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**Matilda Nash** is a BA Early Childhood Studies student at Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth. Her main areas of interests are social justice and protecting human rights with a focus on a child's right to develop and learn in a safe environment. An eye-opening experience whilst travelling in Namibia almost a decade ago was the initial spark which helped Matilda gain a true understanding of different cultures and potential struggles for children globally. She plans to continue her academic journey onto postgraduate study where she can continue to raise awareness of current issues and potential solutions through her research and explore further initiatives by continuing to travel.

## **A discussion on the Involvement of Somalia's children in Armed Conflict**

### **Abstract**

A discussion on the Involvement of Somalia's children in Armed Conflict

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This paper discusses the issue of children's involvement in armed conflict across the historically war-torn country of Somalia. This serious breach of a child's rights is often kept 'under the radar' and needs voice. Here, the immediate, short term impacts are explored in addition to the life-long consequences for a child currently involved in armed conflict and for those who have had previous experience of it. Drawing on the work of a London-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), Peace Direct, this article highlights the key challenges faced by those who attempt to tackle the problem and offers a thought-provoking, locally-led concept that has been effective and influential. It is recognised that being culturally aware and utilising local expertise are essential components for tackling this issue.

### **Key words**

child soldier, trauma, non-governmental organisation, cultural context

Somalia is a country in the Horn of African, devastated by reoccurring drought, famine and shocking rates of extreme poverty. Ongoing armed conflict and governmental instability after a civil war broke out between 1988-

1991 are some of the countries' toughest challenges, especially in terms of child wellbeing. Although the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) has been internationally recognised since 2012, they do not have control over the whole country including the North where there are two governmental authorities- Somaliland, which has self-declared independence and Puntland which is a disputed area run by another presidency. An Islamic terrorist militant group, 'Al-Shabaab' also have control over parts of the country bringing fear to many people. This cobweb of governmental control, instability and border disputes in fragmented Somalia makes the development, implementation and regulation of child protection laws challenging. In fact, Somalia is one of the last members of the United Nations to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, taking until 2015 to do so (UNICEF, 1989). The convention has articles which cover a child's civil, social, cultural, economic and political rights and although Article 31 states a child's right to relax and play, 49% of Somalia's children are engaged in labour (Save the Children, 2018). In 2019, the FGS signed their commitment to a roadmap which details measures and practical actions to prevent violations against children but as my discussion reveals, perhaps these action plans are purely just ornamental.

In this article, I will be discussing a specific form of child labour in Somalia, drawing a focus to children's involvement in armed conflict across the war-torn country. I will be considering both the short and life-long impacts of forced or alleged 'voluntary' child recruitment into militant groups and highlighting the key challenges that humanitarian organisations face when trying to introduce strategies to tackle the problem. It becomes apparent that ostensible solutions to eradicating child labour are not as straightforward as hoped.

I feel that this issue deserves greater recognition due to the lack of attention given by the internationally known United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where this grave breach of a child's rights is not specifically mentioned at all but instead, children involved in armed conflict can be self-categorised into several goal categories; These include SDG 3: good health and well-being and SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions. SDG 5: Achieving gender equality is also a relevant target with boys and girls falling victim to kidnapping, recruitment and indoctrination (United Nations, 2019). This concern is 'under the radar' and needs voicing.

The definition of a child soldier is widely known to be a boy or girl under the age of 18 who has been recruited either forcibly or voluntarily by armed forces or groups in any capacity (The Paris Principles, 2007: p.8; Machel, 2000: p.7). However, there is little information available on the Somalian national laws on the use of children in armed capacities due to contradicting legal texts from three different legal systems: customary law, Islamic law and codified law which makes change even more difficult (UNHCR, 2019). The concept of 'voluntary' recruitment is also disputed. The International Labour Organisation makes it clear that when children personally decide to enrol themselves as fighters, they are in fact,

being coerced or violently threatened into it (ILO, 2019). Regardless of the circumstances, there is no doubt that children's well-being and safety is strongly compromised in a range of roles that include fighting, cooking, spy work, sexual purposes, suicide bombing and cannon fodder in conflict contexts.

