CHILDREN DRILLED INTO PERPETRATORS

Name Student: Carina Feininger
Student number: 500671242
Course program: International Fashion & Design
Number of words: 3293
School: Amsterdam Fashion Institute
Date, Place: May 9th, 2016, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Supervisor: Leslie Holden
1: CAMOUFLAGED CHILDHOOD

“They fight like soldiers, they die like children”.

This is the title of a 2010 non-fiction book by the Canadian senator and author Romeo Dallaire about the child soldier phenomenon (Dallaire, 2010). The pure contradiction in only one sentence, describes the reality of children being recruited from their safety zone and transformed into cannon fodder. The issue of this filmed book is the subject of this paper and the inspiration for my graduation collection.

Recruited children in armed conflicts are not a phenomenon of modern times. As early as the Middle Ages, the illegal use of children in war can be found in reports (Singer, 2006). However, this has gained attention since the 1990s to aid organizations, media and therefore our public eye (Bouwman, 2016). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the use of child soldiers is not even allowed to exist, due to the signed declaration on the rights of children by 105 countries, which theoretically prohibits the use of soldiers with an age under eighteen (The Paris Principles, 2007). One may say, the recruitment and use of child soldiers certainly constitutes one of the most serious forms of exploitation of children. While, the International Criminal Court in The Hague defines any recruitment of children under fifteen as a war crime (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1999). Simultaneously, the Convention No. 182 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) implied that the use of children in war is “on the worst form of child labour” (International Labour Organization, 1999).

From a young age I was aware of this world issue due to my Ugandan pen friend and several demonstrations I have participated in. This topic not only influenced my project but also was important to me all through my childhood. When thinking of my life, the most influential time has been my childhood, a time that nobody can ever take away. In contrast, there are estimated 250,000 children on our planet, some as young as eight years, which have been recruited, brainwashed and afterwards become fighters, sex slaves, spies and even human shields (Bouwman, 2016). These children mostly do not even reach their eighteenth birthday and yet have experienced in ones opinion a childhood that is a living nightmare.

Besides the fact, that mostly their guns are even taller than they are (see
Fig. 2), the paradox, of how these children become dependent on the people that made them kill their own parents and loved ones, is shocking to me. There are many articles, books and documentaries on this topic, which one could argue does not have enough media coverage yet. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to expose this phenomenon to theoretically underpin my graduation collection. Using fashion as an influential medium, I want to raise awareness by visualizing beauty in such a brutal topic with a street wear collection and a brand philosophy, that is based on a non-profit fashion label.

(Fig. 2, child soldier wandering down a street in Uganda, Lost Children, 2005)

2: INTRODUCING A REAL LIFE STORY

If one thinks of what children usually do, things such as draw, sit at the computer, listen to music, play games, learn or help with the chores come to mind. And if that someone thinks of war, what images will he or her see? Perhaps rows of uniformed soldiers marching in step, or tanks and armoured vehicles moving in a big group, or the smoke after a bomb has exploded. The reality, however, is that the majority of wars today are civil conflicts fought with small arms (Watchlist, 2016). And the upsetting news, as reported in the Child Soldiers Global Report 2008, is that wherever such combats take place, many of those fighting soldiers are children (Adam, 2008).

Yet how often do pictures of a child holding an AK-47 or pulling a grenade come to someone’s mind? Somewhat one such story of a recruited child has become widely known: A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldiers
provides firsthand experiences of Ishmael Beah, a former child soldier in Sierra Leone (Beah, 2007). Attacked by rebel forces, then being forced to separate from the family, Beah decided to avoid his abduction into the armed conflict that destroyed his village and enveloped his country. Eventually, hunger, self-doubt and solitude led him to join the armed government forces. Without realizing he has been forced, to not only fight against the rebel groups but to commit acts of extreme violence against innocent civilians along the way. One may ascertain, that the story of Beah is shocking, it is not a unique one. He was just one child soldier of approximately 250,000 boys and girls (WarChild, 2016) taking part in wars in more than twenty countries around the world at any given time over the last two decades (Adam, 2008). His experiences written down in his book have increased awareness of the circumstances of child soldiers, who are living most of our nightmares, including murder, mutilation and rape (Beah, 2007).

