

## Political Communication

### Child Soldiering and its Implications for National Security in Liberia

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**Abstract:** For fourteen years, Liberia was involved in a bloody civil war, in which the state and armed non-state actors made use of children as soldiers in combat operations. The overwhelming involvement of children in the armed struggles was presumed to be a negative trend that seriously undermined their personal productive capacity and the Liberian national security. This paper examined the use of children as soldiers in Liberia and its implications for the security of the country. The paper explored the causes of the Liberian civil war, the nexus between the war and child soldiering, the factors that aided the recruitment of children as soldiers and the physical and psychological effects of the war on the children. Findings from the study, which utilized data from secondary sources, were that the Liberian civil wars were caused by structural violence, perpetrated by indigenous rulers against their citizens for decades. Many children were forcefully or willfully recruited by the government and armed non-state actors to prosecute the war. Children were more preferable for the war because they were cheap to procure and easy to be lured into combatant operations because of their tender age and low level of comprehension and perception of dangers associated with war and their less understanding of the implications of their actions for national security at that formative age. The Liberian war had both physical and psychological effects on the children. Apart from the physical destruction of their lives and those of other innocent citizens, many of the child soldiers showed symptoms of psychological complications in form of post-traumatic stress disorder. The paper also found that the use of child soldiers by warring factions in Liberia denied the kids of their childhood with negative consequences for their future progress and prosperity as adults. The reintegration programmes that were put in place for the rehabilitation of the children into the communities ended with marginal success due to concert of internal and external factors. Evidence still remains of past maltreatment and neglect of Liberia's ex-child soldiers, many of who are still physically and psychologically traumatized having remained largely uneducated, unemployable and thus, vulnerable to permanent poverty and re-recruitment for armed conflicts elsewhere across the world. The paper concluded that the use of child soldiers in Liberia, just like in

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other parts of the world will not stop until extreme deprivation facing the children, which leads to their impoverishment, is addressed and until they have better opportunities for their personal and group development aspirations. It is recommended; amongst others, that good governance should be pursued to a logical conclusion in Liberia while the government should continue to address all acts of structural violence against the children in the country.

**Keywords:** Child; soldiers; security; Liberia

## **Introduction**

In many regions of the world, both state and armed non-state actors have been making use of children as soldiers in combat operations. The United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (2013) asserted that rebel groups in 22 countries across the globe have used children in armed hostilities, and the governments of 17 countries also used or backed militia groups using children in armed conflicts. Those countries where children were or are still being used as child soldiers by rebels and insurgent groups, sometimes with active collaboration of national government include Congo, Mexico, Myanmar, Syria, Central Africa Republic, Sudan, South Sudan and Columbia. Others are Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, Yemen, Philippines and Nigeria. It is on record that the Boko-Haram insurgent group use young boys below the age of 18 years to prosecute its terror war in North- Eastern Nigeria and uses young girls for suicide bombings across the Northern part of the country while the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which is collaborating with the conventional Military Joint Task Force (JTF) largely consist of children that are supported both by the state and federal governments to complement the efforts of the Nigerian state in fighting insurgency in the North-Eastern part of the country. In such combatant engagements, many children; some as young as eight years old have been prematurely weaned of their childhood innocence and thruster directly into a devastating warfare. Though there is no accurate data of the exact figures of the children that have been enlisted as child soldiers across the globe, the UN Report (2015) estimated that approximately, 800,000 children were involved in combatant warfare having been engaged by government, rebels and insurgent groups to carry out terrible atrocities for courses they know less about and can hardly comprehend. The American Council on Foreign Relations (2015) reported that approximately 300,000 children were recruited as combatant soldiers in thirty conflicts prone countries worldwide as of 2014 while about 500,000 additional children serves in the formal and informal armies not currently at war globally. As posited by Johson (2015), about 40 percent

of the world's armed groups have children in their ranks. The above statistics confirms that there is an overwhelming involvement of children in armed struggles all over the world; a negative trend that has been documented in previous studies (Coday, 2013; Johnson, 2015) to have seriously undermined their present and future progress and prosperity. The statistics also confirms the phenomenon of child soldiering as one of the worst practices of institutionalized child abuse worldwide.

Specifically, African Countries have witnessed one form of civil war or the other, leading to destruction of lives and property. The major fallout from those wars is the phenomenon of child soldiering which is on the increase in the continent. In the nineties alone, there was widespread genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, interstate war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, bloody and protracted civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Insurgent groups have also emerged in Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia, amongst others in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with overwhelming use of children as soldiers in their violent agitations. The upsurge of the phenomenon of child soldiering in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Africa is an unwholesome development that needs urgent attention of the global peace stakeholders.

For many years, Liberia was involved in a bloody civil war. One major defining characteristics of the Liberian war was the extensive use of child soldiers as it is estimated that about 15,000 to 20,000 children were used as soldiers by various Armed Non-State Actors (ANSA) in the Liberian crises during the war (Human Right Watch, 2013). Despite claims by the Armed Forces of Liberia under Charles Taylor that individuals under the age of 18 were not recruited for military services, evidence (Global Child Right Index, 2014) indicated that all factions in the Liberian crises recruited large numbers of underage children to engage in violence conflict, especially during the height of the country's protracted civil war. A report released by Charles (2015, p. 2) estimates that during the disarmament and demobilization period from 1996 to 1997, over 18percent of National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPEL) soldiers were between 8 and 17 years of age. Of this number, 69 percent were between the ages of 15 and 17 years, while 27 percent were from 12 to 14 years. Till date, evidence still remains of past mistreatment and neglect of Liberia's ex-child soldiers, many of who still remain physically and psychologically traumatized. Some continue to be addicted to drugs and alcohol they were used to while in the Military. As part of the peace building process, The United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) enthroned a national Disarmament,

Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program in the country to assist with the reintegration of ex- child combatants back into the society. The goal of the DDR was to empower ex-combatants with employment skills that would replace the destructive military combat skills they had previously relied on for economic survival, amongst others. However, the reintegration of child soldiers as part of the post conflict reconstruction, rehabilitation and peace building efforts that can guarantee their future development in becoming responsible adult citizens seems to have become practical challenges that continue to confront Liberia and serve as a threat to her national security.

