Conflict dynamics in human trafficking and child soldiering: A comparative study of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan

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Abstract

In Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, prolonged conflicts had fostered environments that were conducive to both child soldiering and human trafficking. Such conditions not only undermined the right to personal security, but facilitated the exploitation of children through forced labour, sexual coercion and conscription into armed conflict. In this context, children who were inherently predisposed to violence, poverty and desperation often became subjects of abuse for economic and strategic gain by armed groups and human traffickers. Notwithstanding this recognition, the prevalence of these human rights violations have frequently been treated as two distinct phenomena in existing literature. As a result, there remains a significant absence of consideration in relation to the socio-economic conditions, cultural practices and geopolitical instabilities that render child soldiering and human trafficking as deeply interconnected issues.

The convergence of these two concerns, however, is not merely coincidental. Rather, the historical, social and legal contexts of both protracted wars reveal a

broader breakdown of social structures, legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms that were meant to protect children from manipulation, exploitation and violence. Beyond the need for a comprehensive approach to address the circumstances that fuel these abuses, the link between child soldiering and human trafficking requires integrated legal reforms, improved international collaboration and effective policies to bolster the resilience of vulnerable communities plagued by warfare. It is only by addressing the structural forces that sustain these violations that the global community can hope to break the cycle of exploitation and ensure a safer future for children in conflict zones.

1 INTRODUCTION

The profound severity of human trafficking is reflected in multiple instruments, including the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which categorises it as a crime against humanity under article 7(2)(c).[1] The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children ("Palermo Protocol"), which supplements the United Nations (UN) Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, of fraud ... for the purposes of exploitation".[2] In this regard, the UN recognises that "exploitation" is not limited in scope but includes "the exploitation of the prostitution of others ... forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs".[3] Within the context of armed conflict, this definition has been expanded to encompass broader forms of exploitation, including those affecting children.[4] Indeed, while the Palermo Protocol typically associates human trafficking with threats, the use of force or other forms of coercion, article 3 makes it clear that the mere recruitment of a child for the purpose of exploitation constitutes trafficking.

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[1]   Boas Z, Ponchio M & Smanio G "Child trafficking and recruitment in armed conflicts: Exploring the worst forms of child labour from a Colombian perspective" (2025) 14(2) *Social Sciences* 1 at 3.

[2]   Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, 2000 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 55/25 (2000).

[3]   Boas, Ponchio & Smanio (2025) at 3.

[4]   Boas, Ponchio & Smanio (2025) at 3.

Article 8 of the Rome Statute is especially relevant, declaring that the recruitment or enlistment of children under the age of 15 for active engagement in hostilities constitutes a war crime.[5] The 2007 Paris Principles on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict define a child soldier as "any person below 18 years of age who is or who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity ..."[6] This broad classification covers not only engagement in hostilities but also functional participation in roles such as surveillance, as well as indirect contributions to warfare, including tasks such as cooking, cleaning, transportation or messaging.[7] Importantly, this definition recognises that recruitment may take place through both forced and voluntary means, ranging from acts of violence and coercion to familial pressures and the desire for protection.

The prevalence of human trafficking and the recruitment of child soldiers remained a pressing concern within the conflict-affected territories of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.[8] Unstable conditions in these regions provided fertile ground for the perpetrators of these offences, granting them the ability to exploit vulnerable populations through coerced movement, forced labour and involuntary servitude.[9] To date, the failure to promptly and effectively address human trafficking and child-soldier recruitment as two distinct yet interconnected issues sustains a distressing cycle of violence and exploitation, thus leaving countless individuals susceptible to further human rights violations.[10]

In the light of the profound need to confront this critical issue, which transcends geographical boundaries, a better comprehension of the interplay between conflict dynamics, socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural contexts and geopolitical dynamics is necessary. Such an understanding would provide an illustration as to how these factors shaped diverse recruitment methods and the experiences of victims in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan.[11] These valuable insights are crucial for

[5]   Boas, Ponchio & Smanio (2025) at 6.
[6]   Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions (The Paris Principles), 1993 United Nations General Assembly Resolution 48/134 (1993).
[7]   Boas, Ponchio & Smanio (2025) at 6.
[8]   Council on Foreign Relations *Understanding human trafficking in conflict* (2019) at 7.
[9]   Council on Foreign Relations (2019) at 3.
[10] O'Connor R, Betancourt T & Enelamah N "Safeguarding the lives of children affected by Boko Haram: Application of the SAFE model of child protection to a rights-based situation analysis" (2012) 23(1) *Health and Human Rights Journal* 27 at 27.
[11] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict *Child trafficking and armed conflict* (2023) at 15.

crafting effective laws, policies and interventions to dismantle the structures and frameworks that fueled such acts of exploitation and violence.

