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‘My heart was already cooked’: Girl soldiers and situated moral agencies

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ABSTRACT: The study of children in war has become popular in recent years in International Relations, International Law and Moral Philosophy. The status of child combatants is intriguing as it powerfully conflicts with our common intuitions of innocent children and fighting combatants. Girl soldiers seem to be particularly interesting subcategory of fighting adolescents as they are not only soldiers but female as well. In this paper we will look at the narrative of children’s victimhood in the context of war by concentrating on former girl soldiers of Liberian civil wars that took place between 1989 and 1997 and again between 2000 and 2003. By benefiting from the interview material with war veterans, we make the case that the study of child soldiers in general and girl soldiers in particular would benefit from more contextually sensitive and empirically informed study of girls’ experiences on possibilities and limitations of their capacity to be agents of war. We demonstrate how agential capacities of children are case-sensitive and argue that the complex contextuality of childhood and agency must be taken better into account in the study of children in war.

KEY WORDS: girl soldiers; moral agency; ethics of war; Liberia.

Some girls, some boys, some men, some women, some commanders, some fighters were wicked. What I mean, is that I myself used to be like that: I used to do so many wicked things. [...] Like I told my boys to go and rape the women... so many bad things. So they were under me, I was a WAC commander and what I would tell them to do, they did it. - Rose¹

In the above passage, Rose, a woman war veteran currently in her early thirties, reflects upon her experiences in the first Liberian civil war, which tormented the country between 1989 and 1997. Rose was captured by the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) at the age of nine in 1992. Here she illustrates what she later did as a Women's Artillery Commandos / Women's Auxiliary Corps (WAC) commander. In doing so, Rose describes the 'wickedness' that was present in her and so many other adolescents' lives amidst this war and the second Liberian civil war that lasted from 2000 to 2003. She also acknowledges that she had a *role* in all that transpired.

Reading commentaries such as Rose's, powerfully conflicts with our common intuitions. On the one hand, we are speaking about a *child* who was involuntarily drawn into a bloody and destructive conflict. On the other hand, we refer to the commander of an armed child-battalion, who ordered her peers to go and conduct serious war crimes. Hence, Rose was not only a child but also a *perpetrator*.

More specifically, Rose was a *girl commander* and therefore a *female* combatant, a category that is particularly controversial within the wider context of child soldiers. Girl soldiers are not only children and soldiers but also children *and* females, and in this manner, they challenge the prevalent notions of victimhood and innocence from two overlapping directions. Thus, gender indeed matters in studies of child soldiers, in a similar manner than it matters in global politics in general. With the words of Laura J. Shepherd (2010, 4–5):

If we accept that gender is the social meaning attached to the shape of our bodies, we can begin to understand why is it that feminist IR scholars insist that gender is not something we add to the study of world politics, but rather is integral to its functioning. That is, you cannot ignore (or abstract) the ways that gender informs and affects the practices of world politics. Gender is, on this view, not only a noun (i.e., an identity) and a verb (i.e., a way to look at the world, as in the phrase 'gendering global politics') but also a logic, which is produced by and productive of the ways in which we understand and perform global politics.

It is impossible to provide an exact figure of the prevalence of child soldiers in the world today, even though as high a number as 300,000 has often been cited (e.g. Singer 2010, 93). Child Soldiers International (2017) maintain that the figure is significantly lower and put it somewhere between tens of thousands and over a hundred thousand. Of these children, roughly 30–40 percent are girls (McKay and Mazurana 2004, 115; Machel 2001, 17).

In this paper, we will look at the narrative of child soldiers' victimhood. More specifically, we want to problematise this narrative by relying on both normative analysis and empirical evidence on the agency of child soldiers by concentrating specifically on girl soldiers. Our aim is to critically examine a variety of contemporary perspectives on children's agency in

¹ Former girl soldier 'Rose' interviewed in 2014. In order to protect their identities, Rose and the other interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

the study of war and conflict and propose that more *contextually sensitive* accounts are required for capturing girl soldiers' complex roles in modern conflicts. To demonstrate this, we will analyse the experiences of former girl soldiers in Liberia and argue that there still is an acute need for more nuanced and socially embedded understandings of children as agents. By using the exemplary cases from interview material collected among Liberia's young female war veterans between 2012 and 2014 (data that overall contain interviews with more than 130 girl soldiers),² we propose that the complex roles of girl soldiers that make them both victims and perpetrators are generated by a complicated set of social factors and structures, *all* conflict and context specific.

