

Violent Conflicts, Human Rights and the Fate of the African Child

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Abstract

Children are said to be the leaders of tomorrow, and the only way they can become good leaders of tomorrow is through education and the reinforcement of social values. Also, by inculcating societal norms and standards in them at an early age which will go a long way in moulding them to secure a good future for them in the society. This will in turn have the rippling effect of creating a descent society. This goal can however be achieved, only if a conducive environment is created to tender and nurture the greatness in them. The family and the community at large play an essential role in order to attain this objective of helping a child to lead a meaningful life. During wars the family structure and communal bond is attacked, everyman struggles for himself, and the survival instinct comes into play. However, children by their very nature are naive, harmless and extremely vulnerable, yet they are exploited and taken advantage of by those who are expected to take care of them. It is sad to note that in times of war, they are subjected to varying degrees of horror. Even though they are by no means the cause of the conflict; nevertheless, they are made to reap what they did not sow, children are subjected to most extreme cases of violence. This work advocates that great premium should be placed on the rights of a child, such that it would discourage violation. This paper further discusses some of the humiliating and horrifying experiences children go through in times of war.

Key words: War, Education, Children. Peace, Human Right.

Introduction

Many parts of the world in recent times have witnessed an unprecedented level of conflict and security challenges. In most cases, conflicts are ignited by greed, power tussle, territorial considerations and selfish interest of selected few who have economic resources in their control. The resulting consequence brings about huge destruction in its wake, cutting across every sphere of the society. Children are the worst hit by the horrors of war (Barbara: 2006). There are several ways by which children are affected by war which include being deprived of education

and health care, sometimes recruited as child soldiers, permanent disability and paying the ultimate price of death. For the female child, the additional cross they are made to carry usually entails being forced to satisfy sexual pleasure. This brutal dehumanization causes them an incurable emotional injury which last a life time.

Gone are the days of honour, where battlefields were the place for men to tread, where men fight to defend their nation and protect their wives and children with every atom of strength in them. Today we now find ourselves in a sorry situation where children are made to bear arms and fight wars in order to serve the selfish interest of a few. Children participate in wars as active soldiers. In Uganda, the National Resistance Army had an estimated 3,000 children, many under 16, including 500 girls (Dodge and Raundelen: 1991). It was revealed that in 25 countries, many children under the age of 16 have fought in wars. In 1988 alone, a staggering 200,000 children fought in wars (Ressler et al, 1993).

The ultimate price which children are made to pay as a direct consequence of war is death. Their innocent life is cut short as they are exposed to the highest risk in times of war. Many child soldiers die in war front as a result of their inexperience as their young minds are not skilled enough in the art of war. They are sent to the front line to embark on a suicide mission because they are introduced to lethal weapons at a tender age. During the war in Mozambique, approximately one million deaths was recorded with 60 percent children under the age of 15 (Massue, 1999). Also, in former Yugoslavia alone, 15,000 children were killed (Sutton-Redner, N.A). While there are well documented afflictions of the child during war and peace time in many parts of the world, this work advocates that more energy should be channelled towards the protection and the elevation of the rights of the child. Such that violations of their rights would attract profound consequence because of their vulnerability and special needs.

Conceptual Clarification

The dictionary meaning of war as defined by (Dictionary.com) is a conflict carried on by force of arms, between nations or between parties within a nation, either on land, sea or air. This definition expresses the fact that any conflict involving the use of arms, regardless of the manner in which it is carried out, or the parties involved amounts to war. According to Sherman (1864), he described war as cruelty that cannot be refined and that those who bring war deserve all the curses and maledictions a people can pour out.

Edo and Adeyeri (2013) while quoting Preston (1956) described war as a conflict between rival groups through the use of arms or other means. He stated further that a state of war may exist even without the use of arms and in the absence of violence. In the light of the above, war is explained in this context to include the neglect, refusal to protect the child from violence, attack, oppression or assault on the rights the child.

Education involves the process of equipping the human mind with the right skill, competence and the understanding to effectively participate in the society (Ofojebe, 2014). Education therefore promotes the dual objective of creating the right attitude that ensures the resolution of conflict in a non violent way and to appreciate the diversity in the society. Peace education also entails inculcating positive values as an agent of change in the attitude people and disposition towards

the others. The absence of these values fuel the lack of respect for humanity. Also Adesina and Odejobi (2011) explain peace education as an effort geared to acquire and develop the values of social integration. From the above, education is a vehicle through which attention can be drawn to the ills in the society through the creation of the appropriate disposition in order to achieve the desired goal.