Amidst this landscape, a crucial question emerges: How did the interplay of conflict dynamics, socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural contexts and geopolitics affect recruitment strategies and victim experiences in human trafficking and child soldiering within Sierra Leone and Afghanistan? Building on this overarching concern, this research is guided by three questions: (1) How were recruitment methods for human trafficking and child soldiering shaped by the dynamics of conflict in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan? (2) What socio-economic, cultural and geopolitical factors drove child-soldier recruitment and trafficking in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan? (3) In what ways did the experiences of recruited individuals differ in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan?

The research will be structured into six sections. The first section will establish the framework for the analysis, setting out the problem statement and the central research questions. The second section will contain a descriptive comparison of conflict dynamics and recruitment tactics in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, touching on the forced conscription and indoctrination of children. The third section will assess the manner in which political instability and socio-economic vulnerability in both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan created conditions conducive to human trafficking and child-soldier recruitment. The fourth section turns to the cultural atmosphere of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, analysing the past prevalence of child labour and the role of religious seminaries in perpetuating exploitation. The fifth section shifts focus to the broader geopolitical environments of Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, exploring how the proliferation of arms and the activities of extremist groups sustained these practices. The sixth section is the conclusion, which highlights the interplay of these factors and recommends measures for combatting human trafficking and child-soldier recruitment.

2 CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND RECRUITMENT TACTICS

In Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, the combination of political instability, socio-economic turmoil and ethnic tensions created fertile ground for recruitment into armed conflict and human trafficking.[12] These regions, scarred by the consequences of war, witnessed children being drawn

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[12]   Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2023) at 15.

into a cycle of recruitment for purposes as dire as becoming child soldiers.[13] Examining the dynamics of these regions, this section aims to explore the interplay of factors that had fuelled recruitment and human trafficking during these periods.

2.1 Children in the crossfire: Recruitment realities in Sierra Leone's civil war

Sierra Leone, a West African nation that achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1961, was profoundly affected by a civil war that spanned from 1991 to 2002.[14] This conflict, driven by entrenched ethnic tensions, political instability and economic strife, resulted in the displacement of approximately 500,000 individuals.[15]

At the onset of the war, former army corporal Foday Sankoh, with the support of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, led the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in overthrowing the government of Sierra Leonean president Joseph Momah.[16] This period bore witness to unimaginable atrocities, such as widespread executions, decapitations, amputations and the abduction of children for placing them in military ranks.[17]

The impact of this conflict on Sierra Leone persisted far beyond the war's duration, with the forced recruitment of child soldiers by the RUF and the rebels' merciless treatment of civilians standing as symbols of the war's horror.[18] According to the UN Assistance Mission in Sierra Leone, an estimated 10,000 children were used as child soldiers by various factions, while UNICEF recorded that 6,000 children were coerced into violence over the course of the conflict.[19] Furthermore, the recruitment of children into armed conflict claimed the lives of over 2,000,000, leaving more than

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[13] Olsson S "Why child soldiers rarely stay free for long in the Central African Republic" (2018) *Time* at https://time.com/5290083/child-soldiers-central-african-republic/ (accessed 15 March 2025).

[14] Kormoh J "Ethnicity and conflict instigation in Sierra Leone" (2020) *Accord* at https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/ethnicity-and-conflict-instigation-in-sierra-leone/ (accessed 15 March 2024).

[15] United for Others "Sierra Leone" *United for Others* (n.d.) at https://unitedforothers.org/blog/sierra-leone (accessed 15 March 2025).

[16] Momodu S "The Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002)" (2017) *Black Past* at https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/sierra-leone-civil-war-1991-2002 (accessed 15 March 2024).

[17] United Nations Development Programme *Evaluation of UNDP assistance to conflict-affected countries*: *Case Study Sierra Leone* (n.d.) at 6.

