Carita’s War

ABSTRACT Carolyn Nordstrom argues that millions of girl-youths are affected by political violence taking place in the world today, yet less is known about what happens to girls in war zones than to any other segment of the population. This ‘invisibility’ is not an accident, but relates to the many ‘wars’ children encounter on the frontlines. Girls suffer the assaults of war, and in addition face the escalating levels of sexual and domestic violence, poverty and social dislocation that war brings. As well, they may be preyed on by international criminal rackets exploiting the invisibility of poor girls in war zones for illegal sexual, domestic and industrial labour – the tragic underbelly of development that generates billions of dollars annually. And in an enduring irony, young girls working in informal subsistence trade are able to survive, yet their work produces financial assets for adult ‘business people’. Solutions rest with making visible girls’ realities, and the links between wartime and peacetime profiteering across legal and illegal development schemes.

KEYWORDS development; girl child; human rights abuses; informal economies; profiteering; violence

Invisible girls

Carita is invisible. It is an invisibility politically executed. She is never interviewed by the media, she is not represented in statistical indices, she is not part of the war stories bantered like cultural currency in military enclaves or produced in literature. But she stands centre stage in war and development.

Carita is a war orphan in central Angola. She survived the 1993 siege of her hometown that took 30,000 lives in less than a year. Living close to the lines that demarcate government from rebel-held areas, she has since 1993 survived subsequent battles that have continued into the 21st century. In the midst of this, Carita faces a number of other ‘wars’ as well: physical and sexual violence, landmines, violent crime, poverty, economic exploitation and the sheer wrenching pain of orphanhood. All of these forms of violence rise with the escalation
As we will see in the second half of the article, Carita, in a profound irony, is also central to
development issues. Carita was about six when I met her in 1996.
There are hundreds of thousands of children orphaned or lost from their families in war-affected
Angola. These figures also hold for the wars that have taken place in Mozambique, Sudan and Sierra
Leone, among others. Other children have been forced into militaries: UNICEF (2000) estimates
there are 300,000 child soldiers worldwide.¹

**Invisible wars**

There are taboo truths in war, ‘public secrets’ as Michael Taussig calls them: truths too real to
ignore, too challenging to political ideologies to speak. Child casualties of war are such a secret. Changing the abuses of war, and of development, involves speaking what has been politically deemed
‘unspeakable’. But this involves finding the Caritas, collecting their stories, providing solutions,
making them visible. The task is not easy. A great deal of ideological energy, as Cynthia Enloe (2000)
writes, goes into creating the impression that war is about men in uniforms fighting other men in
uniforms; and children – more importantly, innocence – is being protected. The fact that more children are
killed and tortured in political violence worldwide than soldiers (UNICEF, 1996) is a public secret. The
fact that war may well target innocence in a bid to undermine political will, rather than protect it, is
rendered invisible in politico–military parlance. It is a whitewash participated in by segments of civil society;
how can one admit one’s own soldiers have harmed infants and young girls; and conversely,
how can one admit one’s soldiers cannot protect their own children from ‘the other side’? Either
killing or being killed in ways that break public rules is not tolerated ... in speech. Girls live and die
at the epicentres of violence; we just do not talk about it.
The lives of those who manage to survive the onslaught of war encounter another series of ideolo-
gical whitewashes: what actually happens to these children? The 1990s saw the rise of public
attention challenging the ideological silences surrounding children and war (e.g. organizations like
UNICEF and Save The Children; and scholars like Cairns, Boothby, Stephens and Scheper-Hughes).
The plight of child soldiers gained international political and humanitarian attention. Unaccompa-
nied children in war zones saw the rise of programmes to reunite them with their families. Street
children, especially those killed at the hands of security personnel, began to benefit from aid pro-
grames. But for anyone walking down the roadways where street children congregate, talking
with war orphans, or sitting with child soldiers, a pattern becomes visible: the majority of these children are boys. Girls are no less affected by war assaults, orphaning and brute poverty. They are perhaps more affected by the correlates of war: domestic violence, sexual abuse, the deprivations of impoverishment, and onerous workloads. Where are they?

If you put this question to people in the war zones of southern Africa, they often respond: girls
are easier to take care of than boys, families usually take in girls who are orphaned or separated from
their families. This is certainly more true in southern Africa where extended concepts of social relationships provide a greater safety net for the unaccompanied than it does in my home country,
the USA.

