in contexts of conflict, it is easier for commanders and armed groups to indoctrinate boys and girls and supply worldviews wherein the cause of their war is the supreme reason to fight for. In Asian conflicts, indoctrination played an incisive role in the recruitment of children in armies due to the explicit political agenda of many militias (Becker, 2010). Particularly, in Sri Lanka, the opposition forces carried out methodical propaganda campaigns in schools to indoctrinate and recruit children. The programs consisted of parades and special events for children exhibiting war equipment, describing the abuse and suffering that their minority was forced to live through and showing speeches or movies about their fight for independence portraying them as heroes (ibid).

At this age, children lack a sense of morality and cannot often distinguish right from wrong, and once they have been coerced and persuaded of the belligerents' right motives, the mere fact of pertaining to the armed organizations acquires meaning and purpose (Wessells, 2006).

Inherent Characteristics

The last category includes features intrinsic to being young. Children are considered to be easily controlled, exploitable and more responsive to threats and physical violence than adults, making them pliable to orders. Furley's (1995: 32) research in Mozambique revealed that the Mozambique National Resistance preferred children because commanders could intimidate them enough to avoid escape attempts, which in contrast, often occurred with adults. Furthermore, brutality and terror, as well as 'spiritual magic' or voodoo rites, have been found to be effective in manipulating children and coerce them to follow the instructions from their officials, also elevating their loyalty to the troops and to the causes for the war (Dallaire & Humphreys, 2011: 165).

In addition, children are considered to be an effective tool in terms of shock value. In fact, in a number of countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia, small units of naked child soldiers would be sent to initiate battles in order to confuse the enemy, who would be appalled, thus giving an advantage to the army using children (Singer, 2005: 164).

International Elements

This academic debate is framed around the actions taken by the international community to eradicate child soldiering on one side, and the counterarguments that have been produced by opposing academics, on the other. The three main instruments employed by the international community to prevent and stop the practice have been sanctions, including travel bans, economic restrictions, and arms embargoes, directed to perpetrators of child soldiering (Haer, 2019). Another technique is the ‘naming and shaming’, which involves the use of UN annual reports and official statements to publicly call out the states violating the norms concerning child soldiers, in order to make them accountable for their abuses (Lleshi, 2018). Finally, the criminalization of the recruitment of children in armed conflict was accomplished by the International Criminal Court through the prosecutions, convictions and sentences of Thomas Lubanga, a war criminal from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Charles Taylor, former president of Liberia (Haer, 2019).

To counterargue the efficiency of these mechanisms, Gates and Reich (2010: 5) argued that tools such as criminalization may also become an obstacle in reaching peace agreements because, if perpetrators of child soldiering fear the possibility of prosecution once the war is over, the risk they will not be willing to put down arms easily increases. Moreover, scholars such as Francis (2007) define conventions and treaties as ‘paper protection’, since it cannot be conclusively determined that they are effective in protecting children from recruitment and use in armed conflict. He also argues that many African states, in order to preserve their sovereignty, do not perceive themselves as subject to the law and do not implement its rules in their domestic legislation (ibid).

The aforementioned categories gather all the elements recognized as the main rationales for recruiting and using children as agents of war. Nevertheless, not all factors are found in countries where child soldiering is a practice; generally, each case has different characteristics and the phenomenon can be more or less affected from domestic, cultural, social and political conditions. Among the factors discussed above, it is possible to find two that are especially compelling to describe the underlying logic of child soldiering in the Somali conflict.

The next section will elaborate on the main theoretical frameworks in support of the arguments of the thesis. It will give an overview of the methods used to reach the answer to the research question and it will further explore the case study in the context of Somalia.

THEORY AND METHODS

The research question of this thesis is: why is the use of children as agents of war, by each party involved in the conflict, a prevailing phenomenon in Somalia?

This thesis maintains that children have been recruited and used in Somalia by al-Shabaab and the government's forces and allies, for different reasons. Nevertheless, only two elements appear to be true for both groups, revealing the root factors that make child soldiering not only a prevailing issue in the country, but that also give a broader perspective on a global phenomenon that still persists in many countries. Consequently, the argument of the thesis is composed of two parts.

First, the reasons at the basis of child soldiering differ for al-Shabaab and the government. The two sides and their associated militias generally employ children for different purposes and with different methods. On the one hand, al-Shabaab's commanders carry out forced recruitments and abductions in public spaces such as schools, markets, villages, and crowded streets. After the recruitment, children are sent to training camps, they are taught how to fight and are assigned duties, such as combating, intelligence gathering, becoming suicide bombers, spying, cooking, carrying loads, or guarding the army's camps (HRW, 2012).

On the other hand, although there have been few verified cases of abductions from the government security forces, children are still significantly present in the SNA. In addition, it is problematic to establish whether all the militias supporting the state are complying by the rule of non-recruitment of minors. This deficiency of information, together with the lack of methodical monitoring mechanisms that ensure minors are excluded from the armies, make it easy to keep children inside the troops.

Second, voluntary recruitment is found to be a shared feature and two factors are common to both factions. Firstly, children are recruited by the armed group or may join voluntarily, due to the scarcity of external options. In fact, many of the children in Somalia come from poor backgrounds or from villages that have been devastated by the war. Therefore, commanders persuade children through, often false, promises of money, material benefits, and youths are attracted by the idea of being able to provide for their families and acquire food, shelter, and a certain level of protection. Secondly, Somali children were born and raised in a constant climate of insecurity and widespread violence. This, along with decades of conflict,

has brought them to believe that war is the only feasible strategy to fight for their freedom, their identity and values, regardless of it being the rebels or the government forces that help them fulfil a nationalistic sentiment that arises from wanting to protect their country and regions, and to take revenge for the recurring abuses perpetrated by the belligerents.

Table 1 shows the aforementioned differences between al-Shabaab and the government armies and highlights the shared features, composing the arguments of the thesis, that will be further investigated in the analysis.

