



CHILD SOLDIERS IN AFRICA

Book Launch - Alcinda M Honwana

Africa Programme Event

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Research Background

During my initial research I had the chance to interview youngsters who had been involved in the conflict and I started reading a little bit more about it. I had the chance later on after my dissertation was completed and I was working for the University of Cape Town to continue my research on a grant I had been awarded. Prior to this I had had an invitation to continue with my work because of past work evaluating a project of reunification of child combatants with their families. So that is when I really started immersing myself in the topic and I followed the journey of some of the youngsters who were soldiers and were taken home to their families. I talked to them and their families and the priests, healers and people in the communities. That's when I started the research and I never stopped.

Having worked in the field for several years first in Mozambique and later in Angola I then had a chance to work at the UN with Olarno Moturu, the special representative for children in armed conflict, and that opened me to the issue from an international perspective. I had a chance to work with colleagues in Columbia and Sri Lanka, and to get to know more about the situations in Nepal and West Africa. In a way, although my book is based on my ethnographic research in Angola and Mozambique over the years, there is a lot in the book which has to do with what is happening with the issue of child soldiers internationally and I try to bring in comparisons and examples from other places and to look at the issue from a much broader perspective.

The Book

The book is organized into six chapters. There are three main arguments in the book. One is that after having looked at the issue, I came to the conclusion that the issue of child soldiers is not one that happens by chance because there is no man power or because the adult population is disappearing. I am convinced that this is a carefully crafted strategy of war and that child soldiers are systematically recruited and abducted; some of them volunteer of course but there is a system of bringing young children or youngsters to the forefront of the conflict in a very particular way and there are strong similarities across cases: in Cambodia, in Mozambique, and in Uganda for example. Another point that I make in the book is that it is very common to look at child soldiers as a homogeneous group, especially because we look upon them as victims. So we try to brand this group as one group of victims. But my research showed me how complex the issue is and how heterogeneous this group is and how many layers are in it and I think that is what makes the issue interesting to look at. Of course they are victims, of course they have been instrumentalized but we cannot forget that they have also been perpetrators of violence; how can we reconcile with this? The very concept of the child soldier is an oxymoron; it's a paradox because we look at children as innocent, vulnerable, and needing protection. But the image of the soldier is of the strong, mature defender, and so in a way my book has been constructed within this paradox and our ideas about what a child is and what a soldier is. My second main argument looks at this duality of the child and soldier and how uneasy this cohabitation is, but how in reality it happens and we are dealing with it today.

The third area that I really make a point of in the book, and that links up with my previous research on cultural politics, traditional healing, and how political powers deal with this, is the reintegration and the rehabilitation of these children. I think this is very much tied to context and culture and in this regard I think a lot is going on in communities to deal with the problem of child soldiers from a cultural standpoint. For example, healing strategies for child soldiers and understandings of what a child is and how a child ought to be treated have a very strong cultural and social resonance and so my book has a large section that deals with local understandings of children, the relationship between childhood and adulthood, of war and trauma, local understandings of distress, and also understandings of how individuals can be regenerated after such processes. I have long

descriptions of community rituals for rebuilding society and how children are part of those processes.

I think that in conceptual terms, ideas about agency and contexts are really key to this whole study, because in a way all local communities and the children who are involved in conflict and the warring parties have an agency in this. The tendency is to look at the children as devoid of agency and so what I tried to bring into my book is the agency of children. In dealing with that I look at these children not just as the simple victims who are abducted and the empty vessels into whom we just pour violence and terror, which is a fact and I'm not denying that, but I'm also trying to look beyond that and look at how they are various things at the same time. There is the child who cries at the end of combat, the child who is frightened, but also the child who is a fierce fighter that is able to chop people's limbs off and do all these horrible things. And there are those who do it because there is some thrill in it, even if they don't accept this. And we have different types. There are those who join because they want to avenge their parents or they want to prevent fighting in their own village or their village would be burned. Also there are situations in which parents or families would rather send the children to a group because sending them into a war theater is the best protection they can give them. So by giving these examples I wanted to bring the complexity of what is going on with child soldiers. It is one of the most terrible issues that has happened in the context of war and it is not surprising that the international community has taken the issue so seriously to the point of creating in 1997 a special office at the UN just to deal with it. Of course, we have UNICEF which deals with children's issues but after the Machel report of 1996 which was commissioned just to look at this issue, the decision was made to establish an office at the office of the Secretary-General, with a top-level special representative just to deal with the issue.

