Review Articles

Children's Rights and Violence

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These three books have widely different settings and main concerns, but they all illustrate endemic forms of violence that attack children and their rights.

Alphonce Omolo's two decades of work with children who live and work on the streets of Kenya led him to study children's rights. Unlike most reports, which document street children's current problems, Omolo searched back to discover risks and causes that lead children to leave their family. Overwhelmingly, his PhD research found violations of children's rights through violence, which drive so many Kenyan children away from their family, and these are reported in this important and deeply moving book. Far from being simply a biological stage, vulnerable childhood is understood by Omolo as socially
institutionalised in laws, policies and practices through intergenerational relations, as well as being a social space where children learn and practise their agency.

Each Kenyan childhood is unique but also has features that are shared widely across sub-Saharan Africa, and these individual-general interactions connect with the local-universal relevance of the UN 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Violence too is understood as a complex, interacting entity, both socially constructed but also intensely physical and emotional, so that definitions of violence, its nature, causes and effects, have to be informed by children's direct experiences and accounts. Otherwise, powerful adult groups such as the police, judiciary and teachers' unions define violence against children vaguely in ways that can favour the adults' behaviours and interests and assist in perpetuating the atrocities. Kenyan children are beaten, raped, burned and tortured with horrifying frequency, and one depressing finding of the book is that violence against children appears to be increasing.

Types of intentional violence are carefully documented and organised into Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems. They are analysed as self-directed, interpersonal or collective violence, as well as physical, sexual and emotional violence and the violence of severe neglect. The social structure that is childhood can be a multiple trap when children have extra needs through being physically, socially and economically vulnerable, but most children in Kenya are accorded such low value and moral worth that many adults assume they can and maybe should ignore children's needs and suffering and pleas for help. Formal government inquiries tend to stress sexual violence and to overlook emotional violence, which from national to personal levels is the most invisible, including in the children's accounts. Thirty children aged from 5 to 17 years, and 48 adults, were interviewed in three cities, and the children's experiences of extreme violence are summarised in one dire table (pp. 104–106).

Many risk factors are analysed starting with personal factors: the child's lower age, poor mental health, special needs, being a girl, and being an orphan. At the meso family level, risks arise from family conflicts and separation, poor parenting, being the child of a single parent and of a sex worker, being in a large family, or living with a relative or guardian. Large families and children living with a relative are strong traditions in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet now that so many families and communities are disintegrating and migrating, and with customs of neighbourly care for all the local children breaking down, the traditions increasingly expose children to uncontrolled violence from adults within their households and neighbourhoods. Many children face multiple risks