Although a significant contributor to the involvement of children in armed groups is political instability, when we pay close attention, it becomes clear that poverty is likely to be the root cause and main driver of voluntary enrolment with the promise of a better life for impoverished families. The most recent data reveals that half of the population live in poverty on less than \$1.90 a day (UNICEF, 2017: p.8) with four out of five Somalis living below the national poverty line (DFID, 2018). The severe and ongoing drought in Somalia is leaving people malnourished and desperate, unable to harvest crops on arid land. This is an example of degraded natural capital potentially influenced by human-induced climate change. In 2017, a BBC news reporter discussed with a woman living in South-western Somalia who highlighted the vulnerability faced by children as a result of the food insecurity, she said 'Al-Shabab is harvesting the boys and men we left behind on our parched land, offering them a few dollars and a meal' (BBC, 2017). According to UNICEF Somalia, lack of livelihood opportunities has 'fuelled' the recruitment of boys into armed conflict groups and girls into exploitation (UNICEF, 2018). It is evident that poverty is multi-dimensional, not only about income levels but impacts also stretch to a person's quality of life, level of vulnerability, opportunities and freedoms. The Joseph Rountree Foundation (2019) focusses on a lack of resources to define poverty which 'encapsulates financial capital (income and wealth), human capital (good health and education) and also, social capital (ability to build positive and trusting relationships and communities)' - a multi-angled view of hardship, all being drivers for the voluntary involvement in conflict.

Due to the erosion of statistical infrastructure needed to accurately collect data, it is extremely difficult to find reliable data on Somalia through internet searches, including their position on the Human Development Index. However, it is very clear that there are ongoing issues within the country that affects children's well-being day in and day out. Short term implications of involvement in conflict as a vulnerable child includes physical injury, poor health and potentially loss of life due to exposure to gunshots and other weaponry, poor living conditions and a general low standard of living. Betancourt and others (2008) explored some experiences of former child soldiers in Sierra Leone and found accounts of children being injected with harmful narcotic substances, being forced to carry heavy loads and being frequently raped. A tragic account highlighting the true disregard for girls is when a sergeant from a Belgium peacekeeping troop, stationed in Somalia was reportedly charged for buying a Somali girl as a birthday present for a paratrooper in 1993 (Amnesty International, 2004).

Witnessing and experiencing traumatic events such as sexual assault, can have lifelong negative consequences on all aspects of a child's

growth and development. If a child develops post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) there are 'devastating impacts on a child's learning, behaviour, and emotional and social development. The longer a violent conflict lasts, the deeper its impact will be' (UNICEF 2019a: p. 2). Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts are commonplace amongst those who have witnessed violence during conflict, making learning and skill development challenging (Betancourt et al. 2008). Trauma can also cause emotional dysregulation, resulting in behavioural difficulties due to architectural changes in the emotional centre of the brain, the amygdala (Lyons et al. 2015). Emotional difficulties related to attachment figures continue with displacement and loss of contact of family members. Due to conflict, the World Health Organisation (2002, cited in Bastick, Grimm and Kunz. 2007: p.59) estimated that 400,000 Somalis have been internally displaced and another 400,000 have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. Contact with attachment figures, usually maternal parents, is an important factor when analysing child development and survival rates. Through a psychological lens, close proximity to attachment figures is important for cognitive advancement and social understanding but also from a basic, fundamental biological perspective where if a child doesn't have contact or attachments to their birth parents then it is likely that they will not receive the nutrition they need to physically grow, especially in developing countries where food may be scarce and competed for.

