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Source: *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (SEPTEMBER 2009), pp. 77-95

Published by: Professors World Peace Academy

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20752896>

Accessed: 20-07-2018 09:37 UTC

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CHILDREN AND WAR IN AFRICA: THE CRISIS CONTINUES IN NORTHERN UGANDA

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Since the 1990s when the nature of conflict changed from interstate to intrastate, the use of children in the battlefronts and related places has become unprecedented. This paper discusses issues on children and war based on African experiences. The paper shows how children and their surroundings suffer in war conditions and how the crisis of use of children continues in northern Uganda. Issues that face children in war refuse to go away, the paper concludes.

This paper is a version of the theoretical framework of the author's thesis on the social reintegration of war-affected children in northern Uganda. She is indebted to Inge Hutter, Peter Kanyandago and Jacques Zeleen.

INTRODUCTION

The use of children in warfare is perhaps as old as humanity. Suggestions of children's involvement in warfare range from as far back as ancient Greece (Macmillan, 2009) to the twelfth century (Honwana, 2006). Skinner (1999) points out the 1212 French and German children's crusade and the use of youth by Hitler at the end of the Third Reich. The involvement of children of Colombia, Cambodia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Croatia and Herzegovina among others (Honwana, 2006; UNICEF, 2005; Skinner, 1999) in conflict are also public knowledge, thanks to the media. Therefore, this is a historical and worldwide problem. Skinner (1999: 8) acknowledges this but at the same breath, he goes on to

say that “why African societies mistreat their children raises troubling questions for the contemporary world (p.8).” Actually, the more troubling to me is why Skinner, after showing that the use of children is also found in other countries that are not in Africa, focuses on children in African societies. Is it alright for non-African societies to use children in warfare? Even when they do, are they not mistreating their children? Alternatively, is the blame on African societies a condescending attitude towards Africans: what Macmillan (2009) somehow discusses as “The Child Soldier in North-South Relations”? Whether Skinner is blaming African societies or not, the use of children in war is offensive to childhood everywhere the crisis occurs and the world should not allow it to continue.

I prefer to use the term “war-affected children” to the most commonly used “child soldiers” which connotes more stigmatization and has an ambiguous representation in terms of soldiering as a chosen profession and children who do not have the capacity to make the choice of soldiering as their profession. My experiences in northern Uganda also show that children who have been in captivity and their parents never refer to them as soldiers; so who are we as outsiders to brand them so?

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In the contemporary world, however, the problem of war-affected children has traditionally been exposed by the humanitarian community, probably in the beginning as an offshoot of their work in humanitarian emergencies. Moreover, this literature approaches the subject of war-affected children generally from a “problem” perspective with a “fire brigade” attitude which is reflected in the titles of such literature as, Human Rights Watch’s “Forgotten Fighters” (2003), “Stolen Children”, “Abducted and Abused” and UNICEF’s “Childhood under Threat” (2005) among others. This “emergency” attitude and tone could probably be understood as expressing the need to marshal resources and support for the job these organizations need to do.

It is literature such as Sendabo’s (2004) research in Liberia, and the research spearheaded by the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa

such as “Invisible Stakeholders” (McIntyre, ed, 2005), among others, coming from the academia and attempting to study the “problem” exposed by the humanitarian community with more rigor and objective attitude. The literature from the academia is also attempting to explain the various faces of the concern for war-affected children, for instance, Afua’s “The political child” (2005) explains the interface between politics and war children and Veale’s “Collective and Individual Identities” (2005) emphasizes the issue of how war experiences change and complicates the identities of children caught up in war. However, due to its historical grounding as a problem faced by the humanitarian community, the more recent literature from the academia is still heavily influenced by the “problem” properties of the subject. This historical baggage to some extent is important to ground the problem in order to be able to define the dimensions of the problem.

CHILDHOOD, CHILDREN AND WAR

UNICEF (2005) considers childhood to be a period when children are given an opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential. This period is the space between birth and adulthood. Childhood also concerns itself with the quality of this period and thus implies a safe space in which children can grow, play and develop.