The first chapter of the book outlines the conflicts in Mozambique and Angola, the two places where I worked, and the trend on what we know and how this issue of child soldiers has been evolving.

The second chapter is the chapter that discusses the issue of child soldiers from a broader perspective. I tried not to isolate the children from a number of social, political and economic processes that are going on in the war, for example warfare trends and

how our ideas about war are changing and the relationship between civilians and combatants, and I link that to international law and how international law also sees the issue and how children are perceived in international law. But I also look at the issue from an historical point of view, because we know that this is not new. Historically, children have been at the forefront of conflict since the middle ages and we know that in Napoleon's wars and in Nelson's navy, there were young twelve year-olds as cadets in the navy, etc. But what is happening today that makes this issue so major, that makes it unprecedented, what is new about it is the extent of it, our consciousness of human rights, and how our understanding of childhood has changed. And some of this might also be linked to the debate on child labour. Those are the kinds of general issues that I discuss on that second chapter. I also link it to ideas about why it is that children are more easily manipulated. What are psychologists saying about developmental issues, about how children absorb things, etc. But I also discuss some ideas about Africa as not being the scenario for this kind of phenomenon, because there have been some remarks in the literature that say well, of course in Africa it is about initiation rights and the transition to adulthood, hunting and all that so war may be a natural step. So I refute those kinds of arguments and I show that historically, although young people have been linked, there is a whole process of preparing societies for war and issues like that. So that second chapter really is to try and take key issues and the debate on old wars, new wars, civilians, child soldiers, international law and give a broader discussion in situating my own position and the materials that come out of my research.

Chapter three is about recruitment and initiation into violence, and of course in terms of recruitment, there is forced recruitment, there is voluntary recruitment and there is also the question of how voluntary recruitment is, given the conditions people live in and what do we mean by voluntary. And when we talk about forced recruitment, in what circumstances it happens, how, etc. I also try to bring the stories of the children, what happened to them. I do have lots of quotes in the book, although I do not use their names for their own protection, but I try to bring in their voices in that chapter. One thing that I try to capture is the moment in which they feel so strong and they did this and they did that and their war name was Rambo, and then they say "and then I was missing mum and dad". I try and bring in that kind of contrast and the humanity in what is going on.

My Chapter four is about girls, because girls tend to be forgotten. It is more common when we talk about child soldiers that we think of the boys. However, I did a lot of research with girls and I must confess that it was extremely difficult to do research with girls because all of the sexual violence and sexual exploitation that girls endure during conflict is something that becomes taboo in the communities, because it has a lot to do with the family and how it looks in the family. So there is a tendency not to talk about it. In 1999, I managed to spend some months in Mozambique in a place that had been greatly affected by the war. I interviewed about thirty young women. Most of them had babies that they brought from the military camps and some of them did not even know who the fathers were. It was through a prolonged presence with them and the help of an NGO that was supporting them that I managed to get through some of the issues. But I'm sure I got to just the tip of the iceberg and there is a lot more to be said about that. With regard to the issue of girls, it is true that most of what we see in the literature is to do with rape, sexual abuse and sexual violence and that is very important, but I also try to look at another side which the girls brought up which is the labour exploitation of girls. Some of them have physical deformations because they were the ones carrying ammunition and heavy loads. So they have serious problems because they were the carriers. But also they were the ones cleaning and cooking in the camps, doing all the work. That tends not to be brought to the surface because the issue of sexual abuse comes up a lot.

In my Chapter 5, I discuss the healing process; what I mean about the quest for healing, and I discuss ideas about trauma, I discuss the extent to which modern psychotherapy, taking psychologists to a setting like Mozambique and doing one-to-one therapy, would be a solution. I look at the rituals that are going on in the communities, and which are spontaneous. Families, groups, churches and associations do those kinds of things and I try to see what are the possibilities for combining the approaches. Of course there are merits in various approaches. I noticed that communities are very open to accommodate and learn, and to bring in their own perspective in accommodating with others. I also discuss the relationship with death and the dead and the living, and the fact that when one kills somebody, what happens when you are not protected and what is the impact on the young ten year old who kills somebody; what happens to the spirit of the dead. That is the cosmology of the communities with whom I worked in southern Mozambique

and in Angola. There is very deep knowledge and traditions and understandings about those issues. And all that has an impact on the healing process.

