Beyond war: ‘suffering’ among displaced Congolese children in Dar es Salaam
Gillian Mann

To cite this article: Gillian Mann (2012): Beyond war: ‘suffering’ among displaced Congolese children in Dar es Salaam, Development in Practice, 22:4, 448-459
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2012.672958

Please scroll down for article

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Beyond war: ‘suffering’ among displaced Congolese children in Dar es Salaam

Gillian Mann

This paper examines Congolese children’s experiences of war and displacement in the context of the material, social, and relational aspects of their lives in Dar es Salaam. It argues that the challenges, privations and indignities of daily life in urban Tanzania were characterised by feelings of loss, deprivation and hardship so intense they were felt by many to be as or more devastating in their brutality than was life in the midst of war. In so doing, the paper raises profound questions about what kind of ‘protection’ we are providing to children in these circumstances, and for what purpose.

Au-delà de la guerre : la « souffrance » parmi les enfants congolais déplacées de Dar es Salaam
Cet article examine les expériences des enfants congolais relatives à la guerre et au déplacement dans le contexte des aspects matériels, sociaux et relationnels de leur vie à Dar es Salaam. Il soutient que les défis, privations et indignités de la vie quotidienne en Tanzanie urbaine se caractérisaient par des sentiments de perte, de privation et de difficultés si intenses qu’ils étaient ressentis par beaucoup comme aussi ou plus dévastateurs dans leur brutalité que la vie au milieu de la guerre. Ce faisant, l’article soulève de profondes questions sur la sorte de « protection » que nous offrons aux enfants dans ces circonstances, et à quelle fin.

Além da guerra: “sofrimento” entre as crianças congolesas desalojadas em Dar es Salaam
Este artigo examina as experiências das crianças congolases frente à guerra e ao desalojamento no contexto dos aspectos materiais, sociais e de relacionamento de suas vidas em Dar es Salaam. Argumenta-se que os desafios, privações e a indignidade da vida cotidiana na zona urbana da Tanzânia eram caracterizados por sentimento de perda, privação e dificuldades tão intensas que foram sentidos por muitos como tão ou mais devastadores em sua brutalidade do que a vida no meio da própria guerra. Ao fazer isto, o artigo levanta questões profundas sobre qual a finalidade e que tipo de “proteção” estamos oferecendo às crianças nessas circunstâncias.

Más allá de la guerra: el ‘sufrimiento’ de los niños y niñas congoleños desplazados en Dar es Salaam
Este ensayo analiza las experiencias de la guerra y el desplazamiento de niños y niñas congoleños en Dar es Salaam, en los aspectos material, social y relacional de sus vidas. El ensayo revela que muchos niños y niñas describieron los desafíos, las privaciones y la indignidad de sus vidas cotidianas en las zonas urbanas de Tanzania con expresiones de pérdida, privación y dificultad.
Introduction

Today there are astonishing numbers of children around the world who have been forced to flee war, violence, and persecution. Millions have crossed into neighbouring states where they live officially and unofficially as refugees. Multilateral and non-governmental agencies have long been concerned with the special protection needs of boys and girls in these circumstances, for whom the social and psychological threats posed by war are considered to be so great as to warrant significant intervention and assistance. Family reunification, rehabilitation, long-term psychosocial therapy, health care, schooling, and vocational training have been provided to large numbers of refugee children in different settings. The intention of these programmes has been to help boys and girls to resume their everyday routines, to seek and give support to their peers and families, to come to terms with their war-related experiences, and, ultimately, to feel out of harm’s way, safe from the terrors, disorientation, and violence of war.

This attention to the practical and emotional needs of war-affected children is undoubtedly important but the assumptions that underlie these efforts require careful examination. Not all children experience and make sense of war in the same way. Past experiences of violence may not be the only, or indeed even the primary source of stress and suffering in their lives. Through an examination of the experiences and perspectives of Congolese boys and girls in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, this paper elucidates the everyday preoccupations of one group of displaced children. Based on 27 months of professional and doctoral research (2001–02; 2006; 2007–08) with more than 100 children between the ages of seven and 18, it aims to break the apparent inseparability between the concepts of being ‘war-affected’ and being a ‘refugee’. Ultimately, its purpose is to show that in order to improve the protection of displaced boys and girls, we need to focus not only on why children became refugees but also on what it is like to be a refugee.