This paper, which utilizes data from secondary sources, examines the use of children as soldiers in Liberia and its implications for national security of the country. The paper specifically explores the causes of the Liberian civil war, the nexus between the war and child soldiering, the factors that aided the recruitment of children as child soldiers and the psychological effects of such negative trend on the children. The paper will also examine the mode of recruitment and training for child soldiers in Liberia and also discuss the implications of child soldiering for Liberian national security and assess the rehabilitating strategies of reintegrating the ex-child soldiers back into the Liberian society and the extent of its success.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

**Child Soldiering:** Young boys and girls below the age of 18 years who are conscripted to fight as field combatants in conflicts. These boys and girls, some as young as 8 years old serve in government forces and armed opposition groups. They are children recruited to fight in the front line operations, participate in suicide missions and act as spies or messengers while girls may be forced into sexual slavery or used as suicide bombers in warfare. Child soldiering is a phenomenon associated with using children as combatants in a conventional and unconventional warfare.

**National Security:** The term denotes the aggregation of the security interests of an individual, political entities, human associations and ethnic groups that make up a nation. Such security interests include safety of lives and property, promotion of economic, psychological, mental and physical well-being of the people and their freedom to pursue the attainment of legitimate objectives without any form of danger within a country.

**Review of Literature**

Literature is replete with various perspectives on the phenomenon of child soldiering globally. As posited from an historical perspective by Brownell (2013), child soldiering has its origin from the ancient Greece, where children were used as slingers to throw rocks at opponents, to the eventual use of Jewish children as soldiers in World War II up to the use of children as combatants in the current civil and insurgent wars across the globe. From the moralistic perspective, Vindevogel (2011) considers child soldiering as an institutionalized child abuse with its negative tendency of turning children as terrorists in their early lives. Eben (2015) linked child soldiering to proliferation of small arms and ammunition, which has contributed to the socio-economic and political disintegration of many African countries. As posited by the author, there are conservatively about eight million small arms and light weapons in West Africa alone. Of the 640 million small arms circulating in the world, it is estimated that 100 million are found in Africa. Meghan (2016) discussed the efforts being made to curtail proliferation of arms and ammunitions in Africa, alluding that the sub-regions of the continent have made and continue to make efforts in this direction. These efforts include the formation of the West Africa Moratorium on Prohibited Importation, Exportation and Manufacturing of Illicit Small Arms (WAMPIEMISA), initiated by Coalition of Civil Society Groups in West Africa (CCSIGWA), which has been adopted as a Resolution by Member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Other treaties on prohibition of illicit use of small arms by children along other unauthorized persons include the Geneva Convention of 1949, the Rome Statute of children in International Criminal Court of 1998 and the Addition Optional Protocol (AOP) of 2000, which declares child soldiering a war crime (Jasom, 2010). All the above arms proliferation treaties, conventions and resolution borders on the de-escalation of unauthorized use of arms in Africa and the world. According to Johson (2012, p. 2), although there is not much literature on massive rehabilitation efforts for child soldiers, lessons from El Salvador has helped to point relief efforts in Africa in the right direction. As sighted in the report on demobilization programme for ex-child soldiers in El Salvador, the programme, which took place in the country from 1995-1997 was one of the most extensive in the history of post war reintegration efforts in the world because it was the first time that children were specifically included in the peace process. As argued by the author, the experience of El Salvador provides a longer-term perspective on the transition process to civilian life for child soldiers in Africa and it was significant

particularly for the females because 30 percent of the children included in the El Salvador peace process were ex-child soldier who are girls. The central thrust of the demobilization programme consist of an amnesty and rehabilitation programmes, in which the child combatant soldiers were encouraged to surrenders their arms and ammunition in return for state pardon, economic empowerment, formal and informal vocational training, and automatic job engagement for them in the formal and informal sectors of the economy after training. Oyekunle (2016) expressed the dilemma often encounter in a demobilization programme, especially from the El Salvador experience by recognizing that demobilization programs directed specifically at children must be adequately protected because they can quickly be manipulated into recruiting avenue for other ongoing of future wars by Military Commanders charged with the responsibly of carrying out the demobilization programme, who are often bribed by other war lords to re-recruit the child combatant soldiers for further rebel operations elsewhere. The UNMIL (UN Mission in Liberia) took these challenges into consideration during the demobilization programme by managing to insulate the demobilization programme from touts through rigorous screening to establish genuine ex-combatant child soldiers.

Laide (2011) posited that although virtually all countries with civil war records across the world recruit children as soldiers, African countries are guiltier of this trend. Those involved in child soldiering in the continent include Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan. Others are Libya, Mali, Chad, Uganda, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Central African Republic. Mozambique, Congo, Burundi and Rwanda are also included. As posited by the author, while many countries across the world are still using child soldiers, the phenomenon in African countries seems to be more brutal as young soldiers terrorizes civilians more by cutting off their hands and arms, among other acts of severe criminality. Haer (2016) discussed the changing trends in the dilemma of the recruitment of children as soldiers, which use to be an exclusive preserves of the informal armed state actors, especially the rebel and insurgents groups. Contemporarily, nation states have also joined in recruiting or supporting the recruitment of children into their formal and informal armies. Thus, countries, such as Sudan, Somalia, South Sudan, Libya, Mali, Chad, Uganda and Central African Republic, have children recruited into their national armies while there is a tactical support of both the state and federal governments of Nigeria for the recruitment of children into the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), for degrading insurgency in the North- Eastern Nigeria. Oyekunle (2016, p. 8) opined that Non-

profit making anti-child soldier organizations, such as the War Child and Child Soldier International (WCCSI) have played a big role in reintegrating the child soldier into the society across Africa. As noted by the author, since early 1998, over 30,000 child soldiers have been reintegrated back to their families after being released from the armed rebels.