These nuances, we further suggest, cannot be theoretically grasped if narratives of victimhood are understood in merely agential terms in singular. As Chris Coulter has written in her ethnography on girl soldiers in Liberia's neighboring country Sierra Leone: "In this discourse, a victim of a violent *event* becomes a victim as *a person*. [...] The problem is even more multifaceted when *victim* becomes synonymous with *lack of agency*" (Coulter 2009, 149, emphasis original). Following Coulter (*ibid.*, 148-151), as well as scholars such as Brocklehurst (2006), Denov (2010), Drumbl 2012 and Shepler (2014), we argue that instead of concentrating on personified agencies, the contextualities within which these agencies appear should be *regularly* addressed in the academic discussions on children, as well as women (see e.g. Moser & Clark 2001; Sjoberg & Gentry 2007) in war.

This can be achieved only by accounts that are empirically informed and therefore conceptually sensitive to the *social structures* that generate roles and responsibilities amidst armed conflicts and their aftermath. By taking guidance from Alasdair MacIntyre's work on socially structured moral agency in particular, we aim to offer an empirically informed, yet theoretically novel way for looking at girl soldiers as such agents (MacIntyre 1999).³ 'The workings of gender and conflict are always warzone specific' (Baaz and Stern 2014, 161), and so are children's capacities and capabilities to be agents within their own circumstances as well. Finally, we argue that the dominant narratives that commonly victimise particularly girl soldiers⁴ are not only normatively problematic but also immensely harmful for females of all ages who attempt to enlist in Disarmament, Reintegration, and Rehabilitation (DDR) programmes in the aftermath of war.

The story of victimhood often told

² For details on the research data and general research setting, see Vastapuu 2018, 1 –19.

³ As the reader will find out below, certain 'Westernized imaginaries' have already been challenged in recent literature. We still find even these more nuanced imaginaries problematic, as they tend to emphasize the individual capacities instead of the roles and statuses that children have in their respective communities. This is why we have turned to MacIntyre's work for guidance. We do acknowledge, as correctly pointed out by one of the Reviewers, that MacIntyre's thinking of course *itself* represents Western philosophy. That being said, however, we also maintain that his *community-based* account of moral agency is more appropriate and culturally sensitive than the accounts often offered in relation to children in contemporary ethics of war literature.

⁴ While in comparative study of child soldiers many authors discuss girl soldiers in particular, they tend to do so largely in separate 'girl' sections, indicating that the *boy child soldier* is still the norm against which girls are compared and contrasted to. See e.g. Brocklehurst (2006), Honwana (2006), Singer (2005) and Wessells (2006).

Children, if anyone, are victims of armed conflict and should be protected accordingly. The relationship between victimhood and childhood is prevalent in literature studying the status of children in war. Similarly, international law's treatment of children as persons deserving special protection is expressed in documents that highlight childhood as a sphere of special care. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, for instance, stipulates that 'childhood is entitled for special care and assistance' (United Nations 1989) and the laws of war regulate the special protection of women and children in armed conflict. The additional protocols to the Geneva Conventions prohibit the recruitment of children under 15 years old for armed forces (United Nations 1977).

The victimhood of child soldiers is linked to wider discussions on the moral, legal and political status of children. The rationale behind the special treatment of child soldiers derives from perceptions of children as vulnerable and in need of protection and care in everyday life. According to David Archard and Colin Macleod, childhood is often defined in *negative* terms; that is, as a *lack of* adult capacities and competencies (Archard and Macleod 2002, 13). A 'child' is someone who is significantly different from an 'adult', and both the personality and agency of children, subsequently, differ from those of adults. Following Tamar Schapiro, the status of children is like a glass that is simultaneously half-empty and half-full: 'The half-full part is', Schapiro writes, 'that children are persons, which means they make direct moral claims on adults' (Schapiro 2003, 575). At the same time, the glass is also half-empty, as children 'are not full persons, which means two things: first, they are not permitted to exercise the full range of rights enjoyed by adults, and second, they do not carry the full burden of adult responsibility' (Ibid, 576). Robert Noggle captures well the position widely held among those who claim that children are not yet (moral) agents⁵ in their own right: 'Children lack the fully developed capacity for the kind of moral agency that allows adults to interact with other moral agents on equal terms' (Noggle 2002, 100). While Noggle does not wish to deny the personhood of children altogether (and therefore maintains that children do have a moral standing), he nonetheless states that children are 'moral patients' 'who are entitled to receive moral concern from other persons'. According to Noggle (Ibid), 'children lack important aspects of moral agency, and that this prevents them from relating to the community of moral agents in quite the same way that adults can.'

