Reflections on Children and Armed Conflict:
Popular Discourse, Intergenerational Realities, & Implications for Canada

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The rebels attacked my village and I was separated from my parents. . . . [They] threatened to kill me if I made any attempt to run away. I didn’t want to die so I joined them. I was afraid of being around these dangerous men with all kinds of weapons... I had no mom, no dad, sister or brother...I was alone for the first time in my life. As time went on and the killing happened everyday, we all became used to it...After some time, the violence became part of me. Now that the war is over, my community refers to me as part of the evil ones...They don’t love me anymore...they despise me now (Ken, former boy soldier, Sierra Leone; Denov, 2010).

Popular Discourse on Children and Armed Conflict

Wars are dramatically altering the lives of children around the world with devastating social, political, economic, psychological and health effects. Children are affected by armed conflict as victims, participants and witnesses, and like Ken, who was abducted by an armed group at the age of nine, are all three simultaneously. What is both remarkable and inspiring about the responses of the youth in this year’s Shaking the Movers report, was the accuracy of their knowledge of issues surrounding children and armed conflict, and more importantly, the sensitivity with which they explored the issue. The media and popular discourse often portrays the realities of child soldiers within the narrow dichotomies of the “helpless victim” on the one hand, or the “dangerous and threatening perpetrator” on the other. What was so impressive was the complexity with which the youth in Shaking the Movers (STM) understood and discussed the issue of children affected by armed conflict. Through their comments, and the photograph of the four STM participants with the words “killer”, “violent”, “rejected”, “unstable” on their backs, the youth clearly appreciated the “messiness”, blurred lines, and multi-faceted consequences of children’s roles and realities in relation to armed conflict.

Intergenerational Realities

Another striking point made by the youth in Shaking the Movers was in relation to the effects of armed conflict on families. As this youth noted: “[war is] affecting the families as well since children are taken away and the other siblings need to take their responsibility at home”. While much attention has focused on the children themselves, and their lives during and following war, less attention has been paid to families, as well as the intergenerational impact of war. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners are recognizing the importance of using approaches that pay greater attention to a child’s broader social context, including family and community. This socio-ecological approach begins with the notion that children cannot be considered or studied in isolation from their surrounding context. The approach deemphasizes the individual as the sole focus of research and practice and instead consider a “child’s well-being from an individual, familial, social, cultural and political perspective” (Tol et al., 2014: 200). It recognizes that
children’s lives and experiences are constantly shaped and influenced by the powerful structures, communities and individuals that encircle them, as well as the dynamic interactions and relationships between these elements. In relation to children affected by war, vital “systems”—whether family, school, and peer group—are key determinants of war-affected children’s developmental outcomes (Boothby et al., 2006). For example, the family, including extended family in many parts of the world, is the key microsystem within which children develop and where basic protections and needs are provided. The relevance of family and community spaces in contributing to, or hindering, children’s well-being cannot be understated. For many former child soldiers, a key part of their struggle in the aftermath of war is feeling rejected by their families and communities. Moreover, families and local communities can contribute a rich array of cultural resources—including traditions, elders and community leaders, and community processes and tools, such as rituals and ceremonies—to assist in the development of psychosocial assistance (Kostelny, 2006). Exploring the issue of children affected by war from a socio-ecological and intergenerational perspective can help to open up new lines of inquiry into youth, family, and community and their unique capacities to contribute to their own healthy development. The youth in *Shaking the Movers* understood this intimately, underscoring how family and community life dramatically shifts and alters as a result of war.

In addition, given that many former child soldiers may have experienced sexual violence within armed groups, with some girls bearing children born of wartime rape, socio-ecological approaches can work to ensure that the lives and realities of multi-generations of children are included in research and practice. As such, when considering the plight of child soldiers, a socio-ecological and intergenerational approach would not only take into account the rights and well-being of child soldiers, but also the rights and well-being of their children.

**Implications for Canada**

Countries like Canada are indirectly, yet intimately touched by war. Each year, thousands of children enter Canada, fleeing war zones (Stewart, 2011). In the province of Quebec, between 2003 and 2012, 7 of the top 10 source countries for accepted refugees were war-affected nations, representing nearly 27,000 people (MICC, 2015). Moreover, given the scale of the recent humanitarian crisis in Syria and the nine million people displaced, Quebec increased its 2015 and 2016 admissions target for Syrian refugees, while Canada will receive 25,000 refugees by spring 2016. The youth in *Shaking the Movers* discussed how the issue of war is closely connected to life in Canada, touches the lives of Canadians, and is an issue that all Canadians need to be aware of. As this youth noted: “*My dad got captured by the army when he was at the age of 15 but he managed to escape.*”

Resettlement from a war-affected context is both complex and multi-faceted. Children and youth displaced from war zones witness or directly experience severe and unimaginable violence and upheaval. They have often lived in societies where basic social structures and systems have been degraded or completely collapsed. In addition, the experience of flight from their country of origin may involve threats to their safety, as well as the complexities of resettlement to a new context (Denov & Bryan, 2010). While there is great variability in young people’s experiences of war, flight, migration and resettlement, children and youth displaced from war zones may endure significant trauma, stress, and adversity that can severely impact their functioning and
development (Betancourt et al., 2010). For those children who make their way to Canada, war-related mental health distress may occur alongside poverty, discrimination, isolation, language barriers and difficulties in school (Denov & Blanchet-Cohen, 2016). As a host nation, Canada must be prepared to provide effective resettlement and integration support and services to children and families. And yet, research has highlighted that not only are war-affected children in Canada an under-served population, but also that these youth feel that current services are not sufficiently meeting their migration and resettlement needs (Denov & Blanchet-Cohen, 2014).

This points to the importance of involving young people who have experienced war in the design and evaluation of services and programs. Young people’s right to participation has been established by the UNCRC as an overarching guiding principle, and explicitly stated in Article 12, yet young people are rarely included in the creation and monitoring of protection policies and program (Checkoway, 2011). Recognition of participation is especially a shift with respect to war-affected children given the predominant emphasis on children’s maladaptive, antisocial behaviour in the aftermath of war, as well as negative physical and mental health outcomes in research and programming (Derluyn, Broekaert & Schuyten, 2008). UNICEF (2009) has however stated: “young people should be seen…as survivors and active participants in creating solutions, not just as victims or problems” (p. 6). By involving war-affected young people one can hope to create services and programs that they will actually use and benefit from. Indeed further research is warranted however in establishing how best to involve war-affected young people in such programming.

There is often an assumption that children affected by armed conflict and child soldiers are forever destined to a post-war life of violence and trauma. This is simply untrue. Youth in many such situations survive and in some cases thrive, raising families, taking on leadership roles in their communities, ultimately becoming key contributors to their families, schools, communities, and societies. In contrast to the popular media images of children holding guns, this is the real image of a child soldier, and the one that the youth in STM clearly understood.
Bibliography


