“Let’s play war!”

An analysis of the child soldier’s experience of conflict

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Abstract

This dissertation carries out an investigation into the *Child Soldier* topic. The study is based on a revision of the literature available on the chosen subject. It intends to establish if a broader understanding of the child’s behaviour and his personal motivations, as well as the socio-cultural factors that might condition his decision to join armed forces, can lead to more efficient action planning. The aims of which are to sensibly reduce children’s recruitment and improve the quality of the reintegration/rehabilitation programs for ex-combatant children. The study also wishes to investigate if the war can, in some instances, produce positive growth and development in child soldiers.

This paper, by acknowledging that the children’s conflict experience has been so far only partially evaluated, argues that an improved comprehension of the child soldier’s topic might be extremely beneficial in terms of prevention of child soldiering practices. In particular, it is observed that so far limited investigation has been conducted on the capacity a child has within his personality and character to provide effective and visible transformations in the surrounding war-affected society.

Conversely, a consistent part of the literature concentrates on the negative aspects arising from the child’s war experience, focusing mainly on children’s vulnerability as well as traumas and violence suffered by child soldiers.

This work will begin with an introduction which will clarify the objectives of the dissertation and formulate the related research questions. The following chapter will review the existing literature on the chosen area of investigation, particularly with regard to child soldier’s agency capacity, his motivational processes and the effects/implications of the war on his life.

This will be followed by a case study that scrutinises the war experience of young female combatants during the Mozambique’s war of independence. In this regard, it is
believed that the inputs contained in the case study are very relevant to the dissertation objectives.

The fourth chapter will contain the dissertation authors’ discussion, based on analysis of the literature and findings from the presented case study. In this section a synthesis of the most prominent views will be operated and an attempt will be made to provide sensible considerations and proposals for an advanced research in the topic.
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I would like also to say a special thank you to all my lecturers, in particular to Dr. Brian Phillips for his extraordinary classes on human rights and to Dr. Rod Burgess who has been an incredible source of inspiration, with his lectures and informal chats. Some of the topics we have discussed in classes have, in one form or another, inspired crucial arguments of my dissertation.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to all my course mates. Thank you very much for your help, my friends. If during this MA I have learned something, it is probably through the testimonies and contributions of you all.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CS (CSs)</td>
<td>Child Soldier(s)</td>
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<td>DDR</td>
<td>Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration</td>
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<td>DF</td>
<td>Destacamento Feminino (Female Detachment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FRELIMO</td>
<td>Frente de Libertacao de Moçambique (Mozambican Liberation Front)</td>
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<td>HSRP</td>
<td>Human Security Report Project</td>
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<td>HCHR</td>
<td>High Commissioner for Human Rights</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Office</td>
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<td>KLA</td>
<td>Kosovo Liberation Army</td>
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<td>LRA</td>
<td>Lord's Resistance Army</td>
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<td>TKP</td>
<td>Teach Kids Peace</td>
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<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organization of African Unity</td>
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<td>OMM</td>
<td>Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (Organization of Mozambican Women)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 A Background to my study

In 2006 I was working on an essay for the module “Armed Conflict and International Humanitarianism” which constituted part of my MA in Humanitarian and Development Practice.

The main objective of the paper was to look into the root causes which were influencing the choice of a child to become a soldier. During my research, I came across an interesting view expressed by Burman and Reynolds (1986). The authors were examining how the cultural background and the socio-economic and political influence of the Apartheid conditioned the lives of the majority of the South African youth, and what was the children’s response to the nearby violent environment. They observed that:

“Children do not simply absorb the values of their society but rather they reinvent these values and in doing so, over time, alter society’s understanding and consciousness.” (p. 125).

I found this statement extremely enlightening and original. Particularly, it developed my curiosity in investigating if and how children with their action could dynamically and effectively operate a transformation in their surrounding environment, particularly within a war set-up. Was this hypothesis applicable to the area of study I was exploring: the subject of child soldiers?

My dissertation work has been heavily influenced by this initial reflection. This paper addresses the subject of children involved in armed conflict from a different and somehow newer perspective: it aims to explore what is the role of children exposed to warfare with regard to their capacity of operating effective changes in the society they are living in. My work also aims as to investigate in depth the child soldier’s
(hereinafter referred to as CS) experience in order to understand better what impact the war can have on the lives of the youngsters.

Nowadays, the amount of literature available on the CS subject is rising in size and constitutes for researchers and practitioners an important instrument for the development of discourses and activities aiming to study the phenomenon with the necessary competence. There is in fact a growing concern at international level for the process of recruitment of young boys and girls throughout the world. The characteristics of the modern conflicts in fact is increasingly affecting and targeting the civilian populations, particularly those who are customarily considered more vulnerable: children, women and elders.

As a result, the process of recruitment of children in armed forces has become a widespread practice which is implemented in numerous countries world-wide. Consequently all the stakeholders involved in the CS caseload are trying to address this emerging issue by promoting a deeper understanding of the root causes underpinning the recruitment. It is hoped that this will provide an improved comprehension of the phenomenon and, possibly, stimulate an appropriate intervention.

The hypothesis formulated in this research states that associating child soldiers ONLY to concepts like vulnerability and coercive manipulation, might not reflect the real situation and not be representative of the CS caseload.

Therefore, the objective of my research is to contribute to the CS discourse by offering a deeper reflection on why a child becomes a soldier and what impact this decision will have on his life and on his society at large.

In this paper, I will argue that important aspects of the CSs war experience have so far been taken too lightly: modern studies are now revealing that children’s capacity to operate effective changes to the environment they are living in, is meaningful and that their level of participation to armed conflict can be extremely relevant.
This dissertation affirms that an improved understanding of these capabilities might help researchers and practitioners to provide sensible answers to the CS issue both in terms of recruitment deterrence and support programs.

Moreover, based on the evidence gathered from the literature, this paper will place a special focus on the external environment surrounding the child when he is exposed to armed conflicts. It will be argued that besides economic and poverty related issues, which have been historically estimated to be very powerful influential factors, other important aspects associated with cultural beliefs and social influences can likewise be crucial for a child and influence his decision-making processes.

Finally, I will also examine how the implementation of more adequate research methodologies and studies, which aim to study the child from a broader perspective, can contribute to a better designed CS prevention, assistance and reintegration programmes.

My first research question will therefore be:

_Can child soldiers instigate effective changes in the war affected society they are living in? And how a better understanding of this contribution can help researchers and practitioners to set more appropriate intervention plans for CSs?_

This dissertation will also observe the relationship between CS and empowerment: based on evidences gathered from the literature, I will provide examples of CSs who have benefited from the war experience. In this regard I will argue that activities aiming to reinsert children in the civil society should acknowledge that war not always constitutes a negative aspect of their life experience but, conversely, it might represent an important agent of growth and development.
My second research question will therefore investigate:

*Can war represent a means by which CSs can become empowered? If so, can an improved comprehension of this dynamic assist in the prevention and rehabilitation of CSs?*

1.2 Methodology and research design

My dissertation is entirely a literature-based revision. Its theoretical background is based on the available writings available on the research topic. I believe that during my study I have come across a relevant amount of information, such as books, journals, articles and academic publications.

I have also consulted field reports and surveys published by the United Nations, humanitarian agencies and human rights organisations. Finally, I have examined the pertinent legal documents existing on the topic, produced by the international community.

To illustrate the most relevant findings of my research, a case study is offered which has been taken from the existing literature on CSs. The case study explores all the core topics of my investigation and contributes to give positive insights into the subject matter.

The above-mentioned research provided me with a reasonably clear understanding and an adequate background of the subject matter. It has also enabled me to sharpen my comprehension of the topic and consequently to express sensible opinions and formulate adequate proposals in the discussion chapter.

The research is structured as follows:
In chapter 1 (the present chapter) I will provide the background of my research, formulate my research questions, explain the methodology applied and the existing study limitations.

Chapter 2 will examine the available literature relevant to the CS case. At the beginning of the chapter, basic information on the topic plus essential facts and figures will be provided. The following section will then tackle the traditional views on the argument, by examining the position expressed by relevant humanitarian organisations, human rights groups and part of the academic world. The last part of the chapter will explore what are the contributions and the proposals of some modern and alternative approaches to the subject matter: by providing opinions and sensible examples it will be examined how a newer and more comprehensive study on CSs can promote a better definition of the caseload and encourage an improved intervention.

Chapter 3 will entirely focus on the chosen case study. By scrutinising a real example taken from the literature, this section will propose a model which illustrates ways in which a CS can actively contribute to and receive positive outcomes from the warfare. The first part of this chapter will present the historical background to the research while the case study will be presented in the central part. The last part will finally discuss the most relevant findings arising from the case study.

Chapter 4 will concentrate on my discussion. I will argue that both the traditional and modern literature can contribute significantly to the CS discourse and therefore a more positive dialogue and confrontation between the various stakeholders should be encouraged. I will then examine the most important findings arising from the literature review and the case study. I will provide an analysis, in form of discussion, of how an improved understanding of the child, his war experience and his surrounding environment can be beneficial to a much more efficient action plan for CSs. Finally I will verify if an adequate and accurate response has been provided to the research questions of the dissertation.
The final chapter 5 will recapitulate the main topics and arguments of my dissertation and sensible recommendation should also be provided.

1.3 Limitations to the study

As an exclusively literature based dissertation, this research is limited to the published writings on the subject matter. Ideally, a more comprehensive plan would have included some interviews to child soldiers carried out in the field, but unfortunately this has not been possible due to time and, mainly, financial constraints.
Chapter Two
Literature review

In the past 30 years, a more comprehensive study of the CS phenomenon has been broadly developing: the recruitment of young children from fighting parties represents an emerging issue which is increasingly drawing the attention of humanitarian agencies, human rights organisations, UN bodies and academia.

Today, the knowledge gathered has become quite consistent and its significance, in terms of production of a better understanding of the CS life experience, can be considered remarkable.

It must be noted, however, that the amplitude of investigation is particularly vast and the researched topic is complex: reliable information is collected with great difficulty and its scrutiny often generates discussions and debates within the existing literature itself.

In particular, we find contrasting positions about the level of participation of children in armed conflict and, specifically, with regard to the dynamisms surrounding and conditioning CSs’ involvement in warfare.

Firstly, is primarily disputed whether the decision for a child to join the fight is a voluntary action or not. There are in fact arguments about the CS’s effective capacity of making sensible decisions and meaningful choices without the intervention and/or influence of adults.