By maintaining that children are moral patients rather than moral agents, it is implied that they are not *full members of the moral community*. A moral patient is someone who may have a moral worth but whose autonomy is limited or non-existent. The vision of children as moral patients is particularly supported by the 'Western imaginaries' of the child (e.g. Boyden 1997, 192; Shepler 2014, 6). More importantly, it seems to be the most common vision in the context of war, in which children who if not initially innocent, *become* innocent through the horrors of war (Brocklehurst 2006, 14), or are "constructed the identity" as a child soldier through the international child protection framework (Shepler 2014, 6). As

⁵ 'Moral agent' in philosophy refers to a person who has capacities for deliberating over possible courses of action and their consequences, who can act upon that deliberation and who can therefore bear responsibility for one's actions. This capacity has often been understood to be fulfilled only by persons, human beings capable of intentionality. This account of moral responsibility is commonly known as a 'humanist individualistic account'. It is common in moral theory to exclude certain types of persons from the category of moral agency. Mentally ill and *children* are the usual suspects for these types of persons. See for example French (1992).

moral patients, child soldiers can be understood as persons lacking the ability for responsibility. As soldiers, they can be considered bearing responsibility through their role or through the task they are currently performing⁶. As children, they are, however, excused from strict legal liability while at the same time they as combatants are members of their armed group and, at least theoretically, thus subjects of humanitarian and international criminal law.

Adults are, in contrast, 'full members of the community of moral agents' (Noggle 2002, 100), while children are only prospective or probationary members. In the context of laws of war, this position is expressed by envisioning children as victims of both adult abuse and criminality. Such as with the concepts of the 'child labourer', 'child bride', or 'child prostitute', the 'child soldier' is a product of adult abuse – a conception that presupposes that children are 'dependent, exploited, and powerless' (Rosen 2005, 297). It further follows that 'children cannot be held responsible for the war crimes they commit, because they are considered to have no legally relevant agency' (Ibid).⁷ Both in legal and moral theory, children are thus conceived to have incomplete agential capacities: 'Childhood is defined as that which lacks the capacities, skills and powers of adulthood... If childhood has virtues they are such only because of their very inappropriateness to adult life' (Arc-hard 2004, 39).

The imaginers of patienthood are interesting as they propose that children are right-holders but not bearers of responsibilities. In the words of Schapiro: 'Like non-human animals, children are objects but not full subjects of duties. The very youngest of children have no moral or legal duties to adults or to anyone else, although adults have strong obligations to them... even older children, who are regarded as subjects of at least a range of duties, are not held strictly accountable for them' (Schapiro 2003, 576). Consequently, 'it is a feature of children's less-than-full status that their violations of moral, legal, and institutional duties

⁶ For a relevant discussion on the moral culpability of child soldiers to be killed in war, see McMahan (2010) and Vaha (2011).

⁷ Contemporary international law is, if not contradictory, at least problematically unclear on the status of children as responsible combatants. While the laws of war, and particularly the Geneva Conventions (together with the CRC), prohibit the conscription of children under 15 years of age (United Nations 1977 and 1989), the International Criminal Court and its Rome Statute limit their jurisdiction to persons over 18 years old (United Nations 1998). State practice shows that adolescents between 16 and 18 years are, however, often considered legitimately recruited. While the so called 'Straight-18' position that aims at international prohibition of *all* combatants under 18 years has gained global attention since the early 2000s, it has not so far replaced the laws of war allowing the recruitment of youngsters between 15 and 18 years. At least in theory, then, international law leaves a door open for non-culpable 15-18 adolescent combatants. This legal loophole is important as far as the adolescent combatants possibly participate in committing serious war crimes. For international law's treatment of child soldiers, see Breen (2007); Fox (2005); Maxted (2004); Moir (2000); Sheppard (2000) and Sinha (2013). Regional jurisdiction has, in certain cases, attempted to facilitate this problem; the Special Court for Sierra Leone for instance established the possibility to proceed with cases against 15 - 18 year-old perpetrators in its statute. The Court did not, however, ever use this prerogative (see, for example, Cohn 2001; Elagab 2004; Shepler 2005; Schocken 2002). Although we acknowledge the problems in contemporary international law, we will not, for good reasons, take a stand on its future here. Firstly, neither one of us is an international lawyer. Secondly, and more importantly, we believe that the issue of legal culpability is ethically a very difficult one, especially if and when it is based on the rather arbitrary benchmark of a certain age. What we aim at establishing here is exactly the opposite, namely to argue that in the terms of justice, moral agency and therefore the potential responsibility of children in war has to be sensitive to particular warzones. Internationally established age limits, the 'Straight-18' position included, hinder these localised attempts to look at the conflicts and child soldiers, both during and after the conflict, as the participants of their social realities.