Childhood is conceived differently in different cultures (Afua, 2005) depending on different social, cultural, and economic realities (Leão, 2005). While the African child establishes social identity and position through contributions to the household and community by fetching wood and water, tending livestock, cultivating alongside adults (Leão, 2005; Afua, 2005)—and thus a continuous becoming (Afua, 2005)—the western notion of childhood is primarily based on the juridical 18 years as a limit for childhood. At 18 an individual automatically becomes an adult. Below this age, an individual is a child, innocent, and needs protection and parental guidance and is generally perceived to be lacking in maturity and judgment (Afua, 2005). But what dramatically changes on the night of the last day of the seventeenth year of life is not clear.

Due to these varying perceptions of childhood, UNICEF (2005), in its report the State of the World’s Children, adopts the Convention on the Rights of the Child definition of childhood. Understandably, the defini-

tion is human rights based with a universal set of standards for children (UNICEF, 2005) and is a reflection of western notions of childhood (Afua, 2005). To the Convention on the Rights of the Child “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (article 1). Also to adopt an “easy” (Afua, 2005) definition and perhaps to cut across the cultural divide of the African societies, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of the OAU in article 2 defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years” (OAU, 1990, article 2).

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But due to the realities and complexities of the experiences of war-affected children in Africa, this paper adopts a flexible description of the war-affected child. It considers anybody who had been abducted and/or conscripted into the armed groups before the age of eighteen years even if at the time of participating in the research on which this paper is based they were youth or young adults due to their long stay in captivity. The idea here is that, one way or the other, the children became and did things usually done by adults when still in their childhood. On the other hand, those who return from conscription and captivity as young adults are really children who had lost their right

to childhood as a “safe space to grow, play and develop” (UNICEF, 2005) through victimization. It is this right to childhood as a safe place to grow, play and develop that is lost by war-affected children.

Children do not start wars; neither do they understand their complex causes. Yet many children in the world today are growing up in families and communities in armed conflict. The changing nature of conflicts from interstate to civil wars dictates that the community—the spaces where childhood is lived and experienced—becomes the battleground. When fighting takes place where people live—in the community—it has far-reaching

consequences for children. The consequences, interdependent among themselves, range from being orphaned, emotional scars, abduction, trauma, displacement, and poverty, among others. The destruction of health and education systems as an aftermath of war means that children are deprived of education and health (UNICEF, 2005), their most valued assets.

Not only does war affect children at the general societal levels, but they experience war at very personal levels. They become combatants. Children have been conscripted, kidnapped, pressured, or duped into joining armed groups (Imogen, 2005; UNICEF, 2005; Maslen, 1997; Human Rights Watch, 2003). As combatants they not only become fighters on the front-line, they play other roles such as spies, cooks, laborers, and messengers; and for girls as sexual slaves and child mothers and wives (Veale, 2005; UNICEF, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2003; Graça, 1996).

Very often it becomes difficult to draw the thin line between children and youth combatants; “where do child victims end and youth combatants begin?” (Aning and McIntyre, 2005: 80). But childhood (and even youthfulness) is a transient period. Often people abducted as children grow to become youth while with armed groups. But there are also those who join armed groups while they are youth, in their mid or late teens. Of the two groups, it can be said that armed groups use children because they are easier than adults to condition into fearless killing and unquestioned obedience (Teferi, 2004; UNICEF, 2005; Imogen, 2005; Aning and McIntyre, 2005). However, what motivates young people to join armed groups may be a variety of economic, familial, personal and political influences that they face (Honwana, 2006; Aning and McIntyre, 2005). It could be argued that for younger children, joining armed groups is more or less through outright coercion and abduction while youths may join armed groups through a semblance of “decision making,” nevertheless coerced by other intervening factors.