The longer version of this article on the Young Lives website situates the study within an active and growing body of research and in so doing, provides a more complete discussion of theoretical perspectives and a longer list of references.

Didier

One day in late 2007, Didier, 18, told me a story that highlighted in a very succinct way the significance of this distinction. In the year or so that we had known each other, I had learnt a lot about Didier. I knew that he had come to Dar es Salaam in 2004, from his hometown of Goma, in North Kivu. I also knew that his move to Dar was not the first time that he had been forced to flee violence and civil conflict: he had also done so in 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2003, returning in each instance after a period in a neighbouring region or country.¹ I had heard from him, his parents, and his five siblings, about the two years that he and his sister, Marie-Clara, now 17, had lived alone in Goma before they were eventually reunited with their family in Dar. While these and other past experiences featured in our discussions, for the most part they were offered as background information to the issues and concerns that
Didier wanted to talk about with me. Like nearly all of the older children whom I knew, Didier’s focus was not on the past but on the ‘miserable’ character of his present life and the challenges it posed to his dreams and expectations for the future. He was certainly willing to talk about the war and his life in DRC, but he repeatedly told me that life in Dar was far worse than anything he had ever experienced in Congo.

It was with comments such as these in mind that I listened attentively to Didier’s stories of growing up. The imprisonment of his father, the panicked departures from Goma to seek safety in South Kivu or Rwanda, the constant opening and closing of his school, the death of his young sister, and his struggles to provide for himself and Marie-Claire when the rest of the family went missing – these experiences he described in detail, with one leading into the next. At one point, he mentioned that, at age 14, he had been abducted by the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) to fight as a child soldier (Hubert 2011). While travelling to visit his uncle, his bus was stopped in the middle of a national park and he and several other boys were forcibly taken by a group of heavily armed men to a high-walled, empty building in the middle of the forest. Here Didier stayed for a number of weeks, during which time he and others were forced to clear the forest and to build another building. Having eaten very little food, most were weak with hunger. Those who failed to work effectively were summarily killed. One day, he and many other boys were pushed inside another lorry and told that they were going to fight. As the vehicle barreled along the road, Didier and four others made the decision to jump off: ‘I knew that either way I was going to die, and this way seemed better’, he told me. Together, the boys chose their moment and threw themselves from the speeding lorry into the bush beside the road. The vehicle came to a screeching halt and the driver and a soldier jumped down and began shooting at them. But these men did not know how many boys had jumped, and when they saw the open skulls of two of the escapees, they stopped shooting, announcing that ‘everyone has died’. When the lorry had driven away, Didier, suffering from an injured shoulder, waited for a while before stumbling into the bush and beginning a two-day walk to the first village he found. Initially, the other surviving boy accompanied him but eventually he succumbed to the bullet in his leg and ceased to travel with Didier. After a few days in the village, Didier was given a lift with a local driver back to Goma, where he was reunited with Marie-Claire.

For some reason, hearing this particular story, alongside all of the others, I felt quite shocked. My shock was not out of ignorance of the abduction, forced labour, militarisation, and brutal killings of children that have taken place throughout the past 15 years of civil conflict in Congo. I have known many boys and girls who have experienced life in these circumstances. My amazement came from the countless times that Didier and others had asserted to me how much better life had been in DRC compared to their ‘miserable’ existence in Dar es Salaam. ‘Life there was difficult’, he told me, ‘but at least we weren’t refugees’. Perhaps my shock was caused by hearing about these horrific experiences while sitting with a relatively healthy 18-year-old, drinking Coke under a shady tree, in what, to all objective observers, was a peaceful country like Tanzania. Suddenly the incongruous nature of it all overwhelmed me. How is it, I wondered, that a person can have experienced such horrific things as Didier described, and still say that life in that context was preferable to life away from the war? What is it about life as a refugee in urban Tanzania that is so bad that it led so many people – young and old – to describe life in Congo as better?