to which they are subject are dealt with from a supervisory, rather than participatory perspective' (Ibid, p. 577). As Peter Singer illustrates, this grey zone of children's agency is often intentionally abused when children are recruited into armed forces (Singer 2005, 86-88). Most children are not typically motivated by any internal belief regarding the rightness of their cause, which makes them easily abused and generally manipulated to break laws of war. Children do not often consider whether the practice they are involved in is just or unjust, as it is required – at least in legal terms – by an adult soldier in the humanitarian laws of war.

To categorise children as moral patients also problematically undermines the status and agency of children themselves. By labelling children as moral patients, their various active roles in their communities are overlooked. Several recent studies indicate that children are not necessarily as incapable of agency as the moral patient accounts suggest. Helen Brocklehurst, for instance, proposes that 'children's level of moral reasoning and inclusive moral engagement is more advanced than we have mostly given them credit for. *Children are now suspected of being able to reason morally during the period of middle-childhood, from seven upwards*' (Brocklehurst 2015, emphasis ours).⁸ Moreover, to be an agent does not necessarily entail the capacity to make 'right' decisions, as the description of moral agency seems to presuppose. Even adults do not always make morally 'good' or 'right' decisions (especially in war) and this is not considered an obstacle for their agency or personhood. If it is at least somewhat true, then, that understanding children as moral patients and therefore as non-responsible agents is unfounded, one could conclude that children are not, at least not *all of them*, incapable of being active members of their moral communities. A more accurate way of approaching children's moral status might be found by understanding them as 'moral persons in becoming' (Arneil 2012; Drumbi 2012). Here, the moral agency of children is viewed as a *gradual* development from early childhood to adolescence and finally to adulthood. This position, as Brocklehurst (2006,4) notes, is more likely to be found from other parts of world *than the West*, from cultures where childhood is often understood in terms of patienthood rather than of active agency as discussed here.

In her study of El Salvador's civil war, Kay Read has demonstrated that the Western philosophy of the child very strongly *idealises* children as vulnerable and innocent, like the discussion above on moral agency has illustrated, without any responsibility attached to their actions. She problematises the way in which childhood, being often conceived in the West through the 'Straight-18' position (see note 7), is applied in societies in which the moral agency of the child is gradually accomplished at a much earlier age. A 'universal' understanding of the child as a person under the age of 18 therefore fundamentally fails to 'distinguish between moral knowledge and socially conventional rules' (Read 2002, 399). David Rosen (2005, 136) argues along the same lines and blames the 'humanitarian narrative' for misunderstanding the concept of 'childhood' in the service of political purposes, as does Susan Shepler (2014, 4-6).

All of the above challenges are also well-illustrated in the case of Liberia from which we benefit in our analysis. If we look at the country's legal structure, we find that it follows a dual system combining both statutory and customary law. Whereas the Anglo-American common law system was originally taken as a model when the statutory law structures

⁸ In several criminal law systems, children well beyond 18 years old are considered legally accountable for the crimes they commit.

were created, primarily oral, customary law practices form the basis of the customary legal system being primarily applied in the rural areas. The two spheres of jurisdiction are often in contradiction, which also holds true concerning the status of children. Under the civil law, for instance, the legal age for marriage is 18 years for women and 21 years for men, whereas under the customary law, very early marriages regularly take place. While polygamy is prohibited in the civil law, it is permitted under customary law. Possibly the most controversial detail in the legal system of Liberia is that under the civil law, all individuals are considered equal, whereas married women are treated as legal minors under the customary law (Kabbah 2014; OECD 2014). Taking also into consideration that the social signifiers that typically signpost a movement to adulthood in Liberia, such as marriage, employment or self-sustaining business are more and more difficult to achieve for the poor in the country (Hoffman 2011, loc. 1779-1791), it becomes clear that taking the oft-proposed 'Straight-18' position can hinder important local realities. Indeed, it is very difficult to define both legally and culturally who is an 'adult' and who a 'child' in contemporary Liberia (e.g. Utas 2008).