What has been summarized from the above review is that the use of child soldiers by warring factions in Africa is very rampant and both the state and non-state actors are very guilty of the dangerous trend. Many reintegration programmes have been put in place for the rehabilitation of the children into the communities with marginal successes due to concert of internal and external factors. International treaties have been signed to curtail the use of children as soldiers. In spite of the treaties; the inhumane practice of child soldiering continues to prevail across the globe despite its attendant negative consequences for individual and national security.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work adopts the Liberal Structural Theory of conflict as its theoretical foundation. The central thrust of the theory as enunciated by Galtung (1958) is that social conflicts occur because of the unjust ways in which societies are structured or organized, leading to conditions of social exclusion, deprivation, social injustice, political marginalization, gender imbalances, racial segregation and economic exploitation, among others. The theory is adopted for this study because it could be used to explain why conflict occurs in the society.

Within such unjust structural milieu, key social institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs and such unjust development atmosphere are regarded as an avoidable impairment of their fundamental human rights and social injustice. Galtung (1958). Eben (2015), explained that structural violence is a needless and avoidable limitations society places on groups of people, which constrain them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible. These limitations could be political, economic, religious, cultural, or legal in nature and it usually originates from the institutions that have authority over particular subject matters through weak service delivery, corruption and disrespect for the fundamental rights of individuals, amongst others. As noted by Mbombo (2017), there is a direct link between structural violence, physical violence and national security. Structural violence becomes visible when

disparities, disabilities and deaths occur as a result of systems, institutions, policies or cultural beliefs that meet some people's human needs and rights at the expense of others and this condition of human existence produces secondary violence, which manifests at personal level in form of alcohol intake and drug abuse, suicide mission, depression and internalised oppression. At the community level structural violence could lead to crime and interpersonal violence (armed robbery, ransom taking, domestic violence, rape). At national and international levels, structural violence-induced frustration often manifest in destructive tendencies amongst the youth which manifest most in rebellion, insurgency, terrorism, civil wars, cyber crime and piracy.

The phenomenon of child soldiering is considered a form of structural violence against children brought about by ineffective and poor government system that fails to protect child rights as enshrined in the international and domestic laws. In this regard, Paes (2005) noted that as a result of the Liberian civil war, approximately 800,000 children were denied their rights to education because they were compelled to flee their homes or become child soldiers. The society therefore places the child at a disadvantage through wrongful conscription into soldiering to satisfy his basic needs and actualize his self potential as he lacks the necessary skill and education to survive and contribute to national development outside combat.

The Liberal structural theory is very ideal for this study in order to understand the phenomenon of child soldiering in Liberia. Issues of structural violence on the Liberian children, which is largely characterized by poverty and other negative environmental factors such as living in the slump's have been documented as been responsible for the involvement of the Liberian youth in violence. Using Galtung's concept of negative peace, which implies absence of direct violence but the presence of structural violence as our conceptual narrative, what the UN peace process has achieved in Liberia through the DDR programme and despite putting in place, a democratic government in the country is a negative peace. While the danger of children being conscripted for war by armed factions have been largely eliminated by the cessation of armed combat and hostilities, the ex-child soldiers are still experiencing structural violence due to the shortcomings of the DDR program and failure of government to completely rehabilitate them. The structural violence encountered by the combatants could manifest into suicides, depression and internalised oppression, crimes at the personal level; crime and interpersonal violence at the group level, as well as rebellion, insurgency, terrorism and civil



wars at the National and Regional levels with the potential of undermining national security in Liberia.

### **The Liberian Civil War and the Use of Child Soldiers**

For close to two decades, Liberia witnessed deadly farcical civil wars, which claimed over 200,000 lives, displacement of 6 million people within and outside the country and the destruction of property worth \$3 billion (Global Conflict Assessment Index, 2009). Described as one of the bloodiest wars in Africa, the history of the Liberian civil war is steeped in structural violence as the Americo-Liberians dominated the politics and economy of the country for nearly a hundred and fifty years, having been in power since 1847, while excluding the larger indigenous ethnic groups from political relevance. The war led to inter ethnic killings and human rights abuse against civilians and children in particular between 1989 and 1997, and between 1999 and 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2004). The root cause of the Liberian civil war, and its consequences for children, is traceable to the political history of the country. Liberia was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. The new settlers, known as Americo-Liberians, subsequently controlled the Republic for 133 years and ran Liberia like an American colony by establishing a feudal structure with social, economic and political powers that virtually benefitted them alone. In the name of this Christianizing and civilizing mission, the indigenous population, who outnumbered their host by ratio twenty to one, were subjected to a wave of abuses, including forced labor, disenfranchisement and virtual exclusion from governance, all of which led to their impoverishment and cultural alienation while the ruling class prospered. The disenchantment within the Liberian political space led to the overthrow of the government of William Tubman by Samuel Doe in 1980. Though, Doe stated well as a populist with massive support from the populace, corruption and injustices and special favour for his Krahn ethnic group soon weaned support for his government. The years that followed were marked by mounting unrest due to an increasingly Krahn-dominated authoritarian regime that promoted the militarization of government and promoting ethnically based politics, and reigning over sagged economy, which was characterized by burgeoning inflation and growing unemployment in Liberia. Against this background, the other ethnic cliques began plotting their own rise to power, culminating in 1985 in a brutally suppressed coup attempt by Thomas Quiwonkpa, an ethnic Gio from Nimbo County. After murdering Quiwonkpo, Doe's soldiers, which were Krahn ethnic dominated, began

a bloody campaign of reprisal killings, mainly targeted at Gios and Manos, a closely related group that resides in the same region of Liberia. For fourteen years, Liberians knew little but warfare.