‘Suffering’ among refugees

In Dar es Salaam, the feeling that life was ‘wretched’ (Swahili: unyanyapaa) was common for Congolese of all ages and in a variety of circumstances. Their undocumented status and the hostile environment in which they lived meant that most adults and children lived in constant
fear of exposure and its dreaded consequences. Most were highly distrustful of Tanzanians, Tanzanian authorities, international agencies and, often, other Congolese. Their illegal status meant that they needed to exercise extreme caution in their efforts to find paid work, access services or assistance from churches, government, or NGO sources, and in their interactions with unknown individuals who might be able to assist them with employment, housing and other ways of addressing their material needs. These challenges were experienced alongside sometimes tense and difficult relationships between parents and children. The result was a life characterised not only by extreme poverty and a lack of basic social services such as health care and education, but also by high levels of fear, isolation and disappointment, and low levels of social support.

For many boys and girls, it was not so much the inability to attend school, the lack of decent shelter or the need to hide their identity, per se, that were so difficult. It was the way living in these ‘difficult surroundings’ (mazingira magumu) made them feel. Most described an overwhelming sense of abjection, a term Ferguson (1999: 236) uses in relation to the experience of long-standing decline on the Zambian copper belt, to describe the sense of not only losing one’s place in the world, but the associated feelings of betrayal, humiliation, and having been cast aside. These feelings were exacerbated by a sense of being suspended in a boring and meaningless present in which the future was so uncertain and beyond control that it was at times unimaginable. Boys’ and girls’ day-to-day lives and futures were contingent on so many different things and people that many found it, both literally and figuratively, painful to think beyond the here and now.

So overwhelming were these bad feelings that many, like Didier, said that they would rather live in DRC, even in the midst of war, than in Dar es Salaam. Given the profound insecurity and overwhelming challenges posed by life in DRC, it is significant that so many children and young people made similar statements. The fact is that life in eastern DRC has been extraordinarily difficult for generations. State-sponsored violence, terror, and pillage began in earnest under King Léopold and the Belgian colonial authorities and continued under the long dictatorship of Mobutu Sésé Seko (Prunier 2009). Since the mid-1990s, the provinces of North and South Kivu, Ituri, and Maniema have been engulfed in civil war and cross-border conflicts. So great is the scale of the crisis that in 2007 the International Rescue Committee estimated that 5.4 million people had died since 1998, in large part from curable illnesses such as malaria, diarrhoea, pneumonia, and malnutrition (Coughlan et al. 2007). Extreme brutality, massive population displacement, widespread sexual violence, and the collapse of public services such as health, education, and infrastructure have characterised this period. Every person I have known from eastern Congo – adults and children, rich and poor, rural and urban, refugees and those who remained – has been touched by this large-scale humanitarian crisis. While numerous peace agreements have been signed, and the war officially ended in 2003, political violence and civil conflict continue in the east. Reports of widespread killing, rape, and other atrocities on the part of government troops and rebel groups are still commonplace. Many aid agencies are warning of impending large-scale humanitarian disaster.

Despite all of these problems, many children nonetheless reflected on their lives in Congo with a sense that perhaps it was not so bad after all. It was violent and unpredictable. Insecurity had forced them to flee. ‘But there we were free, here we are nothing’, Hamisi told me. When I asked him what he meant by freedom, he explained that as a refugee, ‘You are no longer a person ... You have lost not only your land, your things and your country, you have lost yourself’. ‘In Dar es Salaam’, Marie-Claire said, ‘we are no longer human beings’. Alain echoed:

Here we live like chickens, caged up ... circling around, never knowing if we will be released. In Congo, it was different, I had a life. I was a person.
This idea of ‘freedom’, and of ‘having a life’, defined residually by reference to the absence of freedom, and the absence of ‘a life’, were central to children’s understanding of their suffering in Dar es Salaam. These feelings may have been particularly acute among the children I knew, who tended to come from families with relatively high levels of formal education, who had primarily urban and professional backgrounds. Despite – or perhaps because of – the disappointments and failures associated with their lives in Dar, their parents often spoke to me of a desire to instil in their sons and daughters a sense that life could be different, that despite their hardship, they were nonetheless people who could make a good future for themselves. Some, like Mireille, mother of six, asked me to spend time with her 17-year-old daughter, to talk with her about my life, ‘to show [her] another world’. Others, like Agnès, encouraged me to take adolescent Lucie to the University of Dar es Salaam so that she could ‘see a possible life’. Despite these attitudes, in the face of formidable barriers to their achievement, such strong hopes often faded and disappeared. What remained

Figure 1:  Drawing by Christophe, 14

Figure 2:  Drawing by Angela, 12
was a sense of failure, abjection and sometimes, hopelessness: ‘We have fallen’, 18-year-old Martin told me, ‘and we don’t know how to get up’.