Article 1 of the Convention of the Rights of a Child defines a child as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country prescribe a younger age of adulthood. The above description leaves room for a lower standard provided it is stated so by the relevant law in the jurisdiction. In Nigeria, the Child Right's Act 2003 also puts the age of a child as a person who has not attained the age of 18 years. This work would adopt this standard for determining who a child is.

Peace is when people are able to resolve conflicts without violence and can work together to improve the quality of lives (International Alert 2016). The word peace also connotes calmness within an individual and peace of mind. It is all encompassing free from strife or fear. Peace is simply the absence of violence, and can only endure when human right is respected.

Human right can be described as a claim a person makes on the society by virtue of their humanity. It is foundation on which a peaceful coexistence within a society is built. Human right is built freedom, mutual obligation and corresponding respect for the sanctity of life devoid of discrimination. It is referred to as an inalienable right guaranteed to every individual by virtue of their humanity (Edo and Adeyeri, 2013).

Selected Conflicts in Africa

A. NIGERIA

In Nigeria, it is no more news that the Islamic sets Boko haram are responsible for several indiscriminate killings and attack of citizens including women and children. The menace of Boko haram has been felt in several Northern states in Nigeria with particular attacks on government institutions, schools, markets, and churches to mention a few (P.M News, 2013). In Madugari State of Nigeria, in an attack on a market by Boko haram, it was reported by Vanguard news paper that not less than 30 people died including an undisclosed number of women and children in a gun fire and bomb explosions (Vanguard, 2012). In another report, it was stated the Islamist set (Boko haram) attacked a village (Musari village in Maduguri) tying up women and children before slitting their throats (Umar, 2012). In April 2014, the Boko Haram sect abducted over 200 girls from their hostels in Chibok, Bornu State and its now over 662 days the girls are yet to be found (#BringBackOurGirls, 2016).

B. DARFUR, SUDAN

There has been much debate over categorizing the situation in Darfur as genocide. The conflict in Darfur, Sudan, which started in 2003, was declared "genocide" by United States Secretary of State, Colin Powell in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (Jamal and Williams 2005).

C. LIBYA

Libya is another African Country that has recently witnessed the bitter horrors of war and yet to get over it. In what initially started as a protest in 2011 ended up in a 6 months civil war. Like every other war, the Libyan experience witnessed a plethora of human rights violations. Children as young as 8 years old were sexually assaulted and raped (The Guardian, 2011)

Also, in modern warfare where aerial strikes abound, civilians are more prone to attacks. The recent bombing of civilians in Libya is a life example of how a government may exhibit total disregard for the life of its citizens. It must however be stated that the killing of an adult cannot be justified let alone a child. This is because the minds behind these wars are so clever that they keep their own children miles away from arms way and yet they exhibit total disregard for human life in other people's children.

Human Rights Violation

A. Deprivation of Health Care and Education

A direct consequence of war is unrest and instability in the polity. Whenever peace ceases to exist, the normal flow of daily life is greatly altered, access to food and drugs are limited or nil. Crop production and distribution are crippled thereby causing denial of access to food. Children are the worst hit in times like this as their growing bodies require a lot of food to grow, hence, they become acutely undernourished. They become very weak from fatigue and are prone to diseases. All these combinations put together become tragic. It was revealed in a 1980 study in Uganda that 20% of death of children in times of war was caused by disease while hunger accounted for about 78% of death, only 2% of the death was as a result of children caught in cross fire (Ressler et al, 1993. 97).

Medical personnel and teachers in schools are not exempted from the tales of war. Sometimes they too have to take to flight themselves in order to keep blood running in their veins. Even the few doctors who are brave enough to stay back to render emergency services have their hands full and may have to work in places not so conducive. Another problem they face is that they cannot adequately keep up with the outrageous demand that calls for their attention and are quickly stretched beyond their limit. In addition to this, they sometimes run short of drugs or lack essential equipment.