Secondly, there is widespread disagreement about the impact of the conflict on the lives of the youngsters: does the war always represent a threat for CSs or, in some instances, might it produce significant and positive changes for his future?
2.1 Structure of the chapter

The objective of this section is to examine the most relevant positions proposed by the existing literature on the subject matter.

In the first part, I will supply a general account of the CS caseload, by providing essential information, facts and figures.

In the second part I will talk about the traditional literature’s position on CS with regard to my dissertation research objectives.

The third part will then offer some alternative modern proposals on the argument: in three consecutive paragraphs I will examine what some original approaches have to say on:

1. CSs agency and participation in war
2. War and CS empowerment, and
3. Objectives and research on the CS topic

At the end of the chapter I will then summarize the most relevant views in a final summary.

2.2 Child soldiers: basic facts and figures

Children’s involvement in armed conflicts is not a new phenomenon: throughout history, nations and armies have been regularly utilising young boys and girls for military purposes\(^1\) (Child-Soldiers, 2001; Human Rights Watch, 2008).

\(^{1}\) For example, it has been observed that training of youngsters for military purposes has been regularly done throughout the history, from the times of the Roman Empire until the Third Reich’s reign (Briggs, 2005). Twum-Danso, (2003) also reports that approximately 30,000 children participated the Crusades in 1212 and in the 19th Century a significant number of young combatants were among the fighters enrolled in the Napoleon’s troops.
However, in recent years, with the proliferation of numerous intra-state conflicts which caused a higher degree of involvement of the civil population, the number of children who either decide voluntarily to join the conflict arena or are forcibly recruited, have increased dramatically (Child Soldiers, 2001). Moreover, it seems that the recruitment age of minors is abruptly declining: it is not unusual to find in armies or guerrilla groups children below 10 years of age (Child-Soldiers, 2004; ILO, 2003).

It has therefore been argued that the participation of young boys and girls in armed conflict is becoming a common characteristic of modern warfare and consequently, researchers and practitioners are addressing the CS issue with greater concern than in the past (Amnesty International, 2002; HSRP 2005).

Nowadays, the utilisation of children as soldiers is considered a widespread problem that occurs at a global level. It has been estimated that between 250,000 (Child soldiers 2008; Brett and McCallin 1996) and 300,000 (Amnesty International, 2008; UNICEF, 2006) children are serving as soldiers in approximately 30-35 wars around the globe. This figure has remained unchanged over the past 10 years: obtaining useful and reliable statistics is in fact quite complicated since children are often enrolled in an unofficial way and commanders and army chiefs are particularly reluctant to openly provide reliable and sincere information on the recruitment process of minors (Wessels, 2006).

But, who is a child soldier?
The understanding of the concept of “childhood” generally varies across countries and societies: children behave and perform differently according to their culture and the geographical location they are living in (Sommers, 1997). This might imply that attempting a generalised definition of childhood, adolescents and adulthood and examining the capabilities ascribed to each of these life phases could represent a hazardous proposition (Holland, 2004; Hart, 2002).

Likewise, providing a universal definition of who a child soldier is seems to be particularly problematic: i.e. western societies tend to portray a child as any person
under 18 years of age, therefore still in the age of immaturity (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998). Their understanding of what a CS is will consequently be influenced by this account. Other cultures, where children’s participation in the adult’s world is more tangible, might have a different view of childhood\(^2\) and therefore their understanding will frame the way they approach the CS experience (The Economist, 1999; Boyden and Gibbs, 1997; Ansell, 2005). In this regard, Boyden, (2003) also observes that children living in different societies are raised by their community in several different ways and with different social expectations.

However, so far, the most commonly adopted definition is the one set by UNICEF (1997 p. 12) which describes a CS as:

> “Any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members”.

CSs normally are found both in government armies as well as in paramilitary guerrilla or rebel groups. The phenomenon is particularly acute in developing countries and, particularly, in Africa where it has been estimated that approximately 100,000-120,000 children participate in intra-state conflicts. (Twum-Danso, 2003; Child-Soldiers, 2008).

CSs functions within warfare are not limited to combat but involve a high number of paramilitary tasks\(^3\). Moreover, research indicates that they can constitute an important portion of the armed group they are working with\(^4\).

\(^2\) For example, in some Sub-Saharan societies an individual is considered adult after completing the initiation ceremony which constitutes the passage from childhood to adulthood. Usually these ceremonies occur when the child is 14 years of age (Boyden, 1997).

\(^3\) Mainly, CSs’ functions are those described above by UNICEF (1997)

\(^4\) Numerous reports highlight CSs’ prevalence within national armies and guerrilla groups: it has been observed that in Sri Lanka up to 60% of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) army is composed of children under the age of 18 years (Hogg, 2006; Somasundaram, 2002); it has also been estimated that in Uganda the number of children conscripted by the rebels of LRA (Lord Resistance Army) might have reached 80% of all combatants (U.S. State Dept., 2006). Also, Singer (2005) states that in Liberia approximately 20,000 CSs served as warriors during the civil war, tallying almost the 70% of the entire fighting forces.
Not only boys, but also girls take an active part in conflicts, at different levels. UNICEF (2005) estimates that the number of females involved in conflicts might have reached the important figure of 40% of all the world CSs.

The CS caseload and its implications for the lives of the children involved are becoming an increasingly high priority on the international agenda: the United Nations (particularly UNICEF), human rights organisations, humanitarian groups and activists have been encouraging data collection activities and have also promoted advocacy efforts in order to improve understanding of the phenomenon as well as to raise awareness about modalities of recruitment and all the problematic issues associated with children’s enrolment and engagement in wars (Amnesty International, 1998; Hart, 2002; Child-Soldiers, 2008).

Also, international legislation is generating useful legal instruments in order to protect CSs. Particularly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts (HCHR, 2000) provides a powerful contribution to the anti-CS campaign by giving more authority to the defence of children at a legal level, as well as setting the age of 18 as a minimum age for participating in war and hostilities. Although some of these legal tools are not universally adopted or totally accepted by all states, it is generally acknowledged that they represent a useful means in terms of safeguarding the rights of the children.

Moreover, the UN is regularly promoting further research and debates on the CS topic (Achvarina and Reich 2005). Over the past 20 years, several United Nation bodies, including the UN Security Council, have approved strong resolutions which condemn

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6 Comprehensive data and information (on which Country has adopted the various conventions and protocols) can be found at the HCHR website: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/ratification/11_b.htm
the use of CSs and provide sensible measures aiming to stop the recruitment of minors (UN 1999; UN 2000; UN 2001; UN 2003).

Finally, human right groups and organisations are also prominently involved in the CS discourse: Human Rights Watch (2001; 2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2003c; 2004a; 2004b; 2005), for example, is publishing regular relevant information at country level specifically on the issue of CSs. Also, the most relevant humanitarian agencies involved in supporting CSs have in recent years formed an inter-agency working group - The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers\(^7\) - which aims to contribute to the dissemination of information and knowledge on the topic at a global level. The Coalition also publishes a comprehensive report every three years (Child-Soldiers, 2001; 2004; 2008).

### 2.3 Children at war: a traditional approach

Arguably, the CS phenomenon has rapidly captured the interest of the international community either for the apparent high level of vulnerability shown by children exposed to violent conflicts, as well as for the harrowing psychosocial consequences of the war on the youngsters.

The preliminary information available on the topic was originated in individual countries, often non-interrelated studies (Wallenberg, 1991; Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994; Save the Children 1992; Dodge, 1987) carried out independently by practitioners and researchers throughout the globe.

These pilot investigations have provided useful and informative accounts of the CS caseload, such as recruitment age, general military practices and the conditions of the children’s lives when in conflict. These reports contributed to reveal for the first time

to the public opinion and the press, episodes and dramatic scenarios depicting the atrocities witnessed and suffered by children at war (Garbarino et al. 1991).

The international community, whose attention was increasingly centring on humanitarianism and human rights discourses (Amnesty International, 1998), consequently began to feel a profound need to, firstly, develop an improved understanding of the subject matter as well as of the causes and factors underpinning the CS recruitment process and, secondly, to carry out a more comprehensive analysis of what was becoming an alarming issue at the global level.

Landmark research on the topic was carried out in 1996 when the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child proposed recommendations for further investigation and urgent action on the CS caseload. Consequently, the UN Secretary-General commissioned a study on the impact of armed conflict on children. As a result, a survey (UNICEF 1996), prepared by Graça Machel8 based on 24 case studies world-wide was presented to the UN, the media and public opinion. This report is considered the first attempt at studying and analysing the caseload at a global level and has represented the milestone on which the core reflections and discourses on CSs have been centred: by showing to public opinion a shocking scenario that, all over the world was affecting hundred of thousands of children involved in conflicts, it appealed for an urgent and resolute action by the international community in order to give an immediate answer to the plights of vulnerable and innocent boys and girls.

Since then the literature has been dominated by the image of children suffering the violence of war as victims of institutionalized abuse operated by the societies they are living in. It is acknowledged in this literature that war violates their basic rights and greatly affects their childhood. Particularly, it is believed that the impact of war over their present and future existence can be extremely severe and produce permanent present and future effects on them both physically and psychologically (Amnesty International, 1998; BBC, ND).

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8 Graça Machel is the former Mozambican First Lady. She has also been during the 1990s the Minister for Education of Mozambique.
It was also soon realised that the role of the children in conflict is not minor but that CSs feature prominently at all levels during warfare: by spying for the enemy, supporting with camp duties, participating in suicide missions, and, mainly, carrying and utilising a gun (UNICEF 1996).

Regarding the modality of children’s employment in wars, it has generally been argued that most of the children join the army because of forced recruitment. (UNICEF, 2001; Human Rights Watch 2001; Human Rights Watch 2003c). Children are considered easy to manipulate and to recruit, do not cost much and can be conditioned without difficulty. Moreover, in modern warfare CSs can easily carry and use the new generation of small arms and light weapons and they are often utilised in the front line as sacrificeable items (Child-Soldiers, 2001; UNICEF 1996).

This last depiction of CS as lost generation of fighters usually has a strong impact on public opinion since it results to be the most emotionally appealing. Children are also generally shown by the media while carrying guns or big weapons. This contributes to massively draw the attention and outrage from the public.

Special attention has also been given by the literature to girl soldiers. They are usually portrayed as the most vulnerable individuals, generally abducted by warriors in order to function as sexual toys and entertainment for the troops or, in the best cases, to serve as camp slaves and servants. The literature often produces atrocious narratives which describe in great detail modalities and practices of the sexual exploitation of young girls during warfare (UNICEF, 1996; 2003).

