Girls Behind the (Front)Lines

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Q: What did you do?
A: I held my M-16 on them.
Q: Why?
A: Because they might attack.
Q: They were children and babies?
A: Yes.
Q: And they might attack? Children and babies?
A: They might've had a fully loaded grenade on them.
    The mothers might have thrown them at us.
Q: Babies?
A: Yes.
Q: Were the babies in their mother's arms?
A: I guess so.
Q: And the babies moved to attack?
A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a Counterbalance.

Paul Meadlo, court-martial testimony

Behind the rhetoric of soldiers fighting soldiers that fuels military propaganda and popular accounts of war around the world, children are maimed, tortured, starved, forced to fight, and killed in numbers that rival adult civilian casualties, and outnumber those of soldiers who die. These youthful casualties—some one and a half million in recognized armed conflicts in the last decade alone—are largely invisible: most of the military texts, the political science analyses, and the media accounts of war ignore the tactical targeting of children.

In over a decade of studying war, I have seen children victims of war lying maimed in hospitals or dead in bombed out villages, and living or dying of starvation in refugee camps and on the streets after their families and homes have been attacked. I have seen children sold into forced labor and sexual servitude by international networks of profiteers who exploit the tragedies of war and the powerlessness of children. This constitutes a multi-billion dollar transnational "industry." Despite seeing all this, I have witnessed only a very small percentage of all the children directly affected by war. When I try to find out what has happened to other children in war, what (very) little data exists concerns mainly boys. This prompts me to ask: Where are the girls?

The more I ask this question, the less I find an answer. Cynthia Enloe demanded a new sensibility in political studies when she insisted we ask: "where are the women in politics, in conflict, and in political solutions?" In answering Enloe's question, I could find women . . . I could follow their stories.
Not all, not most, by any means. But I could see women during my time in warzones: they told stories and traded and set up healing programs. But girls were largely, dangerously, invisible. Outside of families, they disappeared from sight; they had no agency to direct their lives, to talk and trade and set up healing programs, they never spoke on the radio, their words were not recorded in newsprint, political scientists did not quote them, NGOs did not interview them.

When one tries to track the plight of girls in warzones, one finds the images of children in war obviously circumscribed. While bombing victims are rife in military and media presentations, discussions of the torture of children by state security forces are rare. While starvation among refugee children is frequently analyzed and photographed, the rape of these children is far less evident. While forcefully conscripting children into militaries has been studied in both academia and popular documentaries, the contemporary slaving of war orphans had been far more hidden, especially when the buyers are Westerners. Likewise, military texts seldom publicly document the strategic targeting of children, even though frontline realities show how frequently these strategies are pursued.

In the warzones I have visited, girls are actors in the drama and tragedy of war along with adults. They are targeted for attack, they devise escapes, they endure torture, they carry food to the needy, they forge a politics of belief and action. In general accounts of war—not the few excellent ethnographies focusing specifically on children—I look for children actors, and usually find none. Girls, children, are acted upon; they are listed as casualties—they do not act. They are not presented as having identities, politics, morals, and agendas for war or peace.

What we hear and do not hear about the world we occupy is no accident. If reality is socially constructed, if we are the architects of our world and the cultures that give it meaning and vibrancy, knowledge is a profound resource. Shaping knowledge, and a lack of knowledge, constitutes a basic element of power. Silences—spheres where knowledge has been kept from public awareness—are undeniably political. So, what lies behind the silence about children in war, and why does it happen?

Two years of trying to locate girls in the warzones of Mozambique have raised many questions about the very premises of war. Where war is the worst, where suffering is at its greatest—the least is known. It is simply too difficult to travel to the hotspots erupting in the world, too difficult to get people's stories on the frontlines. The sad truth is that no one knows what occurred in the hundreds of towns and villages in Mozambique (and thousands in the world like them) when the violence closed down the links with the NGOs, the administrators, the reporters, and the researchers. When we ask the questions: where are the girls? what is their experience of the war?, no answer is possible. Even the most concerned researchers can not track the lives of girls in such towns under fire.

Following the plight of girls across time as well as across warzones complicates an already difficult task. The one million people killed in the 15 years of war left some 200,000 to 300,000 orphans. During my fieldwork, I continually asked after the orphans: what became of them? Many simply shrugged their shoulders; local Mozambicans generally responded that someone took them into their own
families. There is a strong tradition of such care in Mozambique. More than once I visited friends whose families had grown by a child or two from the last time I saw them: war-orphans, they had taken them in.

But this is not the full story. Thousands of children were visible on the streets of the major cities. Virtually all of them were boys. I mentioned to people that not all children found homes, otherwise there would not be street children. But when I asked: where were the girls?, the answers were vague. People claimed girls were easier to care for than boys, and thus they fit more readily into established families. Yet no one has followed the path of the hundreds of thousands of orphaned girls to find out what has really happened to them.

Although I met children taken into caring homes, I also encountered girls who did not fare as well. Their story is as much a part of war. We must recognize the international networks of illegal racketeering that are spawned in times of war. One example of this occurred in 1991 while I was in Mozambique.