Table 1.

Differences in recruiting methods and use of children in al-Shabaab and the government armies.

	Al-Shabaab	The Government forces
Recruiting Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abductions in schools, markets, crowded streets, public spaces. • Recruitment through propaganda campaigns • Acceptance of voluntary enlistment by children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance of voluntary enlistment by children
Reasons for Use of Child Soldiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suicide-bombers • Domestic duties in al-Shabaab camps • Spies, guards, porters, intelligence gatherers • Combat duties (also used as ‘shields’ to protect adult soldiers) • Girls are also given in marriage to officers or used as sex slaves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combat duties

Armed Conflict and Human Rights

The significant theories for this thesis are mainly taken from the broader field of conflict studies. The dynamics between war, conflicts and human rights are complex, prone to change and touch upon political, legal, socio-economic and cultural issues. Violations of human rights are frequently found to be causes as well as consequences of armed conflicts, playing a key role in the interests of the actors involved, in the sufferings of the populations and in the general outcomes of wars (Sriram, Martin-Ortega & Herman, 2018). This is especially true when wars are launched in the name of ethnic, territorial, or religious claims, and new violations are perpetrated, by one or both parties involved, as the crisis intensifies (ibid).

These abuses can also be politicized and used, as Regilme (2014) describes, as repressive measures initiated by state actors to remove behavioural threats from opponents and insurgents. Although insurgencies or civil wars might be launched to promote ideological or political agendas, advance a minority's group rights, or access resources, they can result in the unlawful involvement of civilians, in systematic abuses, crimes against humanity and war crimes (Hafner-Burton, 2013: 21). Hafner-Burton (2013) asserts that contexts of conflict elicit human rights abuses mainly because violations become justified or even virtuous when put in terms of extraordinary measures carried out to increase the state's security. Consequently, when aggression becomes routinized, it propagates cycles of violence in the entire society, and lastly, war deteriorates the social controls on society and creates conditions of crisis (ibid).

Nevertheless, scholars have started taking into account the political changes that are triggered by transnational, regional and domestic factors. In his article, Regilme (2014) proposes three hypotheses that bring the transnational dimension into the debate on human rights norms violations. Firstly, he asserts that a number of Global South states can be defined as weak, regarding their domestic authority and their ability to prevent external actors from intervening in their national affairs. These dynamics have consequences in terms of violating or complying with human rights norms.

Secondly, the author claims that abuses are not unilaterally the result of states' actions, but that international and domestic non-governmental actors, such as corporations, transnational rebel groups, or even powerful international institutions such as the World Bank, might be involved. Thirdly, evolving ideas, beliefs and norms have either positive or negative influence on human rights according to their impact on states, domestic political elites and governments (Regilme, 2014).

This also has significant value within conflict studies, in terms of conflict resolution, as the persistent violation of human rights can create mistrust and compromise negotiations, peacebuilding and long-term peace.

Internal Armed Conflict, the Government and non-State Actors

A shared notion when discussing child soldiering is that although it is not a novel practice, it has notably increased during the 21st century. Rosen (2005) claims that there is a remarkable distinction between 'old' and 'new' wars. In 'old' wars, states had clear geographical and time limits, political agendas, and combat took into consideration the international rules on civilians, prisoners and soldiers. On the contrary, the humanitarian

approach argues that ‘new’ wars have drastically changed. ‘New’ wars are technologically more developed, but the proliferation of new, small and light arms has resulted in illicit traffic and, especially in developing countries, in more criminalized and unmethodical conflicts (Singer, 2010). Furthermore, ‘new’ wars have become more and more internal, fought inside a specific country, often with elements that cross borders, such as the recruitment of soldiers, training, movement of resources, weapons and people.

In his research, Samphansakul (2008) offers three hypotheses on the correlation between child soldiering and civil wars. He claims that the on-going civil war, the duration of it, and the death rate of the conflict are all elements affecting the possibility that child soldiers will be employed by non-state actors, as well as by the government (ibid). Specifically, the duration of civil war increases the likelihood that children will be recruited by armed forces: the higher the death-rate is, the higher the chances will be of recruiting children. Child soldiering may also increase parallel to the advancement of threats towards the national government. Finally, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees is strongly linked with a higher possibility that children will be recruited in the fighting (Samphansakul, 2008).

A further globally conducted study found that oftentimes the incentives that push governments and insurgents to use children differ from one another and they are influenced by the rebel mobilization, the level of democracy, the intensity of the conflict, and the government’s degree of militarization (Tynes & Early, 2015). The research also suggested that the international community should have the duty to effectively monitor and intervene when internal conflicts are brutal and protracted, even though these are the same reasons why it can be difficult to interfere in such wars (ibid).

Theoretical Framework for Child Soldiering

Besides framing the phenomenon in the broader discourse of conflict studies and human rights, it is fundamental to have insights into the theories that try to explain child soldiering and that are crucial in answering the research question.

In the classical theory of principal/agent, the principal tries to gain the most profits while minimizing costs; the agent is the individual who looks for the best agreement in alternative to the other existing options (Eisenhardt, 1989). In contexts of war, the ‘principal’ is the commander of an army that seeks to maximise the probabilities of triumph while keeping the lowest financial costs. The ‘agent’ is the soldier who receives certain benefits from being

in the army. In terms of child soldiering, the commander of the militia employs children, who are cheap resources, which compensates for their lower military skills and effectiveness in combat (Andvig & Gates, 2007: 10). The benefits gained by the 'agent', that is the child, may not be in the form of money but can correspond to protection, food, shelter, clothing and so forth. Moreover, Andvig and Gates (2007) assert that 'principals' can manipulate children through perceived benefits, such as a sense of power that comes from fighting and being part of a community with an apparent cause to vindicate.