Suffering and refugeeeness

It was this sense of abjection, and its impact on individuals’ sense of agency that children were referring to when they said ‘tunaishi kwa mateso’ (we are suffering, or we are living with suffering). Not only did boys and girls have the sense that they had been rejected and discarded by external forces, but they struggled against internalising the idea that they were, in fact, the useless and lazy beggars, the ‘garbage’ on the street, that they believed Tanzanians thought them to be. One of the many ways that I tried to elicit children’s perspectives on these issues was to ask them to draw a picture of two children, one Tanzanian, the other a refugee. The following three drawings (Figures 1, 2, 3) represent a few examples of the many that I collected according to these instructions.

On their own, these drawings give a general indication of the way Congolese children saw themselves in relation to Tanzanians: smaller, poorer, less healthy, with fewer belongings and fewer resources. But it was in discussing these drawings that I was able to learn more from individual children about how precisely they saw themselves, and refugees in general, in relation to the world around them. Asked what the two people were thinking in Figure 1, 14-year-old Chistophe replied that the Tanzanian child was thinking what kind of car he would one day own, while the refugee child was tired, hungry, and sad. I asked why.

‘Because he has nothing else to think about’, said Christophe. Similarly, in Figure 2, 12-year-old Angela explained to me that the person on the right, a Tanzanian girl, was healthy and strong, had nice clothes, shoes, hair extensions, a purse, and jewellery. The refugee child on the left, she said, had a simple, plain cloth for a dress, no shoes, no hair, no accessories. When I asked her to tell me why there were such big differences in the way these two girls looked, she said it was because Tanzanians are ‘more intelligent’. They know how to get money and live well and God looks after them (note the cross on the child’s necklace). The refugee child, she said, does not know how to get these things. Luc, 13, made similar remarks about the two children he drew in Figure 3, emphasising not only how the refugee child was small and undernourished, with torn clothes and skin lesions, but how his situation

Figure 3: Drawing by Luc, 13
contrasted with that of the confident, well-dressed Tanzanian child, who stood at the forefront, unafraid to be seen or noticed.

These children’s feelings that, as refugees, they were somehow not able to meet their full potential were also shared by adults. In the planning session for a half-day-long workshop for seven- to 11-year-olds in April 2002, my two Congolese female co-facilitators requested that I not include one of the activities I had prepared, a task I had called ‘I am strong’. This simple activity involved each child drawing the outline of one of their hands on a blank piece of paper. The idea was for each boy or girl to identify five things – one for each finger – about themselves or their families that they felt good about. Both women argued that the activity would be disempowering for children because most felt that there was nothing good to say about themselves. This view, that the failures that accompanied refugee life – and the failure inherent in being a refugee (see Harrell-Bond 1986: 6) – were somehow embodied in children, was shared by other adults as well. Six years later, again in Tanzania, Ismael told me in front of his 16-year-old son, James, and two of James’ friends, that Congolese children in Dar were ‘a lost generation’: according to Ismael, these boys and girls had realised that they had no future to speak of, and had begun to behave accordingly. ‘As refugees, they will never become anything here in Dar es Salaam’, he asserted. This association between being a refugee, being a child, and having no future was central to the way in which ‘suffering’ was understood.

In fact, for the Congolese children and adults I knew in Dar es Salaam, the concepts of suffering and refugeeness were inseparable. When one suffered, one became a refugee (mkimbizi): those who saw themselves as having no choice, no future, and no control over their own lives, considered themselves and were considered by other Congolese, to be refugees (wakimbizi). So linked were suffering and refugeeness that they were often evoked together: ‘To be a refugee is to suffer’, 16-year-old Mugisho told me, after explaining why his father, a trained physician from Bukavu, was unable to find paid work. ‘Me, as a refugee, I suffer’, said adolescent Lucie, when lamenting her mother’s requirement that she remain at home all day. ‘The life of a refugee is a life of suffering’, said Charles, after he withdrew from school and moved house because of his inability to pay the ‘hush money’ the school principal said he required in order to not report Charles’ family to the police. The circumstances that elicited these sentiments were not in all cases unique to refugees; there were other marginalised groups in Dar es Salaam who had similar experiences. The social and economic conditions under which most undocumented Congolese lived were in many ways not particular to them. But the feelings of abjection, of futureless-ness, of the inability to escape the crushing power of the present – these were the things that made these children feel like refugees.

