

Book review

Magali Chelpi-den Hamer (2010) *Youngest recruits: pre-war, war and post-war experiences in Cote d'Ivoire*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam: University Press

This book sets out to investigate the life experiences of former child soldiers between the ages of 8 to 14 years in Cote d'Ivoire. The author assessed the pre war, wartime and post war experiences through qualitative methods over a six month period. The main respondents were former child soldiers between the ages of 14–19 years. The author interviewed 21 of the respondents. Other results were obtained through reading children's profiles held by the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) called Organization for the Development of Women's Activities (ODAFEM) One of the questions the author attempted to answer was what made the children enlist in armed groups, whether the rebel forces or the national army? The author also sought to raise awareness of the complexity of child soldiering, and to point out the multiplicity of patterns in six chapters. Some of the findings included that some child soldiers demobilised themselves when they heard that they had an option to register at a project, others were directed by humanitarian staff or their military commanders, and others were traced back to their villages when NGOs toured war affected areas to provide support to children formerly associated with armed forces. It was also found that children displayed a high degree of resilience, and had few or no ties to society. The author further

gives the reader information that 'reinsertion' activities started in Man in February 2005, and at ODAFEM in the summer of 2006.

This 77-page book is an interesting read for any individual who would like introductory information about the issue of child soldiers in Africa. The content reflects a summary of the broad topic, covering pre war, war and post war trajectories of child soldiers in Cote d'Ivoire. The strength of this study is that it allows children (mostly adults at the time of the interview) to speak for themselves in semi-structured interviews and data are presented verbatim.

There are a few limitations to this study. The author was supported by an NGO (ODAFEM) and introduced herself as a researcher affiliated to an NGO (The International Rescue Committee – IRC) supporting reintegration of former child soldiers. This could have prompted the former child soldiers to say what they perceived as appropriate information for her.

The author does not refer to scholarly studies on child soldiers, reintegration, NGO work or armed conflict – which I believe would add value to concrete analysis of the data obtained during fieldwork.

Although the author is at pains to show that it is child agency that made children enlist for armed rebellion, and how this theory contributes to child soldiering, she misses the point when she fails to reflect on the young age of these children and the *context* in which they 'made decisions' to join armed struggles. For example, all the 21 respondents narrated how they were poor, lacked basic necessities for school and were already school

dropouts, as well as living in the context of armed conflict. These latter points could be major contributors that facilitated their choices to join the armed struggle, and not the children's own agency. So, I do not agree with the author when she is reluctant to present crucial issues clearly, but instead preferring to lump together both major and minor factors that may have contributed to children's involvement in the armed struggle in Cote d'Ivoire. Lumping the ideas together that were presented in the respondents' narratives gives the impression that the author could have foreseen the contradiction in discussing the agency of former child soldiers – especially in connection with '*voluntary decisions*,' '*motivations*,' which instead show the children's vulnerability. It is important to point out that when people, including children, are exposed to dangers such as the possibility of injury, abduction, insecurity and lack of alternatives, their minds will trigger defence responses. Therefore, while in their narratives they name their dire circumstances and many other factors, it should have been possible for the author to perceive the hierarchy in factors that determined, or exposed, her respondents to child soldiering. Our findings, with an ethnographic assessment of the lives of former child soldiers in northern Uganda (Akello, Richters, & Reis, 2006), show that it is mainly coercion, fear of insecurity, and dire living circumstances that contribute to the phenomenon of child soldiering. There are a few scenarios where we found that it was rejection by the community in which former child soldiers are reintegrated that prompted them to rejoin the armed struggle. Otherwise, in northern Uganda, the rebels and the state army forcibly recruited children into the armed struggle through child abductions, or detaining rescued former child soldiers in army

barracks and later deploying them at the frontlines of battle.

I am unsure as to why the author chose to use the word *reinsertion* and not *reintegration* throughout the text. Reinsertion refers mostly to objects and not human beings. Reinsertion implies that the former child soldiers are passive, and their narratives portray their agency, their attempts to negotiate and surmount their dire circumstances.

On page 20, the author says that it is *unlikely* that the respondents understood what she had explained to them in connection to her research. If that is true, did she attempt to explain her research objectives more clearly, or did she continue to collect possibly biased information from people who did not understand what she wanted.

I also beg to differ with the author's critique of Save the Children's (2005) assertion that access to school reduces the boredom and idleness that encourages children to seek a more exciting life. Firstly, such a quote is not suitable for her work on former child soldiers who were school dropouts in the first place. Additionally, the reality is that different levels of the formal education system(s) in Africa are suitable for particular age groups. Therefore, if an 18 year old former child soldier is reluctant to join formal education, then vocational skills acquisition would be a preferred option. Furthermore, to make such a sweeping statement is uncalled for, bearing in mind that the author is basing her argument on the experiences of only 21 former child soldiers. In her book, she even provides conflicting information when she mentions that the '*school age former child soldiers interviewed (a large minority)*', despite being given make up classes, were unable to pursue their education due to lack of funds.

Furthermore, in Akello (2009), one of the recurrent themes all school-aged children

frequently raised when interviewed about their needs and priorities was that they 'would like school fees for their education'. Another interesting finding from a narrative by a former child soldier (Akello, Richters & Reis, 2009) is that what motivated him to always abduct school-aged children was 'so that he is not the only one to miss out in formal education'. So acquiring any level of formal education is not only important for children in Africa, but also an issue regarded with high importance for adults.

In my eyes, the author would have done better if she had assessed thoroughly *one* aspect of the three broad sub-themes; namely pre war, wartime and post war experiences. The book's arguments could be made stronger by seeking to first understand the meaning former child soldiers attributed to their life experiences.

References

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