Social structures and agency of children in war: In the words of former girl soldiers themselves

As we can see above, the agency of children is a complex matter for both legal and moral reasoning. What seems to be the core criticism of the 'children as victims' narrative is that childhood is understood in idealised terms that do not grasp the contextual realities on the battleground. Therefore, it is also crucial that theoretical work on children in war takes into account the empirical evidence of the realities of the child soldier, including listening to the views of (former) soldiers themselves. One fundamental element for developing the research on children in war further, we now suggest, is to *regularly* take into account the *social contexts* in which child soldiers operate and are recognised – and, as it is more often than not the case with girl soldiers in particular, *not recognised* – as agents in their own right. Indeed, while the critical voices in contemporary literature are increasingly calling for a more contextually sensitive conceptualisation of moral agency, a full appreciation of children as agents of their social realities is still not prevalent in the literature that starts with the individual competences and capacities, and, the narratives of victimhood.

Let us begin by introducing Martha and Tracy, two young war veterans from Liberia's capital Monrovia. When asked about her experiences, Martha (who had joined the AFL when she was as young as nine years-old) explained how the injustices she had witnessed around her made her take action.

My sister, it was disadvantage. The thing Liberian men call disadvantage, it is what made me to hold the arm. For instance, you look at the people who are living in the same community with you and then they [the soldiers] will kill them in front of you, they will be beating their wives. Myself too, [because of all the things I've experienced] I am a small girl but my heart is like a man's.⁹

In her interview, Martha explained how she had 'had enough' and decided to take revenge. After joining the AFL, Martha was first asked to carry loads, cook and perform other combat service support tasks. When Martha expressed that her wish was not to undertake

⁹ 'Martha' interviewed in 2012.

these 'mundane' tasks, she was provided with an AK-47 and urged on to the frontline. Having proved her strength and resiliency as a fighter after a short period, she was given her own female unit to command. In Martha's division, there were only women, while noting there were also some WAC commanders in Liberia who had male soldiers under their command as well (Vastapuu 2018).

Tracy, in contrast to Martha, was not a WAC commander. She was nonetheless asked to take a role as a responsible person in her commando unit of four girl fighters. Tracy, who was a 13-year-old teenager at the brink of the new millennium, and had therefore lived in a conflict zone her whole life, started to become more and more restless. In searching for food, clothes and other resources, fighters from various factions had just recently begun to pay regular visits to Tracy's family home. When the violence turned more severe, and when one evening Tracy's beloved aunt was raped by a group of boy soldiers, Tracy's anxiousness forced her to act. Thus, she contacted some friends, packed her few belongings, and headed to Charles Taylor's base to volunteer for his forces. She explains: 'We had no food, no clothes, no nothing. I wanted both to revenge for my family and get something in return. So, I said to myself that let me join the war to save my family.'¹⁰

In practice, the chief of staff (Charles Taylor in the AFL) or his deputy gave orders to the WAC director, who in turn passed these orders to WAC commanders like Martha. Tracy, on the other hand, received orders from her own WAC commander who sent Tracy and her girls on specific missions. In these missions, Tracy led her own small unit. Food ingredients were typically looted from stores or civilian homes, and sexual relations were frequent between female and male fighters. Having an access to a gun – to become a fighter – was the sturdiest protection against sexual abuse within forces; in the most precarious positions were the individuals who performed solely combat service support tasks.

Besides non-armed soldiers, sexual violence was also regularly utilised against civilians and the soldiers of opposing forces in Liberia. The perpetrators included selected female commanders, who ordered their male soldiers to rape women and girls as was illustrated in the quote at the beginning of this article. Indeed, female perpetrators of sexual atrocities in wars are typically sidelined, as are the male victims of this type of violence. As Charli Carpenter remarks, however, there are at least three categories of sexual violence against boys and men in wars as well: being a direct victim of sexual violence; being forced to rape; and being a secondary victim when sexual violence is used as a means of psychological torture (Carpenter 2007, 94-97). In the Liberian civil wars, boys and men were ordered to commit sexual atrocities as well as forced to witness rapes of their family members. Although we have no proof of direct sexual violence against boys and men within the Liberian wars, it does not mean that this type of violence did not occur.¹¹

In light of the above narrations, what can we say about these young women as agents? What seems to be common to both of their stories is how they describe the level of *inescapability* created by their circumstances. Here, we find the work of Alasdair MacIntyre on moral agency useful. MacIntyre has made an important observation on the role of

¹⁰ 'Tracy' interviewed in 2014.