Closely related to this sense of belonging to a community, is Wessells' (2016) theory of self-categorization that corresponds to the classification of people at different levels of abstraction from the personal to the social identity. The author explains that when the social categories become prevalent and particularly strong, the subject experiences depersonalization and starts shifting his or her social category (ibid). For child soldiers, this process becomes easier as they do not yet have a formed personal or social identity, which can quickly bring about their self-identification as soldiers, being part of a certain armed group and behaving accordingly.

Methods

This thesis will be built upon descriptive qualitative research, through the method of plausibility probe in a single case study. Qualitative research allows the researcher to describe and explain social phenomena in order to build a profound understanding about the characteristics of social life (Leavy, 2014). The analysis of a case study is one of the methods of qualitative research, and it is advantageous due to its detailed, and therefore precise approach of inquiry.

According to Van Evera (1997: 50), the three possible methods to test theories are observation analysis of a large set of data, experimentation, and observation through the analysis of a case study. Lijphart (1971) differentiates six varieties of case studies: atheoretical, interpretative, hypothesis-generating, theory confirming, theory infirming and deviant. For this thesis, the second type will be used, as the research is investigative and descriptive.

Specifically, the method of plausibility probing will be employed in this research to illustrate a concrete example of theoretical hypotheses. Plausibility probing, in fact, is used to investigate if a precise case is suitable for a theory (Levy, 2008: 6).

This thesis has described the roots of child soldiering in the literature review and it has explored the theories pertaining to the phenomenon in the theoretical framework. These factors

will be applied to the case of Somalia and the thesis will define not only the push factors for each faction to recruit and use children, but it will explore in particular the two shared core reasons that are at the basis of the Somali phenomenon.

To answer the research puzzle, the thesis will make use of a single case study: the investigation of child soldiering in Somalia and the involvement of all the actors engaged in the conflict, namely the radical Islamist group al-Shabaab, the SNA and the supporting militias. For the purposes of this study, the data comprises sources on Somalia from 2007 to 2017, as this time frame corresponds to the rise of al-Shabaab and to the peak of the war. This decade has seen a tremendous increase in the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, yet, the phenomenon, in the Somali context, has been understudied at the academic level.

The thesis will argue that the existing explanatory hypothesis concerning the causes of child soldiering are true in part for the case of Somalia when all sides to the conflict are considered. The argument of this research will be the result of qualitative analysis drawing upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources will comprise documents published by the UN and UNICEF, verifiable and reliable news articles, as well as official texts of international law, such as the CRC and its Additional Protocol, the Paris Principles, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and all other relevant normative documents related to child soldiering. Secondary sources will include journals, peer-reviewed articles, books, reports by international organizations working in the field of human and children's rights, including Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, World Vision, Save the Children, and previously conducted research on the topic.

Lastly, it is important to mention that this thesis has certain limitations. First and foremost, fieldwork research in Somalia to collect data was not possible at the time of writing the thesis. However, this restriction was overcome, and the study offers reliable empirical data through data triangulation, which allows the author to use different sources, including different local and temporal settings (Flick, 2002).

Moreover, as it often occurs in human rights studies, the data previously collected by other scholars or organizations cannot be completely accurate due to the challenging conditions that conflict-afflicted countries pose for researchers. In fact, the number of child soldiers both in Somalia and globally, is estimated to be much higher compared to the figures declared by the governments, which are not always reliable.

The Case Study Explained: Somalia

After gaining independence from Italy and Great Britain in 1960, Somalia entered a phase of almost constant political change. The first democratically elected president, Adam Abdullah Osman, united the Italian and British territories and governed for seven years (Al Jazeera, 2016). Osman was succeeded by Ali Sharmarke, who was assassinated in 1969 and replaced by Mohamed Hussein, whose presidency lasted only six days and culminated in a military coup conducted by General Siad Barre. The coup terminated the Somali democratic period and marked the beginning of a 22-years-long dictatorship, that ended in 1991 (ibid).

Nonetheless, it was in these decades that modern Somalia was developed, as Barre was able to increase the population's literacy level and to gain support from the United States (US). However, he suspended the constitution, dissolved the parliament while banning political parties and suppressing freedom of press (Al Jazeera, 2016). In 1977, General Barre's army invaded Ethiopia in the Ogaden region, starting a conflict against the neighbouring country. Ethiopia, backed by Soviet aid, which included Cuban troops and soldiers from Yemen and North Korea, forced the Somali army to withdraw, defeating Somalia in the war (Yared, 2016). Since then, the opposition against Barre gained momentum until 1988, when the Northern Somali tribes took control of the region now known as Somaliland⁷. Moreover, in 1991, southern and northern militias, finally deposed Siad Barre, ending his twenty-two years of absolute power (Al Jazeera, 2016).

Nevertheless, the country did not return to a peaceful stage. The collapse of Barre's government resulted in the civil war, which brought about a serious humanitarian crisis and the establishment of a UN peacekeeping mission from 1992 to 1995 (UN.int). In 1998, a second northern region, Puntland, gained a semi-autonomous status allowing it to provide a relatively safer setting to its population⁸ (UNICEF, 2016: 13).

In 2001, the UN withdrew from the country and the US, suspecting Somalia of being an al-Qaida hideaway, declared its intention to advance military operations in the country. A

⁷ It is worth mentioning that although it was faced with several challenges, the newly independent Somaliland was able to keep a peaceful, self-governing, secure state during the conflict that afflicted the rest of the country (Bradbury, 2008). The government of Somaliland was a pioneer in guaranteeing protection to children from conflict and in giving them free education (Lasley & Thyne, 2015: 296; Save The Children, 2010).

⁸ In recent years the regions of Somaliland and Puntland repeatedly clashed over territories. Although, the two regions managed to enjoy relative stability during the Somali fight against al-Shabaab, this new escalation of violence could destabilize the two regions, as well as the country even further (International Crisis Group, 2018). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this thesis, it will not take into consideration the new developments in Somaliland and Puntland, but it will focus on the Somali civil war against al-Shabaab.

Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for Somalia was elected in 2004 in Kenya to guide the country out of its crisis and it only returned in Somali territory in 2006 (BBC, 2018).

Additionally, in 2007, the radical Islamist organization al-Shabaab transformed into the most powerful Somali militant group (Wise, 2011). In February of the same year, the African Union sent a peacekeeping mission, AMISOM, to support the federal government in its struggle against al-Shabaab. One year later, the US declared al-Shabaab as a terrorist organization, halting all financial aid to it. Since their emergence, al-Shabaab started a campaign largely made up of terrorist attacks in Somalia, as well as in neighbouring countries (Rice, 2010). The famine of 2011 drove the country into a deeper humanitarian crisis, while the war between the government and al-Shabaab kept advancing. In 2012, besides blocking the Red Cross and other aid sources from operating, al-Shabaab declared their affiliation with al-Qaeda, establishing an even more dangerous connection in terms of terrorism and resources.

After years of transitional governance, in 2012, Somalis elected president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and adopted the provisional constitution of the Federal Government of Somalia, denoting a sign of hope both at the national and international level. In fact, 2013 marked the first international recognition of the Somali government since decades (Talsky, 2018: 35). Notwithstanding, peace and security did not endure, and the conflict intensified in the following years.

Additionally, piracy has been further destabilizing the country. In 2008, the first UN resolution was issued in order to tackle the robbery and piracy crisis in the region. However, the lack of competent political parties able to address development and poverty, left space for pirates to emerge and build their economic power by hijacking and attacking ships off the coast of Somalia, in the Indian Ocean (Reva, 2018). These groups also make use of children as (pirates) soldiers and exploit them for their own interests⁹ (Drumbl, 2013).

In 2017, a new wave of hope was brought by the election of Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo'. While al-Shabaab has lost control over several territories, the government and AMISOM have not yet retrieved the entirety of the country which still suffers violence from both sides.

⁹ Although child-piracy is a further violation of children's rights by Somali armed groups, this thesis will not take into consideration the role of piracy, as they do not have political or ideological goals, and thus have not directly partaken in the conflict between al-Shabaab and the government.

This section aimed at giving an overview of the academic literature on child soldiering and describing the methods, including the single-case study. The next sections comprise two analysis chapters. The first will provide an overview of the differences between the reasons and the tactics employed by al-Shabaab and the government to recruit and use child soldiers. The second chapter will analyse the two features common to both factions, revealing the underlying factors that allowed the use of Somali children in conflict.

CHAPTER 1 – THE DIFFERENCES IN RECRUITMENT AND USE OF CHILDREN

Al-Shabaab

The growth of al-Shabaab intensified the conflict and triggered substantial risks for the population to be caught in the middle of the civil war. The rising number of children recruited by the group reflected its gain of control over territories in Central and South Somalia, where they imposed strict rules of conduct (AFR 52/001/2011). Forced recruitment of adults and children, became a regular practice in 2009. The following year, Amnesty International interviewed Somali refugees finding that the possibility of children being recruited was amongst the reasons for fleeing (ibid). Initially, al-Shabaab targeted children from extremely poor districts, not only in Somalia but also in Kenya. However, as the group expanded its influence, it also started aiming at educated university students, offering them money and regular salaries (West, 2016: 6).

The recruiting method used by al-Shabaab varies from luring children with gifts and money, to directly threatening them or their families. In addition, militants started abducting children by raiding schools, markets, playgrounds and crowded outdoor locations (Kriel & Duggan, 2016). Particularly, in the areas under al-Shabaab's influence, many of the men fighting for the group draft children from their own families to support the war. Furthermore, recruiters force clan elders to deliver a predetermined quota of children desired by the army (HRW, 2012; Maruf, 2017). Lastly, a number of children voluntarily join the guerrilla, driven by the prospect of escaping poverty. An important feature is that the population rarely opposes al-Shabaab as the group frequently publicly punishes, flogs, or even kills the children or the members of their families when they refuse enlisting (HRW, 2012: 25).

Al-Shabaab's practices show that the main reasons for children recruitment are to replace and increase the available soldiers. However, the organization also employs children for numerous purposes, including cooking, gathering information, carrying water, ammunition and heavy loads for other soldiers, guarding the camps or pressuring potential recruits among their peers to join the army (HRW, 2012).

Furthermore, as it is common in armed groups practicing child soldiering, al-Shabaab benefits from the ease of manipulating children through corporal punishments, demonstrations of violence and executions to dissuade them from escaping or rebelling against the commanders' orders (HRW, 2012). Occasionally, children are ordered to punish other fighters or innocent people that violate al-Shabaab's strict rules. The punishments include whippings, identifying lawbreakers, beatings, and sometimes killings which have terrible psychological repercussions. In a study conducted with former child soldiers, years after their liberation, 48% of those who spent more than one month with the militia suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, while one out of four confirmed to still be severely tormented by their times with the armies (Schauer & Elbert, 2010: 322).

Young girls are also recruited by al-Shabaab for diverse purposes, including cleaning, washing or performing other domestic duties. Furthermore, testimonies reveal that young girls are also recruited from Muslim and Christian communities, both in Somalia and Kenya, and promised the possibility to have well-paid jobs in other cities or countries. These girls are then brought to brothels to provide sexual services for soldiers, or forced into marriages with al-Shabaab militants, often giving birth to children who are automatically born and raised inside the organization (Attwood, 2017).

These factors and traumatic experiences create stronger ties to the group, because children are convinced that they will not be accepted again in their communities, having committed and suffered such terrible acts, so they give up on a life outside the army.