On these bases, the leading humanitarian organisations and human rights groups such as Save the Children, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, have tried over the years to give an affirmative response to the issue. It has been believed that trying to

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9 For example it has been reported that in more than 10 years of civil war the rebel group LRA (Lord’s Resistance Army) has forcibly recruited at least 12,000 (Singer, 2001) children, both boys and girls. Moreover, Human Rights Watch (2003c) has argued that the majority of the (estimated 70,000) CSs have been forcibly recruited.
determine the main causes and factors contributing to generate the CS phenomenon might constitute a good working ground on which a more accurate action plan can be developed.

Research on the topic shows that these reasons can be extremely intricate and complex to evaluate. Among the contributing factors, it has been observed that displacement caused by war (Alfredson, 2002), the disruption of the social environment, particularly school (Amnesty International, 2005), or incapacity of the community to protect their youngsters (Honwana, 2002) represent very powerful agents of persuasion for the child.

Twum-Danso (2003) also observes that the disruption of the family background caused by conflict very often contributes to increase children’s vulnerability and consequently might determine their decision to join the fighting. Moreover, dynamics like desire for revenge (TKP, 2005; UNICEF, 2005; Wessels, 1997) natural attraction to war and personal inclination to violence (Burman, 1986; Garbarino et al. 1991; Sommers, 1997) have also been considered to be important emotional factors which should not be underestimated.

However, it is generally acknowledged that the factors which mostly contribute to children’s enrolment are mainly poverty, (UNICEF, 1996 Barnitz, 1997) economic problems (Millard, 2001; Human Rights Watch 2002) and hunger (Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Twum-Danso, 2003; UNICEF, 2003). Faced with harrowing life conditions which do not guarantee them not only a decent life but also survival, children frequently opt for a militarised environment which, they hope, can provide at least a better form of livelihood.

In terms of decision-making processes it is believed that, whatever the pushing factor is, children decide to join the army because they do not have other choices if they want to guarantee survival for themselves and (often) their families (UNICEF, 2003). As society breaks down, children suffer the lack of services, particularly schools; they are often displaced from their towns or villages, sometime as orphans. The risk of being exposed to aggression and brutality increases and consequently, fighting can represent the sole
viable option, the only possibility available in order to escape the surrounding violence.

In this regard Human Right Watch (2003a p.10) observes:

“Even the voluntary decision to join irregular forces is more a reflection of the dismal lack of opportunities open to children from the poorest sector of rural society than a real exercise of free will.”

The input of the traditional literature on the CS topic contributed to generate a working framework within the humanitarian discourse which is essentially directed to provide support to young individuals desperately in need of help and assistance. CSs are seen as the most prominent victims of abuses against children which are perpetrated by adults who live in the same societies. Children’s behaviour is frequently associated with the idea of weakness as well as the inability to perform tasks which do not pertain to their age group (UNICEF, 1996).

As Amnesty International (2008) observes, “Children are robbed of their childhood and exposed to terrible dangers and to psychological and physical suffering.” Their capacity to operate deliberate and sensible choices is considered very minimal if not absent (Reliefweb, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2008a) and the process of reinsertion of children within the civil world is considered a top priority.

In recent years, processes of “Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration” (also known as DDR) have been considered the only feasible solution available in order to give back to the children (even partly) the right to the childhood they are entitled to. It is hoped that with the promotion of DDR initiatives, an affirmative response can be provided to the children affected by war.

The provision of assistance at a psychological level as well as reinsertion in an education environment or access to income-generating activities (Child Soldiers, 2004) should on one hand minimize the risk of children re-recruiting and on the other assist them during the recovery process (especially when it is traumatic).

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10 The above-mentioned reference is contained in the Amnesty International Child Soldier web page. There is no information on the number of the page.
To conclude, it must be observed that, although it is believed that DDR programs are very useful, a consistent number of children, for many reasons, either do not have access to or do not register with the programs, thus creating increased concern in the international community which is always looking for new strategies aiming to support the ex-CSs lives (Human Rights Watch, 2008b).

2.4 Critiques to the traditional approach

2.4.1 Child Soldiers’ agency and power
There is a growing recognition, especially at an academic level, that the role played by children involved in armed conflicts might be more complex than had previously been estimated. The modern literature is oriented to believe that, so far, the role played by children engaged in conflicts has been inadequately explored. Also, little attention has been given to the children’s capacity for “action” while the reactive component to war has been thoroughly documented (Hart, 2002).

In recent years, it has also been observed that there is a growing understanding of the CS topic, generated by studies in medicine and child psychology (Singer, 2002). It is therefore deemed very important to address the issue by using a multidisciplinary approach which takes into account the contribution that other disciplines such as social sciences, psychology and philosophy can provide to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. (Allison, and Prout 1990; Archard, 1993; Brocklehurst, 2006) These disciplines suggest that children are perfectly capable of making rational and appropriate choices, even under distress (Aries, 1962; Higonnet, 1998) and that children exposed to conflicts can, with their behaviour, influence their external environment and by doing so, produce a significant change in their situation and circumstances (Hoyles, 1989).

In this regard, the work of the sociologists Giddens (1984) can be particularly helpful: in his work, he analyses the notion of “agency” by stating that this term does not only
express the intention of acting (doing something), but it also indicates the full capability a person has of doing deliberately what he intends to do. With regard to the CSs subject, Giddens observes that children involved/exposed to armed conflicts can construct their own role in order to fit to the best of their capacity within the war scenario. According to Giddens, a better understanding of the role of human agency in children could provide an improved definition of CSs role in wars.

The concept of agency is considered particularly meaningful by the modern literature on CSs. Wessels (1997; 2006), supports Giddens’ theories by arguing that the fact that a CS can be extremely important influential actor in the warfare has been seriously underestimated. In this regard, Kimmel and Roby (2007) observe that if an analysis totally concentrates on the passivity and submissiveness of a child when exposed to conflicts and violence, it risks underestimating CSs’ capacity of operating significantly within a warfare environment. Boyden and De Berry (2004) note that the CS should be observed with much more attention since he does not only participate in the war in full but is moreover becoming an active agent of change and can influence the outcomes of conflicts: by observing the profound implications and effects a CS has on the war environment, they describe him as a maker of meaning and consider his personal influence and impact on the war extremely significant. Also, Lansdown and Karkara (2006) note that the outcomes of CSs’ actions have important implications on the society where the child is living because the children do not only influence their own existence, but also that of others, particularly their families.

In this regard, of particular interest is the work of the British researcher Brocklehurst (2006) who combines the above-mentioned concept of “agency” with the concept of “power”: after examining the degree of capacity a child has to participate to social practices (agency) she also investigates the degree of power a child has within the society he is living in and the outcomes of the expression of this power. She argues that child’s power is manifest and significant, and that it can easily determine a change in the society he is living in. With regard to the CS caseload, Brocklehurst strongly challenges the conventional analysis in which it is believed that a CS is recruited only
because vulnerable or because he sees the war as a big game. She instead proposes an image of child who is determined, influential and, to a higher degree, very powerful.

The modern research on CSs has made strong efforts to verify if and how the above-stated modern theories can find adequate correspondence with field based practices. Relevant outcomes have consequently emerged:

Boyden and Gibbs, (1997) note that during the Khmer Rouge regime\textsuperscript{11} in Cambodia children’s participation in the revolution was total and their active presence, which included participating in the war, influenced both the society and the conflict. Also, while studying the outcomes of conflicts in south Asia, Boyden \textit{et al.} (2002) observe that growing productive responsibilities as well as a higher level of involvement in armed conflict were assumed by children.

A recent work of Rosen (2005) highlights the sharp rationality children are capable of and the active political role they can play within a conflict: In his research, the author presents three different case studies\textsuperscript{12} taken from different continents. He argues that on each occasion CSs appear as active political actors able to influence the dynamics of the conflict they are involved in.

Particularly relevant, because it focuses solely on girl soldiers, is also the contribution of Swaine and Feeny (2004), which observes that female adolescents caught up in conflict during the Kosovo war, were able to deliberately develop their best strategies for survival, \textbf{including active participation in the conflict}. In their book, the authors provide a significant example: the story of Fatima (a young Kosovar girl) who, officially employed in a shoe factory, was instead involved in the production and manufacture of \textbf{not only shoes} but also weapons and uniforms for the KLA\textsuperscript{13}. Her family did not know anything about her \textit{unofficial} activity and she was satisfied and proud of secretly participating in the process of freedom of her country. Swaine and Feeny also observe that frequently during conflicts, children assume roles and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] 1975-1979
\item[12] From: Sierra Leone, Palestine, and Eastern Europe
\item[13] The Kosovo Liberation Army
\end{footnotes}
responsibilities that in normal circumstances would have been assumed only by adults, and quite often these new roles openly challenge the customary hierarchies which are based on gender and generation.

Another useful example of the girl soldiers’ caseload is provided by Utas (2004) who points out that, during the civil war in Liberia, young girl combatants quite quickly became used to the war system and were able to manipulate it and influence decision and choices.

Also, in their research carried out in Cambodia of the social distress effects of war, Boyden and Gibbs (1997) provide some useful examples of how children who were actively involved as warriors were considered by their own community as heroes, an example to follow and imitate, rather than passive victims.

Finally, while investigating the relationship between the actions and reactions of children to the armed conflict in Northern Ireland, Cummings and Lovell (2001) observe that children often have the capacity to interpret the conflict, to give it a meaning and to take from it what is necessary to survive not only for them but also for their families and their communities.

The modern literature depicts a broader image of young boys and girls involved in armed conflicts, where the imagery of mere reaction to an event is substituted by a strong capacity of contextualising the conflict, giving it a meaning and acting accordingly. For this literature, children show the capacity of being agents for themselves first of all, and, secondly, for the society they are living in.

2.4.2 Child soldiers’ empowerment
The recent literature also expresses a deep concern about how the appraisal of the influence of the conflict on the lives of CSs has been conducted so far.
Although it is fully acknowledged that war can inflict profound wounds on children and that abduction and violence can concur to generate traumas and suffering, it is also believed that in numerous circumstances the impact of warfare might instead generate in CSs development and growth.

As mentioned above, it has been observed that children possess a high degree of imagination and creativity which enables them to produce effective changes in the war scenarios and in societies. Moreover, scholars nowadays emphasize that children, as individuals able to operate deliberate choices, possess the energy to produce an elevated degree of resilience which enables them to turn the negative turmoil of war into something positive for their lives (Hart, 2002; McAdam-Crisp, 2006).