In the midst of a war where public violence is often associated with armed forces, collective civilian actions stand out. In 1991, groups of civilians gathered in one of the suburbs of the capital city Maputo, and then stopped and overturned certain vehicles and beat their occupants. The media explanations focused on *feiticeira*: African medicine used for ill gain. For example: body parts, often of children, are said to be used in the more powerful and dangerous medicines of *feiticeira*. The general word on these disturbances in Maputo was that children from the area were being kidnapped and killed to make these medicines. Many of the cars targeted in the attacks had South African registries. This happened when the apartheid South African government was aiding Renamo’s war in Mozambique.

Having worked with African healers for over a year, this explanation rang false to me. When I examined the allegations of “feiticeira and the body parts racket,” I found a different and more insidious truth behind these disturbances. A thriving international industry had emerged to sell Mozambican children into white South African homes as domestics or as sexual slaves. The attacks described were launched against the people running children across the border. War orphans, those who had fled war and been separated from their families, the poor and desperate, were the targets of this trade in humans.

Curiously, while the stories of selling “body parts” in pursuit of “sorcery” were widely circulated in the media, the actual selling of living children was not. A handful of industrious journalists documented the sale of children into white South African homes and businesses. The international media did not feature the stories. The reluctance to report may have resulted from the rumors that covering such racketeering could ruin more than merely a journalist’s career.

Networks that sell children internationally do not result merely from the work of a few amoral individuals. Business, government and military officials worldwide have greased the wheels, and their own pockets, in such illegal enterprises. Accusations of *feiticeira* may be a safe way to discuss child disappearances. But largely lost are the links among war, network profiteers, illegal border transfers, and abusive labor practices. Exactly who did the selling and buying, and how, was certainly not documented, either because the specifics were too
difficult to obtain or too dangerous to print. As a result, the children's plight has not changed, and their experiences have remained largely silenced.

As a profound irony of war and peacebuilding, young girls found themselves vulnerable to the sexual predation of the thousands of peacekeepers who passed through Mozambique in the 2 years between the 1992 Peace Accord and the 1994 elections. Each transient carried with him his own values about his rights as a soldier, as a peacekeeper, and (since most peacekeepers were male) as a man. Many peacekeepers were dedicated to their jobs and to the rights of the Mozambicans. But some abused the rights of girls (and boys).

International justice systems tolerate the sexual exploitation of children; no U.N. soldier has yet been prosecuted for child rape or prostitution. Attitudes that seem to rationalize soldiers acting in this way only make matters worse. For example, the head of the U.N. mission in Cambodia, Yasushi Akashi, was asked about the physical and sexual violation of women and girls by U.N. troops. He responded by saying that he was "not a 'puritan': 18-year old, hot blooded soldiers had a right to drink a few beers and chase after 'young beautiful things of the opposite sex'." Akashi left Cambodia to direct the U.N. peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia where his attitudes, in that powderkeg of sexual violations, can have only fanned the flames of human rights violations.

These are international abuses, transcending different regions and peoples. While many nationalities were implicated in the sexual abuse of children in Mozambique, the Italians were considered the worst offenders. M. Poston, who studied these abuses, claims that while local Mozambican officials knew about the Italian soldiers, they were afraid to make complaints about U.N. personnel—a clear indication of the power relations in operation.

A report was made, and some soldiers were sent home (but the numbers of soldiers discharged and their nationalities were kept quiet). The report stated that while the sexual trade in children did exist, it certainly was not restricted to the U.N. soldiers. To many, this merely constituted a whitewash. But it points to a deeper injustice: the sexual abuse of children is a human rights abuse racket that extends across societies and nationalities.

We must be cautious against "othering" violence against children. The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect just finished a two and a half year nationwide study, and found levels of fatal abuse and neglect far greater than even experts had previously realized. The report, entitled "A Nation's Shame: Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States," found abuse and neglect in the home a leading cause of child deaths. Possibly more shocking, most abused and neglected children are under the age of four. This abuse, claiming the lives of at least 2,000 children and seriously injuring more than 140,000 each year, has been declared a public health crisis.

In some cases, the level of abuse children suffer in "peaceful societies" may rival, or surpass, that in countries at war, as the above report demonstrates. We should beware of looking at the abuse of children in war, in another country, in another culture, in a different context, as if that were somehow different, more barbaric, than the patterns of abuse that characterize our own everyday cultures, in peace or in war. What people tolerate in peace and in the domestic sphere configures what takes place in war. Rather than seeing "war abuses" or "child
exploitation" as "outside" the rules and boundaries of "average" or "normal" society, we should instead be asking what makes such behaviors possible wherever they are found, what patterns of in/tolerance link them, and how they can be changed.

As of 1995, 168 countries—home to 90% of the world’s children—have endorsed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, making it the most widely ratified human rights convention in history. Children are thus forced to live at the epicenter of the following irony: The major civil and human rights abuses children face are perpetuated by adults, yet children must rely on adults to protect their rights.