In my last chapter, I look at reintegration, the demobilization processes, what are the main difficulties involved and what are the prospects for these young children and youths that are involved. Why these community rituals are slowly helping children to adjust and communities to rebuild themselves; one thing that we cannot forget is that these youngsters are being reintegrated into very impoverished social settings, completely devastated by war, in which schools are not available, medical facilities and healthcare are not available, unemployment is high or there is no employment. These are societies that are struggling to come to terms and to rebuild themselves, and in those kinds of circumstances, there is no ritual alone that can do it. Some NGOs have started programmes for education, vocational training, but we still have a long way to go. The full rehabilitation of these children has to be a combination of poverty eradication, full economic recovery with all these other social-cultural issues.

Discussant: Victoria Forbes Adam, Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers

First of all I would like to say thank you to Alcinda for this book which really provides a powerful and horrifying reminder of what children's experiences in war are actually like. It was also fascinating to read such detailed information about the healing rituals used to assist child soldiers in Angola and Mozambique to return to their communities. Such information gathered first-hand is incredibly valuable in understanding what works and what does not work and in establishing good practice for future reintegration programmes in other parts of the world.

We at the Coalition fully endorse the book's concluding statements, in particular, that the only way to effectively address both the causes and consequences of child soldiering is through broader projects of poverty reduction and socio-economic development and that should include long-term well-funded carefully conceived programmes for vocational training designed to meet the actual needs of the children and the young adults in the places where they live and are going to live.

I would like to make some brief comments on two of the key issues discussed in the book: international law and community healing progress. The book rightly argues that international humanitarian law and human rights law have failed to protect children from armed conflict effectively. It argues cogently that the provisions of these laws must be much more widely disseminated and discussed amongst local communities, and there should be a marriage between international law and more localized notions of children's rights and protection. Our experience working with local NGO partners has shown that the marriage can work very successfully and that once these laws are understood and linked to localized notions, they can provide an important framework both around which to mobilize community action and to lobby governments to respect their obligations vis-à-vis former child soldiers and as a matter of fact other disenfranchised members of any community in the sense that human rights law provides a set of common social values and a legal recourse that defines the scope of protection. It is perhaps worth noting that international treaties on child recruitment have had a significant impact on government recruitment practices. It is much more difficult to imagine a government adopting an official or even unofficial recruitment programme of children today than it was ten years ago, and thousands of children have been demobilized from government armies, so I think international law has played a significant and effective role in relation to government armed forces. Obviously the question of armed political groups is infinitely more complex and problematic. The fact that the Rome Statute of the international criminal court has now defined the recruitment of children under 15 years old as a war crime is also hugely significant. The indictment of child recruiters by this and a special court in Sierra Leone is likely to have an impact on recruitment practices across Africa and elsewhere in the world. Achieving the full implementation of human rights law is a slow process and a discouraging one at times, but I think it is not necessarily an irrelevant one.

Turning to another big theme of the book; the question of healing and local healing processes and rituals. With respect to healing mechanisms, the wealth of detailed anthropological and other documentation, including through Alcinda's work, has established very clearly the need to embed healing work through local contexts and meaning systems. I am not sure that the polarity between Western and non-Western models is as extreme as pictured here at certain points in the book. Contemporary studies in psychiatry and psychology emphasise the need for more holistic approaches

which take into account cultural meanings, symbols and relationships in treating children who have suffered abusive or violent experiences. There may be room for complementarities and strategies which combine elements of both Western medical and indigenous approaches, which Alcinda mentioned at the end of her presentation. I wanted to ask Alcinda whether programmes she researched, the healing mechanisms, were evaluated in any way in terms of their impact and their effectiveness and how the children themselves responded to those programmes. Has there been a critical analysis of what has worked and what has not worked? Are localized healing rituals sufficient to address the grievances of victims and indeed the situation of children who have committed serious human rights violations or the most serious cases of violence? Do these localized practices serve to satisfy victims' needs for redress, which might be an element of the process reconstruction of society in the long-term process of building a sustainable peace? What are the short-comings of the mechanisms; do some of them not work? Given that tens of thousands of children are emerging from violent armed conflict in Africa alone at this time, there is an enormous need to establish good practice and to exchange information across the continent but also across the globe. It would also be interesting to have a sense of the political dynamics of the reintegration process at the community level; who controls the healing mechanisms? What role do government officials or other political or NGO actors play? While there is evidence of discrimination against particular groups of returned child soldiers, many NGOs, for example in Congo and Sierra Leone, have documented community rejection of girls who were formerly associated with armed forces, who have been raped or indeed simply married to a military commander. Localized notions in these cases of female defilement or contamination have served to exclude girls in those cases from community reintegration programmes and I wondered how the communities addressed those kinds of structural inequalities, and how could that discrimination be addresses. I think this is a key question, for example for reintegration in the Congo. I will conclude here, and once again thank Alcinda for opening up this important and quite painful debate.