3: CHILD SOLDIERS AND RECRUITMENT

As the author Dr. Heather Montgomery argues in her lectures about childhood studies, the definition of childhood differs from culture to culture (Montgomery, 2013). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, “every human being below the age of 18” (Human Rights, 2002) is usually characterized as a “child”. The 2007 Paris Principles clarify “a child associated with an armed force or armed group” 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, including but not limited to children, boys, and girls used as fighters, cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes. It does not only refer to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities” (The Paris Principles, 2007). The average age of child soldiers is between thirteen and eighteen, though many groups include children with the age of twelve or even under (Beah, 2007).

Beah, for example, fought alongside an eleven-year old and a seven-year old. He saw the youngest one critically wounded by a rocket-propelled grenade, and remembers the child “[crying] for his mother in the most painfully piercing voice that I had ever heard” (Beah, 2007). So did for example, an eleven-year-old girl, who has been abducted by the Revolutionary United Front
in Sierra Leone see “people get their hands cut off, a ten-year old girl raped and then die, and so many men and women burned alive”. She stated: “So many times I just cried inside my heart, because I didn't dare cry out loud” (Ensalaco and Maijka, 2005).

Stuart Maslen, the Coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers reported that “in states such as Angola, Burundi, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sudan and Uganda, children, some no more than seven or eight years of age, are recruited by government armed forces almost as a matter of course,” although are rebel forces of Sierra Leone known for their recruitment of children as young as five (Maslen, 2000). The Child Soldiers Global Report 2008 states, there are twenty one countries or territories around the globe that made use of children taking part in armed conflicts between 2004 and 2007 (see Fig. 3).

(Fig.3, countries that deal with children fighting in armed conflicts, Willinger, 2016)

Today there are child soldiers in many nations around the world, including the Central African Republic, Chad, Somalia, Uganda, Myanmar (Burma) Sudan, Iraq, Colombia and Sri Lanka (Bouwman, 2016). Government and non-state forces, both in developed and developing countries are carrying guilt. In a desperate need for fighters developing countries tend to use younger children in conflicts, and even the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand have used youths as young as seventeen in armed conflicts (Owen, 2014).

When thinking of child soldiers, one would argue that mostly boys will
come to mind, yet girls not only fight on the front lines but also provide domestic labor and therefore serve as 'wives'. The average age of girls being recruited and then mostly used as sex slaves by the boy soldiers and adult commanders is thirteen (O'Neill, 2007). They do not even have an option to protest. Those who refuse to join the armed group will be killed or raped and soon become mothers and therefore carry the responsibility of providing food for their babies. This is not only exhausting, but also not to be wondered that most of the newborns do not survive, whether it is birth or the short life after (Mazurana and McKay, 2001).

In Child Soldiers; What about the Girls?, University of Montana researcher Dyan Mazurana and University of Wyoming professor Susan McKay argue that “the RUF’s [Revolutionary United Front’s] birthing practices in Sierra Leone included jumping on the abdomens of expectant girls and inserting objects into their vaginas to force the girls into labor well before they were properly dilated, or tying their legs together to delay birth if the forces needed to move quickly.” Besides pregnancy and forces motherhood, the repeated sexual rapes can also cause diseases, sterility and death, as well as any post-traumatic stress effects. Mazurana and McKay emphasis the important attention towards treating these girls: “Because girls are the mothers and caregivers for future generations, their health has a critical impact on the overall health of a nation and its population” (Mazurana and McKay, 2001).

4: CHILDREN – READY CANNON FODDER

In her book Childhood Deployed: Remaking Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone from 2012 Professor Susan Shepler describes that “both government and armed groups use children because they are easier to condition into fearless killing and unthinking obedience” (Shepler, 2012). Adult commanders, such as Joseph Kony (see Fig. 3), who appointed himself as the 'messiah' of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), makes beneficial use of recruited children, which are forced to serve in their ranks (Laing, 2016).

Not only are children seen as cheap and effective, but also as obedient fighters. They are easy to manipulate and impress, plentiful, hence expandable and trustworthy. This cannot be described as anything less than part of a war
strategy. Therefore, children are seen as a resource to be exploited, not only by rebel leaders but also by the military. Their undeveloped ability to notice danger means they are often not aware of taking risks and fulfill difficult assignments that adults will refuse to do.

(Fig.4, Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, Str/AP, 2015)

There are diverse ways, children can become a part of an armed group (Bouwman, 2016). Child soldier expert Michael Wessels mentions in his book Child Soldiers – From Violence to Protection that no choice of these children is a 'free choice', because it is established in horrible circumstances, including starvation, physical and sexual abuse, poverty, separation from family and their familiar environment and much more (Wessels, 2006).