Achvarina and Reich, (2005) also observe that associating children’s risk of recruitment and vulnerability with concepts like economic distress and poverty might often be problematic. For example they argue that poverty rates do not always give an explanation of a child’s decision to join armed forces because:

“According to our calculations, child soldier participation rates measured between 0% and a staggering 53% of all combatants in the 17 conflicts for which we were able to locate measurable evidence of child soldier participants and poverty.” (page 5).

Moreover, a research conducted by Gibbs (1994) in Mozambique, challenges the traditional notion of vulnerability by stating that children exposed to conflicts (and particularly CSs) are not more vulnerable than any other social groups of the civil society but, conversely they often show a high degree of resilience. Gibbs also observes that is not unusual that CSs, when exposed to violence, show an inner capacity to cope with the conflict which is frequently much higher than that expressed by other social groups of the society they are living in. This attitude contributes to minimise their risk of vulnerability.
Modern theories also assume that in various instances war represents an important event for CSs. Organisations such as the ILO\textsuperscript{14} (2003), whose position on the topic is normally closer to traditional views, have acknowledged that the war in several instances represents a distinctive opportunity for children to overcome their daily problems.

With regard to the relationship with the brutality that conflicts can generate, it has also been pointed out that violence can often be seen as an acceptable compromise that children make in order to get an opportunity for personal development: Chachiua (1999) observes that domestic violence in a war-affected society can often be much harsher than the violence children experience in the army. Consequently the decision to join is a natural move towards a safer environment and stronger opportunities for development. In this regard, field evidence collected by Rosen (2005) indicates that not joining the army is often much worst than doing so.

In the specific case of girl soldiers, the literature available now suggests that conflicts do not only constitute a negative experience but rather can represent a unique opportunity for emancipation and a chance to build on changes in gender relationships (Baden 1997; West, 2004). In this line, Ansell (2005) comments that the level of emancipation produced in the young girls is extremely visible and observable in many instances.

The extension of empowerment is manifested in CSs at different levels: they can effectively receive a higher level of protection for themselves and/or their families (Wessels, 2006); recruitment can also be viewed as a means to build the capacity of children in terms of personal human growth and organisational skills (Høiskar, 2001); life in armed camps often offers children the opportunity to gain literacy tools, reading and writing in particular (Rosenblatt 1983)

War can also concretise children’s aspiration for freedom and peace: a meaningful example is provided by the case of Guatemalan CSs (Wessels, 1997). These children,

\textsuperscript{14} ILO research was based on field investigation conducted in four African countries, namely Burundi, Congo, Rwanda and DRC.
sons and daughters of extremely poor farmers oppressed by a despotic regime, decided to join the armed struggle and create a strong opposition, including guerrilla activities, in order to contribute to the autonomy and liberation of their social group.

The modern literature indicates that children are always in search of opportunities, moreover, there are some social implications that need to be considered in order to better understand the process of potential empowerment that war can provide to their lives: it has been observed in fact that conflicts frequently diffuse displacement (in the society at large and in children in particular) and consequent loss of family links. In children, the psychological need for a replacement family is very profound (Boyden and De Berry 2004), and warfare can often represent an important opportunity to recreate or regenerate the family links that would otherwise have been lost. Fighting groups can therefore constitute a new family for the children where they can feel supported and assisted, and they might represent an unexpected opportunity for social integration and personal empowerment (Redress 2006; West 2004; ILO 2003).

Finally, the modern literature is particularly attentive to evaluating the impact that DDR programs have on ex-CSs. It is argued that is some instances, this impact can be extremely problematic and harrowing for children. As Wessels (2006 p.8) states in some cases children do not participate in the programs because they “may wish not to be identified or labelled”. In DDR programs the risk of stigmatisation can be very high and in some cases programs aiming to support former CSs turn out to be detrimental for them and their future. In this regard the literature offers a very interesting example (Human Rights Watch; 2003b; Moszynski, 2003; Pearce, J. 2002): at the end of the long lasting conflict in Angola, former child combatants were refused (because of their status as minors) the payment of the salary arrears due to the ex-soldiers. Also, the newly established Angolan government did not include them in the formal rehabilitation program for former soldiers. Consequently, they did not receive the first assistance recovery kit which was provided to their adult comrades.
Instead, the ex CSs were put in the national DDR program in order to be assisted at a psychosocial level, re-inserted in their original families when possible (which in many cases was particularly problematic due to the high level of population displacement in the country) or, if they were orphans, assigned to foster families.

What had been underestimated was the profound link that most of the children had established with their military group during the war, a group which was not composed only of adult soldiers but also of women, comrades of the same age and friends. This social group had represented a new family for the children during the conflict and in many cases the process of separation from this group was particularly traumatic. Many ex-CSs consequently felt heavily disempowered and the DDR process which was aiming to generate a positive change in their lives conversely produced disempowerment, frustration and loss of social links.

2.4.3 Research and methodologies for studying the CS phenomenon

Modern analysis of the CS caseload observes that the traditional literature’s research and its production of information is substantially lacking in dynamism, focuses primarily on a stereotypical model of the child and has remained unchanged for the past 10-15 years: it has been argued that the depiction of children at war ONLY as abducted, sacrificeable and a low-cost armed force (Singer, 2002), or as exclusively victims of violence (Kimmel and Roby, 2007) could be severely misleading and hence not provide a clear and truthful picture of the reality.

A strong model for more sensible investigation, which should take into account aspects which so far have so far only been marginally explored, is gradually emerging: research that, as Hart (2002) suggests, does not focus exclusively on the CS as a therapeutic case, but instead appreciates the multifaceted aspects of the child’s war experience.

Recent scholars have also pointed out that the traditional research has been almost exclusively dominated and influenced by westernised society. It is believed that this attitude might risk reflecting only a certain kind of cultural belief and sensibility and de facto will not represent what the CS reality is in other parts of the world (Hart, 2002).
In this regard, it has been noted that associating CSs only with incapacity of making sensible decisions when exposed to violence might constitute a **social construction** which is not applicable all over the globe (Honwana, 1997). Moreover, field practitioners (Brocklehurst, 2006) stress that the western notion of adolescence and youth promotes an icon of the child **mainly related to vulnerability** which is not easily applicable in other societies where the roles, duties and existence of children are considered using different criteria.

Consequently there is a generalised effort to promote newer and more appropriate research methodologies on the CS caseload by concentrating the study on two core aspects: the child’s knowledge and experience of war and his ethnographic, social and cultural background.

Contemporary scholars and researchers are focusing their investigative efforts on a model which gives the child the possibility to express his opinion more actively, to generate ideas not just merely by answering questions. It is believed that children can greatly contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon because they have the full capacity to do so and possess the necessary information. A more participatory exercise can lead to more profound and accurate findings if the child is allowed and encouraged to control and stimulate the narrative. In this regard, Boyden and Gibbs (1997 p. 132) point out that research that involves children’s participation is vital:

“In this kind of approach children are treated not merely as informants or research subjects but as social agents with an active part to play in decisions affecting their lives.”

The core assumption underlying this belief is that the CSs contribution to the research is invaluable, because he fully has the necessary knowledge of the topic and the capacity of express himself especially with regard to his individual aspirations and motivations (Wessels, 2006). What he needs is only to be allowed to do so by the researcher, and, unfortunately, it is felt that this has rarely happened in the past when research has
instead strictly followed the form of structured interviews which has not given sufficient space for creativity or the contribution of the subject (Brett and Specht 2004).

It is also believed that concentrating only on a generalised phenomenon of CS might risk neglecting the unique contribution that individuals can provide. As Reynolds (1990 p.330) observes:

“Children help to shape society: their contribution cannot be unravelled until they are studied as individuals and not merely as members of the procession through childhood.”

The alternative approach that has been proposed is now finding favour with field practitioners and investigators and is implemented in the field with apparently positive results: researchers (Eyber and Ager, 2004; Boyden and De Berry, 2004; Wessels, 2006, West, 2004) consider this approach unique in order to get clearer insights on the CS life experience.

A second important consideration of the research on CSs is stressing the importance of developing a more adequate method of observation of the CS phenomenon. It has recently been noted (Wessels, 2006) that there is a general lack of strategic researching methodology when exploring the world of children in conflict. Particularly, it is felt that it is necessary to focus more on the anthropological background of the CSs, including all the factors that can determine and influence children’s recruitment. The critique of the traditional literature stresses out that many efforts have been made in order to establish the external causes which contribute to children’s recruitment (such as poverty, economic reasons etc.) but very little has been done in terms of gaining a better understanding of how the children’s socio-cultural environment can frame CSs’ war experience (Hart 2002; West, 2004). Particularly, it is observed that the traditional research lacks deeper investigation into the specific ethnography of children in war (Boyden and De Berry 2004; Hart, 2002), while so far the exploration is too inclined to observe the phenomenon by using a universalistic approach.
Scholars are now aiming to propose a model of investigation which puts a strong emphasis on all of the social and cultural factors such as culture of the area, local habits and traditions, community links, tribal restrictions.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter provides an informative account of the CS caseload. The arguments put forth have shown that the research topic is particularly intricate and complex.

An analysis of the existing literature on the subject matter reveals that although significant work and research has already been done, it is still necessary to develop an increased understanding which could help to improve methods of intervention in favour of CSs at a global level.

The review of the literature also indicates that there are issues related to the topic which are particularly problematic and appear difficult to resolve. Different cultural approaches and understandings of what a CS is, as well as how societies outline children’s roles and the different notions of childhood, contribute to generate confusion around the caseload and difficulties in providing an appropriate response.

This chapter also shows that a new type of approach is now challenging traditional theories and views on the subject. By proposing a more participatory child-centred approach which emphasises CSs motivations, talents and capacity for agency, the new theories aim to provide a more complete understanding of the caseload.

Modern research puts a strong emphasis on the need for greater attention to be paid to the ethnography of the child as well as on the relevance that anthropological issues have on the examined topic. It is argued that a more accurate exploration of these factors might produce an enhanced comprehension of the CS’s needs.

Finally, from the literature review emerges a strong call for the development of a more contextualised research practice that, by taking into account the contribution of the
recent advances into the researched topic, can provide an improved action plan and interventions in favour of CSs.
Chapter Three

The girls with guns (Case Study)

This chapter looks at the conflict experience of young girls who served as guerrilla combatants during the anti-colonial war between the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Portugal.