Thinking too much

Boys and girls struggled not to feel overwhelmed by their suffering. Doing so required thinking about the future – about the possibility of a different, better life – despite the difficulty and painfulness of doing so. It necessitated a delicate balance between thinking, and not ‘thinking too much’ (kichwa na kinajaa na mawazo, literally ‘my head is full of thoughts’). Children like Didier needed to think about what the possible options were for him to survive and make a life for himself. Was going back to school a possibility? What kind of job could he expect to find? Was it best to remain in Dar es Salaam, to return to DRC, or to migrate elsewhere? Who did he know who could help him? Thinking through these questions was critical to his ability to imagine a better life for himself. At the same time, it was a challenging cognitive and practical feat to think of the future without also focusing on the present. Didier’s future plans, and those of his peers, depended in large measure on their present conditions. Yet Congolese of all ages
argued that the best way to cope with the hardships and uncertainties of life was to avoid thinking too much about them because doing so could lead one to fall ill with headaches, ‘pains in the heart’, stomach pains, and debilitating exhaustion and insomnia. Even more worrying was the view that ‘thinking too much’ could result in feelings of hopelessness and despondency, and, at its worst, madness. The gravity of these physical and emotional symptoms contributed to a widespread fear among both adults and children of falling ill with ‘too many thoughts’ (*mawazo mengi*).

Thoughts of violence and war are often assumed by researchers and practitioners to be the cause of problems like ‘thinking too much’ among refugee children. Yet among those I knew in Dar, it was the severe hardships of daily life and the challenges these posed to individuals’ ability to plan for the future that were said to lead to ‘too much thinking’. Thierry told me that, with no money, no job, and ‘nothing to do’, he had too much time to think about his life, his lack of prospects, his inability to support his family back home in DRC, and the frightening reality that he might live the rest of his days in exactly these circumstances. When she was out of school and spending her days confined with her sister to her small, one-room house, Lucie said she began to ‘have thoughts’ (*kuwa na mawazo*). Her mother’s inability to find paid work, her own stalled academic progress, the cruelty of her neighbours, her hungry belly, and her lack of ability to imagine a means of escape led her to feel overwhelmed, exhausted and, at times, hopeless about the future. Adults also spoke to me of how the brutal present and the unknown, unimaginable future sometimes led them to fall ill with ‘too many thoughts’.

Small boys and girls were also said to suffer at times from the problems associated with ‘too much thinking’. While very young children were not understood to worry about the future, per se, their ailments were often understood by adults and older children to be manifestations of the stresses of life in Dar. During the time that I knew her, three-year-old Lise frequently complained to her parents that her ‘head [was] sick’. ‘Pains in the head’ were commonly reported by young children and, in this case, Lise’s parents said that she was sick because she was confined to her house, she had no other children to play with besides her 18-month-old brother, and she had a significantly diminished appetite. Lise also cried a good deal and was often listless – two additional signs that she was ‘sick because of this life’.

The importance of ‘thinking too much’ as an idiom of distress among Congolese in Dar es Salaam lay in the meanings adults and children attributed to the condition, which was considered extremely serious by everyone I knew. One interpretation of this type of somatisation, offered by some anthropologists and post-colonial theorists, may be relevant here. These authors suggest that conditions like ‘thinking too much’ are the embodiment of extreme social and structural inequalities, in which the bodies of the powerless become a means of expressing opposition to their powerlessness (e.g., Das 1992; Diouf 2005; Weiss 2005). To be sure, those who suffered from ‘thinking too much’ in Dar es Salaam were those who were very poor, marginalised, isolated, and who felt an overall sense of abjection, helplessness, and hopelessness about the future. Maire-Claire told me:

*Live, die. It is the same thing. No one cares anyway.*

‘Thinking too much’ may have been a means for people to both express these feelings of despondency and to protest against them (see Eyber 2001: 134). The worse their social and economic situation became, the more difficult it was to escape the pain and difficulties associated with ‘thinking too much’. In this way, their feelings of subjectification and their protests against it may have been inscribed on their bodies (Mbembe 2001). As a mode of social consciousness, ‘thinking too much’ was both individual and collective in that the sources of the condition were understood to be shared with others in similar circumstances.
Beyond war