Not only is war dangerous for children on the frontline. Often war forces children and their families to flee the security of their homes and neighborhoods and support systems. Others are more unfortunate to flee unaccompanied by parents and other family members into unknown territory. This normally brings a sense of loss. UNICEF (2005) explains that the period of such exile may take many years or even decades. In such a situation children are then likely to spend their childhood as refugees and displaced

persons in camps. Yet, displaced peoples' camps are places where children have to endure disease outbreaks such cholera. Displaced peoples' camps are usually places with desperate populations where there is a weak application of the rule of law, poverty, hunger, and further insecurity. All these may play on the moral fibre and the need to survive and thus expose children to sexual abuse or force them into prostitution (UNICEF, 2005).

During and after war children tend to be victims of abandoned or targeted explosives such as landmines either while playing or carrying out children's duties such as herding, fetching wood and water, in societies where these exist (UNICEF, 2005), and running errands around the village.

PREVALENCE OF CHILDREN IN AFRICAN WARS

That children have been used in armed conflict and have made their contribution to the political end results of these conflicts in Africa is no longer a disputed fact. In the past decade, civil wars, in Sierra Leone, Angola, and Sudan among others, heavily relied on the abuse of children in the battlefronts. Today, the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, involving different fighting factions continue to thrive on the use of thousands of children. The Ugandan story and the "new" wave of piracy in Somalia using underage youth are continued episodes of children as pawns of conflict. If war is politics by other means, as written by the German military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz, (1780–1831), then by fighting alongside armed groups that eventually come to take over state power, the child fighters should be an essential part of that victory by at least being redressed for the costs of the conflicts on them. In the cases where armed groups are not outright victors, they normally include children among the numbers of their fighters to show their strength and boost their influence and power at negotiations. This should make children "political subjects in their own right" (Imogen, 2005: 47).

Unfortunately, more often than not, the usefulness of children in armed conflict to those who make use of them tends to end at the victorious capture and entry into the capital or successful negotiations of a peace process. In a way, children's positive contribution to politics is rather kept silent. On the contrary, the two-sided view of fighter children as victims and perpetrators of violence and atrocities is all too common (Honwana,

2006). Notwithstanding, children from various traditional and cultural settings have been made to take part in armed conflicts across Africa. We look at how children have participated in war in some countries of Africa.

Liberia

According to Sendabo (2004), in Liberian society, the transition from childhood to adulthood took place in a traditional cultural setting through the “poro” and “sande” initiation rites. But this had been destabilized through many years of war and instability. These initiation rites taught the children allegiance to the community and spirit world while weaning them from family dependence. This way the community established control of the young boys and girls; moreover, these activities were done in top secrecy. When this traditional ritual was destabilized due to conflict and war, warlords took advantage of the vacuum and recruited children into their ranks and put them under their full control with total allegiance to them.

Against this background, Sendabo (2004: 9) explains that child soldiers in Liberia came from both rural and urban areas and that they were involved with seven different warring factions, the majority (74 percent) of which fought

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for Charles Taylor’s National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Their reasons for joining the armed groups were similar to most reasons for which children normally join armed groups (Graça, 1996): pressure from anti-government forces, revenge, access to food, being forced, among others (Sendabo, 2004:40). Having fought and carried out other duties normally assigned to them in the bush such as cooking, guarding, portering and couriering, most of the children’s experiences of war are related to seeing other children being killed, loss of family members, and their own mistreatment among others. In spite of this seemingly negative experience of war, some of the children (32 percent of Sendabo’s study sample) expressed

that they felt proud of their role in the war (Sendabo, 2004: 40–43). After the war, however, Sendabo's study revealed that 89 percent of the former child soldiers said they had problems in getting jobs and a place at school. Most felt rejected, dehumanized and had become beggars since they had no skills to support themselves (Sendabo, 2004: 44).