An additional reason for al-Shabaab to make use of child soldiers is the actual combat. Boys are frequently selected to fight against the government forces, the clan armies, or AMISOM to protect the more experienced soldiers and remove dead or injured bodies from the battlefield (US Department of State, 2014). In training camps, al-Shabaab separates children in several groups and teaches them how to use hand grenades, firearms, or other explosive weapons, which are given to them according to their ability to carry different loads, ranging from AK-47s to small pistols.

Besides conventional battle, al-Shabaab uses children as suicide bombers to attack government's territories, officials, infrastructures and the population to spread terror. One boy, interviewed by Somalia Report, recalled how al-Shabaab recruited him at 13, through the false promise of financial compensation. He stayed with the group for four years until his escape a few weeks before he would have had to commit suicide-bombing in Mogadishu's International Airport (Roble, 2011).

Finally, al-Shabaab makes extensive use of indoctrination and propaganda campaigns to impress children. In the recruitment phase, al-Shabaab militants go to local mosques after prayers, and enter *duksis* – Quranic schools - to convince boys and girls that the holy war is right and would make them good believers, granting them an ‘entry into paradise’ if they were to die as martyrs (AFR 52/001/2011). Ideology is a fundamental element for the organization, who has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. They use their fanaticism to take back Somali territories, enforcing their idea of holy law that should govern the cities they seized, as well as convincing child soldiers about the lawful fight they have to sustain in order to stop the supposed abuses perpetrated by the government.

To conclude, al-Shabaab mainly recruits and uses children for fighting, evoking many of the aspects described in the literature review. Al-Shabaab profits from domestic factors, luring children into their ranks by promising jobs, salaries or a greater role in the holy war. They benefit from material factors, as child soldiers add to the number of fighters and are employed in supporting duties. The ideational factor is embodied in the religious and jihadi component. Finally, al-Shabaab exploits the inherent characteristics of children, allowing the militants to coerce them into violent acts and control them through fear and punishments.

Furthermore, in light of this research, it can be argued that al-Shabaab largely ignores international customary law and other relevant norms as there is no particular interest in their agenda to comply with international rules. The group, guided by a strong religious-political ideology, looks to acquire legitimacy in Somalia and establish itself as the only rightful regime, able to provide the population with societal, religious, military and economic necessities without the assistance from external ‘apostate’ actors.

The Government and its Allied Forces

The government of Somalia has a recent history of public promises and pacts, both internationally and domestically, pledging to stop the recruitment and use of children in the decades-long conflict. In fact, in 2012, the TFG signed an action plan with the support of the UN Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS). The plan included ending and preventing the use of children in the SNA, reintegrating released child soldiers, criminalizing the practice, and granting the UN access to verify the absence of minors in the forces (UNPOS, 2012). In 2015, the FGS ratified the CRC although the state never ratified the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. Article 29(6) of the Somali Constitution states that

children have the right to be protected from being exposed to and used in conflict (The Federal Republic of Somalia, Prov. Const. Art. 29, 2012). In addition, in November 2017, the FGS decided to start drafting the Child Rights Bill (Cunninghame, Kheir, Martinez & Rayment, 2018: 21-22).

Despite the good intentions, the report of the Secretary-General about children and armed conflict recording data from 2017, declared once again that in Somalia, 2,127 children were recruited and used in conflict; a significant increase compared to 2016 (A/72/865-S/2018/465). The report also asserted that although al-Shabaab was the main recruiter, the SNA still enlisted 119 children. Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a (ASWJ), a moderate Sufis paramilitary organization opposed to radical groups like al-Shabaab, recruited 66. Other armed forces in opposition to al-Shabaab, including the Galmudug, the Jubbaland forces and the Somali Police Force, together recruited 91 children (ibid).

Undoubtedly, the government forces have not yet implemented the CRC, nor have they made significant progress in the Action Plan signed in 2012. Furthermore, it is difficult to obtain reliable information from the SNA about the accurate number of children that may be part of the army.

The SNA and its associated forces do not have a tendency to abduct children. The main issue in this case is that Somalia has an almost complete absence of birth registration mechanisms, making it extremely difficult to determine the age and prove the seniority of SNA recruits, as there are no birth certificates or documents officially stating their year of birth (Gettleman, 2010; US Department of State, 2017). In particular, it is essential for teenagers to be registered, as they are the most vulnerable in terms of recruitment and cannot always rely on their appearances to prove their age. Although donor countries that help training Somali soldiers in neighbouring countries regularly carry out screenings to exclude minors from the troops, this process becomes difficult when recruits are incorporated in the SNA from other clans and militias that do not effectively monitor the age of their novices (AFR 52/001/2011). The coalition of forces opposed to al-Shabaab does not have a formal and central command but consists of a mixture of militias integrated and coordinated in disparate ways (HRW, 2012). Somali government officials admitted that when they started building the army to counter al-Shabaab as fast as possible, they did not stop to discriminate whether recruits were minors, as long as they could carry a gun (Gettleman, 2010: 8).

The SNA and their supporting forces generally let children join the army voluntarily. Whilst the SNA uses adolescents in direct combat against al-Shabaab, clan militias and smaller armies also assign children domestic tasks, such as food preparation and guarding checkpoints (ibid).

The findings show that children mainly join the SNA and its allied forces in attempt to escape from extreme poverty, seek food, protection, money and material benefits that could help them and their families survive. In addition, an important factor facilitating the enlistment of children in the SNA is that many see their classmates, relatives or friends joining the army for financial compensation and better living standards.

Many adolescents are also driven by a sense of duty to their families and fellow citizens that have suffered from the oppression of al-Shabaab for many years and might want to take revenge. In an interview conducted by the East African newspaper, a boy recollected how he decided to join the militias close to his town to take revenge for his father, killed by al-Shabaab. At the time, he did not have any education and joining the armed group seemed as the most logical decision (Barigaba, 2018).