But in any war zone in the world, this hides a deeper and murkier set of realities. Girls in war
zones, especially those who are orphaned, unaccompanied, or impoverished, are the target of
choice for families who want to take in children as little better than a contemporary form of slavery:
for international profiteers in child pornography and prostitution; for illegal child labour; and for
military ‘service’ where child soldier translates into domestic and sexual service (Asia Watch and The
Women’s Rights Project, 1993; Nordstrom, 1999). The fate of girls in war zones is not invisible by happen-
stance: the kindly who take in desperate children as an act of altruism are quantitatively quiet;
and the predators who profit from the plight of the war-afflicted are careful crafters of the opaque.
The opacity of profiting from the hardships of children and war hampers gaining exact figures on
both the number of children suffering these abuses.
and on the amounts of money made from the buying and selling of youths. Recent figures cite human trafficking, for example, as the third largest illicit money-making industry behind weapons and drugs. Given the fact that the United Nations estimates both arms and drugs yield half a trillion dollars a year each, trafficking is a multi-billion dollar a year enterprise. Add to this the billions made illegally in prostitution, pornography, child labour, and the uncharted service of domestic work – and the profits rival the larger industries in the world, illicit or licit. Clearly, children do not make up the majority of unregulated sexual, domestic, and industrial labour, but their numbers are growing as we enter the 21st century. Children are increasingly popular in globalizing industries for the same reasons they are in militaries – they are easily transported, they are easier to control than adults, they can use new lightweight technology (from arms to factory equipment), and they work, essentially, for free. In the era of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, children are more and more sought after as ‘disease-free’ sexual targets. War zones, desperate displaced and refugee populations, and sites of rapid socio-political change and economic collapse are the trawling grounds of unscrupulous profiteers.

Development?

The word development is often used in the literature and in policy to refer to legal, rather than illegal, processes: the means whereby a society achieves a more integrated economy, a better standard of living and a more humane set of socio-economic practices. Complex critiques cite poorly planned development strategies, but these, like the more policy-oriented works, tend to focus on the legal (or informal) aspects of socio-economic advancement. But there is an underbelly to development. Large transnational industries that are established outside of legal controls and that yield billions in profits induce, however tragically, a form of development, however illicit. This exists as a form of development because, as Manuel Castells (1998) points out, unregulated monies and goods are useless unless they are laundered into the legitimate economy. Illicit profits thus ultimately translate into economic and political power through processes. In a modern alchemy, that translate unregulated gains into usability in the formal economy. By exploiting economic niches outside formal state regulated economies, non-state (non-legal) transnational practices can, in the most successful cases, rival the financial and economic power of legal systems. This, then, represents another facet of Carita’s war.

In the wake of vast socio-political transformations marking many regions of the world, and in the midst of the rapid economic changes attending to these – changes that herald the weakening of some economic empires and the wildcatting of vast wealth by others – unregulated practices and profits can thrive. In fact they can provide the capital and the resources to create new economic power regimes (Berdal and Malone, 2000; Nordstrom, 2000a, b). Such profits may quite literally be made on the backs of women, and of girls. The politics of power and the struggle for slices of the globalizing financial pie are written, in part, across the bodies and the labour of girls like Carita. Invisible girls – invisible, that is, to ethical and legal reckoning. The invisibility is not an accident, nor is it the product of a marginalized criminal ‘element’. Too much money is at stake: state and non-state actors alike can see immense profits flowing from the (underage) sexual industry, from unregulated (child) labour, from conquests wrought at the hands of (youth) soldiers. Collusion renders invisibility.

Profound ironies of survival and development

I met Carita one day when she and a group of children showed me how to dig for ‘buried treasure’: goods that had been in buildings hit by bombs and buried in the earth after the flooring had been destroyed. The children would then seek to sell these goods, or barter them for life’s necessities. After digging for a while, Carita jumped up and set a large and heavy can on her head, full of grain. She said she had work to do. Carita survived not only on the goods she could scavenge from bomb-out buildings, but from doing trade in life’s essentials like grains. This large can introduces the irony
mentioned at the beginning of this article – that Carita, in the midst of war and the challenges of childhood, is involved with development.