Mozambique

After its independence in 1975 Mozambique went into civil war—the parties being the government FRELIMO and the armed opposition group RENAMO. This conflict lasted for 16 years and cost thousands of lives. Sixteen years of war means that millions of children and youth grew up knowing only the horrors of war (Maslen, 1997). It is said that a great number of youth and children of both sexes joined either the government forces or the opposition armed group and became active participants of the conflict (Leão: 2005). It is also reported that many of the youth and children joined the armed struggles willingly while others were pressed into service either with a “gun to their head,” by ideological brainwashing, or by economic conditions (Maslen: 1997; Leão: 2005). Many children, however, were abducted and forced to kill and torture both friends and family in order to ensure a total disconnection from the community. Once within the armed group, life tended to be rough with severe and harsh discipline and punishment. Physical or sexual abuse, threat of death or injury constantly stared the children in the face. As is always the case, the consequences of the war were heavy on the children and youth. Between 1982 and 1986, 40 percent of the health centers were destroyed and two-thirds of the two million primary school children did not have classrooms. Lack of food, safe drinking water, and health care led to an estimated 490,000 child deaths between 1980 and 1988 (Maslen: 1997).

Against this background of long years of armed conflict an unknown but substantial number of children in Mozambique today work instead of going to school. The types of work they engage in now differ from their traditional responsibilities of hunting and herding and range from weeding and harvesting cotton, sesame, sunflower seeds and cashew nuts in rural areas. In the urban centres, and especially Maputo, children now work as street vendors, watch boys over parked cars, bus touts and domestic workers,

among others (Maslen: 1997). In this Mozambican case, many of these consequences of the long drawn-out war are being observed long after the war “ended” with the signing of the General Peace Accord in 1992.

Angola

Quoting UNICEF’s 1999 State of the World’s Children, Imogen reveals that “Angola is the worst place on earth to be a child.” This she asserts was due to the 27 long years of civil war that had a brutal and coercive use of children (Imogen, 2005; 46). This war and its leaders, like most in Africa and especially in Liberia (Sendabo: 2004), have fed on and reinvented some traditional beliefs. Among others (especially accusations of witchcraft), the Angolan conflict heavily depended on that society’s traditional belief that authority is derived from age whereby elders are accorded a special status and respect. This streak of the African culture is important in the Angolan civil war because of the war’s dependence on two personalities, Jonas Savimbi and dos Santos, and their ability to mobilize the population behind them to give them status and highlight their respective causes. Savimbi’s UNITA

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out-performed the government in this game and thus exacted unquestioning loyalty directed personally to him who made and called himself “father” of the movement. Thus over time the conflict became a battle of age, privilege and the right to rule (Imogen, 2005: 47-49). In playing out politics and tradition both parties came to understand the significance of young people for the continuation and perpetuation of their party and their own power. This realization paved the way for the forced recruitment of young people and children to increase their fighting strength and ensure that a section of the Angolan society supported them with loyalty.

During the Lusaka Peace Process over 9,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2003) child soldiers were registered but in the 1998–2002 phase of the war, informally the numbers are said to have been between 10,000 and 11,000 (Imogen, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2003). Although UNITA officially

denied having abducted children, claiming they only took children who wanted to join them or had no parents, they had a complicated manner of recruitment. They used a “tax” system in the areas they had controlled through which traditional authorities (sobas) provided young people to be drafted for service. Sometimes children were drafted after attaining a certain age or through round-ups. With time, however, there were outright abductions of children (Imogen, 2005).

Again at the battle fronts they acted as cooks, spies, porters, wives and couriers of messages to and from the battle frontlines. They had this constant fear of death or disappearing especially in enemy territory. They experienced harsh punishment for breaking rules; they were whipped for not following orders and forced to carry heavy loads (Human Rights Watch, 2003). It is also reported that to elicit compliance and break any will to attempt escape, newly captured young children were treated to forced bonding through incarceration in a deep hole for days (Imogen, 2005:54). However, some young ex-UNITA soldiers disagreed that they were conscripted forcibly but instead cited motivation by political reasons to join and fight. This is a credit to UNITA’s political education programmes which was taught in areas under their control.