¹¹ It must be emphasized that even if we cannot explore the phenomenon further here, more empirical case studies on sexual violence against males (soldiers as well as civilians) in different warscapes in the world are urgently needed. See e.g. Sivakumaran (2007); Gorris (2015); Féron (2015, 2017).

social structures for moral agency and action. The question that MacIntyre explores is whether or not there can be social structures that could seriously threaten one's possibility to conceive oneself as a moral agent and to act accordingly (MacIntyre 1999, 314). While MacIntyre's argument is about the limits of person's moral agency in general, his analysis offers a fruitful way of looking at girl soldiers and their agencies. This is particularly so, when MacIntyre draws the attention from individual capacities to the wider contexts of social action.

According to MacIntyre, the distinct social reality affects the roles one plays and the relative possibilities of exercising one's agency. By following this purview, moral agency must be evaluated through the particular social realities where this agency is taking place. Through this move, it will be possible to avoid the 'humanitarian' narrative of children-as-victims that seems to be so prevalent in discussions about children (and especially of girls) in war. Moral agency of any kind, MacIntyre stresses, requires a certain kind of social setting: 'Accountability to particular others, participation in critical practical enquiry and acknowledgement of the individuality of both others and of oneself are all then marks of the social relationships and mode of self-understanding that characterise the moral agent' (Ibid, 317). Consequently, 'strip away those social relationships and that mode of self-understanding and what would be left would be a seriously diminished type of agency, one unable to transcend the limitations imposed by its own social and cultural order' (Ibid).

In order to flourish, agency requires a milieu that takes its practice 'seriously'¹². Any given social order must therefore have enough room for the exercise of agency that individuals undertake in various ways. What guides the development and practice of agency in any given social order, according to MacIntyre, are the *everyday practices* that either enable or hinder moral development. Moral agency, subsequently, is not merely about certain capacities but also about social settings that either prevent or enable the active exercise of these powers. While the accounts discussed earlier suggest that children indeed may have more individual agential powers than they are often given credit for, it is also important to look at the structures where child soldiers – and especially girl soldiers – operate in.

The examples from Liberia highlight well the social structuration of agency. Girl soldiers undertook different strategies for adapting to their circumstances and *exercising* their agency, as the examples provided illustrate. This active – albeit limited – exercise of agency places the double victim narrative often laid on girl soldiers into doubt. At the same time, it also powerfully demonstrates the structural constraints that affect the strategies available to girl soldiers. It is precisely here, on the emphasis we place on structural constraints typically limiting the agencies of girl soldiers, where we differ from the views of those such as anthropologist Mats Utas. Although Utas indeed writes intriguingly against the portrayal of female soldiers as passive victims of war, he does not adequately consider the structural factors behind individual choices within the battlefield and its surroundings, as also Coulter (2008, 68; 2009, 149-150) has earlier remarked.

Utas's narrator, named as Bintu, 'knows the dangerous topography of the Liberian social-zone, and she makes good use of it in her manipulations of her social surroundings, whether in the form of using ties with boyfriends, "mates," commanders, civilians or peacekeepers, in "girlfriending," or even in the taking up of arms herself (Utas 2005, 426)'.

¹² Cynthia Enloe (2013) has made a similar point about taking women seriously.

Thus Bintu actively *makes good use of* and *manipulates* her social reality. Indeed, she is presented as extremely target-oriented and logical: a person who knows what she wants and how to get it. It almost seems that by neglecting the structural surroundings in which Bintu operates, Utas actually frames her as ‘the prototype for an action hero, a sort of African “Lara Croft”’¹³ – a one-dimensional portrayal which Utas himself declares to write against.