[18] Mitton K "Irrational actors and the process of brutalisation: Understanding atrocity in the Sierra Leonean conflict (1991–2002)" (2012) 14(1) *Civil Wars* 104 at 106.

[19] Jang Young S "The causes of the Sierra Leone Civil War" (2012) *E-International Relations* at https://www.e-ir.info/2012/10/25/the-causes-of-the-sierra-leone-civil-war-underlying-grievances-and-the-role-of-the-revolutionary-united-front/ (accessed 15 March 2024).

6,000,000 others mutilated or permanently disabled, orphaning 1,000,000, and inflicting psychological trauma on 10,000,000 individuals. Additionally, it forced a staggering 12,000,000 people into refugee status, a fact that underscores the far-reaching consequences of this chapter in Sierra Leone's history.[20]

During the civil war, the recruitment and exploitation of child combatants stood as a particularly distressing phenomena, highlighting the concerning relationship between conflict, coercion and drug-induced violence.[21] Armed with pistols, rifles and machetes, child soldiers actively participated in committing atrocities, including the killing and mutilation of their peers, alongside engaging in the rape and brutalisation of the elderly.[22] Instances documented by Human Rights Watch reveal harrowing tales of the RUF coercing children to commit atrocities under the threat of death or intoxicated by drugs.[23] Echoing the tactics employed in human trafficking, where children are similarly coerced into violence with threats or manipulation through the use of drugs, witness testimonies illuminate the troubling reality that many of the RUF's most egregious acts were perpetrated while its fighters were under the influence of these substances.[24] Such instances reveal alarming parallels between the exploitation of child soldiers and the trafficking of children.

2.2 Indoctrination and ideologies: Afghan youth amidst warfare

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is a landlocked country in south-central Asia.[25] It became the focal point of a gruelling conflict in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in 2001 when an international military coalition, spearheaded by the United States (US), launched an invasion to dismantle the Taliban regime, a conservative political-religious movement responsible for imposing strict Islamic law.[26] Having compromised the Afghan government's ability to protect civil liberties, the conflict led to widespread poverty among the population, with the vast majority

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[20] Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung "Child soldiers – Brainwashed, drugged and raped" (n.d.) at https://atlasofenslavement.rosalux-geneva.org/child-soldiers/ (accessed 15 March 2024).

[21] Human Rights Watch *Coercion and intimidation of child soldiers to participate in violence* (2008) at 10.

[22] Human Rights Watch (2008) at 10.

[23] Human Rights Watch *Sierra Leone: Getting away with murder, mutilation, rape* (1999) at 10.

[24] Human Rights Watch (2008) at 11.

[25] Dupree N & Dupree L et al "Afghanistan" *Britannica* at https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan (accessed 16 March 2024).

[26] Center for Preventive Action "Instability in Afghanistan" (2023) *Global Conflict Tracker* at https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan (accessed 16 March 2024).

having grappled with food insecurity and malnourishment.[27] With the Taliban's resurgence in subsequent years, humanitarian efforts faced severe restrictions and remaining shelters became targets for ransacking, while the Taliban's recruitment of children into combat roles aggravated the humanitarian crisis crippling the nation.[28]

The Taliban placed children at the forefront of Afghanistan's armed conflicts, often exploiting *madrasas,* or Islamic religious schools, as breeding grounds for child soldiers.[29] Human Rights Watch documented that children as young as six years old were indoctrinated and that by the age of 13, many had become skilled in the use of firearms as well as improvised explosive devices.[30] The war in Afghanistan was classified as one of the world's deadliest conflicts for children – it is estimated that 33,000 children died during it.[31]

In this context, the training and deployment of children in military operations stands as one of the most devastating chapters in Afghanistan's turbulent history.[32] Exploiting the vulnerability of youths, the Taliban relied on persuasion and coercion while drawing on cultural loyalties and religious convictions to sway impressionable minds into fighting in armed conflicts.[33] This manipulation, as outlined by the US Department of State, extended to offering parents financial assurances or promises of protection in exchange for sending their children to *madrasas*, where they underwent military training and religious indoctrination.[34] Such tactics bear a disturbing resemblance to those employed in human trafficking, where the line between coercion and consent becomes increasingly blurred.