Schools are also shutdown; teachers and students alike also flee for their lives. They have to travel from troubled areas to safer zones. In Sudan, over 20,000 young people between the age of 7 and 17 had to leave their homes in order to avoid being cut in cross fire (Zutt, 1994). Many a time will children at flight get separated from their parents, and would have to remain on their own. Children who find themselves in these situations would have education least in their minds; the only focus on their mind would be their survival. In many situations, schools and hospitals are under attack, thereby rendering it unsafe. In Mozambique, 2,655 primary schools, 22 high schools, 36 boarding schools situated in rural areas were destroyed thus preventing around 600,000 children in those areas from having access to education (Ratllat: 1989). With regard to violent acts such as these, the devastating effects are still felt years after the war is ended.

B. Sexual Exploitation and Torture

The girl child does not find herself in an enviable position as they are opened to additional risk of sexual violence. They are beaten and forced to sex. At times, the unlucky girls are gang-raped and even lose their lives. Sometimes rape is used as weapon against other ethnic groups in order to destroy communal ties. Young girls and women are constantly placed under the fear of rape and torture. In most cases, torture precedes or accompanies rape as the girls are not always willing to submit themselves to abuse. Alarming is the fact that sexual violence and exploitation cannot be solely placed at the door step of soldiers or militia groups at war. Peace keepers and humanitarian aid workers who ought to protect them are equally dead guilty of this unwholesome act of rape (Robinson, 2009).

Those who become pregnant and give birth will always have something for the rest of their lives to remind them of their horrors of war. The surviving products of such unwanted pregnancies often become problems to their single parents and the society. Where victims prefer abortion, risk of death is enhanced as mode of procurement is often crude. A report on Bosnia revealed that over 20,000 women were raped since fighting broke out in 1992.

C. Long Term Effects of War on Children

The psychological damage and trauma caused on children by indecent acts during wars cannot be overlooked. Children are by cruel acts deprived of great potentials and in most cases, they will never be able to make a meaningful contribution to the society (Udombana, 2006) The lucky ones who are rescued from the horrors of war have been shaken to the roots and are set back many years. This makes it difficult for them to easily find a place in the society. The problems brought on these children during wars are legion and are in exhaustible. There are instances where children witness violent death of a family member, sometimes they are made to participate in violent acts thus even after the war they display highly aggressive behaviour, others have night mares, depression, fear of attack and some retain the bitter memories of war for the rest of their lives.

It should be stated that violence against children is not only in times of war but also in times of relative peace. In a recent report on violence on children in Nigeria by National Population Commission, it was revealed that 6 out of 10 children below 18 years of age suffer varying degrees of physical, sexual and emotional violence (UNICEF Nigeria 2015).

Conclusion

Even though there are legal frame work to protect children from abuse and terrible crimes, most of the instruments does not have enforcement mechanisms and as such, many of the perpetrators of the abuse(s) on children are left untouched. Recently, a Congolese warlord, Thomas Lubanga, who employed the use of child soldiers to fight for his militia became the first person to be convicted by the International Criminal Court since its inception in 2012. Although his conviction was a step in the right direction, and a plus to the protection the child in times of armed conflict. It is argued that the I. C. C. should be empowered to impose the maximum penalty of death in other to deter other perpetrators of heinous crimes against children and the society at large.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the human rights of a child is flagrantly violated at times of conflict, and sadly enough, the cost of enforcing these rights are enormous. The saying that children are the leaders of tomorrow is a big tale recognized only in its breach. Were it not so, what sane society would allow its children to get involved in wars? And if we all stand by and watch without lending a helping hand to the child, then we will only create a world at war with children.

As aptly captured in the words Udombana²⁰

“...that belligerents should not justify their infringements of children’s rights on any “mitigating circumstances”, and that all ostensible explanations are doomed from the outset unless militants recognize the basic fact that children have no business carrying dangerous weapons. The participation of children in armed conflict teaches them the law of violence and entails mortal danger for the children and for the many that are exposed to children’s erratic response”.

It is therefore necessary that a collective action should be put in place to refine our values towards children not as vehicles of war but as gift from God; as leaders of tomorrow. Our legal system should include strict and proactive provisions such that the perpetrators of these inexcusable crimes against children should not be treated with kid’s gloves, so that the society and the world would be a better place for the child to live. It is therefore advocated that stiffer penalties to be placed on the violation of the rights of a child.

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