In conclusion, it can be argued that the Somali government forces take advantage of the domestic factors mentioned in the literature review and employ the children mainly as regular soldiers, profiting from their recruitment by acquiring new fighters in the war against al-Shabaab.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the differences in the recruitment and use of children between al-Shabaab and the SNA, the ASWJ, and several other militias. The next chapter will, in contrast, engage in analysing the two factors common to both factions and therefore, answering the research question, hence revealing the underlying factors that make child soldiering a prevalent practice in war-torn Somalia.

CHAPTER 2 – THE UNDERLYING REASONS FOR CHILD SOLDIERING

Socio-Economic Factors: Lack of External Alternatives

As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for Somali children to enlist in armed groups is that oftentimes they do not have viable external options and thus perceive recruitment as the rational choice. This absence of opportunities is the result of interrelated factors, such as poverty, health issues, famine, lack of education and social support. Furthermore, children are brought to believe that the armed group will provide them with material and social benefits that could help them survive and provide for themselves and their families.

Poverty, Famine and Insecurity

For years, Somalia has been one of the most impoverished countries in East Africa due to decades of civil war, clan clashes, and dysfunctional governance not capable of restructuring and developing the country.

The main cause of poverty and health issues especially harming children and vulnerable groups is insecurity. After the ousting of Siad Barre from power in 1991, a power vacuum left the country without a central government that could lead the population out of the dictatorship and the crisis. In fact, in 2002, it was estimated that 43% of the Somali population was living in conditions of extreme poverty, which meant surviving on less than 1\$ per day (UNDP, 2007). Moreover, the malnutrition rates were increasing, with one out of four children dying before their fifth birthday (ibid). The escalation of insecurity that followed the emergence of al-Shabaab and the subsequent conflict resulted in the obstruction of service provision and the hindrance of investment, throwing the country further into poverty, especially in the rural areas.

The year 2011 further deteriorated the situation, as the worst famine of the 21st century hit the country and took the lives of almost 260,000 people (Maxwell, Majid, Adan, Abdirahman & Kim, 2016: 64). Initially caused by production collapse and a drought, the famine was aggravated by the lack of preventive measures, and by al-Shabaab restricting humanitarian aid from reaching the most afflicted areas. In order to follow anti-terrorism legislations, major international donors such as the US stalled humanitarian aid in the Southern parts of Somalia controlled by al-Shabaab (Seal & Bailey, 2013). This catastrophe cost a substantial number of lives and caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee Somalia and seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

The repercussions of the famine lasted for several years with two million people suffering from food insecurity, loss of livelihood, and the general deterioration of living conditions, which internally displaced more than one million Somalis (OCHA, 2014). Children have been among the most vulnerable groups. In 2017, 1.2 million children still suffered from severe malnutrition, with 65% of those being IDPs. 4.4 million people were in need of water, hygiene and sanitation services and 24% of children under the age of five suffered from diarrhoea at any one time (UNICEF, 2017).

Along with the widespread poverty and famine, the conflict with al-Shabaab brought even more insecurity into Somali children's lives. In 2017, more than 700,000 children were internally displaced and 6.2 million people (of which 3.4 million were children) necessitated humanitarian assistance (ibid).

In most cases, children were left alone because their parents and caregivers had been killed or injured, and other families did not have enough resources to take on another member. When children did not flee their homes, they had to find a way to help their families survive. Especially in the most afflicted areas where agriculture and animal breeding were no longer possible, children often resorted to illegal means. Under these circumstances, the idea of joining an armed organization that (misguidedly) appeared to accommodate their needs became an attractive, even necessary alternative to poverty and hunger.

Education

Throughout the years, children's educational rights have been severely violated. Machel (1996) drew attention to the fact that when governments enter a civil war, the public spending on education lowers to a minimum to support the costs of the conflict. Therefore, the responsibility of education falls on the communities that have enough resources to continue or resume it (World Bank, 2005). Nonetheless, maintaining a high level of schooling is oftentimes challenging as access to education may be disrupted and both teachers and children's lives put at risk. In 2007, right after the civil war erupted, Somalia's enrolment rate for primary school was marked as one of the lowest in the world with 19.9% (Kirk, 2007: 187).

With the escalation of the civil war, children's opportunities of a standardized education further declined. The Global Campaign for Education (2010: 6) identified Somalia, together with Haiti, as the worst country for a child to attend school. All the factions engaged in the war

deliberately destroyed or attacked schools during combat. Even when no attack was perpetrated, schools closed down due to teachers and students fleeing their towns or not feeling secure enough to continue their studies (AFR 52/001/2011).

Al-Shabaab raided institutes coercing teachers to either give a number of students up for recruitment or be killed if they refused. They restricted the teaching of certain subjects such as English, enforced strict rules on clothing and banned non-Arabic signs (Shil, 2011). Moreover, young girls were prohibited to receive education and forced to either stay home and care for the household or be recruited in the organization (ibid). Schools have also been used by al-Shabaab for propaganda campaigns and classes on jihad led by members of the radical organisation (HRW, 2012).

Interviews with children indicate the consequences of being directly affected by the conflict and experiencing the loss of relatives and structured education. This results in an easier recruitment of children who either answer the enlistment campaigns or join the fight forcibly. In particular, a 15-year-old boy described how his father's death left him to care for his mother and brothers and, with no possibility of continuing his studies or finding a job, he was taken by al-Shabaab and was able to escape only after having fought on the frontlines (Shil, 2011).

Additionally, the aforementioned famine caused displacement and severe restrictions on water resources in proximity to schools, which brought about the closure of almost 400 facilities in the country in just three months (OCHA, 2011).

Despite the fact that al-Shabaab lost control over the majority of the territories, the FGS was not able to restore safe education. In fact, in 2017, out of 4.9 million children, 60% were still out of school and 50% abandoned it entirely before the age of 10 (UNICEF, 2017).