Rebel activities formally began in Liberia in December 1989 when rebel leader, Charles Taylor and his soldiers, invaded Nimba County from Ivory Coast. They called themselves the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The NPFL started a ruthless insurgency campaign by indiscriminately killing civilians, burning villages, raping women and looting while their ranks swelled with the long-victimized Gios and Manos, many of whom were boys orphaned during the waves of reprisal killings by government and were enraged by the attacks against their people. By 1990, the NPFL rebel group had over-taken every military position except Monrovia; the capital city of Liberia. The NPFL could not overthrow Samuel Doe's government due to sudden intervention of soldiers from West African countries who were sent by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

What ensued after the formation of the NPFL rebel group by Charles Taylor was years of war in Liberia fuelled by the formation of one ethnic-based rival group after another. By 1992, the NPFL splinter group, the Independent National Patriotic Front (INFL) of Liberia, led by Yomie Johnson, which captured and killed Doe, had already reached its Zenith and faded. But the United Liberation Movement for Democracy (ULIMO), formed by Liberian refugees in Sierra-Leone who had been loyal to Doe, were making gains from across the border into the southwestern Liberia. By 1993, the Liberia Peace Council (LPC), a largely Krahn offshoot of the INFL, challenged the NPFL and gained significant control over the South-Eastern part of Liberia.

There were numerous failed efforts to bring peace into the country between 1989 – 1997 after eight years of brutal ethnic killings and massive abuses against the civilian population (William, 2008). Thousands of Liberian men, women, and children were killed and subjected to torture, beatings, rape, and sexual assault. According to report by Human Rights Watch (2013), human right abuse in Liberia during the war year resulted in massive displacement within and outside the country. Although the conflict was rooted in historical grievances stretching back more than 100 years, the brutal tactics employed from 1989 to 1997, including a targeting of particular ethnic groups by Taylor's NFPL, and AFL, and later the ULIMO were previously unknown in Liberia history. Finally, in 1997, a ceasefire

was successfully negotiated, after which Charles Taylor; the former head of the MPFL was elected President of the country.

However, Taylor's government was rife with corruption and Right abuse, which further widened the divisions and deepening popular resentments caused by the civil war. State power was regularly used for personal enrichment of many government officials with little or no accountability to the Liberian citizenry. The Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) incursion from Guinea, which began in year 2000, was the fifth serious outbreak of violence in Liberia since Taylor's election and which launched Liberia back into four more years of civil warfare. In August 2003, a negotiated ceasefire witnessed the departure of Charles Taylor from office and Liberia to Nigeria, and the deployment of regional and later, international peacekeepers, which brought an ended major conflict in Liberia, although human right abuses still persisted in the country.

The use of children as soldiers in Liberia dates back to the start of rebellion activities by Charles Taylor in 1989 (Nilson & Solerb, 2005). Taylor's NPFL became infamous for the abduction and use of boys to increase the size and strength of the force. Other Liberian fighting factions soon followed suit, and this tactic was eventually adopted by other rebel groups in Liberia. The NPFL used child soldiers extensively and created a special unit known as Small Boys Units (SBUs) in the 1990s. During the brief period of ceasefire from 1997-2000, many children left the forces. Some left to go to rehabilitation centers while others tried to go back to their old lives as students or working odd jobs. Unfortunately, many children in both categories were rounded up again against their will during the incursion of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Child soldiers in Liberia were utilized during armed conflicts to perform different tasks including combat engagement, lying of mines and explosives, acting as scouts for other child soldiers, spying for the success of the group, and acting as decoys, couriers or guards to rebel war commanders. Others are used for logistics and supporting functions such as cooking and cleaning as well as serving as sex slaves for the group (Ackerman, 2009).

The use of girl soldier started around 1989 by Charles Taylor. Many girl soldiers were abducted during this time as well, although they were rarely referred to as soldier and didn't think of themselves as such. They were forced to be servants as well as sexual slaves to male soldiers of all ages. Later, the oldest and strongest teen girls were supplied with arms to fight alongside their male counterparts.

Children were favored in the recruitment exercise because their physical state of immaturity made them more likely to take risks and less likely to question authority. Also, young boys, particularly those with little or no education didn't quite understand the logic of why they should fight in the war and they were easily indoctrinated with wrong reasons for the war than adult soldiers. Many Liberian children were indoctrinated during the war to believe that looting, stealing, and other activities were just games of personal satisfaction instead of seeing it as crimes. Many of them were easily lure into warfare having been enticed with soft incentives such as promotion in the rebel army without commensurate wages and with adequate food and drug, which made many of them to be eager to prove themselves to success in the war front.