The Congolese children I knew in Dar es Salaam were engaged in an ongoing struggle to avoid becoming overwhelmed by and trapped in a brutal, relentless, and never-ending present. Their fear and dread of ‘thinking too much’ was related not only to the emotional, existential, and physical pain associated with the condition, but also to the truth that lay behind it. This truth was that the social and economic conditions of displacement could succeed in undermining their very sense of who they were. When the possibility of becoming was unimaginable and non-existent, their suffering threatened to undermine their basic humanity because it was the very idea of a future, even if as yet unrealised, that motivated them to make it through the day ahead. One endured the present in order to escape it in the future. This way of looking at life suggests that for some children, the future, or at least the imagining of the future, defines the present. Without a future, and without the ability to think about, plan for, or imagine a future, their present seems meaningless and their existence little more than that of ‘animals’.

On a theoretical and conceptual level, this understanding of the source of refugee children’s suffering challenges at least one dominant assumption in social scientific research with refugees, namely that the experience of war-related violence fundamentally and irrevocably alters the way in which people see themselves and their relationships with others (e.g., Nordstrom 1997). This presumption that violence exerts an all-pervasive, overwhelming influence on all aspects of personal, social, economic, and cultural life has been the silent frame for the main question that has been asked about refugees and others who have lived in conflict zones, namely: ‘How are people getting on with life now that their whole worlds have been destroyed by violence?’ Behind this and other, related questions, has been the view that the violence of war is somehow extraordinary, a profoundly shocking experience that takes place outside the ‘normal’ range of human experience. Coping with war-related violence has thus been understood to be of critical importance to refugees, and therefore to research about refugees (Lubkemann 2008: 10).

This assumption has had particular purchase in research with displaced children in Africa. So widespread is the assumption that war exerts a deleterious effect on all aspects of child development that the lives of refugee boys and girls in these contexts have rarely been explored through any other lens. The abundance of reports and studies about former child soldiers, girls who have served as sex slaves, and those who have been forced to kill, torture, and rape their parents are but a few examples of this trend. Although these works raise many significant issues and concerns, they only give part of the picture. They draw our attention away from the mundane, everyday lives of children – their routines and activities, their social interactions and relationships, the character of their work and play, and the things that they think about on a daily basis. From the perspective of refugee boys and girls in Dar es Salaam, these ordinary aspects of daily life were as much, or more, a part of who they were as the war they left behind in DRC.

My research is not the first to challenge this assumption that the experience of war-related violence fundamentally alters cultural modes of being and interacting in all settings. A growing body of ethnographic research with refugees and displaced people in numerous contexts has shown that the experience of violence is mediated differently by different people, at different times, in different settings. These works demonstrate the integral role played by society and culture in shaping the meaning people attribute to violence and the role of context in determining the subjective interpretation of human experience more generally. For example, in his research with former female combatants in Mozambique, West (2000) found that commitment to the ideology of FRELIMO powerfully influenced the way in which young women fighters experienced the war because they felt that they were making a valuable contribution to the creation of a more just and equal society. These
women were able to make sense of the violence that they experienced and perpetrated because they saw a meaningful reason behind it. Interestingly, West (2000: 191) argues that in the aftermath of the war, it was more difficult for these young women to come to terms with the failure of these larger dreams of liberation than it was to cope with the violence of war. He and other authors assert that the experience of violence cannot be understood without reference to the social, cultural, and moral contexts in which people live (Boyden and Mann 2005: 17).

Despite the overall salience of these assertions, they have been applied in far greater measure to our understanding of the experiences of refugee and war-affected adults than they have to children. In part, this has to do with the reality that, until recently, the vast majority of what we knew about children and war we learnt from developmental psychologists working with children in North America and Europe. While some studies have been undertaken in Africa, these have generally relied on generic behaviour checklists and assessments made in the course of therapeutic interventions for individual children (e.g., Garbarino and Kostelny 1996; Morgos 2009). Because continuity, stability, predictability, and physical and emotional security are considered fundamental to children’s well-being and development, exposure to violence is assumed to have a direct and automatically damaging effect. Consequently, refugee children are viewed in this literature largely as traumatised victims who need medical and psychological care in order to resume ‘normal’ lives. Furthermore, as Boyden and de Berry (2004) have argued, their responses to violence are understood to be more or less the same in all contexts. The term ‘suffering’ is often used by both psychologists and anthropologists to refer to the serious wounds to the body and spirit that war and displacement can cause. The cause of refugee and war-affected children’s ‘suffering’ is usually assumed to be the experience of war-related violence.

