

Recruiting Children for Armed Conflict

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In this talk we have heard a plea for interdisciplinarity in the study of violent conflict; the speaker stressed the importance of integration of knowledge produced in different social science disciplines with 'disparate research traditions' (p.1). He arrived to this point starting from economy and going into conflict studies, studies of child labour and studies in child psychology.

I wish to endorse this plea, and stress that such an integration of knowledge would prove to provide us with important **complementary insights** into the realities we seek to understand and eventually change. I have arrived to this point starting from another direction – going towards economy, from sociology, anthropology, conflict studies and gender studies.

So how would a research in child soldiering look from the disciplinary traditions that I come from?

First, there would be a difference in methods and in data.

Instead of starting from models and experimental evidence, an anthropologist would start from lived realities and experiential evidence. In place of comparative statistics and quantitative data, a feminist anthropologist would use different ethnographic methods to gather qualitative data.

Then there would be a difference in defining the concepts:

The conceptual link between child soldiering and child labour, so insightfully provided in the key note, would have a different twist.

Next to being seen as a form of employment, child soldiering would also been related to forced labour, and even – as some authors already argued – as a form of modern slave labour (mazurana et al); because in central Africa especially, child soldiers slave in the diamond and coltane mines, and labelled as `mules' walk on foot across the continent to transfer the goods from a war zone to a war zone;

The significant insight of the key note speaker that shows links between traditional practices of child labour within a local community and within a military unit would be studied in such a way so as to make visible not only all the many different forms and types of labour that children engage in, in peace-times as well as in war-times, but also, it would allow us to see more precisely what type of labour is done by boys and what by girls of different age groups, and what are the trajectories of both combatant and non-combatant labour of these different groups;

A feminist researcher would look at these issues from a perspective of how dominant notions of masculinity and femininity impact upon social expectations regarding employment, work and labour of boys and girls and exiting options for work; social value placed on the work of boys and girls; and social division of labour between boys and girls.

A concept of force and violence would also be important within a qualitative ethnographic tradition, as it is here within a quantitative economic tradition. But then, probably, the approach would be slightly different. Violence would not be seen only as a functional, utilitarian means for securing a cost-benefit for the military unit - though this aspect is immensely important. Most horrendous forms of physical violence against child soldiers is used in order to control and punish them, while the violence of utter neglect is used because children are in many places of the world of an unlimited supply, and when one is sick and wounded, it is cheaper to let her die and get another one.

But a feminist ethnographer would also look more closely at different forms of violence and symbolic meanings of violence. Because violence is not only functional – it is also ritual and symbolic. It is not used only to punish but also to mark social and symbolic positioning and the status of the actors. Violence of a child soldier forced to assault another child soldier within one's own unit does not have the same meaning as violence of that child against his or her family or community; sexual violence in particular is symbolic as well as functional, and the symbolic meaning differs depending who is violated, and how;

finally, a feminist ethnographer would relate sexual violence and labour and examine the sex-labour of girls involved in protective alliances with soldiers and military commanders as an important survival strategy and symbolic marker of different types of masculinities and femininities in war;

'Contextual factors' would also be conceptualized differently by a feminist ethnographer. For her, a 'context' would not be synonymous for a 'local' – a rural community, or even a military group and its organization; for her context would be defined by the positioning of this local community within the regional, national and global geo-political, social and economic realities and their gendered structures of inequality and exclusion;

Thus, third significant difference coming from different disciplinary traditions would be that of a focus of research:

A feminist ethnographer interested in economies of war would look not only at local economy of supply and demand of child soldiers as determining the number of children and patterns of recruiting, but also at global economy of supply and demand of goods (such as coltan and diamonds) for which child soldiers fight and labour;

She would look not only at local markets for child soldiers but also at global markets of goods that child soldiering helps extract, produce, protect and transport;

She would look not only at economic aspects of local military organization and the place of child soldiers in it, but also at militarized aspects of global economy and the role of child soldiering in this militarization;

A final difference I wish to mention here would then be in the research

questions: a question about the numbers of child soldiers and the patterns of their recruiting by specific local militaries would be placed within a larger question:

in what ways these gendered local economies of child soldiering become an element in the global redistribution of power, and in what ways gendering of global political and economic realities become an element of the local process of recruiting children for soldiering;

The fact that an economist entering other social science and an anthropologist entering economy would focus on different aspects of the realities of child soldiering, and use different methods, conceptualizations and questions is a result of the `disparate research traditions' that they come from. But it is precisely these traditions and these different directions from which the scientists would come into the research that would enrich our work because they would allow us to look at researched realities in a much more complex, and thus much more useful way.