The prevalence of lightweight arms which is not heavier than the weight of the children made it possible for small boys to be an effective fighter in the war front as grown adults because much strength and power are not required in the simple pulling of a trigger. Many of the children chosen for non-armed positions in Liberia were still at an age where they readily accepted authorities without serious resistance. Although there are no precise numbers available, interviews by groups such as Human rights Watch and UNICEF relief workers suggested that majority of the children picked up by armed forces on all sides of the conflict were recruited by force. They were picked up during recruitment drives and while capturing territories. Others were forced to join warring factions while they were seeking refuge at internationally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

### **Factors that Aided the Recruitment of Children as Soldiers in Liberia**

Many factors aided the use of children as soldiers in Liberia. First, the children were cheap for procurement and easy to lure into combatant operation because of their immature level of comprehension on the implications of their actions for national security at that tender age. Thus, they were more complacent and easy to manipulate than adults. The Liberian children just like most other ones across African countries were also easy to maintain for combatant operations because of their previous level of vulnerability to poverty and hunger and lack of basic amenities to survive daily existence, which made them to be lured into acts of criminality provided it will guarantee their daily survival. In fact most Liberian ex-child soldiers were not paid by rebel groups that hired them but were fed minimally because most of them were captured and therefore not accorded the status of

recruited soldiers with right to earn wages like the adults. Many of the Liberian children, especially those from the countryside were more fearless because they do not have the depth of thoughts and deep convictions on the consequences of their actions like adults. They also had far less responsibility to bear or think of because they had no child, wife, husband and deep concern for their future. The children's innocence was easily taken advantage of under the rules of engagement because when they were caught in combatant actions by their opponents, they were mostly spared because of their presumed innocence unlike adults that were summarily executed.

Many children were also used as child soldiers in Liberia because they were malleable, fearless, venturesome, fast learners and disciplined far more than adults. Whitman & Fleischman (1994) also confirmed that military commanders' decisions to use children in combat operations in Liberia included their desire to increase the number of soldiers for combat and their perceptions of children as obedient and easily manipulated, some others were so recruited because their sense of perceiving danger is not highly developed, thus, making it easy to send them on dangerous tasks.

All the ANSAs in the Liberian civil wars recruited children for combat operations because they were more of great military assets who did not compete for leadership roles with their adult war commanders (Vindevoel, 2011). While adults need a good reason to take up arms against perceived enemies, it is easier to convince kids to fight for almost nothing with small promises of money and loot (Wear, 2009). Other factors that made the Liberian children vulnerable for conscription and recruitment by rebel groups included living in conflict zones without families who could care for them, having been killed in the war. Since many child soldiers were recruited from war affected poor communities, many children who have lost their parents to the war viewed armed conflict as a potential source of income and revenge for the killing of their loved ones while others were coerced by desperate family members, who in exchanged for their children's services, received money, protection or goods and services. It therefore follows that poverty which is caused by bad governance is a causative conflict factor, which rendered children from poor families to be highly vulnerable to become victims of child soldiering during the Liberian conflicts. Another dimension revealed by a study (Human Rights Report, 2004, p. 6) indicated that several young boys were conscripted as child soldiers by forcing them to execute captured foes, with the threat of been

summarily executed if they failed to comply. Having carried out the order with regrets, they are congratulated and told they cannot leave the group.

Generally while some children in Liberia were recruited forcibly and subsequently given drugs or alcohol by their military commanders before going into battle to make them courageous (Whitman & Fleischman, 1994) there have been instances where other children volunteered to join the armed parties, usually because they saw no other way to survive. Some of the victims joined the armed groups with the desire to avenge the killings of their parents, other family members or friends and to protect their families from being killed by warring factions; or to get food for themselves and their families (Human Right Watch, 2004).

Lack of political will to enforce laws on the recruitment age limit for combatant operation in Liberia also aided the use of children in the Liberian civil war. Even though Liberia has national laws that set the minimum age for recruitment into the armed forces at 18 years old, the laws were either poorly enforced or not applied at all (Coalition Against the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008). Despite Government promises and claim to the contrary, up to 50 percent of Charles Taylor Army consisted of youth below the age of eighteen. The recruitment of young girls in to the rank of child soldiers was facilitated more because these young individuals most often serve as sex slaves for high-ranking military officials or are sold into slavery in exchange for weapons, money, and other scarce resources by war commanders. Some orphaned girls soldiers willingly got recruited into the rebel army. Knowing of the rapes in other communities, and even their own communities, they hoped that by joining the perpetrators, they might be able to obtain arms and thus be able to fend off such attacks. In a heartbreaking perpetuation of sexual abuse cycle, girls in their early teens, who were fighters as well as wives to rebel commanders, resorted to abducting younger girls during raids that were eventually offered as sex slaves to other child fighters as part of war booty, unity and concrete love within the force.

However, the voluntary recruitment avenue may not be voluntary in the real sense, since the children choice of enlistment into the rebel groups was not exercised freely but because of the negative social, economic, political and other circumstances that the Liberian children found themselves.

### **Mode of Recruitment and Military Training for Child Soldiers in Liberia**

There are two major sources of recruiting children as combatants during the Liberian crises (Deng, 2008). These are done through forced recruitment that entails raids, kidnapping, conscription of children from schools, orphanages and internally displaced persons' camps, amongst others. There was also the voluntary recruitment, which involves the personal decision of children to enlist for service in either national or rebel forces. Child soldiers were recruited and used by Government forces as well as by opposition groups such as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL); the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for democracy (ULIMO) and the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD). Recruitment centres for child soldiering in Liberia included the homes of the children, schools and IDP camps. The recruitment exercises were forcefully done through frequent exchange of gun fire with government forces in the process of capturing the children for enlistment.