Children have no direct access to U.N. forums and decision-making consuls; nor to direct representation in courts of law; nor to State’s policy forming committees; nor to NGO grants. In fact, children may find it difficult to elicit police protection, to find a hospital on their own, or to learn what rights they have in the many local, national, and international laws and conventions. They are bound by laws made without their input, and governed by institutions they cannot control, which may or may not protect their rights. A child who faces abuse at the hands of an adult learns that not all adults uphold the laws of the land; yet they also learn that only adults can rectify the situation.

What are normally considered "war accounts" and "problems of peace-time" have been juxtaposed here to show that the distinctions between war-zones and peace-zones are not only blurred, they are interfused. The profiteering institutions that abuse children are not isolated to countries or regions; to "war" or "peace." The networks that make such trafficking possible are multinational industries with global linkages. Any hard and fast divisions between "war(zones)" and "peace(zones)" is not only misleading but also dangerously wrong. Such divisions obscure the processes by which abuses of power and privilege—and by extension the solutions to these abuses—can be carried out. Only by understanding how abuses are constructed across social and political settings can we work to dismantle them.

International systems that exploit children are carefully constructed and consciously used by people, maintained within societies, and often tolerated in legal practice despite actual laws. They exist, even flourish, across divisions and zones of contention. These systems of abuse put billions of dollars into specific people's pockets. Specific people benefit, or think they benefit from exploiting, or ignoring the exploitation, of children.

Challenging the belief in the naturalness of separating "war(zones)" and "peace(zones)" helps clarify the mechanisms that sustain these systems of abuse. Social habits move fluidly across conflict zones; they are put into place by people whose actions resonate across war and peace. To put this point bluntly: would we as readily find the physical and sexual abuse of children in war if child prostitution did not flourish in many countries, if domestic violence and incest were not tacitly allowed by virtue of the fact that these crimes are so very difficult to formally uncover and prosecute?

Many of those who take sex tours to patronize underage girls and boys are unlikely to find the abuse or exploitation of children in war, or in peace, a significant cause for concern. Those who are encouraged to use physical and
sexual violence against noncombatants and youths in war also have families and personal lives themselves—and a number carry these kinds of abusive actions back into their communities with them. Studies show that domestic violence (physical and sexual) increases dramatically during war; and that people in uniform show significantly higher rates of domestic and sexual violations in war and out. That legal systems have so rarely prosecuted violators of children's rights, and in fact have often persecuted the victims themselves in peace or in war shows that this is not idiosyncratic but rather a system of social practices that permeate civil, judicial, governmental, and military structures.

This should not be overgeneralized: many people work diligently for human rights, and they have created institutional systems that help rectify the injustices perpetuated in the contemporary world. When we can answer the question of "where are the girls" with hard facts and not a few anecdotes, we will know the latter are succeeding.

Ending the silences and gaps in the empirical data on the plight of girls in war and in "peace" is a major avenue for beginning to solve these problems. Nowhere is it more true than here that what is not known cannot be solved.

Sadly, we simply do not have adequate information on what happens to girls in war and out. In war we need to ask: what percentage of casualties are girls? How many are tactically targeted for torture or terror-warfare? How many girls, as well as women, are in rape camps? What do they face, if they survive, when they return home? And because statistics on social and political violence are more political discourses than accurate accountings (how many armies readily admit that more children are killed in war than soldiers, or that children are tortured in political prisons?), we must do direct fieldwork and not rely solely on second-hand data.

We must follow these questions out from war to map the international systems of child exploitation: what children are "bought" by whom and sold to whom for what purposes? What governmental, business, and il/legal networks make this possible, and what are their interrelationships? Who benefits, and how? If public opinion continues to see the exploitation of children as the random product of anti-social fragments of society, and not as a well-developed transnational industry, however illegal, the mechanisms by which this industry can be dismantled or made just will not become evident.

Finally, we must ask girls to tell their own stories of war, its impact, and potential solutions, rather than assuming the right to speak for them. If people misrepresent girl's experiences and opinions, the latter have little recourse to rectify the misinformation: they have virtually no access to publishing, media, public presentations, and formal organizations. It is woefully easy to silence children's own words and realities.

Children often have a well-developed moral, political, and philosophical understanding of the events in their lives and worlds. Years of research on the front lines of war have taught me that even very young children have profound opinions on conditions of justice and injustice, violence and peace, in their lives. Children fight and are fought against. UNICEF broke ground in the survey it sponsored in south-east Rwanda after the recent genocidal conflict. It found that almost 56% of the children interviewed had seen children kill people, and 42%
saw children kill other children. And on the other side of the equation, children worldwide have been involved in sophisticated peacebuilding efforts. From *Youth for Peace* in Northern Ireland to the peacebuilding work of the YWCA of Sri Lanka and the youth groups of South Africa, children have been working to forge viable platforms for peaceful coexistence. As adults, we have a real obligation to support these initiatives.

Examples worldwide show children to be far more politically aware, more morally developed, and more actively involved in conflict and its resolution than most portrayals suggest. Adults do not necessarily impart responsibly to youths in a one way process. Responsibility can flow from youths to adults as well.

**RECOMMENDED READINGS**


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