[27] Rahmat Z, Rafi H, Nadeem A et al. "Child malnutrition in Afghanistan amid a deepening humanitarian crisis" (2023) 15(4) *International Health* 353 at 353.

[28] US Department of State "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Afghanistan" (2023) at https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/afghanistan/ (accessed 16 March 2024).

[29] Becker J "This is our opportunity to end the Taliban's use of child soldiers" (2021) *Human Rights Watch* at https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/20/our-opportunity-end-talibans-use-child-soldiers (accessed 16 March 2024).

[30] Becker (2021).

[31] Becker (2021).

[32] Tallon E "A special report on child soldiers in Afghanistan" (2019) *NATO Association of Canada* at https://natoassociation.ca/a-special-report-on-child-soldiers-in-afghanistan/ (accessed 16 March 2024).

[33] Qanet G, Alam M & Jan M "Recruitment and use of child soldiers in Afghanistan: Cultural traits as pivotal factor" (2021) 5(2) *Journal of Islamic World and Politics* 253 at 261–262.

[34] State Newswire "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sierra Leone" (2023) *State Newswire* at https://statenewswire.com/stories/644415001-2023-trafficking-in-persons-report-sierra-leone (accessed 18 March 2025).

3   SOCIO-ECONOMIC VULNERABILITIES

In Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, socio-economic instability, political unrest and social disparities laid the foundation for a cycle of exploitation and coercion.[35] As political factions competed for power and resources, children become unknowing casualties, having been lured into roles as child soldiers or subjected to other forms of exploitation.[36] This section delves into the socio-economic vulnerabilities that underpinned these grim realities, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges faced by communities grappling with the fallout of armed conflict. By unraveling the complex web of socio-economic factors that were at play, this section seeks to illuminate the need for comprehensive interventions to address the harm inflicted upon marginalised populations.

3.1 Political turbulence: Unraveling socio-economic struggles in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's civil war left an enduring mark on the nation's socio-economic landscape, exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and exploitation.[37] With a significant portion of the population enduring dire economic conditions, compounded by the detrimental effects of climate change on agricultural productivity, children often found themselves in precarious situations in search of livelihood opportunities as a means to provide for their families.[38] Alarmingly, clear evidence underscores the prevalence of child labour in Sierra Leone, with approximately 35 per cent of children having engaged in exploitative forms of work ranging from hazardous mining activities to commercial sexual exploitation.[39] This exploitation spanned across various sectors of the economy, including agriculture, mining and manufacturing, and perpetuated cycles of vulnerability that undermined the development of Sierra Leone's youth.[40]

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[35] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2023) at 15.
[36] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime "Children and conflict" (n.d.) *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* at https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/children-and-conflict.html (accessed 18 March 2025).
[37] Denov M "Coping with the trauma of war: Former child soldiers in post-conflict Sierra Leone" (2010) 53(6) *International Social Work* 791 at 800.
[38] Acland O "In Sierra Leone, climate change worsens human trafficking of the poor" (2024) *Al Jazeera* at https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/29/in-sierra-leone-climate-change-worsens-human-trafficking-of-the-poor (accessed 18 March 2024).
[39] Bureau of International Labour Affairs *2020 Findings on the worst forms of child labor* (2020) at 1135.
[40] Bureau of International Labour Affairs (2020) at 1135.

Moreover, the widespread availability of small arms in Sierra Leone, through both legal and illegal channels, amplified the involvement of children in armed conflict.[41] Porous borders, inadequate border control and rampant corruption created fertile ground for the illicit trafficking of weapons, complicating efforts to curtail their proliferation.[42] The global dissemination of small arms acted as a catalyst for the escalation of children's participation in armed conflicts, reflecting the instability that persisted and underscoring the need for enhanced international coordination.[43] Despite attempts to address this, the absence of a universal treaty specifically targeting small-arms proliferation highlights the need for enhanced international coordination to mitigate this threat.