"By the age of 15, I couldn't remember how many officers had used my body. In the army, my instructor was like God and he owned us. We would shoot when he said and take cover when he said. But he didn't care what happened to us. I remember the times when an officer would say, 'China, come to my place at nine o'clock'. I would spend the whole day thinking about nine o'clock and wishing time would stand still",

describes China Keitetski, the writer of the book Child Soldier, who joined an
armed group due to security reasons and difficult home situations (Keitetski, 2004). The most common and dreadful way of recruiting the children, is kidnapping them from their families. Kony and the LRA in Uganda has the highest number of abducted children, with over tens of thousands boys and girls over the past decade (WarChild, 2016).

Nelson Ojok, primary school teacher at Kilak Corner IDP camp in Pader District, northern Uganda states his confusion about the LRA: "This is a funny war. I cannot even describe it. The rebels are killing their own brothers and mothers. We are killing ourselves. We are confused" (GULU, 2003). As UNICEF reports on their website, the LRA has abducted children as young as five (UNICEF, 2002). Yet the average age of children being abducted by the LRA are between eight and sixteen, mostly after having to kill their own parents or seeing them being killed in front of them. Then forced to walk over days, carrying heavy gears and loads to the hidden camp. Those who are not able to keep up with the rest of the group or try to escape are either being brutally punished, raped or even killed.

Uganda has the highest risk of child abduction, yet there are more children in other nations that have to fear as well. “In Burundi, Bhutan, El Salvador, Ethiopia Myanmar and Mozambique”, says Wessells, children have even been taken while attending school. Same happened to children from Bangladesh and Pakistan, due to the Child Soldiers Report 2008.

5: BECOMING A KILLER – THE TACTICS

Adult commanders use tactics to manipulate these homesick and disturbed children and eventually transform them into cannon fodder. They are forced to do a test of courage, which could include the killing of anybody, including members, strangers, escapees or even members of their own family and village. By doing so, the commanders make sure, they have no more place to return to and therefore stay trustworthy towards their group. While commanders tell the children “It will make you stronger”, Wessels argues that the real motivation is to ruin the children in a way, of being immune against seeing people killed and destroy their respect for death (Wessels, 2009). In order to kill any senses of reality and deaden the effects of conscience, a variety drugs are
given to the children by the commanders (see Fig. 5). (Fig. 5, child soldiers smoking, Angola, Clive Limpkin, 1976)

According to Amnesty International, any child that refuses to take the drugs is immediately punished or gets killed. In order to motivate the children, they use the feeling of revenge. “Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you”, has been told several times to Ishmael Beah by his former commander. These successful tactics affect the conscience of children dramatically. They often feel a mixture of disgust and guilt, which reflects the children's morals and commitments of not hurting somebody (Wessels, 2009).

6: CHILD SOLDIERS – A BATTLE WE SHOULD WIN

In this paper I have referenced several books, stories and reports of child soldiers, watched non-fiction movies, documentaries and interviewed Judith Bouwman, the Coordinator of Action from WarChild, a non-profit organization for children in armed conflicts.

After gathering a plethora of information, there is only one question that has not left my mind. With the help and support of organizations for former child soldiers, is it possible to forecast a time when children will no longer have to fight in armed conflicts? The Child Soldiers Report 2008 indicates that there has never been a big release of child soldiers from armed groups, until the end of a
war in that territory (Adam, 2008). Which means, while armed conflicts persist, there are more than likely always children involved. The answer to the question seems to lie in the existence of war. In a nutshell, the only way of getting rid of the use of child soldiers, is to rid the world of war. Yet one may say that history does not bring much encouragement that this will be possible soon.

As Beah says: “I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance” (Beah, 2007). I share the same opinion and therefore, my inspiration for my collection, Camouflaged Childhood, comes from the transitional phase I found recruited kids to be in. Threatened and brainwashed by strangers, these kids are at a crossroads between holding on to their childhood and being transformed into cannon fodder. In this juncture, I have found opportunities to play with the brutalization from child to barbarian, experimenting with existing symbols for childhood and conflict. This allows my collection to raise awareness and to give the designs an unexpected edge. Especially for my graduation collection I will collaborate wit WarChild, and will donate 100% of my profit from twenty laptop cases that will be sold at the final graduation event (see Fig. 6).