After demobilization the ex-child soldiers have gone back to their families and relatives, but they lack proper food and shelter, health care and opportunities for education despite Angola’s commitment to provide for the care and recovery of victims of the conflict. Due to these conditions some of the children have expressed their preference to go back to the forces where their basic needs can be taken care of (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

CHILDREN AND WAR IN NORTHERN UGANDA

Informed by the human rights literature and my own fieldwork, this section delineates the key themes related to children and war in northern Uganda. The conflict in northern Uganda as an example of the “new wars” fought in the community took a peculiar form of extreme involvement of children. The initial formation of the rebellion from the fleeing Uganda National Liberation Army of the Tito Okello regime ousted by Museveni complexly drew in the local Acholi people through Alice Auma Lakwena’s

Holy Spirit movement. Following a myriad of internal configurations, the rebellion finally emerged to be called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) led by Joseph Kony. To continue the consolidation of the LRA, the rebel leaders started to abduct adults but, gradually, abductions solely targetted children (Dolan, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 1997).

The abductions usually took place at home, in the community, at school, by the road and everywhere. There were no spaces of safety.

The time I was abducted, I was arrested from Tochi. I had gone to gather firewood. When I was arrested, they kept moving with me, they moved with me and we mainly stayed around Alero [interview with a male formerly abducted child].

We had entered the class at 8:00 AM. At 9:00 AM they started appearing. By 9:59 AM they entered the classroom and selected us. We started moving; we moved until a certain area that I didn't know [interview with a formerly abducted girl].

In a space of about one year between June 2002 and July 2003, Human Rights Watch (2003) indicates that approximately 8,400 similar abductions of children had taken place. As indicated, the abductions were always followed by the long, winding and physically draining walking and wandering in the bush. This physical abuse was followed by more abuses including psychological torture, killings, being forced to kill, mutilate and loot in the community (Eichstaed, 2009; Allen, 2006; UNOCHA/IRIN, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003). The abductions were a deliberate guerilla strategy, a weapon of choice to systematically terrorize and subjugate the population (Allen, 2006). Some of the formerly abducted children I met with in different IDP camps shared their experiences on killings, looting and associated human rights abuses.

We were seven in number. When they arrested us they said it seems we are brothers and so they said each one should kill the other. Their leader said they should first wait; they should let us walk together. We walked together the seven of us for a long distance. Among us, four were very young so they agreed that they should kill the four. They killed them and

told us to remember what we had seen. "If you escape, we shall kill you like them" [interview with a formerly abducted boy].

We were sent to loot; two of us were ordered to break into lock-up shops in Anaka trading center. They collected sugar and biscuits. They gave us the biscuits to eat and we ate them all; when we ate the biscuits, they told us that we were to start moving. The women who were abducted were given the beans that were looted from Anaka camp; the very place where they had looted the sugar and biscuits [interview with a formerly abducted girl].

Respondent: We were beaten but also one day a certain man who was abducted was escaping; they caught him and ordered us children to beat him. We beat him; at first I didn't want to beat him, but they threatened me that if I don't want to beat him they would kill me. I then started beating him.

Interviewer: Is the man still alive?

Respondent: He died. They shot him; they killed him.

Interviewer: Did you burn places?

Respondent: We burned Alero camp and Wianono camp.

Interviewer: Did you see many people being killed?

Respondent: They killed many people. At Wianono camp they killed very many people [interview with a formerly abducted girl].

As World Vision (2004) argues, these abductions and related human rights abuses in northern Uganda became a mass hostage-taking where 20,000 children were used as political tools in the event of power and military struggle between the Museveni government and the LRA. While the LRA was the major culprit of abductions, the government of Uganda was a culprit of not giving priority in protecting its children. A signatory to the international instruments guaranteeing children's rights and having enacted its own Children's Act, Uganda failed to observe both.

A related theme to negligence of protection of children in northern Uganda was manifested in the night commuting phenomenon (UNOCHA/IRIN, 2004; Women's Commission, 2004) at the height of the conflict during Operation Iron Fist to destroy and flush out the LRA bases in southern

Sudan once and for all. Every evening children would walk many kilometers from the IDP camps to urban centres in search of safety from the LRA. The camps had become insecure. But even in the urban centres where the children converged for the night, protection was not guaranteed. Young girls especially were easy victims of sexual assault. A massive recruitment of children by the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) into the Local Defence Forces (LDUs) resulted from this new wave of insecurity (UNOCHA/IRIN, 2004; Women's Commission, 2004). The linkage here is that in the absence of dependable government protection, LDUs—children in themselves—ended up providing security for the night commuting children and the internally displaced persons.