Sierra Leone's status as a focal point for human trafficking compounded these challenges, as vulnerable children were often ensnared in networks of exploitation for commercial sexual purposes and forced labour.[44] The phenomenon of *men pikin*, otherwise known as foster care, served as a mechanism through which children were trafficked internally under the guise of educational opportunities, only to face exploitation and abuse in urban areas.[45] These children, robbed of their innocence and familial support, became pawns in the illicit activities of traffickers and armed groups.[46] Despite the passage of two decades since the cessation of hostilities, the scars of war continue to haunt Sierra Leone's youth in the absence of comprehensive interventions to address such crimes and to aid in the rehabilitation of victims and their reintegration in society.[47]

3.2   Conflict's shadow: Unraveling socio-economic struggles in Afghanistan

Afghanistan had faced severe socio-economic challenges that rendered its population vulnerable to human trafficking. Decades of conflict, economic instability and pervasive insecurity plunged

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[41]   Fleshman M 'Small arms in Africa: Counting the cost of gun violence' (2016) *United Nations* at https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/small-arms-africa (accessed 18 March 2025).

[42]   Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime *Sierra Leone* (2023) at 3.

[43]   European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control *Pervasive illicit small arms availability: A global threat* (1999) at 8–9.

[44]   State Newswire "2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sierra Leone" (2023) *State Newswire* at https://statenewswire.com/stories/644415001-2023-trafficking-in-persons-report-sierra-leone (accessed 18 March 2025).

[45]   Cordeiro Cezarita V "Children of Sierra Leone: Realizing children's rights in Sierra Leone" (2021) *Humanium* at https://www.humanium.org/en/sierra-leone/ (accessed 18 March 2024).

[46]   Cordeiro Cezarita (2021).

[47]   Betancourt T et al. "The intergenerational impact of war on mental health and psychosocial wellbeing: Lessons from the longitudinal study of war-affected youth in Sierra Leone" (2020) 14(62) *Conflict and Health* 1 at 2.

millions into a state of dire deprivation and uncertainty.[48] With an estimated 24,000,000 people – nearly half of the population – relying on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs, Afghanistan had grappled with what has been termed the world's largest humanitarian crisis.[49] Against this backdrop of poverty and hunger, children emerged as particularly vulnerable targets for exploitation, especially as families struggled to navigate the harsh realities of daily survival.[50] With nearly one-third of children in Afghanistan having been compelled to work to supplement family incomes, the absence of protective mechanisms left them exposed to exploitative labour practices in hazardous conditions, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and exploitation.[51]

Moreover, Afghan women and children remained disproportionately affected by human trafficking, falling prey to forced marriage, forced labour and recruitment as child soldiers.[52] The absence of robust institutional protections and legal frameworks, coupled with fragile governance structures in the wake of prolonged instability, exacerbated the vulnerability of marginalised communities.[53] Hence, groups such as the Taliban had exploited systemic weaknesses and societal vulnerabilities, leveraging these to advance their agendas and hindering efforts towards child protection.[54] Thus, the intersection of socio-economic challenges and political dynamics shaped the landscape of child protection in Afghanistan, underscoring the urgency for interventions to address the root causes of vulnerability and combat human trafficking in all forms.[55]

4   CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, cultural norms and traditions interwove with the dynamics of warfare, exacerbating vulnerabilities that made children susceptible to coercion and exploitation.

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[48] Human Rights Watch "Afghanistan: Economic roots of the humanitarian crisis" (2022) *Human Rights Watch* at https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-economic-roots-humanitarian-crisis (accessed 19 March 2024).

[49] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs *Afghanistan humanitarian needs and response plan 2024 summary* (2024) at 1.

[50] Save the Children "More than a third of children surveyed in Afghanistan pushed into child labour, as country marks two years of Taliban rule" (2023) at https://www.savethechildren.net/news/more-third-children-surveyed-afghanistan-pushed-child-labour-country-marks-two-years-taliban (accessed 20 March 2024).

[51] Save the Children (2023).

[52] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *Appropriate legal responses to combat trafficking in persons in Afghanistan* (2008) at 13.

[53] International Organisation for Migration *Trafficking in persons: An analysis of Afghanistan* (2004) at 9.

[54] International Crisis Group "Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban" (2022) *International Crisis Group* at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistans-security-challenges-under-taliban (accessed 20 March 2024).

[55] International Organisation for Migration (2004) at 66.

Cultural contexts played a pivotal role in shaping the recruitment strategies used by perpetrators of human trafficking, particularly as customs and societal norms intersected with the realities of armed conflict.[56] This section delves into the role of cultural dynamics in these conflict-ridden landscapes, unraveling the various factors that drove recruitment strategies and human trafficking. By exploring these factors, this analysis seeks to highlight the underlying drivers of vulnerability.