(Fig.6, one of the laptop cases for sale, 100% profit goes to WarChild, 2016)

The bulletproof and bold aura of my collection is not only highlighted in its physical appearance, but also in its philosophy. I really have the desire to create and at the same time speak out, and this gives voice to creative forces and carries a strong minded aesthetic message, visualized in details and contrasts.

For example, in color I am aiming for a story-telling play within assertive
pastels and strong main colors, able to carry an identity and hold a statement. Due to my personally translated emotions, colors display bold and sophisticated confrontations, encourage rawness and bind unexplored topics with authenticity. This balance of markedly different tones brings out the bond between fragility and strength. For example, innocent calm tones challenge demonstrative silvers and blacks, visualizing the mechanic, cold and inhuman atmosphere fighting with the playfulness.

As in materials, comfort fluff and stiff fabrics emerge as attentive and essential partners, ready to merge and communicate emotions. My collection will feed on surprising combinations to suggest unthinkable and unsettling blends, to create nicely unmatched silhouettes of too big and too small. Inspired by the recruited kids collective wardrobe, as they take and wear whatever comes across. Same goes to my details and pockets, as I am aiming to attach them loosely, so they can be taken off any time and to an individual taste. It is about challenging contraries by shifting transparent materials onto layers and mixing thickness and delicacy. I want everything to have subtle hints, but bold silhouettes and details. Therefore, camouflaging guns within my print expresses hidden elements revealed only through a second reading (see Fig. 7).

(Fig.7, all over print with placed guns, own print, 2016)

The collection will be on the borderline of the strange, spicing up sporty street wear with memories of childhood, military wear and tough details of metal. I will pay special attention to functional 3D pockets, introducing
asymmetry and oversized toughness, to compose a body that is brutally shaped by the stranger. It is all about layering, adding-on, mixing all in softness when playing with the hidden and the obvious. The final end result will be a collective wardrobe with a sporty DNA, with a healthy dose of street wear, by blurring innocent and savage notions, such as ruffles combined with metal trimmings.

To conclude, I believe that the transitional phase between youth and maturity enables freedom for imagination. For me this erased area between two points in time in our lives, which has been my most important time, is interesting due to this clash and mismatch of two rules. And in this uncertain environment, I enjoy absolute freedom to express my inner urge of making a stand through my designs. As in doing so, I am using the power of contrasts to raise awareness for a suppressed topic amongst society. In this uncharted territory, I combine the clichés and play around with them in a thought-provoking way. Keeping the clashes in a subtle balance and everything for a good cause. All in all, I am trumpeting fashion, using its power as a form of contemporary and influential media.

Let's give this topic a material dimension, to wear it right on our bodies and make the world a better place!
7: SOURCE LIST

Articles:


Figure 4, Joseph Kony, the leader of the LRA, photograph:Str/AP, 2015. From: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/02/uganda-body-lords-resistance-army-deputy-okot-odhiambo

Books:


Interviews:
Bouwman, J., Coordinator Actions, private interview at WarChild office. Interview, 10 March.

Lectures:
Montgomery, H., 2013, Different Cultures, different childhoods. Lecture, 26 March.

Movies/Documentaries:
Figure 2, child soldier wandering down a street in Uganda, Ahadi A. and Stoltz O., Lost Children, 2005.
Fukunaga, C., 2015, Beasts of no Nation. DVD, Bleecker Street, Netflix.
Russell, J., 2006, Invisible Children. DVD.

Reports:
Human Rights, United Nations, Article 4, 2002 [Retrieved: 1 May 2016].
Mazurana, D., and McKay, S., 2001, Child Soldiers; What about the Girls?.
From:

The Paris Principles, 2007, Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups, p.25. From: UNICEF.org [Retrieved: 16 April 2016].

Watchlist, 2016, Children and Armed Conflict, online PDF [Retrieved: 10 March 2016].

Websites:

Figure 1, contrast of child holding a gun, while wearing a backpack saying “Let's go to school”, 1 March 2015. Photographer unknown.
From: https://journolondon.wordpress.com/2015/03/01/child-soldier-some-words-dont-belong-together/ [Retrieved: 10 April 2016].

Figure 3, Willinger, R., 2016, Terre des Hommes. From: http://www.tdh.de/was-wir-tun/themen-a-z/kindersoldaten/daten-und-fakten.html [Retrieved: 2 April 2016].

Figure 5, child soldiers smoking, Angola, Clive Limpkin, 1976. [Retrieved: 22 April 2016].