Wider impacts of conflict and child involvement include distorted views from indoctrination of alien ideologies causing internal community conflicts. Attitudinal changes result in a lack of social cohesion and disintegration of peer networks, making friendship building for children difficult. As explored below, coherency is important when attempting to make grassroots, positive changes to livelihoods. For example, the implementation of basic services including healthcare and education, are all in requirement of social harmony in order to function effectively.

With such devastating effects, it is clear that child recruitment into armed conflict is a serious problem that needs addressing. So, what can be done to tackle the issue? It has been more than 20 years since Graca Machel, a former minister of Education in Mozambique, published her valuable report on 'The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children' which identifies children as the primary victims of armed conflict (Machel, 1996). Graca's expert report which drew particular attention to the situation of child soldiers, was a catalyst for change that brought about international agendas for action to protect children by the United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations Centre for Human Rights. The report importantly calls for the age of recruitment and participation in the armed forces to be set at a minimum of 18 years but with only 3% of the population having a birth registration, it is hard for children to protect themselves against forced recruitment and even harder for humanitarian organisations to rescue those already involved (UNICEF 2019b). Protecting children from this violation of their human rights is a perplexing puzzle that is problematic to solve. In the words of Machel

herself, 'Children today find themselves caught up in complex and confusing conflicts that have multiple causes and that lack clear prospects for resolution' (2000 p.3).

Somalia has had 12 different prime ministers in the time frame of 15 years resulting in a lack of accountability for donations into Somali Central Bank, however, recent government commitments have been made. In December 2016, the FGS presented a national owned, nationally led development plan (NDP) for the years 2017-2019 and has now approved an updated 2020-2024 strategy. This is a milestone of progress after more than 20 years of conflict. The NDP integrates the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and includes political and security priorities (Federal Government of Somalia, 2016). The plan states that the SDGs have been 'localised' in order to recognise the realities of Somalia, the lead being goal number one: End poverty (United Nations, 2019). Context specific goals and solutions are essential for success. However, after being ranked 2nd out of 178 countries on the Fragile States Index 2019, it is clear that the pressures Somalia faces are currently outweighing its capacity to deal with them (Fund for Peace, 2019).

Although there is no NGO regulatory board in Somalia, their work and progress must not be undermined. For many organisations working to support children who are or have been affected by recruitment into armed conflict, it can be almost an obvious route to physically remove the children from the dangerous groups. However, I feel that is important to be cautious of actions such as these without critically considering the 'next steps' of the child's journey. Will removing a child from their known environment and way of life change or bring psychological conflict to their sense of belonging and identity? Negative stigma surrounding these children who have murdered, or raped others makes it extremely difficult for them to be integrated back into a community. The child is likely to face discrimination and rejection, sometimes by their own family. Displacement is also another huge challenge that the child soldier will face once being rescued from the hands of the fighters. Will the child ever be reunited with their family or friends? Will they be placed in a community of people that do not accept or understand them? It is simply not good enough to remove a child from military involvement and locate them into a nearby area, impoverished families and communities of people may have no other option but to send the child back into forced labour in order to survive. Children are quite often sent to work on hazardous sugar cane and banana plantations through bonded labour in Somalia (Carter and Roelen, 2017).

A London-based, international NGO, Peace Direct, take a different perspective on the issue, working as peacebuilders in Somalia, offering better alternatives for those vulnerable to conflict recruitment. They help to make positive changes by starting at the bottom of the chain reaction where a child soldier's journey would start, recognising the root causes of conflict and investing in violence monitoring to provide early responses. Most importantly, the organisation values local knowledge and expertise. Being locally led, they are culturally aware

