**CHILDREN OF AFRICA: CHILD SOLDIER AND CHILD LABOUR**

**Ijenu Benjamin**

**Faculty of Philosophy,**

**Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome**

**Ijenu.benjamin@proton.me**

**ABSTRACT**

A child, according to Nigerian law (2019), "is a conceptualized term used for anybody that is 14 years old and below." Anshana Arora (2020) found that Africa’s child population will reach 1 billion by 2055, making it the largest child population among all continents. Yet, according to a recent report by UNICEF (2020), between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as "child soldiers," used in different armed conflicts in Africa. Other cases document girls being treated as slaves, forced to work day and night peddling goods in the market. Additionally, there is widespread systemic abuse of children in Africa. This paper, therefore, explores the children of Africa: child soldiers and child labour; and the potential solutions for ending the plight of exploited children. Using the analytic method, an endeavor was made to show the implication of child labor and child soldiers in Africa. The paper concluded that ending the recruitment of children into violent conflict is possible by addressing the root causes of child exploitation, which can be achieved through the proactive creation of good policies, re-education, and skill development training and advocacy programs.

**Keywords:** African children. Child Labourer, Child Soldier

**INTRODUCTION**

Greta Thunberg, a thirteen-year-old global warming activist who looks far younger than her age, has recently addressed a UN climate summit in New York, drawing 60 world leaders. When her face was plastered across tabloid newspapers around the world, it prompted an outcry from world leaders, journalists, policymakers, and climate activists dismayed at the latest example of a broken world.

Although Greta Thunberg was not the youngest girl to have raised the issue of global warming, the extreme youthfulness of her appearance, coupled with her speech packed with emotion, "How dare you?", made her photograph all the more shocking. Her eyes do not reveal youth pride nor the innocence of a youthful girl, but bewilderment, apprehension, and the fear of an urgent crisis for which policymakers are unprepared.

The whole affair has been further aggravated by the sudden warning of scientists who have been warning about the harmful effect of the greenhouse effect. What won't be solved easily is the angry look of Greta Thunberg when she accuses politicians of lying to her generation. According to Dawn (2019), she said, "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words." And yet I’m one of the lucky ones. People are suffering... We are at the beginning of mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you? "

Greta Thunberg’s rebuke is a glaring example of a lonely and forsaken generation abandoned first by policymakers and our society, for which the difference between right and wrong is becoming hazier and which is abandoning our world. Greta Thunbergechoed the concerns of millions of children in Africa who, like her, are saying, "You have stolen my childhood." Take, for example, the story of Njoku**.**

James Njoku was 12 and working as a **scavenger** on the coast of southeast Nigeria when he was trapped by a rising tide one cold night in February 2012. He used his mobile phone to call his brother in Onitsha to say he was now in the Niger River. "He sounded terrified," said his brother, and then the mobile phone's power went off. His death shocked his family. Unable to read the warning signs on the beach, the victim was trapped by fast-moving tides on the notoriously treacherous River Niger. Because the victim was a child, it never made the news.

James is an emblematic example of African children’s tragic tales whose childhood has been stolen from them. In this paper, I will explore the children of Africa (child soldiers and child laborers) and the potential solutions for ending the plight of exploited children. Using the analytic method, an endeavor will be made to show the implications of child labor and child soldiers in Africa. An attempt will be made to proffer a solution to the problem of the exploitation of children in Africa.

**THE AFRICAN CHILD: A TRAGIC TALE**

A child, according to Nigerian law (2019), "is a conceptualized term used for anybody that is 14 years old and below." Anshana Arora (2020) found that Africa’s child population will reach 1 billion by 2055, making it the largest child population among all continents. Yet, according to a recent report by UNICEF (2020), between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to the conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher. Often referred to as "child soldiers," these boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse. Additionally, there is widespread systemic abuse of children in Africa. Other cases document girls being treated as slaves, forced to work day and night peddling goods in the market. Most endured beatings and psychological abuse. Besides child labor, the number of children who end up in the clutches of heartless butchers is reaching an alarming proportion. Profit from the killing of children to sell their organs has outstripped that of the infamous arms trade. Mozambique and other poor countries in Africa are at the epicenter of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, about a third of the world’s child soldiers are in Africa. According to the report on the coalition to stop the use of child soldiers (1999), a non-government alliance that includes Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, more than 120,000 children under 18 years of age are being used as soldiers across Africa. Some of these children are as young as 7 years of age. The countries most affected were Congo-Brazzaville, Angola, Burundi, Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Congo, Liberia, Sudan, and Uganda. For those who recruit them, children are cheap and easier to condition to kill.

