

Book Review

**DENOV, M. (2010). CHILD SOLDIERS: SIERRA LEONE'S
REVOLUTIONARY UNITED FRONT. NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS.**

Felix Kiruthu

Denov explores the lives and realities of former child soldiers, both boys and girls in the Sierra Leone civil war which lasted eleven years. He begins this analysis by putting the terminologies used in the discussion of child soldiers into perspective. Denov observes that definitions of child soldiers not only cause confusion but also complicate the work of people and agencies which work with such children. For instance, while the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone below 18 years of age, the World Bank describes the young as those between 10 and 24 years. Given that childhood is a contested concept, it is important to recognize that social construction varies in form and content across cultures and social groups. Indeed, the context of war renders conceptualization of children even more complex given that children may acquire status of adulthood by virtue of playing adult roles. Similarly, the author notes that while the term soldier conjures images of uniformed men with military training, this contradicts the realities of child soldiers who lack proper military training, and overlooks the presence of girls in war torn areas. Even more important, the work underscores that work of child soldiers go beyond combat activity and includes activities, such as cooking and spying.

Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted over a two-year period with a sample of 76 children, Denov explores the militarization and reconfiguration of the identities of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Twelve adolescent researchers, who participated in the conflict, were invited to participate in the project as collaborators and researchers. The author also borrows Antony Giddens's theoretical concepts of "structure", "agency" and "duality of structure" to analyze the lives of child soldiers. The author acknowledges the challenge of accessing reliable statistics on child soldiers due to concealing of information by armed groups and misinformation by NGOs with vested interests in such data. Nevertheless, Denov observes that in spite of the structural factors that lead children to participate in war, they should not merely be perceived as victims. Children who participate in armed conflict often have agency and frequently act with full awareness of both meaning and consequences of their actions.

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Corresponding Author: fkiruthu@gmail.com

Denev's book explores the intersection between youth's agency and socio-economic and political structures that led to the conflict. The patrimonial crisis, rebellious youth culture, greed, state complicity, political corruption, as well as historical and cultural factors including patriarchy, all played a role in triggering the conflict. Among the structural factors are poverty, poor governance and mismanagement. Sierra Leone ranks as one of the poorest countries in the world with 70 per cent of the population living below the poverty line. The country has suffered economic stagnation, high unemployment and the weakening of the civil society, contributory factors to the eruption of civil war and subsequent recruitment of child soldiers. While the process of militarization of children began through abduction, military training was conducted in diverse ways. Both boys and girls were drugged with substances ranging from gun powder to cocaine and alcohol in order to fight fiercely. Ideological training was also provided in order to convince the children that they were fighting a just war. Singing of war songs was encouraged to create a sense of belonging and comradeship among them. This was enhanced by encouraging peer mentoring and tattooing, which reinforced social control over members through demarcating clear boundaries between the in-group within RUF and the enemies, such as the Kamjors, ECOMOG and SLA. Children were also forced to brutalize family members in order to cut them off from family.

Focusing on the daily lives and experiences of child soldiers, the author observes that children were not passive within Revolutionary United Front (RUF). They contributed to the movement and ultimately transformed it in significant ways. Children experiences were characterized by shifting realities of victimization, participation and resistance (2010: 121). Although there was indiscriminate violence on both boys and girls by rebels, in addition to sexual violence subjected to girls by males, physical and sexual violence was also employed by females in authority to girl soldiers. Nevertheless, in spite of the powerful strategies used by commanders to influence child soldiers, many of the children responded to the culture of violence in individualized ways. Some of the girls, for instance, deliberately befriended and even married powerful commanders in order to secure protection. Finally, child soldiers appreciated the power of possessing small weapons and used this subtle source of power against their oppressors.

Analyzing the initial phases of demobilization, including the individual and structural factors that influenced child soldier's demilitarization experiences after the war, Denov observes that the pathway out of violence and armed conflict was as sudden and unexpected just as militarization process through abduction. While some child soldiers became demobilized through escaping from the RUF, others were rescued by the UN and taken to reception centers. There were also children who simply left the RUF and made their way back directly to their communities, through spontaneous re-integration. Notably, such children did not go through the process of formal demobilization. Nevertheless, many children are reported to have preferred this form of demobilization as its anonymity provided them with a degree of protection from potential post conflict discrimination and ostracism in the society. Significantly, a number of factors shaped the pro-

Felix Kiruthu is Lecturer and Head of Department of Public Policy and Administration at Kenyatta, Nairobi, Kenya. E-mail: kiruthu.felix@ku.ac.ke / fkiruthu@gmail.com

cess and experience of demilitarization both individual and structural. While at the personal level the children had to develop new identities, at the structural level a number of factors were at play, including formal disarmament, demobilization and re-integration, family and community responses and access to education and employment.

Even more important, it is noteworthy that child soldiers responded to the post conflict period in individualized ways depending on the situation they found themselves in. This could explain why although the Disarmament, demobilization and re-integration program (DDR) was supported by several international organizations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNDP, UNIFEM, IOM and ILO, among others, many child soldiers resisted enlisting with any of the DDR programs intentionally. Fear of criminal prosecution and stigmatization appears to have held them back from enlisting. Similarly, while some children turned to drug abuse and prostitution in order to survive the challenges of demobilization; others took advantage of the new motor bike enterprise to eke out a means of livelihood. Significantly, child soldiers constitute most motor bike riders in Sierra Leone and have established powerful labor unions in each region of the country after the war. They have been able to respond to their situation by organizing collective bargaining through strikes and by taking their cases before courts of law, rather than taking guns. Such labor unions have promoted solidarity and reconciliation across members belonging to rival military groups such as CDF and RUF.

In conclusion, it is suggested that it would have been good for the author to discuss issues touching on methodology within one chapter. As it is now; some of these issues are discussed in chapter one, while others are discussed in the third chapter. This could improve the flow of ideas under discussion. As the author admits, although the study focuses on child soldiers in Sierra Leone, disproportionate attention has been given to the child soldiers in the RUF. Those in CDF and Kamjor are only mentioned in passing. Studies with a focus on child soldiers in other armed groups would therefore greatly complement Denov's work. Nevertheless, the work makes a significant contribution to its field and is critical for humanitarian organizations interested in promoting peace and stability, especially in the less developed countries such as the UN, its different bodies, the World Bank, non-governmental organizations and faith based groups. In addition, academics and graduate students, particularly those specializing on child welfare, international relations and psychology, will also find the work extremely useful. Denov also makes an important contribution towards how to conduct qualitative research in post conflict societies. The involvement of child soldiers in the research through interviews and focus group discussions not only increases his work's credibility, but also eases the process of data collection and analysis.

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