



Children in Distress

*Written by FAITH NKOMO
Edited by JONATHAN MUNDELL¹*

Over the past two months, news from various countries across the African continent has featured stories focussed on children. These stories have unearthed some of the worst crimes against the children of Africa, ranging from abduction, to trafficking and child soldiers; the list is endless. The children of Africa are suffering because of the irresponsibility of the men and women who are supposed to be responsible for their care. The vulnerability of children puts them at great risk of being influenced by their elders, and in Africa, these children are often being used in industries such as sex trade and drug trafficking, because they are easy to influence. In addition, they are often used for cheap labour, denying them the chance of a real childhood, and abusing their rights as children, and abusing their rights as the future of the African continent.

Reports accusing a group of French citizens in Chad of the abduction of 103 children have been a topic of much discussion over the past few months. The group was accused of illegally transporting the children from Chad to Europe, in an attempt to deliver the children from a state of poverty and impoverishment. These French nationals stated that they were taking the children, supposedly orphans, to Europe to place them in "host families". However, Chadians reacted in anger to these actions, saying that the children were being trafficked and were going to be used as slaves and in sex trade. Following their arrest, the group claimed that they belonged to Children Rescue, a French NGO created by the association, "L'Arche de Zoe", which is run by fire-fighters in the Paris suburb of Argenteuil. However, it has now been discovered that claims that the children were being rescued were in fact untrue. This sets a bad reputation for NGOs internationally, and could lead to the drafting of strict measures to control the movements of international corporations intending to rescue "vulnerable" children. Further affecting this situation is the fact pointed out by the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights who have stated that "Religion is a very sensitive question in this very conservative Islamic region, and this affair could be mentioned in the next statement by Al-Qaeda...We can now fear that human rights workers could become targets of Islamic terrorists". The Chadian authorities have charged the French nationals with abduction and fraud, and they face a possible five to twenty years hard labour if convicted.

CONFLICT

It is a human tragedy that poverty and conflict stricken areas have the largest impact on children, and in addition, it is appalling that these very children, who have suffered abuse and neglect, are often being used as a means of monetary gain through trafficking. In another story involving children crossing borders, there was a recent report in South Africa, making use of data from a survey of 130 undocumented children crossing borders unaccompanied. The children were reported to be from Zimbabwe. It is estimated that nearly 1,500 minors cross over from Zimbabwe into South Africa every year. This is a problem of grave concern, as these minors are extremely vulnerable to abuse. If South African borders are not properly guarded, the country could very easily start to see a steady increase in issues such as street children, child prostitution and child labour. The researchers on this study stated that "in spite of the many hardships, children were surprisingly optimistic about their futures...they felt that South Africa afforded them opportunities that their countries of origin did not, and that if they could access education in South Africa it would be of a very good quality and would create even more opportunities for them". While the

¹ Faith Nkomo is Head Researcher: Gender Issues in Africa at Consultancy Africa Intelligence; Jonathan Mundell is Director: HIV & AIDS Unit at Consultancy Africa Intelligence (jonathan.mundell@consultancyafrica.com).



above statement is touching, under no circumstances should children be left to worry about finding better opportunities away from their own home, their families and their country of origin. Consultancy Africa Intelligence's "Gender Unit" has reported on a number of reports focussing on war and conflict over the past two months. It is almost impossible to discuss war and conflict, without at least mentioning the children being used as soldiers. In African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), training children as young as nine years old to become soldiers is a regular occurrence. Child soldiers are perceived to be the property of military commanders and are primarily used to increase the number of trigger fingers willing to take a life, or risk their own, when "necessary". In many instances, these children are drugged, manipulated and often abused in the informal 'training camps'. The UN mission in the DRC has demanded that child soldiers be demobilised, and that all minors be handed over to the UN. Reportedly, this process of demobilisation of child soldiers was launched in 2002, yet to this day, there are still many children used in military action.

HUNGER

Access to food is one of the most important human rights, yet it is a right that many African children often need to fight for. Children should not have to struggle to full their hungry stomachs. However, due to the impoverished conditions in which many children live, they often suffer from malnutrition. Children need a variety of vitamins and minerals from various foods for their bodies to properly develop, and such malnutrition, as is experienced by countless children around the African continent, is obviously a huge issue. Some countries, such as Kenya for example, are trying to somewhat resolve the issue by measuring the extent of malnutrition. The "Arid Lands Resource Management Project" (ALRMP) has been conducting surveys in a number of areas around Kenya since 1996. Information gathered through projects like this, such as mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC), can be used to determine levels of malnutrition in children, and assist in the development of new strategies to address such issues. There is, however, criticism over the use of the MUAC, as Grainne Moloney, Nutrition Project Manager for the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's Food Security Analysis Unit in Somalia has noted. She states that "the use of MUAC for routine nutrition surveillance is still quite a new approach, and the Arid Lands project is quite unique, with other countries using the more conventional weight-for-age indicators". She also pointed out that the collection of data by the ALRMP has been flawed and other ways of data collection should be introduced.

One may ask what the above discussions have to do with gender issues, and the answer is subtle but significant. Issues such as gender stereotyping run concurrently with issues such as children being used in sex trade and as child soldiers. In a situation where a girl finds no other choice but to sell her body to survive, she learns that men are powerful, in control, and only interested in her body for their own pleasure. These kinds of issues can easily develop a mindset of fear, inadequacy and confusion in women. At the same time, young boy soldiers are learning that violence is an extension of being male and an exhibition of manhood. Military commanders manipulate their little minds, as these boys are taught to speak to women with disrespect, and treat them with violence and condescension.

The men and women of Africa, who are leaders and role-models to our children, have to a large extent failed the very children we should be protecting and nurturing. It is their basic human right to be children, and that right is being violated, if they are left to be anything other than children.



Web: <http://www.consultancyafrica.com>
South Africa: officesa@consultancyafrica.com
US: officeusa@consultancyafrica.com

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