There is the story of a 13-year old girl, Amarachi, who hails from Mbaise in Imo state. Amarachi left Imo state with her aunt for Lagos with high hopes of getting a quality education to better her life. But her expectation soon became a dashed hope as her host abused her endlessly and turned her into an object of torture. She punished her for allegedly serving her half-cooked rice. She was beaten with an iron rod and a red chili pepper was applied to her eyes. Not only was Amarachi denied her right to education, but she was also made to stay in the shop and run errands. She was subjected to extreme cruelty. Her aunt asked her to sit on a bucket filled with boiling water. She also placed a knife on a burning stove and used it to mark the little girl's legs. There is no end to the tragedies of African children, for whom one can say their childhood has been stolen from them through child exploitation, child forced soldiers, and child labor. These events demonstrate that present-day society denies the average African child any true joy in life. Like James, millions of children in Africa are subject to cruel torture, neglect, and exploitation. Sadly, this is not a new development in Africa. Yet, according to a recent report by UNICEF (2020), between 2005 and 2020, more than 93,000 children were verified as recruited and used by parties to the conflict, although the actual number of cases is believed to be much higher. Often referred to as "child soldiers," these boys and girls suffer extensive forms of exploitation and abuse. Additionally, there is widespread systemic abuse of children in Africa. Other cases document girls being treated as slaves, forced to work day and night peddling goods in the market. Most endured beatings and psychological abuse. Besides child labor, the number of children who end up in the clutches of heartless butchers is reaching an alarming proportion. Profit from the killing of children to sell their organs has outstripped that of the infamous arms trade. Mozambique and other poor countries in Africa are at the epicenter of this phenomenon.

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**CHILD SOLDIER – A HISTORY AT A GLANCE**

# The situation of a child soldier fighting in Africa is a well-traveled movie plot in **Cary Fukunaga's "Beasts of No Nation."** Idris Elba (Commandant); Abraham Attah (Agu) and Opeyemi Fagbohungbe (Sergeant); and then there is "Blood Diamond", played by Leonardo DiCaprio (Danny Archer); Djimon Hounsou (Solomon Vandy ); and Jennifer Connelly (Maddy Bowen), where the directors were using children as child soldiers. These movies depicted the lives of thousands of children in Africa who served as soldiers for various rebel militias. Child soldiers in Africa are best described by PlettApudDallaire (2020).

# […] Man has created the ultimate cheap, expendable, yet sophisticated weapon, at the expense of humanity's future: its children… Desperate children, boys, and girls are cheap to sustain, have no real sense of fear, and are limitless in the perverse directions they can be manipulated through drugs and indoctrination since they have not yet developed a concept of justice and have been ripped away from their families to fend in the new perverted family of armed force.

In a provocative thesis in the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices, which were adopted by the NGO Working Group on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF at a symposium on the prevention of recruitment of children into the armed forces and on demobilization and social regeneration of child soldiers in Africa in April 1997, the symposium defined a child soldier as "any person under 18 who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members." **Theirwords (**2009, p. 4) According to UNICEF (2020), the number of children involved in the armed conflict, including combat roles, is estimated to be 90,000 as of 2020. In other words, hundreds of child soldiers serve in the Forces Nationales pour la Liberation (FNL), an armed rebel Hutu group in Burundi.