4.1 Shadows of labour: Child-work realities in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's cultural landscape played a pivotal role in sustaining child vulnerability and enabling recruitment into armed groups. With youth defined as those between the ages of 15 and 35 years by the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy, young people in Sierra Leone became increasingly marginalised and deprived of familial protection due to socio-economic factors.[57] The erosion of household and community structures, compounded by declining capacities to safeguard children, left them exposed to exploitation and trafficking.[58] This vulnerability was aggravated by the commodification of children, who became integral to illicit activities such as the trafficking of weapons, drugs and humans, including the recruitment of children as soldiers.[59]

In a context marked by the presence of armed groups such as the RUF, cultural and historical practices intersected with the exigencies of wartime operations, perpetuating cycles of child labour and exploitation.[60] Child labour, an entrenched facet of Sierra Leonean society, assumed heightened significance within the framework of armed conflict, as children were coerced into performing essential tasks for fighting forces and survival.[61] Domestic chores – typically tasks relating to cooking, cleaning and fetching water – became indispensable to the daily operations of armed groups.[62] Despite being relegated to the periphery of armed-conflict narratives, children made contributions in terms of labour that were foundational to the sustenance of these groups,

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[56] International Crisis Group *Afghanistan's security challenges under the Taliban* (2022) at 21.
[57] World Bank *Understanding youth violence: Cases from Liberia and Sierra Leone* (2023) at 14.
[58] UNICEF *Child trafficking in Sierra Leone* (2005) at 46.
[59] Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (n.d.).
[60] Denov M *Child soldiers: Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front* 1st ed Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2010) at 120.
[61] Denov M (2010) at 117.
[62] Denov M (2010) at 108.

underscoring the insidious role of cultural norms in perpetuating the exploitation and victimisation of Sierra Leone's youth.[63]

4.2 Faith and recruitment: The role of religious seminaries in Afghanistan

The proliferation of jihadi *madrasas*, or religious seminaries, across Afghanistan served as a potent breeding ground for extremism and militant ideologies, perpetuating a cycle of violence and conflict.[64] As the dominant armed group within the region, the Taliban actively recruited under-age soldiers, with reports revealing that child soldiers comprised the majority of combatants fighting within certain Taliban units.[65]

In provinces such as Nangarhar, where the influence of the Taliban remained deeply entrenched, under-age recruits were often sourced from mosques and *madrasas*, with religious authorities, or *mullahs*, playing a pivotal role in identifying and recommending candidates for recruitment.[66] Whether through coercion, intimidation or voluntary allegiance, these *mullahs* facilitated the recruitment process, thereby having contributed to the violence and instability in the region.[67] Furthermore, the Taliban's ruthless recruitment tactics extended to the indoctrination and training of young boys for suicide bombings, a harrowing reality that highlights the significant role *madrasas* had played in the radicalisation of suicide bombers and attackers.[68]

The recruitment of child soldiers for suicide attacks further underscores the position that indoctrination and coercion occupied in Afghanistan's conflict-ridden region.[69] *Madrasas* emerged as pivotal institutions for the grooming and radicalisation of vulnerable youth, with sources indicating that the process of persuasion and training often spanned from months to years.[70] While some families willingly offered up their children for martyrdom in pursuit of status

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[63] Denov M (2010) at 117.
[64] Mohammadi G "Jihadi seminaries under the Taliban: A looming threat" (2024) *The Diplomat* at https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/jihadi-seminaries-under-the-taliban-a-looming-threat/ (accessed 20 March 2024).
[65] Human Rights Watch "Afghanistan: Taliban Child Soldier Recruitment Surges" (2016) *Human Rights Watch* at https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/18/afghanistan-taliban-child-soldier-recruitment-surges (accessed 22 March 2024).
[66] Qane G & Jan M "Madrasas and recruitment of child soldiers: The scenario in Afghanistan" (2019) 8 *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering* 371 at 374.
[67] Qane G & Jan M (2019) at 374.
[68] European Asylum Support Office *Afghanistan: Taliban strategies – recruitment* (2012) at 10.
[69] Qane G & Jan M (2019) at 374.
[70] US Department of State (2023).

within insurgent organisations, many minors were subjected to intense indoctrination and coercion by the Taliban.[71]

Despite the complexities of the recruitment process, the consensus among sources is that conducting suicide attacks required individuals who were thoroughly indoctrinated and trained, with *madrasas* serving as crucial mechanisms for shaping the mindsets of potential suicide bombers.[72] Accordingly, the pervasive influence that extremist ideologies exercised within religious institutions under Taliban rule emphasises the need for intervention strategies to protect the rights and well-being of children.