Although both Tracy and Martha *volunteered* to join the frontline, the majority of Liberia’s girl soldiers were abducted as was the case with Rose. In addition, it is important to emphasise the situational factors behind each ‘voluntary’ decision to enlist in the forces as the above narrations exemplify: in the majority of cases, the everyday-occurring inequalities pushed these girls into action rather than their desire to ‘gain’ something from the war effort itself (Basini 2013). Therefore, if we follow MacIntyre again, we must understand that although there are several factors that hinder girl soldiers’ power to exercise their agency, these factors do not *automatically* make them moral patients. Obviously, the social disadvantage experienced by Martha and Tracy already casts doubt on the claim that they should be treated as accountable agents in war (at least if we consider legal responsibility), even if Martha attained the rank of a commander. Thus, while Martha and Tracy may treat themselves as active members of the war effort, it is questionable to what extent they were truly able and free to exercise critical reflection on their roles in it.

War’s aftermath: why contexts really matter

The contextuality becomes perhaps even more important when we look at the war’s *aftermath*. The precarious positions in which both Tracy and Martha have ended up in the post-war period are deeply related to their unprocessed traumas and guilt. An excerpt from Tracy’s interview captures well the intertwined nature of guilt, addiction, poverty and trauma:

*Sometimes the tension is too hard on me when I think about the past. I just want to smoke drugs and forget. I can do anything to erase my mind. If I am getting high, I can forget about the past. Because in the wartime everything was too hard. Also in the wartime, when you were getting high, you couldn’t even feel the bullets if they hit you. You can do anything when you’re high. You can be strong. So, after everything, the war business, the war habit can still be inside of me. I can try to stop, but it is hard, it’s hard! The drugs are hard to leave. For that, I would need someone to come and counsel me, to talk to me all the time. It is like this is the only way for me to relax my mind. So, if my life would be proper, like if I had my own place and small business, then I could forget about everything.*¹⁴

In her recent article, Krista Thomason argues that the feelings of guilt that child soldiers express are both intelligible and appropriate. They are intelligible, because child soldiers have mixed and ambiguous motives for their participation, despite the circumstances in which they have at least partially been forced to act. The feelings of guilt are also appropriate, because instead of simple expressions of self-blame, guilt can also serve the function of making them face their wrongdoings. By feeling guilt, child soldiers see both them-

¹³ Itano 2003, quoted in Utas 2005, 404.

¹⁴ ‘Tracy’ 2014.

selves and their victims as moral agents (Thomason 2015, 115-127). Feelings of guilt, Thomson underlines, are especially important in the *rehabilitation* processes, as in an ideal case, these processes should *reintegrate children back to their moral communities*. The feelings of guilt, however, are often mixed with a set of other feelings, particularly confusion, fear and humiliation.

Social structures therefore play a crucial role not only in the battlefields but also in how girl war veterans succeed in its aftermath, both in their personal and professional lives. After the second civil war, both Tracy and Martha managed to enlist in a DDR programme, being called in Liberia as a DDDR programme (Disarmament, Demobilisation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration). This was very rare among the female soldiers interviewed: of the 128 individuals who answered this question, only 19 went through the whole process somewhat successfully, whereas 25 only participated in the disarmament phase and 84 did not subscribe to the process at all (Vastapuu 2018, 86). The main reason for the low participation rate was disinformation about the eligibility to participate (see also Basini 2013; Specht 2006).

The Liberian DDDR process is peculiarly interesting in terms of gender. It was openly stated in the UN Security Council Resolution 1509 that the process would pay 'particular attention to the needs of child combatants and women' (United Nations 2003, para 3f). Respectively, the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) was the first peacekeeping mission in the history of the UN with an explicit mandate to mainstream the UN Security Council resolution 1325¹⁵. However, despite the positive potential, the international community became obsessed with halting male idleness in the country (Jennings 2009, 475-494) and largely ignored the needs of female soldiers regardless of their various war-time ranks (Vastapuu 2018, 85–114; Basini 2013). In the light of previous research, the neglect of girl and women soldiers in the DDDR efforts in Liberia is, unfortunately, hardly surprising (e.g. Coulter 2009; Mazurana et al. 2002; Mazurana and Eckerbom Cole 2013; Wessells 2011).

Of the few female soldiers who managed to enlist in the DDDR programme in Liberia, the majority were offered training for 'female trades' such as baking, tie-dyeing and hair plying, whereas males received vocational training in the 'manly' areas of mechanics, masonry and plumbing. In the post-war reconstruction period, the latter have an evidently substantial market value, whereas the market environment for the former is extremely competitive. When the 'success' of DDR programmes are typically measured by their subscription rates and not according to the actual employment rates after training, the miss-match between the offered education and the factual needs of the market environment remain typically unnoticed (Basini 2013; Vastapuu 2018, 104–113). Tracy, for instance, received training in hair plying but has hardly ever practiced her skills since the end of the programme. She, as well as Martha, who was trained as a farmer without any prospects for land in the DDR framework, are now earning their main income from prostitution. Both women reside in Monrovia shantytowns, have substance abuse problems and many unprocessed traumas.