that 'people within a community have a better understanding of the issues that affect them and a better chance of gaining and building long term trust with each other' (Rylance, 2019 00:40). A huge strength of this charity is that they do not send 'westerners' into Somalia but instead, employ and train young people already living in Somalia to spark development, meaning it is sustainable. Despite starting out as a relatively small organisation, they have had great success as a report published in 2018, estimated that Peace Direct have helped to globally turn 24,000 people away from violence by strengthening local capacities in that year alone (Peace Direct, 2018). In Somalia, the organisation work at a micro level in Kismayo, starting with what people need and want rather than attempting to impose 'one size fits' all solutions. They invest in building human and social capital so that vulnerable children have sources of support they can draw on, utilising people's skills through a strengths-based approach. The forming of networks and the development of trust then provides a crucial safety net due to the bridges built between people and families involved in conflict. Regretfully, I could critique this charity organisation by identifying that their work solves a form of child labour with more labour. In this light, they provide a sustainable solution for older children but not younger ones. Additionally, there are still so many more children and places to reach despite the fact that they already work with 25 countries around the world and their operations are inclusive of both boys and girls.

Peace Direct, other organisations and even police forces, regularly face challenges in their work including physical barriers implemented by armed terrorist groups such as 'Al-Shabab'. Militant groups have been known to close roads and any other access to civilians in an attempt to prevent aid, charity workers and police forces from providing assistance to those in need. On an individual level, it can also be difficult to support the reintegration of former child soldiers into communities, due to the major psychological adjustment needed, especially if the relief worker does not belong to the community themselves. Cultural differences can be an impediment for progress.

It is important to be aware of the influence of culture and cultural traditions when addressing this issue. Kostenly and Penn (2006 & 2014, cited in Huggins, 2015) help us to recognise that we must consider the varied experiences of children in developing countries in order to recognise their differing view and understanding of what 'childhood' means. For example, Lee reminds us that 'children are often regarded as competent 'young adults' and bear significant social, economic, and political responsibilities for their families and communities' (Lee, 2009 pp.14). Understanding and expectations of young children are 'created within each society's historical and cultural context' (Neaum, 2019. pp.10). Importantly, we as 'Westerners' need to be aware that our perspective is often warped by media coverage and that different cultures are not always as what we see on the news. Nonetheless, we need to make sure that regardless of families' or communities' culture, children's wellbeing and rights should always be protected regardless of how ingrained cultural traditions are within a society. For example, it

may be acceptable within some communities for a child at the age of 8 to participate in safe informal labour such as domestic chores outside of schooling hours to enable the adult to go and earn a living. However, child labour becomes a problem when they are denied their rights to an education or to a safety- even the right to play. Our approach to addressing this problem must therefore be context specific, taking into account individual needs in a unique setting.

In conclusion, as mentioned in my discussion, we need to be aware of our Western World standpoint that is shaped by what we hear in the British media. Adichie voices in her TED talk that there is always more than one layer to a story. I quote 'The problem with stereotypes are not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make the single story become the only story' (Adichie, 2009 5:37). We must see things with many different eyes to truly understand another person's life and avoid critical misunderstanding. It is only then when we can effectively provide support to elevate their pressures.

From my perspective, there is much work being done to support children and their families that are facing the consequences of drought and natural disasters (poverty being the consequence) such as emergency aid but, it is harder to find organisations that are focussing on conflict in the country. With no disregard to the great work of Peace Direct, there is little evidence of other support networks covering the issue of conflict as people do not wish to risk their own well-being. From a British students' view, I feel that it is hard to make connections with an issue that is non-existent in our home country. Nonetheless, it is possible to increase awareness on the issue from the comfort of your own home- the internet opens a world of opportunities that could make a real difference to the lives of children in Somalia. Increased awareness often results in increased donations to charities such as Peace Direct who can channel funds into training local people to help themselves.

Although my discussion attempts to summarise the political and cultural drivers of child conflict involvement in modern Somalia, the long- and short-term consequences for the children and pays attention to an organisation that works to prevent children from entering harmful situations to begin with, it certainly does not cover all dimensions of this deeply complex issue. To conclude, the safety of children should always be the highest priority, including their right to a safe and nurturing learning environment as they develop. Knowledge provides children with the power to break free from generational hardships and poverty- the ultimate driver of conflict and poor health.



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