The presented case study provides a noteworthy example of how dedicated child soldiers dynamically operated significant and visible changes to the war affected society they were living in, by playing a fundamental role in terms of exercise of power and participation to the decision making process.

It also offers an occasion to approach the CS topic from a newer and broader perspective which suggests that a war environment in some instances can offer a CS an important opportunity for his human growth and development.

Finally, the case study also gives sensible suggestions on how more thoughtful methodologies, which focus on the CS himself and his immediate social and cultural background, can be implemented when conducting field research with CSs.

3.1 Structure of the chapter

In order to provide a better understanding of the historical context in which the case study is set, at the beginning of the chapter a chronological account of the key events which took place during the colonial war in Mozambique is presented.

The central part of the chapter is dedicated to the introduction and description of the case study. I present here the most relevant data and information available on the chosen

15 September 1964 - September 1974
16 FRELIMO: Frente de Libertacao de Moçambique in Portuguese
subject with a special emphasis on the topics which are pertinent to my dissertation research.

In the third part of the chapter, I expose the most sensible findings arising from the case study.

A brief summary of the core issues presented in the chapter will conclude this section.

### 3.2 The Mozambican Independence War

Mozambique had been a Portuguese colony for almost five centuries. In the 1950s/1960s, while most European countries began the process of granting independence to their territories overseas, Portugal was instead increasing the political and economical influence in its African domains, by encouraging emigration (in Angola and Mozambique) and also by improving the overall operations in the colonial empire (Newitt, 1995, West, 2004).

As a result, the pre-existing sentiment of frustration felt by the indigenous population rose significantly: natives were in fact tired of the inconsiderate exploitation of their territory operated by the Portuguese, as well as by the total lack of development and growth opportunities granted to them (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984). The dissatisfaction soon developed in generalised nationalistic anti-Portuguese feelings and, in the early 1960s, the first self-determination actions began, strongly fuelled by the Mozambican intelligentsia and the pro-nationalist factions living in exile within the neighbouring countries (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984).

This setting led quickly to the institution of a left-wing political group opposing to the European State’s rules: the liberation party (FRELIMO\(^\text{17}\)) initiated the armed campaign against the Portuguese regime in 1964. The revolutionary movement was encouraged and assisted by several independent African states who had recently gained

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\(^{17}\) FRELIMO was created in 1962
independence (Tanzania in particular), which offered military bases and training opportunities for the guerrilla fighters (Munslow, 1983). Moreover, communist countries such as China, Cuba and Soviet Union provided significant support to FRELIMO by supplying the guerrillas with weapons and specialist advisors throughout the conflict (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984).

The long-lasting independence war hit Mozambique severely, particularly in the remote rural areas, where, during the conflict, approximately 30,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands of refugees sought exile in the neighbouring African countries (Newitt, 1995).

Throughout the protracted conflict FRELIMO had been unable to liberate significant parts of the national territory; therefore the outcome of the war remained uncertain until its very end (Newitt, 1995). Eventually, in September 1974, a military coup in Lisbon overthrew the dictatorship of Salazar: as a consequence, the domestic revolution severely weakened the Portugal resources and its fighting strengths overseas and a bilateral cease-fire concluded the decennial conflict in Mozambique.

Following brief negotiations, the newly established Portuguese Government granted independence to Mozambique, which was eventually announced in June 1975. After the independence, FRELIMO became the official Mozambican army (White, 2007).

**3.3 The research**

The following case study is for the most part based on the work of the American anthropologist Dr. Harry West (2004) who carried out for almost 15 years an accurate research on the overall war experience of different Mozambican social groups and on the resulting copying mechanisms for survival implemented by the indigenous population during and after the independence war.
As a part of his research, West spent approximately one and half years\(^{18}\) on the Mueda Plateau, a district of the Northern part of Mozambique which, throughout the conflict, served as a strategic base for the nationalist guerrillas of FRELIMO. In this period, West had the opportunity to carry out extensive interviews with numerous individuals as well as groups composed of adult women who served as child and adolescent combatants during the so called Mozambican *luta armada* (armed campaign).

West’s case study represents a valuable contribution for the comprehensiveness and richness of its analysis which is based on narrated individual life reporting rather than rigid structured interviews. Each of the participants had the opportunity to tell her personal history, not only in relation to the specific war events but, also by the social, cultural and traditional factors which had coalesced to frame the informants’ experience.

The result is a fascinating and sensible account on the war events, which provides the reader with a quite accurate understanding of the researched topic.

For a more critical examination of the case study, several other sources of information have been consulted. The research therefore also benefits of the input of other contributors who over the years have conducted studies on the same issue, Allen and Barbara Isaacman (1983; 1984) in particular.

### 3.3.1 Origins of ‘Destacamento Feminino’

Although it is probable that FRELIMO had been recruiting females from the initial stages of the war, (West, 2004) it is only in 1967 that Samora Machel, (the FRELIMO leader\(^{19}\)) formally authorised the formation of an armed group exclusively composed of women.

The *Destacamento Feminino* (Female Detachment - hereinafter referred to as DF), was formed as a result of the successful political activities conducted by Mozambican females who acted as agents of revolutionary propaganda within the various Northern provinces where FRELIMO had established its bases (Isaacman and Isaacman 1983).

\(^{18}\) Between August 1993 and February 1995

\(^{19}\) After the independence, Samora Machel became the first President of Mozambique.
The courage and deep sense of responsibility shown by these young guerrillas had been in fact positively observed by the revolutionary authorities: both guerrilla leaders and army commanders had fully acknowledged that women’s contribution and involvement was “in no way inferior to that of FRELIMO men.” (Mozambique Revolution 1965 p.17).

It had been consequently agreed that females had not only the right but also the responsibility to contribute to the final victory against Portugal by participating to the armed struggle.

The creation of DF was rapidly followed by the construction of a special base and headquarters to be used by the newly established female armed force.

3.3.2 Girls soldiers

Most of the women who had accepted to be interviewed by West were, at the time of the study, in their late-30s/mid-40s years. Therefore, the researcher realised that the majority of them had probably served the Luta armada as child or young adolescent soldiers.

The ex-DFs confirmed West’s opinion: in fact the oral testimonies provided by the informants hinted that the process of enrolment in DF was systematically involving young minor adolescents and girls: The interviews also unveiled that for FRELIMO commanders the enrolment of girls as young as 10 years old was a standard modus operandi.

The gathered evidence was in total contrast with the official account made by FRELIMO, whose guiding principles had instead determined that the minimum recruiting age to have been at least 18 years old and, moreover, for no reason would minors have been utilised or involved in guerrilla activities (West, 2004).

Most of the literature available on the topic (particularly West, 2004, Isaacman and Isaacman 1984, Artur et. Al 1992), is not exact in indicating the percentage of CSs
enrolled in the DF, although the researchers/scholars generally believed that this figure had been significantly high.

In this regard West (2004) observes that in a disrupted war society where young girls and adolescents represented more than 50% of the population, it was unconceivable for FRELIMO to leave such a significant portion of human resources unutilised. Arthur’s research (1998) also suggests that mainly DF recruitment took place among young girls (aged 10 to 15), probably because this age group had lesser family responsibility and household duties.

Munslow (1983) finally reports that the recruitment of CSs among the DF was so common and widespread in the FRELIMO controlled areas that the girls’ presence was often challenging the social relationship with the local populations.

In a traditional rural society, the utilisation of such a significant number of children in the guerrilla military sphere (young women using weapons and covering military roles) met frequently the severe scepticism of peasants and elders who disliked the loss of authority and power within their controlled area (Arthur, 1998).

3.3.3 Recruitment and roles

The recruitment process of DF members was similar to the one of male guerrillas and included the provision of a regular training which usually was given in the FRELIMO military base located in Tanzania (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984).

Regardless of the biological age, the functions of CSs within the DF were comparable to their above-18 years old female comrades (West, 2004, Isaacman and Isaacman 1984). Therefore, after being deployed to the respective DFs units, the young girls were assigned different tasks. This initially included ordinary camp duties or acting as spies and political mobilisers in order to gather information and intelligence. CSs also provided security support in non liberated areas by shielding civilians from the attacks of the Portuguese army (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984; West, 2004).

DFs were also deeply involved in promoting and recreating all the public welfare activities so necessary within a disrupted war society: this was done by managing the
local FRELIMO schools and camp hospitals and by helping in numerous other active ways the local population which was living in the FRELIMO’s controlled areas (West, 2004; Isaacman and Isaacman 1984).

Eventually, DFs participated in armed missions (Artur et. Al 1992; Urdang 1989) where most of them showed significant fighting skills as Machel wrote in the Revolutionary Bulletin (1969: 24):

“Many of the women prefer the more active combats in the advance zones and choose to fight alongside the men in ambushes, and mining operation, where they have proved themselves as capable and courageous as any of their male comrades.”

The narratives indicate that the relationship between men and female soldiers were sufficiently positive and the guerrilla activities were conducted with a good degree of harmony. However, researches show also that gender related issues and conflict situations between men and women frequently occurred. This was especially in relation to the distribution and acceptance of roles between males and females as well as to the sharing of power processes (West, 2004). Particularly, for male comrades, it was hard to recognize and accept that women could have been assigned leadership roles: the relations between sexes often remained unbalanced and complex and provoked frequently concealed protests and difficulties (Arthur, 1998).

Isaacman and Isaacman (1984) also report that until DFs increased in number and gained more authority and self confidence, the active participation in combat of female soldiers encountered often the opposition of part of the male guerrillas.

Nonetheless, the accounts indicate that DFs perception of their role and duties within the Luta armada was affirmative and positive: ideologically, DFs believed that the participation in the revolutionary struggle was a shared and common responsibility which involved male and females equally, and deemed their contribution essential in order to free the Country from the Portuguese dominion (West, 2004).
The guerrilla arena also represented for them a safe environment where they did not feel harassed, but respected and freed from sex related violence\textsuperscript{20}. They also understood that the newly acquired military status had provided them with more dignity as women and, moreover, had given them the opportunity to supply assistance and protection to other girls and women living in the neighbouring civilian villages (Arthur, 1998).

Paulina, who reached the level of FRELIMO guerrilla commander emphasised this aspect by saying:

\begin{quotation}
“I no longer feel that differences exist between men and myself since we fought side by side. We marched together, organized ambushes together; we suffered defeats together as well as the joys of victory.” (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984 p.164, 165).
\end{quotation}

Teresa, another former CS, supported the above-mentioned statement by adding:

\begin{quotation}
“When we spoke, people listened. Not just other young people and not just women. Every one listened to what we said because we were equal to the tasks that were given to us.” (West 2004, p. 187).
\end{quotation}

\subsection*{3.3.4 Women’s emancipation and FRELIMO’s ideology}

CSs adhered to DF for a myriad of reasons but, probably, the need of being liberated from an oppressive community tradition and customs represented, as Arthur (1998) notes, a strong encouragement to join: Within a society which was ruled mainly according to gender and which was depriving girls and women of almost all power, the military life probably constituted a beautiful alternative.