According to Sarita Vashistha (2020), hundreds of children serve in armed rebel groups, including the Union of Democratic Forces for Unity (Union des Forces Democratiques pour le Rassemblement, UFDR) in the Central African Republic. Child soldiers are fighting with the Chadian military integrated rebel forces (the United Front for Democratic Change (Front Uni pour le Changement, FUC), local self-defense forces known as Tora Boro militias, and two Sudanese rebel movements operating in Chad—the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the G-19 factions of rebel groups now allied into the New Forces (Forces Nouvelles de Cote d'Ivoire, FAFN) also have child soldiers. At the height of the Second Congo War, the UN estimated that more than 30,000 children were fighting with various parties in the conflict. Child soldiers were used by the Rwandan government forces and paramilitaries, as well as government-backed forces operating within the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Furthermore, nearly all factional militias in Somalia use child soldiers, with an estimated 200,000 children involved over the 16 years of the Somalia Civil War. In 2006, during the recent crisis in Darfur, the Sudanese army, the Janjaweed militias, and the Sudan Liberation Army forces reportedly used more than 7,000 child soldiers in the region. Over the past twenty years, the rebel Lord’s Resistance Army, founded by Joseph Kony, a Ugandan militant, has abducted more than 30,000 boys and girls as soldiers. The ZANU-PF government of Robert Mugabe sponsored a "youth militia"—the National Youth Service, known as the "Mugabe Green Bombers." The child soldiers are armed, provided with drugs, and used as political tugs against political dissidents. They are believed to be responsible for some of the worst political violence in the history of Zimbabwe. According to Wikipedia (2014), thousands of children were recruited and used by all sides during Sierra Leone’s conflict (1993–2002), including the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), and the pro-government Civil Defense Forces (CDF). Children were often forcibly recruited because they were easy to condition into unthinking obedience and, when influenced by drugs, to commit atrocities.

**In Raw-Hope, World Vision, a Canadian non-profit organization** supporting former child soldiers and victims of sexual abuse in eastern DRC, **tells the story of "Mukele", 17, a former child soldier who has found a new life as a carpenter. According to World Vision (2019),**

 […] Mukele joined a militia when he was just 13 years old. But the violence he witnessed soon had him praying for a new life…People were getting killed every day. And one day, people came to our neighborhood and said: "please, our people are being killed, we are suffering, let us organize ourselves to fight them."I joined the militia when I was 13 and I lived in the bush fighting other groups. I was eager to get involved and fight to stop our people from being slaughtered. But many others are forced to join these armed groups, they come through your neighborhood and if they see you, they tell you to come with them. I was in the third militia group and became a bodyguard for the commander. There were many people killed on both sides and even in our group. Out of the 380 of us, more than 80 were killed in the fighting. I prayed to leave so that I could start another life…One day soldiers surrounded our camp and asked us to join them. But we refused. There was fighting for three days and I was shot in the leg and wounded. I kept very quiet and hid under a toilet in a latrine. After a few more days I left my hiding spot to try to get my wound treated. But the soldiers found me and began shooting at me. I begged to surrender. I told them if they took me to a hospital, I would give them information about our group. But they took me to jail instead. And I stayed in jail for more than two weeks without being treated. But I survived. And this is how I came out of the bush.

**CHILD LABOUR IN NIGERIA**

The UN convention (2019) defines a child as"... every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, the majority is attained earlier." Although the internationally recommended age of work is 15 years (ILO convention No 138), the number of child laborers between the ages of 5 and 17 in Africa is approximately 72 million, according to recent estimates by the International Labour Organization (2022). The employment of boys and girls when they are too young to work is generally regarded as child labor. Child labor then becomes the exploitation of the most vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized children in society. According to Albert Thomas (2022), the first ILO Director General, "It is the exploitation of childhood which constitutes the evil… most unbearable to the human heart. Serious work in social legislation begins always with the protection of children."