These two sections on poverty, insecurity and education demonstrate that children's rights in Somalia have been violated on multiple levels and aggravated by the ever-going conflict. The thesis argues that, on the one hand, al-Shabaab, the SNA and the other militias have exploited the extremely low living conditions of children. Amidst this already complex scenario, children cannot be supported by teachers and cannot receive a proper education, which makes it more difficult for them to find a legal line of work. Consequently, the belligerents are able to allure them into taking up arms, in exchange for a salary or other material benefits, food, or the feeling of security and power that combat can give to soldiers.

Moreover, in order to replenish their armies, armed groups do not carry out appropriate screening processes among the voluntarily recruited soldiers. Screenings would allow them to identify those children that, left alone to face a crisis bigger than them, voluntarily enlist in an attempt to escape acute poverty, starvation, and oftentimes abandonment.

Childhood in the midst of Violence

The second finding of this thesis is that children may decide to voluntarily become soldiers because they do not perceive war as entirely wrong and they want to help their families and communities to re-establish a peaceful existence, driven by a patriotic sentiment. However, the only way they know to put an end to the perpetrated attacks, is to fight back.

Childhood is a period of outstanding emotional, cognitive, physical and social development. As children grow up, they learn and acquire knowledge from what surrounds them. In Somalia, today's children were born and raised during a conflict of which they understand neither the initial causes nor the reasons for which it is still happening. The majority of them grew up constantly fearing for their own and their parents' lives, being forced to escape from their native communities and live in refugee camps, risking to be recruited in armed forces or to be exploited for labour or sexual purposes, and ultimately trying to survive a dreadful war that has constantly characterized their everyday lives.

Several scholars have affirmed that the consequences of war on young boys and girls are catastrophic: children become distressed, inert and disorientated by the brutality they witness, which might create the opportune conditions for children to voluntarily enlist (ILO, 2003: 24). Children's development is marked by what they are taught in their society. In Somalia, youths have not been socialized to find solutions to end the evolving war but have rather been accustomed to the prospect of becoming fighters and assuming belligerent attitudes, gangster-like culture and a general approach leaning towards violence (Abdi, 1998). Their understanding of violence and war makes children's approach to society and the establishment of healthy relationships with their peers and other adults vastly problematic (Tavares, 2012).

Furthermore, in addition to witnessing the destruction of their villages and lands on a daily basis, children have themselves been victims of killings, torture, ill-treatment and other abuses. Only in 2010, the International Committee of the Red Cross (2011) reported that the two main hospitals of the Somali capital, Mogadishu, received more than 2,300 children and

women suffering war-related wounds, making up more than 40% of the entire number of patients in their clinics.

Especially in the areas controlled by al-Shabaab, children have been obliged to attend public punishments of relatives, friends and people from their communities accused of violating the holy law, the Shari'a. Minors have been regularly sentenced to flogging, stoning, amputations, and beatings because they did not obey the rules. For instance, the dress code included a mandatory hijab and sometimes the abaya – the first is the Islamic headscarf, while the second is the traditional over-gown – for girls (AFR 52/001/2011). To cite an example of a child's punishment committed by the extremist organization, Amnesty International (2008) disclosed the death by stoning of a 13-year-old girl, who had previously been raped by three men, yet was accused by al-Shabaab of having been adulterous.

A further issue is that although children are deeply disturbed by conflict and by the experienced violence, once they have managed to find some sort of refuge, most often no professional help is available, leaving them alone to deal with their traumas. This can only add to the multiple hazards that children have suffered in Somalia in the past decades.

This thesis argues that, as children have seen their own lives disrupted and their country devastated by the different sides to the conflict, they have been brought to develop a sentiment of nationalistic pride that propelled them to enlist, in one faction or the other, to put an end to the conflict. It can be argued that the choice of becoming child soldiers came about on the grounds that Somali children have never experienced peace during their lifetime. Even though they dream and want to eventually achieve a Somalia without hostilities, the only way familiar to them to fight for the freedom of their country, its people and a nonviolent future, is through conflict itself. In addition, this research maintains that, in regard to Somali children who voluntarily enlist, the traumatic experiences they have endured have led to a 'normalization' of violence which has brought them to believe that joining an army and participate in the war is a rational and natural choice.

To conclude, the factors discussed in this second chapter – insecurity, poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, violent childhood, a normalization of conflict, and a patriotic sentiment – are interrelated and mutually reinforce one another. Therefore, they edify the underlying reasons as to why child soldiering is still a prevalent phenomenon in Somalia that involves all the fighting factions. The thesis found that these arguments are especially valid in

terms of voluntary recruitment: a phenomenon that is common to al-Shabaab, the SNA, and the other minor supporting forces. Furthermore, even though the term ‘voluntary’ is used, this thesis argues that the decision made by Somali children is not entirely a matter of freewill, but rather a combination of the different aforementioned factors that urge or force them into becoming child soldiers.

CONCLUSION

The research question posed in this thesis was: *Why is the use of children as agents of war, by each party involved in the conflict, a prevailing phenomenon in Somalia?*

This dissertation has investigated the use of child soldiers by the actors involved in the decades-long conflict of Somalia, the factors that make the phenomenon still prevalent and a number of conclusions can be derived from the study. The occurrence of child soldiering in Somalia was mainly analysed between 2007 and 2017, after the emergence of the extremist Islamist group al-Shabaab and the escalation of the conflict against the then-transitional government and the present federal one.

In the first chapter, the research found that the two main factions to the conflict have dissimilar methods and diverse motives to recruit children into their ranks. On the one hand, al-Shabaab is more likely to conduct abductions and thus force children into becoming soldiers. On the other hand, although being aware of the presence of minors among their armies, the SNA and associated forces generally do not implement any screening mechanisms that would identify and therefore exclude children from fighting alongside adult soldiers.

