

Book Reviews

Invisible Stakeholders: Children and war in Africa

McIntyre, Angela (ed.) 2005.

Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies. 136 pp.

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When you hear the words ‘child soldier’, do you conjure up (as I admit to having done) the image of the child-abductee holding an AK-47 and dressed in cast-off scraps of uniform? Or the tramp of small feet of the children of Northern Uganda, portrayed in a recent documentary film, who make their way each night from the villages to the safety of towns? Or, as you approach a road junction in your car, in almost any city of Africa, and that child approaches, hand outstretched, do you think: if war broke out, that child would be better off as a soldier...

What is the truth that must lie between the perceptions of children in war as either helpless victims or the vanguards of African liberation struggles? *Invisible Stakeholders* tries to get to the truth beyond the received perceptions of children in war. Angela McIntyre was motivated, as she says, to compile this book out of concern with what, in international circles, was passing for the ‘voices of children’, or more precisely, with their disembodiment. Horror stories of rape, abduction and systematic violence from the mouths of children did serve the purpose of mobilising and galvanising sentiment against the use of children as soldiers. But, delivered by child-victims, far from home, to groups

of policy-makers and activists, they become irrational appeals, stripped of their political meaning, and ultimately alienating an important issue from broader discussions of human security. The child-as-victim approach omits fundamental truths about children's involvement in war: that child recruitment is not solely the responsibility of the Sankohs, the Konys and Taylors; that African states are failing to guarantee the rights of their children and youth; that poor governance and policies which do not answer to the majority – children and youth in this case – contribute to conflict.

Angela McIntyre makes an important demographic point: that the majority of Africa's population, unlike the so-called ageing 'developed' world, are children and young people. And young people do have agency. The ways in which bad policies impact on children are not even fully understood. Little effort is made to monitor the impact of political decisions on young people after laws are passed, conventions are signed and policies implemented.

How, then, to move beyond the stereotype? Avenues for political expression for children are virtually non-existent, since they are considered to be physically weak and mentally immature, until, as Afua Twum-Danso says in his discussion of the various Conventions on children's rights, they reach the 'magic' age of eighteen, when overnight they turn into mature responsible adults, and go to vote in elections. What of those children whose parents have died, or are sick with AIDS? Those child-headed households one hears so much, and knows so little about?

The first chapter does well in giving examples of the many ways in which African youth have found agency and political expression, from Sudan, to Ethiopia, Zanzibar and the better-known Soweto schools uprising in South Africa. Yet, for example, South African children and youth have not been involved in the politics of peace-time. Afua Twum-Danso makes the point that as long as weak political and economic structures exist and the continent remains dominated by young people, they will continue to become involved in conflicts. Thus, their large numbers and their estrangement from the formal social and political order will continue to be explosive combinations in times of political instability. It follows, as he says, that instead of advocating for the end of child soldiers, it would be more worthwhile to spend our energies addressing the structural conditions that make it easy to militarise Africa's children and youth.

Chapters two to six present case studies of children's involvement in conflict in different countries across the continent. In her chapter on Mozambique, Ana Leao notes that childhood means different things in different countries and cultures, and the concept of childhood in Africa differs widely from that of the 'developed' world. As one who lived in Mozambique during the days of the socialist revolution, I can confirm Ana Leao's assertion that young people in Mozambique were pleased to be involved in the process of social change. As one young Mozambican put it, 'I am proud of being youth because I know what I want.'

In Angola, the findings of Imogen Parsons were similar. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 1999 stated that 'Angola is the worst place in the world to be a child'. Yet Imogen Parsons found that their involvement in the war had the effect of re-creating Angolan youth as political subjects in their own right, often with strong and coherent views.

In Sierra Leone, the young people recruited into the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and other factions have been described as 'lumpen' and 'subaltern,' a factor that contributed to the violent trajectories of that war. Kwesi Aning and Angela McIntyre show how the youth involved in the Sierra Leone conflict were stigmatised, regarded as barbarians, by the elite. Yet for the most part, the children who fought were not abductees, but volunteers, and the study revealed that children often changed factions or fought for several factions. There is a notion, which the image of Sierra Leone conjures up, of innate African brutality; the idea that youth are somehow predisposed towards violence. The authors ask: 'Constructions of children and youth have served policy agendas, but have they served young people themselves?'

The chapter on Uganda unfortunately focuses on Kampala and Entebbe, rather than the area in the north of the country where the conflict is actually taking place. This does nothing to address the perceptions of children in Uganda as child abductees (those small feet tramping every night to safety in the towns).

Like an afterthought, the chapter on women always comes at the end of every book. ('Better put in a chapter on gender...'). The issue of girls and women in war, and the dual roles they assume, deserves a book to itself. Women recruited into war, and their subsequent identity crisis when the war is over, is

a universal problem. 'Rosie the Riveter' is a worldwide phenomenon, but in the case of the women who participated in the Ethiopian Tigray People's Liberation Front (ETPLF), it was aggravated by the fact that they had been recruited as children. A child recruited at twelve years of age will know nothing of how to manage a household.