5 GEOPOLITICAL DYNAMICS

In Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, global power dynamics, territorial disputes and ideological conflicts formed a volatile backdrop that facilitated the exploitation of children through coercive tactics and human trafficking.[73] These hotspots, characterised by ethnic tensions and political instability, served as fertile ground for the insidious practices of recruitment into and exploitation within armed conflicts. Accordingly, this section seeks to illuminate the geopolitical dynamics that informed the recruitment of child soldiers, highlighting the underlying forces that perpetuated these human rights violations.

5.1 Challenges in reintegrating Sierra Leone's former child soldiers

Given the country's geopolitical landscape and prolonged exposure to violence, the psychological effects of human trafficking and child soldiering in Sierra Leone were profound and multifaceted.[74] The protracted civil war and the instability that followed left the country with severely damaged community structures and inadequate social services, complicating efforts to provide children with

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[71] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *Handbook on children recruited and exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups: The role of the justice system* (2017) at 2.

[72] Lakhani K "Indoctrinating children: The making of Pakistan's suicide bombers" (2010) 3(6) *CTC Sentinel* 11 at 11.

[73] Human Trafficking Search "Conflict and humanitarian settings: The impact on modern slavery" (2024) *Human Trafficking Search* at https://humantraffickingsearch.org/conflict-and-humanitarian-settings/ (accessed 22 March 2024).

[74] Betancourt T et al. (2020) at 2.

the necessary psychological support.[75] Moreover, political and safety concerns often overshadowed essential social services, exacerbating the conflict's long-term impact.

This was particularly evident in May 2000 when rebel forces captured about 500 UN peacekeeping troops and resumed hostilities.[76] At the same time, international aid tended to prioritise immediate humanitarian relief over long-term mental health care, often neglecting the psychological wounds that were inflicted by the decline in moral standards.[77] These factors not only facilitated the trafficking, recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers, but also impeded the effectiveness of mental health interventions and reintegration programmes in the years that followed.[78]

Despite the documented risks faced by child soldiers during the conflict, there remained a limited understanding of the long-term mental health implications of being forced and trafficked into armed conflicts as well as the process by which former child soldiers reintegrated into society.[79] Sierra Leone's limited mental health-care resources, insufficient funding for interventions, and stigmatisation surrounding mental health presented formidable barriers to accessing and providing adequate care for war-affected children, impeding their holistic reintegration.[80] Recognising the crucial link between literacy, skills acquisition and economic stability for these children, efforts to facilitate their successful social reintegration had to prioritise comprehensive systems addressing long-term needs, thereby reducing the risk of re-recruitment.[81]

5.2 Extremist chessboard: Afghanistan's radicalisation challenges

Afghanistan's protracted conflict left an indelible mark on the nation, decimating an entire generation and any hopes for normalcy. With poor border management and widespread ungoverned areas, the country itself became a breeding ground for terrorism, with arms infiltrating every facet of society.[82] The military recruitment of children, often through promises of security,

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[75] Betancourt T et al. (2020) at 2.
[76] Amnesty International *Sierra Leone: Childhood – a casualty of conflict* (2000) at 3.
[77] Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and the War Trauma Foundation *Achieving sustainable peace through an integrated approach to peacebuilding and mental health and psychosocial support: A review of current theory and practice* (2017) at 30.
[78] Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and the War Trauma Foundation (2017) at 29.
[79] Betancourt T et al. (2020) at 2–3.
[80] Harris D, Endale T, Lind U et al. "Mental health in Sierra Leone" (2020) 17(1) *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 1 at 1–2.
[81] Harris D et al. (2020) at 2–3.
[82] Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies *Child soldiers in Afghanistan* (2007) at 2.

honour and economic sustenance,[83] illustrated the desperate need for reinforcements on the battlefield. While many children had initially been coerced into armed militias as victims of circumstance, some went on to become adults for whom exposure to voice in childhood shaped their predispositions, perpetuating cycles of conflict that strained the social fabric of Afghanistan.[84] Accordingly, the pervasive nature of the conflict undermined governance and security structures, complicating efforts to reintegrate former child soldiers into mainstream society.[85]