As a result of poverty, many families in Nigeria depend on their children’s wages for their survival. According to ILO (2022), the National Bureau of Statistics 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) shows that about 43 percent of Nigerian children, between the ages of 5 and 10, are working and about half of the working children are estimated to be engaged in child labor. Children in Nigeria engage in the worst forms of child labor, including hacking on the street, working on construction sites, and armed conflict. Child labor can be called modern-day slavery in its most severe form. Poverty is one of the many causes of child labor, but it is not the entire story of why children are denied an education, shoulder the dual responsibility of school and work, and are subjected to physical, sexual, emotional, and mental abuse, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Child labor and child soldiers have educational, economic, moral, and psychological implications for Africa. Children find it difficult to cope educationally, which in the future means Nigeria will have fewer skilled workers, which in turn affects the nation's aspiration towards technological advancement. There is also the possibility of developing low self-esteem and poor interpersonal skills, which will make it difficult for the child to grow up to become a fully functional member of society. This is especially dehumanizing for African children.

**STOLEN CHILDHOOD: TOWARDS A SOLUTION**

It is an injustice to deny a child his basic rights, as stated by article 32 of the 1993 UN convention on the rights of the child.[[1]](#footnote-2) The ineptitude of dealing with the exploitation of children in Africa is partly a lack of knowledge about this form of deviance. While there are physical effects of child exploitation, the principal damage is psychological, which is long-lasting. When children are repeatedly exposed to traumatic stress during development, it leaves them with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe personality damage. The problem must be tackled comprehensively through a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on prevention by addressing the primary drivers of child exploitation and strengthening the protective environment around children, especially those from dysfunctional families. There should be enlightenment on the commonly used media, such as radio and newspapers, so that everyone living in Nigeria, both in the city and the villages, will be adequately acquainted with the knowledge of how best to help children, especially those living on the street.

In my opinion, there are three-pronged approaches toward a possible solution to the marginalization of children in Africa.The first is the government, whose primary duty is to protect the lives of the innocent and vulnerable members of society. The government should focus on creating new knowledge and increasing innovative operational strategies to combat child exploitation. Attention should be given to activities offering legal, physical, and psychological protection to vulnerable children. The second is the rehabilitation and education of children, which falls under the jurisdiction of the government and non-profit organizations. This could be achieved by increasing access to education, increasing the funding of the ministry of early childhood education, and strengthening child protection systems. The third is the punishment of all child abusers, which requires a holistic, rights-based systems approach and strengthens families and caregivers' capacity to protect their children.

The priority of children is not an option but a choice between life and death. What happens when the children within us are unloved and bruised (conscripted into war) or neglected? All too often, their reaction is hatred or violence towards the person or society that has mistreated them. In the words of the historian John Giannini, using the life example of Adolf Hitler, "Adolf Hitler played out a similar tragedy on even a larger stage ... battered in childhood by a sadistic father, he fanned the fires of hatred in a frustrated and demoralized people into a religious fervor that sought to create a new humanity." **(**Elsaesser, 1996, p. 23). According to David O’Brien and Thomas Shannon **(**1992, p. 23) in Catholic Social Thought, "...great care should be taken not to place children in workshops and factories [also in war fronts] until their minds and bodies are sufficiently mature ... so too early an experience of life’s hard work blights the young promise of a child’s powers, and makes any real education impossible."

African leaders need to realize that the future of Africa is at stake when our children, who are meant to have the warmth of family life, undergo such hardships in life. The use of children as weapons of war should be highly discouraged because it reflects negatively on the future of the world and not only in Africa, where the number of child soldiers is high.

**CONCLUSION**

Ending the recruitment of children into violent conflict is possible by addressing the root causes of child exploitation. Through the proactive creation of good policies, re-education and skill development training by non-profits, and awareness programs, we can strive to eliminate this accursed trade. The famous American pop singer and songwriter, Michael Jackson, (2022, P. 30), answered when asked to offer his view as regards what one should expect from the next American president: "We don't look to man to fix the problems of the world; we don't. They can't do it. That's how I see it. It's beyond us. Look, we don't have control over the skies; there are storms. We are all in God's hands. I think that man has to consider that. I just wish they would do more for the babies and children, and help them more. That would be great, wouldn't it?" We need to secure the future of Africa by doing more for African children, as Jackson rightly invites us to. The time is now. The good of the future should be our priority.

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1. See the Convention on the Rights of the Child Text | UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)