BOOKS

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Chelpi-den Hamer's book on the youngest recruits brings to attention the prevalence of the problem of children involved in conflict in Cotê d' Ivoire. This is important because the problem of the involvement of children in conflict in the West African region has been dominated by the cases in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In this regard, the book flags another area where attention needs to be paid in relation to children in war. However, as the reader goes on, the lack of comprehensive information on the conflict in Cotê d' Ivoire as the context for Chelpi-den Hamer's "child soldiering" does not clarify to the reader if the phenomenon occurs in Liberia, Cotê d' Ivoire or in both countries.

By use of the term "child soldiers", Chelpi-den Hamer's book is part of the dominant literature referring to children who have been involved in conflict as such. This reference is the unforgiving stigma the academia, the humanitarian industry and the common man attach to these children who have been both victims and victimizers. She has no reflections on how to change the discourse on "child soldiers" by use of alternative language to be able to see such children, for instance, as "war-affected", however differently.

I however, agree with the author that the shift in practice of the prevention, demobilization and reintegration "that

only benefit children associated with armed groups, to the supply of psychological and reinsertion assistance to broadly defined 'war-affected' population" (p. 17) is remarkable. Discussing this, as far as I am aware of, as a first in the international reintegration practice is eye opening. In addition, I can also identify with self-demobilization from the experiences of our research in northern Uganda (Angucia, in press). However, the ability of the local and international NGOs to tour villages and approach village chiefs in an effort to identify children who participated in warfare in order to provide them with reinsertion assistance (p. 17), in my view takes the seriousness with which psychosocial services for children of war has reached a whole new but healthy level.

At the end of chapter 1, Chelpi-den Hamer relevantly brings out the issue of the "never known", always approximated numbers of children who participate in conflict in the Ivoirian case. She however, does not clarify whether the problem of the "opeque nature of numbers" (p. 18) as she refers to it is an "African problem" related to incomplete or inaccurate statistical records of births and deaths or even politics. In this regard, her book still leaves readers in the dark as to why the numbers of children that participate in warfare are always approximations.

For a qualitative research, the children's own voices in explaining their pre-war trajectories,

war experiences and post-war trajectories are a strength of the study. On the other hand, notwithstanding this strength, in the absence of a definition, it is not clear to the reader what trajectories refer to.

In chapter 4, the author lists the different reasons for joining the military such as self-defence to protect parents, revenge, lack of alternatives and seizing opportunity to secure food. These reasons seem to be the usual reasons for joining the armed groups as represented in Machel's 1996 basic study on children in war. However, what strikes me is the clear difference with recruitment of children in northern Uganda where the vast majority of the children were exclusively forcefully abducted. On recruitment she continues to argue that "child soldiering cannot be reduced to coerced recruits and that the youngest can exercise some degree of reflection and agency when enlisting in the military" (p. 32). Although Chelpi-den Hamer, through the children's narratives identifies coercion, logical response to a direct threat and lack of alternatives as reasons for joining, her central argument leaves the impression that the children more or less were not coerced into military life. Depending on the definition of coercion, I would consider "the most logical response to a direct threat" (p. 32) and "lack of alternatives" (p. 33) as forms of coercion that cannot leave room for a free choice to young minds to join the military. The choices the children make at this

point to join armed groups are from a position of weakness. Honwana (2006, p. 71) calls it "strategic agency". It is a survival strategy. Moreover, the author's central argument that "child soldiering cannot be reduced to coerced recruits" runs contrary to our experiences in northern Uganda as already indicated above although we are aware of the different contexts that shape children's involvement in violent armed conflicts.

Chelpi-den Hamer's discourse on demobilization exploring the triggers of demobilization shows a close relationship between the armed groups and the community. For instance, children could demobilize at the insistence of care givers, upon a visit of a parent, the death of a personal chief and bargains by a family member. These strategies of demobilization show a degree of interaction between the civilian community and the armed groups. It is different from the experiences in northern Uganda where the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) was extremely violent to the civilian community. No one would come into contact with the LRA for any express purpose. Because of this, the children mostly escaped or were rescued by the Uganda People's Defence Forces during exchange of fire or in very rare cases were released at the whims of the rebels. Therefore, the children had to cut ties with the LRA upon their self-demobilization to the extend of hiding as much as possible for fear of re-abduction.

Anymore contact with the LRA was a matter of death and life.

In her concluding remarks, the author of *The youngest recruits* asserts that "younger recruits do not necessarily follow different patterns of mobilization and demobilization than their older peers, and any statement that claims so must be challenged by empirical evidence" (p. 49). To us this appears to be a generalized statement about patterns of mobilization and demobilization for children who have been involved in conflict. We would prefer to talk about different contexts than age differences. For instance, while Chelpi-den Hamer asserts that going back to school was mostly not an option for young people who had returned from the armed groups in Cotê d'Ivoire, in northern Uganda, we found that younger formerly abducted children were returning to school in spite of their need to be supported in schooling. Our research in northern Uganda further found that the need to return to school was not only expressed by institutions as part of the external interventions but also by communities, parents and leaders in addition to the formerly abducted children themselves who looked to the school and schooling as a way of reintegration. Many of the formerly abducted children in schools felt better being in schools than in the community.

Lastly, the reader is left wondering if "reflections on child soldiering" (p. 50)

is what was supposed to be a theoretical framework and an engagement with the existing literature. One would have thought that "reflections" would reflect the author's personal experiences or thoughts on the youngest recruits. We find the author's personal experiences and or thoughts missing in the "reflections" and therefore her intentions about this section are not clear.

REFERENCES

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Honwana, A. (2006). *Child Soldiers in Africa*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
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