Not only did questionable conduct of the UPDF occur in the recruitment drive of children as LDUs but the escaped/rescued children from the LRA were also a target for recruitment into the mainstream UPDF in addition to being sources of intelligence. It was a requirement for escaped/rescued children to pass through the UPDF before they could be sent to either reception centres or to their families. An army officer, in one of my interviews, told me that the official aim of requiring escaped/rescued children to pass through the army was allegedly to build confidence in the children. But responses from the field point out that recruitment and intelligence-gathering were also key to the army.

They then took me to the barracks. They took me to the barracks. From the barracks, they started questioning me. They said are you returning from the bush?.....

....You move and your feet do not hurt because you somehow give up. That boy with whom I was arrested has *decided* [emphasis mine] to join the government army. He has not come back. He joined them from Ongako [interview with a formerly abducted boy].

This boy says his colleague decided to join the army but that kind of decision is questionable. How could a boy returning from the bush join the army "from Ongako" (a small army detachment [barracks], part of the many that were spread across the IDP camps in northern Uganda to provide security to the camps)? Had the army officially announced a recruitment exercise? Normally army recruitment exercises in Uganda are

announced through the major media and there are procedures followed with senior army personnel moving to the main towns of Uganda to carry out the exercise. Could a child returning from captivity decide to join the army without reaching home to see his family?

However, the children, having served within the LRA in a context where moral and legal regimes for their protection were either broken down or simply ignored and taken for granted, and taking into account that the children had been militarized, trained and indoctrinated, participated in committing atrocities and military combat, it could “genuinely” be said that they actually acquired soldiering skills (Veale and Stavrou: 2003). It was often these arguments that the UPDF used to justify the targeting of the children in military combat as indeed the children comprised the

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majority; some say up to 80 percent of the rebels. This dilemma made the dead children in the battlefield with the UPDF be called “the killed rebels” while those who managed to escape and run away during such military engagements became the “rescued children” by the UPDF.

But whether rebels, dead or alive or rescued, these abducted children were and/or are always a son, daughter, brother, sister, niece or nephew to members of the now-traumatized community (Veale and Stavrou, 2003) and citizens of Uganda. Wars that capitalize on children whether in northern Uganda or elsewhere should not be allowed. This is why the reintegration of war-affected children after their escape/rescue should be of utmost importance. In northern Uganda, there are efforts to support the reintegration of formerly abducted children through the many reception centres and NGOs that now operate in the region. There are also efforts through the Amnesty Commission whose main objective is to be the face of government forgiveness not only to the formerly abducted children but to ex-combatants of the numerous rebellions against the Museveni government. Between themselves, the NGOs and the Commission provide some vocational skills, school fees, one-time non-food items such as cups, plates, mattresses, seeds and an equivalent of 163 US dollars. This provision of one-time materials

to formerly abducted children, some of whom spent more than half their lives in captivity, to be considered as “reintegration” is a travesty of justice to the children. The experiences of formerly abducted children are life changing. Short-term material-based humanitarian interventions are just good enough for the short term. Their reintegration needs a deliberate government effort that is long-term and multifaceted. The scenario in northern Uganda shows an apparent government neglect in this regard.

ISSUES WE STILL FACE

In the first instance, it is apparent that when conflict is on-going such as in Uganda, the type of literature on children and war in particular and conflict in general tends to be the “fire brigade” type. This may be because when conflicts escalate, it is usually the humanitarian community that tends to reach the conflict spots first. Because of this, initial reports and literature usually comes from them. One cannot therefore ignore the human rights literature which is sometimes the only source of certain types of information pertaining to conflict during a particular period. However, literature on conflicts that are officially ended tends to be more rigorous and reflective, perhaps reflecting a peace time dividend for the academia. Nonetheless, I argue that however rigorous the analysis in the post-war period, studies on children and war are still rooted in the “fire brigade” humanitarian and human rights nature of the problem.