Discussant: 'Funmi Olonisakin, King's College, London

I will start with one of the remarks that Alcinda made. One of the reasons why I was eager to come here this evening was to have a reunion with an old colleague in this very interesting debate and subject of children affected by armed conflict. I was with Alcinda

in the office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. She made reference to the Machel report and the appointment of the Special Representative for children affected by armed conflict. This debate is 10 years old. About 10 years ago in 1996, we had the Machel Report, which led to the appointment of Olara Ottunu as Special Representative. The excitement of working on this issue at that time was that this singular issue of child soldiers was at the heart of a broader agenda of children affected by armed conflict. It represented a number of challenges for people trying to resolve multiple challenges on the international peace and security scene. At the UN the first task was to try to put this agenda on the larger agenda of the UN Security Council. We fought tooth and nail to do this. I make this introduction because all of a sudden ten years later we understand the subject or we think we understand the subject and it is no longer a strange thing to talk about child soldiers or children affected by armed conflict. But there are several gaps that existed at the time, and I want to argue that those gaps still exist now.

The debate in New York and the struggle to place it in the international peace and security agenda was especially crucial because we dealt with gaps between the knowledge base (research and academia) and policy and practice. We all wanted the same things but were using different methods and were not always talking to each other. This also represented a far bigger gap between the security and development communities; globally, regionally and nationally. Yet we all fight for the common goal of global security and development, in order to have the kind of stability that will eliminate poverty. This subject highlights the most difficult challenge that we all have. Therefore I think that Alcinda's book helps us to begin to bridge the knowledge gap, because the challenge in 1996, and until now, was that those who agitated to improve the situation in the field and reduce the number of children bearing arms were hindered by the lack of data. The Coalition started trying to gather data a few years back, to provide a clearer idea of numbers of child soldiers. That knowledge gap remains, but it is possible to see systematically over the last few years the growth in academia of the study of children affected by armed conflict. So there is improvement, we are beginning to achieve results. But unless people like Alcinda begin to document what is going on elsewhere, we cannot begin to formulate the right policy. That is why some of us saw the gaps between policy and practice.

As for the contribution of the book, I want to highlight three issues. One which I have mentioned already is how it positions the issue of child soldiery: she emphasizes that multiple issues affect children in general. It is not about child soldiering alone, but the economic and social environment that are linked with the issue. Related to this is that context is important. She talks about the Angolan and Mozambican contexts. Having read her book, it is possible to see how the same issues occur in Sierra Leone, in Liberia and across other parts of Africa, and I am sure these issues reveal themselves in Asia and Latin America. So context is specific, but in her book there are lessons that have global relevance and regional relevance, lessons for integration and especially lessons for the way we have to work together across disciplines and professions.

Lastly and related to this is the whole multidisciplinary challenge that confronts us who have to resolve the issue of children affected by armed conflict. I went to the United Nations as someone who focused on regional peace and security issues and the subject of peacekeeping, and there I realized that the child soldiers issue represents the soft belly of the problem and constitutes an important entry point for discussing larger peace and security issues. Yet this is the one area where many leaders can pay lip service to dealing with the problem, nobody wants to be caught not attending to the issue of children and so they sign a lot of agreements and documents. This represents the single-most important problem internationally: unless the mindset of leaders and different actors really truly changes, we cannot find the kind of change that we are looking for. Failure to address this issue in an effective manner is a failure of the global system and points to the fact that we have not managed to resolve the larger development and security issues. To conclude, I think that Alcinda's book is extremely interesting because of the way it focuses on several disciplines at the same time: sociology, economics, health, security, development. It goes back to the issue of poverty, which is the issue through which we can address that of child soldiers. The real problem, which is a challenge of the international community, is that of international law. In 2000 there was a great debate at the UN, when the special court in Sierra Leone commenced. The question was how to deal with children who had been involved in atrocities, if they should be treated solely as victims, or as criminals under international law. This was a major debate. The main problem is that unless we achieve a level of coordination and treat seriously seemingly basic issues like the role of children in our societies, we cannot deal with the greater problem of international peace and security at large. Thank you.