Moreover, economic desperation and the allure of protection had driven many children to join armed groups, including the Taliban.[86] For these children, promises of food, shelter and belonging often outweighed the dangers of becoming foot soldiers in a conflict-ridden society.[87] Exploiting the vulnerabilities of homeless and orphaned children, the Taliban often resorted to bribes and manipulation, pressuring them into planting bombs, acting as decoys or undertaking suicide attacks against Afghan or foreign forces.[88] In such circumstances, the notion of "voluntary" participation had become blurred, especially as political and economic forces left children with minimal alternatives.[89] The historical recruitment of child soldiers in Afghanistan underscores the long-term consequences of armed conflict on vulnerable youth and highlights the need for interventions that address root causes, protect children and facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

6   CONCLUSION

The historical realities of human trafficking and child-soldier recruitment in Sierra Leone and Afghanistan emphasise the urgent need for comprehensive and effective action. In terms of international protocols and principles, these practices exploited vulnerable children, perpetuating cycles of violence and abuse.[90] Sierra Leone's protracted civil war, marked by atrocities and forced child recruitment, and Afghanistan's past of conflict and extremism, highlight the pervasive reach

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83   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2017) at 12.
84   Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (2007) at 3.
85   Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (2007) at 3–4.
86   Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (2007) at 1.
87   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *Targeted by terrorists: Child recruitment, exploitation and reintegration in Indonesia, Iraq and Nigeria* (n.d.) at 102.
88   United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan *Suicide attacks in Afghanistan (2001–2007)* (2007) at 105.
89   United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (n.d.) at 128–129.
90   Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict (2023) 7.

of exploitation amidst political instability and societal upheaval, particularly as armed groups fight for power.

To confront these challenges, a nuanced grasp of conflict dynamics, socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural contexts and geopolitical dynamics is imperative, alongside practical efforts to strengthen child protection and justice systems through clear legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms.[91] In this respect, continuous investment in education, sustainable livelihoods and social safety nets stand to reduce the economic factors that perpetuate vulnerability.[92] By enhancing access to education and making provision for adequate financial support, such initiatives possess the capacity to empower individuals to break the cycle of poverty and build resilience against future adversities. At the same time, community-based initiatives, including social support, emerge as playing a pivotal role in supporting affected children in the long term.[93] These grassroots efforts not only assist in instilling a sense of belonging, but ensure the delivery of essential resources, thereby contributing to the psychological recovery and social reintegration of children.

Building the capacity of domestic institutions through ongoing training and education also occupies a crucial position, particularly as frontline workers – including members of law enforcement and the judiciary – stand to assist in identifying and responding to such human rights violations.[94] Such efforts are supplemented by the need for international and regional cooperation in regard to information-sharing and cross-border surveillance, most notably as a means to safeguard children from trafficking networks.[95] Rooted in local empowerment and inclusive governance, these measures represent fundamental steps to be taken towards mitigating

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[91] Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict "Calls for increased integration of child protection in efforts to prevent and end conflicts" (2023) *Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict* at https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/2023/02/call-for-increased-integration-of-child-protection-in-efforts-to-prevent-and-end-conflicts/ (accessed 18 March 2024).

[92] Borrett A "Conflict and climate shocks fuel food poverty crises" (2024) *Financial Times* at https://www.ft.com/content/ef0107a1-626e-438a-a6dd-cdbda6e4fb32 (accessed 18 March 2024).

[93] Betancourt T "A longitudinal study of psychosocial adjustment and community reintegration among former child soldiers in Sierra Leone" (2010) 7(3) *International Psychiatry* 60 at 61–62.

[94] Betancourt T (2010) at 61–62.

[95] United Nations "Inter-Regional Conference on International Cooperation in Criminal Matters related to Investigating and Prosecuting Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants" (2023) *United Nations* at https://egypt.un.org/en/239261-inter-regional-conference-international-cooperation-criminal-matters-related-investigating (accessed 18 March 2025).

vulnerabilities and fostering sustainable solutions in the fight against human trafficking and child-soldier recruitment in conflict-affected regions.

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