Another important account, which emerged from several informants’ reports, hints that other social factors might have enhanced the above-mentioned decision making process:

\textsuperscript{20} All accounts concord to state that sexual relationships between male and female soldiers were strictly forbidden: those breaking the rules were severely punished.
Many young girls felt desperately the need to reconstruct social links within a war disrupted society. According to West’s informants, the military camp life was for them very attractive; it represented a safe area where they could have been able to recreate a somehow normal life, often together with members of their original family or other female friends.

Arthur (1998) echoes this proposition by saying that most girls saw the opportunity to re-establish the pre-existing relationship (with friends of the same age group) which had been destroyed by the conflict.

Girls’ and women’s social needs and plight for personal emancipation were also backed by a strong commitment to the ideology of the liberation cause proposed by FRELIMO. This constituted for many CSs the strongest attraction pole to the guerrilla life and provided them with a unique opportunity for self-development and growth (West, 2004).

The revolution considered each and every FRELIMO militant as an active agent of propaganda and therefore adequate structures and training had to be provided to the soldiers. Most of the young girls and women were consequently taught not only guerrilla tactics and related strategies, but learned also the basics (reading and writing) of the literacy. This allowed them to approach FRELIMO’S socialist ideology for their personal education and development but also to raise the popular awareness and mobilise the masses (Isaacman and Isaacman 1984, West, 2004).

Hence, the educated CSs played an useful role in the planning and implementation of the FRELIMO’S propaganda and, moreover, because of their young age, were often deployed to strategic zones not yet under the control of FRELIMO; in these areas they had in fact the possibility to operate productively without attracting the attention of the local population’s enemy spies or the Portuguese army (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984).

With regard to the revolutionary principles, The FRELIMO’s political manifesto was fundamentally based on two core concepts: First of all, the interest of the indigenous Mozambican population was central to the Luta armada and, secondly, the ideology inspiring the revolution disallowed any form of oppression and discrimination

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21 West (2004) observes that before the creation of DF, often women received very little training. It is only after the institution of the Female Corp that a proper training program was institutionalised.
particularly in relation to class and social groups. As a consequence, the process of women’s emancipation became an urgent necessity: In one of his speeches, Samora Machel proclaimed that:

“The emancipation of women is not an act of charity [...] the liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the pre-condition for its victory.” (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984 p. 174).

DFs themselves were proud of their status. As above stated, they gradually realised that the *Luta armada* represented primarily a unique occasion to break the traditional and culturally determined functions of women: looking after husbands and children or carrying out typical female household duties. Moreover, they also became conscious that the revolution was an invaluable instrument for the construction of their identity and personality as members of the Mozambican society. Finally, as West (2004) observes, the conflict had provided them with a mission in life: DFs strongly felt empowered by the revolution and ideologically, (by virtually symbolizing the FRELIMO’s conception of socialist woman), they became irreplaceable agents of meanings for the society in conflict and central players in the warfare. One of the interviewees, Basilisa, commented:

“During the *luta armada* [...] we rose to meet the needs of our whole society, not just of husbands and our own children. In this way we were just like men and we had to be treated just like men.” (West, 2004 p.187).

It must be noted however that, as McKay and Mazurana (2004) observe, the FRELIMO’s *propaganda* based on gender equity was *full of rhetoric* and not all the women’s pledges had been fulfilled by FRELIMO. West (2004) also notes that many discourses on women’s liberation and emancipation remained unattended.

Nonetheless, the acquired self-determination gave the opportunity to the women to continue to struggle during the post-independence period, sometime by looking at the
revolution days with nostalgia but with the full determination and willingness of maintaining their leadership role and the acquired privileges: after the war, many women remained in the FRELIMO military operation sphere, sometime reaching higher military ranks such as captain; some other females covered relevant positions such as tactics instructor; finally former DFs participated the creation of the OMM \(^{22}\) (Organization of Mozambican Women) which in the years following the revolution played an important role for the support and empowerment of women within the Mozambican civil society (Urdang, 1989).

3.4 Findings from the case study

I believe that the presented material is particularly relevant to my dissertation and research questions. The following three sub-sections highlight the most significant findings from the case study.

3.4.1 An original methodology

The case study places an interesting emphasis on how motivational and anthropological processes influence and contribute to form the overall CS warfare experience.

Firstly it reveals that, in order to carry out a proficient research which is aiming to properly investigate and understand the causes which contribute to generate the CS phenomenon, it is necessary to frame the war experience within the social and cultural environment the CS is living in: the case study shows how loyalty to an ideology, linked with a strong desire for independence and emancipation constituted the pushing factors which had determined the decision of CSs to join DF.

Moreover, the case study highlights that the above-mentioned pushing factors, revealed to be stronger than both the existing social and cultural limitations dictated by a military male-dominated rule and the norms imposed by the traditions of the civil population, hence the decision for many young girls and adolescents to join the guerrilla.

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\(^{22}\) Organização da Mulher Moçambicana in Portuguese. It was formed in 1973.
The study also hints how crucial it is for a researcher to observe and evaluate accurately all the aspects which are contributing to mould the children’s understanding and perception of the war: factors like cultural beliefs, social and traditional boundaries, as well as threats and opportunities, family links duties and responsibilities, can determine in which direction a child’s mindset will be oriented.

Also, West (2004) in his analysis recommends researchers to adopt this pretty original approach if they aim to establish and comprehend better the relationship between children and armed conflicts.

The case study also suggests that a more innovative research methodology should be applied to the CS investigation. This is based on a straightforward assumption: The interviewee is the core of the research and his role, as a study-contributor, must be central to the research itself. By doing so, the investigator will be able to acquire meaningful results and a higher level of findings.

The presented case study is dominated by this working technique23: West (2004) reports that, throughout the interview, his role was prominently the one of the listener. Encouraged by the women, he decided to put aside his block notes packed with prepared questions and let the ex-DFs lead the conversation. He believes that by leaving the flow of the oral testimonies under the control of the interviewees, the quality of the narrative will be greatly enhanced by this approach: As the researcher reports, from the outset, Teresa, the youngest of the group began with her story and then all the others: “Followed suit, knowing exactly what they wanted to say” (West, 2004 p. 185).

Therefore the evidence gathered from the case study hints that this kind of approach might be particularly helpful when conducting researches on CSs because, firstly the interviewee is free to talk about what he/she consider a main concern and concentrate

23 It is important to note that also the works of Isaacman and Isaacman (1984) and Arthur (1998) have been adopting similar researching techniques, by providing semi-structured interview methods and allowing the DFs to express freely their opinions and priorities.
on the message he/she wants to convey and, secondly, the researcher can hugely benefit form this methodology because, freed by any pre-determined hypothesis and assumption, might become capable to generate new ideas.

From the case study we learn that, using a person-centred approach, topics like the commitment to an ideology, the desire to regain family links, as well as the struggle for self-determination and emancipation, represented for the now adult women the core topic to discuss, and symbolised the most valuable learning outcome of their conflict experience. Conversely, victimisation, injustices or abuses suffered by women and girls, which as seen in the initial part of the literature review are arguments so commonly recurring in the female CS discourses, were instead not considered a priority by the informants, did not constitute the core message the former DFs wanted to pass on.

It might be interesting to explore if and how such an original system can be applied at a wider level into the CS’s investigation area: the following chapter (4) will be further explore this issue, particularly how a re-designed approach to the research can be beneficial to a deeper understanding of the overall CS phenomenon.

3.4.2 Child soldiers’ participation and agency

From the scrutiny of the case study another important aspect emerges strongly: the capacity the CSs have to generate sensible changes within the war society they are living in.

The researched material highlights that CSs reaction to conflict experience was particularly dynamic rather than passive and static. CSs’ contribution to the warfare was tangible and significant. By joining DF, CSs operated a visible change to the environment, and this change was particularly meaningful. In this regard the analysed material offers interesting points for the research discussion:

First of all, the case study emphasises the concept of voluntary participation: The CSs deliberately decided to join DF. In all the accounts examined there is no sign of external coercion or conscription.
According to their rationale and capacity of critical analysis, children made a specific choice and this choice was to join FRELIMO and its guerrilla activity. This decision was intentional and represented for these young girls a valuable opportunity, or at least, what they deemed to be the best available option in that moment in time.

The argument of deliberate choice emerges prominently in the case study and constitutes an interesting example of how children exposed to violence and armed conflicts are able to decide, choose, manage and administer their own life in order to pursue an advantage and, possibly, to form a consistent base for a brighter future.

Secondly, the case study provides a captivating example of how children can influence the environment not only in relationship to the warfare but to the wider surrounding civil society at large. It also offers an occasion to examine the extraordinary agency capacity a CS has to give a different meaning, to re-shape the present. In the DF’s caseload this can be observed at different levels:

- **At the warfare level.** Receiving women into the ranks somehow revolutionised women’s social position. DF was an official guerrilla army and CSs were among its operative soldiers. Like their male comrades, they participated with authority and initiative in conflict; they had military objectives; they planned and implemented war related activities; from the case study we learn that often DFs held high military ranks. West’s report also describes how sometime DFs had enough authority to write letters directly to their superiors (even to the Commander himself), often to discuss conflict-related issues, or sometimes war strategies and tactics. Young girls were sent off in the field as spies, and (as West reported) they were fully aware that from the outcome of their findings some people might have lived or died. DFs unexpectedly entered into what had been considered an exclusively male domain. Their inputs and actions contributed to re-form an environment which, historically, had excluded any discourse of gender balance.
- **At the social level.** The case study is a visible example showing how important the CS’s contribution to a disrupted society can be. The testimonies highlighted the relevance of DFs service for the Mozambican community. Their involvement helped to narrow the gap which had been created by the war, particularly the lack of services and infrastructures for the civilians. As seen, CSs were in charge of schools, hospitals, and escorted civilians. An observation of all these activities contributes to provide an extraordinary example of how strong the agency role of a CS can be. As Arthur (1998) observes, the CS’s efforts, particularly in the education field have been meaningful: through their work the DFs gave the possibility to a large number of civilian children, especially females, to gain access to basic education in the war liberated zones.