¹⁵ Adopted in 2000, UN Security Council resolution 1325 addresses the various types of impacts of war on women and girls and emphasises that women should play a pivotal role in conflict management and peace building efforts. Most importantly, it argues that the UN should incorporate a gender perspective in all its actions around peace and security. Although the resolution has also been criticised, it is still widely regarded as a landmark resolution by the majority of gender theorists and practitioners.

The reason why the imaginaries of children either as moral patients or as persons-in-becoming appear to be particularly harmful is that they seem to leave child soldiers, and especially girl child soldiers, in limbo as passive non-agents not only during the conflict but in the war's aftermath as well. The ways in which girl soldiers are perceived in conflict affect also the ways in which they are perceived when the conflict is finished. The case of Liberia's female veterans powerfully demonstrates how the social stigma and lack of true opportunities have thrown many of these young women as social outcasts, and this experience is not unique to Liberia.¹⁶

As the cases of Rose, Martha and Tracy illustrate, girl soldiers face, if possible, perhaps even stronger structural restrictions of their agency both during and after the conflict than boy soldiers do. A lot of this is traced back to the fact that girl soldiers, and girl combatants in particular, are often twice victimised, as both girls and as children, both during and after the conflict. This double victimisation is a product of not only 'Western narratives' of female and childhood innocence but also due to active international policies of how DDR programmes are constructed. While global initiatives such as the 'Straight 18' might strengthen the protection of children in modern conflicts, in the long run, they also take another step away from the local realities by enforcing idealised and universalised images of the child as a person under 18 years old, other things notwithstanding. In order to take both (former) girl soldiers and their agencies seriously, then, what we need is to pay closer attention to the structures that in any given conflict and its aftermath create, enforce and hinder certain roles and opportunities.

Conclusions

While the academic literature is becoming increasingly aware of the complexities of children's agency and their roles and competencies as active members of their communities, not only rights but also with regard to responsibilities, the work on children in war still seems to be torn between two competing intuitions. On the one hand, children are conceived through their innocence and status as individuals demanding special protection. On the other hand, the evidence from the ground shows that some children participate in atrocities, even in leading roles, and are therefore not only victims but perpetrators as well. Empirical research in different fields of childhood studies has expanded our understanding of children's agential capacities and it is crucially important that the theoretical work on the ethics of war also draw its lessons from the battlefield.

In this paper, we have attempted to bring the theoretical inquiry of war together with the empirical data on former girl soldiers' experiences and realities in post-war Liberia. We have argued that the double victimisation narrative related to girl soldiers in particular is a highly problematic starting point for exploring the questions of ethics and politics about children in war. By giving a voice to former girl soldiers themselves, this paper has aimed at expanding both our theoretical and empirical understanding of children as agents in, and of, war.

¹⁶ Reintegration challenges of former girl soldiers have been recorded in several countries around the world. See e.g. Denov 2009 on Angola, Sierra Leone, Mozambique, and Northern Uganda, De Mel 2001; Hrdličková 2009 and Parashar 2009 on Sri Lanka; and Tonheim 2014 on DRC.

The woman veterans interviewed are aware of their previous actions on the frontline (albeit not perhaps in the way in which the dominant theories of moral agency require *full* cognitive capacities); they themselves construct their agency through the social reality despite the often cumbersome social structures; they feel if not guilt, at least deep remorse for their moral wrongdoing (feelings, that should be better addressed in the post-war rehabilitation processes); and they indeed are often both victims and perpetrators simultaneously. We propose that by continuing to move away from the simplistic victim narratives that both children and especially girls are regularly placed into, and by recognising the multiplicity of roles girls hold in different warsapes, it is possible to plan more efficient DDR programmes for girl war veterans. This move will help us to better address the needs of male soldiers in the post-war periods as well. Boy soldiers, as well as girls, can be sexually and otherwise abused on the frontline. It is here where the theoretical questions of agency become important for the real world as well: As long as the specific conflict environment, as well as the questions of guilt, responsibility, trauma and addictions of *all* war veterans are not addressed in the post-war assistance programmes, their long-term effects are likely to remain bleak.

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