Children recruited as child soldiers go through tough military training in the rebel camps, which pushed them to the brink of their physical and mental capabilities. Such training exercise included forcing the children to remain frigid in the water for hours, even though their bodies were screaming for relief, and running through grueling obstacle training such as crawling on the ground until they were exhausted with bruises on their bodies and one –shot target training along detonation of live explosive on innocent civilians, after having slept only a few hours the night before. Some of the trainings underwent by the soldiers were similar to common military training used all over the world in conventional armies. Examples of such training models included climbing over and under barbed wire, learning to service and operate weapons, and learning to take cover in the war front. In the course of their training, many Liberian children learned that not only was escape not an option for them, neither was fear. They were taught not to feel or show any act of cowardice while those caught crying for committing heinous crime were giving severe punishment. Most of these training were forced on the children at gunpoint with no medical staff around for hundreds of miles. Without doubt, life at the training sites for a child soldier in Liberia was brutal. One major goal of training apart from improving their fighting skills was to completely dissociate the children from their past life. Many children confessed that when they were abducted, war commanders often ordered them to forget about their old life and their parents and recognize the armed forces as their only family (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Such

child soldier was therefore expected to be more obedient and eager to prove himself as worthy of being enlisted and strong in his new life as a soldier. War commanders also initiated the children into warfare through secret initiation ritual to desensitize them to future violence. And because of the cultural value placed on the secrecy of initiation rituals in Liberia, many of the children enlisted in warfare refused to explain to aid workers what exactly happened during the initiation ceremonies (Sirleaf, 2015). Other child soldiers were psyched up to be used to murdering their close relatives. Once the children attitude to life has been immorally conditioned to murder their best friends, they began to care far less to kill strangers on the order of their commanders.

Oftentimes, recruitment training only eliminated fear momentarily from the minds of the Liberian child soldiers, especially in the short term because fear is a fundamental part of human psyche. Thus, a child who behaves one way during a training exercise is in no way guaranteed to act the same way during a real fight. This is why many Liberian child soldiers were supplied with drugs such as cocaine, hashish, marijuana, and amphetamines to boost their fighting morale in the war front. Child soldiers, especially those sent out to kill were forced to take these drugs before embarking on their mission. Many times, the commanding officers made small incisions on the children's faces or temples and lace it with brown or white drug substance (usually rock cocaine) into the slits (Sirleaf, 2015, p. 6). The cuts were then closed with a plaster-like substance or tape to ginger the young soldiers into action in the battle front while the drugs were put in the children's food in other instances.

Sometimes, boys were told to stand in line and they were all given hard drug injections. Children were also given alcohol and marijuana to calm them and make them more obedient and to numb or quell any negative feelings they might have about their actions in the war front. Not surprisingly, after a short period of forced drug use, many child soldiers became addicted to the substances. This made them more irritable and thus more violent when they were dissatisfied with a civilian's insistence that he had no money in his pockets. Children without drug additions looted for food, but children with drug addictions looted for anything they could sell to get money for drugs. In combinations with drugs, many units of armed forces took advantage of the naivety of the children to eliminate fear of fighting from their mind as many children genuinely believed that the only reason they were still alive was because their commanders had embalmed them with natural bullet proof from enemy's bullet. Some of them believed that charms obtained



during initiation ceremonies and which they carried with them during battle kept the bullets off them. Others believed that markings cut or burned into their bodies kept them safe in the war front.

### **Effects of Child Soldiering on the Well-Being of the Liberian Children**

The civil war in Liberia had both physical and psychological effects on the children. Apart from the physical destruction of their lives and those of other innocent citizens in Liberia, many of the child soldiers showed symptoms of psychological complications in form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, bedwetting, anxiety, heart palpitation, nightmares, hallucinations, chronic psychological pains and depression (Whitman & Fleischman, 2004). This was due to the severe human rights violation and widespread sexual violence beyond their widest imaginations that child soldiers experienced during the war. The kids were also denied of their childhood with negative consequences on their future upbringing because the formative years that they needed to prepare for adulthood has been abridged in their life having been thruster directly from childhood to adult responsibility, which their young age cannot fully comprehend. Thus, several of the Liberian children lost their innocence and became monsters.

Some of the children lost their minds and sanity because the level of drug usage and cruelty perpetrated by them during the war became overwhelming for some of them to bear, and this made a lot of the child soldiers to run crazy. Girls used as soldiers during the civil war in Liberia faced additional burden of proper re-entry into a society that treats women as second-class citizens. For example, traditionally, rape in Liberia is only considered a crime if the woman was a virgin. If not, the woman takes the blame for being seductive. Therefore, many girl soldiers could not formally report many acts of rape perpetrated against them by commanders during the war. The girls also needed specialized medical care to deal with the aftermath of forced births, gang rapes, forced abortions, and sexual assault which were not there. Girls who have had children outside a formal wedlock needed special support for their children so that they do not remain bound by poverty to their soldier husbands. In many instances, where the girl soldiers wanted to remain with their husbands, many cannot because they were abandoned for younger, prettier and healthier girls but these requests for assistance they could not

formally make to the government because of stigma attached to rape and these became a psychological trauma for many girl child soldiers in Liberia.

On a positive note, many child soldiers expressed relief to be out of the armed forces because once they left, they didn't have to take orders from their commanders again and they had far less of regimental lifestyle to live. They could do as they pleased. Many of the children forgot about their life as a soldier and went back to school because they recognized that by going to school, they can get a job and make something out of their lives. With education and skills, they won't have to rely on the armed forces as a source of livelihood again. They can be self-sufficient. They expressed regret for the things they have done as soldiers, but recognized that they didn't have a choice because sometimes they were on drugs then, which took over their minds, and at other times, they were terrified of being killed by their war commanders for disobedience. They believed they were just trying to survive and they didn't enjoy hurting people.