- **At the cultural level.** Finally, the presence and activity of DFs contributed to confront and modify the traditions and local habits of the society. By abandoning their conventional role and their traditional household responsibilities, CSs operated a visible fracture which overturned the conventional habits and conservative attitudes of the local population. Women, which had been seen for centuries as mainly mothers and wives, by joining the army, operated a change within the culture they were living in: this was done by climbing the traditional barriers and placing a challenge to the traditional relationship between women and men. In the revolution for the freedom of the country, probably this might have constituted the biggest domestic revolution.

### 3.4.3 Emancipation and empowerment

West’s research has had the invaluable merit of discussing the CS phenomenon by proposing a case exclusively based on girl soldiers. West observes that his account “constitutes a somewhat unique contribution to the literature on child soldiers [...] because it focuses on female combatants” (2004, p.182). Analysing the CS by observing a case study entirely concentrated on girls as girls, (and not in opposition to boy soldiers for example) is particularly suggestive and fascinating.
From the case study it emerges how, the independence war had constituted a unique occasion for **female emancipation** and an incentive to the personal growth of numerous young girls and women. 

DFs gained the opportunity to access to a **new and different status** within their society which was predominantly oppressing women. As Arthur (1998) observes, the women who participated to the revolutionary struggle had seen their existence totally changed by a discourse that focused on women’s oppression and the process of their liberation. 

The war had provided DFs with useful instruments and tools in order to fight discrimination and imbalance between sexes: Many DFs, especially those involved in camp duties and welfare activities had the opportunity to study and received a **reasonably good education** in the fields of health and literacy. They realised and benefited from the fact that that a woman with an education and a certain level of literacy can provide a significant contribution to the society she is living in.

Another important aspect of female empowerment involves **protection** related issues. The warfare structure imposed by FRELIMO, as said, was very strict on the sexual relationship and sexual behaviour between men and women within the guerrilla. The *luta armada* allowed DFs to gain a higher level of protection with regard to sexual violence and abuses and moreover, allowed girl fighters to protect other girls and women in the surrounding villages who “felt encouraged by the presence of female armed cadres” (Isaacman and Isaacman, 1984 p. 172).

Within a CS caseload where the issue of female protection and abuses against females is so commonly widespread and relevant, the contribution of the case study provides a new and extraordinarily interesting approach.

Of significant importance is also the process of DFs emancipation operated by the guerrilla army which as a consequence generates further empowerment within the civil society of girls and women. This issue constitutes an imagery which is particularly powerful, and brings new light on the rhetoric issues of some traditional literature which instead almost exclusively focuses on the vulnerability of children.
Finally, as observed in the case study, the war setting gave the opportunity to many young girls to **recreate and re-constitute family links**. For people, especially young ones, it might be particularly important to maintain close relationship with their own families and social groups. The war often contributes to disunite family members, to displace some of them and to produce isolation, lack of support and in some cases vulnerability. In the presented case, the warfare constituted, for the girl soldiers, an extraordinary occasion of maintaining relationship with elements of the same society and to minimise the risk of displacement that so frequently occurs during conflicts.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The presented case study aimed to propose a different and to some extend pretty unique image of children and their relationship with conflicts.

In this chapter, it has been discussed how the role children play in a war scenario can be extremely meaningful and tangible.

The analysis of less traditionally investigated topics such as participation and agency has offered an interesting opportunity to reflect on how research can be more accurate if greater attention is paid to the child and his capacity to react to the war events.

Moreover the case study offers an occasion to consider how, in specific circumstances, war can represent for CSs a very powerful meaning of freedom and self determination.

Finally, the case study also offers an opportunity to reflect on which techniques can be adopted in order to understand better the CS caseload and provide a more efficient methodology of intervention in the future.

In the following chapter the findings from the case study will be compared with the elements of the literature review in order to see how a synthesis of the most important arguments can be proposed and how this might contribute to generate a better
understanding of the CS caseload, and possibly, an improved methodology of intervention.
Chapter Four

Discussion

The previous chapters have focused on the contribution provided by the literature on the CS topic. Apparently, it emerges that there is a hectic ongoing debate on the studied subject.

It has been observed that the area of study is vast and, although investigation has been carried out for more than three decades, there is a visible need to improve the work done so far in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The literature is indicating that the CS topic is particularly intricate and complex. The data available is not always precise and reliable information is difficult to gather also because the access to war zones is presumably not very easy.

Therefore, the review of the existing literature on the CS subject as well as the findings from the examined case study, suggest that a research aiming to produce reliable indicators and sustainable action plans should intensify its efforts. Also, it emerges that several important factors such as children’s agency capacity and individuals’ motivations should be taken seriously into account. Moreover, the pressure of the CS’s external environment, seems to be an extremely relevant component of the CS’s overall war experience and therefore it necessitates to be scrutinised accurately too.

The literature review has also disclosed that there are dissimilar opinions on the CS topic: it appears that researches and discussions on this subject tend to disagree in several instances and that in some critical points there is an evident divergence.

The objective of this chapter is to provide a response to the dissertation research questions. This will be done by summarising the most meaningful views/concepts which are emerging from the literature. It will also be attempted a reflection which, in form of discussion, aspires to highlight what elements and contributions are relevant to
a discourse which aims to construct a better understanding on the CS topic and possibly a more sensible action plan.

4.1 Structure of the chapter

The first part of the chapter will discuss about the limitations and strengths of different opinions and views existing on the studied subject.

In the following sections, it will be conducted an analysis of the most relevant arguments and ideas discussed in the literature review and the case study.

Particularly, it will be argued that for an improved comprehension of the CS caseload, it is necessary to develop further understanding of the child’s character, his needs and the surrounding driving forces.

It will also be discussed the relationship between children and conflicts with regard to the notions of empowerment and children development.

Throughout the sections of this chapter, sensible observations which possibly will lead to suggestions for a better structured action for prevention and rehabilitation of CSs, will be also made.

To conclude, it will be offered a recapitulation of the most relevant issues, including an attempt to provide a response to the research questions formulated in chapter 1.

4.2 Traditional vs. modern literature

This dissertation places special emphasis on what recent literature has to say on the subject matter. An approach that seeks to competently and thoroughly explore the children’s world is deemed essential.
Therefore, throughout the work, relevant space has been given to these modern opinions. The case study itself provides a response to the author’s interest in approaching the topic from a new perspective, taking into consideration fresher ideas and updated methodologies.

Before discussing how this original set of ideas can provide useful inputs to the CS discourse, it is appropriate to comment on the contribution provided to the topic by traditional literature.

I have observed that quite often in such narratives, the current role of this long-established ideology is heavily criticised. New formulations on the CS topic are often presented as opposed to the previous knowledge, as if their function and objective is to replace something that is out of date, no longer valid.

Having read a significant number of documents and reports, I am inclined to admit that this kind of literature is static, repetitive in terms of production of new ideas or theories, and generally conservative in providing a unique model of CS which is quite inflexible.

On the other hand, I note that, for reasons which will be exposed below, the role that this type of literature plays in the CS arena is not only meaningful but also essential for a comprehensive understanding of the entire caseload.

Firstly it is believed that the literature which in this paper has been defined as traditional, takes overall merit for having brought the attention of the CS topic to world level. The input provided by human rights organisations, research conducted by NGOs, as well as the role played by the international community have contributed to disseminating information on the argument and to structuring a discourse on CSs which did not exist previously. Also, an impressive amount of reports and field investigation have been made available and contain essential data that can be utilised by other researchers who are operating in different latitudes.
Moreover, the above mentioned stakeholders contribute profoundly to spread humanitarian discourses mainly related to advocacy and protection issues which are so important for many CSs worldwide.

This pioneering work should constitute the essential grounds for any further development on the topic, and whilst limited in some instances, should be considered a useful available resource.

Secondly, this rigid traditional work must at least be commended for creating a category (the CS) with specific observable patterns and characteristics. In doing so, it has been possible to promote a working program, albeit an unsophisticated one, to bring the case to the attention of the international community, and to insert the CS issue into the humanitarian discourse and field practices.

As the critics have observed, lack of flexibility of analysis represents one of the key weaknesses of the traditional approach. But it may also be true that the opposite, an entirely holistic case-by-case model which appreciates each aspect of an individual CS’s life experience, essentially de-categorises the entire cluster rendering it very difficult to study. It follows that without some kind of mechanism for observation, an efficient and sophisticated working model is impossible to develop or indeed to implement. Lack of understanding of this humanitarian issue may lead to ineffective and even inappropriate intervention; if de-categorisation dilutes understanding, then it promotes, despite its good intention, a less informed response.

In conclusion, it might be appropriate to consider all the various inputs to the CS topic not in antithesis of one another but rather as complimentary contributions to the understanding of a caseload which is per se already quite difficult to explore and understand.
4.3 Children’s free choice

The discussion of children’s participation in war, whether it is voluntary or not, constitutes for the literature a controversial topic. In this regard, any attempt to produce reliable global statistics or tendencies is particularly difficult.

A close analysis of the literature shows that establishing a trend is very problematic: children exposed to conflict provide different responses to the pressures of the environment surrounding them. Also, the dynamics of their decision-making processes often vary according to the geographical locations they are living in, the cultures they belong to and the needs and aspirations each CS has.

In many cases, the evidence gathered from the literature shows that the enrolment process is not originated by a deliberate choice: reports indicate that often children do not have any other option because they are forcibly recruited or abducted. In these instances, it would probably be appropriate to condemn such practices and to try to address the problem vigorously (this is what is currently done in practice).

But, as seen in other instances, the children’s decision to join the conflict is instead conditioned by multiple factors such as strong determination, a desire for emancipation or freedom, a search for better opportunities etc. In this regard, the case study provides some useful examples. In these cases, a different approach to the issue might be necessary in order to provide a specific response to specific needs of the children.

In light of the evidence gathered from the literature, this paper argues that for an improved intervention plan in favour of the CS caseload, a more attentive reflection and observation, which concentrate on the child and his needs, should be done. Therefore, in order to protect children’s rights it is necessary to firstly acknowledge that children behave and respond in different ways and that they do also have the right to choose what is better for their lives, especially when no other options are present.
In this regard, if it is believed that the CS experience might constitute too risky an option because it involves war practices, including participation in fighting and exposure to violence, on the other hand some viable alternative solutions should be sought. If substitute opportunities are not found, children may continue to deliberately decide to enrol because they perceive it to be the most feasible and useful thing to do. And if their perception of the war-life is more favourable than other opportunities that society is offering them, they are likely to choose the option which appears to be the most adequate to their necessities.