The findings of my research with undocumented Congolese children in Dar challenge this assumption. For these boys and girls, daily life in urban Tanzania was considered more threatening to their individual well-being than was their experience of conflict and war-related violence in DRC. As 16-year-old Munga told me:

“When I can’t sleep at night it is not because I have bad dreams about the war. It is because I don’t know what I am going to do tomorrow or the next day or the next day. How will I ever leave this miserable life?”

I am aware of the dangers of taking such statements at face value. Sometimes the present can seem worse than the past because of its proximity. Some children may experience serious and prolonged psychological and emotional distress as a result of the violence they experienced (and sometimes perpetrated) in conflict zones. However, the analytical and methodological problem is that researchers who look for traumatic responses to experiences identified in advance as highly stressful may miss important differences in the individual and collective experiences of boys and girls in different contexts (Boyden and Mann 2005: 13). Indeed, at the stage of their lives during which I knew them, the focus of Congolese children was not on the past but on transcending the crushing power of the present – the bad feelings and debilitating thoughts that resulted from living in a xenophobic, discriminatory environment in which they lacked basic entitlements – in order to plan for or imagine a future.

Conclusion

Congolese children’s lives in Dar es Salaam were influenced by a number of social, economic, political, and personal factors that had little to do with the war they had experienced and fled. The challenges, privations, and indignities of daily life in urban Tanzania were characterised by
feelings of loss, deprivation, and hardship so intense that they shaped to a large extent the ways boys and girls came to think about and tried to make sense of their lives. Existential concerns about things like ‘freedom’, ‘having a life’, and ‘feeling like a person’ were at the heart of their condition. Displacement had affected their lives in countless ways. But from their perspective, its greatest impact was on their sense of themselves as people. The social and economic conditions in which they lived led them to question not only who they were and their place in the world but whether they were in fact human beings. They queried not only their own ‘suffering’ and those of their families; they questioned life, its meaning, and the existence of God. Living with, making sense of and challenging their existential predicament was a central feature of their daily lives.

These findings raise profound and challenging questions for those of us concerned with child protection. What kind of ‘protection’ are we actually providing to children like Didier and Munga and the many others who live in similar circumstances, and for what purpose? It is true that in Dar, these boys and girls were safe from the violence of war. They no longer feared that their families would be killed, that their school would be attacked, or that they would be forcibly made to fight. They were ‘protected’ from these grave risks, but at the same time made intensely vulnerable to violence of a different and more insidious kind. Fear of physical death at the hands of soldiers and rebels was replaced by fear of a spiritual death, in which life had no meaning. War did not kill them, but they feared that life as a refugee might. In this context, protection is about more than safety.

Those of us concerned with the protection and well-being of children need to engage with these realities in substantive and meaningful ways. On a theoretical level, doing so requires acknowledging the psychic damage that hostility, indifference, and extreme poverty can cause. It means rethinking the important role that context plays in shaping personal and collective responses to adversity and doing away with simplistic assumptions about which experiences and aspects of life are most detrimental to boys and girls. On a practical level, it means creating the conditions under which children can develop and sustain their hopes and aspirations, even in the most difficult of circumstances. Doing so requires seeing boys and girls not only as children who need protection from physical harm, but as human beings who seek and deserve to live lives worth living.

Notes

1. The eruption of Nyiragongo volcano in Goma in January 2002 also forced Didier and his family to flee for several weeks to safety in Rwanda.


3. The FDLR is the name given to groups of rebels composed of some Rwandan Hutu refugees who fled to DRC in the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. Violence instigated by and inflicted against this group has been continuous over the past 15 years or so, as regional politics have played themselves out in complex and brutal ways on the people of eastern Congo.

References


The author

Gillian Mann, PhD, is a freelance child protection consultant with a background in education and anthropology. In addition to her academic work, she has conducted research, evaluation, and training for a broad range of agencies on issues related to children’s experiences of forced migration, displacement, family separation, HIV/AIDS, and poverty. <gillian.mann@yahoo.com>