### **Child Soldiering, National Security and Disarmament Programme in Liberia**

There are many implications of child soldiering in Liberia for the security of the country. The involvement of children in the Liberian civil war undermined public peace and aggravated insecurity in the country as children destroyed many innocent lives and property, which also affected the progress and prosperity of the country because many vibrant productive forces and business enterprises were destroyed by child soldiers during the war. The involvement of children in the destruction of both private and public productive venture in Liberia equally weakens domestic economy because it reduced government ability to invest on productive venture owing to the fact that much of the needed resources for such venture are diverted to security votes to maintain peace, thus exposing many citizen to excruciating poverty which in turn generates new form of economically induced violence and financial insecurity of many Liberians. The flagrant use of arms and ammunition by child soldiers has led to the proliferation of the items in the country leading to domestic violence in many homes where the ex-soldiers use their gun even on their own immediate family.

Child soldiers along their adults displaced many innocent Liberians from their places of residence into Internally Displaced Persons' (IDPs) camps where a new form of health, economic and social security threats emerged because of their

exposure to hunger, diseases, and prostitution, amongst others. There were incidences where many Liberia child soldiers were hired to fight as insurgents across the globe, including Libya and Somalia. The engagement of the Liberian children in act of warfare, which thrive on the periodic dole out of financial and material gains by their war commanders, has virtually destroyed many of the children as irresponsible citizen. Thus, instead of a large number of them being useful as present and future agents of national growth and development, their involvement in warfare as child soldiers has built into them, the culture of violent that is characterized by riotous form of livelihood in many facets of public life. It is even difficult to make good future leaders out of such Liberian children who have imbibed and perfected act of violence, wild life and savagery that have endangers political stability of Liberia. Many of the children are being used as political thugs in the current democratic dispensation in Liberia. Those that dropped out of schools became societal menace and a threat to peace and security of Liberia because they were not properly rehabilitated after the war. The children were also used as combative force to champion inter ethnic agenda and violence clashes in post war Liberia. For example, some of the ex-child soldiers were overwhelmingly involved in the inter ethnic violent that erupted in Liberia between the Gio and Kran tribes in Liberia in 2009. War profiteers, especially smugglers did bribed child soldiers in Liberia with money to prolong the fight against government in order to prevent them from paying taxes and to prolong free flow of illegal businesses into such country. With the inducement, Child soldiers regularly kept violence alive, especially at the borders, which were made ungovernable beyond government control to allow illegal businesses to thrive, thereby undermining the economic security of Liberia.

The involvement of children as soldiers has equally undermined future unity amongst Liberian children as many of them fought along ethnic lines, where lots of atrocities were committed against the other ethnic groups during the war. Many of these children now pursue more of ethnic rather than national agenda and sometimes wait for the slightest provocation to avenge atrocity committed against one another in the past. The level of sophistication and quantum of arms and ammunitions that are used by Liberian children during the war also points to reasonable measure of proliferation of light and advanced weaponry in the country, which raises national security concern. Such rampant and reckless use of arms makes it difficult for the security forces to isolate and control political violence in Liberia, especially where such violent is carried out under ethnic identity.

Many ex-combatant Liberian children, who are now adults, know and understand the power of weapons, especially rifles, and have not hesitated to use it to get what they want, through armed robbery and other forms of violent crimes. In fact, some of the ex-child soldiers have become international armed robbers, leaving Liberia and the international community prone to persistent security threat. Many were used as conflict mercenaries in the country and drug carriers to other countries having been used to drugs during their fighting days, thus constituting threat to fight against drug war in Liberia. Peer pressure from ex-child soldiers has continued to lure other innocent children into acts of criminality in the country after the end of the civil war as groups of boy-soldiers tells many innocent but poor Liberian children how much easier it is to obtain food and other goods when one has a gun, which made innocent children to join them in the hope of bringing food and other needs to their families. Many of those children, especially those who are currently involved in new operations in other countries are now the primary source of income for their poor families against their own personal security risk of being killed in the battle front. Some boys who had fought prior to the ceasefire of 1997 picked up arms again as they saw old comrades marching-by for new assignments in other insurgent spot in Africa, especially in Libya and Somalia while some other Liberian children withdrew from school. Such illiterate children are now more of security threat to Liberia because they don't have the required training skills to be engaged in meaningful employment, which undermined their economic security. The children are easily lured into crime as a means of personal survival. Many of the child soldiers were lured by the false promises of the war lords that they would receive luxuries such as cars and money but got nothing except death, thus jeopardizing their personal security. The Liberian child soldiers practiced the killing of the "enemy" on real people and this led to the death of many innocent Liberians.

Some of the re habilitated ex-soldiers became disgruntled elements who occasionally carried out protest violent to agitate for better condition of living. Instances of this negative trend were the two violent protests by ex-combatants in Liberia in 2006 and 2007 to express their dissatisfaction with the DDR program in Monrovia, the capital city with weapons; sticks and knives, where they demanded monetary settlement for their demobilization (Integrated Regional Information Networks, 2012). These violent agitations does not portend well for Liberia's national security. It is perhaps in this regard that Meghan (2010) warned that the use of child soldiers in Liberia and other African countries is a time bomb that

threatens stability and growth in Africa and beyond. As posited by Meghan (2010, p. 6), the teenage soldiers are lost children who have been lost for peace and the development of their countries. In fact, many of the ex-child soldiers in Liberia are currently walking ghosts, highly damaged and uneducated pariahs of future destruction of the country (New York Times, 2016). From the above discourse it is evident that child soldiering have contributed to the conflict trap or increase the likelihood that conflict recurs in Liberia or elsewhere where the Liberian ex-child soldiers would serve as mercenaries or “regional rebel soldiers” in conflict spots, especially the ECOWAS sub-region, apart from undermining their personal and national security. Thus, each round of fighting in Liberia has created a new cohort of largely unproductive, traumatized children bereft of economic skills that have become potential pool and catalyst for the next spate of violence in the country and beyond.