A plan aiming to provide protection for children at war should take these concerns into serious consideration. In this regard, if the advocacy efforts are focusing solely on issues relating to traumas, lost childhood and kidnapping, a great contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon, represented by children who instead have operated deliberate meaningful choices, will be simply missing, not reported and therefore not evaluated.

To conclude with an example, the literature indicates that many ex-CSs decide **not to adhere to the DDR** programs. As seen, these programs are organised with the hope that they will produce positive outcomes in the children’s lives. Therefore, it seems appropriate to reflect on why this occurs. As seen, authors like Wessels (2006) suggest that **fear of being labelled or stigmatised** might constitute some of the reasons preventing former young soldiers to join DDR programs. Many other factors can determine similar choices in diverse typologies of ex-CSs.

What it is important to observe is that many children’s perceive that the DDR experience is not suitable for them, it does not responds to their immediate needs and in some cases is detrimental for their life. Hence they will decide not to join the program and they will look elsewhere for more appropriate alternatives and solutions.

This analysis therefore suggests that, in the case of DDR, an accurate reflection on how the rehabilitation programs are organised should be undertaken. Also, in general, the
current research and practices aiming to provide assistance to children should ask themselves on whether they are ready and equipped to meet the different needs of ex-CS.

4.4 Understanding children’s war experience

The previous sub-chapter (3.3) has been suggesting that an enhanced understanding of the capacity a CS has to make meaningful choices can be helpful for researchers and practitioners. Similarly, it is also believed that an improved comprehension of the relationship between children and conflicts with regard to CSs’ agency capacity and CSs’ empowerment could also constitute crucial hermeneutic keys very useful for a better understanding of the CS caseload.

If it is important to acknowledge children’s freedom and their rights to make significant choices for their lives, it is also relevant to judge the CS’s experience not only as passive and fully determined by the adults but, rather, considering the CSs as active agents of changes in the war affected society they are living in.

This paper argues that, in light of the contribution of the examined literature, it may be important to recognise that children can often be a determinant feature of the warfare, someone that with his action can change things, can make the difference.

As observed in the literature review, several disciplines, often related to social sciences, are suggesting that the child’s world is much more complex than it was previously thought. Evidence suggests that children, especially in stressful conditions can express higher levels of resilience and develop important mechanisms to cope with the problems caused by the surrounding environment. Similarly, some literature on the CS topic has disclosed that children operating in conflicts can heavily contribute to generate effective mutations both to the war environment and the surrounding society. Moreover, it appears that in some determinate conditions children show elevated levels of consciousness and fully express their willingness to influence these changes.
Also, examples from the literature show that war can represent for children a unique occasion for personal growth and development. In the warfare, they often find an effective substitute for education, or, as shown in the case study, the conflict might represent a chance for emancipation. In this regard, part of the literature argues that it might not be appropriate anymore considering children exposed to war just in terms of individuals who are suffering. Likewise, definitions such as lost generation and lost childhood which have probably an important emotional impact on the public opinion might not reflect and refer to the entire CS category. Instead for an improved analysis of the caseload it might be observed that the impact of conflicts on children can also be very positive.

Acknowledging the relevance of these evidences could be particularly crucial if a research aims to really understand the CS caseload. Recent attempts to overturn the methods of observations (see e.g. the case study) by focusing more on the child as contributor to the research rather than as interviewee are now hinting that this shift could be extremely significant. It might be therefore useful to promote this kind of investigation which considers the child not just an informant but rather a person informed on the facts, somebody who could really help the research to develop its scope and objectives.

Moreover, if a research aims to understand the children’s world, it might be also appropriate to try to examine the role that the surrounding environment plays in the CS context. As shown in the literature available on the topic, the role played by socio-cultural factors, often contribute to give to the child soldiering experience a peculiar shape: by constituting either pushing or pulling factors, they often determine (or not) the choice of a child to join the armed conflict. Particularly powerful is in this regard, the influence that social needs, such as the child’s desire to re-construct family links, play in the children’s decision making process.

A deeper understanding of the role played by the surrounding society, how it contributes to shape the CS’s experience, might be very helpful to deliver action plans which effectively respond to the necessities of the children. If it is true that children’s
experience must be better understood, similarly it should be understood that also the scrutiny of the society he is living in can provide useful information on the child himself.

These setting might lead to a completely revolutionised scenario and to some extent can represent a challenge to the more traditional ways the approach to CS is made.

This paper argues that the acknowledgement of children’s agency might be particularly helpful in terms of **child recruitment prevention**. If it is clearer what the need of a child in a particular social context is, and if it is understood that he can be fully capable to operate and make decisions, **regardless** the adults’ intervention, it might be easier to propose opportunities which are alternative to the soldier’s life.

It is also believed that the understanding that war can generate empowerment in children might produce **better designed programs of intervention**. The Angolan caseload, discussed in the literature review, is a very interesting example of how a program aiming to minimise vulnerability in children has **de facto** increased that vulnerability.

### 4.5 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to operate a synthesis between the materials examined in this study and express some views and ways forwards which could be helpful for an improved understanding of the caseload.

It constituted also an occasion for providing a response to the research questions of this dissertation.

In this regard, it is believed that the evidence gathered in the literature review and the case study, in light of the inputs originated by the discussion in the present chapter, suggest that CSs can frequently show patterns of behaviour that have been so far marginally studied in the past.
In particular, it has been observed that, when exposed to armed conflict children do not just react passively but rather can actively provide a meaningful response to the stimuli produced by the war.

It has also been argued that children are able in some instances to gain benefit from the war, that this form of empowerment is visible and can effectively produce development in the lives of the youngsters.

Finally this research calls for a renewed commitment of all the stakeholders involved in the CS caseload to firstly appreciate all the distinctive characteristics of children as relevant for an improved understanding of the topic and secondly to promote a renovated plan of action for CSs.

The most relevant recommendation emerging from the dissertation analysis will be summarised in the next conclusive chapter.
Chapter Five

Conclusions

This paper represents the author’s attempt to provide an original analysis of the child soldier topic. The main hypothesis of this dissertation was based on the assumption that the equation: \textit{child soldier} = \textit{victim} proposed by part of the literature available, might not be fully representative of the entire caseload and that, rather, it could risk to offer an inattentive depiction of the examined target group.

The conducted investigation hints instead that there are several other dynamics and forces which influence strongly the lives of children participating in armed conflicts. These contribute to generate different ways in which the youngsters perceive and live the soldiering experience.

The literature therefore provides on one hand, examples that could be considered tragic, describing how the warfare has constituted for young boys and girls the most harrowing experience. Cases of isolation, traumas and abuses suffered are very frequent in the Cs caseload.

But, on the other hand, the literature offers also accounts on different experiences: episodes where children have effectively benefited from the warfare either in terms of personal development, empowerment and growth, are not infrequent. In this regard, the presented case study represents a significant example.

The available research also reveals the inner capacity children have in many instances to contribute in their own way to the conflict they are exposed to: with their personality and behaviour, CS are able to generate effective changes to the warfare settings as well as the surrounding civil society. In this regard, my dissertation has provided several examples and, again, the case study constitutes an important testimony.

Based on these evidences, this paper therefore has been arguing that CSs can react and interact with the conflict in many different ways and that the war impact on their young lives can be sensibly different from case to case.
The goal of this dissertation was not to provide a justification for the utilisation of child soldiers in conflict but, rather, simply to observe that in many instances if children are not provided with alternative solutions which are useful to their lives, they might deliberately choose to join armed groups because it represents for them an effective strategy to cope with the difficulties produced by the conflict situation they are exposed to.

In this regard, this paper calls, firstly, for an improvement in the research techniques: it is believed that the stakeholders working for CSs should further develop their observation methods in order to understand better the child, his capacities and his needs. This process implies an increased comprehension of the CS as a significantly powerful agent in the warfare.

Secondly, this dissertation has examined how children experience different war outcomes according to the country they are living in, their religion and culture, their tradition and social settings. It has been observed that these factors might be very influential for the children’s decision making process of joining or not armed forces. Consequently, a research aiming to provide an improved action plan for CSs should take into account these influences, very seriously.

The scope of this type of renovated research is mainly to stimulate more appropriate interventions in the CS field area: if it is believed that the existing arrangements aiming to support the target group are providing a significant amount of positive results, on the other hand it is also true that in many instance they fail to reach their objectives because some of the above-mentioned factors have not been adequately scrutinised or understood.

For example, DDR programs for ex-CSs constitute an effective response that both the civil society and the international community are trying to give in order to address the CS issue. But, as discussed in this dissertation, these activities are often unable to reach their goal either because the targeted beneficiaries are unable or unwilling to participate,
or because the program itself fails to provide an effective response to the needs of the children.

Finally, this dissertation acknowledges that, so far, a lot of work has been done for child soldiers. It is also believed however that still it is necessary that all the stakeholders involved in the process, join their efforts and improve the quality and the level of the assistance provided to young boys and girls.

In the following section some recommendations, arising from the most relevant findings of my research will be offered. It is hoped that at some point they might contribute to a better understanding of and improved action for many CSs and potential CSs.

**Recommendations**

To researchers:

- To carry out extensive investigations aiming to explore more exhaustively the CSs topic, by taking in consideration multiple factors including children’s motivations and aspirations, influences of societies, different cultures and ethnography of the child.

- To conduct the research in a way that gives the opportunity to the child to express himself, his needs and desires. To encourage him to participate in interviews by putting him at the centre of the investigation exercise, as an informed person rather than a simple informant.

- To share the acquired research knowledge with others, particularly with researchers operating in different geographical and cultural contexts in order to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the studied topic or to appreciate possible dissimilarities.
To academics:

- To contribute to provide a more accurate and truthful description of the CS topic, by producing relevant publications based on informative and informed accounts.

- To stimulate debates within the academic arena in order to expand understanding and knowledge on the CS argument.

- To promote the interdisciplinary discussion across the academic forum in order to acquire greater understanding of the meaning and experience of childhood.

To field practitioners:

- To acknowledge that the motivations that underpin the circumstances for a child to participate within an armed conflict will always be specific to that child. Consequently intervention plans should be tailored as much as possible to the individual’s needs.

- Where possible, to facilitate the research process by providing an environment that accommodates the needs for meaningful interaction for both parties involved in the process.

To states actors and international community:

- To create suitable alternatives scenarios that minimise the attractiveness of the participation of children in armed conflicts.
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