To explain, one needs to see Carita within a larger context. War and struggling state infrastructures have produced an 'economy' in Angola that is 90 percent informal. While billions exchange hands in the illicit gem (and other luxury resources) enterprises that have helped fuel the war, much of the average citizenry depends on the informal economy to gain access to basics like grains, clothing and medicines.\(^2\)

The word 'informal economy' tends to conjure up pictures of adult women bartering in foods and clothing, and men in hand-labour. This picture, however accurate in part, becomes a mechanism of invisibility when it is the only image representing the informal sector. Carita, and all the children like her, fall out of this picture. The importance of the informal sector also falls out of this picture – Angola is highly dependent on the informal sector, and it is not unique: 50 percent of Italy’s, Peru’s, and Kenya’s economies, and perhaps as much as 60 percent of Russia’s and 30 percent of the USA’s economies, enter unregulated channels (Ayers, 1996; Greif, 1996; Castells, 1998). For good or bad, the informal economy is a mainstay of the world’s economies (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Strange, 1996; Tilly, 1985). One other fact that falls out of the conventional picture of the informal economy is the powerful nature of this economy. To think of a woman selling food and second-hand clothing, or a man doing off-the-record construction work, calls up an idea of earnings that constitute a miniscule percentage of total GNP. But as the UNDP economist Alexander Aboyage (personal communication) says:

one woman transporting one basket of tomatoes is a small transaction, but 11 million women in Angola transporting 11 million baskets of tomatoes is a significant aspect of the economy. The problem is we forget to add up all the informal transactions to see how fundamental they are to a country’s economy.

Carita’s selling a can of grain is survival for her. One person, one basket of tomatoes. But in truth, Carita’s poverty – the deprivation of being an orphan – means she is readily accessible to fuel larger economic gain. Someone gives Carita the grain, and takes a percentage of the profits. The irony is profound: in this way Angolans in severe poverty have a better chance of gaining the means to survive; and a handful of profiteers who oversee the international exchanges that move everything from grain to diamonds gain (literally) untold riches. If half of the economy of countries like Italy, Kenya and Russia takes place outside of formal state-regulated lines, then it would appear that extra-formal economic activities are central to contemporary societies (Reno, 1998; Roitman, 1998; Sassen, 1998). The Caritas of the world are drawn into this process.

Carita’s war is multifaceted. Simple survival for her is cast in much larger frameworks of power, privilege, gender cultures and economic gain. And because there is so much at stake, a great deal of effort by those who abuse people’s rights and those who profit from the tragic instabilities of war goes into making these activities invisible. Who wants to admit they targeted children in war, raped them, profited from their labour?

**Answers?**

The solutions will be as complex as the problems. But they involve making the invisible visible. Dealing with the entanglements of gender and power is a significant aspect of this, entanglements that to date allow a strong association between gender and economic and political authority. Yet it is important to nuance gender with power, and with criminality. Hierarchies of power can be abusive to males as well as females. In truth, boys as well as girls are bargained away into domestic, sexual and industrial labour. Boys as well as girls are raped in militarys, and can find themselves in a life little different from enforced servitude. There are no simple responses to this, no simple gender-coded hierarchy of aggression. Those whose personalities mesh with hostile hierarchies return aggression with aggression; abused boys discover they can abuse weaker boys and girls. But many, females and males alike, eschew mistreatment altogether, and seek instead to replace violation with dignity (Nordstrom, 1997). Nor should we locate solely positive responses within the aid community.
dichotomized from the military and economic profiteers who engage in violence. I have seen girls raped by soldiers, prostituted by business people and sexually assaulted by INGO aid personnel. But I have also seen people in all these categories risk life and livelihood to protect the vulnerable from aggression and exploitation.

I have written elsewhere that the majority of people I meet in the most violence-ridden locales are peaceful: it seems the violence of a few can wreak chaos on the many. In the world today, a significantly higher percentage of men hold positions of power that allow abuse. But males as well as females are caught in strong cultural currents that have washed across many centuries and world’s countries – a current that simultaneously stigmatizes and profits from sexual and unregulated labour while silencing children’s rights. The issue is to change the equation that teaches that access to power rests on masculinized hierarchies that tolerate, and even encourage, human rights violations. An equation that makes non-transparent the international links between the formal and the informal, and between peacetime commercial gain in everything from arms trade to child labour and the tragedies of war. And to put this equation into the larger international context where war and violence are seen as sites of financial advantage, where development takes place along both legal channels and along the invisible paths that girls like Carita walk, and where profit steering is allowed to speak more loudly than the words of the majority of people who prefer a society where Carita is not subjected to life-threatening wars in the political sphere, the military domain, the economic realm or the domestic home.

Notes
2 In a town like Carita’s in the middle of Angola, the situation is further compounded: the lines demarcating the MPLA government controlled areas and the Unita rebel held areas are strongly militarized, and movement across these lines is controlled. Unita zones are predominately rural, and MPLA urban, which translates into a situation where Unita areas produce food, but lack goods (which tend to flow along urbanized channels), and the government zones have goods, but lack sufficient food. In such a crisis, over 60 percent of the population lives in grinding poverty. Given the militarization of the demarcation lines, trade is curtailed, and it is also essential.

References