### **Child Soldiering and National Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration Program in Liberia**

A major effort at rehabilitating and reintegrating child soldiers in Liberia was developed by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) through the entrenchment of national policies on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration Programs, which were intended to assist child soldiers and ex-combatants in Liberia to cope with life outside armed combat. The program consisted of amnesty for all the soldiers that surrender their gun, skill acquisition training programme for the ex-combatant to improve their productive capability and back to school enrolment program for ex-child soldiers in Liberia, and payment of stipends to the ex-soldiers during their training programmes. In a bid to reintegrate these child soldiers and other-ex rebel combatants back into the society, the UNMIL conducted a DDR programs in Liberia which ended in November 2004. Within the scheme, a total of 102,193 people (67 % adult males, 22% adult females, 9 % male children and 2% female children) were processed and voluntarily turned in 27,000 guns and approximately 6.15 million rounds of ammunition (PAES, 2015). The international community also complemented the DDR programme in Liberia. The response of the international community to counter child recruitment in the country falls into two categories (Haer, 2016). The first strategy borders on criticizing and drying funding for both government and non state actors in Liberia who use children as child soldier. Such act is also classified as international war crime while some of those involved were eventually

prosecuted at international tribunals for committing war crime. In fact, part of the charges against and conviction of Charles Taylor along Thomas Lubanga Dyilo, the warlord from the Democratic Republic of Congo by the International Criminal Court was his intense use of children as soldiers during the war. The international community also mitigated some of the damages done to the Liberian ex child soldiers once they leave the armed group by funding and implementing child-centred DDR programs, which revolves around training and empowerment of the children.

The United Nations has been in the forefront of international efforts at addressing the problem of ex-child soldiers in Liberia. Appreciable progress has been made since 2000, as the Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Children and Armed conflict (2012) reported that more than 115,000 child soldiers were released as a result of dialogue and Action Plans with national armed forces and armed groups. According to the Office “The advocacy generated by this mandate has brought about a global consensus among Member States that children should not be recruited and used in conflict, and should be protected from all other grave violations. Liberia has also signed the international agreement to provide a free primary school education for every child. The endorsement of the agreement was essential in helping children to acquire the required skill for personal survival and involving children in violence because many adult commanders in armed forces have admitted that children who can read and write are harder to recruit for violent actions.

There were several criticisms regarding the efficacy of the DDR program in Liberia. For instance, despite the implementation and completion of the programme in the country, majority of the ex-combatants claimed that the DDR program failed to provide them with sustainable livelihoods in Liberia’s post war economy (Brownell, 2013, p. 19). The Child Soldier International (2008) also observed that, ex-combatants in Liberia “remain largely uneducated, unemployed and thus, vulnerable to poverty, illegal activities and re-recruitment for future armed conflicts”. It has also been observed that female child soldiers were left more disadvantaged in the programme because they were not acknowledged as combatants having served as sex slaves, cooks, or messengers (Ackerman, 2009). Another point of negative observation on the DDR programme was that in the absence of treatment for many former child soldiers, coupled with psychological trauma through alcohol and drug abuse, self-mutilation, attempted suicide and violence have undermined their personal security (Kelechi, 2014). Evidences

suggest that the rehabilitation programs in Liberia neglected the mental health needs of child soldiers due to shortage of mental health professionals. Thus, Liberia is challenged with identifying and treating former combatants who are psychologically traumatized (Abramowitz, 2010). The DDR program towards rehabilitating and reintegrating ex-child soldiers back into the Liberian society did not succeed much because it did not have the required funding, optimal local and international supports and wherewithal to address much of the emergent problems. The programme failed to provide them with appreciable means of livelihoods in the post war economy, leading to frustration and despondency.

### **Conclusion**

Findings from this paper confirmed that the Liberian civil war was caused by structural violence against the citizens as perpetrated by indigenous rulers who misruled Liberia for decades. Many children were forcefully or willfully recruited by the government and armed non-state actors to prosecute the war. Children were more preferable for the war because they were cheap to procure and easy to be lured into combatant operations because of their tender age and low level of comprehension and perception of dangers associated with war and their less understanding of the implications of their actions for national security at that formative age. The Liberian war had both physical and psychological effects on the children. Apart from the physical destruction of their lives and those of other innocent citizens, many of the child soldiers showed symptoms of psychological complications in form of post-traumatic stress disorder. The paper concluded that the use of child soldiers by warring factions in Liberia denied the kids of their childhood with negative consequences for their future progress and prosperity because their formative years that were needed to prepare them for adulthood was abridged by war that they were trusted directly from childhood, which their young age could not fully comprehend. The reintegration programmes that were put in place for the rehabilitation of the children into the communities ended with marginal successes due to concert of internal and external factors. Till date, evidence still remains of past mistreatment and neglect of Liberia's ex-child soldiers, many of who still remain physically and psychologically traumatized, which made them to remain largely uneducated, unemployable and thus, vulnerable to poverty, illegal activities and re-recruitment for armed conflicts elsewhere across African countries. The paper concluded further that the use of child soldiers in Liberia, just like in other parts of the world will not stop until extreme deprivation

of children, which leads to their impoverishment, is addressed and children have better opportunities for personal survival and their group development aspirations.

It is recommended that good governance should be pursued to a logical conclusion in Liberia. Under such positive governance profile; the country should continue to address all acts of structural violence against her children. A proper democratic culture, where transparent elections are conducted and so declared should continue to be held as sacrosanct to lower the temper of politics in Liberia. The country should also develop a more robust entrepreneurship and empowerment programs for the Liberian children to insulate them from vicious circle of poverty and wrong indoctrination to fight in a war they can hardly comprehend.

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