The use of children as agents of war differs between the two military groups. The government forces treat and use children as if they were of age, mainly for combat purposes and to make sure they always have restored and ready fighters. Whereas al-Shabaab exploits children not only to fight on the front lines, to use them as ‘shields’ or as suicide-bombers, but also to guard their camps and the villages they control, to work as cooks, porters, spies, or in case of girls, to be exploited as sex slaves or married prematurely to the group’s officials.

In addition, this thesis has depicted the non-compliance of the Somali actors with international laws and norms. Concerning al-Shabaab, it can be argued that the extremist organization is not interested in abiding by the CRC, the OPAC or other several treaties that prohibit the use of child soldiers. This is due to the fact that the radical organization does not look for international approval but is guided by a religious and political ideology that leads its members to believe they are the sole legitimate and true authority capable of guiding and providing the population with the right tools to develop and govern Somalia under the holy law.

The second chapter of the thesis focused on the two common factors that make child soldiering still prevalent in the Somali conflict.

The thesis argues that children are driven to ‘voluntarily’ join al-Shabaab, the SNA, or the other militias because of two main reasons. The first is primarily correlated to domestic factors. Children do not have any alternative social support that would help them in providing for themselves and their families when their parents or caregivers die. The Somali civil war has resulted in a worsening of already unstable conditions for the population, with children suffering from extreme poverty, malnutrition, water scarcity, and devastation. On top of that, they cannot receive a proper education, which pushes them to approach unorthodox practices, such as child soldiering. Second, alongside these socio-economic difficulties, children are traumatized by their experiences of conflict and by what they witnessed which brings about a ‘normalization’ of violence, leading them to take up arms in a desperate attempt to put an end to a war they do not understand, but that has been lacerating their country for too long.

The Somali armed groups contribute to worsening the practice of child soldiering by facilitating this choice for children. In fact, they carry out propaganda campaigns that lead children to believe they will obtain material or status benefits and they do not comply with international norms as screening mechanisms are not implemented to exclude minors from the ranks.

It is important to acknowledge that the findings of this thesis remain limited for various reasons: gathering official information from Somali sources is problematic as data on children is not recorded, starting from birth registrations, and the on-going conflict is still evolving and producing new dimensions regarding child soldiers. Moreover, Somalia has not only been bearing the fight between government forces and al-Shabaab, but it has witnessed internal disputes over territories, the involvement of other players, such as pirates, who have contributed to the deepening of the country’s fractures, by allying with one faction or the other to mainly pursue their own financial interests. Additionally, international actors including AMISOM, the US, and the UN have also played a role in the civil war. All these different layers make it difficult to have a comprehensive and clear picture of the conflict in Somalia.

Nonetheless, this thesis focused on one specific aspect of the conflict, trying to achieve a better understanding of child soldiering by taking into consideration the two main parties to the conflict.

To conclude, further research is needed to bring forth new findings on child soldiering and to try and build a framework that could allow children, together with the population, to end the Somali cycles of violence. A point of concern is, for example, a trend that the Somali justice

system has recently adopted, which allows the police to arrest and prosecute children for their involvement with al-Shabaab. This practice removes the children's right to be assisted and reintegrated into society, as it was declared by the national programme that stipulates the mandatory handover of released or escaped child soldiers to UNICEF for rehabilitation within 72 hours (HRW, 2018). Instead, former child combatants have been detained and sentenced to spend time in prison varying from 6 years to life. The military court also sentenced 10 children to death, violating the international norm that prohibits the execution of child criminals, to later commute the sentence on appeal (HRW, 2018: 36-37).

Moreover, further research on the phenomenon of child soldiering, hence the broader theme of human rights violation, is necessary for International Relations and conflict studies as it can bring about new models and explanatory theories for a phenomenon that does not solely concern Somalia, or the African continent, but that remains one of the main challenges for child protection in global terms.

Future research and policymaking regarding Somalia should also focus on factors such as acute poverty, governance, the re-construction of towns and farms in rural areas, the birth registration mechanisms, that could help the future generations exit the humanitarian and insecurity crisis. In 2018, the Somali population between 0 and 14 years of age was estimated to be 46,57% of the total (World Bank, 2018). In a country where almost half of the society is under 15 years of age, the international community should focus first and foremost on restructuring and establishing a functioning education system that could provide youths with the foundations of development and long-term stability.

APPENDIX 1

International Humanitarian Law

Customary International Humanitarian Law¹⁰

Statute of the International Court of Justice (1945)

Geneva Convention I, II, III, IV (1949)

Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions I, II, III (1977)

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998)

International Human Rights Law

Customary International Human Rights Law

ILO Convention 29 (1930)

UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)

Convention Against Torture (1984)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection and Care of Refugee Children (1991)

UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998)

ILO Convention 182 (1999)

Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (2000)

Paris Principles (2007)

Security Council Resolutions on Armed Conflict and Children

Res.1261 (1999)

Res.1314 (2000)

Res.1379 (2001)

Res.1460 (2003)

Res.1539 (2004)

Res.1612 (2005)

Res.1882 (2009)

¹⁰ International treaties bind only those states that have signed and ratified them. Customary law is universally binding.

Res.1998 (2011)

Res.2068 (2012)

Res.2143 (2014)

Res.2225 (2015)

Res.2427 (2018)

APPENDIX 2

Signatures and Ratification of Somalia

Laws, Conventions and Treaties	Signed	Ratified
Geneva Conventions I - IV	✓ 1962	✓ 1962
Additional Protocols I – III		
Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court		
Statute of the International Court of Justice	✓ 1960	✓ 1963
Convention on the Rights of the Child	✓ 2002	✓ 2015
Optional Protocol to the CRC on the involvement of children in armed conflict	✓ 2005	
Covenant on Civil and Political Rights		✓ 1990
Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights		✓ 1990
ILO Convention 29	✓	✓ 1960
ILO Convention 182	✓	✓ 2014
UN Convention against Torture		✓ 1990

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child	✓ 1991	
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	✓ 1982	✓ 1985

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