The paper highlights the point that there seem to be no exact figures on the number of children involved with armed groups. What is available are approximations in all countries. It is not clear if this explains lack of interest, or difficulty in accounting for the children or condoning the impunity with which the children are treated. Whichever way, this tends towards a betrayal to children’s trust in adults as protectors. Even with the importance of statistics today, the world has failed to account for its war children numerically!

The failure to properly account for children caught up in war, however, raises the issue of the relevance and effectiveness of international law for these children. The 1990s and early 2000s have seen the increase of international instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Optional Protocol and the Rome Statute and UN Security Council

Resolutions 1261, 1379 and 1460, yet their effectiveness in stopping the cruel involvement of children in war is questionable. (Honwana, 2006). Skinner's (1999) optimism that international law would address the problem has not come to pass. The children of northern Uganda continued to suffer abductions and the general effects of war up to the middle of this decade when all the relevant international laws have been in place. The LRA abductions have continued in the Democratic Republic of Congo where they shifted their base into southern Sudan as we write this paper. The question therefore is, as domestic governments fail to provide protection to children in war conditions, can existing international laws be effective?

Those architects of child use in warfare in Africa manipulate cultural and traditional values and practices to either recruit or maintain the loyalty of children. For instance, the LRA used a mix of Christian and Acholi cultural traditions to especially achieve loyalty among the children they abducted. In Angola, Savimbi gave himself a position of "fatherhood" that all children had to show respect to. Perhaps this is part explanation for the cultural changes that normally accompany the end of major armed conflict. Furthermore, whether forcefully recruited through abduction or convinced by ideological politicization, children's membership in armed groups is linked to the larger African challenges of governance at the macro level and survival and livelihoods at the micro level. Because of this, majority of those who end up in armed groups are normally uneducated children mostly from rural areas or among the urban poor. It may be deduced that since rural families are economically less stable and are generally lacking in bargaining power with their governments, they end up getting less schools and education for their children and thus exposing the children to the manipulation of the more sophisticated warlords.

While in armed service, the children seem to face some identity crisis. At one time they are comrades, especially at the frontline, fighting together with their bosses and at other times they are treated like the underdogs in the group. They do all the menial and risky jobs and seem not to get all the privileges. Sometimes then the children are soldiers and at other times they are captives. But when they return home they are definitely perceived as soldiers—to the point of stigmatization—who have acquired other survival and life skills and thus have status. Thus, the issue of identity crisis is persistent both while the children are in captivity and when they return

home. While still in captivity, the crisis is within the children themselves. For a long time they do not see themselves as soldiers but “prisoners” and abducted persons. Even in language use the children refer to the rebels as “they” or “them” and themselves as “we” to make the difference between themselves and the rebels very clear. This is how a formerly abducted girl reflected on themselves as prisoners:

...when the shooting got intense, *we* ran away from *them*. *We* left *them*. *We were nine of us*. There were three girls and six boys...there was nothing to carry and then if it is there, it is usually the bigger *prisoners* who carry.

But when they return home their experience in captivity puts doubts in their minds as to whether they are not soldiers and therefore different from the other members of the community who have not had their experience. In a way, the return home poses more problems for children who have returned from captivity and their families and communities and Skinner’s (1999) concern for the stability of the family as an institution still has no clear answers under these circumstances.

Many years after the conflicts in Liberia, Mozambique and Angola, reintegration efforts in northern Uganda officially continue to be short-term and mostly institutionalized through NGOs. The philosophy of this type of reintegration seems to be based on material well-being, however short-lived that may be. It is a kind of one size fits all scenario. The long term relational issues in the community seem neglected and yet, the community and families are the last, long-term places formerly abducted children return to. Governments, UN agencies and NGOs involved in the reintegration of formerly abducted children had better change their short-term reintegration practices for those that are long-term, community-based, and in tandem with the local philosophies and practices.

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